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In Another World, They'd Be Dandelion Petals

There's a mouse in our apartment.

It scurries across the kitchen floor and darts behind the refrigerator. Small, gray.

The feather earrings I left by the sink are gone. I imagine the mouse scooping them up, burrowing its face in the softness.

"There's a hole," I tell Trey. We're eating Chinese take-out in the living room. I closed the kitchen door, sealed the bottom with a towel. I bought paper plates so we don't have to go back inside. "Where there's one, there's more," I say. "They multiply."

Trey presses his thumb in the middle of a soy sauce packet, forcing the ends to bulge with liquid. He takes a long sip of beer. "There aren't any droppings," he says. "No scratch marks." He moves the stove and refrigerator, but doesn't find a hole. When he walks out, he leaves the door open. I shut it, wedge the towel back underneath.

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Things I know about mice: They flatten their bodies to squeeze through tight spaces. They breed year round, ten to twelve babies per litter.

Our son, Zander, would want to pet them. He lets orange salamanders crawl on his arms, hide in his hair. Zander Salamander, we call him. Last year when he was 17, he walked up to a bison on a hike in Montana, hand extended. We ran after him and pulled him back, held him as he screamed and thrashed. His feet were off the ground like a bird trying to take flight, kicking us with his heels so we'd let him soar.

It could hurt you, we said.

You're hurting me, he said.

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I open cabinets, move edibles into the refrigerator. Salt and pepper shakers, rice, tea. I'm wearing rubber gloves. Trey pulls a can of tuna from the butter bin. "Pretty strong mouse."

"They carry disease." I take the gloves off in the bathroom and turn on the faucet, let the cool liquid splash into my hands.

Zander loves the water. He puffs his cheeks and dunks, resurfaces only to spring back down. He rushes waves, screeching with delight as they swoop him up and toss him about.

Sometimes we have an underwater tea party in the Central Park pool. Muted sound. Undulating sunlight. He pours and we toast, knuckles touching. We tilt our heads back and turn our cups upside down. Him first. Then me.

When Zander sees a lake or pond, he has to be in it, submerge. It's the one trait I can point to and say yes, that's mine. Like a cat tucking itself between couch cushions. Except the water opens a space for me, seals me in. When I move, it follows, weightless.

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Trey puts traps behind stove and refrigerator, between sink and cabinet. Thick metal coils, cheddar squares. Lure it with cheese, then crush its spine.

"Isn't there anything more humane?" I ask.

Trey squints up at me from the floor, trap in hand. "I've seen worse," he says.

We had mice years ago, in Paris. The handyman gave us glue traps. Zander was a toddler. Old enough that people were starting to notice he wasn't talking yet; young enough that we could tell ourselves it didn't mean anything.

Trey went on a business trip and a mouse ran across the floor. I grabbed a broom. A loud thud, then silence. My back was sweating. I couldn't let go of the handle. I called Trey in tears. He said it was a natural instinct. That I was protecting our home. I didn't want to pick up the dead mouse. I didn't want to call the handyman, because then he'd know what I did.

I took Zander to a toy store with a miniature *patisserie* in the window, held a tiny half-moon *croissant* in my palm. We sat inside a circle of train tracks. Zander rested his head on a giant Paddington bear and I didn't stop him. He closed his eyes to sleep, and I covered him with a Twister mat, his hand clutching a large yellow dot. The shopkeeper found us, threatened to call the police if we didn't leave.

We moved home to New York not long after.

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I wake Trey in the middle of the night. "I hear it clawing at the wall."

"I'm sleeping," he says, flipping on his stomach.

He turns toward me, takes my hand. "The insurance finally got back to me about Zander." He buries his head in my lap. "It's covered. In-office procedure. Less than half an hour and it's done."

I clap with exaggerated glee. "Do we get a goody bag, too?"

"Stop it," he says, his head back on his pillow.

Barbaric. That's what I said when Trey first brought up the vasectomy last month. It was two days after Zander's 18th birthday. We were in a van, moving Zander to a group home in New Jersey. The counselors promised kids his own age. A chance to grow.

