

AN EXCERPT

THE OBITUARY OF DWIGHT O. AUDREY

PART I: CONCEPTION

My father rolls off my mother. He's sweating. He yawns.

My mother steps out onto the balcony to smoke a cigarette, pinching the bottom hems of her wet, wrinkled nightgown and pulling them down over her knees.

She remains there a while, dreaming of the moon, wishing it were a flaming comet, that it could sweep down and carry her off.

They say that when a mother-to-be yearns for something and doesn't get it, the child-to-be is born with a birthmark in the shape of the desired thing. Could be anything. It could be an ice cream cone or another man.

They also say that whatever a mother can't do, the father can't do. This means he can't smoke. He can't drink alcohol. It might upset her and indirectly hurt the baby.

My mother flicks the butt of her cigarette off the peeling-paint balcony. It lands on the blue Chevrolet that my father gave her for Christmas.

When my father brought it up the drive on Christmas Eve, she immediately said she wished it were red. It would have been more festive that way, more exciting.

This blue was the generic blue of a Windex bottle. It was a business-suit blue, old math textbook blue.

With the wind pushing its way into the bedroom and the white lace curtains pressed over the bedroom lamp, my soon-to-be father tells my soon-to-be mother to come back inside, but she's already on her way in.

My parents both step into the bathroom and share a shower. My mother's clothes are on the clothing hamper, while my father's are layered on the hook behind the bathroom door. She keeps hers loose. She doesn't like the idea of repeatedly folding and unfolding. She doesn't like having systems; they feel too much like living the same day over and again. She is not a news broadcaster, she tells my father when he complains. She isn't a tape recorder, a broken record, a Tellatubbie. She is not prerecorded.

When she does the laundry, and she seldom does, she takes my father's clothes and throws them into an industrial-sized black trash bag at the bottom of the molded basement steps. For weeks, the clothes compile. As they do, my father wonders where all his suits are going, his socks, his ties. Then, one day, the clothes appear in his dresser, in the closet, under the bed where he keeps his socks. He doesn't like to think about it, this time my mother spends downstairs, her habitual hoarding of his worn clothes, the destruction of a perfectly good suit and tie and the almost ritualistic way the clothes arrive one midnight. He tells himself not to think about it, that it is a holy time for my mother, her cleaning. He likes to think of the kitchen, the laundry room, the entire basement as my mother's domain.

After I'm born, he starts to miss the old patriarchy.

While they're in the shower, they don't say a word.

Once the water stops, they both dry off.

Then they return to bed. My father pulls the sheets over them both as he enters behind my mother, wrapping one arm around her hip and the sliding other beneath her head on the pillow.

He tells her that he loves her. She nudges her head back, pressing it against his neck. She tries to get closer to him, as close as she can.

She feels his hot skin on her cheek, his hand sifting through the hairs on her head.

Then they fall asleep.

The next morning, I think, I'm conceived.

PART II. IN UTERO

Can't see a thing. Everything is aqua-echo. All loop and soup, warm and wobbly, safe in my mother's belly.

Sometimes, when my mother visits a South Boston bar, my whole bubble-ball fills with smoke. It's hard to breathe. Maybe that's why I'm born with this disease, this thing that's going to kill me one day. Only right now, I don't know what life is. Life is only this, drifting in my saline soup, attached by my tether to Her.

I dream bits of noise and touch, vague tremors in my head, colors that don't exist.

PART III. THE WAITING ROOM

*

Soon my mother-to-be starts to have morning sickness. She vomits in the sink when she drinks milk. She thinks she's developed lactose intolerance.

When she goes in alone to see the doctor, he suggests a pregnancy test. She leaves angry with him for not suggesting a G.I. series.

She drives to the pharmacy, goes to aisle 3 for a home pregnancy test. Then, while awaiting the cashier, she faints.

*

When my father learns that I am due, he tells my mother that he thinks she should have an abortion. A baby can't come into a household like this, he says. We can't even take care of a fichus the way we are.

A week later, he tells my mother he wants to treat her to a movie. She's been working so hard; he just wants her to relax.

He stops the car in front of a free health clinic. The sign in front advertises an abortion program. They give post-abortion therapy and send you to a spa the following day. It's like a summer camp for women who don't want children.

My mother says nothing. She looks at the sign, then down the road ahead. In the summer haze, the road sizzles like a heated grill.

My mother opens her car door, walks around the back of the car and keeps walking.

She makes the 7:15 showing of the movie and watches it alone. ■