Apple

by Katrina Gray

If he had been able to feel what she felt—the gentle aching in her small breasts as her chest swallowed the cold, sharp air on her run to the morning bus —he might have been able to help his daughter, to tell her that soon the aches would become familiar and regular, and would become an indication of something else. That she'd feel those aches one day, and casually say to herself without conscious recognition, *I know what's coming.* But he couldn't feel what she felt, and he couldn't help her, and she seemed unaware that she even needed help. A shine in her cheek said that, like it or not, know it or not, she would need someone to talk to her about it all, about growing into the body that was revealing itself to her.

What did he know of women, anyway? Sexually, he knew their general ins and outs, though they were all different. Most of them were soft and gentle enough, but talked too much for his taste. Which was why he spent his time without them. Questions about modern European literature he could answer with ease; questions about life as he knew it were much harder to address, and the answers were nearly impossible to formulate into something remotely sensible. Those weren't the questions that Apple would ask, but they would be the ones that he would have to answer; there was no getting around it now. If she needed to know about men and women, about him and her mother, about what it would be like for her to grow up, then he had to be fair and tell her what he knew.

What he knew was that he had once known women well enough but had forgotten about how to get to know them. Now he found himself unbearably lonely, more than a decade after returning from Cairo a newly single father. But he couldn't bring himself to spend time with women casually, which is how you have to do it at first. He could do long-term; he could do intimate. But he had to remind himself that the uncomfortable moments of getting to know women are the very moments necessary to arrive at the love he missed.

The few times he'd invited a woman to his home and then to his

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bed, he'd felt hypocritical, like a contributor to the circumstance he didn't want Apple to one day find herself in—some brash man climbing on top of her and taking his pleasure, unable to give it back to her, and her not able to properly take it. But it would be inevitable, wouldn't it, no matter how he raised her, no matter how he behaved in his own affairs. There would be an emptiness always in her core, a cavernous desire that no one could fill. And that's what she had to know, and he had to find a chance to tell her.

Most nights he had a beer at home while Apple did her homework, or while she was at ballet practice with her friend Peg, or while she was out lying on her back under a dusk sky trying to spot the very moment when the stars came out. Sometimes he would lie under the sky with her, beer in hand, because he'd spent too long trying to pretend he wasn't watching her from behind the blinds of his study. He didn't know how, but she called to him without her eyes or her voice, and he would go to her on those nights. She'd scoot over on the blanket without taking her eyes off the sky and tell him, *It's about to happen.* It was a monkish ritual she'd had for years, one that he'd shared with her for as many. The more she grew, the more lying beside her on her star blanket had recently begun to make him feel as if were lying beside her mother again; and some nights, God help him, he wanted to grab her in a dizzied frenzy, close his eyes, and tell himself just that.

Apple tried to be a woman, tried all kinds of ways that she had seen on television or in movies or that she had read about in books. She put on an old apron she found and bought with her own money at a second-hand shop and baked slightly complicated pastries from scratch. She swept the dust from the grid of gray grout lines between the ceramic tiles in the kitchen until they were white again. She brought in the *Post-Intelligencer* every morning for her father, then brewed a half-pot of coffee and poured half of that into a Thermos that he took to class. She also tried to be a woman by washing the dishes and separating the laundry just right, or by shaking her long, skinny finger at her father when he didn't separate

the laundry just right.

She did the shopping sometimes, too, and had recently become quite good at it. Just last week she carried home a canvas bag full of butter, eggs, sugar, cake flour, and vanilla. He wished that he still held the excitement of wondering what she was planning to make with all those things, but this morning he knew, and his excitement had become anxiety. If he were to smell that familiar sweetness coming from their kitchen, he was sure that he would mistake her for her mother, and it terrified him that he would want to ease his hand beneath his beltloops to release the tension, staring at Apple from behind as she stayed occupied at the counter, praying she wouldn't turn around.

Apple had only asked about her mother once, when she was five, after noticing that at her neighbors' houses— which she watched from her second-story bedroom window—there were women coming in and going out, always planting flowers or beating rugs or fetching mail or bringing lemonade to men mowing lawns. Her father answered her by saying, She's in the stars, and Apple smiled because she loved the stars, and now she knew why. This had satisfied her, but soon it would not be enough.

