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Ruben

*Translated from Italian by Victoria Offredi Poletto and
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To my mother, Anna Maria Battistin: Thank you for everything.

NO LONGER DUSK, not yet dawn. It's that long, drawn-out time of the night. Time freed from social interaction. Time meant for rest that I, instead, often turn into time for work. Mornings I prefer to sleep. Late. A pleasure I would not give up for anything, or for anyone.

I look at the clock. The hands continue to move forward, indifferent. Tick-tocking in the silence. I look at the sky. Black, clear, starry, cold. Silent. I continue to paint. I'm still perched on the top step of the ladder, a brush in one hand and a can of paint in the other. One of the walls in my living room is turning golden yellow. Meanwhile, I have finished three large Moretti beers and a packet of Red Fortuna cigarettes. The bottles are empty and the ashtray is overflowing. I begin thinking. . . Not only about golden yellow, but also about pink. The pink of that extra dot that appeared on the pregnancy test. I am pregnant. I didn't want to be. Now I'm not so sure. Not easy to get up at noon when you have a child. But it's not just that.

I've never had warm, fuzzy feelings about children. Indifference and annoyance perhaps. Happy little families? Forget about it! I can just see them at dinner, sitting around a white plastic table under a miserable improvised porch attached to their old motor home, in some shabby campsite along the honky-tonk section of the Adriatic Coast. Children yelling, adults yapping, and in a corner a TV set projecting hypnotic images and words that emphasize the tired, squalid banality of it all. Exhausted mothers with flabby bodies, fat, sweaty fathers, annoying and whining children. A big bubbling pot of food, dished out like army rations on chipped ceramic plates. I have never experienced anything like that. I'm terrified at the very thought of it.

No exhausted mother with a flabby body, no fat, sweaty father. My mother was white, Italian, with brown hair and green eyes. My

father was black, Indian, with black hair and black eyes. Monochrome. The only white thing about him were some spots on his face, around his chin—vitiligo, due to stress. His encounter with the West had stamped small white spots on his skin. An unusual form of integration.

My parents were profoundly different in terms of their culture, their aspirations. They soon split up. Both fighting, in their separate ways, to achieve self-realization.

Between the two of them: me. Me, belonging to only one nation, Italy, because the other had been abandoned. We lived in Italy, in Milan. All that was left of India were some photos, as evocative as a Chinese vase. An object which defines décor, not personal identity. Sure, I ate a lot of rice with curry and very little pasta with tomato sauce, but eating a hamburger does not make you feel American.

Only when they called me the N-word, all of a sudden, I remembered.

And I immediately wanted to block it out. We usually reject what hurts us. The paradox was that in India, the children also stared at me, pointing and laughing. Perhaps they called me white, but I didn't understand their language. I knew nothing of their country, a country that should have also been mine.

I was made up of two halves that did not fit together, that did not communicate. One had been born, the other was still in gestation. And it ran the risk of never being born. The fairy tale of the ugly duckling upset me: I'd closed the book and burst into tears. My mother, surprised and worried, asked me, "Why are you crying?" and I, sobbing, answered, "But if the black duckling turns white, how will his mom recognize it?" My own peculiar way of interpreting the happy ending.

In the meantime, my father too was becoming Italian. The only thing he retained from his country were his physical traits. Or he let show only those traits that could not be erased. With time, his native core became covered with layers of Western life. From the cramped room of a student dorm where he slept, studied and ate, poor, lonely, constrained by his immigrant status, he had moved to a villa with a garden in the wealthy suburb of Brianza, where he was known and respected as "the Doctor." And he could wear different clothes every day, choosing from his many cashmere sweaters. Sweaters that he had desired for so long, admiring them from the street, standing in front of the elegant window of a store in downtown Milan. For this reason, no doubt, he could not stand my shapeless, hippie-style sweaters.

But that is part of his heritage too. India is a country made up of men for whom a pressed shirt and a gold watch are almost *de rigueur*. No matter if then they wear them over their *lungi*, a cotton garment wrapped like a skirt around their waist.

In me, on the other hand, India had almost been obliterated. So, when asked, "Are you Italian?" without skipping a beat, I would reply, "My father's Indian." He, not me. I was someone who straightened her hair before Michael Jackson became a star. I used total sunblock protection in the summer months and thought of having a nose job during the winter. I didn't think I could have a child. Terrified of being a mother who was still a child, too wrapped up in herself to be able to take care of anyone else. Terrified of having a child who might feel, like me, an exile in any land. Too black to be Italian, too white to be Indian. A child who straightened his hair, used total sunblock protection, and had a nose job in a vain attempt to identify with just one nation, a much easier solution. Unable to fully appreciate his mixed origins. To be proud of his two halves that together become a plus not a minus. As they should. Anyway, for him it would only involve a quarter. My heredity, difficult stuff to deal with, as I knew from experience. So, how could I pass this onto someone else so lightly, without their knowing? Perhaps I could.

