

NATHAN OATES

The White Chickens

WHILE JASON PLAYED SOCCER WITH Sasha in the yard, Holly took the pile of blankets, sheets, and pillows her sister-in-law had left on the picnic table and arranged them into beds in the barn, as far as possible from the chickens, though the whole place throbbed with their clucks, their shaking and fluttering, their aborted leaps toward flight against the wire cage. Two years ago, the last time they'd been up to visit, Sasha, then three, had spent a morning in the chicken pen with Uncle Robby, picking up the birds. She'd taken to trying to catch pigeons in the park back in Brooklyn, cooing at them the way her uncle had taught. And so, as soon as they'd come into the barn Sasha had gone straight to the coop.

"No!" Jason had screamed. Sasha stopped, arms out for balance.

"Don't touch those things. Don't touch them," he yelled, scooping her up.

Too frightened to ask why, Sasha looked at her mother for an explanation.

"They're dirty, honey," Holly said, trying to keep her voice even. There'd been enough shouting over the past few days. In the city, on the trip, on the ferry, and then, finally, and maybe worst of all, outside the house, when they'd called Alice.

"No, they're not!" Sasha cried.

Holly had heard Robby tell the girl how chickens were actually clean animals. But times had changed, and it was too much to explain, so she just let Jason carry their girl out into the yard.

The blankets laid down, Holly went out to watch them play, but she couldn't stop looking at the house, from inside of which Alice was surely watching, probably with her new baby Anabel clutched to her chest. Maybe if they'd left the city immediately, before the riots, before the quarantines, before the shooting on the bridge, and especially before those images on the news of body bags, thousands of them, dumped into a construction site behind a hospital in Queens, if they'd gotten out before all that, maybe Alice would've let them into the house. Though Holly knew what Jason would say. No fucking way. His older brother's wife was a bitch. That's what he called her after the phone call in the driveway, and though she hated that word she didn't say anything, because she'd seen the panic edging up in his eyes. It had started there last night, as they'd driven through upstate New York, past shuttered towns, through check-points where the policemen wore surgical masks and pointed flashlights into their eyes. They'd assumed things were better outside the city, but that's not how it looked as they drove, waiting in the long lines at the gas stations that government had

taken over. All the fear and stress he'd pent up for weeks had come surging out after that phone call from the driveway.

But she felt he'd earned a moment of hysterics after holding it together long enough to get them out of the city, get them all the way up here. He was the one who'd decided they should drive out Long Island and catch one of the ferries she'd never even heard of up into Connecticut. The next day, they'd heard on the radio, those ferries had been shut down, sealing off the island. Temporarily, the news insisted, but by then everyone knew not to trust what you were told.

"Who's hungry?" Holly shouted, and Jason carried the squirming Sasha over.

The lasagna was frozen on the inside, surely because Alice had been rushing to get it out there before they arrived. Wouldn't want them to actually, you know, *see* her. Alice had asked them to call when they arrived, in case she was out doing errands. Robby wasn't home: like every other doctor in America, or maybe now the world, he was swamped.

As they'd pulled up the long gravel drive Jason had asked Holly to make the call. A weak, "Hello?" came after two rings.

"Alice," Holly said, as brightly as she could through the descending pall of exhaustion. They'd made it. The lovely wooden house with its dark green shutters and screen porch was right there in front of them.

"Are you here?" Alice said, her voice tight and hard.

"We are," Holly said. Even then, she could tell something wasn't right. "Are you?"

"What?"

"Are you home?" Holly leaned forward and through the leaded glass windows, shimmering gray with the sky, she thought she saw something move.

"I don't know. I," but Alice stopped.

"Excuse me?" Holly said.

"I left you some food, outside. And blankets. On the table. Can you see it?"

Between the house and the barn was the picnic table, atop it the lasagna, covered with tin foil, and the heap of blankets.

"What? Food?"

"Robby and I have been talking," Alice began.

She said something else, but just then Jason said, "What the hell is going on?" and reached for the phone.

Holly leaned away from his hand and said, "Wait, I'm sorry, Alice. What?"

"Just until we're sure you're not sick," Alice said.

"What are you saying?" Holly said, leaning against the window.

"The barn's winterized. We keep the goats and chickens out there all winter. And it's been warm. You'll be fine."