One night a few years back, Peg asked her why she didn't have a mother. Apple said, *That's just the way it is,* and Peg never asked again. Peg understood ballet and ice cream and theme parks and sleepovers, but she could never understand a mother made out of stars. Neither could Peg's mother, but she understood other things that Apple wanted to understand too, so Apple enjoyed talking with her about cleaning techniques and recipes. Peg's mother felt sorry for her, having to bear all that. She wanted Apple's father to hire a maid or find another woman or something, anything. She felt intense pressure, too, to talk to Apple's father about changes that happen for a thirteen-year-old girl, and how to handle them. He needed to understand her needs and know how to be sensitive. Her opportunity came when she offered to drive Apple home from ballet practice.

There was Apple, just last night, standing at door in her white

opaque tights and light pink leotard and slippers, her half-sweater tied at her chest to cover the embarrassment of the small bumps that had just appeared over the summer, her chestnut hair in pigtails. Her soft forehead was beaded with unexpected rain, but she looked perfectly content, and mildly animated by the thought of surprising her father with the treats in a crumpled bag. Peg was standing beside her, and Peg's mother beside Peg, and they both had on raincoats.

“Good to see you again,” Peg's mother said. “I walked Apple to the door because of the rain.” She grabbed Apple's shoulder in a half hug, looking at her and smiling. It was strange for Apple's father to see her embraced in that way by a mother. The sight distracted him.

“Thanks,” he said. He didn't smile or wrinkle his brow in disappointment with himself for sending her of without a jacket. If there were a single advantage that fathers had over mothers, it would be the absence of guilt over little things like forgetting jackets, but that was the only thing he could see that was easier about being a father.

He still had a beer in his hand from drinking it in his armchair alone before they arrived, and Peg's mother was not at all surprised by this, or at all surprised to find him still in a suit hours after his teaching day had ended. It was maybe the fourth or fifth time she had seen him, and he always looked the same: curly brown hair brushing the tops of his solid shoulders and framing his oddly handsome features, a kind-of-nice suit, polished loafers, a beer, and no expression.

Peg's mother was waiting for him to say something, but there was nothing else to say but thank you, and he had already said that. There was a pause that no one thought about filling or even knew how to fill, until Apple's father reluctantly invited Peg's mother in. He did it only because he might have embarrassed Apple if he hadn't. She would have said it was the hospitable thing to do.

There was polite small talk. There were offers of tea, twice refused. Peg's mother quivered inside. She didn't know how to say

the words out loud, especially to a man: *breasts, sex, period.* She hadn't thought far enough ahead to imagine that she might embarrass Apple, but she remembered that now and didn't know what else to talk about.

“Apple is such a delight to spend time with,” she said. There was a start. “We would have been here earlier,” she continued, “but we stopped at a dessert shop after class.” Apple's father smiled politely and nodded, but no words came to him. He had talked his way through three lectures today, and he was done with words.

“She picked out a treat for you, by the way.” Apple held up the bag and smiled. Her father was staring at her pink ballet shoes, where fallen leaves had wrapped around the toes and stuck there, their darkness stark against the pale leather. He looked up and smiled back at her.

Peg's mother was noticeably nervous. She fixed her eyes on her left middle finger, which scratched at a loose piece of skin on the edge her right thumb. If she couldn't discuss Apple's changing body, she could at least figure out how to bring up the matter of hiring a maid or a nanny. It was too direct to tell him that Apple needed a mother. She stalled, rolling the thought over in her mind, then rolling it away, saying instead that she and Peg had to get back home for dinner. They turned to walk away, but Peg's mother stopped and turned around, having figured out gentle way to tell him that his daughter had been asking her about cooking and cleaning and other things that she shouldn't be thinking about at her age. “I gave Apple a recipe for some sort of tea cake a few weeks ago. Has she tried it out?”

“Tea cakes?”

“Yes,” she said, “she thought they'd be something you'd like. She found some at the baker tonight, but she's dead-set on making them from scratch. If she needs help, I'd be happy to come over.”

A shudder ran through him. He said a terse, “No,” and “Bye,” before shutting the door. *Madeleines*, he said to himself under his breath, with almost no breath at all.

Apple became uncharacteristically impatient and excited for

him to open the bag. She knew—God knows how—that these sweets, the ones she had been planning to make for him herself but had the good fortune of finding just down the road, would make him feel something he hadn't felt in a long time. He unwrapped the desserts and smiled at Apple, who was beaming, but he couldn't bear to touch any of the cakes to his lips. He wondered if Apple could sense his trepidation or feel his trembling, and wondered what else she knew, what else she would come to know, and how soon.