Now it's August. I'm seven months pregnant. We stroll together along a beach in Sicily. My body swaddles and protects you: you sunbathe and observe the world. You are doing somersaults. I'm wearing a two-piece bathing suit, my belly is sticking out, and my skin is pitch black. Melanin has this effect on me. I turn darker than my father.

I feel watched. I throw myself into the water to erase my image from the gaze of other people. It's a difficult time for me; I'm not sure I'll be able to love you. I don't want to hurt you.

In the meantime, I hear the children from the house next door singing idiotic songs at the top of their lungs. I can't stand them. I light my umpteenth cigarette while I try to read the newspaper. Grandpa calls, he is happy and proud of your existence. "Are you still smoking?" "No, I quit." I lie. I am tired of being a cause of concern to him. Now that you are here, he's been calling me every day. I feel like the bearer of a precious gift. Because of you I am taken care of and protected at every step of the way. Will I be able to take care and protect you at every step of the way?

I am pregnant and I don't hide it, I wear short tank tops over low-

waisted pants. People stare at me, at us. Now we're back in Milan. I can't even throw myself, ourselves, into the sea any longer. It sucks. I have never wanted to be perceived as an outsider, as different, and I do not want it to happen to you either. And now that's exactly what is happening to us.

Your birth is less than a month away. I go around on a bicycle. I'm sure you like biking. You don't bounce, not even when I go over a hole. You stay calm. Perhaps you're busy playing with your umbilical cord. You even dance, following my body, with my body, inside my body. We go to concerts and dance together. Perfectly synchronized. We go home when the sun rises and collapse on the bed, exhausted. Perhaps I'm asking too much of you.

Anyway, I bike to the house of my friend who has bought me the stroller. Obviously, with this powerful means of transportation, I won't be able to take the stroller home with me. But with great foresight my friend is ready to load it into her car. "I'll take it to your house." "Oh, thanks." I can't explain it (and in fact, I don't), but that stroller bothers me. I just can't see myself as a mother. So far, I only have a belly. On the other hand, my friend worries about you and how you will get around. I envy her, I wish I could plan for your arrival with her same enthusiasm.

There is nothing in my house for you. It's true that I have completely emptied my room of the Ikea bookcase, filled to the top with paints, fabrics, glues, scissors, paintbrushes, and bottles of sand. Work supplies of an expectant mother who paints until three in the morning. Only when she feels you kicking too hard does she realize she's overdoing it and goes to bed.

The room that has always been mine, and that soon will also be yours, now has a more Zen-like atmosphere. There isn't even the bassinet in it. That's stored at grandma's house, a neutral zone, out of sight, where I could also take the stroller.

My—our?—room is empty, except for the double mattress resting on a wooden platform. Plenty of sharp corners, perfect for a small child; you can bump into anything and you would have a good chance of hurting yourself, I mean, really hurting yourself. No little bumps here, I can definitely promise you a nice little cut.

Anyway, I don't want the stroller. But it is a present. My friend is driving it over to my house. I can't refuse it. I follow her on my bike. I help her load it into the elevator and take it up one floor. I put it in the living room. Oh God, can't it go out on the balcony? Better yet,

squished up at the end so I can't see it? Your dad is thrilled. He wants to open the box and assemble it right away. My friend is beside herself with excitement as well.

"Let's open it! Let's assemble it!" I feel like locking myself in the bathroom. Got it! "No, look, opened and put together it will take up a lot of space. . . much better to leave it where it is." I can see the disappointment in their eyes. Followed by a few moments of silence, dead silence, that never seem to end. Then they move toward the box. Christ, nothing can stop them! They tear off pieces of tape and cardboard corners. I could faint. They pull the stroller out, a part of it. Anxiety attack. Then they agree with me, "No, it's too much of a pain. . ." Phew! That was a close call. I throw myself on their object of desire and repackage it as best I can. I put it in a corner. Out of the way as much as possible. And it isn't just a question of space.

I can't imagine you. But I am afraid. I'm afraid that you might be deaf, mute, blind. All things that an amniocentesis test cannot reveal. I'm also afraid you might be missing an arm, a leg. All things that the ultrasounds have ruled out, but who can say. I'm also afraid you might be stupid and ugly.

I am not an asshole. These are things almost all mothers fear. They even write about it in women's magazines. Sure, not all mothers fear these things. But I do. I belong to the other group. No, listen, it's not a group of assholes. It's the group of people who do not trust life, or themselves.