"The barn?"

"What? What the fuck? No fucking way," Jason shouted, throwing open his door.

“Just for a few days. Robby said the incubation period is seven days. So after that, well, we’ll know.”

“If we’re sick,” Holly said, watching her husband walk toward the house.

“You have to understand,” Alice said. “Anabel’s so little. Last week five babies died at the hospital. And there aren’t even any quarantines up here.”

“You want us to live in the barn for a week?” Holly said. Jason climbed the steps and pounded on the door with his fist. Holly could hear the banging through the phone.

“Robby will be home tonight. He’ll talk to you about it,” Alice said over Jason’s shouting, coming to Holly in stereo.

She looked into the back seat. Sasha stared at her portable DVD player, headphones covering most of her head.

Jason pointed at the door, mimed something. Holly shook her head.

“Robby will be home,” Alice said, then hung up.

“What the fuck is going on?” Jason shouted, pounding down the steps. “Seriously? What the fuck?”

When Holly tried to explain he immediately started shaking his head and shouting, “The barn? What are we, her fucking goats?”

He said he was going to smash in the window, get in that way, but she knew he’d calm down quickly, for Sasha, and he did, lifted her out of the car, explaining that they couldn’t go inside yet, but the barn was open, let’s go see.

After dinner they went inside to look at the sleeping arrangements.

“Not so different from the Tribeca Grand,” he said, holding the soccer ball under his arm. “And like the Grand they’ll probably charge us seven dollars for a bottle of water.”

In his sagging white T-shirt he looked thin, wasted. She knew she looked no better, in the blue and white striped shirt she’d been wearing for three days. They might look sick, but they weren’t. At least as far as they knew. They were just skinny because for the past two weeks there’d barely been time to think about eating, barely time to think about anything other than the fear of contagion.

Sasha jumped into the pile of blankets and rolled around, twisting them together, undoing all the work, but Holly couldn’t bring herself to complain. Cooler air blew in through the door, and Jason hauled them shut, then turned on the heaters.

Holly cuddled with Sasha in the pile of blankets, reading her the books they’d grabbed before leaving the apartment. *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, *Curious George and the Firefighters*, *Dodsworth in London*. None were favorites, but Sasha didn’t complain. Holly sang “Rocky Raccoon” until she could slip out and join Jason at the window. Cool air leaked in through the glass. It was April, almost spring even that far north, but it could still snow. It happened up here, all the way through May, a sudden Arctic blast.

“Brotherly love, right?” Jason said, pulling Holly against him. He smelled like grease, body odor, and the coppery tang of fear.

“At least we’re here,” she said, kissing his neck. “At least we’re safe.”

“Right,” he said, sarcastically, but it was true, they were safe. Unless, during the night, or tomorrow, or any time in the coming week, one of them got a sudden, spiking fever. She’d seen it happen on the subway. The young woman sitting across from her on the F hadn’t looked well when she’d gotten on at 14th Street and by the time they were rattling under the river sweat stood out on her forehead, dampening her temples and her cheeks flared a bright red. The woman lurched up at Jay-Metrotech and fell into the man in front of her and slipped to the floor. Holly got off the train, hurried up the stairs, away from the shouting. She ran up the last flight to the street and down the block, looking back, as if that woman would come after her, cough on her face.

From outside came the snuffling of the goats. Alice’s Facebook page was little more than a weekly updating on the new wonders of Anabel and the goats.

“We should sleep,” she said.

“I have to talk to Rob. This,” he nodded over at Sasha. “This is just bullshit.”

“They’re just scared.”

“And assholes. Don’t forget that part.”

“That’s true. They are kind of assholes.”

“But then some things never change,” Jason said. “Alice always was a bitch.”

She felt suddenly dizzy, as if she might fall down, and terror rose up in her. But she touched her forehead and found it cool. She was just tired. She’d slept a couple hours on the drive, but otherwise not at all for two days.

Behind them one of the chickens started warbling, thrusting out its chest. She’d always thought of chickens as little, but these were huge. They were with heavy bodies, long, proud necks, and gleaming white feathers. Robby raised them for their meat, she remembered, though the slaughtering was done elsewhere.

“I should fucking kill those things,” Jason said.

“I can’t believe they still have them,” she said. Sleep. She needed to sleep.

