

# *The Deep*

Anthony Doerr

*Tom is born in 1914 in Detroit*, a quarter mile from International Salt. His father is offstage, unaccounted for. His mother operates a six-room, underinsulated boardinghouse populated with locked doors, behind which drowse the grim possessions of itinerant salt workers: coats the color of mice, tattered mucking boots, aquatints of undressed women, their breasts faded orange. Every six months a miner is fired or drafted or dies and is replaced by another, so that very early in his life Tom comes to see how the world continually drains itself of young men, leaving behind only objects—empty tobacco pouches, bladeless jack-knives, salt-caked trousers—mute, incapable of memory.

Tom is four when he starts fainting. He'll be rounding a corner, breathing hard, and the lights will go out. Mother will carry him indoors, set him on the armchair, and send someone for the doctor.

Atrial septal defect. Hole in the heart. The doctor says blood sloshes from the left side to the right side. His heart will have to do three times the work. Life span of sixteen. Eighteen if he's lucky. Best if he doesn't get excited.

Mother trains her voice into a whisper. *Here you go, there you are, sweet little Tomcat*. She smothers the windows with curtains. She moves Tom's cot into an upstairs closet—no bright lights, no loud noises. Mornings she serves him a glass of buttermilk, then points him to the brooms or steel wool. *Go slow*, she'll say. He scrubs the coal stove, sweeps the marble stoop. Every so often he peers up from his work and watches the face of the oldest boarder, Mr. Weems, as he troops downstairs, a fifty-year-old man hooded against the cold, off to descend in an elevator a thousand feet underground. Tom imagines his descent, sporadic and dim lights passing and receding, cables ratcheting, a half dozen other miners squeezed into the cage beside him, each thinking his own thoughts, sinking down into that city beneath the city, where mules stand waiting and oil lamps burn in the walls and glittering rooms of salt recede into vast arcades beyond the farthest reaches of the light.

*Sixteen*, thinks Tom. *Eighteen if I'm lucky*.

School is a three-room shed as warm with the offspring of salt workers, coal workers, ironworkers. Irish kids, Polish kids, Armenian kids. *Don't run, don't fight*, whispers Mother. *No games*. For Tom the schoolyard seems a thousand acres of sizzling pandemonium. His first day, he lasts an hour. Mother finds him beneath a tablecloth with his fist in his mouth. *Shhh*, she says, and crawls under there with him and wraps her arms around his like ropes.

He seesaws in and out of the early grades. By the time he's ten, he's in remedial everything. *I'm trying*, he mumbles, but letters spin off pages and hang themselves in the branches outside. *Dunce*, the other boys declare, and to Tom that seems about right.

Tom sweeps, scrubs, scours the stoop with pumice one square inch at a time. *Slow as molasses in January*, says Mr. Weems, but he winks at Tom when he says it.

Every day, all day, the salt finds its way in. It encrusts washbasins, settles on the rims of baseboards. It spills out of the boarders, too: from ears, boots, handkerchiefs. Furrows of glitter gather in the bedsheets; a daily lesson in insidiousness.

Start at the center, then scrub out to the edges. Linens on Thursdays. Toilets on Fridays.

He's twelve when Ms. Fredericks asks the children to give reports. Ruby Hornaday goes sixth. Ruby has flames for hair, Christmas for a birthday, and a drunk for a daddy. She's one of two girls to make it to fourth grade.

She reads from notes in controlled terror. *If you think the lake is big you should see the sea. It's three-quarters of Earth. And that's just the surface.* Someone throws a pencil. The creases in Ruby's forehead deepen. *Land animals live on ground or in trees rats and worms and gulls and such. But sea animals they live everywhere they live in the waves and they live in mid water and they live in canyons six and a half miles down.*

She passes around a thick, red book. Inside are blocks of text and full-color photographic plates that make Tom's heart boom in his ears. A blizzard of green fish. A kingdom of purple corals. Five orange starfish cemented to a rock.

