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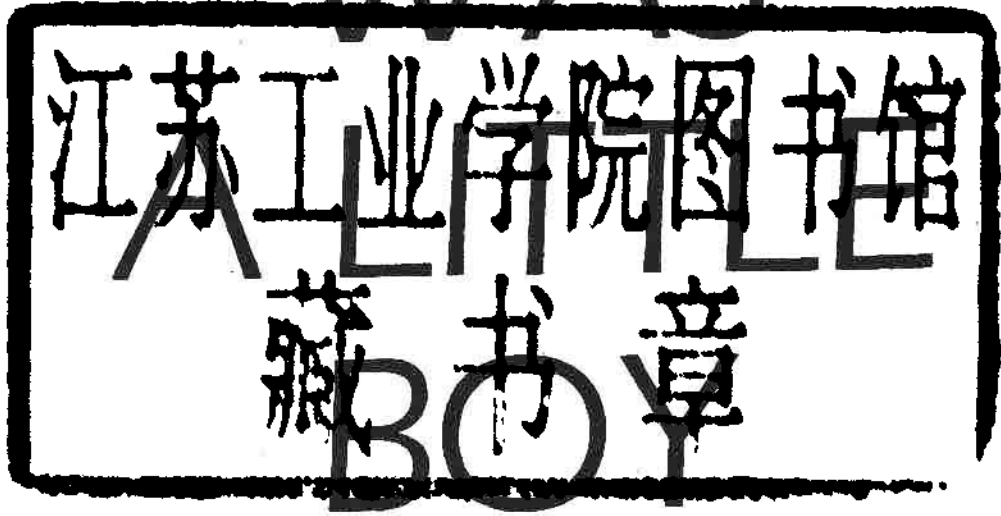
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Claire Rainwater Jacobs

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THERE
WAS



Claire Rainwater Jacobs

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More praise for
THERE WAS A LITTLE BOY

"Eerie . . . Jacobs has done a good job of re-creating the grimy desperation of the inner-city school."

The Orlando Sentinel

"Blood-chilling . . . Holds the reader fascinated with its horror and pity. One can only keep turning the pages avidly as one follows the grim unwinding of this story."

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Advocate (Baton Rouge, LA)

**For Carroll, Andrew, and Stefan,
and in memory of
Gyongyi and Morris**

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— Prologue —

December 1973

CHEAP BINOCULARS focused in on Julie from deep in the shadows behind thick panels of curtain in a room not five feet from where she sat in her apartment rhythmically brushing, brushing her hair. The lens that held her captive was marred by a threadlike crack, partially distorting her face. Trying to focus precisely was useless because the amplification was inadequate, so that the image of Julie sitting sideways at the dressing table in front of the curlicued mirror on the wall perpendicular to the window was ever so slightly blurred. She was brushing a cloud of gold.

The observer could not hear Julie singing softly as she brushed methodically, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair." But the lens lingered longingly on her fair face, and the viewer, scowling at Julie's ambiguous smile, could not have known that Julie was thinking that instant of one of the happier moments with her husband, Les, who called her Rapunzel. And combining fairy tales, he asked her every night, as she let down her hair before going to bed, if she was still spinning flax into gold. She did indeed look like a fairy princess in her long nightgown, brushing her hair.

Suddenly Julie jumped out of the circle of the fractured lens, and gnarled fingers unbent from the binoculars to wait.

An unseen hand always raised the cracked white window in the morning and lowered it at night. Julie stared across at the grimy window with the faded red curtains and the ever-present darkness inside, at the hotel room facing her baby's bright, sunny, cheerful room, wondering what poor soul lived there.

You're too softhearted, Les chided her on many occasions when she worried about the residents of the run-down building next door. But his admonition was loving, she thought. And she felt he really understood. "There but for the grace of God go I," he said once, peering nervously at the window with a strange look, barely perceiving a faint shape inside.

The SRO, Single Room Occupancy Hotel, for welfare people stood side by side with their Art Deco building in Manhattan, fronting west on the Hudson. But the impenetrable room faced north on the alley between them, all light unforgivingly blocked by her building, which towered sixteen stories over it.

Julie felt particularly guilty about it, as if it were her fault that the grim room opposite, so close she could almost reach across and touch the crumbling ledge, had no morning sunlight, that its curtain-shrouded windows were identical to those of every other room in the SRO, giving each one that faceless, anonymous quality.

Julie jumped up from the dressing table at the sound of her infant stirring to pick him up even before he uttered a cry. She put her gloomy feeling aside, just as she pushed her other dark thoughts away. The day was too luminous, and her heart lightened at the sight of her baby opening his violet eyes in the handsome antique crib.

