trompe l’oeil

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TinHouse Books
Portland, Oregon & Brooklyn, New York
for Jeanne, Linda, and David
for Rick

& always, for Robert and Rena
PROLOGUE
ROME

Prospettiva
Francesco Borromini (c.1652–53)

PALAZZO SPADA

Rome, the first time: imagine wandering the historic center, the centuries crowding together, tourists in bright scarves speaking languages you can only glean, Vespas cutting fast around the clustered pedestrians. Turn a corner, another, onto a momentarily quiet street: here’s one more residential palace, almost tucked away. A doorway, a hall, a courtyard where you’ll find a scattering of fruit trees. And in the courtyard, in this city of arched passageways, yet another arched passageway opens before you. This one appears as an alluring question, suggesting elegant spaces beyond, perhaps a dinner table set for eight, a Persian carpet; or a music room, a piano, tall windows. From the courtyard, you approach. Four sets of double columns flank the arch, and repeating rows of blue squares cover the curved ceiling, echoing the floor’s square tiles. At the passageway’s far end, a statue—a male nude in centurion’s headgear—rises in profile, one arm extended forward, one leg extended back, as if
he is in motion through that other corridor. A good distance, it seems, from the courtyard’s exterior arch. Beside the orange trees, the museum guide—stylish, middle-aged, lipsticked, a woman like many women in Rome—smokes a cigarette and says, *Yes, I will show you.* She gestures toward the passageway. The archway and second hall beckon, but she does not usher you in. Instead the woman hands you her cigarette and enters the passageway as you remain beside the trees. She steps forward, though as she moves, the archway ceiling seems to press down on her, the space itself shrinking, forcing her to stoop. A quick shock, an architectural joke: it’s a foreshortened stage, the far end child-sized, the statue a miniature. The woman steps back out and reclaims the cigarette; and now, again, defying you and what you have just seen, the space reasserts itself as the long, high-ceilinged hall, the unfurling space a deft false promise. And—too—a wish?
For the Murphys, there was always the house and the idea of the house, one relatively more stable than the other. From a distance it appeared camouflaged, a silver-gray box perched on stilts; beyond it the sea. To each side, other sea-weathered boxes, variations, one smaller, another with a single peak. The air smelled of salt, seaweed at low tide, smoke from charcoal grills or summer campfires on the next beach. From the deck and the beach below, one could see the Massachusetts coast stretching out and falling away, and in the space beyond, the sea, a vast openness, Massachusetts Bay merging with the Atlantic, the curving arm of Cape Cod reaching far to the southeast and the distant east, leaving the shoreline unprotected from Atlantic swells. A beautiful rough corner of the coast: a spit of land on which the town’s early residents would never have built, instead choosing the far side of the harbor, or the inland cliffs. But the longer one lived there, the more permanent the house seemed, even as it rocked in the wind. The storms might slam in directly, but there were long stretches of beach to walk, where small stones mixed with sand, and the sea’s blue, the mixed greens and grays, shifted with the light, going violet or sapphire...
or slate. Out unshuttered front windows, from the weather-beaten deck, from the east- and northeast-facing bedrooms, the sea appeared and reappeared.

Different years, different versions. First, the house had been a ramshackle summer outpost Nora and James had scrimped to buy from James’s uncle, a place of ease despite or because of the off-plumb doorjambs and slanted floors and salt-worn wood. Outside stairs led up from the narrow street to the broad wrap-around deck, where in summer they drank cocktails with their friends; a windowed door opened into a large kitchen, drafty or breezy depending on the month. They renovated and winterized; still, the wind was undeniable, and at night the house swayed lightly, enough so that water in a bowl might register the smallest of tides. Grand ill-tempered swans moved between the shelter of the brook-fed pond to the beach, crossing the narrow bridge of land down the road from the house and into the shallows, startlingly white against the sea.

At first, the Murphys spent summers there. Or Nora and the children did. James drove down for weekends and August vacation time. Theo and Katy were in grade school then, the youngest, Molly, still at home. From one year to the next, the scenes of leisure blurred into each other, as if contiguous with the preceding summers, all other seasons forgotten. Cousins and friends arrived for beach days and barbecues and drinks out on the deck. And then, the year James’s promotion came through, they planned a shorter season in Blue Rock, to follow a two-week trip to Italy.

