

Consolation

Billy grew up Catholic. "I cried because I had no shoes until I met someone who had no feet." The Catholics he knew in his youth were always saying this sort of thing, as if they read it somewhere in a manual. He's thirty-one. Sherry is twenty-eight, and she's eight months pregnant.

He's making chili for supper when she comes up behind him. She'd been taking a nap on the sofa. It feels good to have her belly against the small of his back. He's stirring the chili, it's bubbling, but when he turns around and sees what Sherry's face is like, he shuts off the gas. He thinks she's going to tell him about a terrible thing that took place in her dreams

"Billy," she says. "Something's weird. It's way too quiet in here."

To get to the medical center they have to drive along the river. Sherry has to lower the seat so she's half-sitting, half-lying. It's the middle of March. She's wearing her big down jacket but she can't zip it up. "Driving seat capable to be prone. Do not place driving seat to prone setting while operating vehicle." This is something they tell you in the manual. Who translates these things? The car is a Camry. He's not used to it yet. He's used to a Corolla with a stick. This is an automatic. They bought it brand new with a big down payment from Sherry's parents just a couple of weeks ago.

There was only one time when Billy doubted the fact that Sherry's the right person for him to be married to, and that was last Christmas, when they were sitting around the table at her oldest brother's house playing cut-throat Trivial Pursuit for money. Everyone was drinking beer and shots of Southern Comfort except her. Already she

looked as if a watermelon was on her lap. Her breasts were like eggplants to begin with: now they looked like eggplants pumped up with an air hose. It was Sherry's turn in the game. It was a question in American history. What was the name of Eisenhower's wife?

Her name was Mamie. Sherry knew this because they had that question before. But she thought of saying "Ikette" this time, so that's what she said, "Ikette," even though it made her look stupid and she was out for thirty dollars. This rattled Billy so much, he missed his next turn, so it was sixty dollars between them and he could hardly look at her for about an hour, but then it was normal again, she could say whatever she wanted, and her brother wouldn't take their money. He said, "Keep the whole pot and buy a stroller or something."

Drive like normal. Think about normal things. The manual is in the glove compartment. Maps are in there, tapes, credit card receipts, random junk, normal things, the registration. If they open the glove compartment the wrong way, everything spills out; it takes a long time to get it back in. The only tapes Billy would listen to are Jerry Garcia's, but they're back at the house.

The river is gray with fog. Up along the north-facing side of the railroad bridge, someone wrote a message to Jerry Garcia. There's nothing makeshift or shabby about it; it isn't just some cheap, let's get drunk and climb the railroad bridge, small-town graffiti. It was done very carefully by a steady hand in capital letters, all matched exactly in size. The old black bridge is weather-beaten smooth. The paint of the message is shiny-silver, like aluminum foil. COME BACK, JERRY GARCIA. WE MISS YOU. There has not been a train on that bridge since the end of the Second World War. It's supposed to be demolished, but maybe the person in charge of blowing it up is an old-time Deadhead, or

the father of one, as impossible as that seems.

Billy would like to know who wrote the message. He would ask them how they did it, in spite of Sherry. She hated everyone except groups with girls, but this might have been a phase. It started when they found out they were having a girl. If you wanted them to be musical, you started early. Could they name her Annabelle, the name of a daughter of Jerry Garcia?

No, they could not. Annabelle was a name for a cow, and the only song of the Dead that Sherry thought was any good was "Uncle John's Band." She only liked it because a girl group sang it, too, on an album of covers, and they did it all wrong; they sang it like girls in a choir. Billy knows that the song is about Jerry Garcia wrecked on heroin, but when it comes to the lines where Uncle John shows up at the river, at the rising tide, to take his children home, he'd think of himself walking into a day care center after work some day to pick up his baby. He'd only have to say "Hey," or just whistle in the doorway, and she'd know who he was, even in a crowd of other parents.

Billy was named William like his father. There always were William Mulhearns, in five generations, and it's lonely that he's the only one of them who's alive. Should they name the baby Willa or something and get it over with? No, Willa sounded like the wife of Fred Flintstone. When it came to Sherry's family, he would not allow them to muscle in and name her something Catholic. But he had planned to let them baptize her. They already had the outfit and everyone looked forward to the party. Sherry's family's name is Mastromatteo. They're Italians; they love baptisms.