"Oh, my little lamb," she crooned, scooping the delicate infant up and pressing his body tenderly to her, his dimpled little fingers playing with her cheek. "What would life be without you?"

There was a slight odor of ammonia in the room because Esperanza had sprinkled it into the corners to chase away the spirits. Now the large empty basket in the center of the nativity scene was ready, cushioned in expectation.

Esperanza meant hope. And now, for the first time since Marcos, her baby brother, was torn from her, she had hope. Was this why the Virgin had been whispering in her ear all these years? When they sent her away, she never even told them the Virgin spoke to her. They pitied her enough. It was wise to keep it from them. She would never have gotten away. First her voices had led her here, and then God had sent His Messenger to teach her.

The room was dark. Two black candles burned on either side of the basket, casting twisted shadows on the ceiling. They flick-

ered madly against the breeze. Checking across the alley, she shut the window. Then Esperanza raised the binoculars.

She had to have a baby. It was God's will. Esperanza had been cursed at birth, but now God was making amends. She looked down at her hands gripping the binoculars. Ugly, misshapen, like the rest of her body. She squinted into the eyepiece. The baby's face, fresh and innocent, filled the lens. Just like his mother, healthy and blessed with beauty. As soon as she had the infant, Esperanza's disfigurement would magically evaporate. Like last time.

Esperanza rested the binoculars on the bed and hovered over the two fast-melting tapers. The decision was in God's hands, and in a moment she would have His answer. If the right candle burned down first, she would have the baby. If it was the left candle, she was helpless, in spite of her instructions. Esperanza needed God's approval, above all others'.

Today might be her last chance. Which was it to be? She had waited so long.

Julie noticed that the window across the way was closed. It was as if the invisible tenant had waited for her to leave the room so that she would not see who shut the window. She shuddered.

"Time to go, lovey-dovey." Julie whirled the baby around in his pram suit. She had decided to wear her alpaca sweater and skirt, long wool stockings, and her high, laced shoes. She was roasting in the overheated apartment and wondered if she was overdressed.

She turned off the record she had been playing as she dressed the baby for their walk. It was a composition of her husband's that had just been released.

"Aren't you proud of your daddy?" she crooned into her baby's ear. She bent him down to the record jacket, which showed Les, his handsome aesthetic features brooding. "The Les Layton Trio," it read in bold print. "Modern Moods."

She picked up the cover and turned it over to the blurb.

"Listen to this, lambie. 'Brilliant, innovative jazz compositions from the great bass musician, written for his own trio. After a two-year hiatus, the long-awaited . . .'"

Julie stopped reading. "You don't need to hear any more. Enough for you to know your father's a famous genius."

She smoothed the blanket in the crib, feeling the thick velour, loving the white lambs and the clouds on the pale blue background.

“Your legacy from the past,” she told her baby, laying him down and raising his head gently to pull his hat over his ears. “Your father slept under that very blanket. Did you know that?”

“I wonder what *you* will be when you grow up, my little bright eyes? Musical like your father? A doctor? A lawyer?”

She pushed the carriage toward the elevator, pulling her wool cap from the hall closet at the last moment.

Esperanza grabbed her coat from the bed as soon as she saw the baby in outer clothes. She raced down ten flights to reach the lobby of Julie’s building. The hall would be deserted at this time of day. And the cavernous old marble entranceway had nooks and crannies to hide in. She knew the layout from memory, having worked there for a year cleaning for an old man, who had since died, in the same apartment line as Julie’s.

This couldn’t be a coincidence, the mother and child living next to her, in that apartment, she realized with joy. For the first time in eighteen years Esperanza felt alive. She had tracked Julie for weeks. Now she knew what she had to do. The right candle had already burned down with a gasp.

Julie’s carriage clattered and echoed in the large entranceway. Passing the stained-glass windows and the old leather couches, the wall sconces and the chandeliers every day felt to Julie as if she were living in history. A glass bonnet covered the circular driveway, which had been designed for carriages at the turn of the century. There was a fountain on the right for watering horses.

“Faded elegance,” Les called it. Today it gave Julie the creeps. The lobby always gave her palpitations, so she hurried outside with her baby into the crisp December day.

“It’s chilly,” she advised her infant son, pulling up his plaid blanket. His eyes were shining, and he smiled at her. Julie was glad she was wearing her warm clothes as the wind off the river nipped her nose.

“Whee!” she cried, speeding up the carriage to a run. Let’s get out of here, she thought, escaping more than merely the December wind.

