

Sight Unseen by Caren Gussoff

About this story:

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Comments or questions can be directed to me at caren@spitkitten.com.

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Commander Beth says to me, I don't know sometimes how you hold on.

Commander Beth has a home; she welcomes me into it.

Nothing ever happens to Commander Beth, nothing that isn't supposed to. My life, however, reminds her of movies. She offers me sanctuary, and I tell her everything. I always have. In return, she cooks me food, and I tell Commander Beth the way everything has happened to me before I lose the language and courage to do so.

Think of an injury. An ankle, a knee, your wrist. You broke it, you twisted it, it hurt, it swelled. As I say this now, you remember the pain. It soaked across you, invading everything. It was most important. Now, tell me, when did you forget it, forget to favor it, to shift your weight with caution, to care for it?

Now think of a lie from a mouth you loved. Why have you never forgotten that?

"The night was bitterly cold. Somewhere else, a building was burning to the ground, but she was tucked away at a hotel bar drinking shots of Jameson with Baby Boy.

Nineteen years old. He wanted her to teach him.

This was not the first time she'd seen Baby Boy. But this time, she thought she was going to get away clean. Instead, she'd drink the Jameson shots until all she could do was follow and laugh.

But for that moment, she drank Jameson in a hotel bar until Baby Boy took her by the hand and gave her arm a good twist. Then he led her away. They say, somewhere, not too far away, a building was on fire.

When she woke up, she wasn't laughing anymore. The game was on the TV in the hotel room, the Lakers losing to the Heat on their home court. Her forehead was tender, and her wrists were bruised."

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I come to Commander Beth's to rest. We drink a few beers because one or two won't hurt anything and we dance quietly to electronica so we don't wake up Miss Jane Rowe. The Commander Beth wraps me in a quilt; she gives me a place to sleep. All her bedding is so sheer and clean and white. My sheets are marked with stains from a life I don't completely understand.

Your lies were lies of omission. When you lied you said it was because you'd been lied to so often. But are these lies, these lies of omission, because you couldn't possibly tell a comprehensive and objective truth, how you move through the world, second by second? Is there any way to tell that truth? Is the lie what we choose to tell over what we choose to keep silent?

Today, you chose what to wear, what to eat. Where to go, what to tell. How do you make these distinctions?

"I want to share my life with you. I am falling for you, I am falling with you, Baby Boy says in the nightly phone calls she takes outside on the porch, whispering through cigarettes into the receiver.

Oh, Baby Boy. Baby Boy.

Then long sentences turn into short ones, short ones into words. Finally, there is nothing but this woman she has become."

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Miss Jane Rowe is six years old, and like a six year old, her movements hold neither logic nor poetry. She's old enough to remember me, visits to visit, but this morning she ignores me. She strings Cheerios on lengths of Coxswain's fishing line. The entire living room is trip-wired with the garland.

She's been at this for hours, Commander Beth says. I'm afraid I can't stop her.

You are lucid now, attentive to every detail you have never noticed before.

You've walked through cherry trees just past their flowering, petals holding fast to the tops of your boots. You drank a Diet Coke and it burned your throat; you listened to music, When In Rom's "The Promise." You will have to share every detail of this, the time is quickly arriving. Can you even remember the ease with which you lived before this?

"So, she took a cab home from the hotel that first night. She climbed the stairs, she pushed open the door. She made dinner, sinking back Kettle Ones with tonic until she ran out of tonic."

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Commander Beth touches my forehead with the back of her hand, looking for a fever. She inspects my arms, my stomach for swellings. Coxswain is staying with Commander Beth's sister because she contracted chicken pox. They are protecting Miss Jane Row.

He looks perfectly medieval, Commander Beth says. I have no idea how a man his age contracts the chicken pox.

She should get the chicken pox, I tell Commander Beth. She's six years old. If you wait, she could get—and I can't think of the name of the disease.

Shingles, Commander Beth says.

It seems like a funny word, and I look up at the ceiling as if I could see through to the roof.

Commander Beth has a home; she welcomes me into it.

