

DASHKA SLATER

The Ruddy Fruits That Still Remain

Early on, while their mother is still in a coma, Meg's brother, Paul, turns to her and says, "Everything you're feeling about this is wrong." Paul is always accusing Meg of feeling the wrong things, particularly where their mother is concerned, but the accusation stings anyway because Meg knows he is right. Paul's love for Bertie is golden and pure, whereas Meg's is muddied by annoyance and disappointment and guilt. She had planned to have a better relationship with her mother when she reached middle age, to respond to her dithering with calmness and acceptance and love instead of rolling her eyes like a teenager. But middle age is always five years in the future and Meg is only 34. She thought she had a few years of eyerolling left. Now, instead of being flooded by waves of hope and grief as Paul is, she can only summon their runty cousins: anxiety and regret.

If only she had known that the clock was ticking. According to Dr. Tuan, the aneurysm had likely been there for decades, a blood-red berry blooming on the stalk of a cerebral artery, ripening slowly until it burst. Five days ago, in their weekly phone conversation, Bertie told Meg that she was worried about a dog next door that growled through the fence when she went out to get the morning paper. What if it got loose and went for her throat like the dogs you saw on the evening news? Meg reminded Bertie that springer spaniels were rarely implicated in fatal maulings, but as soon as she had calmed Bertie down, a mischievous impulse made her mention she was going rollerblading at the lake that afternoon. Bertie had asked in a pinched voice whether that was really such a good idea, because the paths around the lake were filled with Canada geese and teenagers this time of year, and even if they didn't actually attack, they could startle you and you could fall and break your wrist.

There was something satisfying about this familiar exchange. Hanging up the phone, Meg felt reassured that she was not trivial and terrified like her mother, but a calm, sophisticated, and reasonably adventurous person. Two hours later, when she was halfway around the lake, her phone buzzed against her hip. It was Paul.

Bertie had collapsed in the cereal aisle of the supermarket, clutching her head in both hands. She had been unconscious ever since.

Paul's outburst about Meg's subpar emotions comes on the fifth day of their vigil, while Meg is listening to a podcast about a serial killer.

"Why can't you feel how tragic this is?" he demands. "Are you doing it on purpose or are you made of stone?"

Meg isn't good at sitting and feeling, which is what Paul thinks she ought to be doing. She needs electronic support. Before resorting to the podcast, she spent the days of their vigil with her laptop open, reading articles about cerebral aneurysm. She studied the blood vessels that feed the brain, which form a loop near the back of the skull called the circle of Willis. In the picture on Meg's computer, the circle of Willis looked like a garland of vines, the kind a flower girl might wear at an outdoor wedding. Thinking about this wreath of arteries sitting at the back of her own skull made her feel woozy, as if she had fallen into a vortex of contemplation from which she might never emerge.

The podcast was supposed to interrupt the loop, a loop that is now associated with the circle of Willis: *This is my brain thinking about my brain, this is my brain thinking about my brain, this is my brain thinking about my brain thinking about my brain.* After Paul scolds her, she takes her earbuds out, but then she feels itchy and anxious again and so she goes downstairs to get a muffin and a cup of coffee from the hospital cafeteria. The cafeteria smells of salty meat. As soon as she walks in, she finds herself caught in the spider strands of a memory of herself in fourth grade, balancing a tray containing a hard-shell taco and a plastic container of juice. But then the picture falls off. She cannot remember the faces of the friends she was going to join, or what lesson preceded lunch. The memory is like a page torn out of a book, beginning awkwardly at "of" and ending with "and."

Dr. Tuan could probably explain why her brain had leaked that small, pointless memory when prodded by the scent of cafeteria cuisine. He must think about those things sometimes as he lifts the lid of the skull and contemplates what lies beneath: *here lies empathy, here lies speech, here lies humor.* But Meg knows he thinks nothing of the sort. To him it is all mechanical—cut here, insert metal clip here, everything tiny and painstaking, like building a miniature ship inside a bottle.

