

I

HARVEY WAS BORN in a redbrick hospital on a hill. It was the hardest day of her mother's life and she cried for a long time after.

There was a park near the hospital where children went on swings and ran away from their parents. Harvey's mother used to go there when she was pregnant. She sat on a bench and ate little things from her purse.

There was also a duck pond that froze in winter. People came early, in twos and threes. They held hands going around in loose circles. There was no music, just human voices and the clapping of skates.

When Harvey was old enough to feed the ducks, her parents brought her to the park with a stale loaf. Her father put his hand inside the bag, tearing the bread into small pieces.

"You were born here," he told her.

"In the park?"

"No, in a hospital," her father said. "But in this town."

Some of the ducks came right up to Harvey. They tilted their heads to one side and opened their beaks. When the bag was empty, her father shook out the crumbs.

Harvey wanted to see the hospital where she was born, but her mother said next time, for sure.

Harvey asked how many babies are born in the world on one day.

"Thousands," her father replied. "Maybe millions."

Harvey imagined the babies in her room. So many it was hard to open the door. Some of them were crying, their faces red and glistening. Others crawled around touching things, or just lay on their backs. Harvey imagined sweeping the babies up with her play broom.

“When can I have a baby, Daddy?”

“When you get married,” said her father. “When you’re in love.”

“I only want two. Two little sisters.”

At lunchtime, they went into town. Harvey clambered into her stroller. She knew how to get in without making it tip. Her doll Duncan had been waiting for her. He was just a baby and needed looking after.

Sometimes on long car trips he threw up doll pizza.

The crackle of stroller wheels on the sidewalk. Winter salt not yet washed away. Town very busy. Lines of cars at red lights. People inside the cars looking at them. Harvey reaching under the seat to poke the shape of her butt. It was like a big tummy. A big tummy with a person inside.

She put Duncan under her shirt. “Look,” she said. “I’m married, and this is my first baby.”

Harvey’s mother laughed but then felt hollow and afraid. Her husband’s arm came around her.

“Everything we’re feeling, they said we were gonna feel,” he told her.

THE RESTAURANT IN town was famous for a life-size statue of a donkey. Everyone coming in had to touch it for good luck, even Duncan with his plastic doll hand.

Harvey watched her mother’s face when their orange

soda arrived in glass bottles. She couldn't read but knew what writing was. Harvey would get soda for being good—which meant not talking, or at Easter—after giving up candy for Lent.

Harvey plopped Duncan on her mother's lap. It was a sacrifice to let him go, but sudden generosity made her feel safe. Her mother sucked down the orange liquid, tipping back the bottle, the pop fizzing as though angry, making her lips shine. Harvey wanted to wear lipstick too, but wasn't allowed. She wanted to touch it with her tongue but was definitely not allowed. It was like the skin of a red apple. *Poor Snow White*, Harvey thought. *She had to sleep for a million years, all because of fruit.* At McDonald's she sometimes painted her lips with ketchup, using a french fry, but then retched.

Harvey's mother patted Duncan's head, then cupped her daughter's hand inside her own as though it were a secret she was keeping. Two waiters in fancy hats brought a cart to their table and mashed avocados in a stone bowl. They all watched. The waiters were getting it on their hands.

"It's like green poop," Harvey said.

HARVEY'S FATHER OWNED a jewelry store at the mall. He left early in a gray two-piece suit. Aftershave made him feel important.

Sometimes he came home with a bag of food from McDonald's or Burger King. (Other restaurants didn't put toys in the bag.) Her father's business did well during the holidays. One of Harvey's first memories was watching a woman try on a gold necklace. It was around Christmas, so the shop was

decorated. Harvey and her mother were waiting for him to close, but then a man and a woman came in holding hands.

The necklace was brought to the woman on a red cushion, the way Harvey had seen things carried at church. Her mother said that people liked gold crosses at Christmas because Jesus had died on one. Harvey once saw a picture of Jesus dying. His head hung low like he was upset about something. There were spikes too. People stood watching in sandals and bathrobes. Harvey knew there were bad people who hurt others. She had seen them on TV. They had guns and rode motorcycles and came for you at night or in the city.

The woman looked at the necklace on the cushion, then at her husband.

“Where was Jesus born?” Harvey asked her mother.

“You should know that.”

“I forgot.”

“In a stable,” her mother reminded her. “With animals watching and presents from three wise men.”

Harvey wished she had been born in a stable on Christmas Day. Santa Claus could have been her wise man. Santa could have given the animals a chance to fly with magic dust. Jesus too if he wanted.

Harvey’s father watched the man fasten the necklace around his partner’s neck. When the woman felt his hands, she closed her eyes and stroked the cross with her fingers.

Harvey wondered how something that had hurt Jesus could make people happy. Sometimes she would lose count of the things that didn’t make sense.