Zander was sprawled on his bean bag chair in the back. He likes how it bends with his body. Hip hop music blasted from his headphones and he sang loudly and off-key. I picked his swim goggles from the dashboard and ran my finger over the smooth plastic lenses. He'd slipped them on while we were packing, flung them off when we hit the highway.

"I'm not taking away my son's manhood," I said.

Trey massaged my shoulder with his free hand. "Having kids doesn't make you a man." His hair was newly cut, surprisingly gray. He reminded me how Zander wandered into Victoria's Secret at a recent trip to the mall, ran his fingers over a red silk corset. How he tried to kiss a girl at a wedding after she caught the bouquet. "We can't watch him all the time," Trey said.

"He's doing so well," I say now. And it's true. Trey got him a part-time job folding linen at a hotel near Newark airport. Salary. Benefits.

I imagine Zander at work, pulling towels from a bin, twisting them into flowers and hearts and swans. They're waiting on the bed when guests arrive, a touch of magic in an otherwise dreary place.

Janelle even took one home, said it was too pretty to use. She held the bird in both arms like it was real, brushed her cheek along its neck. She's the youngest assistant manager at the hotel, on the fast track to GM. Large green eyes, bangs that tickle her lashes. Off duty, she wears colorful ensembles – pink mini-skirts, orange sweetheart tops. She taught Zander how to use the

pottery wheel in the hotel art studio, knead holes from clay. She showed him how to dance, spinning her out, reeling her back in.

I told Trey one day Zander will turn a pile of dingy gray towels into an elephant, and Janelle will tuck herself under the leafy, half-heart flap of its ear. Zander will ask if she wants to have a picnic, and she'll say yes, that would be lovely. The next day he'll build a sleigh out of beach towels, and he and Janelle and the elephant will slide it into the water and sail to a distant land.

I didn't know terry cloth could float, people will say.

Trey added that last part, hot face in my shoulder. Like that game when each person in the circle makes up a sentence for the story, except it was only him and me.

I repeat the story now, but Trey won't say his line.

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I rescued Zander once.

We were in a boat. It was hot. He jumped in. I jumped, too. The water was choppier than I expected, the hull rocking back and forth above us.

"Swim close to mommy," I said. He plunged under, re-surfaced yards away. He drifted with the waves, his head bobbing, the space between us growing like oil pooling after a spill. Trey tossed him a rope, but it came up short and he ignored it. He was giggling and gurgling, whispering to the water.

I tried to swim to him, but the waves pushed against me, erasing my strokes. My shoulders hurt. He flipped on his back, arms and legs out like a snow angel. Soon he'd look like driftwood, then a small, thin, line. Then nothing.

The current was too strong. It happened so fast. Already the words were forming in my mouth. Already I'd stopped moving.

I imagined the ocean splitting like a sliced grapefruit, Zander on one side, me on the other. Each half now its own whole, smaller.

Trey leaned over the boat, his hands gripping the edge, but he was silent, motionless. Small waves broke softly against the boat.

I dunked my head and kicked furiously, stretched my arms so far I thought they'd tear. I dragged Zander to the rope, held him as he squirmed.

When Trey first bought the boat, we joked about spending the night at sea, leaving our stash of condoms at home. The day after the outing with Zander, Trey sold the boat and I went on the Pill. I carried the pack everywhere, afraid I'd get stuck in an elevator or the subway without it.

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The traps remain empty.

I see a tooth mark on cheddar, but Trey says it's only a shadow.

There's a Brillo pad missing from the new box underneath the counter. I imagine the mouse clawing it apart like cotton candy, sleeping on the scraps.

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Zander wouldn't take the goggles back. That day we moved him to the group home.

I tried to hand them to him in his room, but he knotted his arms behind his back. Trey put them on his desk, but he threw them across the wall.

I reminded him of the brightly colored fish that circled him in Key West as he held out a fistful of pretzel crumbs. How he lunged headfirst down the waterslide at Disney while everyone else lay on their back. Trey reminded him that his eyes are sensitive.

