Ursula, Under

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I Ursula

ON A CRYSTALLINE, perfectly blue morning in June, after a day of angry pewter skies and of sheeting, driving rain, we enter our story. Clouds pile themselves picturesquely, theatrically, like plump odalisques, against the blue, clear-edged and astonishing. The forest all around is a palette of greens.Wild chokecherry trees are in raucous bloom. It is as if this were the first morning of the world, perfect. Even the garter snakes slithering under roots, over rocks, over roots, through the grass seem a part of the day's jubilance. Dew on fat ferns catches the sunlight in bursts and disperses it, starlike.

We are just miles inland from the tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula of Michigan, which juts out into Lake Superior, the arrival point for the earliest hardy wide-eyed settlers arriving from the East on lake packet boats to stake claims and seek copper, well before the Civil War. Lifting off from a branch overhead, a red-winged blackbird calls out clearly something that sounds much like kee'-we-naw, the native word for "portage." Many things here that are not called Keweenaw are called its English equivalent, Portage, almost as if life were much like a brief transit across a wee stretch of land.

It is Monday, June 9, 2003. Our story itself began long before, if we believe that all back story is also story, that the underside of the iceberg explains what we see above: all those wind-sculpted shapes that, looking for all the world like praying hands, came to be called, by fanciful meteorologists, nieves penitentes, or penitents sculpted of snow. Still, a painful and highly unusual event happens this glorious morning, and it is through this tiny aperture that we enter our narrative.

We are at the moment seeing through the eyes of Ursula Wong, a child with dark Asian eyes, café-au-lait complexion, and a thick blond braid down her back that seems frankly too much hair for a two-and-a-half-year-old to have had time to grow. Ursula has had her second birthday on November 19. She is a child small in stature, five pounds nine ounces at birth and now just over twenty-seven pounds, as of her spring checkup. She wears denim bib

Published by Vintage

overalls with a purple T-shirt beneath; in the cool of the morning she has insisted on putting on her purple hooded jacket for the weather. Snow mittens are clipped to the sleeve ends. Yes, they are purple too. It is perfect and cool in the sixties.

Her mother, Annie, says, “Honey, you don’t need a coat. It’s June.” Her father, Justin, says to Annie, “She’ll figure it out pretty quick. She’ll take it off herself and think it was her own idea.”

In a clearing a couple of hundred feet down an untraveled dirt track into the forest, a glade carpeted by short grass kept low by odd gravel-shot soil, Ursula is crouched on her haunches examining tiny white blooms on wild strawberry plants in the grass. Each tiny bloom is a star. Ursula is transfixed.

Ursula and her young parents have traveled almost five hours west and north from their home in Sault Sainte Marie,Michigan. They have spent the night at a Super 8 Motel in Houghton, a town that houses the state’s mining college, now more diversified as mine after mine has shut down. The motel faces Portage Lake, and Justin, who is an installer of vinyl siding and gutters, has paid the five dollars extra for a room with a view of the lake and the opposite shore. They rarely leave home, and this overnight away is a treat.

Ursula has splashed in the pool and run around on the motel’s wooden deck, puddled from the day’s rain. She has giggled delightedly as with the heel of her hand she pounded buttons in the lobby vending machine to make foil packets of chocolate-chip cookies fall, klunk, to the bottom of the machine. Ursula has suggested in a business-like way that they might live here. Justin has reminded her that Grandma Mindy is back home, and her purple carpet in her bedroom and all her stuffed animals. “Oh,” Ursula has said. “That’s true.” Sober as a church mouse, clear-spoken as a valedictorian.

The Wongs have come here because Annie, a librarian, has gotten a bee in her bonnet of late: she wants to know more about her great-grandfather’s death in a 1926 mine collapse, and then more about his life. Seems dumb, she has said, to live so geographically close to it all and know nothing much about our roots.

So the previous fall they had gone to a commemoration of the disaster at the iron mine where her great-grandfather died, and now, several months later, in weather as lovely as Eden’s, they have come to search out the site of the copper-mining camp where the family lived when her father’s grandfather was a blond barefoot boy new to Michigan, new to America.Her father is foggy about family history, does not remember being told much; he is beer-sodden most of the time anyway.