When Harvey was a little older, the mall got bigger and other jewelry stores opened up. Harvey’s father tried to drum

up business with coupons in the *Penny Saver*, radio ads, and a man outside the mall in a Statue of Liberty costume. The man was supposed to dance and get everyone excited, but whenever Harvey and her father drove by, he was sitting on the curb.

When Harvey was four years old, her mother had to start working.

Harvey was sent to day care and wept uncontrollably when her mother came for her in the evening.

“We’ve never seen her cry like this,” the caregivers used to say.

Harvey’s mother made a face. “Don’t you love your mommy?”

But that wasn’t it. She hadn’t been able to cry all day because the people there didn’t love her and she was afraid of them.

Her father said the food they served was trash.

At home, Harvey’s mother made pasta sauce with canned tomatoes, garlic, and onion. She said sugar was the secret ingredient. She also made fresh mashed potatoes. Harvey poured in cream, then watched it gloop in the mixer. On television, she saw a commercial with a girl doing the same thing. Years later, Harvey wondered if it was only that she was remembering, because all life is pieced together from memory where nothing is certain, even feeling.

In late January, icicles formed outside Harvey’s window, dripping into a shallow pool. In winter, nothing grew under the hard leaves that clawed the flowerbeds.

Harvey remembers taking off her mittens to palm the frozen earth. Her hands then were small and fleshy. Garden

tools left out were drained of color by winter; the cold handles of a wheelbarrow she used to ride in barefoot, when it was hot and the air rang with green grass.

Sometimes she helped her mother plant bulbs. Eyes that would open in the earth once a year. She had on a cable-knit sweater that came up to her chin. Her mother would press on her hands—press them into the soil and laugh. “Let’s grow a Harvey tree!”

Sometimes worms nosed through the grass, strings of flesh that had neither eyes nor mouths but lived and moved through light and darkness, recognizing neither one. If a worm got chopped in half, her mother said, it would have to grow another piece to keep on living.

THERE IS A book of photos somewhere, of Harvey when she was five or six. In one picture she is standing in the driveway with a backpack, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. On another page, she poses on the front step in a red sweater and gray wool skirt. She was told to smile because in pictures it’s how you’re supposed to feel that counts.

The night before Harvey’s first day of big-girl school, her mother cut her hair in the kitchen. She first wet it under the faucet, then spread a towel on her shoulders.

Harvey’s father got upset watching his wife sweep the fallen pieces.

“It’s only first grade,” she told him.

“I know,” he said. “I can’t believe it.”

II

ONE CHRISTMAS HARVEY'S father gave her mother a diamond necklace. Harvey got Barbie's Dreamhouse.

Sometime around then, she built a snowman in the yard. Her grandparents were visiting from Florida and said they didn't miss the cold. It was the last time Harvey would see them alive. They all wore heavy coats and drank hot chocolate from Christmas mugs. Harvey couldn't hold the cup with her mittens, so it fell in the snow. Harvey laughed, because what could snow do? But when she looked, the mug was cracked. At first her mother was annoyed, and Harvey was afraid she had ruined Christmas.

When she stopped crying, her father strung flashing lights along the side of the house. Harvey looked at them and imagined Santa trying to land his sleigh.

A few days before her grandparents arrived, they got the house ready. They had bought the Christmas tree at Home Depot and tied it to the top of the car. It was almost too big to go through the front door of the house. Harvey thought it was funny and wanted to draw a picture.

As they were unpacking ornaments for the tree, Harvey saw a photo album at the bottom of a box. She took it out with both hands and peeled back the cover. Some of the photos were yellow, and it was hard to see who anyone was. Some pages were stuck together and wouldn't open at all. When her father saw the book on his daughter's

lap, he shouted to his wife: “Come and see what Harvey’s found!”

Harvey said her father’s face was the same now as in third grade. His wife regarded the likeness. “That’s right.” She laughed. “It is the same.”

Harvey’s mother said she had never seen these pictures. Harvey’s father remembered the name of the street he’d grown up on, *Sycamore Avenue*; the sort of car they’d had, *Buick Regal*; and even the name of a dog they’d found wandering along Queens Boulevard, *Birdie*.

“It was a young Lab,” said her father. “And it came right up to us and started licking my brother’s hand.”

“You have a brother?” Harvey said.

Her mother reached over and closed the album. Her bottom lip was shaking. Then she stood suddenly and looked around. “Let’s get this house decorated for Christmas!”

Harvey turned to her father. “What’s his name? What’s your brother’s name?”

“Jason.”

“No, Steve!” Harvey’s mother snapped. Then she went into the bedroom. The sound of the door slamming made Harvey jump.

Harvey’s father just sat there fingering a branch of the Christmas tree, as though it were the most precious thing ever.

LATER ON, WHEN Harvey’s father was doing things on the roof, Harvey asked her mother if Jason would be alone for Christmas. She rubbed her hands on a paper towel and knelt down so their eyes were level. “Jason is not a part of our family anymore,” she answered softly.

Harvey looked at the paper towel in her mother's hands. It had softened and she wanted to grab it.

