

Quercus Alba

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WHEN THEY MOVED IN, Beth barely noticed it there at the corner of the lot, its crown lifted over the rooftops and its branches spread so wide they shaded the better part of three lawns. How could she miss something so massive? Perhaps because she was massive herself, nine months pregnant and counting, her ankles thick as tree trunks and her swollen belly marked with a dark line as if to indicate the seam where she would burst open and release her seed to the wind. All she wanted was a place to land. She'd preferred the stately neighborhoods, the front yards with wrap-around porches and gazebos, the houses with bay windows and gingerbread trim. But her husband Phil wanted to get closer to the woods. So they wound up looking in this forgotten corner of the city where the small houses and large lots left the tree cover undisrupted and neglect allowed honeysuckle and Rose of Sharon to spread. She gave in and signed the mortgage, even though she could hardly imagine the span of thirty years, longer, at this point, than she had even lived.

The real estate agent described the modest ranch as a starter home, something like a training bra, Beth supposed, preparing the body for further domestication. And Phil assured her that they would consider selling after five or six years. Still, she couldn't help but feel that she had been tricked into the bargain, immobilized into submission by her heavy belly and aching feet. How had she come to this? She'd spent her whole life on the move. Her father was in the Air Force and she'd lived in five different cities, one of them in Germany, before turning eighteen. Unlike her younger sister, who cried for weeks after

each reassignment, Beth adjusted quickly. She joined the Girl Scouts in Nebraska, the soccer club in Colorado, the swing choir in Texas, and the debate team in Virginia, slipping into each new identity with the understanding that she wouldn't have to be this person for long. So she might as well play the role with zest. She spent her junior year of college abroad in Barcelona, and, after graduation, got a job with a franchise that sent her travelling around the country inspecting hotels.

Then, upon being transferred to this new city in the lower Midwest, she'd done as usual and joined a club. This time, she chose a hiking club to keep her active on the weekends. She took great pleasure in the lightweight hat that sat atop her persimmon-colored curls without crushing them and shivered with pleasure as she ran her hands over the heavy treads of her new boots. But when she arrived at the designated trailhead, she discovered that the group consisted of only four people, half of them over sixty. The old man stood stabbing dead leaves with his trekking pole, as if determined to clear the whole park of debris, while the old woman rubbed his seamed face with sunscreen. In this way, Beth understood that they were married.

Next to them, a slim middle-aged woman with extraordinary posture lifted a pair of binoculars from around a neck so delicate you could make out individual bones. Although she was silent, her whole body radiated purpose. Now this was someone Beth might like to know. But the other person, a man of indeterminate age, was the one talking, throwing his arms wide and bobbing his large blond head. He was describing the sycamore he'd discovered on his last outing, its roots exposed by erosion, still clinging to the side of the bank. The others noticed Beth and nodded in her direction. But the blond man kept talking, his gestures growing wilder, until she was afraid he would knock into her with his elbow. He finally turned and saw her. But even then, he didn't stop gesturing, only drew her into his orbit, touching her first on the arm and then on the back as he led the group into the woods.

Looking back, Beth couldn't believe how long it had taken her to shake off the trance of motherhood or began venturing out into the yard. She'd taken maternity leave, a decision she regretted, because it left her with no reason to wash her hair or wipe the crust from her sleep-deprived eyes. Cam was a colicky baby, and only seemed truly happy when nursing. Then his fists would

finally relax, the fingers spreading open in ecstasy until his palm rested possessively on the curve of her breast. She'd never experienced such physical power, not even on the three or four occasions when she'd inspired erotic thralldom in some unsuspecting male. But it was also a fearsome responsibility, and, in fulfilling it, she felt herself turning into a troll woman, weighed down by her heavy breasts, back constantly bent over the basinet. She was growing pale as a mushroom and when she passed herself in the mirror, she saw her curly hair crimped up into bizarre shapes like topiary.

