

THAT'S WHAT YOU REMEMBER [An Essay in Third Person]

By Jill Christman

She was in the grocery store sulking past forbidden sugar cereals when she stopped, looked around, and realized she could put a box of Froot Loops in her cart if she wanted. Could she? She was thirty-four years old. She did. Nobody stopped her—who would stop her?—but she kept checking her back until she made it out to the parking lot and got all the bags into the car.

At home, the milk turned a putrid gray, and even dry, the bright sugar rings weren't as good as she remembered them. She sat at the wooden table in the kitchen with the baby, sliding the red ones into place for the top arc of a cereal rainbow and remembering the Atari her brother had won back in the mid-seventies with his drawing of Toucan Sam in the Kellogg's "Stick up for Breakfast" contest. The only game was Pong, a drifting dot and two straight-line paddles locked in a perpetual bling-boing-bling. How would she ever communicate to her new-millennium daughter the excitement, the thrill, of the day that Atari arrived in its plain brown box? For months, her brother—celebrated artist, creator of the winning Sam-in-the-jungle scene—reigned as king of the neighborhood.

She was down to the greens in her ROY G. BIV rainbow when she realized something, something big: They could catch a plane. They could buy tickets, fly out of dreary, frozen Indiana and celebrate the rest of Christmas vacation somewhere sunny—and alone. This was revelatory. A full year into her daughter's life and Jill suddenly understood that she was the mother.

She chose a family-run hotel in Madeira Beach near St. Petersburg. Their room had a little kitchen with one of those undersized stoves and a too-bright fluorescent light, but the double glass doors

looked out over the bay where the proprietor seemed always to be busy on his sailboat, Island Woman. That's the thing about men and their boats, she thought—they can never get enough. There's always something to fiddle with, a reason to pull her out of the water, sink her back in, sand her down, shine her up. A man with a boat never lacks for something to do.

Her own husband, boatless, was still sleeping in the king-sized bed under the giant straw fan, and Jill sat cross-legged next to the baby tossing Cheerios onto the tray of her booster chair. They faced the water and the man. Boat TV. A pelican—the baby's first!—sailed in and landed hard on a piling. "Look, Ella! Look! A pelican!" She could have called that bird anything—a sea gull, a loon or an osprey, an ostrich for heaven sakes—and the baby would have believed her. But she didn't. She called it a pelican.

That afternoon, they set up the booster chair on a picnic table and drank margaritas and ate blackened grouper sandwiches on the dock. The baby munched fries and smeared ketchup in her hair. Men in tight suits buzzed by in weird parachute machines that reminded her of the jet pack police in Fahrenheit 451. A gull dove down to steal a fry and her husband covered his head with his hands, threatened to scream like a little girl. That night was New Year's Eve and she fell asleep on the couch in front of the glass doors despite the blasts of color exploding over the water. Her husband woke her up with a mid-night kiss just as Regis talked the ball down in Times Square (Regis? Where's Dick Clark?) and they went together into the bedroom to kiss their sleeping angel on her fat cheeks. She felt a kind of surreal happiness and thought, This is probably as good as it gets.

The next afternoon, while the other two napped, Jill took her book down to the dock to show her Indiana-white legs to the Florida sun, breathe in some air the wind had cleaned on the salty water.

She was never alone these days. She found a spot on a bench and another seaplane pelican, all pouch and hold, skimmed low across the water, eyes trained down, looking to scoop up some morsels, swallow them whole and squirming. From a distance, the pelican had seemed so exotic. Up close, she could see the pelican was filthy, mangy. A dirty bird.

Her book wasn't even cracked before a little girl came skipping down the planks of the dock on her bare feet and cast a towel in a flap of rainbow colors down on the warm wood.

"Mmm," the girl said. "I think I'll set up here for a while!" She was six, she reported, her name was Cameron, and she was here in Florida with her mom and dad for a whole week. After this, they'd go to see her sister's baby who had just learned to walk. Cameron wanted to know if Jill had any sisters or babies and she told her, feeling lucky, that she had both. Two sisters and one baby, my own little girl, also one, who's sleeping up in the room. Cameron took that in, told her that Ella was a good name, and then mentioned the brother she never sees. He was in some kind of trouble, she wasn't sure. She'd like to see all of them more—the sister with the baby, the baby, the brother—but she was careful to let Jill know they don't all live together. They can't. They live all over the country. All over the country. Jill noticed Cameron's flare for emphasis, one word in every sentence, often where she'd least expect it.

As Cameron talked, lying on her belly, her bare feet stirred the air in rapid circles and her palms patted the colors of her towel. Every paragraph or two, she required a bit of information. "Do you have any brothers?"

"Yes," Jill reported, "and he has a little girl exactly your age." Jill's eyes flicked up to the mother lying by the kidney-shaped pool, a pool only big enough for children to really get going in, but beautiful in a tropical way, palm trees and shine. The mother looked to be about forty, so she would have been about her age when she had Cameron. Not a young mother. The other mother's sunglasses pointed down towards her book. An older man sat two lounge chairs away, talking

business on a cell phone—probably almost sixty, and that explained the sister with the baby, the brother too far away to see, maybe in some kind of trouble. . .

Cameron popped up from her towel, all long brown legs and round eyes. She couldn't stay down for long. She was made of springs and tendons. "Well," she said, "I guess I'd better throw these shells back in the water so they can become sand!" She produced a handful of shells out of nowhere, scuttled to the edge of the dock, still chattering about the fish she saw earlier, bigger than these little fish, much bigger, but look at all those fish now. Do you see them? And she cast the shells, a handful of tiny white shells, like beads or confetti, across the calm surface of the water and they sprayed down, a lovely sprinkle of sound. Together they watched them sink down through interested fish and onto the sandy bottom. "Watch," Cameron instructed, "now watch." And the sand on the bottom shifted and danced—was it moving all that time? before the shells?—and Cameron's luminescent shells absorbed into the tawny grains. "See? See? Now they will become sand."

