

AERIALIST

The night of the fall equinox I walked into the living room from the kitchen. Katie stood suspended above the ground, arms out from her sides, eyes locked in concentration, bare legs flexed, ballet slipper-clad feet poised, one in front of the other, on a wrought iron curtain rod propped between couch and coffee table.

Katie has always had a tremendous sense of balance. When she was a month old, she could push herself to her feet, holding tight to my fingers, to her mother's fingers, and rock there, flexing leg muscles that even then longed to assert themselves. Ever since she could walk, she's been fascinated with moving on the edges of things, balancing, arms out, concentration furrowing her brow.

But I wasn't prepared for this: my five-year-old hovering two feet off the living room floor, walking across a rod as if it were an earth-bound curbstone.

"Katie," I said, ignoring the pork and vegetables that were in danger of burning, "How did you do that?" My eyes locked on hers. My body ready to pounce at the slightest hint of a fall.

The coy Katie grin, the one where she knows she's on to something, danced across her lips, but she said nothing.

"Little bird," I said. "How long have you been able to do this?"

Katie paused in her trek through the firmament of our living room, and placed an index finger on her lips.

"Shh, Dad," she said. "I'm practicing."

Sometimes you have to give yourself over to mystery. I tried to accept this as something Katie could do. Some children have a knack for Legos, some for puzzles. My wife Monica, when she was alive, had double-jointed elbows. Katie could walk on air.

I tried to remain rooted in practicalities. Logistics. How had she moved the curtain rod from behind the couch? I'd forgotten it was there, after months of intending to install it. How had she hoisted the heavy wrought iron? How had it occurred to her? These questions I could handle. They had potential answers. Other questions terrified me – *how – where – had my child learned this?*

One fall day, just at the time Monica got sick, the sky an angry silver, air turning cold, Katie at three, climbing to the observation deck at Blue Hills. Scrambling her way up this mountain, keeping up, my brother-in-law Joel and I experienced hikers. I kept waiting for Katie to give up, to ask to be carried. But she climbed, clawed, strode her way up, purposeful. At the summit, we stood on flat rock, looking out over Greater Boston, all three of us hands on hips. The amazement in Katie's blue eyes. Her ability to command this view. We couldn't get her to leave. She stood on an outcrop, leaned into the wind, unconcerned by the void below. I had to pull her back, kicking and screaming, vertigo dizzying me as I looked down. But this isn't the sort of thing that makes you conclude that your daughter is going to be an aerialist.

Some people would call me a recluse since Monica died. I don't get out much. Moved my business home. Rarely meet clients. But here's how I see it. Katie's all I've got left, and it takes everything I have to protect her.

"What does the future hold for her," I asked Monica one evening as we warmed ourselves with tea. Nightly tea after putting Katie to bed is a ritual we've continued since Monica's death a year ago. No, I'm not crazy. I know she's not really there. It's just that some things are too important to let go.

"How do we prepare her for a career? Do we send her to college? Encourage her to join the circus?"

Monica is able to take things in stride in a way that I am not. When I asked her if she'd seen any unusual behavior in Katie, anything remarkable, she said not especially.

"Are you sure?"

"You mean like head spinning, or levitation?" Monica laughed. "No, nothing like that." She wrapped a sweater around her, rainbow knit, navy trim, silver buttons. I didn't recall her having a sweater like that.

I told her about the curtain rod incident I'd walked in on. "Oh, that," she said, smiling. "Enjoy it, Nick. It's a gift."

Sunday morning living room. Cold wind outside, rattling windows. Ruffling power lines. Katie on the floor, Play-Doh Fun Factory spread before her. Wavy green strips for grass. Pink and purple trees. I stood on a step stool attaching metal brackets to the window frame with a Phillips screwdriver. Dampness leaked in through cracks in the sill. Across the driveway, our neighbor Lauren, on her porch, rocked her infant son Gregory. In our yard, the plastic climbing structure which, until recently, had been Katie's favorite toy.

"It's not fair," Katie said.

