

THE GIRL IN THE FLAMMABLE SKIRT

It's that special sugar.

Oh, he said. Well. I've always liked sugar.

I felt a little nervous but he gave me a good supportive look, so I dipped a finger into the sugar and licked it off. Mmm, I said, mmm, you've gotta try this. The grains sparkled on my tongue. The robber sat down in one of the wicker kitchen chairs next to me.

It's really good, I said.

He dipped in his own leathered finger and took a tentative lick off the glove. I watched his expression carefully. The house seemed very quiet except for the precise ticking of the clock above the kitchen table.

Do you feel any different? I asked.

Not yet, he said.

He put his finger in it again and I did too and once we touched fingertips and he curled his knuckle around mine and squeezed.

Hello there, I said softly, to our fingers.

He put his hand on my leg. My leg leaned into his hand.

I think we should eat it all, I stated. He moved closer to me. I'm full, he said. Keep eating, I said.

But Penny, it tastes just like regular sugar, he whispered into my ear.

Sshh, I murmured back, touching my shoulder to his, scooping up a new pile of grains into my hand. Don't tell.

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Aimée Bender

When I came home from school for lunch my father was wearing a backpack made of stone.

Take that off, I told him, that's far too heavy for you.

So he gave it to me.

It was solid rock. And dense, pushed out to its limit, gray and cold to the touch. Even the little zipper handle was made of stone and weighed a ton. I hunched over from the bulk and couldn't sit down because it didn't work with chairs very well so I stood, bent, in a corner, while my father whistled, wheeling about the house, relaxed and light and lovely now.

What's in this? I said, but he didn't hear me, he was changing channels.

I went into the TV room.

What's in this? I asked. This is so heavy. Why is it stone? Where did you get it?

He looked up at me. It's this thing I own, he said.

Can't we just put it down somewhere, I asked, can't we just sit it in the corner?

No, he said, this backpack must be worn. That's the law.

I squatted on the floor to even out the weight. What law? I asked. I never heard of this law before.

Trust me, he said, I know what I'm talking about. He did a few shoulder rolls and turned to look at me. Aren't you supposed to be in school? he asked.

I slogged back to school with it on and smushed myself and the backpack into a desk and the teacher sat down beside me while the other kids were doing their math.

It's so heavy, I said, everything feels very heavy right now.

She brought me a Kleenex.

I'm not crying, I told her.

I know, she said, touching my wrist. I just wanted to show you something light.

Here's something I picked up:

Two rats are hanging out in a labyrinth.

One rat is holding his belly. Man, he says, I am in so much pain. I ate all those sweet little sugar piles they gave us and now I have a bump on my stomach the size of my head. He turns on his side and shows the other rat the bulge.

The other rat nods sympathetically. Ow, she says.

The first rat cocks his head and squints a little. Hey, he says, did you eat that sweet stuff too?

The second rat nods.

The first rat twitches his nose. I don't get it, he says, look at you. You look robust and aglow, you don't look sick at all, you look bump-free and gorgeous, you look swinging and sleek. You look plain great! And you say you ate it too?

The second rat nods again.

Then how did you stay so fine? asks the first rat, touching his distended belly with a tiny claw.

I didn't, says the second rat. I'm the dog.

My hands were sweating. I wiped them flat on my thighs.

Then, ahem, I cleared my throat in front of my father. He looked up from his salad. I love you more than salt, I said.

He seemed touched, but he was a heart attack man and had given up salt two years before. It didn't mean *that* much to him, this ranking of mine. In fact, "Bland is a state of mind" was a favorite motto of his these days. Maybe you should give it up too, he said. No more french fries.

But I didn't have the heart attack, I said. Remember? That was you.

In addition to his weak heart my father also has weak legs so he uses a wheelchair to get around. He asked me to sit in a chair with him once, to try it out for a day.

But my chair doesn't have wheels, I told him. My chair just sits here.

That's true, he said, doing wheelies around the living room, that makes me feel really swift.

I sat in the chair for an entire afternoon. I started to get

jittery. I started to do that thing I do with my hands, that knocking-on-wood thing. I was knocking against the chair leg for at least an hour, protecting the world that way, superhero me, saving the world from all my horrible and dangerous thoughts when my dad glared at me.

Stop that knocking! he said. That is really annoying.

I have to go to the bathroom, I said, glued to my seat.

Go right ahead, he said, what's keeping you. He rolled forward and turned on the TV.

I stood up. My knees felt shaky. The bathroom smelled very clean and the tile sparkled and I considered making it into my new bedroom. There is nothing soft in the bathroom. Everything in the bathroom is hard. It's shiny and new; it's scrubbed down and whited out; it's a palace of bleach and all you need is one fierce sponge and you can rub all the dirt away.

I washed my hands with a little duck soap and peered out the bathroom window. We live in a high-rise apartment building and often I wonder what would happen if there was a fire, no elevator allowed, and we had to evacuate. Who would carry him? Would I? Once I imagined taking him to the turning stairway and just dropping him down the middle chute, my mother at the bottom with her arms spread wide to catch his whistling body. Hey, I'd yell, catch Dad! Then I'd trip down the stairs like a little pony and find them both splayed out like car accident victims at the bottom and that's where the fantasy ends and usually where my knocking-on-wood hand starts to act up.

