

Excerpt from “You Remind Me of Me”

Jonah was dead for a brief time before the paramedics brought him back to life. He never talks about it, but it's on his mind sometimes, and he finds himself thinking that maybe it's the central fact of the rest of his life, maybe it's what set his future fate into motion. That's it. He thinks of a fat cuckoo clock in his grandfather's living room, the hollow thump of weights and dissonant guitar thrum of springs as the little door opened and the bird popped out; he thinks of his own heart, which was stopped when they got to him and then suddenly lurched forward, no one knew why, it just started again right around the time that they were preparing to pronounce him deceased.

This was in late March, 1977, in South Dakota, a few days after his sixth birthday.

If his memory were a movie, the camera would begin high in the air. In a movie, he thinks, you would see his grandfather's little house from above, you would see the yellow school bus coming to a stop at the edge of the long gravel road. Jonah had been to school that day. He had learned something, perhaps several things, and he rode home in a school bus. There were papers in his canvas knapsack, handwriting and addition and subtraction tables which the teacher had graded neatly with red ink and a picture of an easter egg which

he'd colored for his mother. He sat on a green vinyl seat near the front of the bus and didn't even notice that the bus had stopped because he was deeply interested in a hole that someone had cut in the seat with a pocketknife, he was peering into it, into the guts of the seat which were made of metal springs and stiff white hay.

Outside, it was fairly sunny, and the snow had mostly melted. The exhaust from the bus's muffler drifted through the flashing warning lights, and the silent bus driver lady caused the doors to fold open for him. He didn't like the other children on the bus, and he felt that they didn't like him either. He could sense their faces, staring, as he went down the bus steps and stood on the soft, muddy berm.

But in the movie you wouldn't see that. In the movie you would only see him emerging from the bus, a boy running with his backpack dragging through the wet gravel, a red stocking cap, a worn blue ski jacket, stones grinding together beneath his boots, a pleasantly rhythmic noise he was making. And you would be up above everything like a bird, the long gravel road that led from the mailbox to the house, the weeds along the ditches, the telephone poles, barbed wire fences, railroad tracks. The horizon, the wide plain of dust and wind.

Jonah's grandfather's house was a few miles outside of the small town of Little Bow, where Jonah went to school. It was a narrow, mustard-colored farmhouse with a cottonwood beside it and a spindly choke cherry bush in front. These were the only trees in view, and his grandfather's place was the only house. From time to time, a train would pass by on the railroad tracks that ran parallel to the house. Then the windows would hum like

the tuning fork their teacher had shown them in school. *This is how sound feels*, their teacher said, and let them hold their fingers near the vibrating tines.

Sometimes, it seemed to Jonah that everything was very small. In the center of his grandfather's bare backyard, an empty pint of cream would be the house and a line of matchbook cars, scotch-taped end to end, would be the train. He didn't know why he liked the game so much, but he remembered playing it over and over, imagining himself and his mother and his grandfather and his grandfather's dog, Elizabeth, all of them inside the little pint container, and himself (another part of himself) leaning over them like a giant or a thundercloud, pushing his makeshift train slowly past.

He didn't call to his grandfather when he came into the house that day. The door banged shut, the furniture sat silently. He could hear the television talking in his grandfather's room, so he knew his grandfather was there, dozing in the little windowless room, an addition to the house, just space enough for his grandfather's bed and a dresser, a small tv and a lamp with curlicues of cigarette smoke around them. His grandfather was propped up against some pillows, drinking beer; an old blanket, pilled cotton, silk edges unraveling, was thrown across his grandfather's middle, an ashtray balanced on it. Tired. His grandfather worked as a janitor, he went to work early in the morning, while it was still dark. Sometimes when Jonah came home from school, his grandfather would come out of his room and tell Jonah stories or jokes, or he would complain about things, about being tired, about Jonah's mother-- *What's the problem with her now? Did you do something to get her mad? I didn't do anything to her!*--and he would swear about people that he didn't like, people who

had cheated him, or maybe he would smile and call Elizabeth to him, *Babygirl, babygirl, what are you doing there, does a babygirl want a piece of lunchmeat does she?* and Elizabeth would come clicking her nails across the floor, her bobbed tail almost vibrating as she wagged it, her eyes full of love as Jonah's grandfather crooned to her.