Although she'd be loathe to confess, Jill wasn't always one to enjoy the company of other people's children, but she liked this Cameron. She sparkled, but the way she talked to her was terrifying. Jill found herself wishing she wouldn't tell her so much. There's too much not to trust in this world, and strange ladies sitting on docks are probably one of them. Also, there was something behind her eyes, something old. Something that reminded her of herself.

Her husband walked down to the dock carrying the baby. Ella squinted into the bright light to marvel at the lively creature standing on the dock next to her mother, so much better than a pelican. "This is my baby," she told Cameron. "This is Ella." Cameron reached out for Ella's cheeks and

pinched them just as an old woman might do. Ella hated to be pinched, but she didn't cry.

Cameron's eyes were too round. Too much like her own eyes.

With a bigger audience, Cameron turned business-like, played the experienced tourist. After all, they'd been there for a week. She gave her review of the Dali museum. At first, they heard "dolly" because she was six, but their misimpression didn't last long. "You have to touch the fur when you first go in. It's red. You have to touch it." Cameron was full of instructions. "Then you look into this box and it's like a frame. Inside it's a face, but it's not a face. There are two pictures on the wall and they're the eyes. Then there's a fire. That's the nose. And a couch is the mouth."

For the rest of the afternoon, Cameron trailed Jill and the baby wherever they went on the hotel grounds. She followed them when they took the bag with the dirty diapers to the dumpster, and then she skipped behind her until her nose pressed against their glass door. She must have known she wasn't supposed to come in, and she hadn't been invited, but she came terribly close. "We're in four," Cameron announced. "Right there." Pointing. "Okay, I guess. I'll see you later." When she backed away, her eyes were funny again, that same look, darting around to see if anybody was watching.

Shouldn't somebody be watching?

Jill remembered a time when she was a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Alabama, hanging out with boys, the kind of boys a good feminist wouldn't hang out with on a normal day—body-ogling, PBR-swigging boys who were fun to play pool with because they were smart and funny and could quote poetry even when they were many, many sheets to the wind. These boys were graduate teaching assistants just like her, and one day, an out-of-a-magazine co-ed from her English 101 class came into her office weeping about her life, pledging that she would do

anything to make a C in the class. She was wearing a tank top over another tank top, both lycra, no bra, and she put her breasts on the desk. Put them there. The act seemed unconscious— why would it be otherwise? force of habit?—but there they were, placed there, like a bottle of Coke or a literature anthology. On the desk. And she couldn't help but look at them, sitting there. She explained about the final paper and the revision process, but she was thinking: Shit. My God. What if I wasn't me? What if I was one of those boys?

Later, entering the red mouth of the Dali museum in St. Petersburg, Jill stopped to peer into the hole, and with one hand on the baby's stroller and the other on Dali's box, she could see that Cameron remembered everything exactly: the frame eyes, the fire nose, the couch mouth. "Don't you think that's pretty impressive, Mark?" she asked her husband. "She's only six."

"Not really," her husband said. "That's what you remember. You remember what's at the beginning and what's at the end."

She put her own eyes back up to the box and forced her mind to turn: a face, a living room, a face, a living room. The baby tossed her Dali finger pup- pet onto the floor and Jill took this as a signal to keep moving.

When they pulled into the hotel parking lot, she waved when she saw Cameron in the back seat of a white rental car. Cameron looked down without waving back. Jill couldn't see the other mother's eyes beneath her dark sunglasses, but she could tell she was looking right at her. The other mother's mouth was a straight line, a couch—no cushions. More of a bench, really.

In the morning, Cameron was not by the pool. The family had checked out.

Jill was disappointed. She had wanted to thank Cameron for recommending the museum. She wanted to tell her they'd touched the red fur, and everything in the box was just as Cameron had said it would be, she'd remembered exactly: a face, a living room, a face. . . and still, she had imagined saying to Cameron, there's no place to relax, is there? No place to sit, not without messing up the face. What's that blot on the mouth? A bad tooth? A canker? Oh. No. It's Dad, sitting on the couch. Jill had thought maybe this would make Cameron laugh. Such a serious little girl—she had wanted to make her laugh.

Outside the glass doors, the man worked on his boat, sanding down the bowsprit. He whistled while he worked. The day was so perfect, the sun on the water, it made her eyes hurt. Under the rippling surface, Jill imagined Cameron's shells, everything becoming sand.

She wiped the applesauce from the baby's face with a wet cloth and walked to the open door of the bedroom. She could see her husband lying spread eagle on the floral bedspread. The straw fan on the wall was a kind of sombrero, the open fingers on each of his hands a fringe of flirty lashes, eyeball palms, head and torso nose, legs forming those lines that trace from our noses to the edges of our lips—what are those lines called?. . . but no mouth. She imagined curling herself onto the bottom of the bed to finish the picture. She could reach up and around her husband's feet, touch her fingers and toes to bold hibiscus cheeks on the horrible bedspread, and become a grinning mouth. Maybe she could grab the baby from her chair and plunk her, round and perfect, on the bottom corner. She could be a mole. A beauty mark!

Yes, she thought, scooping up the baby. That's what you remember. You remember what's at the beginning and what's at the end. Even if nobody was there to see her, she would be the smile.