It was a slippery moment in their marriage, a crossroad. They had agreed to move from their small house in Newton
to a place with more room, but only that. Where to remained vexed. James pushed for the wealthier cloistered suburbs; Nora missed Cambridge, where they’d once lived. In careful tones, they avoided the straining subtext, and when the Newton house sold, they put the furniture in storage, deferred. James had dreamed of travel; Nora had studied art. Rome would give them perspective. And there would be summer in Blue Rock, which from the vantage point of spring always seemed an endless unspooling of days, July a broad yellow plain with no apparent horizon beyond the brimming gold edges of August. For each of them, there was the pull of summer light over the sea, like something remembered from the deepest dream, a vast fluctuating gem that seemed to alter the rooms of the house, the narrow road, and, with luck, briefly, oneself, into their most vivid incarnations.

In June, just after the school year ended, the family flew from Logan Airport.
In the moment of traveling to Rome, James was still a familiar, recognizable James, still visible to Nora as the ardent, playful man who’d once courted her. Still also perceptible the wash of hopeful anticipation from their early days in Cambridge, that first buoyancy; how brightly dappled their lives had seemed, rising, moving further and further from the respective narrow rooms in which they’d lived as children into a lofty expansive space. As if those days, that rising, promised to define all to follow. Even after Theo was born, and despite the late-night hours, cut-up naps, bleary days; he was nonetheless an easy baby, and Irish-fair, blue-eyed, quick to learn. For his first year, they marveled. On weekends, James played hiding games with Theo, stacked blocks to knock down, lifted Theo in flying sweeps. He’d carry a bundled Theo around the neighborhood repeating aloud the names of objects and colors (yellow, bird, truck). Sometimes Nora and James would take Theo to matinees, where he’d easily doze or drink from his bottle and watch the changing images on the screen. On clear weekdays, Nora tucked him into the stroller for visits to coffee shops, or carried him on the local bus to visit her mother in Somerville. If the
afternoon was bitter or stormy, Theo would sit in her lap or lie beside her on a blanket for long stretches as she paged through books of art reproductions. She imagined no reason to want any life but her own.

And at first she recognized the emerging shadow as temporary disturbance—the move from Cambridge to Newton, the vicissitudes of another pregnancy—paired with hard losses, her mother’s death, her father’s decline. Yet the disturbance persisted and deepened, stranding her far from that early expanse. Soon her father, too, was gone. How had this transpired? It seemed she’d been choosing bananas; she’d been laundering sheets. Her mother called, frightened. Snow fell. She drove to a hospital; she iced cupcakes; she dressed Theo in blue pants. But now the cupcakes belonged in the Newton kitchen, and Katy had arrived. Where were her parents? Or for that matter James: she missed James, whose work claimed most of his time. Katy, a baby as beautiful as Theo had been—the eyes more hazel, and the hair a fine dark amber—cried far more often, slept lightly, quickly grew restless. An uncalm baby, a girl who took hours to quiet, responding only to Nora. Eventually Katy settled, happy to be walking, running, a fast-moving girl with strong limbs, impatient with books, impatient with small puzzles and quiet tasks, a girl who loved the multihued beach ball and the tub of blocks and strove to keep up with her brother. A girl of raw energy, as a toddler happiest on the playground or in the backyard snow, as long as Nora remained nearby.

If Nora glanced away, she’d turn back to find soup cans on the pantry floor, a carton of milk spilling over the edge of the table, Katy watching the cascade, or the blue bath beads—a
gift forgotten on a low shelf—rolling and smashed in Katy’s hands, one in Katy’s mouth. Spit it out. Katy, spit it out. Katy. Now. And finally Let’s have a cookie instead and Katy spitting out the shrinking blue globe, her face puckering with the bitter chemical taste, near to sobbing at Nora’s frustration. Sweetheart, Nora would soothe. And then Katy would hug her hard, in what seemed a silent begging for forgiveness; Theo stood in the doorway watching, a red wooden train car held in midair. Theo, cookies? And Nora offered a hand to him as she carried Katy.

They were good children, lovely children—though when exactly had the moment shifted from almost enough to something less? She’d said yes and yes again to this life with James, yes to some deferrals—a gallery job? A little studio? James spoke earnestly of his career, what a step up could mean to him, to the family. Might she wait? Perhaps until the fall. Or soon after. How reasonable it had sounded; how quickly she’d agreed. Oblivious, it now seemed, as the status quo altered, the consequences multiplied. During summer in Blue Rock, the sense of possibility returned, though she could not say why. Their Newton neighborhood—lush old-growth trees, smaller well-tended houses—was friendly enough, occupied most of the week by women and younger children, the men commuting to the city or to companies on 128. Days at the park with local kids, Theo and Katy seemed happiest; or down the street at the neighbor Lydia’s. Lydia owned a good swing set and a new sandbox, a three- and a five-year-old. She warned her girls, Don’t break your heads, on the swings, her irreverence drawing Nora in. An appealing chaotic barn-red house in which the
kids’ toys were perpetually scattered, Lydia’s surreal sketches pinned to the refrigerator alongside the girls’ finger paintings, her larger paintings lining the halls. Had Lydia been stealthier with time than Nora? More disciplined with art? Maybe. Certainly Lydia had, Nora thought, accrued more knowledge, a worldly savvy—as if she’d traveled abroad alone. During the first months of their friendship, it seemed that little mystified Lydia.