Zander shook his head violently and shrieked, wouldn't stop until Trey shoved the goggles in my purse and zipped it shut.

The counselors warned that Zander might protest the move – block a doorway, unpack a suitcase. Trey thought the goggles were protest, too, but I said it was the opposite, acceptance.

When we got home, I put the goggles in the small safe in our closet, circled my grandmother's pearls around them.

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I tell Trey it's only a matter of time before Zander and Janelle become a couple.

We're driving back from visiting Zander at the hotel. Janelle told us friends tried to drag her to a singles mixer, but she played Scrabble with Zander instead. Sometimes they make up their own words. Eggscellent, Quarantini. Sometimes they play on the diagonal. "Janelle can beat anyone," Zander told us, grinning. "She's very strategic." His vocabulary surprised me, made me think Janelle or someone at the home was teaching him new words.

Trey says the friendship isn't normal. "She's pretty. Successful. She should be dating."

He said the same thing at the holiday party. People tried to flirt with her – guys, girls, young, old. She kept excusing herself to find Zander, teaching him a new dance, giving him one of her earbuds so they could listen to music together. Trey said there's a difference between running to something and running away from something. He compared her to a 12-year old at a

birthday party, helping the host's mom load the dishwasher while all the other kids play spin the bottle.

I fiddle with the radio dial, try to find a dance station. I imagine Janelle and Zander huddled over her iPhone, the thin white "V" of their shared headphones. "She wants to be with our son. Why can't that be normal?"

"She never even mentioned an old boyfriend."

I find a song with a heavy bass, turn up the volume. "I don't air my dirty laundry, either."

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Trey wants to poison the mice.

"I thought you didn't believe me," I say. Last night I told him the mouse was stealing cotton balls, but he wouldn't let me put the bag in the refrigerator.

"If we have mice, poison will kill them." He turns to me. "You want them gone, don't you?" He books a long weekend in Miami. It'll be done by the time we get back.

I imagine swimming to a floating dock, scrambling up, diving back in.

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Zander walks into the kitchen before I can stop him. I didn't know Trey was bringing him over. The shelves are barren, like Zander's room when we moved him to the home.

He shrieks, scratches at his cheeks.

I try to smooth his fingers over his face, tell him we're not moving, we just have mice. We don't want them in our stuff. Trey says the exterminator is coming Saturday, that everything will go back to normal after that.

Zander bangs on the stove, tells the mice to run. "Follow me," he says, racing to the window by the fire escape and trying to open it. "I don't want you to die."

I try, unsuccessfully, to pry his fingers from the pane. We're on a low floor, don't want to tempt would-be robbers.

I turn to Trey. "You shouldn't have told him about the poison."

"You're the one who turned our God damn home upside down for a non-existent mouse." His eyes are narrow with anger.

I tell Zander the mice are bad. They carry disease. They aren't smart enough to go out the fire escape. Trey glares at me, and I wish I could grab that last part back. Zander tries to punch the window and Trey snatches his fist, pulls him, kicking, to the bathroom to try to quiet him.

I wait for Trey to make a sarcastic comment about Zander's sense of reality. Joke that maybe we don't need to shut our windows, after all. Hell, maybe we don't need to lock up our son's sperm, either. But that's my style, not Trey's, and I'm grateful for the silence.

Zander had a toy mouse when he was little. He kept it in his bathrobe pocket. One day there was a bad thunderstorm and he said the mouse was too scared to come out. He kept petting it, whispering that everything was going to be okay.

I take him for a walk in Central Park. Crisp air. Bodies in motion. He calms down. He leads me to the pool where we swim in the summer. Except now it's winter and it's an ice skating rink. I explain that it'll change back when it gets hot again, we just have to wait. I don't tell him that Trey and I will swim in Miami. That the water there is warm and blue.

"Thaw," he says. I nod, and for a moment, I almost don't notice the scratch marks on his face.

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Janelle was ten the first time her mother locked her in the bedroom.