But Jonah's grandfather didn't come out of his room that day, and Jonah dropped his bookbag to the floor of the kitchen. There was the smell of smoke, and fried eggs, and the old food in the refrigerator. Unwashed dishes in the sink. His grandfather's door was half-closed, and Jonah sat at the kitchen table for a time, eating cereal.

His mother was at work. He didn't know whether he missed her or not, but he thought of her as he sat there in the still kitchen. She worked at a place called Harmony Farm, *packing eggs*, she said, and the tone of her voice made him imagine dark labyrinths with rows of nests, a promenade of sad, dirty workers moving slowly through the passageways.

She wouldn't talk about it when she got home. Often, she wouldn't want to talk at all, wouldn't want to be touched, would make their supper which she herself wouldn't eat. She would go to her room and listen to old records she'd had since she was in Junior High, her eyes open and her hands in a praying shape beneath her cheek, her long hair spread out behind her on the pillow.

He could stand there for a very long time, watching her from the edge of the doorway and she wouldn't move. The needle of the phonograph pulsed like a smooth car along the spiraling track of a record album and her eyes seemed to register the music more than

anything else, her blinking coinciding with a pause or a beat.

But he knew that she could see him standing there. They were looking at one another, and it was a sort of game--to try to blink when she blinked, to set his mouth in the same shape as her mouth, to hear what she was hearing. It was a sort of game to see how far he could inch into the room, sliding his feet the way a leaf opens, and sometimes he was almost to the center of the room before she finally spoke.

Get out, she would say, almost dreamily.

And then she would turn her face away from him, toward the wall.

He thought of her as his spoon hovered over his cereal. One day, he thought, she wouldn't come home from work. Or she might disappear in the night. He had awakened a few times: footsteps on the stairs, in the kitchen, the back door opening. From the upstairs window, he saw her forcing her arm into the sleeve of her coat as she walked down the driveway. Her face was strange in the pale brightness cast by the floodlights that his grandfather had installed outside the house. Her breath lifted up out of her in the cold and drifted like mist, trailing behind her as she moved into the darkness beyond the circle of porch light.

We won't be staying long, she would tell Jonah sometimes. She would talk about the places that they used to live as if they'd just come to Jonah's grandfather's house for a visit, even though they'd been living there for as long as he could remember--almost three years. He didn't remember much about the other places she talked about. Chicago. Denver. Fresno. Had he been to these cities? He wasn't sure. Sometimes, things came in flashes

and images, not really memories at all--a staircase leading down, with muddy boots outside of it; a man with a fringed jacket like Davy Crockett, asleep on a couch while Jonah looked inside his open mouth; a lamp with autumn leaves patterned on it; a cement shower stall where he and his mother had washed together. Sometimes he thought he remembered the other baby, the one that had been born before him. *I was very young*, she told him. That was all she would tell. *I was very young, I had to give it away.*

I remember the baby, he said once, when they were sitting together talking, when she was feeling friendly, holding him in her arms, running her fingernails lightly back and forth across his cheek. *I remember the baby*, he said, and her face grew stiff. She took her hand away.

No, you don't, she said. *Don't be stupid. You weren't even born yet.* She sat there for a moment, regarding him, and then she shut her eyes, her teeth tightening against one another as if the sight of him hurt her. *Jesus Christ*, she said. *Why don't you just forget I ever told you anything. I mean, I confide in you with something that's very private, and very important, and you want to play little pretend games? Are you a baby?*

She sat there coldly, frowning, and began to gather and arrange her hair, ignoring him. She had long hair which reached almost to the belt-loops of her jeans. His grandfather said that she looked like the country singer, Crystal Gayle. *Don't you think she looks pretty, Jonah?* his grandfather would say when he was trying to cheer her up, but she would only smile a little, not really happy. He watched as she shook a cigarette from her pack on the coffee table and lit it. *Don't look at me that way*, she said. She took a sip of smoke from her cigarette, and he tried to make his expression settled and neutral, to make his face the

way she might want it to be. *Mom?* he said.

What?

Where do babies go when you give them away? He wanted to make his voice sound innocent, to talk in the way a child on television might ask about Santa Claus. He wanted to pretend to be a certain type of child, to see if she might believe in it.

But she didn't. *Where do babies go when you give them away?* she repeated, in a high, insipid voice, and she didn't look at him, she didn't think he was cute or forgiveable. He watched the rustle of her long hair, her hand as she ran the head of her cigarette against the rim of the ashtray.