Paul, who has been in therapy, would argue that Meg is thinking about twenty-five-year-old tacos because it's easier than thinking about her mother lying in the neuro ICU unit three floors up, the right side of her head decorated with a U-shaped scar and a shunt at the back of her head pumping out excess cranial fluid. The shunt is, to Meg's mind, more horrifying than the scar. She doesn't like seeing her mother's brainy secretions sucked away like that, never to be returned to her. She has the urge to save them somehow, the way Bertie has saved their infant locks of hair, their baby teeth, the programs from their elementary school performances.

Bertie has not saved any souvenirs from her own childhood, which Meg knows was unhappy. "Your mother had a hard time of it," her father used to say when she complained to him about Bertie's anxiety and gloom, her debilitating caution. There was never any elaboration. Now Meg imagines that if she looked at her mother's cerebral fluid under a microscope, she would see images of Bertie's undescribed childhood and all would be explained to her. When she returns to the room, she considers sharing this thought with Paul, but Paul is still angry at her about the earbuds. So she sits down by Bertie's bed and tries not to think about herself thinking about her mother's brain, and her own brain, and how little the two organs understand each other.

An hour or two later, Bertie opens her eyes.

"Hi," she says when Meg touches her hand. Her voice is thin, and she seems to be talking out of one side of her mouth.

"Do you know where you are, Mom?"

Bertie looks around the room for a moment. "Of course," she says, and squeezes Meg's hand. "We're in Capwell's Department Store."

"Why are we in Capwell's?"

"To buy a bicycle." Bertie's tone is smug. She's bragging, Meg realizes, although she can't imagine why. She looks at Paul, who is a better son and might have some idea what Bertie is talking about. He shrugs.

"A bicycle, Mom? For me?"

"For *me*," Bertie says. And then, disconcertingly, she laughs.

"She seems disoriented," Meg says when they finally track down Dr. Tuan. "She thinks she's in a department store."

Dr. Tuan always waits a few seconds before answering any question. It's awkward for Meg, who thinks he didn't hear her or doesn't know she expects him to say something. "You said you thought the surgery was a success," she prompts. "Should we be worried?"

Silence. Then Dr. Tuan says, "It depends on what kinds of things worry you."

"It worries me if her brain isn't, you know, fixed." She waits.

"The surgery on the aneurysm was successful," Dr. Tuan says. "That means it won't do any more damage. But substantial damage has already been done by the hemorrhage. You should expect some neurological deficits."

"I don't know what that means." Meg looks at Paul, who has been the one to deal with the family's official business ever since their father died. He is looking at the floor and rubbing his hand over his mouth and jaw, a sign that he's on the verge of tears.

Dr. Tuan glances at his pager, which is vibrating. "It means her brain has sustained a significant injury. I think you should be very pleased that she's capable of speech."

"But she doesn't seem to know who we are!" blurts Paul. He puts his hand back over his lips and looks at the floor again.

Dr. Tuan lifts his pager from his belt and inspects it. For a moment Meg thinks he's going to walk away without saying any more. But then he speaks. "I think it would be wise for you to begin adjusting your expectations," he says. "She will certainly improve from where she is now. But we don't know how much she will improve or how impaired she is now. All I can tell you is, no one who survives an aneurysm bleed is ever the same as they were before."

As far back as Meg can remember, Bertie Clemens has been a small, brittle woman who wore neat little cardigans twelve months a year and pinned her hair into a chignon. Before she collapsed last Wednesday, she taught eighth-grade French at a Catholic school. She likes French painting and French poetry and French cooking and anything that is at all French, even though she has only been to France three times, once on her honeymoon, once when Meg was nine and Paul was eleven, and once last year, as a 60th birthday present from her children.

Meg doesn't like to think of her mother as peculiar, but it can't be helped. She's seen the way other people look at her — salesclerks and waitresses, even Meg's own friends. Bertie has a habit of twisting her rings around and around her fingers, and she is always rubbing her lips together as if she has recently applied lipstick. At moments when she feels herself to be alone — while waiting in line for a public restroom, for instance, or when making herself a cup of tea in the kitchen of her apartment, or even when her students are quietly filling out the answers to a test — she recites French poetry under her breath, her lips stretching and pursing around the muted syllables: "*Ma jeunesse ne fut qu'un ténébreux orage, / Traversé çà et là par de brillants soleils.*"

"You must speak French beautifully," people always say to Meg when they learn whose daughter she is.