Ruby says, *Detroit used to have palm trees and corals and seashells. Detroit used to be a sea three miles deep.*

Ms. Fredericks says, *Ruby, where did you get that book?* but by then Tom is hardly breathing. See-through flowers with poison tentacles and fields of clams and pink monsters with kingdoms of whirling needles on their backs. He tries to say, *Are these real?* but quicksilver bubbles rise from his mouth and float up to the ceiling. When he goes over, the desk goes over with him.

The doctor says it's best if Tom stays out of school. *Keep indoors*, the doctor says. *If you get excited, think of something blue.* Mother lets him come downstairs for meals and chores only. Otherwise he's to stay in his closet. *We have to be more careful, Tomcat*, she whispers, and sets her palm on his forehead.

Tom spends long hours on the floor beside his cot, assembling and reassembling the same jigsaw puzzle: a Swiss village. Five hundred pieces, nine of them missing. Sometimes Mr. Weems sits and reads to Tom from adventure novels. They're blasting a new vein down in the mines and little cascades of plaster sift from the ceiling. In the lulls between Mr. Weems's words, Tom can feel explosions reverberate up through a thousand feet of rock and shake the fragile pump in his chest.

He misses school. He misses the sky. He misses everything. When Mr. Weems is in the mine and Mother is downstairs, Tom often slips to the end of the hall and lifts aside the curtains and presses his forehead to the glass. Children run the snowy lanes and lights glow in the foundry windows and train cars trundle beneath elevated conduits. First-shift miners emerge from the mouth of the hauling elevator in groups of six and bring out cigarette cases from their overalls and strike matches and spill like little salt-dusted insects out into the night, while the darker figures of the second-shift miners stamp their feet in the cold, waiting outside the cages for their turn in the pit.

In dreams he sees waving sea fans and milling schools of grouper and underwater shafts of light. He

sees Ruby Hornaday push open the door of his closet. She's wearing a copper diving helmet; she leans over his cot and puts the window of her helmet an inch from his face.

He wakes with a shock and heat pooled in his groin. He thinks, *Blue, blue, blue.*

One drizzly Saturday when Tom is thirteen, the bell rings. He's scrubbing behind the stove, Mother is changing linens upstairs, and Mr. Weems is in the armchair reading the newspaper. When Tom opens the door, Ruby Hornaday is standing on the stoop in the rain.

*Hello.* Tom blinks a dozen times. Raindrops set a thousand intersecting circles upon the puddles in the road. Ruby holds up a jar: six black tadpoles squirm in an inch of water.

*Seemed like you were interested in water creatures.*

Tom tries to answer, but the whole sky is rushing through the open door into his mouth.

*You're not going to faint again, are you?*

Mr. Weems stumps into the foyer. *Jesus, boy she's damp as a church, you got to invite a lady in.*

Ruby stands on the tiles and drips. Mr. Weems grins. Tom mumbles, *My heart.*

Ruby holds up the jar. *Keep 'em if you want. They'll be frogs before long.* Drops shine in her eyelashes. Rain glues her shirt to her clavicles. *Well, that's something,* says Mr. Weems. He nudges Tom in the back. *Ain't it, Tom?*

Tom is opening his mouth. He's saying, *Maybe I could*—when Mother comes down the stairs in her big, black shoes. *Trouble,* hisses Mr. Weems. Heat crashes over Tom like a wave.'

Mother dumps the tadpoles in a ditch. Her face says she's composing herself but her eyes say she's going to wipe all this away. Mr. Weems leans over the dominoes and whispers, *Mother's as hard as a cobblestone, but we'll crack her, Tom, you wait.*

Tom whispers, *Ruby Hornaday,* into the space above his cot. *Ruby Hornaday. Ruby Hornaday.* A strange and uncontainable joy inflates dangerously in his chest.

