

ANTIPHONS

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As some wait upon the Lord, I wait upon the arrival of my daughter Roe. I always listen for the school bus in my shady work spot. My space heater whirs, my keyboard taps like sleet on glass, but this flat noise is nothing to the rise and rumble of an arriving bus. I picture a bus massive and cautious, warm children inside like lit candles. When I hear a downshift and the hydraulic doors breathe out, my mind kneels before an image of Roe standing on the curbside, unhurt.

Today as I wait for Roe, I rock like a bus surging forward and type at nerve speed. My flextime job is composing emails for Here's Help Foundation. Pine branches weigh against my windows. Through their pressed needles I see clouds with no blue, a raw day. Being at my desk quiets my phobias, though in other places they may cry *wasteland, trap, chaos*.

Roe is whole. I am in pieces. Who am I to protect her as she glows, newly bus-delivered, with a child's warmth?

Mindful of my limitations, today I am fooled. No bus has yet sounded, and cold air hits my neck anyway. Is it a ghost breath? Then Roe's hat with its purple-glo feather sneaks around the door frame. Her peeking eyes appear.

Aieeeeeeee!

Aieeeee!

Roe squeals, and I squeal back in our scared-you game. Roe brings the outside air in with her. She hugs me big, which at almost thirteen she doesn't do much any more. My cheek meets her icy mesh of curls, bold to the touch, and next she is whispering into my eyes, "Mom, they picked *me* for the Sousa solo. I ran all the way home to tell you." *No*, I say, on cue. *Yes*, says Roe.

I take care to save my Here's Help files, which our well-meaners need to keep us funded. Alert, I trail Roe into the front room. She bounds onto the couch, her purple feather pointing, her flute-piccorno case by the window shining like a trophy. There is good light here because my husband Phil trims the chokeberry bushes in front and saws off dead branches from the white pine. Phil is

kind and calm. He is as brown as peat moss. I am pink-white-freckled and nervous. Roe is our joy. Her eyes are just as smart as her father's, her smooth skin the color of ginger. To shield her, I will soften the sound of things past.

A mother should act nonchalant and cool, is my belief, so I pop in some wintergreen gum and in my gum-chewing voice I ask Roe to tell me what the Sousa solo is, exactly.

"Mom, *you* know! *Stars and Stripes Forever.*" She toots the melody with her growing-up lips.

"Oh, yeah," say I. "In grade school we had words for that tune: *Be kind to your web-footed friends! For that duck may be somebody's mother!*" I make my rendition off-key and jokey.

"Mom!"

My singing draws a laugh. Roe and I chat on, me smacking gum like a pal, never mind all parenting advice to the contrary. We choose favorite animals to be reincarnated into, like the duck in the song. Roe's selections are deer and wild horses and wolves and otters.

Then Roe reads me the rules for concert clothes. Women must wear a long pure-black skirt and a long pure-white blouse, neither of which she owns.

"We have our mission. Now?" I say.

"Now!" says Roe. She is one clear note, with me the jittery percussion.

We head off to the discount store. Roe folds her lengthening legs into my compact car and spreads the rule sheet over her jeans.

My car is a lifepod for me—not a cage, not a desert—and soon Roe will be too tall to fit in there. It's stuffed with protection. I have a backrest of wood rollers and hemp. I have power bars, juice boxes, pillows and shawls, books on tape, electric seat warmer, defrosting spray, flashlight, recharger kit, hats and gloves, peanuts in the shell, chocolate drops, quarts of seltzer, flyers from Here's Help, flares, a jack, a power tool for lug nuts, and poems by Dr. Seuss. If our brutal Pennsylvania weather whams us with a blizzard, or black ice, my riders and I will have nutrition and hydration, rhymes, batteries, and heat. When Roe's friends were younger they sang, *Your mom's car is sweet, can we camp out in it?*

The two of us steer through the neighborhood, past duplex

houses and burglar-protected stores and Juneau's Salon and the corner laundromat. There at the fenced court are the Jefferson twins, Sachel and LeGrand, starting a pick-up game, and we see a basketball lurch upward and get snatched down. Roe fiddles with her rule sheet and asks whether her Grandpa and Grandma, my parents, might want to travel north to hear her solo.