He played it over in his head this morning, a ticker-tape of the night before. He watched Apple hurry for the bus minutes after she had made herself toast and eaten almost all of it before putting a load of whites in the wash. It wasn't like Cairo, wasn't like Cairo at all, where they'd had a maid and could concentrate on things more important than laundry and toast, where they'd been younger together, and whole.

So he watched her run, fixing his eyes on the chest he had once gently washed with castile soap in her bath of sandalwood oil and warm water after she was born; now it was inappropriate to watch that same chest, and touching it was out of the question. The intimacy between them waned with each year that pushed her into womanhood, but why? To him, her chest was still the small white puddle of flesh that became a mound of belly dotted with the dried purple cord that had once connected her to her mother; and he still saw her chest covered in bubbles in her bath, or in rice pudding after her mother fed her breakfast. Her lips were the same ones that had eagerly attacked her mother's breast minutes after she had been born. She still laughed the same, and had the same way of biting her lip when she thought too hard on something. He found himself on a constant hunt for lost time, searching for the days when her mother's milk was Apple's only desire, searching what was the same and different.

As she grew, she was pleasantly silent, not like the Arab kids shrieking and shouting in the streets below. Then finally a day came along like any other, and it became the day when she said her first

word—said it perfectly and boldly with a period at the end: *Go*.

And this morning, she was going, she was running, and the bus was coming, and there was nothing he could do to help her. He couldn't make her run any faster, and he couldn't make the bus slow down. He couldn't make things change. The worst that could happen was that she would miss her ride, and that wouldn't be life-ending.

He stayed calm, standing there watching her chest draw its deep running breaths. He sipped his coffee and thought of what he would be teaching in an hour: Proust. Proust and the smell of madeleines and how the smell of the madeleines made Marcel think of the ones he ate a long time ago, and how everything else—all the memories he thought he had forgotten—came back with relative ease across thousands of pages, and he couldn't stop the memories from flowing and taking hold of him.

Go, she had said that first time in her little white pajamas, sitting in his lap and looking their maid Cherifa sharply in the eye. And then Cherifa stood up and laughed and clapped her hands and said something in Arabic that he couldn't understand as she put her brown hands on Apple's cheeks in a gesture of adoration. Apple smiled. She knew the maid's hands and liked the maid's hands and knew and liked the smells of cumin and coriander that were always on them.

And he immediately liked Apple, right then—really liked the daughter he already loved beyond words, and knew that the coming days would be easier because of the kind of person she would be. Quiet and kind, contemplative and serious, mysterious and enchanting: all of those things he knew she would be just from her utterance of that single word, that first carefully selected word. And that moment made him think that he should see about staying in Cairo at the American University for as long as they'd have him there, beyond the Fulbright post. When the time came to go back home, they'd all settle down somewhere in the valley—Puyallup, maybe—and he'd teach English somewhere small. He'd spend his

free time writing because Apple would be grown then, and she would maybe even have brothers or sisters if her mother had her way, but then they'd be grown too. And all of them would be fine there with Mount Rainier watching over them, reminding them of the world they'd loved and left behind miles beyond it. They'd think of Cairo fondly and of how their young family had begun there. How its climate had helped Apple's mother's asthma, how they had spotted Naguib Mahfouz casually sipping coffee some rare mornings. They'd go back to visit every few years, and they would not be able to imagine it any other way.

Go, she said, and only said for a long time, until a few months later. Then the day came when she was in hospital with her stitches healing, her tiny body naked and bruised, and her mother wasn't there, wasn't anywhere. She finally said, *Gone*. He couldn't possibly stay on, he told himself, and he had to leave the University and leave Cairo. If he didn't, he would go mad. His brightest student Ashur told him, *This is your home. That woman is not one of us. She is a still living by old ways....* And he was right; he was right that Cairo and its people held more comfort for him than horror. But one enemy made all of his new friends and his new home a blur and a sore. He couldn't live in the same country where she lived, and couldn't run the risk of passing her on the street. He feared he might kill her if he ever locked eyes with her. When Apple slept, he stepped out of the hospital and panned the sidewalks and markets for those eyes. He'd know them anywhere, even with the rest of her face, her body, veiled and protected from him.

