

BARN



A NOVEL

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SHEFFIELD - LONDON - NEW YORK

First UK edition published in 2020 by And Other Stories
Sheffield – London – New York
www.andotherstories.org

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First published by Greywolf Press, Minneapolis, USA

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ISBN: 978-1-911508-64-9
eBook ISBN: 978-1-911508-65-6

Cover design and illustration: Kimberly Glyder
Offset by Tetragon, London
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI limited, Croydon.

And Other Stories gratefully acknowledges that its work is supported using public funding by Arts Council England.



Supported using public funding by

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For Matt

BARN 8

A NEST. Built of 14-gauge galvanized wire mesh, twenty-five thousand water nipples, a moss of dander and feed. Six miles of feed trough runs down rows, up columns. Staggered tiers rise ten feet high into the shape of the letter *A*, the universal symbol for mountain. Wooden rafters, plywood walkways. Darkness. Sudden light. Three hundred thousand prehistoric eyes blinking. The entire apparatus ticking and whirring and clanking like a doomsday machine. Above it the purr, coo, and song of a hundred and fifty thousand birds at dawn.

1

THE MOMENT JANEY stepped off the bus she suspected her error.

Until then (through the long hours of the ride, pulling through town after town, the day dimming, the door sighing open and shut, the darkening, then the darkness, her head lolling back and forth in a half sleep, stepping down to change buses in Chicago, waiting on the cement with her duffel, pulling out again into the dark, then the sunrise, the plaid day flipping by, her reflection laid against the window over the highway signs and strip malls) she'd felt she was at the start of a great journey. She'd peeled off from her former self, left the old Janey behind. She could almost see the old Janey ghosting along her usual track, back in the city, headed to school. They were like conjoined twins torn apart: one would live, the other would die, and the doctors weren't sure which was which, so the world watched, waited. She trembled with anticipation (the states widening, the land flattening, the fields turning into fields, not tangles of brush and trees, the God signs whipping by along the roadside). She, the new Janey, had stepped out of the line of her classmates and walked away, and who knew what would happen now. She could almost glance back across the country and see the line move forward without her, the old Janey inch up, follow those in front of her like a cow.

But now, a day and a half later, she got off the bus, climbed down on gummy legs, and the station instilled her first doubt. The clean plastic seats, the antiseptic smell, the collection of very badly dressed people, their suitcases wrapped in cellophane and piled on the floor like the components of a giant packed lunch.

Mostly, her father: not there. She didn't know what her father

looked like, but no man stood by the door with the expectancy and nervousness fitted to the occasion. No one shifted from foot to foot, turned a cap in his hands, glanced up at each person coming in from the bus. Or, a different version: no one waited in the middle of the room with a proprietary shine, arms folded across his chest, a batch of supermarket flowers wrapped in plastic in one hand, pointing toward the floor. No one around was the least bit interested in Janey's great journey. No one was having a great journey themselves.

She hadn't counted on him being at the station. He hadn't said he would be. He had said nothing at all, since he hadn't answered when she texted (the stupidity of a text in this circumstance) or called ("Uh, hi, this is Janey, your . . . daughter"). Janey lowered her duffel bag to the gleaming floor and checked her phone (another message from her mother, which she ignored). But she *had* counted on him being there.

Back at the other end of the long ribbon of the bus ride, on the other side of the country, the old Janey would be walking home from the train right now, school out at four, debate till six, a canopy of trees listing overhead. Janey could almost see her passing brownstones, swinging her backpack, tripping up the steps to the apartment, calling out, "Ma, you home?"

No, wait. The old Janey was an hour ahead of this one. She'd be eating dinner, settled into a chair, squatting with one foot on the seat, her fork in the air in a gesture of "holding forth," her mother leaning against the stove, laughing. Meanwhile, the new Janey, the one who now paused in front of a line of concession machines, had lost her appetite, though she hadn't eaten much on the slow, uncomfortable bus (she now conceded the discomfort, but while in transit she had posted photos of barns, hay, houses, population signs, along with cartoon faces expressing glee, humor, surprise, revelation, and other emotions she did or did not feel), concession machines of flat sandwiches locked in plastic compartments,

cigarettes released by a coil. Jesus. She lifted her duffel and walked out into the cool spring evening.