"Oh, *want* to," I say. "Of course they would *want* to."

"What goes on with them?" Roe shifts to her little-girl voice. I take the jolt; my throat is cold and small. She says, "They hardly ever visit, and we don't go down there. It's no huge deal, Mom, I just wonder. It's kind of weird."

I scroll down my worries, find no alternative, and spin out the old explanation in a voice boring enough to deflect questions: "Your *dad's* dad lives here in town, see, but *my* parents, they're a three-day car trip away in Alabama, and they're not rich, and neither are we, and the plane fare . . ."

Roe interrupts me. "On their last visit, Grandma squeezed my cheeks until they hurt. Are they mad at me that I'm not white, like them? You can tell me, Mom. I took the school workshop on mixed-race families."

Mad at Roe? My mother, mad at Roe? Rescue words leap from my mouth. "Oh, no, no, darling, no, not at all, they're mad at *me* for some things, like marrying your brown-skinned father, I suppose, but no. You, *you*, they completely adore."

"Mad at *you*, Mom?"

Stupid, stupid me. My worries have squeezed a new fact from me, and now I must fetch a safe explanation. I swerve the car onto the grass and cut the ignition. In our modest neighborhood, we can still park on the roadside grass.

"Why are you stopping the car?" Roe asks. I don't look at her because I cannot bear anxiety on her face.

"I want to concentrate," I say, making utter composure mine. "This is a confusing topic." I tell a lie here. To me, this topic is night and day.

From beneath her purple feather, Roe watches me. Her fingers play flute tunes along her jeans and pleat the rule-sheet into an accordion. I say, "You're right, Roe, it's weird that even when someone is

your relative, and of course you *love* them, you get into such unhappy *fights*, that after a while you almost don't *like* them. Some people's arguments are so tangled up that the people stay apart from each other, to prevent getting mad all over again. So your grandparents and I, we have short visits, and not so often. That's the best. We send presents through the mail. That way, we don't get mad at each other, and we keep all that confusion away from *you*, whom we all cherish."

"Sure, I see," says Roe. "That's like the divorce speech. You just said exactly what Palumbra's mom said when she split from Palumbra's dad."

"Mm, probably so." I stop. Too many of my words are in the air. They need time to disperse.

"I get it, Mom," says Roe. "Relax, I don't care *that* much. But can I ask you a question?"

Roe knows she can ask me anything, anytime.

"You and me, Mom, we don't have actual *fights*, do we?"

"We don't," I say. "And I won't let us, ever, I promise."

Roe giggles. "How can you promise that? What if I turn into a brat?"

"I promise, anyway. I've been around so long, I'm an expert in both fighting and *not* fighting. And brats are a myth."

Roe cranks the window all the way down. She pulls off her hat, shakes her curls into the opening, and flings her hands into the cold air.

"Roe?" I ask her, in my casual-pal voice. "What?"

She rolls up the window and grins. "I'm shaking off the talk about *fighting*. All gone."

"Well. Good job." I pluck another strip of wintergreen gum from my shirt pocket. Roe re-sets her hat and waggles her paper accordion. I start the engine and move the car out. The explaining is done, but my hands vibrate on the wheel and my breath is fast. A ledge inside me has just narrowed, and someone wobbles there, one push away from the pit.

The street widens. The colorless clouds move further back in the sky. We hook a left on the road to the warehouse stores, those monster concrete bunkers with their blind heads. I find a park. We enter one bunker, pass its rubber-gassing mat and smeared glass doors,

and land in a field of clothes racks so thick you can't see where they end. Hooked sheaves of fabric quiver in the distance. It stupefies me, like the brink of the Grand Canyon with glare lights added. In vast expanses I lose definition, and my heart does syncopated time. I'm grateful these places need upright beams to support their ceilings. While I venture from beam to beam, dizzy, Roe swivels among the racks, fingering the textures, taking her bearing from metal signs and perhaps from the east wind. I follow her purple-glo feather.

