

But You're Not

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Right in the middle of our evening at the minister's, I excused myself from the dinner table, followed a carpeted hallway decorated with framed photos of the minister, his wife, and a third tall figure wearing a double-breasted peacoat, locked the bathroom door behind me (there were two locks, one inside the knob and another that slid along a flimsy brass track) and, after washing my hands, took off my dress and panties in front of the mirror. The minister wasn't our minister or even, hardly, a minister at all. He was only a dean at the College of Arts and Sciences, recently ordained. He had no congregation and besides, we were atheists. My partner, Raye Yeet (no relation to the famous dead Scottish philosopher, she loved to confuse people by pointing out) had just been hired here in math at the university, where people kept inviting us over to dinner. Since Raye was still freshly exhausted by the move, by the work of impressing her funny smart self on her new colleagues, and by the final thinning trail of sleepless nights and zombie mornings caused by the spell of postpartum depression from which she seemed at long last to be reluctantly recovering, it was I who got all wound up about these dinners, for her sake more than mine.

Raye longed to meet the people who would be our friends, people to go to farmers' markets with, while spilling our secrets along the way, or in case we had no secrets, people who did . . . but it was in Raye's nature to be disappointed.

The wife's name, Serena, unsettled me for days; it sounded so full of promise, but even so I was dreading what Raye would find to say about her when dinner was over and we were on our way home. We would be crossing the frontage road, Raye and I, along an overpass approaching the flat gravel roof of a Walgreen's store instead of into the tunnel of sycamore trees through which we used to drive home in St. Louis, and I would ask her if we had had a good time or not. I would know that this joke, meant to deflect Ray's discouraged response, wouldn't go over. In the sky above Walgreen's, some stars would be visible in spite of headlights off the highway, but even as we glided past them, I would file the constellations away in my mind in a folder marked *It was okay, I guess*.

Raye would tilt her blond head in fairness a moment, revealing the dusky throb of her pulse, a star blinking at her ear as if to make up for the absence of earrings. "I guess I just didn't find her all that interesting," she would reply, and if the stoplight were red she would make a right turn instead of waiting for it to turn green again, underscoring the Yeet-ness of her remark. She would be driving, because I didn't know how to drive a manual transmission, which was the only car we had since we'd sold my dented Saturn so as not to have to drive two cars all the way from St. Louis. The whole way to Wisconsin, Raye did the driving while I stayed in the back seat playing with Trace, picking up Rice Chex one after another, naming each latticed square of breakfast cereal after a famous person we hated, making the people beg for their lives, and then either sparing them at the last second or gobbling them up. Though it was getting to be time for me to find a new, used car, I was putting off looking, just as I was postponing either looking for work

or returning to school. I had paid our room and board all through Raye's long years in grad school by driving that rattletrap Saturn to work at the bakery, decorating cakes that resembled cloisonnéed boxes, and now that we were settling in, I thought I might just sit home with the baby for a couple of months, maybe even for years. I'd surprised myself coming to this greedy idea, but I didn't miss working. Aside from my car I missed nothing at all of our time in St. Louis: not the sycamore trees, not our lacy apartment six blocks from Delmar Avenue where Paul's Books used to be, not our great friend David Karpakian who lived with his canaries (free carbon monoxide detectors, Raye joked) in the rooms below ours. Not the hits of cake flour I used to inhale when I opened the flour sacks there in the bakery, the edible silver beebees (free dental work, Raye said), the linen towels with the pictures of fat chefs dancing on them, my co-workers, our whisk-licking-contests, the spoon-juggling tournaments, or the way we used to launch paper doilies off the countertop like wheels that had skidded off motorcycles. Not even the pregnancy did I long for, the high, almost mystical way Raye carried it, her slender frame if anything rarified by it.

Instead of missing these things, which had been so important while they were happening, I found myself inclining toward a yeasty domesticity I elected not to mention even to Raye. Now that her hormones appeared to be stabilizing, it seemed permissible for me to sink into some myself, as if into a pool I had waited too long for her to pull herself out of.