Janey was fifteen years and five days old and she had found out five days earlier just where the hell her father had been all these years. Her mother had always plowed her with the old sperm bank story, and Janey had believed her, though really how could she have believed such horseshit? By the time Janey was old enough to count she should have figured out she hadn't come out of a vial. What woman gives up and goes baster at eighteen, the pinnacle year of love and abortion? But Janey had believed her and longed for a father all her life. Then on Janey's fifteenth birthday her mother had sat her down and said that Janey was old enough to know: her father was alive and well and back where Janey's mother had left him when she'd run away pregnant to New York to give her coming daughter a better life, left him back in southern Iowa, a gray land of truck stops, crowded prisons, and monocrop farming. Janey was lucky to have never laid eyes on the place. Her mother explained that Janey must not now develop debilitating parental issues that could bleed into the rest of her life. She was old enough to make a mature decision about meeting him and seeing the town of her conception. Her mother would take Janey herself when school let out.

In other words her mother (*the bitch!*) had *lied*.

School wasn't out for a month and no one should keep a daughter that long from her father. Let alone fifteen years and counting.

Janey walked through the town, down a Main Street of imitation antique lampposts and shut shops, though it was only seven o'clock. She shouldered her duffel like a bandit, followed her phone's glowing map. She found the address beyond the houses and platters of lawn, on one of two identical apartment buildings

made of sad tan bricks. No buzzer, she just walked up the stairs to 209 and knocked. "Heyo," she called. She put on her clowning-around voice to cover the quaver. "Anybody got a beer in there?" She was not the sort of person to make stupid remarks but there you go. She did a quick thing with her hair.

The old Janey (the ribbon of road connecting them like a string and two cans, or like a game of telephone, the messages between them garbling, on the verge of losing meaning, dissolving) would be back in Brooklyn right now saying it wasn't her turn to do the dishes. The old Janey's mother would be at the computer saying it was always her turn to do the dishes. The new Janey's mother was calling. Janey could hear the vibration in her bag. She saw the doorknob to 209 turning. The lock clacked, and in the second between that clack and when her father was revealed, the new Janey felt a surge of hope and longing, so familiar and compressed, as if from the innermost parts of her being, an old-Janey ache.

She was startled to see a frightened grimace. She quickly corrected it into a smile.

"Surprise!" she said, lifted her arms. "It's a girl."

He was Fred Flintstone white, had the arms and stance of a bully.

She heard him (her father?) speak: "You're early."

She mock-pouted. "Was I supposed to wait till I was thirty?"

The new Janey, grinning with the bravado of the old Janey (the old Janey, who'd had the courage to send the new Janey off, pack her bag while her mother was at work, wave goodbye from the apartment window), stepped into the apartment.

Janey sat at one end of a sofa. Her father sat at the other. She felt comically female, even in her tomboy garb, like an invasion of femininity bleeding into this dead-fast male apartment. They were having a conversation that went like this:

Him: [not meeting her eyes] I thought your bus got in at eight.

Her: It's fine. I like to walk.

Him: I was going to come get you.

Her: [nodding manically and looking around] It's cool. So this is where you live?

Him: It's a temporary situation, a stopgap.

Her: Yeah? Where are you going?

Him: [his face going into his phone] Hang on. We need to call your mother.

Her: We have a sofa kind of like this. So what do you do?

Him: Oh, I'm in ag.

Her: [having no idea what that is, resuming the nod] Cool.

[Silence. Nodding continues.]

Even his TV looked old-fashioned to her. She'd never had a TV. All her screens had been computers of various sizes and shapes. She felt like she'd slipped through time to find her father and he'd turned out to be from a Smithsonian diorama, so obsolete as to be almost futuristic. And worse, he looked like he was *dying* to get away, shut out whatever was happening in the vicinity. He'd had about as much audience as he could handle in a day. This wasn't going like it was supposed to.

Him: You said you wanted a beer?

Her: I'm fifteen.

Him: Right. I'll call your mother. [pressing button] It's ringing. [raising finger] Hey, she's here . . . yeah . . . yeah . . . [glance up at Janey] Uh, I don't think so . . . okay . . . [holding phone out] She wants to talk to you.

The last thing Janey had said to her mother in her screaming tantrum after her mother delivered the news that she *knew* who her father was, and after Janey had demanded to know how her mother could have *lied* all these years, how she could have kept her away from the man who never even got the *chance* to be her father, how who on earth would *do* such a thing unless they were a *horrible* person, after all that, she screamed, “I’m never speaking to you *again!*” (little did she know), and the next morning she’d said into her phone, “How do I get to Iowa from here cheap?”

