

A year after Ann

The footpath had Carmine and I, and some wood ants, and some crab grasses, splashed on the lawn like a stroke of painting. Carmine, trim in her curled bun, rolled a song on her lips, like a thread she carried from the house to the paths. Both of us, eager as clawed frogs, leaped with each step, pressing the heads of finger grasses. We've known much of same: a loss, a dachshund, a cowshed. And we've tried: shedding a leaf of memory, masking our past with a tale, lying enough to our hearts, as though we could heal them that way. Carmine, at six, lives without a mom—Ann, my wife—who wouldn't have lived without her. She lives here, a thumbnail of her, as pristine as she was, like a raven, cawing days and nights, burrowing a nest for everyone. Last year Ann died in the air, flying like a bird, with wings of a plane, between continents, between rocks, between breaths, between pulses and none.

We walked. The path smelled like remembrance. Carmine dimpled a smile with her head inside her mom's fur hat. Her curly bun as new as a gift carefully wrapped, waiting to be unwrapped, waiting to see the sun like we've hoped in our own lives. For Carmine—after a year in this aerie of a town—has burrowed deeply than she can manage. She walked, holding me, heading with a stride, not smooth, like the stride of one's life, roughish, chapped. We tripped murky paths, switchbacks, and moist off-ramps, heading where we argued about: the games and granny's. Carmine, avoiding wood ants, pouched a photo in her sack. On the photo, I lean, with hands around her, and Ann, leaning on a fig. There's a light, on the left, beaming and beaming. The very last light we had as a family.

The gate to granny's, each morning like this, shuts till six. She's still in love with her farm. Each morning, four till six, she visits it. She goes there in her words, to treat and tidy it. She treats her farm life, for instance, like she treats other lives. A love life, a family life, an aging life. She comes home to her fig after farm. She loves the fig. Not its ovate leaves, in their elliptic hooks, ovoid, reminding her about eggs she hates. Nor its bark—flaky, yellow, as wrinkled as her skin, reminding her of what time can still do. She doesn't love the smell either. There's a memorable stench on it she wouldn't call a fragrance, still reminding her of past events, all of which stink with an odor of regret. She loves the fig—the cape fig she conceived and seeded, now part of her life—for the shadow it casts: a slender shape of the heart cast on ground.

She prefers this shade to her roof. She's planted a ladder-back like a stem on one spot there. She sits there, her shadow fused into the shade, her body a bit hunched, her breath a bit thin. Then she hums her favorite tune, an old strain playing new on her lips, and it sounds as though she cuddles each note, with her under- and over- lips, and she reads there and leans there and rests; each morning a bit, in an unending byte of routine.

We came, almost scorched by the sun, but soothed by longing, to hear her heartbeat once again. She was in that same spot like we'd thought. She was holding a book in one hand, and a fist in the other. The fist paddles her breath, front and back like a paddle, as though breathing were sailing, and she could drown in any sniffle, in any of the days in her eighty-fifth year. When I smelled her—as we hugged and lingered without a word—

she smelled departure, something I couldn't liken to any fragrance I know, but close to the fig, which seemed dying as she aged, having rubbed off on her some way.

On her lap, Carmine snored for an hour. The fields adjacent to the compound—at the right (if you're looking at the gate outside the compound)—had two kids playing soccer. I was pulled right there by their creole, a kind of alloy of language I haven't heard. They blessed and cursed with it, swore with it, and it fell peacefully on the body of the fields. I stole two or three of the verbs—crisp on the surface of the tongue—and kept them in my jotter. Granny would love them, I guessed. When I got to the house, I tossed them to her like coins, which all jangled on the floor to nothing. She wouldn't understand a word. I would later learn the little boys were brought in from a different state and the language they spoke wasn't common to granny's town.

On the table, granny moved pieces of boiled yams to different spots. Sapphire, as fine as the sound of her name—dressed in dashiki, like our visit were some occasion—divided the sauce with the metal in her hand, a soup spoon. She lives here to look after granny. She's Ann's little sister. Granny is her mom and Ann's mom. Granny is Carmine's granny. Carmine gave her that name when she was four; we liked it, and it stuck.

Over the meal, we talked. And it was Ann. It was exactly a year since she left, but her presence, her smell and warmth, her voice, still felt real. Something like Carmine but thick. Something like Granny but fresh. Something like Sapphire but more. And there was the photo, pulled out from Carmine's bag. And Granny stared at it: her look drill-like, as though trying to bore a hole of love, or hawse of longing, on it.

Carmine, you're her, she said.

Quite much, I said.

A lot much.

That much.