Annie has spent the previous afternoon in the archives of the Finnish college across the lake, reading accounts of the 1926 tragedy an hour and a half south, in Rovaniemi, Michigan, while Justin and Ursula first nap and then dry-roast in the sauna until they glow. Ursula loves the sauna. She sits with

a sober expression, for only a few minutes, nonetheless, and then says perkily, “I’m done,” ready to move on to the next thing. She is after all two years old. “I’m not,” says Justin lugubriously, peering out at her from under the wet towel draped over his head and then retreating back under. He takes sauna seriously.

So Ursula sits and waits, rolling her eyes in the way she has seen little Olivia do on old Cosby Show reruns, precocious, in charge but obedient. Ursula’s swimsuit is purple, like her bedroom carpet and her coat and everything else in which she has a say, and she sits on the hot cedar bench on a small purple towel. She draws the line at the television dinosaur called Barney. “Get outta here,” she says, when anyone mentions him, with an exaggerated wave of her tiny hands, dismissive, parodying someone else—maybe from Brooklyn—she’s seen on TV.

Ursula’s even having come to be—considering Annie’s injuries (a fractured pelvis from a hit-and-run accident at age ten which also broke both her legs) and all the doctors’ attendant warnings—is a miracle in everyone’s eyes. It has occurred to Annie that the birth of any of us, our coming to birth at all, in light of all the hazards every ancestor faced, is pretty much a miracle too, and she has been chewing on this thought for several months.

While Justin and Annie are awed and protective toward Ursula, they also believe that she needs to learn to make choices from early on. So she gets to make choices. She is, as a result, a bright, perky child, astonishing everyone.

That evening, taking Ursula for a final packet of cookies, Justin hears the roar of the crowd on the lobby TV and plunks himself down between a tool salesmen from Ironwood and a grandfather from Escanaba who is en route to see his little granddaughter Ursula’s age, in Bay Mills, and has stopped here to visit the shrine of a sainted priest-missionary for his wife, who has cancer. They are all watching the Stanley Cup playoffs. There is a television in the Wongs’ room upstairs, of course, but the lure of the lobby and all of these hockey fans is irresistible to Justin. He drops into a chair and starts roaring with the rest of the men.

Out through the glass door of the lobby, in the twilight, the surface of the lake sparkles. Ursula stands waving her silver packet of cookies with a defeated look but also with flashes of a tiny anger. She makes an exasperated face at the desk attendant, as if to say, Men. The attendant laughs heartily. The New Jersey Devils are playing the Anaheim Ducks, and the Devils are on their way to shutting out the Ducks.

Justin does not know that two defensemen, one on each team, playing against each other, are actually related, at not so great a distance back in time, to his wife, Annie, who is here after all seeking out her ancestry, and neither he nor Annie will ever know it. On the Devils, Oleg Tverdovsky, from Donetsk, in Ukraine, is descended from an ancestor who migrated east; on the Ducks, Fredrik Olausson, of Dädesjö, Sweden, has hands shaped like those of Annie’s great-grandfather dead in the mine, passed down from a shared great-grandfather of their own. The degrees of separation are

considerable— the connections go back to the beginning of the nineteenth century— and no one is asking the question, anyway. Justin's high-school team in Sault Sainte Marie was called the Blue Devils, and he is rooting for the Devils.

The lady at the desk has a name tag that says EILEEN. She looks down at Ursula standing rolling her eyes, waving her packet of Mrs. Fields cookies, waiting for Justin. "Who do you want to win, honey?" she asks.

"Well, who's playing?" says Ursula perkily, her eyebrows lifted.

The attendant is surprised at the response. What did she expect? "The Devils and the Ducks," says Eileen.

"I like ducks," says Ursula. "I hate devils. Devils are ba-a-ad."

The attendant laughs heartily. "They're not real devils," she says.

"I don't care," Ursula says. "I like ducks."

Justin and the tool salesman and the grandfather hear none of this. There is a great deal of roaring from the onscreen crowd as well. Pucks fly, ice shivers up in fine flurries, blood flows. All is adrenaline joy.

The attendant helps Ursula open the cookies and gets her some milk from the breakfast room, checking with Justin first in pantomime. Justin nods yes, but this is after all hockey he's watching: she might have asked him anything and he'd agree.

