

Polar Bear

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*The end of the world began with us
and shows no signs of ending.*

—Italo Calvino

How long had it been since Jacob had stopped moving?

Outside the door of his apartment, just a few feet from where he stood, a neighbor, Ms. Chandler, was listening. The doorknob jiggled tentatively. From the corner of an eye Jacob watched it, not stirring, not breathing a word. Then he heard baffled footsteps retreat down the carpeted hallway.

Against his chest his baby breathed humidly. She gurgled and stirred but soon relaxed astride Jacob's forearm like a cowboy nodding off in the saddle. With a bit more effort than it probably should have required, he rolled his eyes toward the coat closet, then across a water-damaged patch of plaster half-hidden by an antique oval mirror, and finally he glimpsed in the blurry meniscus of his peripheral vision Rebecca's side of the bedroom. A diamond patch of sunlight lay upon her pillow. It slowly climbed the headboard and dilated across a framed print of a Chagall, it stretched tall and slim as if reaching for the ceiling fan, only to vanish by the time the building's front door banged shut and those unmistakable, rapid footsteps were crossing the foyer, ascending the staircase.

Rebecca burst inside and gave a surprised *oh!* upon coming face-to-face with Jacob. She laughed gamely, as if he'd been waiting in coquettish ambush. But her smile dropped when he didn't do anything except stare wide-eyed and breathe through his half-open mouth. Sensing that whatever was going on here must be, at a minimum, embarrassing, Rebecca squeezed past and locked the door behind her. Jacob couldn't provide an explanation. He couldn't answer her rapid-fire questions or give any reassurance as Rebecca pried a snoozing Lily loose from his unbending grip. Immediately

paramedics were jamming the doorway. They seemed to be discussing Jacob's medical history (uneventful besides a broken finger in third grade), his allergies (a minor one to dust), and anything else Rebecca could think of that might have triggered her husband's... *situation*. Ms. Chandler appeared bearing coffee cake. She minced cautiously around Jacob, wearing a look of perplexed horror. The way his eyes followed her must have been unbearable; Ms. Chandler fled. Next the EMTs took turns, singly and in pairs, trying to hoist Jacob onto a gurney. But he remained as intractable as ever. Since his vital signs were healthy and there didn't appear to be an injury of any kind, they departed, flummoxed, making vague speculations about self-hypnosis.

Rebecca retreated with Lily to an area of the apartment that Jacob couldn't see. Quiet fell. He imagined his wife breastfeeding at the breakfast nook. He hoped that by chance she would skim this morning's newspaper, the article about melting Arctic glaciers that Jacob had intended to clip out, because it was where his predicament had originated somehow: in the climate calamity, manmade, irreversible—

“Boo!” Rebecca shouted directly behind him. Jacob didn't bat an eyelash. Moments later her hands were touching his stony limbs and exploring, kneading, searching for any sign of softening. Rebecca hugged Jacob's waist and lifted with all her might. Only the faintest rush of air escaped his lungs, and it carried upon it a phrase—

“...polar bear...”

—which came out sounding like the death rattle of a ventriloquist's dummy.

Why, why was he doing this to her? *Why now?* Rebecca implored, her eyes vainly masking hurt and mistrust, her torso swiveling constantly to keep Lily pacified. They vanished once again. Jacob listened closely. In the silence he could suss out the furtive noises of papers rustling in his office niche, the desk drawers being rifled through. But Rebecca must not have found anything incriminating because she reappeared in front of him wearing a scowl and tugging

at the canvas grocery bags that dangled from Jacob's fist. He wanted to let go. He pictured how ridiculous he must look, standing there like a freeze-frame of a dutiful husband going to run errands. It was pathetic. Rebecca turned away to gather herself, and for an instant Jacob almost believed that when she moved he'd move: that the rhythm of their marriage would recommence after a skipped beat.

All alone now for the first time since he'd strangely ground to a halt, Jacob came to a decision (alarmed to find that even his thoughts were growing sluggish—the alarm itself registering only after a troublesome delay) that he would quit this absurd nonsense. He missed his wife and child. He wanted to surprise Rebecca by being back to normal when they returned from Whole Foods, so he tried his damndest to unglue his feet from the ground. He strained with immeasurable psychic force like a man running motionless in a nightmare. Jacob could almost feel himself tip forward—did the floorboards groan questioningly? His love for Rebecca, his love for Lily urged him on; he threw the full weight of that love and devotion and manly responsibility up against the impasse. And yet it was useless. There wasn't a single action he could imagine taking that would make things better.

During the endless night Jacob gazed sideways at Rebecca while she cried silently in bed, her figure blotted by the unfocused slope of his own nose and faintly illuminated by the reading lamp that had been left burning on his nightstand.

The next morning Rebecca placed a cup of ice water nearby—directly in Jacob's line of sight but barely out of reach—and told him that she was going to fetch her parents from the airport.

The Davids were nice folks. They downplayed the situation and treated Jacob like someone with a run-of-the-mill handicap, making accommodations for his disability but not directly addressing it. Over a light brunch of hummus and pita they talked politics, sipping herbal tea while perched in chairs crammed knee to knee in the narrow corridor, as if Jacob might join the conversation at any moment. When it came time to check in to their hotel, Mr. David hugged his

son-in-law goodbye, while, in the subtlest manner conceivable, using all of his strength to try to pry Jacob loose. The old man exited wearing a pained smirk and with purplish-blue veins throbbing on his damp forehead.