"It's not a tightrope." I turned the screw tight, tested the bracket with my weight. Katie looked up. Looked outside.

"When will Mommy be home?"

Cold wind on my spine. I steadied myself against the wall. "What do you mean?"

She added a midnight blue tree to her landscape. "What time will Mommy be home?"

A restriction in my chest. A flash of anger, followed immediately by the realization that she did not, she could not, mean this to hurt me. I touched her hair. "Mommy's gone, honey. She died. She won't be coming home."

Katie straightened her Play-Doh grass. Wind shook the window. "Oh. Yeah."

A week later, Joel appeared. I hadn't seen my brother-in-law since the funeral, where he seemed to think he alone was entitled to grief. Then, just last month, a dramatic act of extended grieving had landed him in a Montana hospital. He'd called me from there, at two or three in the morning. I'd tried to be sympathetic, but it wasn't my first impulse. Monica had fought so hard to live.

Katie was due home from school any moment. I'd thought it would be her at the door. I'd thought Joel was still in Montana. But there he was, on my doorstep, come to show me his wounds.

He insisted. Right away, first thing when he took off his coat. "Here," he said, rolling up the sleeves of his red flannel shirt. "Look." He turned the cuffs up three folds. I kept an eye on the door, ready to derail Katie. "Look," he commanded, then said, "Here's why you should never, ever use a dull razor." Both our eyes were on the cuts. Inch-long, jagged, scar tissue still tender. Puffy and red. "I'm going to have to develop an interest in cuff links." He waited until our eyes met, held mine for a moment.

I wondered at this gesture. It did keep my eyes from being drawn to his wrists throughout our conversation. Addressed my morbid curiosity and removed one obstacle to us getting on with our friendship.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." Across the street, a group of crows circled the open space where, until last week, an oak tree had stood. Loudly cawed their protest. "I know I don't want to die."

"Good. That's good. "

When Joel was eleven and Monica eighteen, their father had closed himself in the garage one autumn morning, started the car, and drifted off to sleep. Left a note on the dresser that Joel still carries with him. I've never figured out if he believes it will protect him, or if he thinks it will someday explain his own actions. After their father's death, Monica became a second mother, and Joel became melodramatic.

The front door swung open and Katie charged through, backpack trailing behind her. "Daddy!"

She landed in my lap before she saw Joel. Dropped the backpack to the floor. Wrapped her arms around him. Her head on his knee.

"Hey, kiddo," he said, stroking her hair. Joel has his sister's high cheekbones. Her slightly off-balance smile.

She touched the wound on his wrist. "What happened?"

My neck and ears felt hot. Joel beat me to an answer.

"I had an accident."

"Oh. Are you going to die?"

Joel blushed. "I hope not."

"Good." She pulled at his arm. "Wanna play?"

"I have to meet a friend," he said. Katie frowned. Joel was a vapor that appeared and disappeared in our lives. "I wanted to let you know I was in town. This guy's giving me a place to stay."

"Waah. Will you come tomorrow?"

I stood up. "I'm not sure how much Joel will be around, sweetheart."

Katie had moved onto the arm of the chair. Held Joel's sleeve. He met her eyes.

"I'll be around as much as you want, kiddo."

You've got to build something from what fragments you can. Leaves. Falling like confetti. Sun not seen in days. Sky the color of a fading bruise. Red maple. Weeping myrtle. The trees Monica taught me to recognize. The cork tree she loved to climb. The smell of the soil in my garden. Walks in the woods. The moments where you plug into your body, where a copper-colored leaf floats by on the wind, bearing snatches of conversation from autumn afternoons. The day Monica told me she was going to have a baby. The day she told me she was going to die. So much goes by unnoticed, it's a victory just to catch a glimpse. To hear a moment pass, to let it carry you. The trick on days like this is to stay warm.

On Sunday afternoons, Katie and I go for ice cream. As much as we can eat. Banana splits. Enormous sundaes. The Trough. We gorge ourselves. Katie can't do quite as much damage as I can. She's five and just a wisp of a thing, but she eats with abandon. It's a ritual we have, and we take rituals seriously.