Mr. Weems has long conversations with Mother in the kitchen. Tom overhears scraps: *Boy needs to move his legs. Boy should get some air.*

Mother's voice is a whip. *He's sick.*

*He's alive! What're you saving him for? How much time he got left?*

Mother consents to let Tom retrieve coal from the depot and tinned goods from the commissary. Tuesdays he'll be allowed to walk to the butcher's in Dearborn. *Careful, Tomcat, don't hurry.*

Tom moves through the colony that first Tuesday with something close to rapture in his veins. Down the long gravel lanes, past pit cottages and surface mountains of blue and white salt, the warehouses like dark cathedrals, the hauling machines like demonic armatures. All around him the monumental industry of Detroit pounds and clangs. The boy tells himself he is a treasure hunter, a hero from one of Mr. Weems's adventure stories, a knight on important errands, a spy behind enemy lines. He keeps his hands in his pockets and his head down and his gait slow, but his soul

charges ahead, sparking through the gloom.

In May of that year, 1929, fourteen-year-old Tom is walking along the lane thinking spring happens beneath the snow, beyond the walls—spring happens in the dark while you dream—when Ruby Hornaday steps out of the weeds. She has a shriveled rubber hose coiled over her shoulder and a swim mask in one hand and a tire pump in the other. *Need your help.* Tom's pulse soars.

*I got to go to the butchers.*

*Your choice.* Ruby turns to go. But really there's no choice at all.

She leads him west, away from the mine, through mounds of rusting machines. They hop a fence, cross a field gone to seed, and walk a quarter mile through pitch pines to a marsh where cattle egrets stand in the cattails like white flowers.

*In my mouthy* she says, and starts picking up rocks. *Out my nose. You pump, Tom. You understand?* In the green water two feet down Tom can make out the dim shapes of fish gliding through weedy enclaves.

Ruby pitches the far end of the hose into the water. With waxed cord she binds the other end to the pump. Then she fills her pockets with rocks. She wades out, looks back, says, *You pumpy* and puts the hose into her mouth. The swim mask goes over her eyes; her face goes into the water.

The marsh closes over Ruby's back, and the hose trends away from the bank. Tom begins to pump. The sky slides along overhead. Loops of garden hose float under the light out there, shifting now and then. Occasional bubbles rise, moving gradually farther out.

One minute, two minutes. Tom pumps. His heart does its fragile work. He should not be here. He should not be here while this skinny, spellbinding girl drowns herself in a marsh. If that's what she's doing. One of Mr. Weems's similes comes back to him from some dingy corner of memory: *You're trembling like a needle to the pole.*

After four or five minutes underwater, Ruby comes up. A neon mat of algae clings to her hair, and her bare feet are great boots of mud. She pushes through the cattails. Strings of saliva hang off her chin. Her lips are blue. Tom feels dizzy. The sky turns to liquid.

*Incredible, pants Ruby. Fucking incredible.* She holds up her wet, rock-filled trousers with both hands, and looks at Tom through the wavy lens of her swim mask. His blood storms through its light-less tunnels.

He has to trot to make the butcher's by noon. It is the first time Tom can remember permitting himself to run, and his legs feel like glass and his breath like quicksand. At the end of the lane, a hundred yards from home, he stops and pants with the basket of meat in his arms and spits a pat of blood into the dandelions. Sweat soaks his shirt. Dragonflies dart and hover. Swallows inscribe letters across the sky. The lane seems to ripple and fold and straighten itself out again.

Just a hundred yards more. He forces his heart to settle. *Everything, Tom thinks, follows a path worn by those who have gone before: egrets, clouds, tadpoles. Everything.*

The following Tuesday Ruby meets him at the end of the lane. And the Tuesday after that. They hop the fence, cross the field; she leads him places he's never dreamed existed. Places where the structures of the saltworks become white mirages on the horizon. Places where sunlight washes through groves of maples and makes the ground quiver with leaf-shadow. They peer into a foundry where shirtless men in masks pour molten iron from one vat into another; they climb a tailings pile where a lone sapling grows like a single hand thrust up from the underworld. Tom knows he's risking everything, but how can he stop? How can he say no? To say no to Ruby Hornaday would be to say no to the world.

