

James Beach

“Dead City”

UPRIGHT on her knees, new mobile phone headset freeing her hands, Sheila yanks out a patch of prickly weeds growing beneath her rhubarb stalks. She asks her son, “Why would you want to move there?”

“It’s ultra-liberal,” answers Erin, from an apartment in a neighboring exurb. He packs cups and flatware into boxes; a stretch of phone-cord trails behind; he’s careful to keep it clear of the filter-full ashtray perched on a box near the open front door. “It’s got a very large gay population.”

“Gay population?” she asks, and stands, brushing her gloved palms against her jeans to unpucker the earth-damp knee marks.

“They accept me.”

“Why would you be seeking a life with the gays? I can’t imagine,” says Sheila. She removes a gardening glove to scratch where a mosquito bit her neck. She lets go the other glove, frowns at the dirty spade. “Does this mean you’re Aaron again?”

“I’ve always been Erin,” Erin says smugly.

“I have trouble thinking of you as anything but Aaron.”

“I’m still Erin. Legally becoming E-R-I-N.”

“You know I’m not set on you having grandkids; your brother’s giving me more than I can handle already,” Sheila clarifies, stepping into the shade of the porch to sit on the chaise lounge. While crossing her legs she spies a cigarette filter among the woodchip mulch, and she reaches out a toe to grind it out of sight. “I found a ciggy butt, near the porch. I wish you’d stop smoking those, Aaron. It nearly proves you hate yourself.”

“I don’t want kids,” Erin continues, lighting one.

The bark of hydraulic brakes outside the apartment causes him alarm; he picks up a compact to apply more powder to his upper lip. “One birth defect per family is more than enough.”

In the mid-morning heat, Sheila adjusts her floppy gardening hat and leans toward her iced tea, which sits in a pool of condensation on a pebbled-glass-top table. “How many

times have I told you that you and your brother are as normal as anybody? You were both beautiful babies.”

“Mother, just stop.”

“Why? Why, Aaron? Is this because of that time he tied you to the bedposts—”

“I’m talking about me,” says Erin, disseminating a plume of smoke as the first of the stocky moving men arrives. Stooping to conceal his height, he points at the stack of boxes by the front door. When the mover slides the stack of boxes onto the dolly, the ashtray bounces onto the vinyl floor; Erin turns red beneath his heavy cosmetics. “My body’s all wrong for my brain, I’m afraid.”

“You’re afraid. We’re all afraid, aren’t we?”

“No, I meant... you’re quick to twist my words! The movers are here, Mother. I need to cut you loose.”

“You’re absolutely normal,” says Sheila wearily. “I gave birth to you. After all the trouble your brother gave me, his shoulders getting struck like that... you were the easy one. Twenty years later, you turn out to be the problem child, and your brother’s a dream. How ironic. Oh, Aaron, I’ve got a pimple over this.”

After a short cough, Erin asserts, “Sheila, I’m not a child. I’m a twenty-year-new woman.”

“Aaron, sweetie. You don’t know the first thing about being a woman. It’s not about high heels and matching your jewelry to your outfits, choosing the right perfume. Some of the things I’ve done, let’s just say I’ve fought tooth and nail for my position in this community — now, suddenly, you’re moving away and claiming the title for yourself?”

“Should I be flattered or mortified, I ask your brother. He says mortified. I don’t know what to think. So you’re not the most brutish man on the planet — so? The world needs gentlemen... I’m driving my mind silly here, Aaron. Why in the world would you want to cut off your nose to spite your face?”

“I’m not doing a thing to my nose.”

A hummingbird hovers near the near-empty feeder, darts away.

“I could’ve put a stop to your costuming,” Sheila tells her son. “Your father and I decided it was a phase, your getting into my cocktail dresses... we didn’t know what to do. I told your father to be strict with you. He didn’t have it in him.”

Erin scoffs, “Dad never taught me a thing. He was there, then he died, I barely remember him.”

“That's maybe the trouble. I was your role model.”

“You encouraged me!”

“All children play dress-up. The smart ones anyway! It's fantasyland. Then they grow up and lead normal lives — you don't see too many adults trying to look like a Lion King or a Jedi Knight, or a Cinderella, do you. It's perverse. Playing Princess, at your age!”
Sheila finds a jug of sugar water in the porch, fills the hummingbird feeder. “My goodness these birds drink.”

“I am seeing a therapist, you know. She's helping me to get in touch, with my inner female.”

“Intelligent men might call that inner female an ‘anima,’ sweetie. It's quite a common thing.”

“Jung again. Trash! Outdated pop-psych puke. I hate him.”