One day, in desperation, she took Cam out on the deck to nurse him in the fall sunshine. Over in the corner of the lot, the oak tree beckoned, light winking though the leaves that had just begun to turn, the green interspersed here and there with a startling red. Seeing them, she began to cry. It had only just been summer. It had only just been adolescence. She had barely begun to live. Now life was passing her by, hemorrhaging color like a woman in childbirth. She stood up, without bothering to cover her breast, and carried Cam down the deck stairs and into the yard, the lawn cool under her bare feet. The smell was overpowering—loam, leather, spice, smoke. She walked to the tree, getting so close that the roots rose up, rough and solid, under the arches of her feet, and she clung to them like a tightrope. Holding the baby out in front of her, she touched his infant hand to the ragged bark and a shiver ran through her. Cam had stopped crying, in spite of the fact that he'd been removed from the breast in the middle of a feeding. And the tree was demanding something from her. What could it be?

She kept wondering, through a hurried lunch of tuna fish and crackers, a phone call to the city, and a hushed reading of *Goodnight, Moon*. Once she finally got Cam down for his nap, she went to the bathroom and rummaged through the top drawer, where she stored the diaper rash cream and the ointment for her sore nipples. There, under the cotton balls was the remainder of Cam's umbilical cord, which had fallen off, as the doctor predicted, seven days after his birth. She picked it up and fingered its rough edges. If you didn't know what it was, you might take it for a discarded roach, the dry remainder of some forgotten pleasure. What to do with such a thing? Just throwing it into the garbage would be crassly unsentimental, while keeping it as a memento would be manifestly weird. Besides, wasn't there some superstition about the umbilical cord? That whoever possessed it could control a man's destiny? She

had to get rid of the thing, for Cam's sake, if not her own. And she knew just how to do it. She checked the bassinet to see that Cam was still sleeping, his face untroubled as a pink rose petal in repose. Then she grabbed a trowel and went out into the yard, where the tree was shaking its leaves in anticipation, as if waiting to be fed.

The next day, Beth went out and bought a can of formula, instructing Phil to start Cam on the bottle in her absence. If she couldn't work, she could find other reasons to leave the house. On Monday night, she took a yoga class. On Tuesdays, she went grocery shopping. On Wednesdays, she met with the Sierra club. And on Thursday, she had a glass of wine with a friend. Meanwhile, Phil took Cam on a nightly hike, even when it got so dark he had to strap on a headlamp.

Things were fine until one weekend in late October, when she looked out the window and saw Phil running his hands over the trunk of the oak tree, pressing his face against its bark. His broad back was covered in a green hunting jacket, and he seemed to meld into the wood, closer to the oak than he had been to her own body in months. She felt a flush of jealousy. For her husband, she wondered, or for the tree? Did Phil suspect anything about the umbilical cord? He'd never asked about it. In fact, the whole birth experience seemed to have faded from his memory.

Watching him, she grew so distressed that she ran right out the door without her coat.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Just checking for damage. I've been listening to the woodpeckers. They're really going at it. And I think I've figured out what they're so excited about."

Beth stared at the thick trunk, so large it could contain two or three people.

"Here, let me show you." he said. He took her hand and conducted it to a hole in the tree's side. She felt a break in the bark, a painful breach in its consistency, and protruding from the hole, the rough nipple of an acorn cap.

Her breasts filled with milk and she pressed them flat against the bark, just to contain the flow.

"It's their storage system. They can fit thousands of acorns into a single snag. But usually, they pick a dead tree. That's why I'm concerned."

"And what are you going to do about it?"

"Just wait and see," he said, patting the trunk. "The old girl seems pretty healthy otherwise."

Beth stepped away from the tree to stare at her husband. "Why do you call it a girl?"

"Girl, boy, it doesn't matter. Both flowers grown on the same tree."

Then she felt another surge, the milky sensation slipping down to her groin.