I've heard shingles are painful, I say. I'm surprised Coxswain didn't get those instead.

I am right. Commander Beth knows this. But, she says, then she'd be an adult, and I couldn't stop the pain the anyway.

The details. All the details. The things he says are both tender and exact. Like a word newly learned, now everywhere you notice his kisses, his touch, his need. How could you have missed this before?

You are in two places at once; you are under his hands and you are inside your head.

Are you surprised to learn that the one who has been lied to has all the control?

"This, this is the story. She was twenty-seven years old. She was a fool with an empty heart who spent the night with a boy eight years younger while a building burned to the ground. She took a cab home, she climbed the stairs, she pushed open the door. Kelley was home, watching cartoons, wearing jeans and nothing else. He kissed her ear. He didn't notice anything different. She made them both dinner, something simple. Then they drank Kettle Ones until they ran out of tonic."

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Commander Beth's bathroom is pure and clean. The tiles, the grout, perfectly white, and I throw up all over it.

Commander Beth hands me a wet washcloth. There, she says. It all gets better by the sixth month.

You see it now, the everyday drama, the theatre of the pedestrian. You see him in all the small things, angling the steering wheel to park. Now you see the blood empty from his hands, his knuckles turning to white.

What is he grasping at so tightly?

"Kelley did ask about her night. She told him she drank too much Jameson at the hotel bar, until all she could do was follow the walls with her hands and laugh. She said the walls led her to her room where Cassandra and Sasquatch Alice had already passed out. She told him that Sasquatch Alice moaned in her sleep. Robert Ray and his little brother, Baby Boy, crashed the party and woke them up.

She told him that when they get married, she never wants a bachelorette party like that.

She told him that when she woke up, the Lakers were playing the Heat. She told him Phil Jackson was looking pretty good these days, that she liked his goatee."

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Commander Beth says, I don't know how you hold on. Her face tells me she underestimates herself. Then she says, It's like that movie—but then can't remember the name because she only watches movies about mermaids and dinosaurs these days with Miss Jane Rowe.

I am not a mermaid or a dinosaur.

Commander Beth tries to remember the title. She snaps her fingers in the air.

It could be anything, I tell her. This isn't an exceptional story. The world pivots on betrayal and regret. Consequence.

Commander Beth hands me a plate of sliced green apples and cinnamon toast. I tell Commander Beth everything. I fall into her mercy.

*He loves you. He doesn't know you. He loves you. Planets dangle above you.
The things he counts on, stands upon, sight unseen.*

"Baby Boy wore black and grey and snaking sneakers.

Kelley, at home, wore Levis and nothing else.

Baby Boy spun her around and around and a building burned.

Kelley, at home, folded her pillow into his stomach.

She is not a fool because of an empty heart. She is a fool with what she fills it.

A building burned to the ground, reducing everything inside into only a story to be told.

Baby Boy led her away, led her to a room. Teach me, he said, and held a beer can to her thigh."

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Miss Jane Rowe stacks dolls and stuffed animals around me. There seems to be one of everything: purple pigeons, bears and mice, a goose with a hat, bananas in shorts, a Gibson Girl. She tells me their names: Kendra Lee, Marcel, Jason Bailey, Little Lulu. I am exhausted. Miss Jane Rowe shakes a soft shelled crab at me.

Pay attention, Auntie, she tells me. Or you'll never keep them straight.

Get on a bus and ride until you no longer know where you are. You need to go further than familiar sights, rehearsed moments. Sharpen up. Look at the signs, the stores, the sky, and sink into panic.

Look again. Look at the sky. The planets dangle in space, far, far away. If you went that far and were dropped into this same spot, would you feel less lost? Would it then feel closer to home?

"She listened to him talk on the phone, as she shivered through a cigarette. She listened to what Baby Boy said.

She wanted to believe. Believing makes destiny from simple mistakes.

She remembers he said, I'm falling for you. I am falling with you. Then she told him. And long sentences turned to short ones, short ones into words.

But at first, he said, I'm falling for you. I am falling with you. Maybe she misheard. Maybe he really said, I am falling. I am falling through you."