The Devils win, three-aught. Annie comes down in the elevator, using her cane, looking for them. She and Ursula and Eileen have a good laugh at the hockey fans. "She likes ducks," Eileen says to Annie, reporting the remark. "But she doesn't like devils." Eileen crouches to Ursula's eye height and high-fives her. "Gal after my own heart," she says, slapping palms.

They are driving today to the site of a settlement where Annie's greatgrandfather had lived in his childhood, soon after he came over from Finland, the now overgrown location of an abandoned copper-mining community out toward the point.

On their way north from Houghton this morning they have stopped in Calumet to take a couple of pictures of Ursula sitting on the lap of the oversized statue of Alexander Agassiz, Harvard naturalist, copper baron, and aristocrat, otherness incarnate and no friend to the hoi polloi. Still, his sculpted bronze robes are cool, and Ursula poses sitting on his knee as if he were a dear, loving uncle.

The plan is to have a picnic here—the glade looked inviting, and time is abundant—and to spend the rest of the day seeking out where the camp would have been. Camp Grit. Its name must surely have been a joke, Annie thinks—or maybe not? Nature has taken over again at the site of the camp, perseverant, triumphing over all humans' intents. The land had been leveled,

entirely, but, the historian at the college has told Annie, the forest has reasserted itself and is as thick as if it were first growth. The cabins will be gone, even the traces of their foundations, he says, as well as all traces of the two churches that came later on, whose bells were transported inland for two other churches, both Lutheran, one Finnish, one Norwegian. Finns and Norwegians did not worship together, even if both were Lutherans.

Perhaps, Annie thinks, all traces of human habitation will be gone, but still she wants to see where her great-grandfather lived as a child. To set her feet on the earth there and know it directly. Justin is less curious about his own heritage.

Annie's father, Garrett Maki, spends most of his days and nights drunk since her mother's death, eighteen years before, while Annie was in the hospital recovering from the crash that crippled her. Garrett is on disability now, as a Vietnam veteran, but no one is certain just what his disability is. Annie suspects—no, believes—that her father was responsible for her mother's death: there had been a great deal of abuse, and Liz Maki died of a head injury the night of an outburst on Garrett's part. There were no witnesses, there were no charges. Domestic violence was not a thing people were comfortable talking about then. The eighties are as distant as the glaciers.

Annie walks with difficulty, always with that cane, and invariably wears long skirts to cover her scars and her atrophied muscles. Justin is ablebodied and hearty, half Chinese. He is known to local hockey fans as Wild Man Wong. Annie and Justin are fiercely in love.

BECAUSE URSULA is clamoring for lunch, they have pulled the truck over onto a graveled apron of the road, then meandered through a patch of woods, and are wandering peacefully in an odd clearing a short distance into the woods. They have no idea that this clearing once held the boiler house of an old mine. The grass grows up through a layer of finest ashy pea-gravel, a relic of the long-vanished brick structure.When the mine was operating, the land was scalped clean: no trees anywhere. The forest is thick again.

The fragrance of lilacs hovers in the air: there are wild lilac bushes to ei- 8 U r s u l a , U n d e r Hill.01 text 29/9/04 10:44 Page 8 ther side of the clearing. Lupines with their intense tiny indigo blooms poke up here and there. Clumps of wild lavender tuck themselves everywhere. Something else—a bush?—smells like licorice. Justin has set down the picnic basket in the grass. A tiny brown-speckled bird lands on its arched handle. Ursula chortles in delight and leaps to grab it.

"Nope," says Justin. "Birds are to fly." The bird, as if to demonstrate, lifts off. Ursula claps her hands in delight. Then she crouches again and tries to pick one of the tiny white blossoms. "Let it be," Annie says. "It will make a strawberry." Ursula rises to standing, her full height of two feet plus, plunks her fists onto her hips, elbows akimbo, and scowls in frustration: Here we are out in all this great sweet stuff and I can't do anything.

At the edge of the denser forest at the back of the clearing, there is a rustling sound. Papery, slight, but distinct in the silence.Ursula's head turns. A flash of white: a deer, venturing tentatively out of the forest, has spotted them, and turns tail to run. It is perhaps a dozen feet away. Ursula runs after it, squealing. The deer, of course, will not be caught, and there is nothing to say except "Let it go." Annie and Justin smile at each other, a moment too quick in its passing to run to the truck for the camera.

