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Octascope

We live in a house divided into five rooms, heated by a wood stove. When Carlos finished building his house, a friend gave him furniture: three beds, so there are three bedrooms and a living room and a bathroom. In one of the bedrooms is a refrigerator and a sink and a hotplate on top of cinder blocks.

The marionette-maker, Carlos, supports us. His friends Nickel and Dime come by and leave cigarettes and fiddle strings and Jordan almonds (lint-specked from the pockets of their flannel shirts). The baby puts all of these things in her mouth, and when she has nothing else sucks her finger until the corner of her mouth is raw. She sleeps on a mat by the wood stove, far enough away so that the cats are closest to the warmth. The cats, five of them, belonged to Dime, but one by one Dime brought them to live with us. There is also an old mutt, thirteen years old, part hound and part coyote, legend has it, with a missing tail. This dog is devoted to the baby, as is the sleek grey cat, who looks too noble to be in this house, but whose specialty is killing bats.

Nickel's real name is Nick. His best friend, Dominic, had been nicknamed Dime before he met Nick. Because they were best friends, the rest of the joke seemed inevitable.

Nickel brought me here to live. I was living with my aunt, and the baby, and waitressing the night shift at a restaurant. I lived with her when I was pregnant and for nearly a year after the baby was born, with her caring for the baby while I worked, until she told me she was getting married.

Nick came for me in his old Mercedes, with a velvet covered, foam-padded board for a front seat, and drove us to Carlos' house. All the time I was hoping he'd tell me to come to his house — that his large, scarred hand would shyly slip into mine, and that I would go with him. The wind chimes dangled from the handle of the glove compartment and the baby kept lunging for them. Our cat was in the back seat, pacing, meowing. She didn't like living with the grey cat and ran away our first week at Carlos' house. Inside the car were little square mirrors. There was a full moon and when the trees were not dense along the road I could cock my head and see my profile in the mirror glued

on the passenger side window, or bend forward to take the chimes out of the baby's sticky fist and see my eyes in the mirror on the dashboard. Nick was grumbling about what a bad thing it was that the Mass was no longer said in Latin. The front left headlight had burned out, and he smoked grass and drove seventy all the way there. No cop had ever stopped the car.

I first met Nick at the restaurant about a month before. He was there trying to sober up Dominic. It was the end of my shift. When I got off I went out to my aunt's car that I parked in the field behind the place and saw the two of them, in the Mercedes, doors thrown open, weeping. Dominic was alcohol sick, and Nick was sick of being called from bars to round him up. I talked to them, and pretty soon we started to laugh. Dominic passed out in the back seat, and Nick and I drove for hours, going in circles, because he was a strange man I had just met and I was afraid to go anywhere with him. I told him about my baby, my aunt. He told me that he had lived with a woman named Julie for seven years. He had met her when he went to college in the Hudson Valley in 1965. Her father gave them money. They always had money. Every Valentine's day she cut hearts out of red paper and wrote love messages on them and glued them together in a circle, points touching. He took his hands off of the wheel, curling his fingers and looking into the empty circle between them. We went to a bar, had three drinks apiece and danced. We went back to the car and he opened the door for me. I sat down and put my hands beside me, bracing myself already for his fast driving, and it shocked me to feel the material: I was confused and thought that it was something living that I was sitting on — soft, chilly moss. The dome light came on again when his door opened, and I looked down to see the royal blue velvet. In the back seat Dominic was very still, no expression on his face, his hand cupped over his fly.

We drove a long way without speaking, until a big black dog ran in front of the car.

"Do you have a dog?" I said.

He shook his head no. "Dime's got five cats."

"Does she really love you?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

"Should I stop asking questions?"

"I'm not giving very good answers."

"Aren't you afraid to drive so fast?"

"I used to work in the pits, repair race cars." He turned his scarred hand toward me. "I don't have any awe of cars."

"There," he said, pointing across a field. "That's where I live."

The silhouette of a big barn, no house nearby. No lights on in the barn.

"I could take you in," he said.