“Seriously. I’m going to.” He wrung his hands together, baring his teeth.

“Aren’t they heritage chickens?”

“I don’t care. I don’t give a shit what they are,” Jason said.

Holly went as steadily as she could to the blankets. She checked her forehead again before plunging down into sleep.

•

JASON WAS AT THE WINDOW when she woke up, his face almost pressed to the glass. “He’s back,” he said.

Her back was stiff and head throbbed, but she forced herself up. Dawn was coming and everything was drenched with a thick, quivering blue. Tendrils of fog slipped between the trees beyond the house.

Robby came out onto the porch, looked at them through the window. He lifted his hand, then dropped it quickly, as if realizing they weren’t people he knew.

Jason stepped out, then stuck his head back in and whispered, “Off for an audience with the king.” Robby came down the porch steps, but didn’t cross the yard. There was no hug, no real greeting, just the brothers facing each other across the white fence. They didn’t even seem to be talking, but then Jason faced away from her, and when Robby shook his head, rubbed his eyes, held out his hands and started to talk, she knew her husband must’ve been stating their case. Their case for not being treated like animals. To be treated like family.

She went to the just-open door and leaned her head against it to hear what they were saying, but it was all whispers and the sounds only came in snips. Robby turned and went into the house and Jason came back to the barn.

“What happened?” she said.

He took a deep breath, held it, then rubbed his flat palms along his temples. “Do you think he knows what an asshole he is?” Jason stared at Sasha, asleep in the blankets. “He’s so calm and logical. I want to choke his fucking neck.”

“Did you ask him about the chickens?”

“Of course I did. I said, ‘Any chance you can get your filthy vermin out of the barn, just, you know, while we’re sleeping there.’ He said he’d ask Alice. Wouldn’t want to make a move without the queen’s permission.”

They looked at the chickens. Most seemed to be dozing, a few shuffled listlessly through the sawdust. As far as anyone knew, the virus had jumped from chickens to humans at a processing plant in the Wuhan province. She remembered hearing reports on the news: thirty-six dead of bird flu in central China. Then, a sudden surge: one hundred and twelve confirmed dead, and the virus now found in Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Four hundred and fifty dead, and the United States and Europe imposed a ban on flights from China. Independent Television produced a story about the devastation in North Korea, into which the virus had slipped, with reports of mass graves, and the systematic extermination of the sick. By then the virus had already gotten into New York, though no one knew it yet.

Jason kissed her head and said, “He said the real risk is to babies. And old people. That if it wasn’t for Anabel he’d let us in. I asked why he got to go inside, since he’s at the hospital all day. He said he wears a suit. Like a hazmat suit. And he takes a scalding shower with disinfectant. He showed me his hands, how they were all cracked and raw.

And he says he doesn't go near Anabel. He sleeps in the basement. So at least we're not the only ones cast out by the queen."

"You have to sleep, honey," she said. The tide of exhaustion was pushing up over her again and she put her head on his shoulder.

"Who's going to guard my girls," he said. "If I do that?"

"We're safe now, honey. We're safe," she said, tugging him over toward the blankets.

•

BY THE TIME SASHA WOKE up breakfast was on the picnic table: pancakes, wrapped in tinfoil so they were still warm, a stick of butter, and a bottle of maple syrup. Holly felt like crying when she took the first bite. Sure, they were in the barn, and that wasn't ideal, but they were out of New York. She'd never wanted to live anywhere else in her adult life, but once the flu started spreading—she saw it as a red stain, seeping up the avenues, leaping over entire blocks—the city had turned against them.

They used the barn's bathroom and shower, Sasha squealing about the hot water, then walked away from the house, down into the fields. It was warmer than it'd been in weeks. Some people said the flu might fade in the summer, while others worried it might mutate and cause fresh outbreaks.

Despite her terror of ticks, Holly let Sasha run through the high grass, Jason chasing after, roaring like a bear. They could hear the river long before they could see it and Sasha kept ducking into the bushes to look for it, emerging back on the trail with snips of branches and burrs—and, surely, ticks—in her dark, curly hair. Then the trail turned and they were beside the water. On an open patch of grass, they ate the sandwiches Jason had made with supplies left out beside the pancakes.