Two days after Joel's visit, I still walked around in a daze. I couldn't shake the feeling that his arrival made me somehow accountable for his survival and well-being. That he somehow wanted it that way. But he hadn't left any way to reach him, or any clear sense of his destination. Where was he staying? When would I see him? Did I want to?

I had slept late. Left Katie playing in her room while I went downstairs to shower. Came out rubbing my hair dry with a towel. I sensed right away that something was wrong. Shadows. The wrong kind of silence. I reached the base of the stairs and looked up. Perched atop a railing along the second floor hallway, Katie walked, striped in sunlight, arms extended, perfectly poised.

I hurled myself up the stairs, plucked her off the banister, landed her on her bed. "Dad," she moaned. "What are you doing?"

I shut the door. Paced. Breathed. Fish sheets. Pink comforter. "Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?"

"I was practicing."

"Children play, Katie. Legos are playing. Drawing pictures of ballerinas." I felt dizzy. Rubbed a hand across my face. "How do I get this through to you?" Katie sat on the edge of her bed. Watched me. Frustrated. Curious.

Only one thing occurred to me. I worked hard to keep my voice calm. "You're grounded."

She cocked her head at me. Feet swinging above the floor. Baffled. "What's grounded?"

I sat next to her. Her body so small. Crows complained outside her window. "Tethered," I said. "Safe."

Her eyes on me. Afraid to ask.

I groped for words. "It means you can't do that anymore." I patted her knee. "It means no ice cream today."

Oak leaves dotted the driveway. A gentle wind whirled them around. I watched Katie watch the neighbors out the window. Lauren, on her porch, nursing Gregory in a straight-backed wood chair. Lauren and her partner Sue bought the house a month or two ago. It used to belong to the captain of a merchant ship, an older man, rarely home. Now Lauren does this. Sits quietly. As if she's lurking. But I might be imagining this. After all, it's not my fault Katie's mother died.

Katie's fingers on the window. She had not spoken to me since the grounding. Could not understand. Could not be expected to, as much as I might wish it otherwise. Leaned forward, nose pressed against the glass, face reflected. Her voice, from far away. "Not fair. Gregory has two moms, and I don't have any."

*

"I need to find a job."

Joel had come by for a visit. Early. Too early. Saturday morning sun poured through living room windows, past the saguaro Monica and I had bought ourselves as a wedding present. Joel sat in an overstuffed chair his mother had given us. I'd made coffee. Katie slept.

"Planning to stay in town?" My stomach muscles tightened. I preferred the idea of supporting Joel via long-distance phone calls.

He nodded. "I think so. I like Boston."

Katie on the phone with him at Christmas. Her birthday. Annual visits. I could be comfortable with that.

"I have you here. Other friends." Joel looked around the room, a room that for him as well as for me must reverberate with hauntings of Monica. An almost imperceptible expectation that she might enter the room at any moment, one you don't even realize you're feeling until you catch yourself marking her absence. "I can learn to be an uncle."

Uncles took children to the park. Pushed them on the swings. Bought them snow cones. Uncles did not slit their wrists.

I sipped coffee. Tucked my feet under me on the couch. Kept quiet.

"It's not that I resented Monica's happiness," Joel said. I stared at the coffee cup he cradled in his hands. At his cuts. A suspicion began to form in the back of my brain: the real reason Joel had come. I couldn't help wondering if Joel's cuts – shorter than I expected, not as deep – represented more a play for attention than a serious attempt on his life. Couldn't help wondering if this were nothing but an elaborate show for our benefit. Katie and I the latest stop on the Joel grief tour. And I hated myself for wondering.

"I envy how easy it seemed for her," he said. "The way she could come home, pop in a movie, eat take-out Chinese from a carton, and be perfectly, unquestioningly content. It's amazing. We grew up in the same house. Ate the same foods."

And unspoken, but understood, *witnessed the same tragedy*.

