

THE ORIOLE
an excerpt

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All this and it was sunny outside. Warm enough to open the windows, but she didn't. Good in a way to feel overwarm, held in the heat and sunlight angled in from the windows reflecting silhouettes of the house plants up onto the ceiling. Dark leaves hung from their necks. Bird babble outside. Knife purple with jam. At her kitchen table with chairs for six, she sat and watched the light peer in through the window—its stillness, though she knew in fact it was made of movement, of waves. The orchid with its wormy roots. The pots on their rack, gleaming. Tuft of dust in the shadow beneath the sideboard. All that the eye couldn't see. Glass of yesterday's water cupping light. A speck of something floating. She could hear everything. The air, her heart, her breath moving through her throat. She could hear herself hearing. She tried not to listen. She noticed, instead, the wood edge of the table pressed to her forearms. Sharp. She felt her bare feet, cold on the linoleum floor where the sun cast no light.

All this and her daughter had called from two states away to tell her an oriole was singing in the backyard, singing on a sweetgum branch that was spreading new leaves while a cat, someone's orange cat who lived in her daughter's apartment building, lurched toward a lesser bird, a brown scrap of a sparrow fiddling at the lawn. Her daughter described it, the way it crouched on its haunches, pointed straight as a dagger. There was the oriole—she could hear it through the earpiece—and there was her daughter's television on low in the background, grumbling news, and there was her daughter saying *Hear it?* Yes, she said, and she saw there was a pen at rest on

her knuckle and a newspaper beneath the knife edge of her hand, dry and soft. She felt the slight gumminess of ink. There was a list of things her daughter would need to get from the grocery store. *Yes*, it felt strange to go out just now, her daughter said, but her daughter needed those things and she needed those things, too, those exact same things: milk, apples, eggs, jam, bread, coffee, honey, olive oil, lettuce, cheese, lunchmeat, canned tomatoes, dried beans, rice, pasta. *Put a jacket on and bring an umbrella*, her daughter said. *It's okay*. The woman on the weather report in her daughter's city had said there would be rain in her mother's state, two states away, one state between them. Simple things, simple food. She ate simply and, without intending to, she had taught her daughter to do the same. Food had been short for her, restricted for many years, and fear does not easily undo its patterns. Her feet so cold they felt like they had been dipped in buckets of river water. The exact same grocery list in her hand now. Her daughter had read the list aloud for her to copy down. States away, she and her daughter would eat the same meals. Was she forgetting anything? And now an oriole, too, in her own backyard, purest yellow and shining black and handsome as anything, singing on a sweetgum branch, a plain sweetgum branch pushing spring leaves forth from what? From its own hands? Yesterday the buds had been hard and brown as acorns. Now the light in her kitchen was cast in green.

All this and it was spring. Pollen dusting everything. You couldn't open the windows except to invite it in. Itch around the nose and brows, dry crackle in the back of the throat. She swallowed and heard her saliva go down. On the windowsill, in the sunlight, on the houseplants' leaves, a yellow film. The black cat in the grass. Last week, she had thumbed carrot, tomato, and chard seeds into the garden bed, her knees in the soil. Sour smell of mulch. And now they ventured shoots, two rows of green commas and question marks curled up from the bed. A pause, a *What?*, a valley of silence on the telephone. The cat or a squirrel or an opossum had been digging around, even from here she could tell. Soil scattered at one corner of the bed, two green

shoots and their roots dug right out—what would they have been?—and lain on their sides as though they were only resting, sleeping, dozing, snoozing, well at peace, delicate roots, waiting to be replanted, if she could. Could she? The oriole dashed off, flew back, hunting flies and wasps. A paper plate rich with crumbs. A blue vase on the sill. The skin of her hands, paper dry. You never forget the pane of glass is there, but the birds—sometimes they will.

What had her daughter said? Her daughter who looked more like her sister than her, especially now, in the picture her daughter had sent of herself standing in her new apartment in the bigger city. Over time, her daughter had grown into looking more like her sister. The thin, lighter hair, those grey-blue eyes—not hers. It had been a running joke, a family joke, that her husband had cheated on her with her sister and her daughter was the product. It was funny to think she could somehow give birth to her sister's baby, but it was nice, too, so nice, to think about their bodies as interchangeable, shared. They had once been that close. Her husband hadn't stayed, but the joke did.

When she and her sister were children they read an illustrated picture book about two brothers who had the heads of grown men and the bodies of toddlers—one with a mustache and one with a bowler hat—who went on adventures together. They rode steamships into storms, climbed mountains, took hot air balloons up into cloud cities. She and her sister for months pretended they were brothers. A plastic bowl for a hat and a taped-on paper mustache, a broomstick for a ship and the sofa stood in as hot air balloon. *We are brothers!* They shouted. Their parents didn't care or didn't care to care. In the bathtub, they each held a pointer finger below their belly buttons where they thought a boy's pee must come out. *Pssssssssss*, they said. They chanted, *Brothers, brothers, brothers, brothers*, so quietly, chins nearly touching the water, so that their

mother wouldn't come in. It was mirth. That was the word for it. Not happiness—they shook with mirth.

