

The Blue Net

The net is blue. It hangs at the edge of the building. It's a safety protection for little ants that might want to dive, Simon imagines. They must have forgotten it there when they painted the building, the pizza man will comment, when he delivers the pizza later on that day. In the sink, dishes accumulate, and the insects circulate around the leftovers, searching for food. They have no respect, Simon thinks, as he walks by.

The new day is full of colors. His mother bought a red lemon-squeezer at a dollar store for two dollars and it fills the counter. She was holding it when the gurney was wheeled out of the apartment. He doesn't know if he dreamt or if it actually happened. The memory is slow from all the drugs they have given him. If I knew I was going to be this druggy, I would have preferred to die, he concludes, shaking his head.

He shouldn't reason with death. The joke is only possible because he didn't die. But what if he had? He'd failed because consciously he really didn't want to succeed, while unconsciously he was aiming for the fall. Now he is feeling ill as if everybody is judging his mistake. The embarrassment is mixed with disappointment, while the bad memories are still there. He's trying to shake them off, erase whatever is left.

Nobody is looking at him like they did in the hospital. Deep down he enjoyed the attention. Being at home is bothersome. In the hospital they looked for his vital signs, they fed him, and asked questions. He felt relieved. At home he doesn't trust his body, having urges and thoughts sometimes disconnected. He squeezes the ants one by one until they can't move anymore. Ouch, he says, when one of them stings his finger. The little bastards, he affirms, moving his mother's honey container to a safer spot.

That's what happens when he gets angry, fury. The ants keep advancing and he wishes he had company in the kitchen, while his parents are in the living room waiting for the pizza. After they left the hospital, Simon tried to reassure them everything was going to be ok. But in reality he didn't know what had happened. He wouldn't do it again, he said, yet it sounded patronizing and infantile. A long time ago, nobody thought this could happen. The problems were different.

Are you sure you are pregnant? His father had asked Simon's future mother. The question, posed by Paul, thirty-five years old at the time, surprised Mary, who had just turned twenty. Simon was born under a full moon but it wasn't an easy conception. It took his parents a while before they could have him. Can you pass me the ketchup, son? Paul asks. The pizza has arrived and they're planted in front of the TV. Simon is in a daze, slow to wake up. His father is recuperating from a heart attack, with a recurring pattern of eating nonstop. Nothing has changed, Simon thinks, the man ignoring the obstructions of his coronaries again.

Urban grass, fat and green, is the new healthy snack, Paul tells his wife. He promises he will balance his diet voluntarily. Paul will make everything as the doctor says, his father affirms, addressing himself in the third person. He is proud of his apostle's name, a heritage of his own mom, Simon's grandmother. Only he believes in scientific facts. I will eat my greens and grains eventually, he emphasizes, crunching on the whole-wheat dough on the weekends.

With his mouth full Simon finds it hard to understand how his father's large back, wide as an ocean, can shield such a weak heart. His genes must have weakened mine, Simon thinks, watching the devouring. Melaine will leave me because I'm not good

enough and there's no way of being better, he judges, eyes on the mirror. That's how the pattern starts. When he wakes up in the hospital, it's too late. Being groggy and numb softens him a bit. What did you think you were doing? His father asked, not understanding why someone could lose control over a girl.

Simon wanted to apologize for what he had done but instead he punched the side of the bed, an angel holding his hands. His mind is tortuous, he wants to say, whispers coming and going. Mary was not expecting the conversation to start that way. Her son had been unconscious for almost an hour and she had been asking God to forgive him for his actions. Paul was not interested in her prayers. He forgot the story of his birth or how long it had taken her to be pregnant. She knew it was divine intervention but he refused to believe in her version of the story. What challenged her faith made her stronger, she said.

Yet she never thought she would have to see her son lying in a hospital bed. At least he didn't kill himself, she concluded, trying to be positive. He was out of control, breaking mirrors, pushing the dresser, making a lot of noise and alerting the neighbors, she told her friend David. All material things are replaceable, he said, trying to reassure her. Simon yelled at his father when he left the hospital room. I couldn't defend myself and I had the urge to escape from everything, he said, with strong emotions. Mary held him, hoping Paul wouldn't provoke him again.