But no, Meg opted to study Spanish in high school, having developed an allergy to Bertie's Francophilia. She didn't like quiche or French Impressionists or *Les Cages le Folles* or any of the rest of it; she liked guitar bands and mathematics and competitive diving, tangible things with hard edges and clear definitions. Early on, Meg had decided she had a choice. She could be like her mother, anxious and uncertain, murmuring French poetry like the Mad Woman of Marin County, or she could be logical and good at things and have fun. "Bye Mom," she imagined herself saying. "I'm off to have a happy life. I'll send you a postcard and tell you what it's like."

As it turned out, she didn't go far. After her father died, she settled across the Bay from Bertie and taught trigonometry and calculus at an urban high school. When she got together with her mother, they talked about their students and their colleagues and Bertie asked Meg's advice about how to handle things at work as if she were the novice and Meg were the seasoned veteran. None of these conversations made Meg feel any closer to her mother. Bertie's doubts and quavers rendered her indistinct somehow, like an answer on a test that has been erased and rewritten until it blurs into a gray smudge.

Two weeks after waking up from her coma, Bertie is transferred to a rehab hospital. She has survived a spate of seizures and a second brain surgery and Dr. Tuan says she seems to be out of the woods. To Meg, she seems decidedly *in* the woods, staring blankly at her and Paul from inside a leafy thicket of private associations.

At the rehab hospital, they watch Bertie undergo hours of different kinds of therapy. The physical therapist tries to get her to sit up on her own. The occupational therapist has her lift beanbags with her hands and practice getting her arms into her own shirt. The speech therapist works on eating. At the moment Bertie gets her nutrients through a feeding tube in her abdominal wall because while she remembers how to chew, she has forgotten how to swallow and after a few minutes the food comes bubbling out of her mouth and lands in her lap.

Bertie is doing better with the swallowing, but the rest of it is slow going. She doesn't do too well with the neuropsychologist who comes by twice a week to work on her memory and logic either. Bertie always seems like she's trying, but then she loses focus. Name three colors, the neuropsychologist asks Bertie, and Bertie says, *blue, green, and blue*. Name three animals. *Cat, dog, cat*. He has taped pictures of Meg and Paul to the wall beside Bertie's bed to help her remember who they are, but she forgets to look at them. The only name she can remember is Cynthia, her sister who lives in Canada. She calls everyone Cynthia—Meg, Paul, the neuropsychologist, the head physician. Everyone at the rehab hospital seems to find this charming. They love Bertie because she's so cheery. Most brain-injured people are depressed, but not Bertie. Bertie is a little ray of sunshine.

"Hi!" she says when Meg and Paul arrive, her speech clogged and syrupy but still gay. "I have a new car! I went out for a drive today and drove all over!"

Paul gives her a baleful look. He is not amused by Bertie's antics. He tells her, "You do not have a new car. You did not go for a drive. You are in the hospital. You cannot walk."

Bertie wrinkles her forehead, trying to recollect if this is true. But then she smiles. It seems she has found a memory, and it is of herself, driving through a painted desert, up to the top of a chiseled butte. "I went for a drive up a mountain," she says. "It was *wonderful*."

Dr. McCloud, the head physician, is the one who figures out that Bertie's drives are car commercials she's seen on television. Bertie is what's known as a confabulator, which means she takes the few things she can remember and constructs a story around them so they make sense. "She's connecting the dots," Dr. McCloud explains. "It's just that the dots are very far apart."

It's summer and because Meg and Paul are both teachers they're both off work. They come every afternoon at three, when visiting hours begin. Paul's wife joins them on weekends, along with his daughters, Anna and Lucy, but during the week it's just Meg and Paul. One day Meg brings in a little suitcase that she's filled with a few of Bertie's things from home: clothes, shoes, a picture of Anna and Lucy, and one of Minouche, her cat. Bertie couldn't care less about the pictures, but the suitcase throws her into a tizzy. She asks Meg to open it and show her the things inside, over and over again.