We weren't here to discard her memory—talking of Ann—as though hers were a sort of junk; if anything, to reawaken it as wrenching as it was, as it ruined our day the morning she died. She left with a whole lot, granny said—and I'll be leaving soon to ask her why. It felt like a hole. Granny stopped eating, as though no amount of meal could fill it, and she wasn't going to try. She then put on a new look—her eyes bright, her words ballistic as usual, each sniping out from the weapon she always had, her mouth, and she wasn't sparing anyone. She advised about being gentle, with ourselves, with our dreams, just like we've been gentle with the weather. How we dressed and prepared for it, as though it were its turn to be here. She rebuked us for some of the things we didn't remember we did. She walked to the couch and napped.

Twelve noon, the room rang like an empty bowl. Carmine was doing some dance in the bedroom, and Sapphire was with her, and with me was noise, a newspaper and granny, and some weakness I couldn't place on anything. Granny must not be disturbed, Sapphire warned us earlier. And she wasn't. Her lips were slightly

parted; her eyes were partly open, while she wore on that beauty of sleep. Sapphire told us of granny's wish to die in sleep, which granny likened to a transition, smooth and pain-free, and she sleeps three times in a day to boost her chances.

Doub is cold. Its breath—frosty and shivery—gusts like a metaphor, of the benign lives, and of the peace and the quietness of the people. Carmine came, with new kits, a holiday on her back, to run a race. It's difficult to tell her mind. How she says something matters more than what she's saying. So when she speaks, I watch her. I weigh each word. I watch each frown. Each glance. She speaks more with her eyes than with her lips. So I watch them: the pupils—how dull or sharp, what weather they typify, what feeling they stir; and the iris; and the lids—how they blink, how often, what speed. I'd started listening to Carmine this way, for a month, before I knew what I was doing. To raise a child, poetic as my daughter Carmine, is to interpret language a different way. Or best, to approach communication different from what I used to do. To pay attention to gesticulation, to body language, to sound more than tale. Carmine is like that part of my inner self—that I couldn't grow, because it was too deep or too shallow I missed it, or it wasn't there because it was still coming, or arriving—birthed into materiality before me. She is raising me more than she knows. I'm her little kid in elderly form. When she throws a glance, I catch it, and open it up, and translate every word that isn't there.

To parent such a kid, without her mom, is so much a labor labor isn't the word. So she helps by parenting me back, growing faster in her heart than head, learning patience in every step, walking it back through the staircase of reciprocity. We walked through a thin route to the mini-stadium, a lean crosscut thinning and thinning, as more shrubs crept into the way. The afternoon had broken and broken into granules like sugar cube—dust particles flying with birds, and it tasted sweet and cold as it was in the morning.

We came here to run. Carmine was representing her school in the thirty-yard dash. Doub, a country town, sitting at the middle of Duba, has been the spot for the school athletic trials for the past five years. The organizers seem to love the town like a mother. The town could be endearing, with its childlike feel—small markets, hospitable people, simple roads, low cost of living, naïve buildings—which make you want to parent the town, and cuddle it, and pet it, and conserve it the way the people have been doing for a hundred years. English feels humble on the tongue of the people. It tastes like a fluid on their tongue, so relaxed, it mixes with their accent, and chants the place in lax rhythm, with a breath of hush in each word. Looking at the place, from its outskirts, is like looking at a garden. Like a rose garden. Each hill a rose, each valley a rosebed, and the people small roses, flushed in their blushful looks. It's a twenty-minute walk from where we live in south Duba. Coming here, then, among the chances of seeing granny, or Sapphire, is like coming to tend a garden. I intended, then, to tend it well. We quickly jogged into the stadium. We were a minute late. Carmine joined her team from Daku, south Duba, while I breathed and watched.

Coming here, watching Carmine run with other kids, watching other kids watch them, and the press cover them, is relaxing. I may have fallen for places more than I've fallen for my favorite meal. I seem to be addicted to places. Doub, specifically. Among eight towns in the province of Duba, to me, Doub tops. It's the smallest town in the province, airbrushed by rocks, adorned by rivers—ornaments of nature, unlike other

towns, airbrushed by artifacts of the government. It means, then, that what they have—this town, this natural scenery, toned by the weather—is the result of a communal effort, of which nature is part.

Carmine kitted herself in five minutes. I was already sitting on the eighth row, opposite the newsstand, watching her. The stadium looked like a mouth open wide; the seats, a set of teeth arranged round it, and the track, a tongue sticking out. And it yawned—a warmth from the weather descending on us. On the track, eight of them, each representing eight schools from eight towns in Duba, skipped and lunged. I watched them. Carmine jogged all over, each leap descending effortlessly like heavy metal. I opened a book. A book of poems. A wombat sneezed and sneezed, in the book, carrying her young in a pouch, and a bat screeched and screeched, looking for her pup; the two of them escaping a wind, a windstorm going after them as though it knew them, and I got into the poem, with the bat and wombat, and we were running, and I was carrying them along to save them, through line breaks, breath pauses, dashes like bridges, stops like pits, and in the last line they all died. I survived. Because I left the poem and they couldn't. And there was a tear in my eye—something I hoped was not a metaphor for the result of the race.