It was hard to keep up with Julie. She was young, but Esperanza was strong, and her determination kept her going. She would follow them to the ends of the earth if necessary. But it wasn’t necessary. Esperanza knew Julie’s routine. And she rec-

ognized her colorful wool coat, her matching fringed scarf flying behind her neck as she ran, even as she wound her way through a crowd. By noon they would be back home. And from noon to at least two o'clock the baby would be fast asleep.

As she maneuvered around the giant mounds of garbage stacked in black plastic bags outside the welfare hotel, Julie tried to concentrate on the party her friend, Bobbie, was throwing that evening. She recognized the growls of Willie English even before she saw him in his usual bizarre outfit, weaving in and out of traffic on Riverside Drive, doffing his feathered hat to the horrified drivers who glimpsed his sleeveless fur jacket, cowboy boots, and the bottle he held in a brown paper bag before they sped by.

Les named him "Our Local Loco," but Julie felt menaced when he came too close to her and hissed into the carriage. Often she heard his growls at night, and they evoked all the schizophrenics who wandered on Broadway talking to nonexistent companions and the pathetic bag ladies who slept in doorways.

She hurried to the bank, crossing Broadway. Why was she so jittery today? She scanned the bank as she waited in line. No crazies. It must be a bank holiday for the deranged, she thought. Tonight at the party she would try to enlist Bobbie's help in alleviating the plight of street women. Bobbie, a teacher like Julie, was also an actress. They had become permanent friends at Catherine Dunbar Junior High School, where Bobbie had taken her under her wing. Julie was running short of volunteers for her causes.

"You love causes," Les had observed when she settled into his apartment after they were married and he realized how much time she devoted to her work outside of teaching.

Julie moved forward in the line.

She remembered the rest of Les's comment. "If I were a simple guy," he had remarked, "you wouldn't have picked me. I'm a challenge," he said laughingly.

Was it true? Sometimes he was too much of a challenge. Something about Les always nagged at Julie. This morning, for example. He was so indecisive, so conflicted. Reflecting on his leaving without breakfast, she realized how troubled he was.

Today, once again, he had been skulking in the back room, his storeroom. Julie remembered Bobbie's remark when she first discovered the room.

“God, Julie! This looks like an old prop shop. What is this appliance morgue, the dark side of Lester Layton?”

Before the baby was born, there were times when she thought she would give up on Lester. There was a secret side to him she couldn't penetrate, a side he would never turn toward her. He was too fragile, too vulnerable. He needed her strong shoulders. Les had few friends, trusted few. Yet she was attracted to him, to his good looks, his shy quality. He was clever and talented. Modest, too.

She could remember the exact moment she fell for him. He looked so poetic, with a profile like Byron or Chopin. She pictured him performing at her college with his band, when she was a naive sophomore in awe of him because he was a famous jazz musician. How her heart had beaten when he picked her out of the adoring crowd to have a drink with him after the show.

Little did she know then that the subculture of a band on the road was totally unlike the aura of glamour that intrigued her when they met. All she saw at the concert was Les, tall, elegant, worldly, his slender fingers plucking the strings of the bass. Later that night all she knew were his eyes, drinking her in, oblivious to the stares of all the other college girls. She had been seduced by the sounds, by the allure of art, by the song of the siren.

“You were so fresh, so open, so young, and yet mature,” Les told her when they were married, explaining to her why he chose her that night. “Your eyes sparkled. I could see the world sparkling through your eyes.”

She recalled the lines he wrote after they walked through the fallen leaves on the campus the next afternoon.

And turning back the sun burns on
Leaving a blaze of falling leaves.

And when she awoke the next morning, after their first night together, she found the conclusion of the poem, “Autumn-Tide,” which he had written to her.

The salt-taste of skin
(Your finger drawn
Across my lips and chin)
Stings imagination
With quintessential delight

of certain savories long
long lost to memory.

How can a man who can write a beautiful poem, play an instrument with such feeling . . . ? But the last stanza of his poem finished her thought as she looked lovingly at their baby.

There's a pile of pebbles in the sea
A heap upon the sand
A blue wind swirls the stars
and my arms are full of snowflakes.

The bank line was moving fast, bringing her back to reality. She pushed the carriage up. It was her turn next.

Sometimes Julie was afraid Les didn't want the baby. But when she confided in Bobbie, Bobbie had said that most men don't want the baby at first. Then they get to love them as much as mothers do.