Like for all our dinner invitations, I baked one of my cloisonnéed cakes for dessert at the minister's. I didn't know yet Serena was one of the professors, or that she detested cooking. Except for my cake the whole dinner that night came directly from Sam's, the packaging in plain view on the otherwise untouched cutting board island. I could see right away that my cake irked Serena. It made her feel put

out. Still, I liked her anyway. I found all people interesting just because they were people, period. Even if we hadn't learned at dinner that night that the minister, whose name was Winston Lackwena, had "by a hair's bread-th" (you could hear the letter "d" when Serena pronounced it) escaped being murdered by Idi Amin some forty years earlier, I would have thought him interesting: because of the way he plucked five Nancy's Deli Spiral Tomato and Provolone Sandwiches off the appetizer plate and ate the stack in one bite while we were having our drinks; because of the rakish look of the narrow suspenders worn over his snug-fitting polo shirt (there was a weight machine in their bedroom where we'd laid out our jackets); and because he kept the radio tuned to a high school football game. Winston had been a tennis player back in Uganda, Serena explained, not a pro or anything, just a member of a league, and one day he'd been warned by his ex-grade school teacher who'd gone on to be a member of the disbanded parliament that his name was "on a list." His seatmate on the plane escaping Kampala was a girl whose toothache caused her to "behave improvidently," but when they got where they were going, Winston paid her dental bills. For three decades they'd been married. Their grown twins, son and daughter, shared an efficiency in Cambridge, England. The twins "look exactly like Winston," Serena twice exclaimed. On first being married, Serena hadn't wished to have babies at all, but now that the twins were so far away, she regretted her earlier position as much as if she'd stuck by it and they had never been born.

"You don't know yet how lucky you are to be mothers," she said when we were taking our seats at the table, bravely addressing Raye and me equally in this remark.

She was delicately built with skin the identical true black color to Winston's, and wore a bright linen caftan with embroidered bell sleeves, not the best choice of clothing "if you were tossing and serving," she admitted while dressing

the Newman's Own dinner salad. The minister smiled just to listen to her speak. She talked nonstop, maybe only tonight but maybe every night. Even after Raye and Winston eased themselves into the usual dissection of campus politics, Serena kept talking about cars and condominiums, and how she didn't "know wines," and how she wished we had brought Trace with us instead of leaving him home with the sitter. I wished it, too. I would have liked to watch him pull himself onto his toes via Winston's suspenders, and Serena with her French-manicured thumbnail halving a pimiento-stuffed olive, Trace's favorite bedtime snack . . . and I imagined her settling herself in the process, maybe, becoming more like her name, Serena, and less like a woman pretending to be at ease. As impossible as it seemed, I had never eaten dinner with a black person before, and Serena had never eaten dinner with a gay person before, and somehow we both seemed to know this. True, I'd had encounters that were probably more important to me than they should have been, like at fourteen years old on the bus to my cousins' in Kansas City, a man lifted my hand right out of my lap and predicted I'd never play keyboard. I'd been an idealistic teenager. I didn't like that I was white and that we lived on Lake View Drive where there really was a lake, which I was glad we couldn't see from any window in our house. It wasn't that I wished we were poor, exactly, or lived in one of the houses with no screens in the windows that the bus drove by along the winding overpasses. Instead I wished, not in words but in a deeper and apparently pointless way, that there was nothing I needed to *be* at all. I didn't want to be a race, have money, not have money, or live with or without window treatments. I didn't even care to be male or female. I wanted to live outside all categories and I would have been proud, had I known about it then, of the way I lived now, being house-husband even when I was having my periods. Raye seemed proud of this, too, but mainly we just wheeled humbly along like my favorite of Raye's elaborately

framed posters of the Shunya-Chakra, which hung on the landing in our little rented house instead of half-behind the file cabinet in her old grad-student cubicle, and which aside from being the familiar graphical representation of the number *zero*, and which translated from the Sanskrit to mean *void-circle*, connoted the vastness of the firmament including everything still uncreated and thus, paradoxically, eternal.

Serena was a French Club, Russian Club, Swahili Club, Hebrew Club, German Club, and Portuguese Club member, we learned, not the kind of person to spend her Saturday mornings riffling through apple crates with other professors and their significant others. As if she'd spent too many hours in the language lab, she seemed to take solace in repeating herself, like with the thing about the twins looking just like Winston and then reminding us again how "bless-ed" we were to be mothers. In the times she wasn't talking, she appeared to have some difficulty swallowing her food, and also an interesting (to me) habit of pretending to saw very gently through the glass-topped dining room table with the blade of her butter knife.