All this and still so many people had instructions for her. There were cards and letters and messages on the answering machine telling her things she ought to consider or do. Even the flowers, dropped off in boxes at the doorstep, came with requirements, with wishes for her to feel differently. Peaceful, strong. It was important to feel useful and productive now, the instructions said. But she hadn't felt useful in years. She worked a job where many people told her what she ought to do and she gave money to her daughter because her daughter was still young, working her first job and living on her own in a more expensive city. But her daughter had been on her own in many ways for a long time, since her father left. She herself worked hard and late and her daughter was a good kid, too good of a kid, who made her own simple dinners and did her homework and kept the house tidy without being asked. Her daughter, from a certain age on, was more like a sister, another sister, and the three sisters talked on the phone together, calling from three different states to hear about work and the weather and college classes and head colds and the awful president and their gardens and friends who the others, states away, had never even met. She hadn't felt useful in years, not really, but she didn't mind it. It wasn't a bad thing to sit in the sun in her kitchen and have no use but to think about phone calls with her sisters after just having received a phone call from her sister, her daughter-sister, who on the phone had told her what she ought to eat, what she ought to do.

What were flowers but a way to purchase what was outside and bring it in? There were the flowers, and they smelled different than the flowers she grew in her own garden—more powdery, candy-sweet—and there were the cards she had read yesterday in a pile beside her foot. There

were more cards in their envelopes on the table before her. Yesterday, she had opened the envelopes with a butter knife and stacked them. *All this*, she said aloud. The butter knife lay beside her hand. Her hand lay beside her other hand, atop the newspaper, beside a glass of water, a speck of something floating. Fingers as brittle as bark. She left the cards in their sheaths. The flowers, she didn't have enough vases for all of them. Some lay in the sink.

It felt strange to go out because she could see now how little everyone knew of one another. Last week, at the pharmacy, she had filled her basket and waited in a line of people to ring up her purchase and all she could think was, *My sister has died and she has died on purpose, but not one of you would guess it*. They might have thought, *That disheveled woman, That tired woman, That fumbling woman who can't find her credit card in her own damn wallet*. Or they might have looked and thought nothing. A train whistling. Marbles for eyes. Some days ago she had gone to the grocery store and returned only with a bunch of bananas, underripe. Last night, she had eaten two. What else could she do? It had been her sister's secret, and her sister's wife's. That her sister was very ill. That she had received fourth and fifth and sixth opinions and then stopped going to the doctor. It had been three months of doctors, three months of no doctors, and then she got her estate in order and ended it. With opium and pills. It wasn't hard, her sister's wife said, to get the pills. It wasn't a struggle. *She fell asleep*. All this, she learned afterward, when it was over, when her sister's wife called her. *She had only just begun to feel ill*.

In middle school and through their first years of high school, they both let the other listen on the line when one talked on the phone with a boy. It was a way of studying, to hear what the boys said. It made it a game. Do everything you could to confound the boy. Do everything you could not to laugh or hiccup or breathe too hard into the receiver. After they hung up, they repeated

what the boys had said like punchlines in a TV show. Flung across their beds, they kicked their ankles up and howled. *GO TO SLEEP*, their father shouted. He flicked off their light. In their shared room, in their beds that touched end to end, they could make each other laugh even in their sleep. *You looked real nice in that skirt today. How come you were project partners with Tommy and not me? But Francis Kelly let me kiss her.* Those hungry pleads. In the morning, their mother would make them do the dusting and the ironing.

All this and some child squeaked and peeped in a neighboring yard. There were flowers on the plum tree. Pink and white. Daffodils. And other birds. Hummingbirds with their needling song. Robins who only knew how to scold. It felt strange to go out. Every piece in her wardrobe was a costume. For two weeks, she hadn't seen anyone she knew. The answering machine, she let it fill. She had said to her daughter on the phone, *What do I like to eat? It's like I've forgotten.* And her daughter read aloud her own grocery list. *How about those things? Simple things, easy to cook.* But she had not put on her jacket and she had not found her umbrella. The wood edge of the table pressed to her forearms. Sharp. It wasn't going to rain anyway. The sun was out and sinking toward the horizon, again today as yesterday. What a senseless miracle. What had her daughter said? She had said, *We have to, don't we? What?* she asked. *Go on.*

All this and there was a letter in the mail, from her sister, making its way across the states to her mailbox. Her sister's wife had told her it would come. It would explain. Her sister's wife sounded like she was calling from the inside of a cave. And still she expected a phone call. That her sister could ring at any moment. Her sister had been calling her once a week. All this time. As if nothing was the matter. It had been a year and a half since they had seen each other. In the span of their lives, there were now more days they hadn't seen each other than days they had. When

they were small, they had drawn the houses they would one day live in together. Castle spires, swimming pools, doll rooms, secret corridors, purple walls. *It was what she wanted*, her sister's wife said. *It was her life*. But the way lives blur together. Just by knowing them, you give yourself to someone else. Wasn't it only her sister's voice that was missing? Her sister's body, she hadn't seen in so long anyway. In her mind, it was there in her sister's home. Her sister could go on living in her home in her mind, just as she had before. It was only that her sister had fallen asleep. Later on, she would get up. Or she wouldn't. Her sister would go on sleeping for a long time in the sunlight, white sheets and white pillowcase, strand of fair hair on her neck, spring day held in the window's glass, on her side, lain on her side—she was always a side sleeper. On her back, even as a child, she would snore. Like a purr. The oriole singing on the sweetgum branch. A bird so convinced it had something to say. The oriole, she told it to fly off to her sister's home. Hunt her wasps, bow her branches, sing to her flowers. And it did. It flew off.