Paul's parents are alcoholics and drunk all the time so they don't notice that he's never home. Perhaps they conjure him up, visions of Paul, through their bleary whiskey eyes. But Paul is with me. I have locked Paul in my closet. Paul is my loverboy, sweet Paul is my olive.

I open the closet door a crack and pass him food. He slips the dirty plates from the last meal back to me and I stack them on the floor next to my T-shirts. Crouched outside the closet, I listen to him crunch and swallow.

How is it? I ask. What do you think of the salt-free meatball?

Paul says he loves sitting in the dark. He says my house is so quiet and it smells sober. The reason it's so quiet is because my father feels awful and is resting in his bedroom. Tiptoe, tiptoe round the sick papa. The reason it smells sober is because it is *so* sober. I haven't made a joke in this house in ten years at least. Ten years ago, I tried a Helen Keller joke on my parents and they sent me to my room for my terrible insensitivity to suffering.

I imagine in Paul's house everyone is running around in their underwear, and the air is so thick with bourbon your skin tans from it. He says no; he says the truth is his house is quiet also. But it's a more pointy silence, he says. A lighter one with sharper pricks. I nod and listen. He says too that in his house there are moisture rings making Olympian patterns on every possible wooden surface.

Once instead of food I pass my hand through the crack. He holds it for at least a half hour, brushing his fingers over my fingers and tracing the lines in my palm.

You have a long lifeline, he says.

Shut up, I tell him, I do not.

He doesn't let go of my hand, even then. Any dessert?

I produce a cookie out of my front shirt pocket.

He pulls my hand in closer. My shoulder crashes against the closet frame.

Come inside, he says, come join me.

I can't, I say, I need to stay out here.

Why? He is kissing my hand now. His lips are very soft and a little bit crumbly.

I just do, I say, in case of an emergency. I think: because now I've learned my lesson and I'm terribly sensitive to suffering. Poor poor Helen K, blind-and-deaf-and-dumb. Because now I'm so sensitive I can hardly move.

Paul puts down his plate and brings his face up close to mine. He is looking right at me and I'm rustling inside. I don't look away. I want to cut off my head.

It is hard to kiss. As soon as I turn my head to kiss deeper, the closet door gets in the way.

After a minute Paul shoves the door open and pulls me inside with him. He closes the door back and now it is pitch black. I can feel his breath near mine, I can feel the air thickening between us.

I start shaking all over.

It's okay, he says, kissing my neck and my shoulder and my chin and more. He lets me out when I start to cry.

My father is in the hospital on his deathbed.

Darling, he says, you are my only child, my only heir.

To what? I ask. Is there a secret fortune?

No, he says, but you will carry on my genes.

I imagine several bedridden, wheelchaired children. I imagine throwing all my children in the garbage can because they don't work. I imagine a few more bad things and then I'm knocking on his nightstand and he's annoyed again.

Stop that noise, he says, I'm a dying man.

He grimaces in agony. He doesn't die though. This has happened a few times before and he never dies. The whole deathbed scene gets a little confusing when you play it out more than twice. It gets a bit hard to be sincere. At the hospital, I pray a lot, each time I pray with gusto, but my prayers are getting very strained; lately I have to grit my teeth. I picture his smiling face when I pray. I push that face into my head. Three times now when I picture this smiling face it explodes. Then I have to pray twice as hard. In the little hospital church I am the only one praying with my jaw clenched and my hands in fists knocking on the pew. Maybe they think I'm knocking on God's door, tap tap tap. Maybe I am.

When I'm done, I go out a side door into the day. The sky

is very hot and the hospital looks dingy in the sunlight and there is an outdoor janitorial supply closet with a hole in the bottom, and two rats are poking out of the hole and all I can see are their moving noses and I want to kick them but they're tucked behind the door. I think of bubonic plague. I think about rabies. I have half a bagel in my pocket from the hospital cafeteria and the rats can probably smell it; their little noses keep moving up and down frantically; I can tell they're hungry. I put my hand in my pocket and bring out the bagel but I just hold it there, in the air. It's cinnamon raisin. It smells like pocket lint. The rats don't come forward. They are trying to be polite. No one is around and I'm by the side of the hospital and it's late afternoon and I'm scot-free and young in the world. I am as breezy and light as a wing made from tissue paper. I don't know what to do with myself so I keep holding on tight to that bagel and sit down by the closet door. Where is my father already? I want him to come rolling out and hand over that knapsack of his; my back is breaking without it.

I think of that girl I read about in the paper—the one with the flammable skirt. She'd bought a rayon chiffon skirt, purple with wavy lines all over it. She wore it to a party and was dancing, too close to the vanilla-smelling candles, and suddenly she lit up like a pine needle torch. When the boy dancing next to her felt the heat and smelled the plasticky smell, he screamed and rolled the burning girl up in the carpet. She

got third-degree burns up and down her thighs. But what I keep wondering about is this: that first second when she felt her skirt burning, what did she think? Before she knew it was the candles, did she think she'd done it herself? With the amazing turns of her hips, and the warmth of the music inside her, did she believe, for even one glorious second, that her passion had arrived?