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**VOLUME 41**

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Mistletoe

Sliced Bread

Solstice

Lost Languages of Africa

Tiller Family Soup

Who They Were

Dark Work

Genesis

Letter to a Friend

Black Coffee: *A Morning in D*

Garden Weather

Dealt

The Dinner

**E**

Richard E. Amacher; Nobuko Sabino; Graham Good; Darr Hammersmith.

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Amy Root

## SOLSTICE

The tomato sauce is splattering faster than I can keep up with it, which my mother says could have been avoided if I'd used a bigger skillet. She resents cooking, calling it an outdated ritual of the hearth that only subjugates women. Tonight, with her lips barely moving, she asks me, "Why is it necessary to cook for *all of these people* anyway; can't they eat in their own homes?"

*All of these people* means my best friends John and Veda (you pronounce the "e" like you're saying Vegas) but my parents are deeply introverted, and as far as they are concerned I've called a press conference in our kitchen. I don't care. It's our senior year, and for my entire high school career I've been fed by other people's moms, especially John's mom (not Veda's, since she's being raised by her dad, a junk food addict), and it's about time my family ponied up and returned the favor. Just because my parents can't handle strangers in their house doesn't mean I have to be listed in *Who's Who of Sociophobic Americans* with them. Besides, I like to cook, and I'm good at it.

John and Veda are late. In the ninth grade, when we met, we were always on time, sometimes early, because we relied on adults for our transportation, and adults plan for things that never happen, such as traffic accidents or transmission difficulty. Now John owns a battered hatchback that is olive green, and although it looks like a garbage can we love it because now we can lie about our destinations. Of course, there aren't very many places to go to in this part of Texas; the appeal is more in the dishonesty than in the actual driving. We can pretend to be so far away that our families could never track us down.

There's really just one bar near here, and it's so full of crusty granddads with their weird turquoise jewelry that we would never think of going there. There's one decent diner, one two-screen movie theater (no THX—they're still proud to have stereo sound), and a new coffee place called "Sugar's," which my dad claimed was a topless bar until I brought him one of their take-out menus showing all the pies and cakes they serve along with the coffee.

So sometimes we don't go anywhere, driving on the highway until we feel good and settled in Noplace, and we pull over and look

SOLSTICE

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They're here. I ca coats, commenting on being, which John and them the truth about brought real wine, jus would have the guts to them. I look through homemade cranberry p mother are beaming n

up at the stars with the car radio still on while everyone smokes (everyone except for me, since I have asthma). The nearest regular town is Waco, where, despite what the media have implied through footage of cafeteria snipers and messiah wannabes, nothing much happens.

The only excitement I ever had in Waco was when John and Veda and I skipped school and went to Baylor, where we'd heard we could better educate ourselves at the Armstrong Browning Library. The three of us write a lot of poetry (last year we even won an award for reciting *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in its entirety, as a trio, in a district declamation). On a campus where the administration does everything it can to make students follow a moral code that will surely lead to the demise of procreation—and the human race altogether—stands a beautiful shrine to literature's most defiant lovers, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning. No one seems to remember that she was the famous one at first; the Brownings fell in love when he wrote fan letters to her. Without her, he would have been nothing. Then, the elopement. Defying her father's attempts to prolong an Electra-like enmeshment, she fled to the sunny Continent with her beloved. And now the world's largest Browning archive rests in a central Texas town whose more popular attraction is the Dr Pepper factory.

On our sojourn to Baptistland that day, John and Veda and I found gorgeous stained-glass windows inscribed with the eerie lines of "My Last Duchess." We inspected glass cases containing pieces of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's hair, and rooms set up with the Brownings' actual furniture. We didn't ask to look at any of the manuscripts; you probably have to fill out too many forms, and they might have called our principal to see if we really had permission to be away from school. We're the kind of kids who take precautions. Our parents don't know how easy they have it.

They're here. I can hear my mother greeting them, taking their coats, commenting on their cold noses, acting like a decent human being, which John and Veda see right through because I have told them the truth about her. John loudly explains that he hasn't brought real wine, just sparkling cider in a fancy bottle. As if Mom would have the guts to vocalize any rules and regulations in front of them. I look through the doorway and see Veda displaying a homemade cranberry pie maternally near her abdomen. She and my mother are beaming nervously back and forth at each other.