That was how they broke their dry spell, after months of celibacy, and how Beth found herself pregnant again before Cam's first birthday. She'd delayed going back to work for so long that she lost her old position, and when she thought about applying for a new one, she was too tired to imagine what she might like to do. Two children under the age of three. She could hardly make it to the backyard, where she'd spread out a blanket and lie there nursing Keely, while Cam played beside her. He'd grown from a sickly child into a sturdy one, with his mother's unruly hair and his father's broad nose and dimpled chin. The first word he uttered was "outside" and he demanded to be there as frequently as possible, calling out for the privilege as adamantly as he'd once demanded the breast. Once he was out the door, he always gravitated toward the oak tree, digging at its roots with a plastic shovel or sword fighting with the sticks that fell from its branches.

When Keely was three years old, Phil lost his job as a surveyor and Beth thought they would have to divorce. There was the money problem, of course, but beyond that, the house just seemed too small for the two of them. They were constantly bumping up against each other. He'd spread his topo maps out over the living room floor where she was trying to do yoga. She'd get started on a big cooking project and he'd come into the kitchen to mix up a bath of gorp, gut a pumpkin, or clean a cooler of fish. She thought he would be depressed by unemployment, but instead, he took the opportunity to indulge his interests. He planted a garden. He studied up on ornithology. He set up a tent in the yard and camped out with the kids. The only thing that didn't seem to interest him was Beth.

Well, she didn't need his approval. She had wanted her freedom for so long, and now that she had a few precious hours, she didn't know what to do with it. If nothing else, she could certainly find a job. She didn't waste any time in

pondering the possibilities, but took the first thing she could get, a position as a hospitality director at an event center. It was a relief to wear real clothes again and she was surprised by the way her shape emerged, still human after all, the shoulders broad enough to give authority to a suit jacket, the hips long and fluid in a fitted skirt. She often had to work nights, and by the time she came home, she felt a physical longing for her children, their sticky fingers and smooth skin. But they were becoming unrecognizable. Phil let them dress any way they liked and they often wore their Halloween costumes for days in a row. Instead of the usual fish sticks and macaroni cheese, he had them eating gorp and venison, so that their breath smelled like that of middle-aged men. Phil never brushed Keely's hair and when Beth finally took a comb to it, the little girl shrieked and squealed, wriggling like an otter in her mother's lap.

One summer evening, she came home to find Cam peeing against the oak tree. Keely stood next to him, shirtless, her blonde hair matted into a crown. When he was finished, she wiped at his penis with a handful of green leaves.

"What are you doing?" Beth demanded.

"Brother watering the tree," Keely said, her chubby face sly with defiance. "I help."

Where was their father? Where was Phil? How could he leave them unattended like that, two children under five? She screamed his name and felt her whole body go hollow.

The sound of laughter erupted from above, a rough rumbling that seemed to emanate from the sky itself. Was there a thunderstorm brewing? Or was even the tree mocking her, after all they'd shared? She didn't think she could stomach the betrayal. Then she looked up and saw Phil straddling a branch, maybe fifteen feet off the ground, his head thrown back, as if in ecstasy, and his long legs dangling in air.

She considered quitting her job, just to save her children from savagery. But that fall, right before Cam entered kindergarten, Phil found work with the city and the family settled into a new kind of balance, the parents at work, the children at school and pre-school, the tree left to its own devices in the abandoned yard.

Still, Beth could not recover from the vision of Phil dangling above her, like

some renegade angel. He had made her the straight woman in the marriage, the authority figure for their children, while he sat and laughed at her from on high.

She felt her body atrophying, losing its capacity for pleasure. Then she'd suddenly be seized by inappropriate desires: for a ridiculous trash-talking neighbor, for the mountain-biking father of one of Cam's classmates, for a particular slim mustached waiter on the catering staff. She only thanked God for the preposterous nature of the fantasies she would be too proud to indulge.

