

Red Cardboard Hearts Hanging From Strings

He'd been clear with you early on that having a family was never part of his game plan. You'd assumed he'd change his mind when he married you in a King County courthouse that stormy Thursday in February. You wore a black dress, forgetting about the holiday altogether. No bouquet, no corsage, not even a rose tucked behind your ear. Why? *Because I'm allergic, Liza, fuck. How many times do I have to say it?*

He was angry with you on the drive to the courthouse. Half-drunk—you only realized it because of how hard he gripped the wheel when you touched his arm. He said nothing. You lit a cigarette. He locked your window, leaving you to ash in your hand. Can you put this out, please? you asked. He looked straight ahead, mouth turned down. Baby, please? you begged, mouth forced up at the corners. You handed over the burning filter. He rolled down your window and flicked the butt out your side. You leaned back just in time, watching the thing get taken by the wind and rain. He took a long, deep breath before securing your side of the car.

You sat together waiting behind the bar in the gallery of the courtroom while an older couple finished their ceremony. The woman wore a long flowered dress. She was taller than her man with bright feathers in her hair. She reminded you of a peacock. She held a young girl's hand while the judge read the vows. You heard them kiss from where you waited. The woman was weepy, but gleaming, and she kept touching the side of the man's face with a tissue while tears rolled down hers. They were smiling, especially the daughter, and all three huddled at the end. The girl walked out between the couple, each hand in one of theirs. When the door closed behind them, the air thickened as if in a vault. Your left leg began to tremble.

Two weeks before, you'd lost the baby. The pregnancy was no shock given that you'd stopped taking your birth control pills after a conversation with your mother that ended something like,

When are you going to grow up, Liza?

Maybe never, Mother.

What else, Liza. *What else?*

What else is there, Mother?

Then, one Thursday night, he held up a small baggie, swaying it back and forth. After the first line, he ran his hand along your thigh. You sucked salt off the backs of each other's hands and clinked wine glasses of cheap Tequila together until one shattered, leaving you holding just the jagged stem, as if in ritual. Liquor ran down your hand, your wrist, your arm. Like you, standing there, too high, on one last sundown of Hanukkah in your childhood home. The only teenage marking left on your body, a hot pink stripe against dark curly hair. You'd rushed home late from the 8 Bit Arcade, barely making it on time, your mother already in position at the dining room table. She loomed like a vintage portrait on the wall in the murky light from that ancient stained glass chandelier. *Barukh ata adonai*, you sang and lit the match ... *Eloheinu melekh ha'olam* ... the candle shifted ... you reached to catch the menorah from falling, your sleeve inching up. When your mother saw the small crane tattooed on your inner wrist, she kept her eyes down and said, Disgraceful. That was *all* she said. Then she left you standing there with wax dripping down your hand.

Later that night, he grabbed the bottle and flipped the lights off in the house. Then he led you outside to his front porch, where you sat on the stairs in the dark, slightly apart from one

another but angled in, knees touching. Your clouded head streaked the skyline into a million thrashing comets. He pointed to the giant Ferris wheel. Said he'd propose up there, at the top. I'll throw a penny in the Sound for good luck. No shit, you'll say yes before the thing hits the water, he said. You laughed and kissed him, tugging on the back of his hair. He pulled his face away and said, If you're lucky, maybe I'll even put a baby in you by winter. You downed shots after each empty promise as if in sport. By the end of the bottle, you were puddled on the porch, fused into one another. It had been decided: yes, he'd stay with you forever; yes, he'd prove it; yes, he better; yes, you would. Then you went back inside, to his bed, more rigid than before. When a bright sun broke like a yolk behind Pier 66, you two were still wide awake, then hiding your eyes from one another. Somehow you knew there was a little girl in you.

You tried to tell him, you did. But that way he looked at you ... the words were like dry bread stuck in your throat. If you could just get him to the courthouse, you'd tell him after the ceremony, you decided. Yes, right away, while he still had an oath on his tongue.

You'd already named the little girl Rose. And there she was, your child, in a puddle of your blood like a pistil wrapped in red petals. When you cried, salt from your tears spread dark on the bed. You bundled the sheets in your arms before your wound soaked through to the mattress, then dropped them into the washing machine before he could see. When he left that morning, you took a cab to the nearest Planned Parenthood.

How are you sleeping these days? the doctor asked.

Fine. Normal, you said. (Hardly at all.)