No, this wasn't Cairo. And it wasn't Zurich either, where the plane carrying his wife's body back to the States made a stop. There he had endured Apple's screams as he cleaned her healing wounds in an airport sink. He managed to feed her dinner and soothe her into sleep with no help. He would never hire help again, he promised. Some help she was, Cherifa. That morning that her spiced hands came to Apple's cheeks after she first said *Go*—Cherifa must have

told herself that it was some kind of sign, a divine nod. She must have presumed that Apple needed protection from something and that she was hers to protect. This moment, he figured—perhaps baselessly—was where everything turned. He wondered if his wife could feel it too. He wished he could ask her. Was there a sign that this was coming? He couldn't think of one. Cherifa had helped name Apple, for Christ's sake, reminding her parents that it was a special thing to name a girl after flowers or fruit in an arid country, because it held hope for her fertility and her future. Cherifa had been a comfort.

That last night of wholeness, Apple's father felt a voracious craving for madeleines and tea. After teaching Proust that week, he couldn't dismiss the thought of the
celebrated butter and sweetness in his own mouth. In a rare moment of spontaneity, he grabbed his wife. He said something bold that delighted her: *I want to see you under the stars.* He asked her to go out with him and enjoy the coolness of the evening. They hadn't been out like this since Apple was born, and he missed his wife.

She put on some rich red lipstick and grabbed a beaded handbag and wrapped her arm in her husband's as she kissed Cherifa's cheek. They both grabbed Apple's face and kissed her hard, telling her that they'd be back in just a little while. Cherifa held Apple's little fist in hers and moved it from side to side in a playful wave goodbye. Apple retracted her fist and reached out to her mother, who kissed her hand and promised her a story before bed. There had been tears on their way downstairs to the sidewalk. *Cherifa will take good care of her*, he assured his wife, who sniffled and nodded. *I know*, she said, not wanting to spoil their evening.

That couldn't have possibly been so long ago. Now Apple was growing into her mother's shape—petite, boyish, and lovely—even at her age. There was no way to know what shape her mother would have grown into, but Apple's father thought about it often. And

because of the way things had turned out, he had no good way of telling Apple about living, about being a woman, about one day discovering a stain that might frighten her at first, but that she shouldn't be frightened because she was just becoming a woman—that's all. He sipped his coffee slowly to ground the moment, to make it real and unavoidable for him: he had no choice but to face this now, to tell her what he knew, which he was certain would not be enough.

He became hypnotized by each step as she ran as fast as her skinny legs could carry her to the bus that was about to pass the bench that was still far ahead of her. And even though he had nurtured her alone for more than a decade, had done it well, he immediately found himself emotionally paralyzed and unequipped to father her.

Within his arm's reach was the bakery bag that held three moist madeleines that he knew he could never eat. He reached for the bag, then recoiled his arm as if they were scorpions that might come out hissing. He thought of what he could do with them. He'd throw them away at work, he figured, and then tell Apple how divine they were with his morning coffee and ask her how she knew they were his favorite. But it wouldn't stop there; it would keep going. She would try her hand at making them at home and would want to watch his eyes enjoying them, and what would he do then?

Sipping his coffee , he wondered why there wasn't a single madeleine in Cairo that night, with as many French as there were still coming through.

Some part of him wanted to be gone from baby Apple that night. He sometimes ached for the marriage he had before becoming a father, but those aches always passed. He wanted to remember just the two of them in the same way that Proust's memories of love came back to him when the last spoonful of tea-soaked crumbs met his lips.

They searched for an hour, maybe two or even three for madeleines that they would never find, madeleines that Apple's mother could have gone back home and made herself, as she often

did when Cherifa allowed her in the kitchen. He would have rather had hers anyway, and would have enjoyed watching her shape move from counter to counter. But he wanted out of the house. *I want to see you under the stars*, he had said, and he couldn't take it back. They went from shop to shop, asking but never getting the answer they wanted, and it became a kind of game to them, a ploy to spend more time alone together laughing and sharing the very memories he thought only the madeleines could release. And they wanted to bring one back to Apple, to watch her moisten it with her nearly toothless mouth and close her eyes in pleasure with each swallow. But once evening became night, they could barely get in the doors of some of shops for all the people who were elbowing each other to get inside. It was the first night of Ramadan, which they had somehow momentarily forgotten.

They laughed at this, at all of this—their blissful ignorance, the surprise of the festively lighted streets, the smell of donkeys tangling with the scent of dried apricots and figs. Walking on, they noticed entire streets blocked off from all traffic and crammed with *iftar* tables where the faithful waited patiently to break their fast. Ramadan was in June that year instead of sometime in autumn: it had prematurely emerged from nowhere, it seemed. The odd timing made it more extraordinary and more unnatural to them, the American outsiders who delighted in clutching each other for comfort in this strange, strange world that danced around them under the stars that were more beautiful there than anywhere else.