Some Tuesdays Ruby brings along her red book, with its images of corals and jellies and underwater men breathing from hoses. She tells him that when she grows up she'll go to parties where hostesses row guests offshore and everyone puts on special helmets and goes for strolls along the sea bottom. She tells him she'll be a diver who sinks herself a half mile into the sea in a steel ball with one window. In the basement of the ocean shell find a world of lights: schools of fish glittering green, whole galaxies wheeling through the black.

*In the ocean, says Ruby, the rocks are alive and half the plants are animals.*

They hold hands; they chew Indian gum. She stuffs his mind full of kelp forests and seascapes and dolphins. *When I grow up*, thinks Tom. *When I grow up . . .*

Four more times Ruby walks around beneath the surface of a River Rouge marsh while Tom stands on the bank working the pump. Four more times he watches her rise back out like a fever. *Amphibian*. She laughs. *It means two lives.*

Then Tom runs to the butcher's and runs home, and his heart races, and spots spread like inkblots in front of his eyes. *Blue, blue blue*. But how does he know the blue he sees is the right color? Sometimes in the afternoons, when he stands up from his chores, his vision slides away in violet streaks and is a long while returning. Other colors spiral through his mind's eye, too: the glowing white of the salt tunnels, the red of Ruby's book, the orange of her hair—he imagines her all grown up, standing on the bow of a ship, and feels a core of lemon yellow light flaring brighter and brighter within him. It spills from the slats between his ribs, from between his teeth, from the pupils of his eyes. He thinks: *It is so much! So much!*

*So now you're fifteen. And the doctor says sixteen?*

*Eighteen if I'm lucky.*

Ruby turns her book over and over in her hands. *What's it like? To know you won't get all the years you should?*

*I don't feel so shortchanged when I'm with you*, he says, but his voice breaks at *short-* and the sentence falls apart.

They kiss only that one time. It is clumsy. He shuts his eyes and leans in, but something shifts and Ruby is not where he expects her to be. Their teeth clash. When he opens his eyes, she is looking off to her left, smiling slightly, smelling of mud, and the thousand tiny blonde hairs on her upper lip

catch the light.

The second-to-last time Tom and Ruby are together, on the last Tuesday of October, 1929, everything is strange. The hose leaks, Ruby is upset, a curtain has fallen somehow between them.

*Go back*, Ruby says. *It's probably noon already. You'll be late.* But she sounds as if she's talking to him through a tunnel. Freckles flow and bloom across her face. The light goes out of the marsh.

On the long path through the pitch pines it begins to rain. Tom makes it to the butcher's and back home with the basket and the ground veal, yet when he opens the door to Mothers parlor the curtains seem to blow inward. The chairs seem to leave their places and come scraping toward him.

The daylight thins to a pair of beams, waving back and forth. Mr. Weems passes in front of his eyes, but Tom hears no footsteps, no voices: only an internal rushing and the wet metronome of his exhalations. Suddenly he's staring through a thick, foggy window into a world of immense pressure. Mother's face disappears and reappears. Her lips say, *Haven't I given enough? Lord God, haven't I tried?* Then she's gone.

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In something deeper than a dream Tom walks the salt roads a thousand feet beneath the house. At first it's all darkness, but after what might be a minute or a day or a year, he sees little flashes of green light out there in distant galleries, hundreds of feet away. Each flash initiates a chain reaction of further flashes beyond it, so that if he turns in a slow circle he can perceive great flowing signals of light in all directions, tunnels of green arcing out into the blackness—each flash glowing for only a moment before fading, but in that moment repeating everything that came before, everything that will come next. Like days, like hours, like heartbeats.