Lay back. Let me take a look. Just relax, she said, while you spread your legs, each foot to a stirrup.

Right, you said. (Impossible.)

Any undue stress at home?

You crawl your behind back a few inches on the table, still bruised from rough sex on a tipsy (blacked out) Saturday afternoon. Not really, you said. (Bruises in fingerprints on your upper arms that time you were in his seat when the game started ... that welt from a playful snap to the bra when you took his fat joke too seriously ... shocked by the first slap to your face in his car when you were too drunk at daytime ... at a stop light, in broad daylight, on the edge of Occidental Park where a homeless lady selling roses out of a bucket watched. You remember how sad the lady seemed.)

What about alcohol use? the doctor asked.

No more than usual. (Chardonnay with a splash of OJ over ice for breakfast daily.)

Sitting up, you tugged on the hospital gown to cover your legs. Any halfwit would've seen the signs. You never did. The doctor removed her latex gloves as if you were her science project. You left her office with a Valium prescription and a referral to her psychotherapist of choice, specializing in addiction.

Give him a call, she said. He might be able to help you. In the meantime, try to get some rest. If you ever want to carry full-term, you'll have to slow your roll. The good news is you're young. You still have time. She winked and forced a grin, tossing her gloves in the bin on the way out the door.

You checked the clock on the courthouse wall. The second hand ticked. A court reporter dressed in pink filed her nails. She batted eyelashes at the oversized bailiff as he ducked under red cardboard hearts hanging from strings. Your phone rang. Your mother? *Shit*. Now? You hadn't told her yet. About the marriage. Not after the last chat. You declined the call quickly, stuffed the phone into your pocket, and there it was. There *she* was. Helena.

You ached for her, even years later, as if somehow she'd arranged the whole courthouse thing, decorations and all. Mystified, you asked around. Turns out, decorating was standard courtroom procedure for all the lovebirds marrying on Valentine's Day. Just a little something festive to sweeten the big day, the clerk said. You shuddered and kept your hand over her note in your pocket. How odd that you'd remembered to bring it, like you needed to take her with you over the threshold with him. That note she'd passed to you from under her desk in the fifth grade while Mrs. Furlong's back was to the class.

Take it, Helena whispered, just take it, quick. No, I can't, we're gonna get caught, you mouthed, shaking your head. The paper crane sailed off her fingers, gliding to a stop at your feet. Before the teacher turned toward her class, you had the bird nesting in your cupped hands on your lap. Perfect and delicate. Open it, Helena signaled. Inside, she'd written her name in penciled cursive along the edge of the bird's wing—*Love, Helena Rose Halprin*. You folded it back up with just the tips of your fingers as the scent of spearmint rode in on a breeze from the open classroom window.

Then, in the courthouse, you suddenly smelled her everywhere—the girl you finally put your clumsy mouth against in seventh grade, folded on top of each other behind the wooden slats of your bedroom closet after school one day. Light showered Helena's earlobe, her shoulder, her bare chest where a gold Star of David hung. You breathed into her ear as if fogging up a window. Like this? you asked. I think so, yes, she said, that's good. Neither of you knew your way. You fumbled with the button of her jeans and slid your wet palm under her shirt and you thought you might be loved when her pulse beat into your palm against her back. Smiling in the dark, you swore there was just one of you.

She was supposed to be helping you study the Torah that day. Your mother had arranged it. That Helena, wasn't she beautiful up there reading her *haftarah*, Liza? You could really learn something from her, she said.

When she found you, your mother didn't bust through that door, no, she crept in, quietly. She stared at Helena's chest where the star was. You prayed Helena's faith would redeem her. It never did. Indecent, your mother said. That was *all* she said. Then she turned around, leaving you two standing there trying to cover yourselves, then each other. Helena cried. Then she left, too, which just left you, weeks before your own bat mitzvah when you were to become a real woman. Alone, red in the face. Turns out, Jet, the family dog, had led your mother right to the closet, following the crumbs off a plate of coconut macaroons you'd carried to your room. You wanted to kill that fucking dog.

She'd never speak a word about how she uncovered you. Your mother. Weeks later, you stood on the stage of the synagogue shaking. The room was silent except for Rabbi Rosen breathing hard through his nose next to you. You looked for your mother in the front row while uncurling the Torah. Before your eyes could meet, your mother turned hers down and away. Her voice trembled when she forced her blessings while cold sweat rolled down your temples and the small of your back.