Now, sitting on her father’s (?) sofa, she crossed her arms and looked defiant. She didn’t want her mother to even *hear her voice*.

Him: [returning the phone to his ear] Uh, I’ll have her call you back.

He put down the phone. “Your mother says you need to eat.” He rocked off the sofa and padded into the kitchen.

Not to mention, *that’s* why her sperm donor was white—because her mother had had *sex* with him, not because she selected *white* on a form. Janey’s grandfather had been from Mexico, and Janey and her mother shared his name. Flores. Why didn’t you pick Latino? she’d always nagged. This really explained so much.

“You want a pop?” he called from the kitchen. “She always told me you’d come find me someday. If you’d waited a bit longer, I would have been better situated.”

“No,” she fluttered back, about to launch into a show of appreciation for . . . for . . . “No, this is nice. This is . . .” She looked around for some household object to compliment. She slowed. “Wait, what?” she said. “When?”

He was back in the room with a generic orange can. “When what?”

“When did she always tell you?”

“Tell me? Yesterday.”

Her head began to buzz. “No, when did she tell you I *existed*?”

He looked confused. “She always told me you existed. Since you existed.”

Janey felt a sudden sickening. It occurred to her for the first time: her mother hadn’t precisely said he hadn’t known. The buzz in her head grew louder. She couldn’t breathe. She found she was needing her full mental capacity to keep from crying. She managed, “And you didn’t want to come find *me* someday?”

He cleared his throat. “Well, I . . .”

A unit of air somewhere in there clicked on.

That’s when she saw it in a flash, the past, and a premonition of the future, the gravity of her error, her series of errors, her miscalculations, that: (1) He didn’t want her here. (2) He’d been dreading all these years the day she’d come find him. (3) He was scared of her, his daughter, was scared of all things female. He was one of *those*, her father. (4) This apartment was way worse than her apartment, and this town was way worse than her city. (5) She wasn’t going to know how to love, or like, or even how to know this stranger, (6) who was her father. (7) She was so hurt, angry, (8) (and yes, ashamed), (9) that she wasn’t going to know how to go home.

How long they were silent, she didn’t know. Three minutes? Twenty seconds? She had her head in her hands.

He placed the soda on the coffee table, sat down carefully at the other end of the sofa. “So, kid,” he said at last, “how long are you staying?”

She raised her head. She felt in that moment (how long was she *staying*? so transparent and cowardly) the value of the two splintered lives, the old Janey who’d stayed behind and the new Janey who’d left, the worth of them switching sides, whooshing by each other, the life she’d catapulted herself into dropping in worth, down, down, plummeting, and the worth of her old life

lifting, rising. She felt the vinyl under her (her mother did not and never would own an ugly-ass couch like this), she could smell his old clothes, the cockroaches in the walls, and it was right then (she felt it, like a lock clacking shut) that the deadening began (though it took years), because she didn't pick up her duffel and march back to the station that night, like she knew she should. She stayed right where she was because she was going to make this man know her, or at least pay for not knowing her.

"Great news, *Dad*," she said. She kicked the duffel at her feet. "Forever!" (Little did she know.)

His expression did not change. He may have flinched a little. He scooched forward, his hand coming up between them—to hug? to smack? to point the way to the door? She leaned in. She was ready for anything. He had something in his hand. Rectangular.

Fate is not determined by one mistake, though they train you to think so, starting with the Bible—one wrong move and you're stuck outside in the rain while the ark floats away without you, or you're wandering the desert for decades. (Janey had gone to a Catholic girls' school until she turned ten and finally triumphed over her mother and went charter.) In fact we have many, many chances to fuck up. And if we figure out how to fix what we fucked, we will fuck it up again.

"Well, that's fine," her father said, his face twitching (was that a smile or a frown? It was the kind of face you really couldn't tell). "Let's just check the scores." He pointed the remote and turned on the TV.

No, it was not her only mistake, but it was certainly her greatest, as others have great loves, great ideas, or great tragedies that befall them. All else Janey could do would pale beside this error. She could kill a man. She could drown herself in a bucket. She could fail to obstruct a politician who would go on to torture millions. Whatever she did going forward would trace back to this, the nadir, the alpha.

She settled back on the sofa, the “scores” flickering across her face. She thought of the old Janey, her other self, the original, who hadn’t left, five states away, shimmering in her brownstone in Brooklyn. She could almost see her. That Janey was curled in front of her laptop, working on her Malcolm X paper, and her mother was passing her a bowl of ice cream, because it was that hour. The hour of ice cream.