"I need my suitcase, Cynthia. I'm going to France," she says. "I'm going to see the Renoirs." The French R is hard for her to say, and she drags it out so long that it sounds like she's choking. The next afternoon Meg finds that the hospital staff have placed the suitcase next to her bed, because otherwise she would not sleep.

A few days later, Bertie announces she has made a friend.

"Who's your friend?" Meg asks, and out of the corner of her eye she sees Paul shake his head, *don't encourage her*.

"Sylvie," Bertie says after a long silence. "We bought hats."

"What kind of hats?" Meg asks. She thinks she sees Paul roll his eyes.

"A green one," Bertie replies. "Green like the sea. It has a long blue—" She hesitates, searching for the word. "Comes from a bird. Not wing." She makes a motion with her hands, a floating gesture.

"Feather?" asks Meg.

"Yes, on my hat."

"Where will you wear it?" Meg asks. She would love to see Bertie in a green hat with a long blue feather, like something out of a turn-of-the-century French poster. It seems to her that Bertie has always wanted to wear a green hat, but never had the courage. Now she will. When she gets better, they will go to France again and Meg will buy Bertie an elaborate hat and they will see the Renoirs together and drink kir in a cafe.

But Bertie has lost the thread. "I have trouble remembering," she confesses. And then: "My head hurts me sometimes. Do you think I should see a doctor?"

Meg and Paul argue about Bertie's stories.

"You have to help her focus," Paul says. "How can she get better if she doesn't even know she's sick?" When he visits, he talks to Bertie about her progress. "The doctor says you sat up on the mat today!" he tells her. Or: "Did you get that shirt on yourself?"

Meg tries to get to the hospital ahead of Paul so that she and Bertie can talk in private. Sometimes Bertie tells her that she and Sylvie have gone to the beach. Or they went shopping again and bought shampoo and shoes and a sexy bra. Meg loves hearing her mother say *sexy bra*. She knows, because Dr. McCloud keeps telling her, that Bertie's confabulations are a symptom of her injury, but to Meg they are a glimmer of the mother she could have had, if life had worked out differently for both of them.

When Meg was ten, she had a passionate crush on Laura Stein, the mother of a girl she knew at school. Ms. Stein was a naturalist, and she came to their classroom to give a presentation one morning wearing a thick leather gauntlet, a red-tailed hawk perched on her arm. For weeks after, Meg fantasized that she'd been adopted by the Steins, that Laura Stein was teaching her to handle raptors and track coyotes, that Laura Stein was brushing her hair, kissing her goodnight, bandaging the wounds she got from handling wild animals. When Bertie tells her that she's gone swimming with Sylvie—Bertie, who is afraid of the water and never goes in above her knees—Meg feels that she has finally been awarded a mother who suits her.

"I love the ocean," she tells Bertie. "I love swimming far out, past the waves."

And instead of saying, *Don't tell me that, I don't like to think about it*, Bertie says, "How nice."

"It's like her soul has been let out of a cage," Meg tells Paul one day as they leave the hospital. "She's finally free of all that fear."

"I can't believe you're even saying this," Paul says. "You're like some 1950s psychiatrist exulting over the product of a lobotomy."

"But what if the part of the brain that was damaged by the aneurysm was the part that was already damaged by her traumatic childhood?" she asks. "What if, when she heals, she heals completely? Maybe this is who she could have been!"

"But it isn't who she *is*," Paul says. "Do you really think this collection of delusions is an improvement over the intelligent, empathic woman who used to be our mother? Is that what you're saying? You'd rather have a nut job with an imaginary friend than

the mother who raised you?"

"No, of course not." Meg starts to cry a little, because Paul's right, as usual. She's feeling the wrong things again. "I just see so much hope for her."

Paul kicks the gravel in the hospital parking lot, sending up a cloud of dust. "It isn't time to hope," he says. "It's time to grieve."

A few days later, Bertie's younger sister, Cynthia, arrives from Canada. She has short dyed-blond hair and a face as bright and impassive as a daisy. On the lapel of her khaki jacket is a button that reads "That's *Queen* Bitch to you." Meg has only met her a few times, and it occurs to her now that this is odd.

"What was Mom like as a kid?" she asks, after they leave Bertie's room and go down to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee. "Were you two close?"