I'm going to stay in here by the stove, where it's safe. I can't stand to go out there and watch her make a fool of herself. Dad better not come down. He hasn't come downstairs all day. He says that's why we live in the country, so that he can have solitude and go for weeks without seeing another person. He used to pull that when we lived in Houston, until we found out he was spending all that Alone Time with his imaginary friends, writing hundreds of pages a month about people who don't even exist. Unfortunately, it paid off, and now he's a full-time novelist. He talks about his characters as if they're our next-door neighbors: "Hey, guess what? Matilda's going to have twins! But I have a feeling Jerome will lose his job at the plant."

Look at her. Look at my mother in her hemp dress tinted with all-natural vegetable dyes. Her favorite suede moccasins might look all right on a regular person, but not with rainbow-striped knee socks.

I guess she's worried about the cold front. We're having a big norther right now, and they say it might even snow. Of course, it was 185 degrees this afternoon, but there will be icicles by morning. I still love nights like this, though—rustling leaves, rattling windows, uncertainty. And who knows, maybe it will be so icy that John and Veda can't drive home, and my parents have to host a *slumber party*. But Mom and Dad wouldn't notice. They're not planning on setting foot in here anyway. Oh yes, there she goes, yes it's the first shaky step on our creaky staircase, and now we hear the Excuse du Jour:

"Have a fun dinner, John, Veeeeda—everything sure smells great. Oh, no thanks, we ate hours ago. We like to turn in by eight you know, early to bed, early to rise, heh-heh, and we have so much work to do this time of year . . ."

What does she mean, *this time of year*? Ever since my parents read a musty old copy of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* that they pick-pocketed at a garage sale, they have wanted no part in Christmas shopping, or a Christmas tree, or decorations of any kind. If they ever bothered to have a *busy time of year*, this certainly wouldn't be it. Fewer daylight hours means even more hibernation time for them. The most they have to do is sit up in their bedroom tonight, sprawled out on the futon, addressing notes on recycled paper that's been printed with the words "Happy Solstice." And that couldn't possibly take more than an hour; they only send these to the relatives, since they don't have any friends.

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Today was the final day of our final fall semester together, so John and Veda and I are going to get into the Christmas spirit. I don't care if my parents have abandoned all sense of tradition. I have my own money: I bus dishes at Dee-Dee's Family Restaurant (that's the one decent diner). I will buy myself a Christmas tree and fix my famous pasta and write sentimental messages to my friends on Santa-shaped cards from the pharmacy.

Lurking behind me, John smells wonderful, as if he sleeps in a cedar chest and chain-smokes clove cigarettes. Then I remember why it's kind of a familiar aroma; he's wearing the scented oil that Veda and I gave him for his birthday. He gently swats me with a dishtowel and cries, "Mama mia! I guess I'll be eating my dinner directly off the countertops." He occasionally likes to imitate some kind of disciplinarian he knows, his grandfather I think, who's incapable of showing normal affection.

"Quelle mess," says Veda, wiping up the sauce for me and turning down the burner flame.

"Quit yer bitchin,'" I whine.

"Look what I brought you guys." Lifting the pie, Veda snorts like a pig. It could have made the cover of a checkout-line magazine, a special holiday issue. A little bit of sticky cranberry juice oozes from the four precise vents she's poked in the upper crust, which was sprinkled with raw sugar before she baked it, so now it shimmers as she waves it at us. But the best part is the circle of perfectly browned dough that she's carefully carved into the shape of a holly strand, winding its way around the entire edge of the pie. She rests her masterpiece next to my thawing bag of oven-ready garlic bread.

Soon they throw themselves on me, Veda in front and John behind, and we all squeeze real hard. "Merry Xmas," I say.

"Ho," replies John.

The timer rings, and I rush around to drain the linguine before it gets mushy. Veda cranes her neck over the sink, trying to get a blast of the hot steam with me, since we recently read that it's good for your pores.

"Stove-top buffet," I announce, and the three of us go through the line, the way we do in the school cafeteria. I've set our places around half of our circular breakfast-room table, John in the middle, with Veda and me on either side of him.

We eat and eat, and John's champagne makes us belch, which sharply contrasts with my parents' fine china that I passive-

aggressively selected for us to use. They feel that its faint gold rim represents an unacceptable level of materialism and, combined with the fact that it was handed down from Dad's right-winger aunt, it usually stays boxed up in our Out of Sight Out of Mind closet. I've always thought it was beautiful, though. I didn't ask permission to serve off it tonight; I just waded through the rows of dead pill bugs and bronchiole-constricting dust bunnies and dug it out. The backs of the plates say "Haviland, Limoges, France."