They go to live with nice mommies, she said. After a moment she'd shrugged darkly, not liking him anymore, not wanting to talk.

But he did remember the baby, he thought. He and his mother had seen it at the market, being watched by a lady he didn't know. The baby was pink-skinned, and had a tiny head without hair on it and it was inside something-- a basket, he thought, a basket like apples came in at the grocery store. The baby was dressed in a green velvet suit with a Santa's head on it, and rested on a red cushion. It moved its hands blindly, as if trying to catch air. *Look,* his mother said. *There's my baby!* And a lady had looked at them, stiffening as his mother bent down to wave her fingers over the baby's line of vision. The lady had looked at them, smiling but also frightened, and she had spoken to Jonah sharply.

Please don't touch, the lady said. *Your hands are dirty.*

He remembered this vividly--not only because of the baby, but because of the lady's

eyes, the way she looked at him, the sharp sound of her voice. It was the first time he really understood that there was something about him that people didn't like.

He thought of this as he ran through the house that day, swinging a whisk he'd found in one of the kitchen drawers, pretending it was a magic wand he'd stolen. He thought about the baby, about his mother walking on the gravel road in the dark, and he stood at the edge of her bedroom door, looking up at the padlock she had installed there. It was the room that she'd had when she was a little girl, and then a teenager, and she had many beautiful things-- a music box where she kept her jewelry, with a tiny ballerina that stood on a spring and turned around and around in front of a little mirror; there was a box like a little square suitcase with 45 rpm records in it; there was a photograph of her mother, who had died, in a small gold frame; there were seashells, and dried branches spray-painted silver, and postcards of paintings taped to the wall. Monet. Chagall. Miro. She'd named them for him once.

He had never even touched anything when he went in, but somehow she knew that he had been going into her bedroom while she was at work. She didn't say anything to him, but one day after work she came home with the lock kit, and he watched as she screwed the hasp onto the doorframe, as she fitted the shackle of the padlock into the eye of the hasp and clicked it shut, neatly. She turned to him as he stood there watching, her eyes careful and hooded.

There are precious things in my room, she said softly. *I don't want a robber to get them,* she said, and now, standing outside the door, it gave him a lonely feeling.

After a while, he called for Elizabeth. He got a piece of lunch meat from the refrigerator and whistled for her. He called again, and he heard his grandfather's bed creak as she got down from the foot of it, where she had been curled up comfortably, sleeping while his grandfather slept. *Elizabeth!* Jonah said in a high, tempting voice, and she nosed his grandfather's bedroom door open and peered out at him warily, trembling a little, sidling sheepishly as if people were applauding and she were shy. But when he threw the piece of bologna, she caught it in midair.

She was a Doberman Pinscher, older than Jonah by quite a few years. She was not just a pet, his grandfather said, she was a guard dog. The world was changing, his grandfather said, you couldn't leave your door unlocked at night like you used to. There was Charles Manson, a killer; there was the hitchhiker who murdered the man who gave him a lift over near Vermillion; there was the uprising at Wounded Knee. You couldn't trust people anymore, his grandfather said, and Elizabeth would chase a stranger's car down the road, she would frighten the Mormon missionaries who wouldn't dare come to their door, and sometimes Elizabeth barked and barked from the kitchen, her voice raspy and wet even when there was nothing outside to be seen. *She's keeping them ghosts away*, his grandfather would tell him.

Years later, Jonah could still recreate the dog in his mind, perhaps even more vividly than he could recall his grandfather, or what his mother had looked like then. He'd spent so much time with the dog, the two of them sometimes just sitting on the couch as he

petted her, playing quietly until she struggled to get away.

He knew her better than anyone but himself, he thought. He knew the plump shape of her torso, the particular, mottled pattern of her brown and black hair, the sinew and bones of her legs, the long, intelligent, pointed snout. Her head was like a noble bird with a long bill, solid, a dignified Egyptian statue that he liked to shape with his hands. He loved her rubbery black lips with their amphibious, warty nodes nestled near her back teeth, and he liked to make her talk, moving her lips with his fingers so that she told him knock-knock jokes or sang along with the theme songs of cartoons they watched. He loved the polished black of her hooked toenails and the mysterious, marrowbone white stuff he found inside the shell of each claw; he loved the cracked, sandpaper texture of her footpads, the wiggly, recoiling meat of her tongue when he caught it and stretched it out, the freckled, pale, waxy skin inside her ears, the way she'd flap her head back and forth if he touched the right spot, as if a fly were bothering her. He loved the soft bare grey skin of her stomach, the two rows of nipples, which he would press, pretending that they were buttons and knobs on a robot he had built.