We explore the Youth section, but no. Their black skirts are navel-out or side-slashed. We trek to Misses, then to Formal Wear, and there we discover white blouses galore, all regulation plain, and a long black skirt with a liquid feel.

“Mom!”

“I see!”

We fill our arms with clothes. My nerves stabilize. This store is nothing but a garden, an enormous bed of soft cloth flowers, bright and deep and welcoming. Silver foil loops in garlands around the support posts. From the registers at a distance big shamrocks dangle, blinking green.

Roe wants me to sit in the changing-room corridor while she models, so I do that. Have I mentioned that Roe is beautiful? She doesn't realize. Light streams from her skin. Her eyes flash with hope. Her hair frolics in wide, dark, rolling hoops. Her limbs know their own borders. I sit in the changing corridor and marvel. Roe's form is distinct and inviolate as she drifts by me in white concert shirts. Polyester, chenille, cotton—everything looks fine on Roe. She lingers in her selections, and I breathe carefully, not hurrying her. Dress up, I think, be peaceful.

Then we are through. The clerk pries off the shoplifting discs and rings up two white blouses and a black skirt. Her eyes link Roe to me. She says, “I can tell you're mother and daughter.”

“Thanks,” is my only answer, by which I decline the smarmy song and dance some mothers would step into, all that isn't-it-a-wonder and family-resemblances-always-tell. Off to the side, Roe concentrates on a wall display of striped tunics. I do wish that I resembled Roe, but likenesses can trick you. To me, Roe evokes her father. Their chins have the same lift.

We drive back among late winter trees. The sun is out and in, and we see what we expect to be reddish buds and early green. I want to caress the branch tips like babies. I am content. I am breathing well.

I say, “So you have the solo flute melody in the Sousa march. How exciting to . . .”

“Mom, wait!” Roe chides. “There is no solo *flute*. It’s a *piccolo* solo! And it’s not the *melody*!”

“Ah. That’s me, blissful ignorance. Enlighten me?” I plead.

Roe does. “My solo comes on the last verse. The orchestra slows way down to prepare, and then the piccolo player stands, alone, for the descant. That’s *above* the melody. It’s way high and wicked fast!”

“I’m trying to remember!” Mock-agitated, I slap my own head.

“Here, I’ll help!” Roe jiggles her fingers. “The first line of my solo ends like this: *dug-a-dug-a dat DAT, Trrrlllll!* Remember?”

“Almost. Sing it again.”

Not that I am angry—not even annoyed, no—but I am stirred up and can’t figure why. Is it Roe? She is snapping at me, not unfriendly, but yes, you could call it backtalking, if you were some people.

And down that memory chute I go, to that place where local car rides always explode with her wrath. My little brother Cary and I, toddler and child, are pinned in the back seat, assailed by her queries and dreading the shrill solo that comes no matter what: “I won’t be mocked by your backtalk!” That muscular, perfumed arm whips over the seat while Cary and I flinch inside our cell. On those slow residential roads, people stroll by and avert their eyes. The times when Mother does not stop the car to lay into us, she whacks at us backwards while she grips the wheel with her left hand. She is forever late for her errands in that land of twisted wisteria and dripping tree moss.

“Mom? Are you all right?” Roe asks.

“A little headache.”

I long to be with Roe, but memory pulls me down again.

I am in high school, still riding with the woman who will be Roe’s grandmother. She drives and smokes in silence. I lean forward,

straining toward a future, and I breathe from the open triangle window beside the passenger seat. Mother stops the car. She mashes her dead cigarette into the ash tray. "Taking the air?" Her voice is high and narrow. "Do you have a fragile constitution? Or do you mean to ridicule my smoking?" This is years before the world knows about secondhand smoke. When Mother hauls off to hit me, I block her arm. She shouts that she will disown me, that she will cut off college funds. I convince myself that Father will stop her.

Roe is watching me. She says, "Mom? It's all right if you don't know the Sousa. I'll play it for you at home."

I heave my shoulders and come back. "Oh, thanks! Love to hear it! Will you hand me a juice box? You want one, too?"