A boyfriend was coming over. He didn't know about Janelle. Her mother put a large pot in the room so Janelle wouldn't have to leave.

Janelle was drunk when she told me. She usually sticks to ginger ale, but they were toasting her latest business proposal, a sister property at JFK, and she didn't want to be impolite. Besides, it was only me, Zander's mom.

I didn't tell Trey. He already thinks she doesn't get out enough. He'd probably say she's repeating a pattern, self-imposing what was imposed on her.

Janelle keeps a picture of her mother on her desk. Bleached blond in magenta halter, scrawny toddler peeking out from behind her mother's legs.

Janelle told me when she squatted over the pot, she knew she was watering flowers in a distant land. "I could see them blooming," she said. "Blue and pink and yellow."

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We arrive in Miami Friday night. It's chilly. My nose runs and I don't have a tissue. We paid more for a room on the beach, but it's too cold to swim.

My phone rings early Saturday morning, waking us. It's a supervisor from Zander's group home. She says Zander is missing. He didn't come down for breakfast. His window was open. She's already called the police, dispatched a search team to the nearby woods. Trey snatches the phone, demands to know what happened. "He seemed happy," the supervisor says, her voice shaking.

The next flight isn't for hours. I pace the small room. "He never ran away when he lived with us."

Trey grabs our suitcase and unzips it, starts hurling our belongings inside. "I can't believe how lax the security is."

I turn on the radiator, punch the wall when no heat comes out. "He must've known we were thinking about surgery."

Trey shakes his head. "We didn't tell him. No one else knew."

"He could've sensed it. Danger."

Now it's Trey's turn to punch the wall. "Would you stop with that magic shit?"

I slide open the glass door and frigid air hits my face. "You don't know what's real," I say. "What's possible." I head toward the ocean.

Trey yells after me. "Maybe he turned one of his towels into a cape and flew away."

The water hits my calves hard, like tweezers pulling hairs from my skin. Trey runs out, apologizes. He tells me to come back to the room. It's freezing.

I go further, past my knees, up to my waist. I lean my torso forward, let my legs slide out beneath me. I'm kicking, reaching with one arm, then the other, propelling myself forward.

Talk to the water, listen to the water. It's how I learned to breathe. How I taught Zander.

I turn from the shore to the horizon, a flat line that goes on forever. I swim ten strokes without taking a breath. Then another. And another. My hands and arms start to numb, my strokes cramp. I cough water, loose drops rattling in my windpipe.

I will myself *not* to count – to just keep going, heart beating louder and louder, ready to explode. It's like free falling, the moment before impact.

The women at the support group Trey made me go to when Zander was first diagnosed talked about that moment. They wanted to drive off a cliff with their child. Or die in a plane crash. "We'd both be buckled in," they said. I imagined mother and toddler side by side, their upper bodies thrusting forward in unison, then slowly falling back against their seats, coming to rest.

I wasn't like those women. That day on the boat, Zander was alone. Drifting with the current. Peaceful. He always loved the ocean. I'd swim back to the ladder and climb aboard. I'd sail away.

Trey saw me motionless in the waves. He stopped yelling. Maybe he knew.

Afterwards, he called it a rescue. Erased what came before. Like water foaming as it reaches out to touch the sand, then returning to liquid, heading back out to sea. Trey's silence transformed me, made me switch direction.

I flip on my spine, try to catch my breath. I roll forward and start kicking, this time toward the beach.

Trey is on the sand, holding a towel. "Jesus, are you ok?" He wraps the terry cloth around my shoulders. "Your lips are blue."

I pull off my wet clothes in the room and dry myself as best I can. I'm shaking. I get in bed, pull sheets and blankets over my body. Trey takes my hand and rubs it between his. I can barely feel it.

He slides carefully under the sheets, from the edge, so there's no pocket of chilled air. He inches toward me. His hands on my stomach, his chest on my shoulder. I inhale the warmth. He

wraps his legs and feet around me, covers my coldness. Slowly the heat and his weight silence my tremors. Then his lips are on my neck.