The following week a marriage counselor visited. Rebecca had taken an indefinite leave of absence from work—or maybe she'd quit altogether? From what Jacob was able to glean, their finances were in disarray and this dowdy person seated next to him was a friend of a friend. Rebecca excused herself to go to the bathroom. Awkwardly Jacob and the marriage counselor, Dr. Anne, looked askance at one another for a long minute, transmitting silent messages of unfathomable meaning. Then Dr. Anne got right up in Jacob's face and accused him of being a closeted reactionary, whispering that despite everything he and Rebecca had agreed on philosophically, Jacob was balking at being a stay-at-home dad. The nontraditional gender role had short-circuited his nervous system, hadn't it? *Hadn't it?*

It was roughly during the period of these counseling sessions—around the time when Rebecca made a discovery on Jacob's behalf, while role-playing, that he'd always resented her leadership qualities; or else when Dr. Anne was suddenly replaced by Dr. Chris, who made advances toward Rebecca that were clearly orchestrated by the two of them to spark Jacob's jealousy and spur him to act—that he began to notice his perception of things was slipping. Being static, facing these same unchanging walls day after day, lodged in what can best be described as a diorama of his former self, Jacob grew increasingly remote from the progress of things around him. The business of living had accepted his resignation. Only willful denial and sheer force of habit caused his family to maintain the pretense of interaction, offering Jacob stray clues about unfolding events, plans, crises. His own parents visited. All at once they were standing before him like emissaries from a parallel dimension. It was inconceivable that they hadn't come to see Jacob sooner than this, so he guessed they must have, perhaps countless times, and somehow he wasn't surprised when they disappeared again without warning.

One day a tremor shook the building. Fellow tenants flocked to their apartment to scrutinize Jacob head to toe for any hint of alteration. Perhaps the violent upheaval of the very earth itself was the last hope to jolt him free? All it did do, however, was crack the building's foundation. The structure was condemned. Hard-hatted men took measurements of Jacob and then the ceiling flew away with a loud crash and an eruption of dusty sunlight. He was lassoed around his groin and torso; the straps cinched tight; a hydraulic crane grunted overhead. It stalled momentarily, choking and sputtering. Nobody breathed a word. Down on the street corner Rebecca was waiting in the shade of a moving truck, a napping Lily hidden by her stroller's canopy, and it would have been difficult to say what she truly felt when at last the tension broke and Jacob came rising out of the building's shell like a Greek statue excavated from a ruin, his canvas grocery bags flapping in the breeze.

Their trip out to the countryside was, for him, a sort of vague reminiscence. The scheme to buy a ranch house, to pool both families' resources and live together under one roof, the Davids, the Maplethorpes, going back to the land—it had been settled in Jacob's presence as a potential remedy. He remembered it all and yet somehow he didn't; he had listened to the life-changing decisions passively and now he was riding strapped to the bed of a tractor-trailer, observing the dirt road spool out lonesomely behind.

They set him on the front lawn beneath a magnificent oak tree. Chattering sparrows flew out from a tumbledown barn. Low grassy hills surrounded the winding valley in the distance. From this well-chosen angle Jacob could observe his kinfolk bustling back-and-forth as they carried their belongings into the ranch house, and then, during the months that followed, he watched their earnest attempts to fashion a pastoral idyll. A newly dug well provided cool water that dripped from pea trellises and hand-washed linen. A clothesline wrapped around Jacob's forehead like a strand of thought missing its cartoon balloon. Whenever Rebecca happened to glance at him during her chores she forced a tired grin. Morning and evening the

smell of baking wafted through the richly pollinated air; in milder weather when they ate out on the veranda there was always a place at the table reserved for Jacob. But after a little while the old sheep-dog who must have come with the property was allowed to sleep on his empty chair.

Left exposed to the elements, Jacob's clothes disintegrated. He looked surprisingly hale for a human barnacle. Lily, now walking upright on her bandy legs, made a game of stacking pebbles and acorns around Jacob's feet, as if in her child's wisdom she understood that from this spot he would never be uprooted. More and more they drifted back to the city. Errands and supply runs happened with greater frequency. Soon these forays evolved into day trips, long weekends, visits to good neighborhoods in reputable school districts. Imperceptibly the tide turned; the rural homestead became a getaway for swift summer months and every-other holiday, and then it was more like a site of filial pilgrimage. Jacob: the granite angel watching over his own undug grave.

Rebecca hosed him down for the last time. With a dish rag she dried him thoroughly and then embraced Jacob, out of genuine fondness or else some sense of obligation to the past. Lily gave him a hug, too, after being cajoled, but she scurried away frightened and jumped into the minivan where a bearded stranger was waiting patiently.

During a violent storm (though it's impossible to say which season this was) a lightning bolt split the regal oak tree. Charred limbs lay scattered around Jacob, where they rotted. He experienced only the results of things now; the movement of time was a formless fog that blew in amongst hesitant shapes, made tangible by their stillness. It could have been many years into the future when he noticed that another person was standing across the valley. Whoever she was, she looked to be caught in the act of reading. Yellow leaves clung to her knotty hair. Wild herbs grew between her unshifting feet. Like weird mushrooms that sprouted overnight, more and more people began

cropping up. Under grayish skies, torrential showers, punishing heat, they remained stationed together. Wolves and bobcats ate a few of the outliers, but they probably found their tough meat unappetizing—and somehow this reminded Jacob of earlier days, of lost impressions: the fang marks that he'd received on his calves, the musky bear who'd rubbed against him luxuriantly, the doe and her fawns who'd often come to lie down in his shadow for shade. He sought with uncertain and wavering senses the faces of Rebecca and Lily amongst the multiplying, static tribe. But Jacob was amazed to find himself peering across the surface of a brackish lake. Human forms stood like pylons in the shallows. Out deeper they vanished up to their chins. Seagulls flew in from the west, circled above triumphantly, cawing blandishments to their new coastline. Almost without knowing it, Jacob felt the water lap his ankles.