Roe and I sip orange juice. Roe distracts me with stories, gleeful dramatizer that she is, and I rest on the blithe tune of her high-school life. I listen as Kyle Cruller brings a ball-and-chain to gym class and is pursued by assistant coaches up the bleachers. I hear Miz Higgins murmur about two kids missing on the science museum trip and screech when she finds them passing a joint in the mop closet. We reach home measure by measure.

On our front stoop is something with a FedEx label. We carry our store purchases from the car and walk over to find a package addressed to Roe. From my mother. There is no occasion, no birthday, no Fourth of July. My stomach balks. It runs on its own nervous system. It warns me not to bring that thing into the house, unopened.

"Roe," I say. "Can we open this here? Is it warm enough in the sun?"

"Sure, Mom."

We set our discount bags down. Roe grabs the package with her young hands.

All I can do is fill the air waves beside her. "Remember back when Grandma sent us that white lace teddy bear, the size of a bowling ball, stuffed with perfumed sachets? Sweetbear? We shut him in a giant red popcorn can, and once a year we set him loose to smell up the house with orange peels and lavender and rose petals, mm-mmmm?"

My lame humor can't stop a thing, though. Roe extracts a gold chain necklace from the package. From it hangs a circular pendant,

also gold, thick enough to have a photograph inside. Roe cradles it in her open palm.

“A present for my solo, like magic,” Roe says.

“Serendipity,” I answer.

“Mom, this is one of those things with a picture.”

“Oh? A locket?”

Roe undoes the catch. “Whose face is this? I’ve never seen it.”

It is a picture of my face, and I tell her so.

“How old are you here, Mom?”

I tell her I am ten, in the picture.

“You look nice, Mom! Are you smiling?”

A cut-out circular spot that shows my face has been wedged into the locket. I know which photograph it has been snipped from. The discarded remainder would show my trunk and legs astride a miniature pony.

One day when I was ten years old, the photographer man with that pony knocked at our door. We lived in an all-white section of town, newly built. Our unshaded ranch house had starter azaleas, sun-shriveled petunias, a front screen door decorated with white vinyl ivy, and an expensive security system. Father was away at his desk job that day, toiling to keep us protected.

Pictures of the children, ma’am? Oh, yes. Cary, six years old, was plopped onto the saddle and made immortal. Yet by some mad impulse to resist, I stood my ground. Ten was too old for pony pictures, I thought. The pony looked sickly. A baby-size Confederate flag was tucked under its bridle. The saddle was lower than my chest.

I was careful to be polite. “Thanks anyway,” I said to Mother, “but no.”

Mother told the pony man to wait, as you would tell a servant. She yanked me back into the house and laid down an ultimatum: the photograph, or else. She sang her old tune about what she would beat out of me—the tar, the devil, the backtalk, the contrariness—and into me—some sense, some obedience for my elders, some consideration for the wishes of others. Clutching my ten-year-old dignity, I promised myself I would not yield to this beating, one among all past and future beatings.

But I had misjudged what was at stake for Mother. It has taken

me years since childhood to realize her hunger for vindication, her quest for a social position that would put her dignity beyond doubt, her need to display flawless children in photographs. She craved respect. She meant to commandeer love. She fled from whatever invisible threats and humiliations stalked her mind. Cary and I were in her way.

So Mother had at me. She could be brutal when the fit was on her, almost as if she had taken lessons in brutality. Afterwards, when I still refused, the second beating was worse. The pony man, bridle in hand, must have heard my cries as he lingered on our trimmed front lawn. I resisted as if my life were at stake, and when I broke during the third beating my life was lost again.

Mother dragged me out of the house and onto the pony. I sat weeping and defeated, covered in red marks. I smiled when I was told to smile. I had stood up for myself, but then I had let myself down.

This is the picture of me that Mother has sent to hang around Roe's neck.

"Mom?" Roe stares. "What is it?"

My heart flops in my chest among jagged memory fragments too sharp for Roe.

"That picture was after a fight with Grandma. I was unhappy then. She forced me to pose for that picture."