Then one day she found an object that she couldn't laugh away. He was the owner of a tapas bar, one that frequently catered events at her center. And every time he came in, he made a point of stopping to talk, asking her opinion on a new menu item or bemoaning the bland taste of his *midwestern* patrons. She told him about her time in Barcelona and he bragged about the quality of cava in his hometown. He didn't flirt with her exactly, but simply absorbed her attention, so that the rest of her pragmatic world melted away, allowing her to focus for whole minutes on his dark eyes and narrow hips. For months, she evoked his image nightly. But she could never break her way out of the dream state and into active satisfaction.

That was how it had been with Phil, she realized. After a few weeks of hiking with the club, she found herself dwelling more and more on its leader, a large man with infinite enthusiasm, who always seemed to be spilling out of his clothes, the ripped hiking shorts and torn T-shirts, the maroon vest shedding down. At the time, he was already mid-way through his thirties, but never spoke of a girlfriend or a wife. He only mentioned his adventures in Colorado with a hiking buddy and his trips to Florida with his sister's family. A man as confident as that, without a love interest. Beth could not fathom it.

She pondered the question late at night, while reading travel guides in her apartment or staring at the sad remains of room service at one of the hotels she was paid to inspect. She imagined taking Phil out of his element, to a bar or nightclub. Then perhaps then he would reveal his proclivities. She was well acquainted with his limbs, which were always evident in his hiking gear, but could never quite envision the make of his torso. So she dressed him in tight jeans and a tucked-in shirt. She put a drink into his hands—a Manhattan, maybe,

although she was reasonably certain, by this juncture, that he would prefer a craft beer. Then she asked him outright. What was he into? What did he like?

Depending on the answer, she'd find herself sprawled face first on the mattress, straddling a pillow on the sofa, or lying in the bathtub with her legs braced up against the wall. But no matter what she did, she couldn't bring herself to orgasm.

That's when she knew for certain that she had to sleep with him.

She held off on the bar owner, however. As much as she wanted her freedom, she couldn't risk losing her kids. So she settled for the glow of lust over the garbage fire of gratification, congratulating herself on her restraint.

Phil, meanwhile, seemed oblivious to her inflamed state. And when he reached for her in the night, she did her best to still her senses, urging him toward orgasm before she could even get started on the road of no return.

One night, there was a tap on the roof and she startled, moving closer to Phil's back. After two or three more taps, she woke him, convinced there a burglar trying to get into the house.

"It's just the oak tree. It's masting. Haven't you noticed? There's a bumper crop of acorns bringing all kinds of critters to our yard."

There was another tap, as if to confirm his diagnosis and Beth snuggled into his back, a familiar position that she hadn't assumed in months—or was it years? His smell enveloped her in its yeasty comfort and his muscles felt solid as packed earth against her chest.

The next day, she went out and saw the acorns in the grass like manna, scattered in the sand box and lodged between the boards of the deck. So much nourishment and she was starving. She had to take a step back and try again.

For the next few years, life went smoothly. Keely started gymnastics class and Cam took up Little League. Beth got a new job at an event center on the lake. The last members of the old hiking club passed away and Phil recruited a group of livelier people, some of them even younger than his wife. When he returned from their outings, his face was flushed to an alabaster pink, emphasizing an old patch of acne, and he stank of tree sap and cologne. Who would wear cologne into the woods? It went against his own principles. Beth found herself irrationally angry, more annoyed by his ridiculous affectation that any infidelity it might portend.

She spent more time in the yard now, relishing the few weekends and evenings when she didn't have to work. The children were old enough to play on their own, their babbling voices no more demanding than the clatter of squirrels overhead. The oak had grown even larger, so that it dwarfed the rest of the property and its lower branches began to encroach on the roof. She sat in its shade reading about France and Denmark, Germany and Spain. Maybe she didn't need human company. Maybe she didn't have to leave home to drift away. But, as fall progressed, she felt something unusual emanating from the oak, a kind of sadness that fanned out underfoot like a root system. Its leaves had turned a dull orange without ever falling, massed together like the waste paper in the bottom of a cardboard box. She'd never noticed this before. But then, she'd missed so much in the hurried patch of life that was just behind her. Now she took the time to look up the phenomenon and found that in certain species, the leaves died on the tree, cut off from its nutrients, but remained clinging to its branches throughout the winter. Marcescence, it was called. Scientists were uncertain about the evolutionary purpose. Some speculated that the trees benefited from a system of timed release, most of the dead leaves reaching the ground in spring when their nourishment was most needed.

