

from Juked #6, Spring 2009

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## IS THERE LIFE ON MARS?

She sat on his log-hard shoulders as he took giant steps, surveyed the prairie that was hers too. The ice crystals hung from trees like pointed little fingers. From her mitten, Freddy the Tiger dangled by his tail. Marjorie felt she was somebody else or a girl richer than a man sitting on the top of the world.

It's getting cold, her father said.

She was wrapped tight in her coat and scarf like the package delivered last week. A book for her mother that had strange lights on the cover. There were words she could not understand: UFOs, crop circles, black holes.

She remembered her mother saying that in Texas several people reported strange sightings, like the lights on the book cover.

"Are we Martians?" Marjorie asked. She imagined Freddy the Tiger winking at her.

"Just in winter," her father said. "Only Mars is someplace colder. A place where you'd float forever, forget your name."

And Texas, she said. Where's Texas?

Someplace far and deep, he told her. Someplace where you could get lost and they'd never find you.

He carried her back towards the house.

Inside, she stood next to her mother, who was cutting long sticks of rhubarb to make a preserve. On the counter, Freddy the Tiger sat quietly, watching everything with a wide careless grin. Squeezing her hands, she imagined her love for her father like the pecans now in her palm, the ones she could never crush.

In a deep crisp voice, her father asked her mother, what had she been telling Marjorie about Martians?

The night he asked her to lie still, she said to keep the engine running, the heater moaning. In the backseat, they were naked as tiger moths. Under her bare flesh that was thinner than a memory, she felt the cold made her too visible. Like an actress forgetting her lines. Marjorie opened the door and adjusted her long skirt, her sheep-skin boots. He lit a cigarette.

She folded her arms. Staring down at the hard ground that was harder than her thoughts, she admitted he was the first boy she let enter her without a promise.

He chortled. How did it feel, he asked.

Like riding a comet. Like giving birth to a tiny star.

Are they just words, he said. "Stupid words? Or you mean that?"

They were words, she knew, from a poem a girl had read in class. But Marjorie wrote the poem for her because the classmate hated to do anything that made her gawk over her own words, expose her braces. Marjorie knew they were really her words.

Something distracted her. That light, she said, pointing. A space ship.

Sundog, he said.

No, not a mock sun, she said. She wanted to believe it was a space ship. She wanted to believe in something amazing. It loomed closer over the horizon, to the right of its twin sun, her parents' house, about a mile past a twirling road of dirt that exhaled dust in summer.

They lost track of the time. She wanted to hear him make promises that could sweep her like a dust devil. They circled around each other. He said it was getting late, dark. The sundog and its twin disappeared.

I want to get married someplace warm, she said, running one hand across her breasts.

I can't afford Cancun. He dug his boot into another cigarette butt.

You can't afford to stay cold all your life, she said, and walked into the night.

Years passed like tiny feet in the night. They settled in a ranch-styled house outside of Dallas. It shielded her from the scorching heat in that part of the country. It chased away her memories of cold nights back in Wyoming.

In that house, she watched her son grow tall and forgetful. Away at college, he had wired her for money. For books, rising tuition, the increase in room and board. She thought it was really for something else. When he arrived home during college breaks, his manner turned taciturn, distant. He scratched the side of his face, mumbled one or two word answers she could barely make out. She wished she could be a fly lodged on the rim of his ear, his shoulder. That way, she could watch his every move, how he was spending her money, cutting her leash of maternal love.

Her husband sported a handlebar mustache, thick, graying. It reminded her of something soft and deceptive. Perhaps a raccoon. Raccoons, she knew, could be dangerous. They could bite, infect you with a constant hunger, delusions of nightly thirst. She accused him of having affairs. She imagined the voices of his women, wisps in the night, their bodies elusive, pieces of evidence turning to phantoms. At night, legs splayed against the floor, they played Scrabble. She combined letters that could never form words. He always got up in the middle of a game for a beer.

The sheriff arrived at her house one day. He sat at the edge of the sofa and mentioned something about the heat. She didn't know why he was there, dismissed the thought that her husband or son committed a crime. Hunched forward, he said he had some bad news. Her son was killed in an accident on an overpass above Route 61. She remembered when that overpass was first built. It reminded

her of something swerving with crazy arms. She wondered how something with crazy arms could get you anywhere faster.

"It's a bad site for accidents," the sheriff said, rubbing his forehead. "I can't tell you how many. This road rage thing. The heat makes people crazy."

It can't be my son, she told him. Her son was alive that morning. And after all, she thought, it takes years to die. Her train of thought broke into tiny incomprehensible cars.

He described his features from the license, the photo ID, the actual face at the scene that she now feared was disfigured: the crown of chestnut hair, the hazel eyes (gimlet, as she always thought of them), the smear of upturned nose, the slack mouth he inherited from his father. In deadpan voice, he repeated the full name like reciting a license plate.