Joel leaned forward, elbows on knees. Fingers intertwined. "I'm sorry, Nick."

In the end, Monica weak, in constant pain. Joel had promised to come, to help. Decided he couldn't handle it. *I can't see my sister that way*. Warm mug against my fingers. A measure of reassurance. "What do you want me to say? We needed you. It didn't happen. So here we are."

Katie shifted in her bed. Moaned softly.

"I just don't know if I can handle you floating in and out of our lives."

Joel shook his head. "I'm here to stay."

Even he laughed. The spark of humor in his eyes. Joel's face a mirror of Monica. Of Katie. "Maybe it's a chemical balance I can correct. Discipline myself into a positive outlook. Prozac my way to happiness."

I'm a wallower myself. But I resented this turning into a sympathy-for-Joel session. The growing feeling that this was all about his need.

Katie wandered in, her eyes half sleepy. Touched my hand. Planted herself in Joel's lap. "What are you talking about?"

Joel balanced her on his knee.

"Grownup stuff," I said. I kissed the top of her head, the part in her fine, sandy hair. Took Joel's empty mug.

In the kitchen, I poured coffee. I didn't want Joel there. Didn't want to help him. To acknowledge our mutual need.

Easy laughter from the living room.

When I returned, sun cast Katie's graceful shadow on the far wall. Atop the couch, she stretched one leg back, into air, reached her arms out, down, to touch the fabric.

Joel applauded. "That's great."

I set down the coffee. My stomach knotted. "Yup. Great. Now get down."

Katie stood on the corner, where the arm meets the back. Balanced. Arms folded.
"Da-ad. I'm practicing. Joel's going to teach me a dismount – that's a cool way to get off."

"I know what it is. And he's not teaching you anything. Get down."

Silence hung in the air. Katie obeyed. Stood beside the couch, as if it were a
balance beam.

Joel flushed. "What'd I do?"

"Nothing. It's not safe."

"It's fine."

"It's not your decision."

"All I mean is, I used to do it."

I felt myself go cold. "What do you mean?"

"I was a gymnast through high school."

Katie's eyes widened. "Cool!"

I felt as if I were in free fall. No ground in sight.

*This memory plays in black-and-white, a vintage film. Ferris wheel at the edge of
the Pacific. Santa Monica. Holding hands. Cool breeze blowing grease and salt
smells from boardwalk toward ocean, salt and sand from ocean toward
boardwalk. Monica and I high above ground, above ocean. Despite my fear. I
won't let go, she said. Won't let you fall. The seat we rode in swung back and
forth. Squeaks. Suspended in the air, feet dangling, just past the wheel's apex.
Nothing under us. Spring sunshine warming our backs. Me squeezing. She:
You're hurting my hand. Relax. Standing up. See? It's beautiful. The wheel jerked
down a notch. Monica lurched forward, back. Nearly lost her balance. Laughed. I
could see her tumbling into the void. We did not know then that she was dying.*

Just a Monday afternoon on Santa Monica beach, carousel calliope playing.

Monica happy, flying, without a net.

There's nothing in the book our pediatrician gave us about tightrope walking as a normal developmental phase. I checked. Sat in my den and pored over the text, searching for clues. I was willing to make a reach. It didn't have to specifically mention tightropes. I might have settled for any inclination toward a circus act. But nothing.

"I don't want him around her." I paced in front of the fold-out couch in the den. Monica hovered in the doorway, arms wrapped around her. "It's getting cold," she said.

"Monica."

"You're overreacting. They share a talent. He wants to help."

I reached for her hand. "You don't think this is scary?"

"I think you're doing great."

"I feel inept."

"She takes after my side of the family."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Nights had begun to turn cold. Frost predicted.

She rubbed my shoulders. "With Dad, it was like he never really belonged to this world." Rested her hands. "Joel is so much like him."

"That's why I don't want him around her."

Monica smiled. "Katie's different. She's like me."

Although Monica's hands felt cold on my shoulders, I didn't want her to move.

"You're telling me you think this is a good idea?"