"He's not a nice man," her mother said. "Very angry."

Harvey asked if he would hurt a child.

"I don't know," her mother said. "I hope not. But I guess he could do anything."

Harvey said she couldn't imagine it.

"Some people are born with bad in them," her mother explained.

"What bad things did he do?"

"Well, he almost killed someone," she said. "Thankfully, the police got there to break it up."

Harvey pictured Frosty in the Christmas movie, getting killed by the thermometer because it turned red and made flowers pop up. Not even his best friend had been able to stop Frosty from melting.

"He'd still be in jail," her mother went on, "if the police hadn't come in time."

A bird drew Harvey's eye to the window. A garden stripped of leaves by winter revealed a pink egg left over from Easter.

"Can I finger paint?" Harvey said.

Her mother busied herself at the sink. "Your father's family wasn't very happy," she said, wringing out a cloth. "It's a wonder your dad turned out so well."

Harvey hoped her mother wouldn't say any more, and asked if she could go outside.

"It's too cold," her mother said.

"Can I finger paint then?"

"I'm trying to tell you something serious—so stop thinking about finger painting for a second, okay?"

Harvey made a face like she was going to cry.

“Let’s just feel lucky that Daddy is not like his older brother or his father.”

Harvey shrugged. “Okay.”

“Can you believe, Harvey, that one night Steve’s father tried to set their house on fire—can you believe it? While his own wife and sons were sleeping.”

Harvey felt the lick of flames.

“That’s what alcohol can do to a person, Harvey.”

“If our house was on fire, would my dolls get burned?”

Her mother stopped what she was doing.

“Would my dolls be on the news, Mommy?” Harvey said, straining to lose herself in the feeling that Duncan was lost forever.

“Really, Harvey? I’m trying to be honest with you. You want me to be honest with you, right?”

Harvey nodded.

“Well, this is serious,” she said. “Nobody’s house is getting burned down. But your father and his brother had a tough time when they were boys. They even spent a few months in and out of foster homes.”

“What’s foster homes?”

“It’s like an orphanage, Harvey.”

“What’s that?”

“Remember *Annie*? That movie you saw with Grandma and Grandpa when they visited from Florida last time?”

“It was boring.”

“No, it wasn’t,” her mother insisted. “You enjoyed it. It’s a movie for children.”

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WHEN IT GOT dark, they hung the rest of the ornaments and watched Christmas shows. Harvey's mother made a pot roast for dinner, and her father went out to Dairy Barn for apple cider to drink with it.

When Harvey was in bed, voices entered her room.

She sat up and looked through the darkness at her dolls lined up on the dresser. The dolls were listening too, Harvey thought, absorbing everything in their stillness.

"It's our home, Steve!" her mother screamed. "It's our home, and your daughter lives here! *Your* daughter!"

"Don't use Harvey as an excuse."

"Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me?"

Something fell and rolled around on the floor.

"He's a *convicted felon!*" her mother screamed. "Who knows what he might say, or try and do to get what he wants?"

Then her father raised his voice. "Don't start judging! Jason is a part of our family, whether you like it or not."

Her mother was really crying now. Harvey felt bad for her.

"Haven't we done enough for him?" she said.

"He's still family. He's still flesh and blood."

"Please—*please* don't bring him into our lives. Just imagine what could happen."

Harvey pulled the cord on her pink dragon and listened to a song play from its belly.

A WEEK LATER, at Chuck E. Cheese's, Harvey and her father were shooting ducks with plastic rifles. When a cartoon dog appeared on the screen with their scores, Harvey asked

her father what had happened to the dog he found with his brother.

“We only had him a few weeks,” he said. “Then he ran off and we never saw him again.”

On the car ride home, Harvey asked if his brother lived on Long Island, and if he was mean when they were kids. Her father put the radio on, but Harvey spoke over it. “Why won’t you tell me about Jason?”

Her father caught her eyes in the rearview mirror. “I love you,” he said. “Do you know that? Do you feel that?”

They found a pizza shop in a strip mall and sat in a booth with fountain drinks, waiting for the pie to cook.

“It could get me in major trouble with your mother that we’re even thinking about him.”

“I really want to know,” Harvey said. “Is he your little brother or your big brother?”

“He’s my big brother.”

“Did he try and kill someone?”

“Who told you that?”

“Mom.”

“Did she also mention that he’s disabled?”

“What’s that?”

“He has a fake leg, but he thinks I don’t know because we haven’t spoken in such a long time.”

“How long?”

“Almost ten years.”

“Mom just said he was always fighting.”

“It’s true he got into arguments sometimes, but the victims were not innocent.”

Harvey didn’t get it.

“What I mean is, Harv, he never got into arguments with nice people or people who couldn't fight back.”

“Yeah, like kids.”

“Exactly. One time he got in a fight with a real bad man. They both got hurt, but the other man was much worse.”

“Did the other man die?”

“No,” Harvey's father said. “But he was blinded.”