Finally, some of the upper branches began to shed, and now the sight was even sadder, the crown bare and the lower branches molting. By this time, Beth had to wear a jacket and gloves, so that it was difficult to separate the pages of her book. But she didn't want to go into the house, which echoed with Phil's absence. Even when he was home, he spent his time out in the garage, fiddling with his fishing lures or reading his maps.

One day in early November, he called her to come in. She closed her book with reluctance, wondering how she would ever find her place again. The air inside the house was stale and dry, snapping at her skin with electricity.

"I don't want the kids to hear," he explained, closing the door of their bedroom and directing her to the bench at the foot of the bed.

She dropped onto its hard cushion, feeling her will collapse.

"I've done something. Something I'm not proud of. And it's not right to keep you in the dark."

Why did he need to tell her when she'd known all along? It seemed like the ultimate cruelty.

But he sat down next to her, his thigh touching hers, and told her he'd been

having an affair. A young woman, a member of his hiking club, had started spending time with him. At first, it was innocent. They met mid-week on his lunch breaks so he could show her the wagon trails and cemeteries, the paw paws and persimmons, the deer wallows and fishing holes. Then things started to change, so gradually that he didn't see it happening. He didn't ever mean to undermine their marriage. It was just that he needed something, some crust of freedom for himself alone.

Beth felt the fury in her jaw, like a rubber band stretched tight. She wished she had slept with the restaurant owner. She wished she had screwed every man in her path. After trapping her in domesticity, sealing her in so tight she could hardly feel her own body, Phil had the audacity to crawl out of the bargain and escape its bonds.

“I want you to know, it’s over. I won’t be seeing her again.”

“Oh? Why stop now? Just because it’s getting too cold to fuck outside?”

She remembered their first time, a few months after they met, when they stopped in a meadow to survey the remains of a controlled burn. The air smelled of caramel and ashes, hay and fresh bread. The Blue-eyed Marys were already growing back, and butterflies winked all around them, airing their orange and yellow wings in the sun. Phil found a fallen tree trunk that still sprouted green leaves on one end while spilling reddened wood chips at the other. And when they rocked against it, she felt a new kind off pleasure, moving in tandem with the universe instead of hurtling through it for a change.

“I’m done with all that. I’m passing on the leadership and quitting the club,”

That must have cost him something. Beth did not forgive him, however. She only maintained her silence and set up camp on her side of the bed, using a pillow as a barrier between them. It was a wet fall, and Phil was constantly up on the roof, cleaning leaf litter from the gutters. He often asked her to come out and hold the ladder for him. She shivered in disgust as he ascended, watching his muscular calves flex with power. She looked up the leg of his shorts against her will and wondered if she could ever bring herself to touch him again. One day, a tremor passed through her and she let go of the ladder. She watched, in fascination, as it trembled with her husband’s weight. It wouldn’t be difficult to dislodge him. It would only take the slightest nudge. But the wind blew through the oak tree with an insistent hiss and brought her back to her senses, so that she reached for the ladder and held onto it with all her strength.

Soon afterward, Phil began building a tree fort in the oak's branches. He said it was for the kids, of course, but Beth knew otherwise. Even in the heart of winter, he would be out there in the cold, pounding nails and sawing boards while bellowing folk ballads at the top of his lungs.

Beth sat in the kitchen drinking hot tea and scrolling through real estate ads. There were some reasonable properties out at the lake. She was making enough money now that she could definitely afford her own apartment, if not an entire house. But she couldn't stand to disrupt the kids. Her time with them, which had seemed so endless in their infancy, now appeared short, and she felt the weight of each lost tooth like a stone dropped into a well.