Should they name her Marjorie for Billy's mother, a widow now for ten years? No, Marjorie was a name for boring majorette in the half-time show of a network football

game, not that Billy's mother was ever in a band. And it's not like she doesn't have babies around her already. Billy's sister, Mary Jo, has three kids. She took drugs, she had triplets. When they were born, they were as shiny and pink as three shrimps, but they had the right hearts, they kept on living: Tiny, Teeney, and Weence. Every day now, they were hitting each other on the heads with plastic shovels at a day care center.

Sherry's brothers were named for Apostles. Pete, John, Jimmy, Phil. So why was Sherry Sherry? They had wanted to name her for the stuff in the goblets at the Last Supper, and her parents couldn't call her just 'Wine.' But the brothers grew up with nicknames: Tank, Hummer, Dozer, Mack. They all have kids. They stand like human tackling blocks between their kids and all the dangers of the world. There are kids all over the place: Tonka, Bronka, Boomer, Trucker, Tonketta, Tanky, Mackie.

They had not decided on a name. Sometimes Billy called her Sherry, Sherry Baby, in a regular oldies falsetto, and he drew out the first Sherry in extra syllables, like you're supposed to, and then he added an "s" to the second one. Or he called her Jug because of the juggling.

When Sherry had her juggling act, Billy hadn't met her yet. She had never gone public with it. She'd put on her outfit in her bedroom and practice in front of a mirror.

The outfit was a wore bright yellow stretch pants that must have looked great on her, and a bright orange top, which was actually a pajama top from someone's yard sale, but it was satin, she said, like a Chinese jacket. She sewed big yellow plastic buttons down the front of the jacket and bought orange socks like you wear in the woods when it's hunting season. She bought plain white Keds and dyed them yellow to match the pants and the buttons. Yellow and orange, she was proud of it. But back in high school

she never had the guts to leave the house in those colors; she wore jeans and t-shirts like everyone else. Her hair back then was short and curly. She had put in her perms herself. She said you had to have something distinctive to set you apart from just any old juggler, so she decided to use fruit, real fruit: lemons, oranges, even grapefruit, which matched her outfit, and did not roll away too far when she dropped them. Sometimes pieces of fruit would land on the floor too hard; they'd split or pop open. But if she ever went in front of an audience and this happened, she'd stand there like she'd done it on purpose. She'd say, "I wanted that one for juice."

Billy thinks about the fact that his wife must have always smelled like citrus before he knew her. He wishes he could have seen her in those clothes, but she threw them out in a trash bag the day of graduation. Sometimes when they're hanging around the house, Billy tests her by turning about and tossing something across a room to her: his bunch of keys, a balled-up pair of socks, a potato, a shot glass, a tangerine. She caught everything he threw. He could tell she had a knack for it. He's been counting on having his baby inherit it. There could really be a future there.

Roll down the window. Cold foggy air rushes in. Many things around Billy are in their usual places. The tops of houses have roofs on, trees are standing upright, branches poke into the air. The moon is dust and rock, a waning sideways egg of a moon, appearing and disappearing in gray clouds. All the right stars are in the sky in the right configurations, but look, that's not the right planet.

It's Mars. Mars started rising tonight about a minute after sunset. Now it's over the hills, hanging low, like a dry old mottled tangerine.

"Mars, you suck, you are out of here," says Billy. He holds up one hand toward the window and blocks it out.

Sherry says, "Honey, what's the matter?"

"The streetlights hurt my eyes," he says. He imagines that Venus is there instead, because Venus stays put, in one place, for nine months. It's the only thing up there that does. It comes up before dawn for *nine months*. When the nine months are over, no surprises, Venus slides down around the curve of the world and comes up again in the evening, blazing like crazy for another nine months, high above the trees, like the white bright light of a helicopter.

Obstetrics. Guy-no-cology. Sherry's own doctor is away, he's at a conference somewhere. The faces around them are the faces of strangers.

