

The Black Stones of Regret

You drop the children at the sitter and hurry to your car, their protests grating in your ears like bad brakes. You tell yourself you have the right to a bit of private life; this isn't the Dark Ages, you know, women pining for knights in shining armor. You're taking the afternoon off, to hell with diapers and soap.

It's springtime in Santa Clara and the apricot, pear, and cherry orchards are ablaze in their pinks and whites. Traffic on Prunedale is sparse, Silicon Valley light-years away. The station wagon you drive, a '64 Olds, is the size of a hay barn.

Nick's fuzzy-fuzzy slips to the floor from the mattress in back. He'll wail for it all afternoon; should you turn around? Well, he does have his bottle. Bruce's lunch pail is open on the floor, leftover cookie disintegrating, juice can rattling. Earlier he complained about his preschool teacher; seems she didn't care for his drawing of a pony on purple grass. Purple, she said, is wrong for a meadow. Why's it wrong, he asked you. Purple's not wrong, you wanted to say but didn't. American teachers, who knows what they think.

You find yourself touching your hair, your cheek: you're still among the living—and

stylishly dressed for your afternoon; none of the women you are about to join would guess you sewed your Coco Chanel look-alike while the boys slept. A blues singer on the radio is a motherless child a long way from home. Your own song, equally as sad, is a country a long way from home, a refrain that goes, You'll never be mine again. Never my love. Words of regret roll in the mouth like pebbles.

The Olds will be a pain to park. Your husband bought it used, the safest thing around, he said, so what if it's a few years old? Some weekends the whole family camps in the monstrosity, the dog sleeping underneath the car. The afternoon with Lawyers' Wives, Inc., will make up for Bradley's idea of family time.

They'll serve Danish and coffee. The pastry will be sickeningly sweet and the coffee a mockery of what you used to imbibe at *Weise & Monski*, where you translated letters to clients in England and France, described fish pumps, sewage pumps, oil pumps, flipped through dictionaries for the names of pump parts. *Herr Olle*, proud of his language skills, liked to dictate in French. You and Annfried corrected his malapropisms, giggling behind his back, *Herr Olle* pretending not to notice. Everyone in the office—the department bosses, the engineers, and “the girls,” translators all: English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, although Brigitte handled mostly German correspondence—everyone drank one cup of coffee twice a day during the rigidly-scheduled 15-minute mid-morning and mid-afternoon breaks. At lunch the chef of the *Kantine* scooped noodles onto employees' plates with his bare hands, likewise the salad greens. You used to mutter under your breath to co-workers, but it would not have occurred to you to raise the matter with the men who run things. Bosses don't mingle with cafeteria eaters; the *Herren* partake in the dining room. In California, though the coffee is lousy, you don't have to put up

with the server's hands in your food.

At the meeting you'll refrain from alluding to your past, the bread and pastries of those years; you quite understand why television Nazis get laughs from your in-laws. Thank God Brad's dad and stepmother live fifteen hundred miles away and show up only once every three years or so. But there's that figure of speech your husband uses on you, German Boots. Today you'll try to minimize your inflection. Say *vegetables* for me, someone said last time, I love the way you pronounce your vees. You wish you could eradicate your accent, your past, your existence in another country, that sense of being left out. If only a woman was in your life: a cousin, sister, grandmother or aunt. The longing for female companionship eats on you even here, among the well-meaning ladies. In another time, friendship existed: Annfried, in France with you as *au pair* and later as co-translator at *Weise & Monski*; Nancy, an American high-school senior from Detroit, here for the summer, who would return the following year to study at a German university; Isolde on that cruise down the Rhine where you and Brad first glimpsed each other; your cousin in Neibsheim, a few years younger and named after you. These women live in your mind as your country, your birthplace, your mother, your longing for love.

Your mother died at forty-two, which stopped the insistent wheedling of her cancer yet did not silence it, for you, too, take it as a given that you will live in a body wracked with pain. Impending doom is your family story. Your mother's line, *Just you wait till your father comes home*: Do you use it on your children when you're tired or cross? If you could say to them it's nothing but a woman's fantasy, the Law of the Father translated into something else. Laws are inaccurate perceptions, interpretations that don't go by the book, there's no such thing as a father with capital F, there is only this guy remembering his hurting. Your dad the baker, away at war

and prison camp the first eight years of your life: your idea of a father was your mother's idea, a hand-me-down fantasy of the male as persecutor, judge, and executioner, a man to whom one says, *Father forgive me for I have sinned*, a creature who would unite in himself all the kings, knights, gods of all the family stories and fairy tales, the *Übermensch*, the prince and redeemer. At the Eastern front, a stranger in a foreign country, he maimed and killed his fellow humans for their perceived inhumanity. And then to come home to *Father forgive me!* If you could tell your children their father, too, is an ordinary mortal, a man who has suffered, who's been defeated, who wants to be loved for a change. As a child you could not love your dad, and now that part of your life its gone for good. From your mother you learned to withhold love; your mother likely learned from hers. Is it possible to write out your sorrow, look at yourself from a distance?