Cynthia inclines her face in Meg's direction and issues her an unreadable smile. "We're very different," she says. "I never let life bother me the way Bertie does."

Meg suddenly feels the way she did in junior high, when kids at school imitated Bertie's whispered French monologues. "She had a hard time of it," she says.

Cynthia takes a sip of her coffee. "I suppose I should be grateful to Roberta. She got the brunt of it. If it hadn't been so bad for her, it might have been worse for me. On the other hand, I think Bertie is just the kind of person who takes things hard. She always fell apart when Dad yelled. Mom was the same way. I never saw why they let it get to them."

"She never told me much about it," Meg says, hoping to keep the revelations coming. This is what she's been waiting for. The Explanation.

"I don't think we need to dwell on it. She probably doesn't even remember it after the—" Cynthia waves her fingers by her temple. "One thing I know for sure: I don't want to end up like her. Or even worse, like our mother. You know they can scan your head now and see what's there. When I get home, I'm going to get checked."

Meg isn't following. Checked for what? Worry? A congenital inclination to fall apart when screamed at?

"Are you sure?" she asks, because she thinks she would have heard if there were a medical test for that kind of thing.

"I'd get checked too if I were you," Cynthia says. "Your head could be filled with little time bombs too. Grandmother, mother, it starts looking like a pattern."

"Grandmother?" asks Meg, catching on at last. "Your mother had an aneurysm?"

Cynthia stands up and gathers her purse and jacket from the chair next to her. "Didn't Bertie ever tell you the story?" she says, rummaging in her purse for a tissue, which she uses to blow her nose. "She dropped dead while Dad was in the middle of one of his tirades. It was the maddest I ever saw him. He *hated* being interrupted."

That night, Meg stops at Bertie's house to bring in the mail and feed the cat, and she finds herself going through Bertie's bookshelves. She's not sure what she's looking for, but as she examines the Zola and Hugo novels and the piles of Paris *Match*, she realizes she's looking for clues. Is there some essential Bertieness that lies at her core, so immutable that it transcends trauma and self-doubt and subarachnoid hemorrhage?

Eventually she sits down in an armchair with Minouche on her lap and pages through *Les Fleurs du mal* by Charles Baudelaire. She had found it on the end table, the book's red leather cover as familiar to her as the fleur-de-lys pattern on the sofa, although she's never opened it until now. There is a red ribbon marking a poem called "L'Ennemi."

*Ma jeunesse ne fut qu'un ténébreux orage,
Traversé çà et là par de brillants soleils;
Le tonnerre et la pluie ont fait un tel ravage,
Qu'il reste en mon jardin bien peu de fruits vermeils.*

There is no translation, although Bertie has circled some of the words and written English equivalents in pencil. Meg imagines her reading the poem for the first time with a dictionary open on her desk, the meaning of the lines coming to her in fragments like a piece of music heard in rehearsal. Meg holds the book in her hands for a long time, certain she has found what she is looking for.

At the hospital the next day, she reads the poem to Bertie, stumbling

over the French words, a bit ashamed that her accent is so poor. Would it have killed her to learn the one thing her mother was capable of teaching her? Paul, sitting on the edge of the bed, could do a better job, but this is Meg's moment.

*—O douleur! ô douleur! Le Temps mange la vie,
Et l'obscur Ennemi qui nous ronge le cœur
Du sang que nous perdons croit et se fortifie!*

"Very pretty," Bertie says when she's done. "Is it French?"

Meg feels a pang of annoyance and tries to quell it. In the movie she'd plotted the night before, the poem had arrowed through the damaged pathways of Bertie's brain and landed with a thwack in the bullseye of her soul.

"Of course it's French, Mom. You speak French."

Bertie says nothing.

"*Parlez-vous français?*"

Bertie shuts her eyes.

"*Je m'appelle Meg,*" Meg bellows. "*Vous êtes ma mère.*"

Bertie shakes her head and whispers something under her breath, something in French.

"What did she say?" Meg asks Paul, the good son, who studied French all the way through college.

He tries not to smile and fails. "She said, 'Shut up, you're giving me a headache.'"

Paul finds her in the hallway crying, and instead of rubbing it in he puts his arms around her and says, "I know, it's hard. It's hard, I know," over and over like a chant.