Sasha raced up and down the bank looking for fish, shouting, "Mommy, I see it, I see a fish, Mommy, I see it!" and hopping with her hands near her mouth in astonishment. Every time she'd seen those stupid subway ads for a storage company—"Raising a child in a New York apartment is like raising an oak tree in a thimble."—she'd thought, *Oh, fuck off*. She'd been raised in the suburbs and had hated it. But now, seeing Sasha running free, it was clear that this *was* the natural world of the child, the world of the woods, all that creepy mystery. Jason had grown up like this in Wisconsin, and the way he played with Sasha, ducking under the branches of the trees, made her wonder if he wished they'd chosen this life.

She lay back, watched the sky through the branches, feeling calm for the first time in months, and she must've fallen asleep, because when she opened her eyes Jason was standing above her with Sasha clinging to his neck.

"We have to go," he said, in that tone she'd grown used to.

“What?” she said, sitting up, a lurch of nausea in her throat.

“Just pack up,” he said, then started back down the path. Holly watched them until she could see Sasha’s face. Her cheeks were bright red.

Holly flailed around, grabbing the things they’d scattered in their picnic. Jason was almost to the barn before she caught up.

“What is it?” Holly said, gasping.

“She’s hot,” he said, breaking into a run.

“Hot?” she shouted, but he didn’t answer.

In the dark of the barn he laid Sasha atop the blankets. She curled into a ball, a blob of drool on her cheek where it had pressed to her dad’s shoulder. Her breathing was fast. Sweat slicked her hair to her temples.

“What’s wrong with her?” Holly said. She wanted to pick Sasha up, squeeze out whatever was wrong, but knew she shouldn’t get too close, that would just make her hotter. She needed space. Or was Holly just protecting herself? Keeping her distance. Like a monster.

“We were playing, and then she sat down and said she was dizzy. She’s burning up.”

“Maybe it’s heat stroke. Couldn’t it be the heat?”

“I don’t know, Holly, I don’t know.” He rose and hurried out of the barn and up to the house. She could hear him pounding on the door, then shouting.

Sasha’s cheeks were still flushed, but her breathing seemed to have slowed, and when Holly touched her forehead it was hot, yes, it was hot, she couldn’t pretend it wasn’t hot. But not burning. Not like they warned on the news, on the radio, on the internet, on the pamphlets they’d pushed under the doors of their co-op building.

“Please, honey,” Holly whispered, moving closer. “Please, please, please.” She took the girl’s hand, her little fingers. She was still a baby. Holly’s baby. She remembered the statistics. 0-5 years old: 60% survival rate. And then her own bracket: 25-45 years old: 90%. It seemed so stupid, so cruel. But it wasn’t cruel. That’s what Jason had insisted all through the early outbreaks. Everyone who said this was unfair, terrible, mean, those people were thinking like children, or like someone a thousand years ago, as if nature was full of malice, as if it was anything more than microbes reproducing. But it wasn’t true. Jason was wrong. Not literally. Literally he was right. But it *was* cruel, now that it was their baby.

He came back from the house and knelt beside her.

“Alice is calling Robby. She said he’ll bring back Tamaflu. The new version. Robby said they’ve had a lot better luck with it.” He spoke evenly, as if it had already been settled.

“But maybe she’s not sick,” Holly said. “Maybe it was just the running around.”

Jason squinted at Sasha. “He’ll be here soon. And Alice is going to put some ice, some juice and stuff on the porch.”

“So we’re just supposed to wait?” She heard the panic in her own voice, shrill and wild against his calm, but she didn’t care. This was their baby.

“What do you want to do?” he said, touching Sasha’s arm gently.

“Go to the hospital. Right now. If she’s sick, Jason, if she’s sick, if she’s—” but she already knew what he’d say: the hospitals were overcrowded, full of the virus.

“Calm down, sweetie. She looks better, right?” Jason said.

But Holly couldn’t tell no matter how hard she stared. Sasha’s breathing was quick, or maybe that was the normal rate, and her cheeks were flushed, but not that burning red she’d seen on the news, on the streets, in the faces in the cars they passed leaving New York. Without a doctor, there was no way to know. No way to know if their daughter was dying, or just tired out from the heat, from being cooped up for days, from what must’ve been for her a traumatic level of stress.