Then one day when she was hanging Keely's gym suit out to dry, she saw that a tree branch had extended out over the deck. A tinsel of catkins hung from it, dangling strands of tiny green flowers and giving off a phosphorescent scent.

"Come on up," a voice said.

She walked over to the tree and hoisted herself up onto the ladder, unsteady on the rungs.

"It's like a deer stand for a guy who doesn't hunt," Phil said, taking her hand and pressing it between his knees.

"Then what are you looking for, soldier?"

"I don't know, what have you got?"

"Huge resentments, visible stretch marks. A decade of regret."

"But it doesn't seem so bad from up here, does it?" He swept his hand over the yard and she followed his gesture, the wheelbarrow filled with firewood, the deck chairs draped with laundry, the garden just beginning to sprout a few green shoots.

"How old do you think this tree is, anyway?" she asked.

"Old Alba? The white oak is notoriously long lived. I'd say at least a couple hundred years."

"Maybe if I could live that long, I'd have time to forgive you."

"Maybe if you forgave me, your cortisol level would drop off and you'd live a few extra years."

So they settled into a wary peace. Cam entered junior high school. Keely started playing the clarinet. Beth cut back on her hours, just so she could attend field trips and band concerts, holiday parties and baseball games. Phil got a promotion and they looked at a few houses in an upscale neighborhood on the other side of town. But no one had much enthusiasm for the project. Cam hated the isolation of the subdivision, with no convenience store or fast food joint for miles. Keely couldn't stand the idea of moving away from her best friend, a compliant brunette who was willing to go along with her bizarre role-playing games. So they stayed where they were, the kids growing too wise for their parents and too large for the house.

Beth savored each sporting event and family dinner. She couldn't believe her luck—two healthy children, with no problems bigger than math phobia and peanut allergies. She thanked God that she'd waited it out. If she wanted to leave Phil, she could always do it after the kids were gone. He had mellowed anyway, and spent his free time bird watching or collecting exotic insects. Each time he went on a hike, he made an elaborate display of inviting her along. And on the rare occasions when she agreed, he'd cut her a fresh hiking stick and tuck a baggie of gorp into her purse.

Then, in the spring of Keely's sophomore year, Beth discovered a lump under her left breast, a hard knob like a stone in the flesh. She remembered the pain of those early days of nursing. She remembered pressing her engorged breasts into the side of the oak tree. Now she sought Alba out again, pushing herself into its trunk as if she could enter it and share in its longevity. *Quercus Alba* could live nine hundred years, according to Phil. The gray bark peeled away at the slightest touch. But underneath, the trunk was hard as metal.

The doctor said they'd caught the cancer early. They would schedule surgery immediately and try to avoid chemotherapy. Beth was torn between dreading the operation and just wanting it to be over. She could hardly abide the feel of the bra against her skin. And when Phil touched her in sympathy, she brushed his hand away. She told the children she was going to be out of commission for a few months. Cam started clearing the table without being asked and Keely bought her a box of honeysuckle bath soaps in a heart-shaped tin.

Even though it was a routine surgery, she had to sign the papers for resuscitation. She had to remove all makeup and jewelry. She had to take off her wedding ring. But she couldn't shed the weight of unfinished business: her hopes

for the children, her feud with her husband, her desire to escape. Her family sat around her, as if warming themselves at a fire. Phil made a joke about her fashionable ID bracelet. Keely brushed her hair with a touch so tender Beth couldn't imagine where she'd learned it. Counting backward for the anesthesiologist, she felt her life moving in reverse. What was she, before the children, before Phil, before menstruating or growing breasts?

When she woke, she didn't dare look inside the empty fold of her gown. Her whole body felt lopsided, the phantom breast throbbed under her arm. As it turned out, she did have to get chemotherapy. All the red-gold hair fell away, leaving a scalp as bare as that of an infant. She took to wearing Phil's bandanas, comforted by the aggressively healthy smell of his sweat.