Both of their husbands worked in the city, a realm apart, and for the dozens of small decisions that steered each week, Nora consulted Lydia, and vice versa: with their kids, they spent hours of most days together, their partnership shaping itself around the children’s hourly or momentary needs. Sometimes they’d settle in at one house, sometimes the other. You could not hold tightly to your hopes for the day, but with Lydia it did not matter. One could always read stories, and if not read stories, build block towers to push down, or draw animals, or make a parade. If the children would not nap, you made up songs. And while Lydia made up songs, Nora managed to get in the laundry; while Nora led a parade, Lydia started soup. And too they shared occasional distraught mornings, when Lydia would call early and drop her girls at Nora’s for an hour or sometimes more. Nora would give them milk in blue cups, settle them with Theo and Katy on comforters spread over the living room floor, and read stories of sentient teapots and kind bears. Later Lydia would arrive, slightly winded, and lie on the comforter and let her daughters climb over her.

There were, too, fleeting despondent moments of Nora’s own. The morning, say, when she woke from a dream of her
father stopping by her Newton kitchen for coffee, his coat snowy from shoveling—her dream-time pleasure and surprise at his arrival, and the notion that she should have baked (though she could offer toast and jam)—but then one of the kids called, or maybe a door opened, or James spoke. Six AM, and snow in fact falling, but her father was dead again, and James was leaving for work, and her throat seemed to close. She tended to the kids, her throat constricted, and at seven called Lydia. In minutes Lydia arrived with her girls and together they cooked breakfast. Nora did not have to explain the dream, and Lydia did not ask.

More than once Lydia said aloud that she was lonely in her marriage. She said it before her girls started school; she said it when Molly was an infant.

“I leave Dan notes,” Lydia said. “That’s all we do. Write notes.”

“You’re exhausted,” Nora said, “you’re both so busy.” And when she said it, Nora thought, and thought again, Oh, marriage, loneliness, sure—as if the loneliness were ordinary fatigue, or one day’s premenstrual sorrow. You had those moments. You wanted breakfast with your late father, a matinee with your late mother, but you brewed coffee for your friend and built a snow fort. James was busy elsewhere; husbands were busy elsewhere. You got them on the weekends and at parties, home evenings and in your bed, and hoped for the best. It took a certain faith. Or acceptance? When Katy was in nursery school, Theo in elementary, Lydia and her husband filed for divorce. Molly had begun to walk; Nora was coaxing her from a doorway to the kitchen table when Lydia stopped in. Nora poured
coffee; she served jam tarts on fluted plates, hid her surprise, as Lydia spooned applesauce for Molly. Sometimes people divorced—why had she not considered this? Where had she imagined Lydia’s hard mornings or sad afternoons might lead? Better to suspend the question then: an empty thought bubble.

After the separation, the sad days diminished, and Lydia’s sly irreverence returned; when the school year ended, she took a large flat in Cambridge, where her kids stayed most weeks, and she seemed not lonely at all. Once or twice a week, Nora would bring Molly to Cambridge and they’d walk with Lydia in Harvard Square. If Molly seemed content, she and Lydia would try a museum; or they’d stay at Lydia’s place and drink coffee while Molly napped on Lydia’s bed. Over time Nora began to envision herself there too, say, in a place nearby, a rehabbed Victorian, or a smaller house with a brick-lined garden and a redbrick walk. Or a place identical to Lydia’s, where she could live and study for another degree, maybe curatorial, maybe art restoration, and where she could talk to Lydia over breakfast. On ordinary weekdays, Nora would find herself wishing for the morning’s infinite expansion, a desire to stay with Lydia in her living room drinking coffee while Molly slept, Theo and Katy and Lydia’s girls safe in their schoolrooms, James ensconced in his office downtown. This was where she ought to stop time. Occasionally she’d catch herself touching Lydia’s arm or her hair, lightly, as if to say _this_. Delicate happy hours that should not be ruined by thought.