The sound of the car in the driveway came sooner than she expected. Jason pulled open the sliding door and Robby shouted, “Let me shower,” and ran into the house.

They paced around the barn, bending over Sasha to see how she looked—still sleeping, though, now that Holly looked closely, her breathing seemed to have slowed and the redness of her cheeks was fading—and then they went to stand at the door as Robby ran across the yard. He’d put back on his scrubs and was carrying a bag with instruments, medicines maybe. He looked exhausted, and stressed, and old, his hair thickened with gray strands at the temple, and receding from his forehead.

Robby lifted Sasha’s eyelids, shone a light on them. When he took his finger away the girl’s eyes stayed open.

“Honey, it’s OK, Uncle Robby’s here,” Jason said.

Robby’s fingers were at her neck, taking her pulse, and Holly saw his shoulders relax. He sat back on his feet and even before he spoke, she knew what he’d say.

“She’s fine,” Robby said. “I can run some more tests, if you want, but this is definitely not the flu. She’s just tired out.”

Sasha stared at him, as if she’d been dreaming about her uncle, and now here he was.

“Let her rest. Take it easy tomorrow.” Robby ran a hand over Sasha’s head, and now that the threat had passed, now that his role as a doctor was over, his role as uncle returned. He was once again the uncle who’d sequestered them in the barn, or at least let them be sequestered there by his wife, an uncle who should’ve take them in, like family, but had treated them instead like animals. Holly knew she should be grateful. Her baby wasn’t sick. Couldn’t she be grateful for just a few minutes? But instead, when Robby turned to smile, expecting a nod, a returned smile of relief, she felt her tongue thicken with hate.

“Jason,” she said.

He looked at her, smiling, like his brother. She pointed at the chickens, not caring if Robby saw her do it.

“Oh, yeah. Can we talk, Robby?” he said.

Robby looked at Holly. The message was clear: he’d left the hospital, all those truly sick people, to come back and check on their girl, who they should’ve been able to tell was just tired out and overheated, but they’d panicked, and now she was moving on to her next demand?

Sasha wanted to go play, but Holly said, “No, honey, you need to rest. Uncle Robby said so.” That’s what *she* wanted to do. To sleep. To wake up to a new, safe world. Or even the old world. Any world but this one.

Jason didn’t come back immediately, and when she went to the window they were sitting at the picnic table with beers. Jason picked at his bottle’s label, smiling as he talked, as if he was telling a joke.

She turned around to find Sasha at the chicken coop, her fingers through the wire, her face pressed against it.

“Honey!” Holly screamed.

A chicken dropped with a flutter from its perch and moved across the sawdust, flapping its wings sharply. Sasha wiggled her fingers through the mesh.

Holly ran over and dragged the yelping girl away from the birds, all of them up now, filling the barn with their warbling cries.

Jason came back in a few minutes later with two beers. “Thank god,” he said.

“Did you ask him about the chickens?” she said, wishing she could refuse the beer until he solved this, but she already had it in her hand.

“He said they’re fine. He tested them right before we got here. They’re heritage birds, you know.” He said this last bit in the arch, mocking tone he used to imitate his brother. But she knew his heart wasn’t in it. He wasn’t on her side anymore. This was how it’d always been with his brother: when their parents died two years ago, within six months of one another, Robby dominated and condescended to Jason throughout the entire process. Their parents had made Robby the executor of the will and he’d only relinquished what he didn’t need, like the battered old Corolla, without which, of course, they’d be stuck back in New York. But she’d always hated seeing Jason quiver before his brother, all those childhood anxieties turning him into someone she barely knew.

“They can’t stay in here, Jason,” she said. “Sasha was over there. At the coop.”

“Look, honey. We’ll deal with it. But not right now. We’re all tired.”

They let Sasha watch a movie on her DVD player, while they tried to read, and though she said she wasn’t tired, Sasha fell asleep after in Jason’s arms. Like all kids, she slept with a furious intensity, as if pushing her way down through the layers of dream, pursuing something that Holly, with her numb, adult mind, had forgotten was even to be desired.

BY LUNCH THE NEXT DAY Sasha was bored and caught in a loop of whining—she wanted to go the river, why couldn't she go to the river?—and Jason snapped several times. They slept restlessly that night, the chickens shuffling and squawking, and the following morning Jason said, "We've got to get out of here. Just for a little while. Let's take a drive."