I'm confident you will get over this, his father affirmed, stature like a stone, before turning around and leaving the room. Mary hoped Simon wouldn't give so much importance at what his father said. She had learned herself not to. He thinks everyone must do as he does, Simon accused. It's like I'm going to burst, he spited.

Your father likes to believe things are black and white, she consoled, but less than a week ago he was lying in a hospital bed too. Simon nodded and asked for a mirror. He wanted to see if his face looked larger, the impact of his words making him ample. The veins in his forehead were grand, enlarged. His mother held his arm. What did you expect? She asked. Her son was uncomfortable. It's like I drank too much and had a night over at the bar, he said.

That morning in the house, he had the impression he was outside of his body, a stranger telling him what to do. In the kitchen, except for the ants running a muck, normality is back, the television on and the game loud. Simon told the doctor at the hospital that drugs wouldn't change his temperament. He was in love and sometimes he wanted to break things for no reason. The man said he understood him completely but that it would be better if he saw a psychiatrist who took care of things with drugs.

Simon shook his head, unrelenting. In the living room, Mary knows her son is avoiding his room. She has no idea how much more time he will need to fully recover. When she found him in the bedroom, curling in the corner, Mary saw a small elephant, shaking and trembling. When he was little she thought of him like one, yet there he really looked like an animal. In his hands, he had a paper knife. She had called an ambulance because she didn't know what else to do and was afraid of asking Paul. He hadn't tried to kill himself; she hoped to convince the paramedics who said the boy was in shock.

Simon didn't let go of her hand, afraid of going into the ambulance alone. She followed the gurney with the sensation they were the last people in the world. Mary had meet his girlfriend once and called her Barbie. The girl didn't budge. Melaine was pretty but in fact she was really stunning. Mary couldn't bear to see him with such a beautiful

woman. It made him look like an idiot. He was doing his homework, but also hers. I prefer to die than being away from Melaine, he said. While he was being medicated at the hospital and sleeping, she blamed herself for what happened. I suggested he should break up with Melaine because she was no good, she said. Paul returned his plastic cup to the recycling bin and accused Mary of protecting him all his life.

Instead of listening she went back to the house and washed all the walls with Vim because she didn't want him to remember anything, as if all their troubles could be cleaned. Paul knew his son was very sensitive and, different than him, had an explosive temperament. The boy was hyper agitated. The doctor said it was common for teenagers around his age to have nervous breakdowns yet it also could be nothing, just stress, he reinforced, contradictorily. Even the nurse said her son was going to be ok. I don't think he can stop taking his medicine, Paul said, while Mary obsessed over the girl.

That's what she told her friend David, who wasn't her lover but she secretly wished he were. They had met at a Sunday matinee opera. They sat side by side and because she was alone they began to chat. Paul hated classical music. David invited her for tea. And she went to his house to meet his canary. He was a widower and didn't call her Mary but apple pie. He never said a mean word to her or spoke about his dead wife. But he was curious about her husband. He wanted to know what kind of man he was. When she called him to talk about Simon in the hospital, he said the kid needs some assurance. She got offended. She felt he was diminishing her authority.

Unexpectedly, she thought he sounded like her husband. Deep down, she believed they were the same kind of men, self-centered. Paul found her in the hallway of the hospital, holding the phone like a pole. If he had died in his heart attack, Simon wouldn't

have lost his mind, she thought, wishing both men dead. Alone with her son, she would find a way to be alone. Melaine wasn't right for him. She didn't know what they went through, immigrating to America and surviving in a foreign country.

Paul wanted Mary to stop narrating such a sad story to convince herself she had suffered enough. After his heart attack, she wasn't devastated. He knew life could change suddenly. She just began making meal plans. What are you looking at? She yelled. A nurse, passing by in a blue gown like a ghost, looked at them, with no concern in her gaze. Mary wiped her hands in her jeans, wishing she hadn't called David. Paul knew she was near the edge. Now she was sweating, with hot flashes. In a week or two she would turn fifty. He didn't think she was in bad shape. But time had passed.