Sherry's wearing a red flannel shirt she stole a long time ago from one of her brothers, and under it is her hugest jersey. It's orange like a pumpkin. She's got on those elasticized sweat pants they make for maternity; the waist goes under the belly, like a sling. She took the sheet off the examining table. It's not a paper sheet. It's a real one. She's got it wrapped around her on top of her clothes like a toga.

They need for her to take some clothes off. They need for her to cooperate with them Main guy calling the shots, lords it over you, a really short guy, a goatee. Doctor Goat.

Television show the other night, the type you don't switch the channel quick enough, you're nailed, there were people in a room, stripped, electric wires, stick the wires at the nipples, the ass, you need to know anatomy to be able to do this right.

Voice in the television: all tortures are supervised by physicians wearing goatees.

Goat's saying, "We need to have a talk about a C. Do you know why they call it Caesarean?"

"It's like, a surgical incision?" says Sherry. "You cut me open through the abominable wall?"

"Um, abdominal, actually. It's an easy enough mistake." This is from another doctor who just walked in, another stranger, name on his tag begins with a V, Doctor Vile; he likes to have things precise. He has tiny, reptilian eyes.

Caesarean. Julius C. Ides of March. Not born natural of a woman. This is March.

Goat puts on a pair of glasses, small ones, wire frames, Ben Franklin glasses. There was a song Billy knew in school. "Old Ben Franklin, wise Ben Franklin, good Ben Franklin, wise old Benjamin Franklin!" That's the chorus. It went, "All winter long he endured bitter cold. 'There is no way to keep warm,' he was told. So he made up his mind to invent him a stove. Wise old Benjamin Franklin!"

Sherry's getting partly naked.

Goat: "We are going to attach some wires now." The little goatee bobs up and down.

Do the monitors show a different silence from the one you could hear for yourself, if you press your ear at Sherry's belly? They do. If you heard it with only your ears, you would not be able to stop yourself from listening a little harder. You would think that the silence took place because something might be wrong with your ears.

What's the difference between naked and nude? Billy suspects there is a difference. Naked is if something was covered, but then the cover is removed. A naked banana is out of its peel. A naked expression is a face that is showing inner feelings. Sherry's expression isn't naked. It's covered. Nude is for bodies only. "Sherry, partly nude." She could also be naked. Nude is bodies only. Naked is both. Nude and naked can be bodies.

Goat: "We will make this as comfortable for you as we can. We will induce you. In cases like this, what we do is, we induce you."

Sonogram. Ultra sound. Fetal heartbeat. It's not like you could jump-start it, like a car. There would have to be juice in the battery. There's no juice. There was, and then there wasn't. Fetal. Heartbeat. Fee-tull. Get this right. I cried because I had no feet and then I met someone who had no--.

Leg bones. Heartbeat. A brain. You could really get into it, like a song you knew the words to all your life. What size of a heart? A small stone. An acorn. Billy pictures an acorn in a pink balloon that is partially filled with water. Fee. Tull. Jethro. Oh, "Aqualung."

"Don't be talking to me about rush me down the hall and induce me," says Sherry. "Because me and my husband, we got a couple of things to take care of. We want to have some privacy."

What size lungs? Smaller than the back of his hand? Can you drown in a belly full of water, can you sink in there like a stone?

I wish I learned to play guitar, Billy's thinking. I wish I had the discipline to have learned it. I wish I played even one percent as good as Jerry Garcia.

Goat says, "The mechanics of nature." He wants to talk about nature, about natural occurrences. He says the time is right for him to make a prediction. "You won't have to wait very long before contractions begin."

Contractions?

"Wait, like, how long?" says Sherry.

Goat wants to detain her. He believes it would be best. He can't be exact, but twelve to fourteen hours, contractions.

Maybe he didn't say "detain." Maybe he said, "We want to admit you," in the usual hospital way.

Sherry's pushing herself up her elbows. "Honey, get my coat," she says. "And get out the car keys."

Vile is worried. "Perhaps we failed to make clear what your situation is," he says.

"We get it," says Sherry. "I'm not disconnected from reality, and neither is my husband." Then she has a question. "What kind of cars do you guys drive?"

Vile looks at her straight in the eyes. You can tell that he's trying to keep up the habit of talking to people in normal ways, unlike Goat. "I have an eleven year old Honda," he says.

Sherry says, "What color?"