So that's why I'm afraid. Yet it isn't completely true that I can't imagine you. I don't admit it to myself, but deep down I think you are black. Your skin, your hair, your eyes. Completely black. Like your grandfather. Dark traits always win out. So they say. Never trust genetic calculations. Never bet everything on DNA. And I also think you might have dreadlocks. Yes, at birth. Probably after your first cry you won't be waving the Jamaican flag, but, well, almost. Now, why Jamaica and not India? Well, India is grandpa's homeland, but it produces gurus and not reggae, and I prefer music. But these are just details. To mark your arrival in the world you will scream "*Waaah*" instead of singing "No Woman, No Cry." And perhaps I'll be able to put up with it.

It's four in the morning, I'm crawling on the floor and holding on to the furniture. I've never had such a terrible stomachache. Finally I give in and call the obstetrician. She advises me to go to the hospital. We leave. I take nothing with me. I think they will discharge me right

away with a nice painkiller. Right away they take me to the delivery room. You are about to be born. Black T-shirt and jazz pants, red Doc Martens. Someone should buy me an embroidered robe and pink slippers. This is not a rave.

Push, push, push. I've had it. You're not coming out.

"Give me an epidural."

"Give me a cigarette."

"I'm coming back tomorrow."

No luck.

No anesthesia, no smoke, no home.

There I stay. First, sitting in the tub, then, squatting on the ground, finally, stretched out on the hospital bed. Your dad strokes my hair and holds my hand. The midwife says, "You're very beautiful." So, compliments help the delivery? I don't rail against them, I don't swear at strangers, and I don't scream uncontrollably. All I want is an epidural, a cigarette, and to come back tomorrow. If possible. The midwife now voices her opinion: "You don't want to push him out." "Shit, did she study medicine or psychology?" "Sure, he knows very well what a mess it is out here." A hefty woman arrives. She pushes down on my belly. You come out. Fourteen (fourteen!) hours of labor. Oh yeah, you were playing with your umbilical cord. I don't suppose you could have meditated with your arms crossed and your head down. I almost would have preferred a guru. I didn't necessarily want a rasta singer. Anyway, you came out. And you screamed, "*Waaah*." I guess I will listen to "No Woman, No Cry" on the radio.

They ask me if I want to hold you. I'm no dummy. You might be missing a little piece of your body, and I'd die. All right, I'm an asshole. Anyway, your dad takes you in his arms. He stayed with me the whole time without smoking a single cigarette. For that alone, he is to be admired. What's more, he cut your umbilical cord. You belong to both of us, not just me. I ask him, "What's he like?" He replies, "Beautiful." But does he tell me white, blond, with blue eyes? Not him.

They move me to a sterile room and make me lie down on a bed. You'll be here soon, they say they're checking you out. You are perfectly healthy. They bring you to me. I take you in my arms and put you to my breast. You begin to nurse. It's magical. I wish you would never stop. You give new meaning to my life. I love you. I never had a feeling like this before. So perfect, so full, in its—in your—sweet fragility. Your father comes to see us every day, whenever he can. The

way he looks at you and holds you is an absolute, immense poem that he is dedicating to you.

You are two months old. We go to the pediatrician. "This child has blue eyes." "You're joking, of course. It's because I am nursing him, later they'll change and turn black." Old wives' tales. She replies with medical conviction: "No, no, they're blue." Oh, get lost! She senses my confusion. Then comes the question, "Are you happy to have this child?" Jesus, what does this have to do with it? Of course I am happy. It's only a matter of a small chromatic glitch.

A year and a half has gone by. You have light amber skin, light brown hair, and gray-green eyes. You are beautiful. Very beautiful. Who do you look like?

God knows. You created your own mix, choosing carefully among light traits. Stinker. You'd be perfect for a Pampers ad. For an instant I thought of exploiting your good looks. Then I thought of your dad, who has always referred to models as "meat on a stick." Or canned. Now, the two of us are vegetarian. Although you, perhaps, wouldn't say no to a cutlet. Not Hindu by choice or tradition, you simply had no choice. Meanwhile your grandfather, born Catholic, feasts on beef tenderloin. And, whenever possible, goes hunting. His only respite from a life dedicated to work. And dedicated to you, now that you are here. You, who repay him with an enthusiastic, "Oooooohhhh" looking at his collection of stuffed birds. What to me has always seemed a macabre display looks like a splendid parade to you. I imagine the two of you in a field at dawn, both carrying a rifle. Heredity skipped a generation. Are you two alike? One black, one white. Grandfather and grandson. Maybe you too will decide to study medicine. And you'll succeed in becoming the hospital chief of staff, because, just as difficult as it is to find a black chief of staff, it's just as easy to find a white one. But, truly, I do not care. You'll be whatever you want to be. I had other fears. I was afraid. I was afraid that you too would be subjected to racial discrimination. Instead, I'm lucky if they don't make you an honorary member of the Ku Klux Klan. As long as they don't find grandpa's picture in your wallet. Not to mention our friends' jokes. Here's the favorite one, "When you go get him at pre-school his friends will ask, "Who's that woman, your nanny?"