He nudged you with his elbow. What's wrong with you, Liza? Jesus, pay attention, we're up, he said. The whole marriage ceremony was already late getting started. Vows were forced, read like the end of some commercial for prescription drugs. When the judge pronounced you man and wife, there you stood, reaching back into your pocket while secretly wishing he'd eventually cave and want to raise some kids. He never did.

Some Tuesday in November, you'd seen him at a trendy spot on Queen Anne where *Cocktails and Conversation* was advertised across an A-frame sidewalk sign. Rain had smudged the conversation bit leaving the whole thing questionable. Your two remaining girlfriends ordered a cocktail each and closed out their tabs.

There's a cute guy over there, you'd said, pointing him out with a subtle nod.

Come on, Liza, who are you kidding? Sonia said.

What's that supposed to mean? you asked.

Tash rolled her eyes. Your life would get a lot less reckless if you just came out of that fucking closet you're in, she said.

If your mother had been there, she would've said the same thing with her eyes only. You imagined it would be that same cast down look she'd had that day when she'd come home early from work unexpectedly. And there you were, fifteen, smoking a cigarette under the garage overhang in a rainstorm, while Bill Braxton probably waited pantsless and shivering inside after he'd taken your virginity. You'd skipped school to share a joint with him first, and when you kissed him, he tasted like bubblegum. Let's do it at my place, you'd said. He resisted until your hands were down his pants.

You weren't surprised when your mother rolled down the driveway midday. Shameful, she'd said. That was *all* she said. Then, she sort of whimpered like a scolded puppy. You thanked God it wasn't Helena again and smoked your cigarette down to the end. By the time you went back inside, Bill was gone and your mother was shut up in her bedroom.

At the bar, your two remaining girlfriends went home before the hour was up. You ordered another drink, tried to look busy on your phone. A woman at a far table ran her finger around the rim of a martini glass; touched along a sharp collarbone to check her buttons; pleated

a cloth napkin, gently, to set lengthwise across her bare knees. Beyond her, he lingered at the bar. You spotted him again resting on an elbow with cuffs undone and sleeves rolled, leaning into his hip, like some kind of detective. He loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar, shoving the tiny straw to the side of his glass to take a full drink from the rim. He sucked on an ice cube, then bit down. You watched him down his drink, how he crumpled the paper napkin and tossed it on the bar.

There was no first date. In fact, you skipped the whole dating phase altogether. After the second night out, you followed him back to his place. West Seattle, overlooking the city from a direction that disoriented you. He insisted you not face him when he spun you around and bent you over the living room furniture. With one hand on your nape, he angled you face down, your bare backside in the air toward him. He bound your hands in one of his behind you, fisting your hair with the other. His phone rang then, right when he was just about inside you. He paid no attention to the call. You saw his face reflected in the front window. He looked determined, focused, as if working out a puzzle, jamming pieces where they didn't belong.

You awoke in his bed the next morning, your tongue furred like a cat's. Your body ached. Shower running. Was he in it? You lifted the silk sheet to determine how far the night had gone. Bra, intact and clasped, one breast spilling out the right cup. When you touched along your hipline, an image of your mother sprang up like a jack-in-the-box at the absence of your underwear. *Fuck*. Pillow clasped to your front, you kicked your feet wild, as if drowning. Finally, there it was, your thong, stuck like a dryer sheet in a ball at the bottom of the bed. Hooked by your big toe, you slipped it on before the water turned off, as if he'd be shocked to find you impure.

Dizzy holiday months went on like this, your hangovers like skid marks on an otherwise romantic Sunday drive. Your two remaining girlfriends stopped calling, making things much easier on you. You'd grown weary of pretending. In the early days, you'd walk him to his office on 3rd Avenue in the mornings; head pounding, still slick with sleep and sex, him, clean-shaven, smelling of musk, just to kiss him out from under the umbrella and wait to see him again. Then, you'd stop home during the day to feed your cat, conversing with the feline about how well you thought things were going with the man.

One of these mornings he said, I will take care of you forever. You believed him. Move in with me, he said. I want to keep my eyes on you. You thought about calling your mother, right then and there, to tell her the good news. Maybe she'd be pleased by a man choosing you. You never did. Instead, you tilted your head down shyly and slid your hand into his back pants pocket to warm your fingers. He held the umbrella, belting you down with his husky arm while you wedged yourself under his armpit.

Eventually, you'd forgotten to feed your cat for almost a week. No matter, as it turns out, the man required you to abandon the animal at the humane society before he'd allow you to move into his place. Small price to pay to be looked after like that.