Ursula tiptoes dramatically, thinking perhaps of Olivia again—she watches those Cosby Show reruns, mesmerized, over and over night after night and can recite people's lines along with them. She cranes back over her shoulder at Justin and Annie to make sure they see her. They beam at her. She puts her finger to her lips: Shhh. Her back is to them. The blond braid down her back shines like silk floss in the sunlight, against the plum violet quilt of the coat. The deer is still in sight, a few feet into the leafy green shade of the forest. She is determined to catch it. The delight in her eyes is unmistakable.

She gives them a sign in mime: Watch me. Ursula's every gesture seems meant for the comedic stage. She is a natural. She tiptoes toward the tree line. The deer disappears deeper into the forest, as silent as breath. Ursula puts on a burst of speed, silent herself, looking back at Justin and Annie, steps into the trees, and disappears from sight. The only sound is an astonished tiny intake of breath from Ursula as she goes down, like a penny into the slot of a bank, disappeared, gone.

Annie looks terror at Justin, trips on the long skirt that covers her scars, lurches forward, and falls awkwardly onto her bare elbows. They sting and ooze blood. Justin is already at the spot where Ursula disappeared. "Oh, God, Annie," he says. His voice is barely audible.

Annie raises herself on her cane and stumbles toward him. They stand transfixed, staring down. The opening into which Ursula has fallen is amazingly small, and they can see nothing but darkness. They certainly cannot see Ursula herself.

Neither of them wants to call out to her, unconsciously afraid their voices will echo back at them from too deep an emptiness. Both of them think: What is this? How deep? and Dear God, no. Both of them think: A mine shaft? Neither says the word.

Annie had tried to imagine the shaft into which her grandfather descended one August day three-quarters of a century ago and from which he did not come out alive: fifteen hundred feet deep.No one could survive such a fall . . . but is this such a shaft? Annie is telling herself, no, it must be something else. Too small for a mine shaft, surely. Way too small. Then it must be a well. She heaves a half-sigh of imaginary relief. But what would a well be doing out here in the forest? The answer would be: The same thing as a mine shaft, serving a different landscape, a different time. And why in the name of anything would a well seem a relief? Her breath clutches up again.

Rough old timbers are laid across an opening in the ground six or seven or eight feet square. It is too early in the summer for much foliage to have

sprung up yet, but each year it has grown up and died off, and grown up and died off, so the timbers remain exposed. One of those years, perhaps forty years ago when Justin and Annie's parents were in high school—and no one much has been here since, wandering into this forest which is after all nowhere—a tiny shoot grew up between the first and second timbers. As it grew, it pushed them apart, and it has become a tall solid tree, growing from inside the hole, through the timbers set into a collar to seal this shaft. As it happens, this is indeed a mine shaft, an air shaft, meant only for ventilation of the long since abandoned passages below.

Annie kneels painfully, all her weight on her cane, and calls into the darkness: Ursula. She can't tell anything about the depth of the hole. She calls again: Ursula, and then she sobs. She looks up at Justin. It has been a providence that Ursula was so close and they both had their eyes on her, or they might fall into blaming themselves or each other in their grief. Neither even considers that.

Justin's eyes dart wildly but his mind is clear. "How far would you say it was since we saw civilization?" he says. "Thirty miles?" He stops. "Three miles?" It could be either.

"The cell!" Annie says. "In the truck?"

Justin runs to the truck, his work boots seeming to shake the ground. The cell phone lies on the front seat, tiny and useless amid a scattering of animal crackers. In crisis the mind focuses on minutiae: he thinks, Now is that cookie a rhinoceros or a hippopotamus? He picks up the phone. No signal. Of course, no signal: there are no towers out here in the wilderness.

He tries to remember how many cars they saw on the road. All he can remember is the fat, furry rear end of a black bear cub shambling off into the trees near a river, and Annie trying to take a snapshot. He follows that rabbit trail into his mind and recalls the bright topaz eyes of what must have been a cougar just off the road as they drove up in the dark in the rain, the night before. But of course a car coming along the road now, Justin thinks, would be no help at all: none of their phones work either. A rusty dark red Subaru zooms by, heading north. The road is once again empty and silent, the sunlight bright and impassive.