A branch of Lawyers' Wives works with delinquent girls. You signed up some months ago. Since then, some of you have traveled weekly to Juvenile Hall, where you stand beside a teenager cutting into fabric pinned to a pattern. You sit next to her at a sewing machine and demonstrate how to insert the reel beneath the slide plate, guide the thread from spool to threading points, adjust the tension of pressure foot, regulate stitch length. You work slowly, deliberately, with gestures that are easy to copy. Now you try it, you say to the young woman.

She is a girl with black eyes, a child of color. Her foot experiments with the pedal, accelerates, slows down. The machine stitches at uneven speeds, careens forward in jumps, coughs into almost-halts, but eventually begins to hum along, basting a neckline here, joining sleeve to armhole there.

I've never made anything for myself, the girl says, too hesitant to allow astonishment into her voice. I didn't know I could do this.

What's your name, you ask.

Amina, she says.

Amina, what a lovely name. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

My brother's been drafted, she says, tears dripping on green-and-blue paisley. He's leaving for 'Nam in a week. I won't be there to say good-bye to him. I'm so scared! She continues to rattle away at the sewing.

You nod, you glance at the young woman, a child yet, a girl of fourteen or fifteen. You want to tell of airplanes that terrify, toddlerhood disrupted by air-raid sirens, weeds cooked into soup.

Amina, you say, putting your arm around her shoulders, I know what it's like to be scared. The girl continues to sew, snuffling down on her work, making sure the fabric scoots along beneath the pressure foot.

Touching is against regulations, the hall supervisor tells you. When you violate the rules, you're only hurting the girls.

You stare at her mouth, thin lips pressed together. The mouth can shape itself so lovingly; surely it shapes itself even for her?

And today, listening to the drone of minutes read at the meeting, it occurs to you that you should have protested at the German pump-manufacturing company, raised your voice to the chef or else to *Herr Weise* or *Herr Monski*. You and Annfried should have lodged a complaint. But girls don't complain to authority figures. German individuals do not complain. Their fear of passion. Their deference to authority. Everyone is an authority in his field, even a cook dishing out noodles with his bare hands.

But this is America. This is California, the trendsetter state. It's time you opened your mouth. At the meeting of Lawyers' Wives you complain. In Juvenile Hall the girls don't get to sew except with our supervision. The machines, half a dozen of them, go unused until we get there once a week. By the third week Amina has gone home or been transferred, the half-done dress and remnants still in her cubby hole. Before Amina you worked with Debbie and Ruth and Maria and it's always the same. None of the girls finishes what you helped her begin. You're agitated now, you practically shout at the women in their coffee cups.

There's only so much we can do, the president says, a woman in high heels and matching accessories, groomed and exquisitely coiffed.

You slink down in your seat. It's hopeless. You're unaccustomed to standing up for yourself. You think of your babies, driven from the womb into your arms like rag dolls. For this you drag them to the sitter?

On the way to the sitter's housing tract you interrogate yourself. Why did you marry a lawyer? To hitch yourself to a mouth that does the talking for you?

He wasn't a lawyer when I married him. I am trying to find my way in the world.

Why did you decide on California? To escape some cook in some cafeteria?

It got me a ticket into middle class. Bradley got things too. We both chose this.

Someday you'll have to take a closer look.

Your fear of water. Mother gave up on life early on but her fears have become your own. How often you fantasize about death, about loss, about dying! King Tut, the boy king of Egyptian antiquity, played at funeral all his life. All sixteen years of it.

The voyage from Amsterdam to New York, the stroll across deck. On the fourth day you

wondered why the ship wasn't making any headway. Waves heaved and lapped, but the *Nieuw Amsterdam* rocked in place. You imagined a shipwreck, and you unable to swim. The ocean *appeared* to be calm. The many small teeth below *seemed* to be at rest. Yet the ocean, mother of all, would swallow you alive. The future—marriage, love, sex—would slip beneath the waves.

I am going to sign up for swim classes, you decide as you exit the car at the sitter's. Gonna learn how to swim. Presently you scoop the kids into the Olds and roar off. Nick, rolling around on the mattress in back, gropes for his fuzzy-wuzzy. A pony, says Bruce, will I have a pony someday? What does pony-grass look like? Safely home in your three-bedroom bungalow you groan with relief.

In the kitchen with an American cookbook you chop celery and onion for a tuna-noodle casserole, but the children are restless. Hungry. You should feed them right now; why wait for the man of the house? To build a tale for him: look at the good wife, how she nurtures and feeds—myths passed from mother to daughter? *Wait 'til your dad comes home*, you burst out. I'm sick of it, get out of my face.

I want to be hugged myself, sink into lullaby arms, return to the mother country. I am a daughter unloved. Mutti, my mother! Where has she gone?