God-damn it, Jonab, his grandfather would call, when Elizabeth yelped. Quit pestering that damned dog! I hope she bites you someday!

Maybe there was something inevitable about what happened. When he tries to imagine it in his mind it always seems that there was something still and icy about the entire afternoon, something hushed, a kind of expectation, as if things had been prepared for him.

He remembers up to a certain point. He remembers the game they were playing, the

fantasy he was in. They were being chased, and like a king in a cartoon he shouted “Guards! Seize them!” Soldiers with spears were running in small steps, single file, down a corridor lined with torches.

They were hiding in the bathroom, he and Elizabeth, and he feels that sometimes he can see it perfectly: his hand turning the lock on the bathroom door. His hand turned the lock, which he loved more than any other lock he’d ever seen. A skeleton key in a keyhole. A doorknob made of cut glass like a jewel. You could pretend you were a king in a palace.

Once the door was locked, he breathed with satisfaction. Breathed, turned back to look at the dog Elizabeth, who stood uncomfortably next to the bathtub, her bobbed tail tucked down, ears laid flat, eyes wary and doubtful.

They’re coming for us, he told Elizabeth, and she looked at him and then away, tiptoeing in an agitated half-circle in the tiny room. *They’re going to kill us if they get in*, he told her, and he pressed his face against the door, listening.

It was a small room, not immaculate but tidy, chilly black and white tile on the floor, chilly porcelain tub, sink, toilet. A tall cabinet held towels and wash cloths. There was a toilet with a fuzzy blue cover on its lid, like the hair of a puppet; there was the sink, a steady trickling drip from the faucet; toothbrush holder, a medicine cabinet mirror above it. There was a small square of window with its glass textured like ice, Jack Frost designs. Below was the bathtub, clawfoot, deep-basined, the inside of an egg. An orange rust stain ran from the base of the faucet head to the drain.

It was his idea that this was the best place to hide. He remembers this clearly too, the determination that they should hunker down inside the bathtub to get away from the soldiers

that were hunting for them, but there was some difficulty in getting Elizabeth to join him in this plan. He stood in the bathtub and held Elizabeth by her front paws, so that she stood up on her hind legs. He tried to tug her forward, but she didn't want to come. She pulled away from him, and so he got out of the tub and tried to lift her by her hindquarters, but she was too heavy. He had a hold on the loose skin of her haunches, and he managed to lift her off the ground. *Get in!* he said, and gave her a hard shove. *Hurry, Damn it!* And she made a sharp sound as he pushed her, as he fell into the bathtub on top of her.

He doesn't really know what happened then. There was a moment, a kind of wave, a blank spot during which the game fizzled away, during which Elizabeth became not-Elizabeth. The two of them scrabbled against the slick porcelain. Perhaps he was trying to hold her down, perhaps he pushed hard against a tender spot on her belly, perhaps she panicked, upended, disoriented, unable to gain a footing. Her thin legs struggled in the air, and her body twisted, trying to right itself, and she made a sound like she was vomiting up a string of yelps. She snapped with her teeth, twisted, lashed, and Jonah felt a spark in his mind which wasn't really awareness.

The first bite was one of the worst. The long front tooth, the canine, sank into the skin just below Jonah's left eye and tore in a line through his cheek to the edge of his throat. Blood shot up and stippled the window. The bottles of shampoo on the edge of the tub clattered as Jonah's feet kicked in a surprised spasm. When he jerked away from her, Elizabeth bit down on his ear and pulled a piece of it off.

Later, he would try to think that Elizabeth had gone crazy. People would say that it

might have been the taste of blood, that it might have been the noises he was making, the high pitched sounds which instinctively made her think he was some kind of prey. People would say that attack dogs like Dobermans can be high-strung, that they can lose control of themselves. He didn't want to believe that she hated him. He didn't want to think that he was her tormentor, that whatever he'd done to her, she'd finally had enough. That she bit him and liked it, thinking *at last*.