"No," I said, afraid for the first time. "I don't want to go in there."

"Neither do I," he said.

We drove to the end of that road and turned and began to climb a mountain. There were more stars, suddenly. Out of habit, I looked for the Big Dipper. It was as though the small mirror was a magnet — I kept looking into my own eyes.

We went to Dominic's house. There was no phone to call my aunt, and in my sleepy confusion, as I watched Nick load logs into the wood stove, I held my hand over my heart and sent her telepathic messages that I was all right. He put on a light and we helped Dominic to bed and pulled the cold covers over him. I saw the scar clearly then — a thick, jagged scar still deep pink and not very old, from thumb to fourth finger.

"You want to know about my life?" he said. "I was born in China. No kidding. My father was with the Embassy — you don't believe me? I don't remember anything about it, though. We left before I was three."

My eyes moved from Dominic's bed in the corner of the room to a row of vacuum cleaners lined as straight as soldiers, and from there to the only table in the room where there was a mannequin head with a wide-brimmed black hat.

"He repairs vacuum cleaners," Nick said. "He's been my friend since we were twelve years old. Really. Don't you believe that?" He struck a long wooden match on the side of the stove and held the flame over the bowl of a small ivory pipe.

When I woke up it was getting dark. Nick was breathing into my hair. Dominic was sitting on the floor surrounded by his tools, repairing a vacuum cleaner, able to concentrate as though he'd never passed out the night before.

"I thought you should wake up," Nick said, his hand on mine as though he was consoling a patient. I was sprawled in a pile of blankets and quilts that seemed about three feet high. "You've been asleep for almost fourteen hours."

When I told him my aunt was getting married, he told me I should go live with the marionette-maker. They call him that instead of calling him by his real name because his profession interests them. Formerly he was in medical school. Formerly a fiddle player.

His marionettes are made of cherry wood and peach wood, some of birch. They are unicorns and bears and huntsmen. He has passed some on to a friend, a silversmith, to sink eyes of silver into them. There is a green-jacketed huntsman with silver eyes, and there is a shapeless cow with a ridge of fox fur down its back and amber beads for eyes. Sometimes he hangs them on strings from the ceiling beams and the slits and circles of eyes glow at night like the eyes of nightmare demons. The baby is not afraid of any of them. She has broken pieces of some of them and understands their fragility — a bit of unicorn horn, a sliver of claw.

It is sad when Kirk comes the last Saturday of every month and collects them for the drive to New York. The ones that have been around a long time seem like friends, and it reminds me of a funeral when they are laid in layers of white towel in boxes and carried to Kirk's VW bus.

"It would be good if you could make more people and less animals," Kirk says. But he knows that Carlos will carve whatever he pleases. He lingers by our stove, accepts a mug of tea with cloves and honey.

"What do I want to drive to New York for?" he always says. It is his mother's shop that sells the marionettes.

Carlos' father was Mexican, his mother Scandinavian. Carlos does not look like he belongs to any nationality. He is 6'3", almost too tall for his house, with thick, curly red hair and a blond beard streaked with grey. The baby watches him move around the house, watches him carving and painting. It is clear from her expression that she already understands that men are to be respected. He is fond of her and will sometimes call her "my baby," although he has never asked who her father is.

We came to Carlos' because Nick told me Carlos was a kind person who wanted a woman to live with him. I went feeling like a prostitute, but it was weeks before he touched me. The cats and the dog were more affectionate — and he tried to keep the

animals away, afraid that they would overwhelm us. The baby missed her cat when it ran away, though, and quickly befriended all of them.

I looked for clues about him in the old cabinet above the bathroom sink that he used for a medicine cabinet. I found gauze and adhesive, tweezers, aspirin, a jar of crystalized clover honey, a pair of socks folded small, and a card decorated with a pressed yellow field flower — the sort of card you'd scotch tape to a gift — with nothing written inside. There was a box of Cepacol throat lozenges. There was a paperback book about megavitamin therapy.

That was the end of my first week in his house, and it frightened me the way I felt about him, as though I could love any man.

