

Phobia

I am thirty-seven, and she is five, but I am mad. I look down at her, pitiless. “How do you know what color my baby will be?” She is holding her cream pink, naked and bald baby doll. Just a moment ago, I picked it up and said, as any one-day-mother might, “Oh, baby.” Marta has been asking me her questions all week. “Are you big enough to have a baby?” to which I gave my cheerfully grim answer, “Yes, I may even be too big.” All she wanted was the yes. Marta has been asking if I and her “Uncle B” will take her home to live with us, and I know that this is what she is after. I have been finding it cute until now. I was only just picking up the baby to coo at it when Marta took it from me and made her pronouncement, “No, you can’t have a baby that color because you are black, and you would have a black baby,” and I don’t want to stop and explain the world to her.

We have been in the cabin for six days. Marta’s “Uncle B” is my Brian, and this is his family’s summer cabin. Marta is the third generation to spend her childhood here. It is perched on a rise of hill, higher on the left and held up by stilts on the right. It’s a cobbled together thing that looks as old as it is, one hundred years. From the porch in the back and two of the upstairs bedroom windows, we can see Lake Michigan. There’s a thing they do here when the sun is about to go down, an egg yolk dropping into blue soup. They look for a fast, green flash, and the fact that no one seems to have ever seen it doesn’t stop them. At night, I hear the lake. It feels wet even inside the cabin, and the bed rocks with the waves.

Once, with an ex, flying from The Berkshires to Tacoma, the plane slapped against the air hard, then harder. He leaned over me, excited by the lightning. I was crying and didn’t stop until the plane made an emergency landing not far from here in Grand Rapids. Later, sitting at the snack bar in Walmart, because we were that tired, he said, “I’m not sure I want to be with someone who is afraid to fly.” After that, I moved to Chicago. I flew from there to New Delhi and back again by myself. I learned the O’Hare airport well enough to feel fond of it. At thirty-one, I flew from Houston to New York and was an hour into the trip when everything started to sway. I felt a clench in my stomach, minor at first and then it rose until I was hot. I tried to take a deep breath, but by then the clench was in my throat, and my pulse was throbbing in my ears, and my mouth went dry. I am perfectly aware that the bed here does not rock with the waves. It was my dreams. They are not flying dreams. They are nightmares about turbulence.

Yesterday, at one of the numerous family gatherings, I retreated for just a moment and stood in the bathroom. The first thought I had was, I am thirty-seven and he is forty-six. The second thought was, but they are too blonde. I looked at myself in the mirror. I shook my head to unhinge the thought because what if Marta’s Uncle B thought what I thought after a visit with my family except substitute blonde with black? This morning in the car on the way to the cabin from the beach, Marta was in the car seat behind us, and Uncle B was driving. She said, “Do you want to marry Uncle B?” It reminded me that just before we arrived, my friend Ade asked me on the phone, “Are you talking about marriage?” Both then and today, Brian was beside me. I turned to look at him and then away because my tongue was numb with not knowing what I was supposed to say.

In two days, we will leave here. Three weeks will pass, and by then we will have stopped talking about Michigan. It will no longer be in my mind that Marta and I sat making maps of places we have never been, me the route to her house in Munich and her a route to somewhere I will have by then forgotten. She will have already called and told me that she loves me like crazy. Brian and I will have returned to

our normal routine but feel closer than before. What I will think of is how Marta's Uncle B held me when the turbulence came and how when I started to lift my head from his shoulder, he shook his head and said, "Put your head back down," and I did because it calmed me. We will be in bed, and he will be leaning over me, listing the things we should do when Fall comes. I will be cradled beneath him, and the thought will come slowly, a soft tickle, low at first, and then it will increase, gaining speed and momentum until I feel my temperature rise. I'll take a deep inhale, my ears filling with the sound of air. First, my pronouncement will crowd and expand in my stomach, then my chest until it reaches my throat. It will be heavy in my mouth, a full round fruit. The backs of my teeth will have a sharp ache as if I am about to taste it. Marta's Uncle B will be making a list in my ear, and then it will be my turn to speak. Instead of saying what I am supposed to say, naming our possible future, apple picking, flea markets or the Reginald F. Lewis Museum, I will say, "I think we should get married."