"White, but the trim is mostly rust."

Goat looks at Sherry over the eyeglass frames. "I have a Saab. Why would you ask?"

"It's mechanics. I would like to make your motors not run," says Sherry. "I would like to put explosive devices in your crankshafts."

They don't look scared. "Will you at least please wait for the priest?" says Vile.

The priest is coming to see them. One of the nurses had called him. Sherry and Billy have known this priest all their lives, but talking about molesters just went along with priests; you had to acknowledge it.

"If a priest molested you," says Sherry, "how long would you take before you told me?"

"Like starting from when I met you? Two days. That was how long it took before the person molesting me, was you."

"You would've told me before I married you?"

"If I didn't, you'd figure it out. You'd see that something was weird with me."

"Tons of things are weird with you," says Sherry.

"Not in that department."

"But you know what we would do, if you were? Put him in a car, drive up a cliff, and push it in the river. I would be the one who did the driving. I'd jump out at the top of the cliff. It would have to be his own car."

"Thanks, honey."

The priest smells like cold wind, like mustiness, like a man who does not live with women, you can tell. There's a smell on him of backs of altars. A plaid wool jacket is over his cassock, like he's on his way to say a Mass somewhere. Dominic is his name. He is not a molester. Until a year ago on Saturday mornings he played touch football with Sherry's brothers. They have a league, they're serious about it: in bad weather, they play in a gym. But the priest had become arthritic. Dom. He'd had heart surgery, too.

"You're leaving against medical advice," says the priest.

"Dom," says Sherry. "You look like, the one they ought to check in here, is you."

"Well, they told me you'll be back here again in less than twenty-four hours."

"They told us twelve to fourteen," says Sherry. "And please don't start talking to us about inducing, in case that's what you're getting at, since obviously, you talked to the doctors already, before you're talking to us."

"You didn't make a good impression," says the priest. "But that's not what I'm getting at. I want to make sure I find out about it when it's time for you to deliver."

Sherry looks away when he says this word. The priest touches the back of her head. Her hair is black like a blackbird. There's a lot of it. It goes halfway down her back. She had an appointment to cut it off before the baby came. Billy hopes she doesn't cancel it. He almost says out loud, "I want it short like she had it before, and I'm the one who's her husband." But this is not the right time to argue with his wife about a haircut.

Dom touches his hand to Billy's shoulder in the way of the manly old Catholics. Billy expects this. It's a basic philosophy. Touch the shoulder firmly and think of the shoulder of Jesus, like you're saying, son, whatever's gone wrong, you can bear it, it's not so bad as a cross.

"God's with both of you, and so is Our Lady, although it's hard to believe," Dom says. But then it's OK because he looks at Billy with a small, sad smile. He pats Billy lightly on the back, as if he knows for himself what Billy knows: no God ever made this world, because it's got too many flaws.

"I am absolutely sure that you'll be there for your wife. I know that you'll really be there for her," Dom says.

"I'm the one who won't be there," says Sherry. "Once we come back here, I'm making them give me every drug I can have, then I'm staying on them, as long as I can."

"So am I," says Billy.

The priest says, "I have a new phone, I'll give you the number." To Billy he says, "Stick with drinking."

He turns back to Sherry and touches the sides of her face. She lets him. He's not clumsy about leaning into her because of her belly. He touches his forehead to Sherry's forehead. If this were Ash Wednesday he'd be giving her ashes in that spot.

But they can't go home the way they want to because their house is filled with people. They've just turned the corner to their street.

Their house is a dark brown five-room ranch almost smack in the center of the town. They can see the downtown shops from their windows. They don't own it, they rent it from Moira's father. If they ever can afford a down payment for a house, they would never buy a house in this neighborhood; it's too public.

Moira is married to Sherry's brother Pete. It's always on and off with them: at the core of their marriage is a volcano. Pete blows up, he goes out to a bar, Moira blows up, she comes over. They keep a pillow and a quilt for her in a plastic bag under the couch. She brings her own sheets. She watches t.v. with the sound off and smokes a little pot, she's always got pot, or just some cigarettes. Did she sleep over last night? No, she hadn't been over for a couple of weeks now.