"Where?" Holly said.

Sasha was spooning up cereal, listening intently.

"We'll just get out of this yard for a little while, right Sasha?"

"Yes, yes, yes! Can we, Mommy?"

Holly hated how he did that, turned the girl against her, and anyway, should they really be wasting gas, but she let it go and helped them pack up the car, got Sasha dressed, and soon they were heading down the gravel drive and onto the dirt road. In only a few seconds they were out of sight of the house, and Jason was right, it felt good to rush under the bright green leaves through the scatter of shadows, then out onto the asphalt road, past the little restaurant they'd eaten at years ago, which looked closed, but of course it was, it was still morning. Not far past the town Jason turned onto a dirt road that took them over a wooden covered bridge. They went on into the next town. All the shops closed up, no one on the sidewalks except an old man who leaned against a parking meter, head sagging.

"Too bad we can't stop somewhere," Jason said. "Get some i-c-e c-r-e-a-m."

"What?" Sasha shouted from the back.

"Nothing, honey," Holly said, frowning at Jason.

"I'm just saying it'd be nice. Creamy, melting in the mouth," he said.

"Ice cream? Are you talking about ice cream?" Sasha said.

"No, honey, Daddy's teasing," Holly said.

Sasha pouted, crossing her arms dramatically across her chest.

"Maple cremees," Jason crooned.

"It's not open, honey," Holly said to Sasha. "It's only open in the summer." She didn't say anything about the fact that attached to the cremee stand was a farm-zoo with filthy chickens and mangy goats. The girl probably remembered them fondly, despite the peck she'd gotten from a mother chicken when she'd chased a flock of chicks.

Jason turned onto a dirt road and smiled. "We'll just stop by. If it's open, well, you know, we might just have to."

"Yay!" Sasha shouted from the back, clapping.

Holly could see the parking lot was empty from down the road, and that the place was closed was soon obvious. A sheet of plastic flapped loose from one window, a piece of plywood nailed over another, and yellow police tape across the front doors,

a sagging x. Where once there had been animals—goats, chickens, a donkey with a sign on his gate, “I BITE!”—were now empty coops and overgrown fields with fallen fences. But Jason pulled into the lot anyway.

“Daddy, let me out.” Sasha writhed in her booster seat, plucking at the straps.

“It’s closed, honey,” Holly said. She turned to Jason and said, “Go. Right now.”

“But I wanted a cremee!” Sasha screamed.

Hands on the wheel, Jason stared at the building. The windows were smoked over with grime and dust, but Holly thought she saw something, a shape moving inside.

“Let’s go Jason, now,” Holly said, watching the door, waiting to see the handle turn, to see the old woman who ran the place stumble out, bleeding from her mouth, as the sick did in their last days, stains spread over her shirt as she reached for them.

Sasha thrashed in her car seat as they pulled out, wailing, but by the time they reached the farm she’d quieted down, and when Jason lifted her from the booster seat she sagged against his shoulder. He set her down on the blankets, gave her a book to look through, and whispered to Holly, “Can you watch her? I’m going for a walk.” Without waiting for an answer, he went out.

It took her a few minutes to realize what was different in the barn: the chickens were silent. She looked over at them and none were pressed up against the mesh, staring. Then she saw them, huddled in the corner, heads down.

Even as she went closer they didn’t move, except to quiver. She’d seen the images on the television of the poultry processing plants in Hong Kong and South Korea. Everyone knew what a sick bird looked like now.

She grabbed Sasha, and carried her into the yard. At the head of the trail they’d hiked down two days ago Holly screamed for Jason, over and over. Sasha squirmed until she had to put the girl down.

“What are you doing, Mommy?” Sasha said, plopping down in the grass.

“Honey, stop. Just stop, OK? Just,” then Holly turned and screamed for Jason.

He came running up through the trees and across the field. “What?” he gasped, clutching his knees.

“The chickens,” Holly said.

“What?”

“The chickens. I think they’re sick. They’re just sitting there.”

He looked at her, chest heaving, face red, then looked at the house.

“Wait here,” he said.

The garage door was down, so he went around the side. Holly heard glass breaking, then Jason inside, tossing things aside. He came out with garbage bags in one fist, an axe in the other. On his hands he wore plastic gloves and on his face a surgical mask.