Heading for the exit, Julie imagined Les at the party tonight. Bobbie had arranged for the right people to be there. They would be crowded around him in spite of his reticence. Bobbie always claimed you couldn't succeed on talent alone, that Les didn't know how to get ahead. He was famous but poor. It was because of Bobbie, who had introduced him to his agent, that he had cut the record and Julie was able to quit her job and have a baby.

Les was so well known that he had been listed in the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Jazz* for years; he was noted for his innovative bass technique and his proficiency with many different instruments. But there were two years conspicuously missing, years Les never discussed. Julie could only guess about that hole in his history.

Julie's thoughts were jarred by the sight of someone dashing around the corner as the bank guard held the door open for them. It was as if she had chased someone away. Just another West Side oddball to contend with, she decided.

Julie moved more rapidly through her errands, and when she looked into the carriage the baby was fast asleep under his blanket, his eyes tightly closed. She nervously pushed the carriage ahead. The baby looked like Les at that moment in that absorbed expression of sleep. Everyone said he resembled her because of his eyes. His hair was straight and dark like Les's; still he favored her. It was silly, but it made her happy. They would be happy, the three of them, she thought.

Suddenly she decided to cut their outing short. It was too cold for a stroll in the park. Automatically she checked behind her and realized she was on edge, looking for an excuse to go home. She had to wash her hair for the party, and she needed an especially long soak in the tub while the baby napped.

That would do it. She pictured the dress she would wear, one that would turn her into the sophisticated woman. It was black, with one shoulder. She would undo the girlish braid she wore down her back and sweep her hair back into a bun and cover it with a glittery net at the base of her neck. She would even wear lipstick for the occasion. She turned back, almost at a run.

The hall echoed, it was so quiet at noon. Julie preferred the bustle of rush hour in the morning, when the tenants streamed out of their apartments and walked briskly through the lobby toward the subway, or the late afternoon, when the elevators were crowded with teenagers and mothers returning from school with their children.

It was eerie. The doorman wasn't on until eight o'clock. She hurried toward the elevator, hearing only muffled sounds of traffic on the Drive. Nothing moved. Did she hear the sound of breathing? She looked down at the baby. Sleeping peacefully. She opened the gate to the elevator and with relief heard the creak as it lurched upward after she pressed the button for the eleventh floor.

Les retraced his steps down into the Fiftieth Street subway, smelling the foul odor of urine, his disgust extending to the filthy station, the dingy Times Square streets he had just left, and finally to himself. He had just encountered one of his former—what could he call him?—buddies, musicians, in the narrow shop above Sam's Musical Instruments where Les was buying a knife and a sharpening stone for carving his oboe reeds. He was trapped with the guy in the claustrophobic cubicle and had to endure his leering, his attempt at renewing their old connection. And Les had brushed him off.

What a laugh! Did his old "friend" see it? Les was falling apart. He had dashed down the narrow stairs as if he were running from the devil. The train pulled into the station, and Les covered his ears. The screech was god-awful. The train was surprisingly crowded for noon. Graffiti covered the walls and windows, and the light bulbs were dim. Les smelled pot. It could have been midnight.

What's the difference? he thought. It suited his mood. What was he doing back on this train? He should be headed to the

Village, to the music school. For a moment in the shop above the music store when he met the drummer from his past, he had felt a surge of strength and thought he might not go through with it.

But he had deliberately left the back door open, the door to the maid's room, the door with only an inside lock. The maid's room was a room Julie never used. And the train was carrying him inexorably toward that room, out of his control.

He put his face in his hands. Not one of the passengers on the crowded train showed a flicker of interest. Oh Julie, he thought, sweat beading his brow. What am I doing to you?

Esperanza crept nimbly up the familiar back stairs. She was small and hunched, but she was strong and agile. Hardly tired when she reached the eleventh floor, she positioned herself against the back door. It was thirty feet from the elevator and farther from Julie's front door and entirely hidden from view from the hallway.

Esperanza was totally safe. She knew the household routine. The garbage was set out on the back stairs landing for collection in the morning, and then it was gone. The staircase led to only one apartment on this floor, and it was Julie's. This back door opened into a small room off Julie's kitchen that was designed for a maid in the old days but was rarely used anymore. A stranger visiting the building would not be aware of the back staircase. Esperanza had never been caught going up or down in all the weeks she had been watching, waiting.

Esperanza felt under her coat for the cross that hung from her neck. She had never been anxious before. Why should she be? Julie was just like Esperanza's own mother. Laughing, gay, running around. She would turn out the same way. Her mother had been punished. God was evening the score for Esperanza.