Kirk is apologetic. I have heard people described as shrinking before, but this is the first time I have understood what a person who is shrinking looks like. He opens his mouth, clenching his teeth; his neck disappears into his sweater like a turtle's neck.

He has not been to New York. Before he got ten miles down the road, his bus was stopped by the cops. At first he is so funny, cringing, hating the cops, that Carlos is amused. There were all those bumper stickers: NO NUKES; I AM A COON HUNTER; HONK IF IT'S MY BIRTHDAY. And on the side of his bus Kirk's brother had painted gypsy women, dancing in a field with blue smoke blowing through it. Kirk's headlight was burned out. The cops went mad looking for drugs, with Kirk telling them his rights all along: they couldn't search the bus unless they saw something, or they had a warrant (cocky because he had nothing with him).

They lifted the lid of the cardboard box and smiled to each other as they saw the packages of white towels. The tall, old cop was furious when he unwrapped the towel and saw a smirking bear in a painted vest. His partner smelled it. Nothing. They made Kirk walk — to see if he could walk a straight line. He thought then that they would pretend that he had failed and run him in. But when he turned, they were huddled together, no longer even watching. The tall old cop stayed where he was and the other one — who looked to Kirk like he was a little stoned himself — went to the cop car and opened the trunk and came back with an axe. They placed the bear between them as Kirk watched. Then the young, funny-faced cop whomped the axe

through the center of it. The bear split into two halves, exposing the pale peach wood inside, where it had not been oiled. The funny-faced cop bent over it, squinted, and picked up one half, sniffed again. They gave him a warning ticket to get the headlight fixed and drove away.

Carlos listened, transfixed as if a Guru was speaking, the expression on his face somewhere between joy and wonder. That expression never meant that he was feeling good.

We followed Kirk out of the house, walking single-file on the shovelled path, the baby taking clumsy baby steps beside me. They had not disturbed the swathed marionettes in the rest of the box. On the front seat of the bus, along with a horseshoe-shaped mirror Kirk was taking his mother and an unopened bag of licorice, lay the bear. It had been neatly chopped, exactly in the middle. The pieces lay side by side. Before I saw that, I hadn't been as awed by Carlos' profession as the others, but when I saw it destroyed, I was as moved as if he had created something that was living, that they had cut open.

Kirk's teeth were chattering. He wanted both of them to sue the cops. Cops couldn't axe your possessions at will —.

Carlos stared through the window sadly. He didn't open the door or touch the bear.

Kirk, neck still hunched into his shoulders, said he couldn't get it together to go to New York now.

We sat by the stove, as lost in our own silences as if we were stoned.

When the baby cried, Kirk went out to the bus and got the licorice. She sucked a piece and spit it out. He took a circle of licorice from the bag and skipped it across the floorboards. She watched it and smiled. He flipped another out of his fingers and she smiled and went for it.

It has made Carlos more sure that he is right: there is nowhere in the United States safe to bring up a baby.

He is so good to us that I hardly ever think about Nick anymore, though tonight Nick is coming to the house, and they are going to shoot pool at the bar where Nick and I once danced.

I am reading a book about ant societies. I am learning to type on a tall Royal typewriter lent to me by Kirk's brother. The baby, asleep in the cocoon of Carlos' coat, with Bat the Cat curled against her, sucks her first finger (she has never sucked

her thumb). I part the material because she is too warm, her forehead pale pink and sweaty. She has a small blue vein just at her temple. When we lived at my aunt's house, I could hear, at night, her whispered prayers: "Please God, please King Christ, she's a girl — make the vein in her face go away." Her voice at night was nice to listen to — the prayers were so logical, all the things I would have forgotten to ask for, and she breathed them in a rhythm that came fast and slow, like a music-box song.

Carlos made my aunt two marionettes: a bride and a groom, with pointed silk shoes on the bride and rabbit fur slippers on the groom. They both wrote letters to thank him. They have never asked us, since I came here, to come to visit.