He stopped at the barn door. “Wait here.”

“What’s Daddy doing?” Sasha said, tugging at Holly’s hand.

“It’s fine, honey. He’s fine. Daddy’s just cleaning up.”

They couldn’t just stand there and listen to him kill the birds, so she put Sasha in the car and handed over the I-pad. To cover the bleeping of the games she turned on the radio. The last time she’d listened had been the day they’d arrived.

MSNBC were interviewing an epidemiologist from the CDC. The scientist was describing the difficulty they were having coming up with a vaccine. The virus had already mutated several times in unexpected ways. It was quite vigorous, and adaptive, the woman said, with obvious admiration.

A summary of the news followed: the quarantine in New York had been extended to Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. Travel on the highways was restricted to emergency personnel. All flights, domestic and international, were temporarily suspended. Everyone was to stay at home. Avoid large gatherings of people. Stay away from livestock, especially pigs and birds. Temporary treatment centers had been established in most cities. If you get sick, call 911 for the closest facility.

Holly turned the dial, breathing fast. She scrolled past loud thumping pop songs. She stopped on a talk station, drawn to the urgency in the man’s voice.

“They’re lying, people. You get it? Lying to all of us. There’s no cure and I’ll tell you what, if they do come up with one, you’re not going to get it. You know where it’s going? To the President, Congress, those rich people who got helicoptered out of Manhattan. We should’ve shot them down, people. We should’ve gotten up on our rooftops and shot those helicopters down. Because wherever they are now, that’s where the cure is going. The rest of us, we don’t rate. Do you get it? In this system, in this world, we don’t count. We’re the people who die. They’re clearing us out. And if I was you, if I was any of you out there, I’d get myself a gun, I’d hole up in my house, and if the government comes with their men in their white suits and their masks I’d put a bullet in their chests. That’s what I’d do. That’s what I’m going to do. I have friends in New York and you know what they tell me? Bodies in the street, people. There are bodies in the street. Just piled up there. They’re giving up on us. No one, and I mean no one, is coming to save you.”

Holly reached for the dial with a shaking hand, clicked the dial off, and only then noticed that Sasha was staring at the radio.

“Who was that, Mommy?” the girl said.

“No one, honey. A crazy man.” Her voice was shaking. Where was Jason? What was taking so long?

“Who is he going to kill?”

“What are you talking about?” Holly said, trying not to shriek.

“He said he was going to get a gun—”

“No, honey. He was being silly. Guns are bad, honey. He was just being a silly man.”

Sasha squinted at the radio, as if she could still faintly hear the lunatic's ranting.

"Play your game, sweetie," Holly said.

As if she'd summoned him with her panic, Jason stepped from the barn. He no longer wore the mask, or the gloves.

"Wait here, baby," Holly said, and got out of the car.

"They're gone," he said, looking back at the barn. He was sweating, a dark stain on the chest of his gray T-shirt.

"Were they sick?"

"I don't know. I took them out back. I broke their necks. I didn't want blood everywhere. So I just," he wrung his hands together. "And it's done."

"So what do we do?"

"Nothing," he said. "We do nothing. Get Sasha. I'm going to shower."

Walking back into the barn he peeled off his shirt, the muscles in his back shifting, his ribs sticking out. All the softness and roundness of their Brooklyn life had gone out of him and he looked, from behind, like a new man.

•

NEITHER OF THEM HAD TO say what they were waiting for, and they both got up at the sound of Robby's car. Obviously Alice had called and told him what they'd done.

They watched as Robby, still in his scrubs, hurried around the corner of the garage, then stormed quickly up to the front door, glaring at the barn.

When Robby came back out, dressed now in jeans and white T-shirt, Jason was waiting for him at the white fence. Robby gestured at the barn, at the garage. She couldn't hear what they were saying, only the occasional rising tone in their words, until they started shouting.

"This is my house, Jason. This is my home. My family's in there."

"Fuck you, Robby. You put us in the barn. I'm your brother. And that's my family. Right there."

Robby rubbed his face with both hands and said something, pleading. Jason shook his head, gestured back at the barn. Robby's frown deepened, he stepped toward Jason and she could see the tension in her husband's neck, the way he set his feet farther apart.