He wakes to a deflated world. The newspapers are full of suicides; the price of gas has tripled. The miners whisper that the saltworks is in trouble. The Ford plant is shedding men; the foundry shuts down.

Quart milk bottles sell for a dollar apiece. There's no butter, hardly any meat. Most nights Mother serves only cabbage and soda bread. Salt.

No more trips to the butcher or the depot or the commissary. No more outside. He waits for Ruby to come to the door.

By November, Mothers boarders are vanishing. Mr. Beeson goes first, then Mr. Fackler. Still, Ruby doesn't come. Her face doesn't appear among the faces Tom watches from the upstairs window. Each morning he clambers out of his closet and carries his traitorous heart down to the kitchen like an egg. Images of Ruby climb the undersides of his eyelids, and he rubs them away.

*No addresses*, mumbles Mr. Weems. *The world is swallowing people like candy, boy. No one is leaving addresses.*

Mr. Hanson goes next, then Mr. Heathcock. By April the saltworks is operating only two days a week, and Mr. Weems, Mother, and Tom are alone at supper.

Sixteen. Eighteen if he's lucky. Tom moves his few things into one of the empty boarders' rooms on the first floor, and Mother doesn't say a word. He thinks of Ruby Hornaday: her pale blue eyes, her loose flames of hair. *Is she out there in the city, somewhere, right now? Or is she three thousand miles away?* Then he puts his questions aside.

Mother catches a fever in 1931. It eats her from the inside. She still puts on her high-waisted dresses, ties on her apron. She still cooks every meal and presses Mr. Weems's suit every Sunday. But within a month she has become somebody else, an empty demon in Mother's clothes—perfectly upright at the table, eyes smoldering, nothing on her plate.

She has a way of putting her hand on Tom's forehead while he works. Tom will be hauling coal or mending a pipe or sweeping the parlor, the sun glowing behind the curtains, and Mother will appear from nowhere and put her icy palm over his eyebrows, and he'll close his eyes and feel his heart tear just a little more.

*Amphibian. It means two lives.*

Mr. Weems is let go. He puts on his suit, packs up his dominoes, and leaves an address downtown.

*I thought no one was leaving addresses.*

*You're true as a map, Tom. True as the magnet to the iron.* And tears spill from the old miner's eyes.

One blue, icy morning not long after that, for the first time in Tom's memory, Mother is not at the stove when he enters the kitchen. He finds her upstairs sitting on her bed, fully dressed in her coat and shoes and with her rosary clutched to her chest. The room is spotless, the house wadded with silence.

*Now remember, payments are due on the fifteenth.* Her voice is ash. *The flashing on the roof needs replacing. There's ninety-one dollars in the dresser.*

*Mother, Tom says.*

*Shhh, Tomcat, she hisses. Don't get yourself worked up.*

Tom manages two more payments. Then the saltworks closes and the bank comes for the house. He walks in a daze through blowing sleet to the end of the lane and turns right and staggers over the dry weeds awhile till he finds the old path and walks beneath the creaking pitch pines to Ruby's marsh. Ice has interlocked in the shallows, but the water in the center is dark as molten pewter.

He stands there a long time. Into the gathering darkness he says, *I'm still here, but where are you?* His blood sloshes to and fro, and snow gathers in his eyelashes, and three ducks come spiraling out of the night and land silently on the water.

The next morning he walks past the padlocked gate of International Salt with fourteen dollars in his pocket. He rides the trackless trolley downtown for a nickel and gets off on Washington Boulevard. Between the buildings the sun comes up the color of steel, and Tom raises his face to it but feels no warmth at all. He passes catatonic drunks squatting on upturned crates, motionless as statues, and storefront after storefront of empty windows. In a diner a goitrous waitress brings him a cup of

coffee with little shining disks of fat floating on top.