Their bathroom mirror looked just like their dining room table, and like the table, reflected a candle flame. A similar mirror once fell on top of me when I was a girl. I was perched on the counter at my cousins' house, watching one of my cousins depilate the fine black hairs, hairs I considered to be achingly beautiful, on her forearms. Her younger sister, now dead, was shampooing her hair with an egg in the shower. The mirror came loose from the bathroom wall and flipped onto my head, not breaking. I was stunned but unhurt. With no exception I would always be stunned but unhurt by the things that might have hurt me, and despite a few setbacks it seemed like Trace had inherited similar luck. Once, at Raye's mom's house, a tub door fell on Trace while I was preparing to run his bath. I had laid him on the mat, unsnapped his

checkered onesie and draped the onesie on a towel rod. Everything I did I told him I was doing it, not only in order to teach him words but to practice what I thought of as being truthful with him, as if I might otherwise tell him lies.

"I'm hanging your green onesie over the towel rod," I explained, as if I might otherwise have said to him, "Your grandma loves to throw her sweaters out the window."

And I said, "I forgot to bring the oats but no oats are better than no bath," as if I might otherwise have taught him that oats were extremely small chickens. He had chickenpox then, an angry, oozy case of hot, humid, summer-weather chickenpox that was making him miserable, so I was giving him a bath even though we had brought no Aveeno oats to be mixed with the lukewarm bath water. Raye's mom lived in Springfield in the house Raye grew up in. Raye and her mom were downstairs in the kitchen "rounding up the bagels," as Raye liked to say. It would be peaceful upstairs in the gold speckled bathroom, a justifiable retreat. I spread a terrycloth mat on the floor, laid the baby on top of it, tricked him into not getting up by singing Eensy Weensy Spider, and slid open the speckled glass bathtub door . . . which jogged off the track, struck the sharp, squared-off corner of the Formica countertop and shattered into a hundred baby-sized pieces that arranged themselves around and on top of Trace, who, thank God, was still wearing his diaper though with the Velcro strips undone, sticking out like post-it notes. A shard of glass as big as the diaper lay on top of the diaper. Confused, Trace waggled his fingers as if making the rain fall down on the spider, then screeched when I screeched, the two of us entirely losing control. Downstairs in the kitchen, up popped the toaster, one bagel in four transparencies.

"Kaydee doesn't handle crises very well, does she?" Raye's mom asked when they were loading Trace and me into the ambulance, the spinning light like a fan blade oddly visible against the noon air. As they shut the back doors,

she stood adjusting the cape she had made of her sweater, not the sweater Raye and I had bought her but another of the eight sweaters, all cardigans, five of them red, that she'd been given at her sixtieth birthday party. In a way it was good she was finally expressing her doubts about me, for it meant she accepted me as part of the family after ages of pretending not to know what on earth I was doing there.

"Kaydee handles things fine," Raye said with affection, flexing her ankles. For Raye's graduation I had bought at a garage sale one of those beautiful maple Lumbar Extender Arches for lying on top of and stretching your back, which turned out to be something Raye must have wanted all her life without knowing it, since she purchased a second, portable model made of tubing and upholstery to be kept near the shuffleboard court on her mom's basement floor. Sometimes, after stretching her body along that arch like someone prostrating herself in reverse, Raye looked even taller than me than before.

"Kaydee isn't a girl you'd want to have to depend on during an emergency," Raye's mom repeated, Raye dabbing at my cheeks with paper towel, as if reapplying a glaze of tears.

"That's why we love her so much," Raye answered.

Trace had only an inch-long head wound, the EMRs concluded. But he was covered in blood and so was I, the crust dark between my fingers, darker yet between my toes. Raye escorted her mom to the hospital cafeteria. Trace and I read from a crate of Little Golden Books the whole time we needed to wait in a walled-off corner of the emergency room, where since none of the doctors or nurses on duty that day had ever had chickenpox, no one could safely attend to us. At last Trace was stitched up, a bandage like a ribbon of civil war gauze wrapped five times around his head, and he fell fitfully asleep. Only then did I scrub his dried blood from my toes, weeping a little, all the fear I'd corked up. At the gift shop we bought a toy stethoscope, which Trace soon carried with him everywhere. He was a

skinny, wan, bare-chested toddler with pocks on his face and that tatter of gauze, pulling his cherished stethoscope behind him like someone walking a tired kitten on the end of a short leash.

I kept off the light in the minister's bathroom, preferring only the candle aflame in its jar. On top of a clothes hamper sat a phone that started ringing the second I perched on the toilet, and because I had left, with our sitter, a sheet of legal-sized paper displaying the minister's telephone number, hanging it prominently via the only magnet allowed on our refrigerator, the ringing jerked me half out of my mind so I answered it.