At dusk Nick comes, a bottle of beer in his hand, his grey knit stocking cap lowered over his eyebrows. I am always happy to see him. I never see him alone, and I have never properly thanked him for bringing me here. The last time he came, when he got a sliver of wood in this thumb from stroking an unfinished marionette and I tweezed it out, I wanted to hold his hand longer than necessary to tweeze; I thought that I'd close the bathroom door and say thank you, but he was eager to be back in the living room, embarrassed to have cried out.

From the front window I watch them go down the plank from door to field, and over to Nick's car. The baby waves, and they wave back. The car starts and fishtails out of the snowy driveway. The baby looks to me for amusement. I settle us by the fire, baby on my lap, and do what she likes best: I seat her facing me and bend my head until my lips graze the top of her head and softly sing songs into her hair.

He does not know what childhood diseases he has had. He thinks he remembers itching with the measles.

He has lost his passport, but has extra passport photographs in a jar that once was filled with Vaseline.

With Nick and Dominic he plays Go on Mondays.

He washes his own sweaters, and shapes them.

He can pare radishes into the shape of rosebuds.

The woman he lived with five years ago, Marguerite, inspired him to begin making the marionettes because she carved and painted decoys. Once he got furious with her and pulled all her fennel out of the garden before it was grown, and she came at

him screaming, punching him and trying to push him over with the palms of her hands.

I practice typing by typing these facts about him. He nods his head only — whether to acknowledge that these are facts (some told to me by Nick) or because my typing is improving, I don't know. Sometimes I type lies — or what I think are lies — and that usually makes him laugh:

> He secretly likes Monopoly better than Go.
> He dreams of lactobacilli.
> He wants a Ferrari.

I have typed a list for him that says I was born to parents named Toni and Tony, and that they still live in Virginia, where I grew up. That I have no brothers or sisters who can console them for their wild child who wanted to run away to New York at seventeen. At eighteen, they sent me to live with my aunt in Vermont, and I went through a year and a half of college at Bennington. I fell in love with a musician. We skiied cross-country (I was more timid than my parents knew), and in the spring he taught me to drive a car. I learned to like Mexican food. I learned to make cheese, and to glaze windows. I ended the list here; I wanted him to ask if this man was the baby's father, where he went, what my life was really like before I met that man, if I was happy or sad living in my aunt's house. I have told him a lot about myself. Sometimes I've talked for so long that we are both left exhausted. He is so good to us that I want him to remember these facts: height and weight and age, and details of my childhood, color preferences, favorite foods. Sometimes, in his quiet way, he'll ask a question, say he understands. Last week, after I had rambled on for hours, I stopped abruptly. He knew he had to give something. He was painting a unicorn white; it was suspended from the beam with fish-line, so he could paint it all at once and let it air-dry, steadying it only at the last beneath a hoof, then dabbing paint on the last spot of bare wood. He took a deep breath, sighed, and began: Should he raise chickens? Do we want our own eggs, so we will not have to rely on Dime?

Tonight, or tomorrow, or the next day or night, we have to talk.

I have to know if we are to stay always, or for a long time, or a short time.

When he talked to me about eggs, I went along with his conversation. I said we should get another hive, make more honey.

We are thinking about the spring.

I pick up the baby's Christmas present from Nick: an Octascope (a kaleidoscope without the colored glass), which she uses as a toy to roll across the floor. I hold it and feel as powerful raising it to my eye as a captain with his periscope. I aim it at the two toys suspended from the beams, a camel and a donkey, and watch them proliferate into a circular zoo. I put on my jacket and go to the door and open it. It closes behind me with a tap. I have never before lived where there is no lock on the door. I thought that a baby would make demands until I was driven crazy. When I step out, she is silent inside, dog curled beside her, waiting. I raise the Octascope to eye level, and in floods the picture: the fields, spread white with snow, the palest ripple of pink at the horizon — eight triangles of the same image, as still as a painted picture when my hand is steady on the Octascope.

Bat the Cat darts from under the Juniper bush to crouch between my legs. It will rain, or snow. Pink blurs to pearly grey.

This is the dead of winter.