“He studied under Freud. I think he knew a little something about people.”

“That was like, a hundred years ago.”

“Barely older than your mother, hm?”

“Stop. We're so far advanced beyond that in our culture now. Everything is different.”

“Says who, the talk show hosts?”

“My therapist.”

“Oh, her. Aaron, I have to say, your therapist sounds like a man-hater.”

“A man-hater.”

Sheila lowers her voice, states, “A ball-crusher, a bull dyke,” then speaks with the same high-pitched warble as before, “She's got psychological problems, dear. She's Lorena Bobbitt but with a high I.Q. She's not the type of girl you should be getting close with.”

“Mother, you're sick.”

“Oh, another ciggy butt! We'll have to find you an urn.”

Two movers enter the apartment. Erin points at the kitchen table, watches as the guys assess then, after exchanging a nod, each lift a side so as to keep the top level. At the door they flip the piece sideways and maneuver quickly and soundlessly outdoors.

Erin adds, “She's helping me see that I've been largely unhappy because of my penis—”

“—that’s preposterous. Because of your… sex.”

“And that I don’t fit in with other males of my age.”

“You certainly won’t now, no. Not with those falsies,” Sheila says, starting to weed a patch of marigolds. “People are starting to talk, sweetheart. You were out shopping, at the mall, the grocery store? Last week I told one of my girlfriends that you were a rock’n’roller, like that man with the breasts, Marilyn Manson.”

“That’s a publicity stunt.”

“I don’t know, dear. They certainly look real on the ’net.”

“You have Internet?”

“When you were a little boy you acted like a male. Being tough, getting into scuffles, showing off.” A laugh. “That thing you always did, in the pool, pulling your scrotum up over your—”

“God! Mother!”

“I remember specifically one evening, when I drove into the drive, and five of you were fighting in the front yard, your brother was there too, and you and he beat up the Kennelly boys, little Marvin especially, because of some remark he made about whose mother was most ‘doable.’”

“I remember that. You made us take ballet lessons for a whole year as punishment.”

“Then the costuming began.”

Erin sighs and bends over to retrieve the ashtray from the kitchen floor. He wraps it in newsprint and packs it into the nearest open box. “This is embarrassing.”

“And you never asked for girlie things at Christmastime. Always with the trucks, the beebee guns, the rocketships—”

“That’s all stereotype! Girls can and do play with boy toys. And back then I didn’t know what I wanted.”

“I doubt you know what you want now,” says Sheila. “Why not hold off, for awhile? Go back and get your degree, in cosmetology? Paint other people, for an income. Get into movies, something glam.”

“Glam? No.”

“Plastic surgery then. I know a woman who’s a plastic surgeon. I know it's not the same — she does reconstructive surgery, not deconstructive — but I’m sure she’d give you an informational interview, if that's really what you're interested in, career-wise.”

“Reconstructive? No.”

“Are you sure, Aaron? Are you sure you don't want to help other people feel more confident?”

“What I really want is a new...” he lets his voice trail off, swallows what he wanted to say, as the moving men enter again, for the chairs. “I want a new city.”

Sheila sets the outside faucet on low, drops the hose on the nearest stunted ginko tree. “I hear where you’re moving is a dead city.”

Finding stray hard-back romance novels in the drawer of an end-table, the son gapes. He shakes loose the stretched phone cord from behind the piece of furniture. Startled then repulsed at the image of two male gymnasts making out on one of the covers, Erin tosses that book in the trash. “What’s that supposed to mean, a ‘dead city’? What are you saying?”

“That there aren’t enough jobs available, and that more people are leaving it than are moving in, is all. That it’s flat.”

“It’s flat. Another insult?” Erin notices the first mover stepping up on the threshold, looking amused beneath his steely stance, as if he’s been eavesdropping, and rushes to the front door to slam it in his face. “Throw more stink on my plans, why don’t you, Sheila-dear.”

As the movers peer through the kitchen windows, mouthing “hello?” and knocking, Erin trembles and pulls the cord as far as it will go, hides barely out of their sight. “Go ahead and do it, make me see that I’m up to my neck, that making waves will drown me faster than anything.”

Despite the intense sun Sheila shivers, rubs goose-pimples from her bare arms. The woman from two doors down is walking her newly-clipped Lab on the boulevard; it gingerly lifts a leg at the fire hydrant, baring the bald pink scar, exposing its sudden lack.

Dismayed, apologetic, she says, “Waiting is awful, I know! Before long life catches up, though, and lots of things turn out fine. Really. You should see my rhubarb, Aaron. The plants are just natural and gorgeous.”