"I guessed you'd be 'tossing and serving,'" said a person I just knew was the man in the peacoat in the photos in the hallway. He had an accent like the minister's. Serena didn't, somehow. "I didn't expect you would answer but I wanted to hear it ring. Are you miserable, Darkling? How have I reached you so easily? How are the plastic pineapples doing? Where is the telephone tonight that you reached it so soon?"

"On Serena's clothes hamper in Serena's bathroom here in Serena's condominium," I answered, amazed and disappointed to have learned, so quickly and by accident, Serena's secret. The man hung up at once, as if not to have to learn about mine in return.

But that wasn't why I took off my clothes. Nor did Winston being a minister have anything to do with it, nor Serena's filmy nightgowns hanging on the shower rod looking like the curtains on the windows with no screens. There was nothing even lustful about my finding myself in the nude in the mirror, since I had given up on lust when Raye fell off sex after the baby was born. I'd spilled food down the front of my dress, which started me off. This wasn't so uncommon; I often dropped whole forklifts of salads and things. I turned on the cold tap, took off the

dress so I wouldn't get soaked, spread the cloth taut and scrubbed at the stain with a bar of Serena's glycerin soap. After rinsing it clear I spread the dress on the counter and blew the cloth dry with Serena's hairdryer. I'd gone braless that night, which had to do, I think, with that private pool of hormones into which I was stepping . . . and which caused me to remember breathing in the delivery room. I don't mean breathing just at all, but in the birthing room way of which they'd coached us in class, to which Raye did not adhere. Who would have expected Raye to adhere? Not me. But I *did* adhere. And after six hours there came a cry, Trace's first keening, and Raye looking as if she'd lain there a decade but me wishing she'd spring up, brush her teeth, do her hair (two deliberately unmatched hair clips), grab her books and a coffee and rush off to school, which was what she called work, so I could be alone with Trace. When Raye was asleep I picked him up and carried him between door and tray table, from Seven-Up cup to bed control panel, around the visitor's chair along the room divider curtain, explaining all of these things as we passed them by. I promised him I'd tell him everything I knew about everything I knew about, which wasn't much, I admitted, although I promised to be smarter than the people on television, which was turned on but muted. "They're not really chasing each other around that couch," I explained to the baby, who wore the funny little cap, like an ill-baked muffin, that the nurses had shown up with. I was grateful to find that he really was paying attention to me. It would be like that forever, I resolved—me telling Trace things off the top of my head, nearly anything at all, just to form this bond between us that would be stronger than the bond that he had with Raye. Raye wouldn't have argued with this idea, I sincerely believed, which was exactly my point.

Still, even while stepping out of my panties I paid attention to my face (I carefully met my own eyes, I mean, as opposed to skimming past them there in the glass) by way

of reaffirming what I knew about my body . . . that it was I who'd kept the weight on since Trace's birth, not Raye. Also that my nipples were rounder than hers, like saucers, and of a stormier hue. It had been nearly five years since Raye and David Karpakian and I had first discussed the prospect of making a baby, during which all our deliberations had struck me as being so rational. For one thing, I'd be offered no maternity leave from my job at the bakery, while Raye seemed already determined to stretch out her dissertation-writing for as long as was allowed. I couldn't stand milk, loathed spinach along with all other foods with folate in them, and as we all knew, I sometimes snuck cigarettes. Too, Raye had better carriage, although my feet were flat, so for a while under David's steady eye (David as our moderator every so often brought out the hinged wooden case containing rows of English teabags and bade us choose among them for the sake of ceremony) we debated the benefits to growing up this day and age with floppy feet like mine, as opposed to exuberant arched ones like Raye's. And even though we were atheists, Raye wanted the baby born Jewish, in order for Israeli and perhaps even Polish citizenship (with all incumbent European Union perks) to be available to it.

"You're only a Jew if your *mother's* a Jew," Raye explained a little nastily to David, about which I gently chastised her later that evening when he was safe in his apartment feeding his birds.

"We'll hurt his feelings," I said. "He had no way of knowing a thing about that—about having to be the mother in order to be Jewish, or having to be Jewish in order to be the baby, or whatever it is, whatever you said," I added uncertainly, mucking things up on purpose in order to take the edge off my scolding. "He's a sensitive, ethical, unusual person. That's why we want him, remember, Raye?"