In exquisite exhaustion, and with no madeleines, they strolled back home to Apple. The men in the minarets seemed to call only them to prayer that evening, reminding them to give thanks for finding this strange life. The dull roar of people chattering and shuffling their sandals in and out of the mosques swelled and followed them home, and they held hands. This was what he wanted to remember, and this was what he held in his hand until they reached their street, where the festive pulse of the city paled behind one lonely sound.

They could hear her screaming from two streets away; they knew it was Apple, though they had never heard her scream. Their hearts had told them. They ran to her hand-in-hand, and her cries grew louder with every step. They didn't say hello to the young doorman, who usually smiled sweetly at them, and he didn't say hello either. Hearing their daughter's screams, he buried his face in a book and tried to act as if everything were still normal, as if he'd see them both the next morning and they'd once again exchange smiles and warm words. He had heard those kinds of cries before, and had learned to ignore them.

When they got to the top of the third flight, their flight, they ran to their door and tried to open it, but it was locked. It was never locked. They pounded on the wood with their fists and yelled for Cherifa to let them in, but she didn't come for a long time—two or three minutes. They heard the clicking and hissing of several female voices behind the door and then saw the knob move just before Cherifa's calm eyes appeared at the top of the sliver of light between the door and the frame. The couple pummeled their weight against the door, knocking some of the women to their feet and clearing enough room to enter.

They ran straight to Apple in her crib, and saw her as they had never seen her: sweaty and exhausted and bawling and writhing in pain on her back. She was naked except for a diaper with an expanding red stain in front. Her mother shrieked and scooped her up and sat her in her lap, rocking and holding her tight enough to choke her, her fingernails clawing her daughter's head and back as both of them pulsed in a united scream. Apple struggled out her mother's clutch enough to stick her hand in her diaper and pull out a fist of blood-soaked coffee grounds; she looked directly at her mother when she did this, and kept looking at her when she released her clenched fist and touched her mother's cheek with her tiny red hand—a plea for relief. Her mother, whose ivory cheek was now covered in her baby's blood, gasped for air that wouldn't come to her. *Jesus!* she screamed. *Jesus Christ!* And when her eyes darted to the pile of bloody rags in the corner and then the shaving razor on

the floor, she screamed louder than Apple, whose face had gone completely white, even with the magnitude of all her wailing.

Apple's father, who had just run back to the nursery after a fruitless search for Cherifa and the other women, looked dead into his screaming wife's eyes, wondering how to stop the blood and the crying and everything else, but he had no idea what to do. His world of words could not help them. Apple's mother looked at him, then down at her daughter's diaper, hoping it would be white again, but the stain only became larger; and when she began to feel her baby's blood soaking through the green velvet of her dress to the skin of her thigh, her voice sailed in a howling echo that jerked her hysterically, helplessly, into a hollow of pain. Her arms went limp, spilling Apple to the floor. Her lungs labored for each asthmatic breath while they waited for help, Apple screaming and silencing beside her.

No one had warned them of this, of giving birth to a daughter in Cairo and then leaving her with an old maid who would wring pride out of seeing that all daughters, native or not, would be obedient, protected—would be good women. Cherifa had done their family a favor, she thought, had done something worthy of their gratitude. No one told them that these women, these relics, like to make the pain quick for the youngest of the young so their memories would spit out the experience, and wouldn't grow to know what they'd left behind and could never find again. No one mentioned that there was a secret reason women didn't step foot in coffee shops—even if they had been allowed: coffee had an altogether different association for them, would always represent a miserable attempt to soothe pain and stop their blood from boiling to the surface. And none of the bakers they visited that night said to stop looking for madeleines that didn't exist there, that weren't customary there, and to go home, go home quick, because not only was their only daughter about to endure grave pain, but more importantly, she would never know pleasure—the pleasure specific to women, the only good reason to go through cycles and aches and confusion and

broken hearts. And no one told them that it would be infinitely harder to navigate a clear route to a hospital during Ramadan and that there would be no time to spare, or that many would not see this as an emergency at all. No one said, *Go*.

So he didn't know what to say to Apple now, when she needed someone to tell her what to expect in anticipation of womanhood's second sneak attack on her, or to tell her not to be alarmed when it happens. There was no one but him to tell her that it was really a great thing to be a woman because all of this leads to love and sex and life and gratification. The only redeeming thing about a father talking to a daughter about becoming a woman was the part about telling her about the good thing—the blissful fulfillment.