It would have been all right if the only car in their driveway was Moira's. It would have been good to sit around with her, even if all she said was, "When I married

Pete, I thought he was the greatest guy in the world, but I knew in five minutes he is scum." It would have felt good to sit around and trash Pete for a while, then go down to the store for some beer.

Sherry says, "Did you call anyone?"

"I was with you the whole time. You would've seen me," says Billy.

"What do you think they're all doing in there?"

"Waiting for us, I would say."

"I wonder if they're eating our supper."

"I put in like a half can of chili powder," says Billy.

No way are they going inside. They look at each other and decide this without saying it out loud, and it helps that it's dark, and it's cold: no one's standing around watching for them in the yard or the driveway. Every light in their place is on, but the shades are all pulled down. "Look straight ahead and keep driving, but only go like ten so I can see this," says Sherry. She puts her hands on her face like this would hide her. She peers out through slits of her fingers. She counts off the cars in their driveway, in the street, both sides of the street. "My brother's Jeep. Your mother's boring Buick. Your sister's van."

"It's not a van," says Billy. "It's a mini."

"Your sister's boring mini. My brother Jimmy's old Jimmy that I cannot believe is still running. A blue Mazda that looks brand-new."

"Phil told me Cathy was buying one," says Billy. "She must have brought it over to show it to us."

"Cathy's Mazda. The stupid gray Taurus of my parents. My brother's Ram. My brother's Blazer. Moira's Corolla, but she might've come separate from Pete because she hates to go out in the Jeep. A dumpy gray Chevy, about a hundred years old, but I don't think it's for us."

"Maybe it's Dom's," says Billy.

"It's not. He's got a Taurus like my parents. Could you drive a little faster, please, before someone looks out of a window?"

"Let's go buy some beer," says Billy. Sherry's allowed to drink beer again. She can drink whatever she wants to.

Under him is a road. When you first go out in Drivers Ed you hold the wheel at ten and two, you're like a robot, you're going, "Tell me what the rules are and I'll be perfect at this." Then, when you can really lean back and relax, and you can steer with one hand at seven o'clock, it feels good, it creeps up on you that you're not a kid, like that's the absolute moment you're not a kid.

"The Bear Went Over The Mountain" is going around in his head. Oh the bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain, the bear went over the mountain, to see-ee what he could see. To see what he could see! To see what he could see! But all that he could see was, the other side of the mountain. The other side of the mountain, was ah-all that he could see. Yeah.

He's waiting for Sherry to come back to the car. They're parked at the side of Minky Pond, where the textile mill used to be. Nothing is left of the mill except cracked, weedy slabs of cement, which were probably part of a floor. You can't see them in all the

weeds. He had parked out of sight near some willow trees. Before Sherry got out of the car, he took apart the light on the ceiling, so the light stayed off when she opened the door. Sherry said, "Just before you undid that bulb, I was about to ask you to do it."

"I figured we should have it dark. You wouldn't have to tell me."

Sherry's peeing behind some bushes. There are shadows here and there of reeds, weeds, green pond-grass.

Billy calls out the window, "Be careful, honey."

There's low-hanging fog across the pond. He can't make Sherry out in the shadows, but he knows where she is. Some branches of bushes are rustling. Sherry's voice is muffled, whispery. She's saying, "I forgot how beer goes right through me." She hasn't peed outdoors since she was in high school. She couldn't be having an easy time of it, but she wouldn't let Billy come with her, as if they were dating, like this was their first or second date.

The pond is still, and the water looks gray like cement. Back at the store, she had waited for him in the parking lot. At the checkout counter, a fat man was in front of Billy. His shirt was rolled up in the front, it couldn't reach over his waist, he didn't have one. He was grizzled, he smelled like urine, his teeth were as gray as ashes; he was disgusting.

The fat man was buying two things: a gallon of milk, whole milk, in a plastic container, and a quart of coffee brandy. Where his belly showed was as white as the milk. But the back of his shirt stayed tucked in his pants. He had the right amount of money to the penny. The money in his hand looked sweaty. He said to the teenage girl at the checkout, "You got a cat around here?" No, they didn't have a cat. "You give

away paper cups?" No, they didn't. The man walked away with the milk in one hand and the bottle of brandy in the other. He swung up the milk and took the cap off with his teeth, this blue plastic cap, but he spat the cap carefully into a trash container, which he went out of his way to pass by.