We haven't. Not since we moved Zander. *I'm not feeling well*, I said. *I don't want you to catch what I have.*

I open my palms. Mixed with our sweat is the smell of Trey's shampoo, clean, pure.

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The exterminator is already on the FDR when we call to cancel. He turns around, but only after we agree to pay half. We're afraid the fumes will hurt Zander if he comes home. We know it's unlikely – he'd have to hitch – but just in case.

Janelle calls as we're boarding. She's on her way to join the search in the woods, stopped to buy batteries for her flashlight.

I imagine her in sky-blue Go-Go boots and thick black mascara, separating from the others, shining light into darkness, finding our son.

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Cold air hits my cheeks when Trey opens the door to our apartment.

There's an empty box of Junior Mints on the table, Zander's favorite. Trey calls his name, but there's no response. We buzz the doorman, and he says Zander came and went.

There's candy on the floor. An edible trail from kitchen to fire escape. I imagine Zander bent over the hardwood, lining up the dots.

I lean out the open window. I want to see gray mice making their way down the ladder like our son intended, the final moment when they let go of the metal and leap to the ground and scamper off, but there's nothing, only rust and dirt and wind.

It's not until Trey says "Where the hell is my gold watch?" that I see chocolate imprints of a sneaker too large to be our son's entering and leaving through the fire escape. I run to the closet, throw the empty safe across the room. It's on a chain, doesn't go far.

We warned our son that burglars would come if he left the window open. Maybe he forgot. Maybe he remembered and decided to risk our possessions to save the mice. I shove my hand in the safe, bang my fist against the tiny walls.

My grandmother gave me the pearls when I was 13. I'd just gotten my period. You're a woman now, she said. She died a week after we moved back to New York. I wanted to throw the pearls out the window, glistening beads falling backwards from the sky. Trey bought the safe, convinced me to put the necklace inside.

"Who steals goggles, for fuck's sake?" I say now.

There's a voicemail from Janelle. She tells us Zander was agitated Friday. He kept talking about mice. Worried they'd escape. Or maybe they'd already escaped, and he wanted to capture them. She doesn't know what it means, but it might be a clue.

Trey erases the message. "Poor Janelle," he says.

The police tell us to stay in the apartment in case Zander comes back. We sit. We wait.

Trey grabs a tissue. It gets caught in the box opening and he rips it free. Then he rips it again. And again. Scraps fall on the mauve carpet. In another world, they'd be dandelion petals. We'd have stalks in our hands, smiles on our faces.

I imagine a mouse gathering the pieces, building a nest. It's what female mice do when they're pregnant. They want to shelter the babies. Protect them from bad weather and predators.

I forced myself to read about mice after Paris. Tails used for balance. Eyes that see better in the dark. The beauty of a creature I killed. There were other facts, too. Sometimes they attack each other. Maim. Murder.

Trey takes what's left of the tissue, winds it around his finger. Like a string meant to remind him of something.

Zander used to rip toilet paper. Leaves too. It drove his speech therapist crazy. Like there weren't enough trees on the school campus. She said the doctors were wrong – Zander knew damn well what he was doing. We switched to a private tutor, made her come to us.

"Remember when we thought there was a problem with his hearing?" Trey asks now.

I nod. Zander was a toddler. He hadn't been diagnosed yet. "He wouldn't come when we called."

We talk about all the good things that happened to Zander since we took him to the home – first for overnights, then permanently. Zander making pizza with new friends, joining a soccer league and scoring a goal.

I pick up the tissue box, lightness in my hand. "After the third sleep-over, he told me some of the guys had girlfriends – that maybe one day he'd have one, too." I'm not sure this belongs on our list, not sure Zander ever told Trey. But then Trey looks down, curled lip, half smile, and of course he's known all along, why we've both been pulling so hard in opposite directions.

I grab a tissue and tear it. I want to feel what Zander feels. Weightless fabric between thumb and finger. The surprising loudness of something whole coming apart.