Justin remembers a time as a teenager when his first car, a beater the color of pea soup, had stopped dead just west of Sault Sainte Marie at twilight. A passing car had offered to send help, then didn't. He recalls walking alongside the road in the dark, kicking stones, mumbling "goddamn fucker" again and again. Can't chance that kind of thing now. Trust no one. Justin has not trusted many folks in his life anyway. He carries a grudge about his father's having abandoned the family when he was three, not much older than Ursula is now.

Justin calculates the distance back to the last town they passed, Eagle River, and then estimates mileage forward to Eagle Harbor, next on the map. Forward seems best. He runs back to Annie.

She sits silent on the ground, her legs out painfully straight before her, her eyes filled with tears. Justin's attention is drawn to the pattern of the fabric of her skirt: a pattern of tiny blueberries and green leaves. His mind is recording that to keep from attending to what has just happened. Blueberries, he thinks. I never noticed that those were blueberries.

The silence from the gap between the timbers is deafening, the darkness there impenetrable and magnetic as a black hole. They can see only a few inches into the opening: the leaf cover overhead is thick and the shade almost palpable. In the silence, the birds' twittering seems obscene, out of place.

Annie seems in a trance. She is not. This is just slow to register. Justin, however, is functioning in hockey mode: alert, aggressive, all nerve ends ready. "No phone," he says to Annie. "No towers." He sees the look of dismay in her eyes: lost, disbelieving. "I'm going to drive on to Eagle Harbor," he says. "I'll get help." He feels as if he will throw up his innards. "You can do this. Ursula will be okay." He sounds calmer than he feels. Annie just stares at him as if dumbfounded by his composure. "Look," he says, halfangrily. "Was she a miracle or what? So would God just let her go this way?" Annie can't believe he's talking this way. He can't stand for her to mention anything in the vicinity of God, shuts her down when she tries. All of a sudden he's preaching?

And of course Ursula is in no danger. Of course. This will all be explained in a moment. We're on an old Candid Camera show. No, America's Funniest Home Videos, that's it.

"Okay," Annie says, her voice belying her pounding heart. "Go then. I'll wait." She tries to think of something important to say about logistics, what he must not forget to do, but she can think of nothing at all. So she just repeats herself. "I'll wait." The tone is as if she were waiting her turn at the butcher's or the photo counter at Wal-Mart.

"Yeah, right," Justin says, his eyes wide with terror. He leans and kisses Annie on the top of her head. Her hair is warm. The pale skin of her part looks so vulnerable. He focuses on anything but that hole in the ground. "We'll get our miracle," he says.

"Hurry," she says, the audible quavering of her own voice this time scaring her. She squeezes his hand, and he's gone, the truck spraying up gravel.

IT WILL BE seven hours from now—Monday night—a news team on the TV will be helicoptered up from Marquette to broadcast nationally what is not this morning known to anyone else, what has not quite even registered in Annie's consciousness—before the remark is made. A woman her parents' age back in Sault Sainte Marie will be lounging alone in the newly remodeled high-ceilinged living room of the home she inherited from her parents, passed down from her grandfather the judge. Fried and sour after two gins, she will grumble at the TV screen, "Why are they wasting all that money and energy on a goddamn half-breed trailer-trash kid?"

Annie's mind is pulling up, as from a well, the tacit answer to that as yet unasked question. Annie cannot think of Ursula down that hole, so she thinks: So many generations, back into history and then prehistory, all concentrated into this one little girl.

This is the answer to the as yet unasked question, in backward format: this little girl carries with her the inheritance of generations uncounted, precious, induplicable. She is priceless, not only to Annie and Justin, but to the planet, the whole big fat blue-green ball hurtling through space.

As Annie's mind drops as far as it can conceive, down the dark hole of her own lack of knowledge about her own and Justin's families' past, an unfocused image of someone Chinese—male or female she cannot see, an older person, to judge from the posture and shuffling step; likely a male now, to judge from the shoulders and slight baldness, wearing a green gown—flits past her consciousness like a resurfacing memory of something she never knew to begin with.

She cannot flesh it out into focus so instead she begins trying to name the trees that surround her, to keep her mind off that hole and its darkness, and she cannot remember the names of the trees either. Her eyes fill with tears and, just for a brief second, overflow. The birdsong is deafening.

Justin heads north on the winding road, taking the curves too fast, hearing himself saying out loud to the empty cab, "Christ," again and again, and then "Crap," and then "Christ," and then silence.