Don't yell. You're hysterical. He won't like to see you this way, Paul said. You don't know anything, she said, leaving him alone. It didn't help calling David. Melaine isn't worth anything, she said, when she entered the room. She wanted Simon to hear it. She wanted him to know she was on his side. But he was still sleeping, with his own desires dormant. It was more practical to die over a girl than a bad heart. What did you tell him? Paul asked. He sounded retarded asking obvious questions. Mary refused to acknowledge she had influenced her son's actions. She wasn't thinking straight.

She told him to stop seeing Melaine. What? Mary asked. I'm just saying, Paul began, and stopped. Can you see the tree? Even if you can't, it doesn't mean it is not there, Paul said. He's so confused, Mary continued, he doesn't know what he wants. Paul intervened, arguing that was not true. She's good for him, Paul defended, knowing it would be hard to break Mary's hold.

Simon heard them fighting. Both of them were speaking the truth. There's no practical explanation for how family works, he thought. In the house, in his bedroom, the first thing he does is to have a shower. The water was too cold in the hospital. Melaine knew he was weak around his mother, lonely. The thought he had to choose between them made him desperate. It was in the middle of the day when the ambulance arrived. Simon was alone because he had the flu and didn't go to school. Nobody checked on him. Mary went out for her aerobics class and when she returned she found him unconscious in his bedroom floor, the wrists damaged or cut she couldn't remember.

He saw the shield that had belonged to captain America hanging on the door. Mary bought it to him when he was little. While she waited for the ambulance, she looked at his phone and read his messages on display. She thought she knew so much about other people but not many people understood her. Now she can hear Paul and Simon laughing in his bedroom. There's always the carcass of a big turtle lying near the ocean. It's how close I've been of death, he says. Sixty eight per cent of America's population is overweight, Paul replies, more relaxed now he's back in the house.

They will die from a heart attack but not me, his son jokes. Every morning, his father drinks a glass of lemon water with an empty stomach to clear his system. That way you will keep your body purified and balanced, lectured Paul. One should also eat oatmeal with almond milk and coconut sugar, he added. Mary is listening on the hallway. I can smell her perfume from miles away, he tells his dad, when she opens the door. She wants to know what's so funny. She wants to hold him like a baby. But she controls herself. Before they arrived, she searched his room to make sure no sharp objects were around. Not that it would make a difference, she thought.

If someone wanted to die, they would. Simon's wearing the red sweater Paul had given him for Christmas. A blue net is enveloping his hand. The ants won't be nearing the edge anymore, he tells Mary. I ripped them apart. I didn't have the courage to kill them all, he says, just a few. The net around his wrists make him look like a tennis player. I didn't imagine I would survive to see another Super bowl Sunday, he affirms. But his mother is not a fan of football. Simon imagines the life of birds that emigrate. How they must miss their home. The tundra almost kills them too.

All in the same universe sharing different experiences, he thinks. At some point new ants will return and eat the left over pizza on the edge of the sink. It is so close to the holidays you can almost smell snow, Simon tells his parents. I need to buy you new pajamas, Mary says, the bloodstains on the microfiber still there. His father looks at him with the eyes of a crocodile. Paul can't stop eating chips, especially the truffle flavored. I'm not sophisticated but I like good things. You eat, you enjoy life, and you don't panic. That's the idea, Paul says.

On that cue, both of them return to the kitchen. There are no super heroes in Latin America, only in North America, she says, washing the dishes and seeing the dead ants revolving in the water, sucked into drain. When she was a little kid her mother told her this story. I never told you, but the night we met, at the hotel, when I was there to fix the room on the fifth floor, I hoped I could marry you, Mary affirms. He nods, opens the drawers and begins to dry what is left on the counter, neither of them knowing how much longer they would stay awake, after such a long time away from home.