I was never sure how to pronounce that middle word until my friends and I went to see *Out of Africa*, which has a scene where Meryl Streep as Karen Blixen is watching the native "employees" of her new coffee farm unload all of her crap. The way I remember it, one of them nearly drops a crate (I would have done it on purpose if I'd been that guy—this is the same baroness who expected her house boys to wear white gloves in the heat of the day in *Africa*). Anyway, they're hauling her precious things from the train, and something slips, causing her to warble, "My Limohhhhgges!" At last I knew how to pronounce it, and it was the one time during that movie when I was right there with Meryl, terrified that all of her gorgeous china was ruined. I breathed in a small gasp, and everyone in the theater heard it. Since then, John and Veda, now fully aware of my clandestine attachment to my parents' Limoges, have been known to blurt those words at me as a kind of substitute for anything I find startling.

"My Lee-e-moges!" John cries in a falsetto just now, letting one of the saucers seesaw back and forth in his hands. I was wondering how long it would take him to get around to that. I can tell he tried hard to suppress the urge when he spotted my elegant place settings.

We gossip and say terrible things about the people we envy, especially the ones who are applying to far-away hundred-thousand-dollar colleges on the East Coast. We try on each other's class rings, which just came in last week. We choke on my mother's homemade margarine.

Finally, as we wash the dishes and pick at the half-eaten pie, it is time to discuss how lonely we all are and to analyze our past, brief relationships.

"Well, mine's not totally in the past," Veda objects as she dries the butter knife. "Even though I broke up with Carlton last month, he calls me almost every day. I think he's still in love with me. I'm not sure, but I think he's a psycho."

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"Does that mean I'm a psycho for still calling Veronica?" John wants to know. "Maybe I'm just checking in to make sure she's not suffering too much. Maybe I'm just a good man."

"Checking in, Charlie Brown, just to see how much she's suffering. Look, Veronica doesn't want to hear from you anymore. But she is sort of afraid of you."

At this news, his eyes soften for a moment, in a way that makes me want to stroke his jaws while he speaks. It almost seems as if he's about to drop his bitter banter and say something serious. "Yes," John pontificates, "is a relationship really over if only one of the parties involved has decided it's over? Next on 'Dr. Pill.'"

Veda and I groan. She has the most beautiful hair I have ever seen. It is as dark as the burned spot on the skillet that I will grind away with a steel-wool pad, and she recently got orangey highlights that now look like waves of October foliage because we haven't turned on all the lights yet, so the kitchen is still glowing red from our holiday candles. Her ponytail is loose around her earlobes, from which two stars of David are always dangling. (People assume she's Jewish, but those of us who know her best have learned that she's merely in touch with many different forms of spirituality.)

I try to tell her how beautiful I think she is. She tells me I'm pretty, too, tenderly patting my hair (recently dyed to a tint that, accidentally I swear, almost matches hers) and saying how much she likes it. We try to decide whether to make an appointment next week to have our eyebrows professionally plucked ("tweezed," Veda corrects me, saying that chickens get plucked and women get tweezed, then remembering that wax is now the method of choice).

John calls us lesbians, which I deny so emphatically that the two of them dredge up my virginity as evidence, and it is time for their periodic deconstruction of my hymen. Do I still have one because I haven't found the right guy yet, or do I subconsciously not want a guy at all? Or maybe I'm just afraid it will hurt. If only they knew. Hearing John's voice, mellowed with genuinely concerned advice, I start my daily search for the correct words to let him know that "lately I've been thinking." I'm certain he's the ideal man for the job.

"Find someone who will be gentle," John tells me. "You deserve it," he adds protectively.

"Drink some wine first," Veda prescribes.

"Make sure you're on top," commands John, sounding just like my dad did when I was learning how to drive.



They do know me better than my own parents. But I also happen to know that these seventeen-year-old sages are actually just showing off their knowledge, and that as much as they may care about me, it makes them feel superior to give me advice.

"Wait until you're in love," Veda muses. "I know I wish I had."

"Yes," John nods. "You'd better stick to your guns."

Their coaching continues as we clamber out the door, off the porch, and into what we call John's Nast-Car, rattling over to a roadside nursery.

To spite my parents, I buy a thick, razor-needed Scotch pine. The tree is wider than John's car, and I can tell that the guy taking my chilly wad of dollar bills doesn't understand why we don't have a truck. Even though the temperature is below freezing we open the windows and reach up to hold the tree secure as we fly down the freeway. Our hands are so numb that we have no feeling in them when we get home, yet we stand in the front yard and saw the bottom off the tree's trunk before bolting my itchy purchase into its tray of water. We remark that there's not an irresponsible bone in our collective body.