She insisted it couldn't be him, maybe someone who looked like him.

But the driver's license, he said, the face and matching photo, wasn't it more than just a coincidence?

She stood in the middle of the living room, felt her feet, her eyes grow hard; she wished for blindness, for deafness. Imagine being Freddy the Tiger again. She felt too deadened to cry. Later, she knew she would come alive, in the bedroom, at the hairdresser's, maybe in the kitchen, washing dishes. It would hit her. She would cry for years and never shed a tear. A feat of strength. A minor undocumented miracle.

The sheriff rose, and mentioned something about signing some papers. She shivered at the thought. Her son was no longer someone she wanted to identify. A motionless mass of bone and flesh that was also hers. The sheriff left.

That night, she smelled a woman's perfume on her husband's skin. It was a different scent than the previous ones. This one was Ocean Dream, not the wild orchard of some topless dancer he had

met in a Dallas club, a month before. She told him their son was dead. She told him she had to identify him earlier that afternoon.

In the bedroom, peeling off his boots, he said, "What?" and said it again. Why didn't you call me? he asked, a fury rising in his voice.

You . . . You might have been busy.

He turned abruptly to face her, to see her in her thin white skin that didn't smell of rose or orchid, or even of Chinese oranges, her favorite scent. He made a move as if to lunge at something, an object he could grasp, throw against the wall. Instead, his knees buckled, and his lips trembled. She imagined him growing smaller, down to a child's level. She wanted to hold him, if only for a brief moment, to keep him from shrinking, but she couldn't stand the scent of someone else's orchard in her bedroom.

It really wasn't an accident, she told him. She didn't believe in them. It was something else. Some god, some power she couldn't understand, took him away. What was the word she was looking for? Absconded. Yes. That was the correct word. Some higher power absconded with their son. If there was a god, she said, he lived in a cold climate and very far away. He was a lonely god, an alien, and he needed humans for warmth. But absconded, she repeated, was the correct word.

After that night, they never played another game of Scrabble.

In the room that was not hers, there were objects, photos, hair-brushes, faded watercolor paintings, stuffed animals, that could be hers, when she was younger, when she was somebody else.

The woman, dressed like a ghost, pressed her fingers into Marjorie's wrist.

"Eighty-two," she said, "almost her exact age." She said this turning to the man Marjorie called Dr. Freeze. He was bald with smooth skin and Marjorie wondered if he ever had hair. Maybe he was a baby who shot up too fast. Like her own son.

"Mrs. Barnes," said Dr. Freeze, "do you know where you are?"

"Yes," she said, "somewhere on Mars."

"No. You're in Saint Anthony's nursing home in Dallas."

"How did I get here? By space ship? I don't remember coming here."

Dr. Freeze twisted his lips into a wry smile. He scrawled something in a chart.

She wondered if he would melt in warm climates.

And this, Marjorie said, writhing to free herself of a vest restraint that reminded her of an apron tethered too high—what is this?

It's for your safety, said the ghost who at times seemed to blend into the walls. You've had too many falls. Marjorie didn't like the sound of her voice. She wondered if the ghost had a shady past.

I'm changing her medications, announced Dr. Freeze.

"Hey," Marjorie yelled, "I've heard that line before. What does that mean around here?" Even prisoners of black holes, she knew, had rights.

It was the ghost's turn.

"Honey, do you know who that man is?" She pointed to the bed next to Marjorie's.

Propping herself on her elbows, she struggled to turn.

"Yes, it's my son."

"No, darlin'. It's your husband. We put the two of you in the same room."

"Oh, how nice. It should be that way, shouldn't it?"

The ghost then held up a photo of a young man posing in tight denims and cowboy hat to Marjorie's face. He was leaning against a pick-up and his face was scruffy. He flaunted a proud smile. Next to him was a girl with a belly bulging like a watermelon. She wore a mischievous smile.

"Honey, you remember that handsome devil?"

"I remember a dust devil."

"And the one next to him? Who's that girl?"

Marjorie squeezed her eyes, craned her neck. Her eyes danced a zigzag pattern over the photo. The girl in the picture seemed to be staring out at her, smiling, as if to say, "Why don't you step in?"

"It was me in somebody else's shoes," she said to the woman who could shift shapes, blend into the walls.

Dr. Freeze shone a light in both of Marjorie's eyes. The sundog light grew large, eclipsed everything. Something clicked and he put the strange pen-like instrument in his shirt pocket.

"Mrs. Barnes, who is the president of our country?"

Marjorie laughed.

Now how would she know that, she said. She wasn't from his country. And Mars was a place colder than his eyes. Mountains and craters where you could drift over forever.

Her captors whisked past the door. The ghost lady turned and winked at her.

Placing both hands over the bed sheets, Marjorie sunk her head, listened closely. The world, the one she was on, was growing still. She could have cried.