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We find Zander in Central Park. He's looking down at the ice skating rink. Waiting for the pool to come back so he can submerge.

His hands are chalk white. Like a street mime's face. I grab his icy thumb. The skin is hard as a turtle's shell. "What happened to your gloves?" I turn to Trey. "Did we forget to pack them?" I pound at his chest through his puffed coat. "How could we send him away without gloves?"

Trey reminds me that we clipped mittens to Zander's jacket, gave him a bag of extras. He hugs Zander's head as he stifles a cry.

I try to cover Zander's hands in mine, but they're too large. I try to ignore the doctor at the hospital, telling us we never should have left our son unsupervised, wrapping his frostbitten fingers in giant bandages.

Janelle visits us at the hospital. Fuchsia sweater. Bright smile. She pulls open the curtain and sunlight streams in. She tells Zander everyone misses him at work, that he better get well soon. She gives him a ceramic cup she made. "For tea," she says. She tells us we look exhausted, to take a break and walk around the block. "I got it," she says, patting my shoulder. I slip my hand in Trey's and we stroll.

When we get back, Janelle is gone. Her cup is on the floor, smashed. Zander is trying to scratch his face through the bandages. "I only wanted a kiss!" he says.

Trey kneels on the floor, picks up the jagged pieces. Janelle's sunglasses are still on the nightstand. Dark and glossy, like tar.

I want to believe Zander swung at the cup with his bandaged hand after Janelle refused his kiss, purposely knocked it to the ground. "I don't want your ugly cup," he'd tell her. But he keeps saying her name, poking at his eyes, and I know it fell by accident.

I take his hand and rub my cheek against it. It's ridiculously large, unwieldy. His fingers are usually sharp hooks, clawing, grabbing. Now they're melded together. Blunted.

Trey called it swaddling. What the doctor did when he wound the gauzy fabric around Zander's hands. What we did to Zander when he was a baby.

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Two weeks later, Trey and I attend a party to celebrate the opening of Janelle's initiative, the sister property at JFK.

She's been busy preparing for the opening. So busy she barely sees Zander anymore. He's at the group home. His surgery is tomorrow.

The manager is talking to Trey, complimenting Zander's latest towel creation, champagne chilled in a bucket. It's in the center of the room. I imagine a mouse crawling on the bottle, lying across a terry cloth ice square, floating.

Janelle is sipping ginger ale. She's wearing a white fringed dress. It fits her hips snugly, the curve of her backside. She greets us with hugs and a smile.

She never apologized for leaving Zander at the hospital. Her mother was like that too, frying bacon and eggs and singing show tunes the morning after a lock-in. Janelle laughed when she told me, like it was a good thing.

"What a cute outfit!" I say now. "Turn around so I can see it all."

She giggles, shimmies from side to side, tassels swinging.

She danced with Zander at the last party. The DJ called out the steps – back, then side, then round and round. At one point she was in front, and she swiveled her head to watch him, applauded as he mirrored her moves. The night manager tried to cut in, but she took Zander's hand, said they weren't finished.

"All the way," I say, twirling my finger.

She looks at me, uncertain. Her lips are thin. No wonder she wears bangs, tries to draw attention to her eyes.

I pat her shoulder. "Come on, you know it's a real showstopper."

Even if she tries to explain to friends later, they won't understand. "I'm sure she just liked the dress." "Give the old lady a break. She's the one with the sick kid, right?"

I twirl my finger again.

She rotates slowly.

I want her to stop half-way, whip her head around with eyes that could cut glass. She'd have her hands on her hips, her mouth open. She'd let out a girlish squeal, and we'd laugh like best friends trying on bikinis at the mall.

She'd grab Zander's terry cloth champagne, and he'd grab his goggles, and they'd submerge underwater to toast. Her tassels would swirl around her in slow motion, buoyed.

But she keeps her face from me, arms by her sides. Even when she turns front, her head is down, her lips a small line.

There won't be any more Scrabble on the diagonal. No more mirroring moves on the dance floor.

"Good," I say. I clap, but it's slow, silent. "Very good."