The streets are filled with faces, dull and wan, lean and hungry; none belongs to Ruby. He drinks a second cup of coffee and eats a plate of eggs and toast, and then another. A woman emerges from a doorway and flings a pan out onto the sidewalk, and the wash water flashes in the light a moment before falling. In an alley a mule lies on its side, asleep or dead. Eventually the waitress says, *You moving in?* and Tom goes out. He walks slowly toward the address he's copied and recopied onto a sheet of Mother's writing paper. Frozen furrows of plowed snow are shored up against the buildings, and the little golden windows high above seem miles away.

It's a boardinghouse. Mr. Weems is at a lopsided table playing dominoes by himself. He looks up, says, *Holy shit sure as gravity*, and spills his tea.

By a miracle Mr. Weems has a grandniece who manages the owl shift in the maternity ward at City General. Maternity is on the fourth floor. In the elevator Tom cannot tell if he is ascending or descending. The niece looks him up and down and checks his eyes and chest for fever and hires him on the spot. *World goes to Hades, but babies still get born*, she says, and issues him white coveralls.

Rainy nights are the busiest. Full moons and holidays are tied for second. God forbid a rainy holiday with a full moon. Ten hours a night, six nights a week, Tom roves the halls with carts of laundry, taking soiled blankets down to the cellar, bringing clean blankets up. He brings up meals, brings down trays.

Doctors walk the rows of beds injecting expectant mothers with morphine and something called scopolamine that makes them forget. Sometimes there are screams. Sometimes Tom's heart pounds for no reason he can identify. In the delivery rooms there's always new blood on the tiles to replace the old blood Tom has just mopped away.

The halls are bright at every hour, but out the windows the darkness presses very close, and in the leanest hours of those nights Tom gets a sensation like the hospital is deep underwater, the floor rocking gently, the lights of neighboring buildings like glimmering schools of fish, the pressure of the sea all around.

He turns eighteen, nineteen. All the listless figures he sees: children humped around the hospital entrance, their eyes vacant with hunger; farmers pouring into the parks; families sleeping without cover—people for whom nothing left on earth could be surprising. There are so many of them, as if somewhere out in the countryside great factories pump out thousands of new men every minute, as if the ones shuffling down the sidewalks are but fractions of the immense multitudes behind them.

And yet is there not goodness, too? Are people not helping one another in these ruined places? Tom splits his wages with Mr. Weems. He brings home discarded newspapers and wrestles his way through the words on the funny pages. He turns twenty, and Mr. Weems bakes a mushy pound cake full of eggshells and sets twenty matches in it, and Tom blows them all out. He faints at work: once in the elevator, twice in the big, pulsing laundry room in the basement. Mostly he's able to hide it. But one night he faints in the hall outside the waiting room, and a nurse named Fran hauls him

into a closet. *Can't let them see you like that*, she says, and he washes back into himself.

Fran's face is brown, lived-in. She sits him on a chair in the corner and wipes his forehead. The air is warm, steamy; it smells like soap. For a moment he feels like throwing his arms around her neck and telling her everything.

The closet is more than a closet. On one wall is a two-basin sink; heat lamps are bolted to the undersides of the cabinets. Set in the opposite wall are two little doors.

Tom returns to the chair in the corner of this room whenever he starts to feel dizzy. Three, four, occasionally ten times a night, he watches a nurse carry an utterly newborn baby through the little door on the left and deposit it on the counter in front of Fran.

She plucks off little knit caps and unwraps blankets. Their bodies are scarlet or imperial purple; they have tiny, bright red fingers, no eyebrows, no kneecaps, no expression except a constant, bewildered wince. Her voice is a whisper: *Why here you are, there you go, okay now, baby, just lift you here*. Their wrists are the circumference of Tom's pinkie.

Fran takes a new washcloth from a stack, dips it in warm water, and wipes every inch of the creature—ears, scrotum, armpits, eyelids—washing away bits of placenta, dried blood, all the milky fluids that accompanied it into this world. Meanwhile the child stares up at her with blank, memorizing eyes, peering into the newness of all things. Knowing what? Only light and dark, only mother, only fluid.