Roe's glance criss-crosses between me and the photograph. "Why did Grandma do that? Oh, my God. This is a picture of you crying, Mom."

Roe gives me another hug. She hugs with authority.

"Thanks," I say. "I don't know why Grandma sent you that picture." I am guessing, though.

"I don't want this necklace thing, Mom, not any more."

We look at each other, my daughter serving as the older one. Roe lets the necklace and locket fall into my hand before she gives me an envelope.

"This was inside the package, Mom, addressed from Grandma to you."

Then Phil drives up. His job at Public Works allows him a punctual homecoming. He steps out of his sedan, waves, and moves his bags of yard trash from the garage out to the curb, for morning

pickup. Phil's huge bags are filled with old raked leaves, weeds, fallen twigs and branches, pine needles, acorns, bush trimmings, peat moss remains, everything that needs clearing out.

Phil calls over to us, "Aren't you two cold out here?"

Roe plunges toward him. "Dad, guess what happened in band practice!"

"I can hardly imagine," Phil smiles. "I bet you'll tell me, though."

They go inside, safe, while I stay in place holding the letter. I have time to consider things at present. Roe still does not know that Mother phones me every week these days, in the early morning hours when Phil is asleep.

Mother's voice betrays that she is in her cups. She drifts and pleads. She wonders aloud what she could ever have done to alienate her children so. She begs to be closer now, to bond with us. Yes, I say, let's discuss the beatings, that would be a good start. Mother veers away, bewildered, and swears that she has never laid a finger on us, ever. Over the phone I hear the silences of my defeated father, his supportive mumbling beside her. I put on a calm voice, firm, and say I will not risk exposing Roe to Mother's pinches or slaps or mad talk. Mother weeps. What pinching? What slapping? She asks heaven once more what she has ever done to us, and I repeat my response, and we ring our old refrain, a night incantation for the abyss. Whenever I call Cary, at his Army base in the Philippines, he will speak no words on the subject of Mother.

I open the envelope and read Mother's letter.

Hello daughter,

The doctors found a spot on my lung x-ray.

Your father and I wish to see more of our granddaughter Rowena in my remaining time, if you will have the decency to make arrangements.

No, my mind recoils from arrangements. Instead it jumps forward to the time of Roe's concert. Phil and I will sit together in the audience. Roe will rise, and a circle of light will spread over her.

The orchestra will slow into the final verse, waiting for Roe's entrance, the piccolo descant for *Stars and Stripes Forever*. Roe will stand in liquid black and crisp white, dividing night from day. She will lift her piccolo and inhale, filling her healthy lungs. She will bring the instrument to her lips. Aerials, rockets, cones, fountains, sparklers, snakes, wheels—all fireworks will emerge. Her notes will bubble and dance, touch the melody and spring away. She will play free.

But when my mind returns, I know it is no good to stay outside any longer. The cold air has begun to sear my throat something awful.

So I walk to the curb and untwist the tie on one of Phil's enormous yard bags. Its earth smell is old and stale. I crumple Mother's letter inside my right hand and cram the necklace-locket in there with it, using a good strong grip. I reach my hand far down into the bag, under the pine needles and last year's peat moss. But a confusion takes me then. My hand goes rigid, and I fight to loosen my fist. Has the chain caught on my fingers? I shake them, hard.

Then I have a scare.

It might be one of my phobias. It has the feel of reality, though. I swear I can even see it. A black-and-red fleshy spot fierce with pain is multiplying itself from my hand up my right arm, pulsing back and forth to my heart, crawling over my shoulders, taking charge. That spot wants to be a whole, and that whole wants to be me. I shout and jerk my arm out and step away. My hand is empty.

The necklace and letter are gone, buried among dead leaves.

I lunge to re-tie the yard bag, twist it off for good. Yet from down within the bag, two song lines stretch up to my ears. Here comes Mother's accusing litany of me as the devil, until the yard bag seems poisonous to my touch. Next is Mother's wailing plea to be lifted out, disinterred. These two lines slip around me and restrain my hands. I need a full stop in the music, or at least a pause. From the house I can hear Roe's victory descant, faint and far and steady.