Raye said yes but that she wished we didn't need him. But David really was ideal. He had no wish to be a dad,

although he wanted very much to be a progenitor. It was true he hardly cooed or clucked at the canaries, only freshened their water and swept out their old-fashioned cages, which he built and repaired himself out of redbud twigs, which now and then budded and sometimes bloomed.

Trace's birth was as easy as scooping the apple out of our weekly roast chicken, we all agreed.

Just a minute went by with me in front of the mirror, or maybe only twenty seconds. Before I'd left the dining room, Serena, Raye, Winston and I had been talking of Trace and his doctor kit, which, aside from the stethoscope, wasn't really a toy but a kit of supplies—a handful of tongue depressors, some cotton swabs and rolls of gauze, a stack of pleated paper medicine cups, a syringe with no needle, an old reflex mallet for tapping on the soles of Liza's feet, and a disposable pillow the exact texture of Bounce dryer sheets—given to us by the kindly doctor on that long, humid day in the emergency room. Liza was our babysitter, we confessed to our hosts as if confessing a sin. She was my surviving cousin's new husband's step-sister. We couldn't decide which was worse, we explained: that Liza was always late (she wasn't, really, but we'd been twenty minutes late ourselves for dinner that night) or that she showed up at all. She had, it appeared, pierced hair. There were hat pins in her hair or else ornaments that looked like hat pins ("which I suppose we might refer to as hairpins," Raye said) stuck in every which way, with glittery raindrop-shaped beads on the ends, uncharacteristically fancy, for Liza was a sallow, taciturn girl in a dirty down jacket and gnawed-on gloves . . . but she had lovely eyes. Aside from being, in a manner of speaking, family, it was the eyes that saved us from giving up on her, we'd told Winston and Serena while passing drinks around the table. Liza's eyes were chartreuse, her dirty hair like oiled duck feathers as if to keep her from drowning. The minute she'd arrived in

our living room that evening and counted out those nasty hat pins and stuck them in a cupboard, she'd kicked off her sneakers (no laces) so Trace could tap against her foot soles with his reflex mallet, making her feet slowly levitate until he couldn't reach them any longer and Liza tumbled backwards off the ottoman, her stubby legs in the air. He didn't laugh at this trick as some babies might. Rather he regarded his patient with respectful solemnity, uncapping an empty Midol container and tipping it sideways above one of the pleated medicine cups. Her parents raised elk on a farm in Van Dyne, for meat and aphrodisiacs. It confounded me that Trace detected Liza's troubles, and that of all of the adults he came in contact with, it was Liza he so tactfully chose to attend, Liza whose elbows he swabbed, whose ears he examined, and whose terrible grammar he kindly overlooked while pressing the stethoscope to her chest.

I put back on my clothes, thinking about, as I smoothed out the puckered-dry front of the dress, Liza and her cigarettes, which weren't her cigarettes but mine, my awful Pall Malls. The weekly script went like this:

Raye's voice calling: "*Liza* was smoking again! In the *garage!*"

Me: "*Good!* We don't want her smoking outside on the *deck*, in case she locks herself out again!"

There were only a handful of rules we had given our sitter. One: Conserve electricity. Two: No late-night horror movies in case the baby padded in in the middle of one. Three: No baths ("For him or me?" Liza earnestly inquired). No sweets before bedtime (they gave him bad dreams), a glass of milk *before* brushing, a book before bed and then the Weavers' recording of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight," which Trace adored even though it frightened him.

Thoughtlessly I blew out Serena's candle and then, finding no matches, hid the candle in the drawer with the hairdryer, unlocked the two locks and went back into the hallway past the photos of the man in the peacoat, who

had sounded sort of flu-ish over the phone. He was feeling sick of himself, I could tell, and he resented his self-pity, and he wanted Serena to hear this in his voice. He was the twins' father, I surmised. He sent their birthday checks to Cambridge, avuncularly. Winston didn't know the truth of the matter. I wondered what it would be like not to know you weren't the father . . . except it wouldn't be like anything because you wouldn't ever know it.

Shortly I took my place at the table where they were talking about Lake Victoria, which was the size of the Republic of Ireland, Raye boasted, but which in Serena's worst nightmares was shrinking to a puddle like the vanished Aral Sea. Coincidentally it started to pour outside, rain pounding on the skylights over the youthful cheers from the football game. Raye made as if to rise to begin clearing plates but Serena and I beat her to it while Winston rinsed the salmon platter, seeing how weary Raye was getting. My cake was carried aloft to the table where Serena declared that she wouldn't cut into it. People declared this all the time, but then they did cut in and I steeled myself upward against the blade, craving sweets.