The girl at the checkout said to Billy, "Hi, Billy. You see that guy? What a pig."

Billy didn't know who she was. "Say hi to Sherry for me," said the girl. "My mom ran into her the other day and she said to me, 'I just saw Sherry, she looks ready to pop, she's totally huge.'"

Billy said, "She looks like Humpty Dumpty."

In the parking lot in front of the store, under a light, the fat man poured off some milk and it splashed to the ground. Some of the milk went into a puddle that was already there, of engine oil or coolant. It lay at his feet as white as if it came from the moon. When he poured the brandy into the milk that was left, not a drop of it spilled. He really knew what he was doing.

Sherry gets back in the car. Her hair smells like fog and the pond.

Billy says, "You cold?"

"On the inside or the out?"

"The out."

"No, I'm warm."

She's got a blanket around her. They had a blanket in the back. It was folded on the spot where the car seat would go. They had put it there to mark out the space for a car seat. This big old gray wool blanket. She had wrapped the blanket around her shoulders.

"I feel like an Indian," she says. "I feel like Hiawatha. Maybe I never told you this before, but of every single thing I read about in school, maybe all my whole life, she was always my favorite, and it's not just because I had to memorize a hundred lines of it in like, ninth grade."

"You never told me that," says Billy.

"I'm telling you now."

"I think Hiawatha was a guy," says Billy.

"It was a girl," she says. "It ends with an ah, like a girl. That proves it."

"Boys can have names with an ah," says Billy.

He tries to think of names to use as examples. All he can think of is Jonah. He says, "All I can think of is Jonah, so, I'm not arguing with you." He opens a beer and gives it to her. She's got the blanket bunched up on her arms. She takes a long drink of the beer. He opens another one for himself. He says, "If I say I like it, do we have to go back there right away?"

"We can stay here a little longer," says Sherry.

"Hiawatha," he says.

"It's a nice name," says Sherry.

"Well, you would have the same color of hair."

"You're right," says Sherry. "I didn't think of that."

He's got his window down all the way. The heater's on. It feels good to be close to water, even if it's just a weedy old mill pond. The air's all watery too.

He wants to tell her something, but he thinks he'll save it for later. He touches the back of her hand where she's holding the beer. There's something she doesn't know about

him—she only knows part of it, and the part that she knows is a lie—but when Billy was nine, ten, and eleven, he had tried to establish contact with an alien being. He'd told her instead that he used to sneak outside at night to watch for shooting stars. She had just turned twenty. He was trying to get her to fall in love with him a little more than she was already. She had been in no hurry. She grew up with a crowd of brothers; she was sick of smells of guys. She was sick of their hormones, their rough-guy bands, their sheer gigantic bulk.

"When I was in middle school, I snuck out by myself so I could watch for shooting stars, because I thought I would be able to catch one. I had this catcher's mitt. Or I'd stand there and just open my mouth like they would fall in like snow." And Sherry had said, "That's so cool."

She didn't know that he could not care less if stars were shooting. If they were, they were meteorites. They were pocky, scarred old rocks, they were bits of gray dust.

He had never imagined an identity for it. Just any sort of alien at all, some random alien. He knew that some of the starlight coming into his eyes started shining through space so long ago, George Washington hadn't been born.

Light was so slow. It did not occur to Billy for three years that aliens would never answer him, but he worried that the answers would come too late. He'd be old; he'd be sitting in a nursing home somewhere with his teeth in a glass. Even if aliens came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder, he would not be able to care, or even notice.

By the time he started junior high, he realized what he was up against. Not only would an alien have to answer him faster than light, it would have to find a way to send messages that someone in America who only knew one language, would understand.

And it wasn't as if all you had to do was wait outside in the yard with a two-inch square mirror from your mother's make-up kit, and flash it around, and expect that an alien, cruising overhead, would see it, and wonder, "What's that silver light in Billy Mulhearn's back yard?" But all the same, his messages were always simple ones, all questions. Can you hear me? Where are you exactly? What do you have instead of water? What do you have instead of oxygen?