"Look at this," Meg says when she's recovered a bit. She has found a translation of the poem on the internet, and she reads it to him now, stumbling over the English words too, because when was the last time she read a poem out loud?

*My youth was one long, dismal storm, shot through
Now and again with flashing suns; the rain
And thunder stripped my orchard bare: too few,
Today, the ruddy fruits that still remain.*

“That’s her,” Meg says, when she has read Paul all four stanzas. “Her orchard stripped bare by the long and dismal storms of her childhood. That’s what she was always whispering to herself.”

Paul shrugs. “I think you’re reading too much into it. She liked “Le Bateau Ivre” too but that doesn’t mean she liked to sail.”

But Meg knows he is wrong. After that she keeps a screenshot of the poem on her phone and stares at it when she’s waiting in line at the hospital cafe.

“It’s kind of a prayer,” she tells herself. But it isn’t a prayer at all—it’s a lament.

Dr. Tuan agrees with Cynthia: Given their family history, they should all be checked. He refers Meg to the imaging center close to the hospital and a week later she finds herself lying inside a gigantic metal tube. The technician has given her foam plugs to block her ears and has told her to lie still, because if she moves, they will have to start again. Then he is gone. Meg stares at the silvery-dark curve above her. In a few minutes the pings and clangs begin, as if someone has dropped a Superball inside the tube and it is bouncing endlessly and randomly. It is not an efficient, scientific sound. It sounds like the knocking engine of an old Chevy, or an unbalanced washing machine. The noises are first annoying, then overwhelming. Fear slicks her palms, dries her mouth. Somehow the machine is looking at her brain, tracing its whorls and spirals, mapping it like a fingerprint. What will it find in there? Is she just like Bertie on the inside, her brain full of landmines? Could the machine’s probing magnetism cause them to explode? Her heart knocks erratically around her chest, mimicking the rhythm of the machine. She is going to have to get out; she is not going to be able to stay here another second. She tries to calm her breathing, worried that it will spoil the picture to have her mind racing like this, and searches for something to think about besides the machine scanning her cranium. What come to her are the final lines of her mother’s favorite poem:

*—Ah woe! Ah woe! Time eats life to the core,
And the dark Enemy who gnaws our heart
Gluts on our blood and prospers all the more.*

They are not at all comforting.

On the way to the hospital that afternoon, Meg stops at the beach. She's hardly been all summer, consumed by Bertie's illness and all the matters that have had to be coped with: the cat, the insurance, the plans for Bertie's long-term care. But today she feels she deserves a few minutes of salt air and sunshine. She's been angry at Bertie ever since the poem failed to fix her, and even though Dr. McCloud has told her to take none of it personally, she can't help feeling that Bertie could do better if she would only try. Now, like Paul, Meg has begun nagging Bertie about applying herself in her different therapies, because the insurance company is losing patience and if she doesn't start making progress, they're going to want to put her in a home.

She strips down to her suit and walks toward the water, feeling the sand change under her feet from hot and grainy to cool and velvety. Then the water is splashing up around her thighs, throwing up cold flecks of spray. It's chaotic here at the water's edge, the receding waves colliding with the breaking ones like commuters elbowing their way off a crowded subway. The only way to avoid the hubbub is to run through it, so Meg charges in until she's chest-deep, then dives under a wave. *I like swimming out past the waves*, she's told Bertie, but is that really true? She is afraid of the Pacific really, afraid of its currents and its surf and the fangy creatures that live within. Often, when she arrives at the beach, it is littered with jellyfish, and a few years ago a shark swam up and bit off the leg of a little boy.

Still, she is here, floating just past the break, and nothing is biting her at the moment. The water is cold but not numbing and so she treads water with her eyes trained on the waves that are rolling in so that she won't be taken by surprise. As it approaches, each wave looks as if it might rear up into something immense and Meg tenses, ready to dive under it or be crushed. But it always rolls past and breaks behind her, and after a while Meg finds that she isn't afraid after all and that not being afraid is the pleasure she was thinking about when she was talking to Bertie. It seems like there should be more to it than that, but as she leans her head back and lets the water cradle her, she has to admit that this is all there is.