Death steals. It stole Ann from us. And it stole the bat and wombat, and their young ones, from themselves; it dictates last kisses, last hugs, last moments, last photos. It disguises with different faces. In Ann's case, a crash. In the poem's case, a windstorm. But why, I asked, still staring at the poem, as though it was someone or somewhere—a spy or spot—would a writer write about death in such a way as to make it a victor? Is it that we've gotten so used to death, having ignored its woes on us, we immortalized it in a poem? I was asking this question while wishing granny dies peacefully, in her sleep, like she's always hoped. Probably this is the part of death that makes up for the bad.

I looked. The boys had rounded up. It was the time for the girls. And there was my heart Carmine, beating in panic, her face pale, her confidence crumpled, and I was afar, and wasn't close enough to reassemble them, as I'd done before. Carmine, the tallest among them, on the eighth lane, leaping as though she could trick herself into some confidence that wasn't there, or some hope she hasn't kept, looked my direction and waved. Dad loves you, I whispered to her. And I hoped she felt it.

To run, one spends every second walking one's form back to the track. The years and months, the days and weeks, of working hard and training hard, shrink to seconds. The strides are like leaps of faith, into what might be your win, or your ruin. But still you leap. You finish the race. People watch you like a conscience. They will judge you. And you should allow it. No matter how condescending, or painful, one's opinion might be of your ability, or skill, there's someone, oftentimes, understanding how hard you've striven, and leaped, and what it took from you than what it put in. There's often someone who gets it—a coach, a dog, a friend, a sibling, a crowd, a parent, or a stranger. And sometimes, a spouse. Like Ann. Who, before she died, passed the baton on to Carmine. Who taught Carmine how to love her dad like a child, and to loan him support, and to act like she doesn't want it back. Who loved everything at home and christened them. Whose smell the dog remembers, and sniffs, along the wardrobe in her room.

Carmine raced out of the block after the beep. The seven kids were faster. They lined evenly on the lanes, cycling their feet, as the crowd, about a thousand, screamed and cheered. I watched her. She'd made up for her poor start, and had caught up with the kids. Watching them—these six and seven year olds (thumbnails of ourselves)—struggle to win, was like we were starting them on the wrong foot. For winning, like the head of a coin, backs a tail, a loss. How do we intend then to comfort our little kids, should they be handed down the dark side of the coin? How do we intend to teach them that failing is good, and losing is art, and winning is not all it's cracked up to be. For some, they work harder losing than they did winning. And learn more failing than succeeding. Both of them, though—winning and losing—are good. What counted, I thought, was what you did with them. So how, I thought again, more deeply, should Carmine win or lose, would I be able to bake this lesson into bread, and break it well enough for her, while buttering it with a pat on the shoulder? I thought these thoughts, and didn't know they took my eyes off the track. When I looked again, they were just running past the finish line.

The finish line, like the end of many things, was surprising—everyone had evened up. They seemed to have passed the line at the same time. They seemed to have waited for themselves, subtly, or artlessly, but they did it with some sort of grace, or wisdom, that none noticed, I guessed, till they ran past the line. Carmine lay on the floor, spread out like spill of liquid. I ran towards her fearing she'd dry up. She lay there heaving like boiling water, staring and waiting, for the judges to call the result. I wrapped my hands around her, while she soaked me into her spill, her sweat, which I tasted while I pecked her, which tasted as salty as the language our lives had been.

She came third. I like it, she said. I like it too, I said. I really would have liked anything she liked. I would have pretended I liked what I didn't like, so long she liked it.

We strode through the back of the stadium, in warren of trees, and moist paths due to rain that fell fitfully. Getting home, through this shortcut, and softer fields, felt like we were heading for something longer than our journey here. Something seemed to prolong it, and it wasn't Carmine, or her silence—an outgrowth of victory, or me, spent already, dreaming home already, empty and hungry but happy; it wasn't the thimbleberries, beautiful, planted to be stared at, and to use one's time. No, it was above us. Not the sky, but its content—not clouds, but feathery followers: a bevy of larks, swooping low and high, coating the sky. I couldn't leave them behind, and Carmine couldn't too, so we paid the last respect of awe, and wonder, and sight, to them, while returning back to our lodge, to travel out of Doub the next day, back home in Daku.

We walked. We laughed. And mourned Ann. And rain started again, heavily, few meters from the lodge, and we jogged—Carmine going slow, while I went slower, rain poking us, drenching us, and sending us in.

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