But in nine months, she was feeling like herself again, helping out with band fundraisers and attending baseball games. It was Cam's last year of high school, and on Senior Day, when she went out on the field to accept a single yellow rose from her son, she had a full head of hair, a thick bob with eerie flicks of silver.

That summer, Phil became incensed when their next door neighbor feuded with the city over a sewer line and cut down the tree, another white oak that seemed like the companion for their Alba.

"She wasn't even diseased," he said. "The guy just did it out of spite. Think about it, maybe a hundred and fifty years of sunlight and carbon gone to waste."

In truth, their own oak did look sad, its bark gray and some of its branches wrapped in cobweb silk.

"At least Alba's getting more sun," she said. She had taken to calling the tree by the name her husband had given it. *Quercus Alba*, the white oak standing guard over their yard.

But Beth couldn't get used to the bare space in the tree cover. She felt unprotected, too close to the sky and any weather it might bring. She worried about a relapse. She worried about her children, who were growing too large and restless for her to protect.

Cam went to college on a baseball scholarship two states away, and Beth mourned him for months, her remaining breast aching every time she saw his favorite cereal in the cupboard or his abandoned skateboard in the garage. One child and one breast gone. Her life half over. Keely, meanwhile, developed the

most violent disdain for her mother: her clueless expressions, her pretentious cooking, and her stuffy clothes. Now that Beth was healthy again, she was a legitimate target, and Keely seemed intent on making up for lost time.

This stage coincided with Beth's menopause, brought on early by chemotherapy. Now she was as hormonal as her daughter, and cried at the slightest insult. Her skin felt so brittle that she wanted to scape it off. And when she looked at her arm, she saw it was mottled with white spots, as if covered in a pale fungus.

The feud came to a head one Saturday morning when Keely refused to stir from her cocoon of marijuana-scented blankets. She was supposed to get up early to meet the bus for a band competition downstate. But the stubborn girl had been out late night before. And now there was no sign of movement. Beth finally resorted to filling a spray bottle and spritzing her daughter like a disobedient cat. Then Keely leapt out of bed, wearing nothing but a pair of blue flowered panties. Beth took a step back, startled by her daughter's nudity, the dark nipples and the deep hollow between her hipbones.

"What the fuck?" Keely said.

"That's what you get for breaking curfew," Beth said. But in her heart, she knew her anger was about much more.

Ten minutes later, Keely was drinking coffee at the kitchen counter, complaining that she couldn't find her phone. Her mother had probably misplaced it in one of her hysterical fits of house cleaning. She wandered out onto the back deck, where the sky was still dark, muttering under her breath. Looking out the window, Beth couldn't see anything but the gold braid of the band uniform outlining her daughter's form.

Not a minute later, there was a shriek like scissors ripping through fabric and a violent thud that shook the floor. Beth switched on the porch light to find Keely sprawled on the deck, calling out like a wounded animal, reigniting the horrible nerve-searing panic Beth hadn't experienced since the children were small.

In the emergency room, the doctor confirmed that Keely had broken her arm. Luckily, it was a clean break, and, given her youth, the bone was bound to heal quickly. But she wouldn't be playing the clarinet any time soon. Beth stroked her daughter's tangled hair and Phil promised to be more vigilant about sweeping the acorns off the deck. It was the acorns, Keely insisted, that had

made her lose her footing and fall over the stairs.

That afternoon, after settling her daughter into her sickroom. Beth finally had a spare minute to check the messages on her phone. Several panicked texts informed her that the bus carrying Keely's fellow band members had been in an accident on the highway. Three students, along with the bus driver, had been killed, and two others were in serious condition. Her heart clutched up and her missing breast throbbed. At least she could delay telling Keely, who was still high on painkillers. She went outside and climbed the tree, feeling the tug of arthritis in her knees. When she reached the tree fort, she saw the floor was covered in whip-it cartridges. An empty beer can balanced precariously on the railing. And the blue shell of a robin's egg lay smashed the floor. She pressed her lips to Alba's trunk and whispered her thanks, staying there so long she felt a buzzing in response, like some deep thrumming of the vascular system. But, upon investigation, she saw that it was only a brown and gray caterpillar camouflaged to resemble the tree's bark.