We went to Bonassola last summer. Children everywhere. There were more strollers (argh!) than cars. Nannies everywhere. Wouldn't you know, they were all from India. And they smiled knowingly at me. I smiled back out of politeness. But I wanted to wear a sign saying "Dear

ladies, it might not seem so, but I am his mother.” Just look at us carefully, we’re identical. There’s only one problem, the transfer paper got the colors wrong.

I give you your bath, my black hand touches your white shoulder. I’m embarrassed. I really feel like your nanny. Will you be ashamed of me when you grow up? We look like two completely separate entities. And yet you came out of my body. From June to September I put you in the sun, all four months, even at noon. “But did you put sunscreen on him?”

“No, I immersed him in tanning accelerators.” Problems? Yes, there is one: your hair turned ash blond. And you continue to be truly beautiful. You crawl around everywhere, socializing, laughing. Everyone on the beach adores you. You crawl on all fours toward other people. You never stay where you are supposed to be. You have a need to learn and explore. I suspect you also feel a need for a family. Instead, here, there is only me and grandma. Things are not going well between your dad and me. I’m sorry, I’m re-creating for you the same type of divided family that I really did not like. In the meantime you crawl around, socializing and laughing.

Here you are, in the middle of the sea, in a rubber ring, and a woman swims over to us because she wants to see this splendid child up close. She asks me, “Are you his mom?” “Eehm, weeeell, yes, sure.” Surprising? And in the meantime I get all kinds of compliments. For you, thanks to you. You stretch out on top of me, spread like bread over Nutella. You manage to turn the simplest action on its head. You are loved. Deeply loved. The feeling that surprises me the most is your grandfather’s. One day he said to me, “I never felt a similar emotion for you or your brother.” There are several pictures of the two of us when we were little. We look just like you. Same features, different palettes. We look like products from the same mold, made in India. Which is even cheaper. My father walks along the street and holds you tight against his chest, your head leaning on his shoulder. This tenderness of his was unknown to me. You are the childhood that he, as a grandfather, can finally experience, love, and protect. With you his irritability vanishes, and because of you he puts off his engagements. He devotes himself to you, obliterating the world that surrounds him and creates a new universe, in which only the two of you exist. He, the foreigner, and you, the Italian.

He came over here by boat, with no money and full of hope. He left behind a family and a social status. He found himself in a hostile land. He fought to be recognized, as a man and as a professional. He is still an

Indian. He is still black. And he is the only one that doesn't find your colors surprising. As if for him, colors did not exist. Only once, as a good doctor, he told me, "He lacks vitamin B, that is why his hair is reddish." No, dad, no excuses. His hair is light brown, when he doesn't overdo it and it turns a wicked ash blond. But as soon as he gets a little older we'll color his hair. Then we'll take him to India. To the family home: "You'll be able to play at being the white landowner, a modern transfiguration of the Buddha." And to the first person who shouts, "Shit, the British colonists are back," we'll try to explain that you are grandpa's grandson. Perhaps you, as the next generation, will be able to accept your being one-fourth Indian with more spontaneity and ease. One-fourth is mathematically lighter, and it is better diluted. But probably black children will look at you, still pointing even more. Continuing to laugh they will not be able to recognize you as their brother, but I hope you, instead, will. In the meantime we go to the playground by our home. A little childhood oasis surrounded by a road and bordered by the walls of the apartment buildings. The sun peeks through, believe it or not. Just a few rays. Well, that's better: you, a true northerner, are bothered by too much heat and light. There's a little dark-skinned girl on the swing. I take you over to play with her.

Blind to appearances, you two look alike to me. You leave us, running toward a blond little white girl with blue eyes. You even give her a kiss. Are you doing it on purpose? I, who had just reconciled with my black half, hoped to lose myself in a wild celebration of African-ness. because India was already no longer enough. Because India, an unknown country to me, has always simply been one of the many Third World places in my mind.

Here, in Italy, I would see all those immigrants. The excluded. All in the same, identical situation. Whether they came from India, South America, or Africa, there was no difference.

In the meantime, I look at this child in his grandfather's arms. One uprooted, the other rooted, in the country where—by chance or necessity—we find ourselves. And each time I look at you, I am deeply touched. You two make a splendid photograph, in black and white. Resoundingly different and strongly united.

One blood.

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