Fran dries the baby and splays her fingers beneath its head and tugs its hat back on. She whispers, *Here you are, see what a good girl you are, down you go*, and with one free hand lays out two new, crisp blankets, and binds the baby—wrap, wrap, turn—and sets her in a rolling bassinet for Tom to wheel into the nursery, where she'll wait with the others beneath the lights like loaves of bread.

In a magazine Tom finds a color photograph of a three-hundred-year-old skeleton of a bowhead whale, stranded on a coastal plain in some place called Finland and covered with moss. He tears it out, studies it in the lamplight. *See*, he murmurs to Mr. Weems, *how the flowers closest to it are brightest? See how the closest leaves are the darkest green?*

Tom is twenty-one and fainting three times a week when he sees, among the drugged, dazed mothers in their rows of beds, the unmistakable face of Ruby Hornaday. Flaming orange hair, freckles sprayed across her cheeks, hands folded in her lap, and a thin gold wedding ring on her finger. The material of the ward ripples. Tom leans on the handle of his cart to keep from falling.

*Blue*, he thinks. *Blue, blue, blue*.

He retreats to the chair in the corner of the washing room and tries to suppress his heart. *Any minute*, he thinks, *her baby could come through the door*.

Two hours later, he pushes his cart into the post delivery room, and Ruby is gone. Toms shift ends; he rides the elevator down. Outside, an icy January rain settles lightly on the city. The streetlights glow yellow. The early morning avenues are empty except for the occasional automobile, passing

with a damp sigh. Tom steadies a hand against the bricks and closes his eyes.

A police officer helps him home. Tom lies on his stomach in his rented bed all that day and recopies the letter until little suns burst behind his eyes. *Deer Ruby, I saw you in the hospital and I saw your baby to. His eyes are viry prety. Fran sez later they will probly get blue. Mother is gone and I am lonely as the arctic see.*

That night at the hospital Fran finds the address. Tom includes the photo of the whale skeleton from the magazine and sticks on an extra stamp for luck. He thinks: *See how the flowers closest to it are brightest. See how the closest leaves are the darkest green.*

He sleeps, pays his rent, walks the thirty-one blocks to work, and checks the mail each day. And each day winter pales and spring strengthens and Tom loses a little bit of hope.

One morning over breakfast, Mr. Weems looks to him with concern and says, *You ain't even here, Tom. You got one foot across the river. You got to pull back to our side.*

But three weeks later, it comes. *Dear Tom, I liked hearing from you. It hasn't been ten years but it feels like a thousand. I'm married, you probably guessed that. The baby is Arthur. Maybe his eyes will turn blue. They just might.*

A bald president is on the stamp. The paper smells like paper, nothing more. Tom runs a finger beneath every word, sounding it out. Making sure he hasn't missed anything.

*I know your married and I don't want anything but happyness for you but maybe I can see you one time? We could meet at the acquareyem. If you don't rite back that's okay I no why.*

Two more weeks. *Dear Tom, I don't want anything but happiness for you, too. How about next Tuesday? I'll bring the baby, okay?*

The next Tuesday, the first one in May, Tom leaves the hospital after his shift. His vision wavers at the edges, and he hears Mothers voice: *Be careful, Tomcat. It's not worth the risk.* He walks slowly to the end of the block and catches the first trolley to Belle Isle, where he steps off into a golden dawn.

There are few cars about, all parked, one a Ford with a huge present wrapped in yellow ribbon on the backseat. An old man with a crumpled face rakes the gravel paths. The sunlight hits the dew and sets the lawns aflame.

The face of the aquarium is Gothic and wrapped in vines. Tom finds a bench outside and waits for his pulse to steady. The reticulated glass roofs of the flower conservatory reflect a passing cloud. Eventually a man in overalls opens the gate, and Tom buys two tickets, then thinks about the baby and buys a third. He returns to the bench with the three tickets in his trembling fingers.