But she didn't stop. Her teeth raked through his palms when he held them to his face, trailing through his forearms as he flailed at her, trying to hit. One bite cut through his lower lip as she tried to get to his neck, and another pulled the skin of his torn face into a flap. He remembers trying to press the skin back against his face, like it was a puzzle piece he was trying to fit. When he fell out of the bathtub onto the tile floor, he felt wet. He was aware of Elizabeth's front paws clawing fast against his clothes as if she were trying to dig a hole into him, her jaws, bites on his scalp, his neck, his chest as he curled and rolled and kicked, smearing blood behind him. *I'm sorry*, he said. *Mom, I didn't mean to! It was an accident!*

Maybe he doesn't really remember this. Maybe he only imagines it, looking at his body, his naked skin in the mirror. Most of what happened is outside of his memory. He can recall flashes of heat, of pressure, but not pain, exactly. Most people don't understand what it means to be an animal, to be killed, eaten. A quiet peacefulness settles in. The body relaxes, accepts everything.

That was all there was to it, really. At a bar, years later, a woman says, *Tell me*

something interesting about yourself and Jonah pauses.

I was dead once, he thinks. That's the first thing he thinks, though he doesn't say it. It sounds too melodramatic, too complicated and inappropriate. She is a smooth thinker, this woman, she will look at him skeptically, she will take a piece of ice from her drink and roll it in her mouth.

Oh, really, she'll say, after a moment. *So what's that like? Being dead?*

And he doesn't know, exactly. He is aware of a feeling of rushing forward. It is not unlike the way it felt on the expressway when suddenly, at 65 or 75 miles per hour, a pair of semi-trucks framed his car on either side, the rushing walls of their trailers creating a tunnel he was hurtling through. Ahead, a rattling garbage truck drifted into the lane in front of him; behind, a woman in a minivan pushed impatiently toward his bumper, sealing him into a coffin of velocity. Enclosed and yet hurtling forward.

At that moment, he felt a memory spin through his insides. The dog's teeth. The yellow house, the wide plain, seen from above. The skeleton key, the baby in the basket, the lady who said *Please don't touch, your hands are dirty*.

He was dead, or almost dead, when his grandfather broke open the bathroom door. He doesn't remember this, he just knows. He is aware of the blood, his own blood, all over everything. He feels the door splinter and fall open. He hears the sound of his grandfather's raw, smoker-voiced moaning. His grandfather caught Elizabeth by the collar, pulling her away, and then his grandfather began to kick her in the ribs and the head.

In the movie, the bathroom would seem to float in space, white and glowing florescently. In the movie, the ambulance men bend over him, the corpse of a small boy laid out on the bathroom's black and white tiles. The men are silent and gentle and god-like. He pictures them as kindly aliens, with round, interchangeable heads and large eyes. His grandfather must be there somewhere, off to the edge of things, but he can't see him. By this time, Elizabeth is dead. He can picture her, not far from where he is lying, Elizabeth on her side, her legs limp, paws turned inward, mouth slightly open, eyes staring as his own eyes are staring. A line could be drawn between their two eyes, his and Elizabeth's--two points, A and B, beginning and end.

Jonah's grandfather used to tease him all the time. It wasn't mean-spirited, he didn't think. Just something his grandfather did to amuse himself. He remembers the day before he died, the day before Elizabeth attacked him, an ordinary after-school afternoon, not long before his mom got home from work, when his grandfather called to him. *Jonah!* he called, in his wry, raspy voice. *Come quick! Come and look!* And Jonah had stood there eagerly as his grandfather pointed out the back window, toward the railroad tracks, where some boxcars were parked. *I see the carnival came through here last night,* he said. *Look at that! They left an elephant!*

Where? Jonah said, and tried to follow his grandfather's finger.

There! Don't you see it?

No.

It's right there--where I'm pointing. You don't see it?

No... Jonah said doubtfully--but he craned his neck.

You mean to tell me that you don't see an elephant standing there? Jonah's grandfather demanded.

Well.... Jonah said, not wanting to commit himself. *Well....* he said. Jonah scoped along the lines and shapes outside the window again. He didn't see the elephant; but then, after a time, it seemed that he did. In his memory, there is still the figure of an elephant, standing at the edge of the train tracks. It curls its trunk, languidly, thoughtfully, and brings a piece of hay to its mouth.