On the Monday morning of your first anniversary, you wake after he's gone to work. For a moment, you wonder if you're still dreaming when you lie back with a vision of you and Helena in a car filled with rose blossoms. She drives ahead, you glance behind. A baby seat, strapped in, empty. In the rearview window, a sign says *Baby On Board*. You bring your hand softly to your belly and open your eyes. You'd skipped a period. It's then you know for certain.

In the bathroom, you open the vanity drawer to find your script of Valium. One left. Next to that, your birth control. One missing. *Holy shit*. You look in the mirror. Cup one breast in each

hand and bring them close, darkened nipples against your fair chest. You return both sets of pills to the drawer without opening either.

You move back to the bedroom, sit heavy on the edge of the bed, head in your hands. The air is dense and you are still. The last time you saw her was before all of this. You drove her from the city to her mother's house in Ellensburg. She said she needed to get out of Seattle for a while. You took the long way. She opened her window, all the way down, bare feet resting on the outside rearview, top half of her stretched across the console. With her head on your lap, you looked down to see her. It was sometime in July, yes, you remembered that endlessness of blue sky. She sang that one song you both loved, Led Zeppelin, off-key, low, like at midnight, when you'd get high with her under the stars. When you were both younger.

You passed a wind farm on the way. White wings of turbines stood completely still like paper airplanes at the tip of a finger. You found some agricultural road off the highway and made a quick turn. You stopped the car in the middle of the field and laid a blanket from your trunk on the ground. Topped by one turbine's giant wing, she made love to you there, and after, you cried as if visiting a foreign country on an old visa. An almanac of where you'd been together marked in creases of your neck, written in the small folds between your thighs, hidden in the vestal spaces behind your ears. Each kiss a stamp on the landscape of your belly, each touch mapped out undiscovered land. She'd been moving on, concealing more and more of where you'd been together, waving you through the line. You sensed that this would be the very last time.

When you finally arrived at her mother's home, you waited with the car running while she waved to you from the front door. Helena's mother took her daughter into open arms, hugged all of her tight. Then, they turned their backs and headed into the house still wrapped around one

another. You waited until the door was shut and they'd disappeared to the back rooms before backing down the driveway.

You get up from the bed. Suddenly then, you yearn for your own mother. You'd say, Mother, I'm pregnant. (Indecent.) Mother, I'm scared. (Shameful.) Mother, I miss you. (Disgraceful.) You never did. Instead, you search drawers for something of his. You want to smell him, to be reminded of how angry he gets to show he cares. Like that musk of his you'd breathe in while between his legs. And the sour taste of him through your nose after how frustrated he'd get by being teased. Or the smell of his spit on your upper lip after he'd leave you lying there alone. He was always sure to thank your mother because Jewish girls gave the best head. You go to the closet, rifle through his dirty hamper. You step inside. As if you will be the next one worn, you hang yourself amongst his shirts. You close yourself in and crouch down in the dark. What's this? Something hard near your feet. You open the closet door for light and crawl out.

He'd hidden them from you all these years in an old box for his fancy shoes. Handfuls of letters from her. Each one a perfect, delicate paper crane, all tossed into a shoe box, as if fallen from the blades of those turbines had the wind picked up on your last day with her. *I love you, Liza. I've always loved you*, in cursive down the spine of one; *Where are you, Liza?* in block letters on the wing of another; a simple red heart on the beak of yet one more. The last one you open says, *This is my last flight*, in small careful writing and red ink. You touch each and every one with just the tips of your fingers. There is only one envelope crushed at the bottom of the box. You flatten the paper, gently smoothing out the wrinkles. In the far upper left corner, in her own fluid writing—her address, still visible.

Quickly, you pack one small bag. You dump the shoebox of letters in, holding the envelope with her address in your hand. When your phone rings, you know it's him calling to check in on you. He'd want to make sure that you wouldn't be late for your dinner reservations he'd made for tonight. You watch the phone vibrate and ring. For a moment, you think of answering. You never did. Instead, you step outside into the open ocean air. A stray dog sniffs its way up your porch as if following a trail of crumbs. When the dog notices you standing there, he begins to pant, staring you down in the eyes. You think he's smiling. Then he darts away toward the rocky shore. When the door closes behind you, you can still hear your phone ringing in the empty room, and you'll swear forever it was the saddest sound you'd ever heard.