"Are you fucking kidding?" Robby shouted. "You killed them?"

Jason said something, calm, but his hands at his sides were fists.

Robby moved toward the barn, but Jason's arm came up, hitting him in the chest. Jason shook his head. Robby looked down at the arm, then up at Jason, then he turned toward the house and said, "Out, OK? Tonight."

Holly trembled as Jason came into the barn. But not with fear. With excitement.

“He wants us out, to leave, tonight,” he said.

“Where are we going to go?” Holly said, unable to whisper.

Sasha was listening, but there was no helping it. They couldn’t protect her from everything forever.

“We’re not going anywhere,” Jason said, squatting beside the big duffle bag.

“But he said—”

“We’re not leaving,” Jason said. He tucked something into his pocket and stood up. She could see the shape, a long cylinder, and knew what it was: the can of mace he’d bought on the street after the police had shot people trying to cross the George Washington Bridge.

“Jason,” she said. Wasn’t she supposed to tell him to calm down, not to do this? But what else was there to do? Leave? Because they’d killed a few chickens?

For dinner they ate crackers and energy bars, gave the last of the milk to Sasha, and drank water from the tap.

The red sun fell against the dark line of trees before Robby emerged again. He came down the steps slowly. Contrite, she could see. Or at least not as angry as before.

“Here we go,” Jason said. “Stay in here.”

Holly wanted to say maybe they should just talk to him. He wouldn’t kick him out, right? She left the door cracked and pressed her ear close.

“Listen,” Robby said, as they met near the picnic table, where Jason had drawn him. “I don’t think this is going to work.”

“What’s that?” Jason said.

With his back to her, she could see he’d moved the mace from his pocket and tucked it into his belt against his spine.

“This,” Robby said, gesturing at the barn. “It’s just.” He stopped, rubbed his eyes, folded his arms across his chest. “It’s not working out.”

“You mean us staying in the barn?” Jason said.

Robby nodded, frowning. At Jason’s expression, she was sure, though she couldn’t see it. “It’s not working out,” Robby said. “I hoped it would, but now Alice is scared. I mean, breaking into the garage. And the chickens.” His voice tightened, but he paused and kept going. “I want to help. We do. But we can’t do it like this.”

“Can’t do what?” Jason’s voice was loud, almost jocular.

“Can’t let you stay here. We’re going to need to have you move out of the barn.”

“And go where? Where are we supposed to go, Robby? You have that planned out too?” As he spoke, Jason moved closer and Robby stumbled back over a clump of grass.

“There’s a camp,” Robby said. “It’s nicer than this. I mean, they have trailers, mostly tents, but I think I can get you a trailer.”

“A camp,” Jason said, then he threw back his head and laughed, loud.

“Jason, please. My wife is in there. My baby is two months old.”

“And my baby,” Jason shouted, stepping closer so again Robby stumbled back, “is in there. In the barn. Where you put her. Like some kind of fucking animal. Got it, Robby? I’m looking out for my little girl. And we’re not taking her to any fucking camp.”

Holly could see the fear in Robby’s face. His eyes darted over Jason’s face, then leapt to the house, to the window, her face. She didn’t move.

“Jason, listen,” Robby said, stepping away again. “This is my house. You need to leave, OK? This isn’t working out.”

“Oh,” Jason shouted, “I agree. This is definitely not fucking working out.”

She watched him reach around behind and grab the mace and spray it into Robby’s eyes. Robby just stood there, waiting for it to happen. Then he fell, screaming, and rolled behind the picnic table. Jason knelt over him. His fist came up, swung down.

“Come on, honey,” Holly said, running to where Sasha was coloring on the floor. “Get up, honey.”

“Where are we going?” Sasha said.

“We’re going to the house, baby. Come on.”

Sasha brushed at the straw that clung to her legs as Holly prompted her from behind so the girl wouldn’t see the axe her mother had picked up and held behind her back. Robby had stopped screaming. Holly pulled open the door and saw her husband standing over his brother, who was mostly hidden by the table. She wasn’t sure if Sasha had seen him. Dark was falling quickly. Holly tightened her grip on the axe.

“This way,” Jason said, running over to pick up Sasha.

“I have the axe,” Holly whispered, and Jason nodded.

Each carrying their load, they moved up the stone path toward the house.