Winston walked us to the car beneath a yellow umbrella, one at a time. Since I was first in the car, it meant sitting for a moment in the passenger seat like on one end of a seesaw, the car atilt in my direction, the rain coalescing in soft bright beads on the Rain-Xed windshield and sliding into the wiper trough.

Finally, on approaching the roof of the Walgreen's store, when Raye said, as if in imitation of my finding all things interesting, "That's amazing they escaped being shot at by Idi Amin," I told her I felt honored they had told us about it, it being such an important part of who they were and how they regarded themselves and each other. I didn't say a word about the man in the peacoat, because the thing with the mirror had made me need sex badly after all and I was

pissed Raye wouldn't. In a show of forbearance I contented myself with cradling her hand on the gear shift knob, which was a dangerous gesture, she insisted, often throwing off my hand, only this time she didn't.

"Serena didn't like us. Do you think because we're Jewish?" I asked, but since Raye was so intent on not dozing off while driving us home, she didn't get the joke.

"Trace is Jewish. I'm Jewish. You're *not* Jewish," she underscored, with a flinch of apology that made it clear she'd forbidden herself from saying this for quite some time. I didn't know where she was coming from right away, but soon I remembered David Karpakian feeding his canaries on the night Raye got sharp, the way he gently unlatched the doors of their cages and reached inside for the water bottles, being careful not to let something out that he shouldn't.

The light turned green and Raye drove through it in her safe, stern way, a raindrop winking at her earlobe as if to make up for there being no stars. At home we found Liza sprawled on the couch as usual, asleep like three sandbags. For seven whole minutes timed on the digital clock on the stereo, we went through our Waking of Liza routine, first standing over her calling her name, then prodding her arm, then in our stocking feet walking the trail of smooth oval yoga stones we'd collected off the beach at the lighthouse in Racine, massaging our feet while chanting her name, until at last Liza grunted and raised herself straight-up into a seated position, Dracula style.

"Everything was fine? You and Trace get along really well as usual?" I asked while counting thirty-five dollars onto her palm and then bestowing on her all of the Poppi's Mini Creme Puffs that Serena had included in the take-home bag.

"Yeah?" Liza said, scratching at sleep. There was a Band-Aid on her brow of which she seemed unaware, one of Trace's zoo-themed ones that pulled the eyebrow askew. She seemed to be waiting just like I was for her to finish her answer to my question.

"Oh. I borrowed somebody a flashlight," she recalled. "Their car was broke down. Plus they had to use the john."

"You what?" I asked.

Raye had gone up to bed, shutting all extra lights as she passed them by.

There had been the stranger's car across the road with the hood propped open for proof, Liza said, so she'd led him to the kitchen where the flashlight was stored near the calcium chews, then showed him the way to the toilet. Now she tugged against her jacket zipper, hoping to unstick it. At last she dropped the jacket to the floor and stepped undaintily into the neck hole rather than rake the whole garment over those hat pins, which really were hat pins, not hairpins, I'd decided while she counted them out of the cupboard and stuck them back in her hair.

"They didn't have a umbrella," she concluded. At last she set across the lawn in the drumming rain.

In a daze I walked the floors of our little house observing the things (the lumbar arch, a potpourri jar, the tour book of wigwams in Scotland) that might have been stolen by the stranded driver, and then at once, frantic, I rushed upstairs to find the baby on tiptoe in his crib, clearly ecstatic, singing "Wimoweh!Wimoweh!Wimoweh!" at the elephant mobile bouncing around. His eyes were wide open and he appeared to have been upright since before I arrived, grinning toothily at the place in which he knew I would appear.

"How was your night?" he might well have asked, he looked so smart and alert in his neatly zipped footies. I lifted him up, glimpsing through the doorway the Shunya-Chakra. Trace's and my connection wasn't finished being made, but though it might not have a name, it was already cat gut and forever sinew.

"It's hard to say," I explained. "We made a half-decent showing and we ate a good meal. The blackened salmon was tasty even though it came frozen. Winston listened to football. I spilled half a plate of Ajinomoto's Gourmet

Premium Restaurant Quality Fried Rice down my front as usual. There were fake pineapples and a cola-smelling candle and I looked at our life in the bathroom mirror. The flashlight's the only thing missing, my darling, and there are no secrets left."