My parents occasionally emerge to spy on us, nodding and waving shyly from the staircase landing. I can tell that my mother is especially pissed off when she sees me hurling handfuls of silver icicles onto the branches. She says, "Oh, looks nice there, you all," and slams the door to her study.

John contributes a rocking-horse ornament that he says Melissa, another allegedly former girlfriend, received free with a fill-up at the gas station last month when they were still together. It's the only bona fide ornament we hang on the tree. Everything else, emerging from a hatbox passed down from that same china-collecting Republican side of the family, was intended for something besides Christmas. There's a Keith Richards skull ring strung with black grosgrain ribbon, red felt Cardinals sewn by my grandmother (a St. Louis baseball fan, not an ornithologist), a hot-pink plastic miniature of Barbie's three-story townhouse, an orchestra of tiny skeletons bought at a Day of the Dead celebration, and lots of packing peanuts with glitter glued to them.

And then we turn off the floor lamps and plug in the white blinking tree lights I bought at the grocery store, and John and Veda and I see our golden selves giggling in the sliding-glass door. We are a low-watt blaze of tinsel and twinkling glass. We say nothing for a

long time, arms around each other, sweating now from our wool cardigans and hard work.

We had planned to go out for Irish coffee at Sugar's, where they don't check IDs, but John and Veda begin gathering up their things and yawning. We spend a long time in the foyer, and after a chorus of I'll-call-you's they are gone, so I shut and chain the door behind them.

Standing in the dark, I watch them through the living-room window as they slowly walk down our steep driveway toward the Corolla, whose windshield displays their shadows looming closer together and finally merging. Although the black reflection makes it look as if their faces have met, I can see that John is only hugging Veda and his nose is somewhere near her ear. I am surprised to feel relieved that he is only hugging her, and this is the last thing I feel before I see him stop hugging her as their mouths disappear while he turns his back to me, Veda seated on the hood with her white-socked ankles wrapped behind his knees. On his shoulders, her mittens make tiny circles that match the slow movements of their kissing heads.

My mind retrieves two very ancient reels from its archive. In one, John has dermatologist-resistant acne vulgaris and is shorter than I am. He proclaims that kissing is unsanitary, and he rejects my advances on his bunk bed.

In the other scene, I am on a blanket in the park outside the Armstrong Browning Library, shoulder-to-shoulder with Veda. John is inside, looking for a bathroom. Hypnotized by the periwinkle March daylight overhead, I ask her whom she'll marry.

"Many, many, many men. All at once." We laugh. "I know who you'll marry," she says.

"Who?"

"John."

I pause. "Well, that would be sort of like marrying my brother or something," I lie. "That's weird. How do you know this?"

"Just trust me. You will marry him," she says.

"But how do you *know* this?" I demand as casually as possible, eager for the flattering news that he has been harboring fantasies about me.

She rolls over and I brush the grass from her sweater. "When I saw you two at the statue that shows the clasped hands, with all that 'how do I love thee' schmaltz carved into the walls everywhere, and

you were holding hands in all those different ways, making fun of the sculpture, it dawned on me then. I just know John so well. I was sure it wasn't my imagination."

"But nothing's going on between us. What did he tell you?"

"Never mind," she said, irritated, and maybe ashamed that she'd broken a confidence with him. "Forget it. This conversation never happened."

My mind cannot take a picture of them as lovers, even though they have shared everything else, including my friendship. I want to know if this is their first kiss. I do not want them to have parts of each other that I cannot have, but I want them to be happy, not lonely, because I am supposed to somehow love both of them, if I want to have people who look after me in this life. And now there's no one I can talk to about this, no longer knowing what I want because the only thing in focus is what I am afraid to watch.

My mother, relieved that there aren't strangers in her house anymore, pads down the stairs and flips off the porch light. "Listen, I need you to unplug those Christmas lights. It's not very practical. Do you have any idea what this is going to do to our electricity bill?" When I don't answer, she hesitates, giving me a look that might be pity. She moves her lips as if she wants to ask why I have gone silent. But all she can muster is silence too.

My father calls to me from upstairs. His voice, nasal with stifled anger, forms the first question he's asked me all week: "Do you think you could ask your friends to stop having sex in front of our house?"

I tell him not to worry; it's cold out there, so they won't be able to stand it much longer anyway. I turn the porch light back on, risking a lecture about fossil fuels. I want to be seen in the dark.