By eleven the sky is filled with a platinum haze and the island is busy. Men on bicycles crackle along the paths. A girl flies a yellow kite.

*Tom?*

Ruby Hornaday materializes before him—shoulders erect, hair newly short, pushing a chrome-and-canvas baby buggy. He stands quickly, and the park bleeds away and then restores itself.

*Sorry I'm late, she says.*

She's dignified, slim. Two quick strokes for eyebrows, the same narrow nose. No makeup. No jewelry. Those pale blue eyes and that hair.

She cocks her head slightly. *Look at you. All grown up.*

*I have tickets, he says.*

*How's Mr. Weems?*

*Oh, he's made of salt, he'll live forever.*

They start down the path between the rows of benches and the shining trees. Occasionally she takes his arm to steady him, though her touch only disorients him more.

*I thought maybe you were far away, he says. I thought maybe you went to sea.*

Ruby doesn't say anything. She parks the buggy and lifts the baby to her chest—he's wrapped in a blue afghan—and then they're through the turnstile.

The aquarium is dim and damp and lined on both sides with glass-fronted tanks. Ferns hang from the ceiling, and little boys lean across the brass railings and press their noses to the glass. *I think he likes it, Ruby says. Don't you, baby?* The boy's eyes are wide open. Fish swim slow ellipses through the water.

They see translucent squid with corkscrew tails, sparkling pink.

Octopi like floating lanterns, cowfish in blue and violet and gold. Iridescent green tiles gleam on the domed ceiling and throw wavering patterns of light across the floor.

In a circular pool at the very center of the building, dark shapes race back and forth in coordination. *Jacks, Ruby murmurs. Aren't they?*

Tom blinks.

*You're pale, she says.*

Tom shakes his head.

She helps him back out into the daylight, beneath the sky and the trees. The baby lies in the buggy sucking his lips, and Ruby guides Tom to a bench.

Cars and trucks and even a limousine pass slowly along the white bridge, high over the river. The city glitters in the distance.

*Thank you, says Tom.*

*For what?*

*For this.*

*How old are you now, Tom?*

*Twenty-one. Same as you, A breeze stirs the trees, and the leaves vibrate with light. Everything is radiant.*

*World goes to Hades, but babies still get born, whispers Tom.*

Ruby peers into the buggy and adjusts something, and for a moment the back of her neck shows between her hair and collar. The sight of those two knobs of vertebrae, sheathed in her delicate skin, fills Tom with a longing that cracks the lawns open. For a moment it seems Ruby is being slowly dragged away from him, as if he were a swimmer caught in a rip, and with every stroke the back of her neck recedes farther into the distance. Then she sits back, and the park heels over, and he can feel the bench become solid beneath him once more.

*I used to think, Tom says, that I had to be careful with how much I lived. As if life was a pocketful of coins. You only got so much and you didn't want to spend it all in one place.*

Ruby looks at him. Her eyelashes whisk up and down. *But now I know life is the one thing in the world that never runs out. I might run out of mine, and you might run out of yours, but the world will never run out of life. And were all very lucky to be part of something like that.*

She holds his gaze. *Some deserve more luck than they've gotten.*

Tom shakes his head. He closes his eyes. *I've been lucky, too. I've been absolutely lucky.*

The baby begins to fuss, a whine building to a cry, and Ruby says, *Hungry.*

A trapdoor opens in the gravel between Toms feet, black as a keyhole, and he glances down.

*You'll be okay?*

*I'll be okay.*

*Good-bye, Tom.* She touches his forearm once, and then she goes, pushing the buggy through the crowds. He watches her disappear in pieces, first her legs, then her hips, then her shoulders, and finally the back of her bright head.

And then Tom sits, hands in his lap, alive for one more day.