Keely had a difficult senior year, so unlike the triumphant experience of her brother. She had to sit out of band. She had to learn to type with one hand, so that her homework took twice as long. She didn't have the heart to apply for college or to date any of the boys who'd finally started to turn their attention her way.

When the doctor removed her cast with its tangle of signatures, he suggested she might want to save it as a souvenir. And one afternoon when Keely was still at school, Beth used a razor blade to shave a bit off its edge. A sliver of plaster no bigger than a fingernail. She planned to bury it at the foot of the oak tree, along with Cam's umbilical cord.

This time, Phil caught her at it. He gripped her shoulder and asked what she was doing. Then he took the shovel out of her hand and completed the work himself.

Keely begged her parents to let her take a gap year and travel through Europe. It was excruciating, letting her go off into the unknown, after almost losing her. But she'd suffered through months of depression and the ill-advised plan was the only thing she expressed any enthusiasm for, so in the end they had to let her go.

Keely's absence echoed between them. Phil often went camping or fishing

on the weekend. Beth began planning a trip to Spain. Since they'd never bothered to move into a larger house, there was plenty of money for travel. But Phil wasn't interested. He encouraged Beth to go alone or to sign up for a group tour. She wondered what she was waiting for. Why hadn't she left years before?

She'd often go past the back door and hear Phil talking out on the deck, his rugged voice raised in a question, trailing off on a tangent, or breaking into song. Who could be out there with him, at this time of night? The children were gone and the neighbors were in bed. And when she opened the door and went out, she saw that he was alone, gesturing as wildly as if he were giving a lecture to the hiking club.

"Alba doesn't approve of the new developments in the neighborhood," he said. "She's worried that they'll zone the area for commercial and cut her down after we're gone."

Was he suffering from dementia, this early in life? In spite of the seven years between them, Beth had never felt that she was married to an older man. Now, for the first time, she worried about losing him, not to another woman, but to death or disease.

Some nights, she heard him calling out like a coyote or imitating the cry of an owl. She texted Cal saying she was worried about his father. She Facetimed with Keely in Madrid, whispering her concerns so that Phil wouldn't hear.

And she took to sitting out in the yard herself, watching the sun set in a violent pink swath behind Alba's branches, setting them into high relief. The leaves had turned red again, but they didn't sadden her, as they had when she was a young woman. She realized she was happier without all the estrogen, that flush of lust that hid all life's other colors from view.

She didn't know that she wanted to travel now, with Phil acting so strange. She tried to engage him in conversation. She made an appointment for him at the doctor's. She pulled out his old maps and proposed a camping trip. She started doing logic puzzles and asked him to join in.

Then, one night, she looked out the door and saw her husband pacing the deck, his hair standing up in a halo and his hands flapping in excitement.

"Alba and I were talking," he said. "She gave me an idea."

Beth felt his forehead for a fever. Over the years, his hair had darkened to an agate brown and a bald spot appeared on his crown. She always avoided touching this disconcerting bare space, avoiding it like the soft spot in an in-

fant's skull. But now she kissed its smooth surface, surprised at the urgency of the impulse.

"Maybe we could make an agreement with the city," he suggested. "Maybe we could donate the property for an urban park."

Her throat closed with jealousy and an alkaline taste rose on her tongue. Here she was, worrying about losing him, when he was only concerned about the tree.

"But what about us? Where will we live?"

"Well, there's always the tree fort," he said. "We could sell our stuff and move in there. Be campground hosts for the city. Get nice and cozy together in our old age."

She looked up at Alba and saw her beckoning. *Quercus Alba* in all her glory, the branches stretched wide and the leaves reflecting the pale light from the moon. Beth's chest expanded and she felt her capillaries uncoil. A bright pain radiated from her breastbone. Was it a heart attack? Was it a stroke? No, it was only forgiveness, the best part of love that saves its ecstasy for last.