Now she thought she felt vibrations against the door. The front door had slammed shut as the carriage was placed in the foyer of Julie's apartment. It would be silent while the baby slept. Esperanza had watched Julie feeding the baby every afternoon for the past month. This week she started following her.

She knew that after the feeding the baby would sleep, Julie would bathe, then come into focus in Esperanza's lens again with a towel wrapped around her head, wearing a white bathrobe. Then Julie would disappear. Esperanza had twenty minutes if . . . She had tried the door so many times.

She closed her hand around the glass knob. She turned the

knob slowly, slowly. Miraculously, the door gave. The door wasn't locked!

She pushed gently. All was silence. She opened the door barely enough to squeeze through sideways. She was thin and needed only a crack. She eased it shut behind her, praying the click of the door would not give her away.

As soon as the baby was safely asleep, Julie ran a hot tub. She loved the steamy bathroom, and she scented the water. My afternoon spa, she thought, grateful for the two hours she had every day. "Some newborns sleep through earthquakes," Bobbie had told her when Julie brought her newborn from the hospital. It was certainly true of Les Junior, Julie learned. Bobbie, with two teenagers, had been her mother substitute.

She stepped into the bubbly water, and then she remembered. She stepped out. Paranoia, she told herself, irritated at the watery tracks she was leaving on the wood floor as she tiptoed quickly to the front door. She double-locked the door, feeling foolish but secure. She stepped back into the tub and shut the door. Now she could lie back, relax, and enjoy her bath.

Esperanza prowled around the maid's room in Julie's apartment. The door had shut soundlessly as she turned the knob in the way she had practiced so many times to still the squeak. She knew the plan of the apartment and the rooms she had to cross to reach the nursery. The kitchen and dining room were back to back with the maid's room. The hall ran alongside it and into the foyer right past the front door. She would have to walk directly in view of the living room, the master bedroom, and the bathroom where Julie was bathing. Those rooms faced the front hall. Then came the nursery, the room farthest from her.

She had seen the baby's room, of course. Many times. Through her binoculars. The baby! *Muy bonito*. Esperanza crouched behind an old refrigerator, absorbed in the jumbled collection of stored junk sheltering her. Huge drums and cymbals were piled on top of a broken TV; an ancient washer and dryer stood amid trunks, under cartons reaching almost to the ceiling. A good place to hide.

Esperanza closed her eyes and pulled the log gold chain with the cross from underneath her coat. The cross had never left her neck from the time her mother gave it to her, that black day when her mother left her in Puerto Rico. She got the cross and lost her baby brother. A lifetime ago.

La Mala was the name she had given Julie and her mother. They were so alike. God had smiled on them both. She never could understand it. This one wore no makeup, or high-heeled shoes, no tight dresses. The bitch! They were the same under the skin.

Her mother with her blue eyes, bleached hair, and white skin. She was so proud of her white skin.

Huddled in her niche, her mind wandering, Esperanza wasn't quite sure which baby she was pining for. *Pobrecito*, Esperanza muttered. She held on to her gold cross, forgetting where she was. It was time for the whispers. Any minute they would come, the whispers in her ear from the Virgin. They always came when she thought of the baby.

Suddenly she leapt up. The baby! The chain of her cross hooked on the handle of the refrigerator and freed itself from her neck. She watched the tiny cross as it rolled on the floor, out of her reach, the instant she felt the tug. But she couldn't stop to pick it up.

Was that her baby crying? Crying for her! Esperanza imagined the cry of her baby brother from the past. The house was silent to other ears.

Heedless of exposure, she ran out into the open. God was with her. The hallway was empty. The bathroom door was shut.

Another cry! She raced to the nursery. *Putá!* Pick up your baby, she thought, staring angrily at the blank door where *La Mala* was hidden. He's crying, you slut.

Esperanza entered the baby's room the way she entered the church. *Madre de Dios*, she murmured faintly, crossing herself. The baby was sleeping like an angel. Tenderly she removed him from the crib. And cradling him in her arms, she wrapped him in the velvety blanket. *Madre de Dios*, she chanted, rocking him as she stole toward the back door.

The subway plunged dangerously and shrieked to a halt at every platform. Les thought his eardrums would shatter. He was very sensitive to damage to his hearing; he put cotton in his ears when he played the drums. The subway was like an underground nightmare, the graffiti from floor to ceiling, the windows covered with paint. His anxiety increased when he thought about the teaching job that would pull them through the financial crisis Julie wasn't aware of. He had just lost a gig. The economic situation in the country caused by the war and the Nixon scandal was ominous for him.