

The elevator dings. Floor 2.

I'm still checking my receipt from that damn hotel café. 20 dollars for a cup of coffee and a bran muffin? Christ. First they starve you on the plane; then you sit, stomach growling in the back of the taxi, which of course smells like rotten bananas and pork rinds; and then its 20 bucks for a lousy cup of coffee and a stale bran muffin. Damn bran. Whenever Lucy used to play kitchen, she'd make me chocolate chip muffins. Playing along, I'd tell her, "Sweetheart, Daddy can't have chocolate chip muffins." She'd lean in real close and whisper through a sly smile, "It's alright Daddy. They're fat-free."

Ding. Floor 3.

Outta nowhere, I hear this tiny little sneeze behind me. It's a little girl. She must have been there all the while. She's dripping wet from the swimming pool. She grins broadly and I grumble a hello. I say 'little girl' meaning she's young. Besides that, there ain't nothing little about her. Her flabby body shakes, head-to-toe. Her wet hair sticks together in odd clumps and drips slow, steady onto her pale, freckled shoulders. I watch a drop travel all the way to the carpeted floor of the elevator and dissolve into thread. The hairs on her arm are electrified into attention, standing like translucent soldiers on a field of goosepimples. She wears a one-piece swimming suit with a giant picture of Winnie the Pooh printed on the front; poor Pooh is being distorted, stretched to the limit across her belly. I remember watching Winnie the Pooh with my mother. Piglet always sounded like my buddy Doug. Doug died in Vietnam.

Ding. Floor 4.

Christ, when's she getting out? There's no way she's on a floor above six; she's one of *those* people. One of those hillbilly kids you see sprinting towards hotel pools like they're filled with coupons and Hostess cupcakes. A familiar statistic: since 1980, the childhood obesity rate has more than tripled. How they measure that, I'm not sure. In any case, it seems congruous with my experience, so it must carry some weight. This kid definitely carries some weight. When I was a kid, we had one fat guy. We called him Chubby. I couldn't tell you his real name even if you trapped me in a very small room with Oprah Winfrey and a Guantanamo Bay torturer. Oprah would be bad cop; the torturer would be good cop. I honestly wonder if she's *the* fat kid. In all likelihood, she'll just be *a* fat kid. Christ, what was Chubby's name? He went over with Doug, I think. Poor ol' Douggie.

Ding. Floor 5.

She can't be more than nine. I wonder if she's Hispanic. I crane my neck to see her face. Nope. She's very, very white. Statistically, Hispanic children between ages six and 11 are seven percent more likely to be obese than white children of the same age. But good for you, hon', you beat the odds.

Ding. Floor 6.

She caught me staring. Revealing her buck teeth, she gives me an apple pie smile. When I was a kid, my mother always used to categorize my smiles by reaction to different pies. Apple was always the biggest, toothiest grin. Rhubarb made me scrunch up my nose and twist up my mouth like I'd tasted a lemon. Boy, she was fantastic. I should call her.

Ding. Floor 7.

She's trying to yank a Mickey Mouse barrette out of the tangled mess of her hair. I used to watch Mickey Mouse with Lucy. I'd fix her lunch (turkey sandwich, potato chips, apple sauce) and she'd eat it on the shag carpet of the living room, snug between the TV set and me on the recliner. Every once and while, she used to whip her head around and flash her tiny little smile at me. I hear her pixie laugh echo somewhere in the back of my brain. It's been thirty years. I should call her.

Ding. Floor 8.

God almighty, she's blue all over. I can hear her knees knock and her teeth chatter. Her freckles are even blue. Lucy had freckles. Mom had freckles. Hell, Douggie had freckles.

Ding. Floor 9.

God, poor Doug. Sad part is, I don't really feel bad about Doug. I feel worse for his old man. Doug didn't have the money for college and then he got snatched up for the war. I remember when he shipped out, he begged his old man not to make him go. His old man fought D-Day; he didn't give a damn. I never told anybody, but I saw the old man a few weeks after we'd all got the news about Douggie. He was just sitting on this bench in the park, watching this little boy building a sand castle. Never seen a grown man cry before. That just killed me. Wonder what he's doing. I should call him.

Ding. Floor 10.

Jesus, she looks so cold. She just keeps shooting me this ridiculous smile like everything's fine, but I can see this strange shot of desperate sadness behind her eyes. Her eyelashes are all clumped together with water. I just keep staring at her.

Ding. Floor 11.

I can't take it anymore. Holding back the glaze of tears eagerly gathering on my eyes, I slip off my coat and put it on the little girl's shoulders. She whispers a thank you. I nod. I say nothing. I grab my cell phone from the pocket of the coat. She asks me why. I look her right in the eyes, kneeling in front of her, rubbing her arms to make them warm, and I can't say anything. Thirty years of repression come spilling out onto my cheeks. Somehow, this little girl cut through my bulldog skin.

Ding. Floor 12.

It's my floor. I kiss her forehead. She does not recoil. As I pick up my bag and leave, she follows me. I'm not sure why, but it just seemed natural. We walk side by side down the hall, my luggage leaving little treads behind me on the shag carpet. Her hair drips as it bounces off her freckled shoulders. I get to my door. I push the little plastic card into the slot. I flip open my phone, I start dialing Lucy's number.

I hold my door open as I see the little girl cross the hallway and go to door right across from mine. She knocks and turns back to look at me, giving me a strangely familiar, sly smile. Someone opens the door in front of the little girl.

My jaw literally falls to the red shag carpet. I see freckles. In a rush, it all comes back to me. I think of playing kitchen with my daughter. I think of Winnie the Pooh, Mother, little

Lucy, Douggie's old man. I smell pies. I feel the sweat on my fingertips just like after I heard about poor Douggie. I hear Lucy's pixie laugh again, getting louder, louder, sweeter, louder. I feel myself swelling up like Douggie's old man did in that park.

Standing there, greeting her daughter with a kiss is a freckled woman: my Lucy. She sees me. Her eyes, bright within a fading face, light up in the old way they used to. She smiles that sly smile.

With an apple pie grin, I hang up my phone.