If that were the talk he had to give her, father to daughter, it would be awkward, but it would be fine. He'd get through it—they'd get through it—and their relationship would change. But it would be fine because that's how life goes—how it had to go if it were to continue at all. What could he say, though, about what had been stolen from her body? The same thief had come to him as an infant, and for so many male infants, but it didn't equate. This was not at all the same, and he couldn't imagine it—a life without sexual pleasure. He couldn't imagine her naked body now, missing its secret piece.

He had known Apple's mother so well, so intimately, that he could surely get through the first part of that talk. He could maybe even feel what Apple felt, if only he could think back the details of his life with her mother, to the details of her secret internal life that she lived right there beside him for years, subtly and calmly, without complaint. That secret life was not important to him then—he never wanted to think of her pains and her bleeding and the other things that made their daughter possible—but now it was the only thing that mattered. He had been close enough to her to learn about these things. He could have learned her entire miraculous physiology by heart, but he'd never had reason to; he could never have imagined then that he would find himself here. What he had to do was grab hold of something that would make him remember what he did

know. He fingered the bag of madeleines on the table by the door and thought harder.

Even if he remembered all of that, the talk he was going to have to give her would not end there, would not end with the release of the secret that gratification could be hers whenever she wanted it. There was no one who could understand his predicament. No one could give him advice, especially not a mother like Peg's, who thought she knew everything about what girls needed at this age. She had no idea. She might have been able to share recipes and ballet and sleepovers with Apple, but nothing else.

He'd have to tell his daughter why she would always be different and what that would mean for her, and there would be nothing he could say to quell her discomfort. Then he'd have to say what he and her mother were doing when everything happened. Madeleines, which he hadn't touched in twelve years, had a place in all this, were accessories in his daughter's violation. There was nothing he could do about still wanting them and craving them, despite what they represented. He wanted to share them with his daughter, hold her, and fall into a deep and lovely sleep with her for somehow knowing that piece of him. As it were, they barely kissed goodnight because he would not eat the treats she'd bought him. They'd barely hugged goodbye minutes ago, and now she was running, running away, and he was drinking the coffee she made him.

It was hard enough for him to choke down coffee now, knowing that on some days he couldn't see the grounds at the bottom of his cup without seeing them glued together with his daughter's blood, but there wasn't much he could do about that. He had few comforts left, and he had to make choices about what to keep and what to let go.

Go. He kept an eye on Apple running, running quick as Atalanta, her small breasts firm under her sweater and her hair thrashing behind her like a whip. He pushed the bag of madeleines away without looking at them, across the table by the door where they had been since last night. A few more sips of coffee, and he'd

reach the bottom, but there was nothing he could do about that either. He moved the cup to his mouth and held it there with both hands, feeling the grounds meet the tip of his tongue.

Staring at her taut body brimming with hope that the pace of her steps would meet the pace of the bus, he imagined what her Proustian madeleine would be: what would make her remember everything about that first year of her life? Was it possible, even? Something would find her; something surely would. Perhaps something already had. She did everything for herself and her father for a reason, as if she remembered her father's promise about hiring no help and then helped him keep it. And those goddamn madeleines meant something to her, but who could say what. If they didn't whisper to her, then one day she would smell cumin or coriander or something else, and she would know, and a shudder would run through her, too. She might follow her trail of blood across the Atlantic, and confront him for the truth. A boy might caress her just so, and tell her—when she says she feels nothing—that something isn't right. What were the words to explain this before then? No words were coming to him now, within yelling distance of his daughter, his only daughter, who needed him to say something. He trembled, and there was nothing he could do to make things stop.

And there was nothing he could do about the bus, either, or Apple's mad rush to it as she crossed the street to meet it where it should have stopped, or the fog across the window of the bus. All he could do was sip his iron-smelling coffee to the bloody grounds, and watch his daughter's chest fill with cold air, and wonder if it ached inside her. Her breath formed fog within fog until he couldn't see her anymore, and he felt a stain spreading inside him, an illusive thing that made him mourn for what her life would be like. And he wished that he hadn't gone out looking for madeleines that night, and wished maybe even more that he could grab the bag in front of him and sink his teeth into one right then to remind him of what she'd once had.

And he certainly couldn't do anything—anything at all—about what happened after that.