"She'll be okay. They need each other." Her voice trailed off.

She shivered.

"Put a sweater on. You don't want to catch something."

She crossed her arms tight in front of her chest.

"What?" I touched her arm.

She smiled. Her voice low. "I miss her, Nick."

Friday evening. Joel was going to take us to the Children's Museum. I had reluctantly agreed. He was half an hour late.

Katie asked me if I would take down the curtain rod so she could "practice."

"No," I said. "Absolutely not."

She hesitated. Stood with one hand on the couch, her eyes locked on me. "Why?" she said.

"We've talked about this." I tried to remain calm. Patient. "No more. It's not safe."

"I'll put pillows under." She'd pulled her hair into a short ponytail, which made her look older. Like Monica.

"No."

"I can do it," she said, twisting her body in anger. "I need to."

I could feel my teeth grind. "Katie, you're five years old."

"Dad, I already *know* that." Her fingers gripped the upholstery. Dug in. "You never let me do anything."

"The answer is no."

I picked up the phone to call Joel. His roommate answered. Joel wasn't there.

He never showed up. Katie and I ended the evening in her room. She surrounded by stuffed animals. Bears. Kangaroos. Zebra. I tried to explain to her that grownups sometimes forget, and quietly hoped that's all it was.

Katie had the animals divided in two groups.

"What'cha got going there, Katie?"

She pointed. "That's Elizabeth with her four moms, and that's Nina. She's got five moms."

Back yard. Raking leaves. Sun dipping into orange, sinking toward winter. Joel had come to apologize.

"Hey." He stood in the shadow of the myrtle, testing his reception.

I dug into a cluster of leaves, tearing at grass to pull them free. "She was counting on you."

"I couldn't do it." He moved out of the shadow. Hands in pockets. "Where is she?"

A leaf dropped beside me, fiery red, floating. Joel made it so easy to be angry with him, so difficult to express it.

"Grounded."

Joel nodded his head. Smiled a little.

I scooped leaves onto the pan of the rake, held them there with my free hand, tried to deposit them in the bag. Half of them fell to the ground. Joel held the bag open.

"Here," he said. "Let me help."

I collected the spillage and tried again.

"You know, I found her walking on the second floor railing. Could have killed herself." I blushed. "Sorry. Figure of speech."

Joel smiled. "Sounds like we've got a situation."

"We?"

"I'd like to help."

I jammed the rake a little too hard into the bag, tearing it a bit.

"It's a little more complicated than missing the Children's Museum," he said.

"Some days it just isn't there."

"Fine. Do what you need to do. Get your shit together. Just don't drag Katie down."

"Drag her down?"

Joel held open the thick plastic bag while I scooped in leaves.

"Let's just say you tend to disappear when people are counting on you."

Joel let the bag rest against his leg.

I squinted into sunset to see his face.

"You have no idea how badly I wanted to give myself over to grief."

"Look," Joel said. "I can't promise anything. But I plan to be here." He watched me pick leaves from the metal tines of the rake. "And I'd like to help."

"Yeah? How?" I wanted my voice to sound harsher than it did.

"I have an idea. It would give Katie an outlet, and make it a little safer. More controlled."

Wind stole leaves from the top of the bag. Swirled them at our feet.

"I'm listening."

"We set up a tightrope in the back yard. String something under it as a net."

"No, Joel."

"It's a good idea, Nick. She needs *something*."

"Absolutely not."

Steam rose from two mugs, side by side on the coffee table. Earl Grey, honey, lemon. Monica beside me on the couch.

"I can't do it, Monica. There are too many ways she can get hurt. I turn my back for a second. She can burn herself on the stove. Slip in the bathtub. Everyday things. Let alone this." Wind shook the windows. Monica's arm around my shoulder. "I'm so afraid I'm going to lose her."

Monica held me. I wanted to stay there forever.

"You can't keep her from hurt, Nick. As much as you might want to." There were tears in Monica's eyes. Her hands were cold.

I woke with a stiff neck. Street light glowed through the window. It took me a minute to realize I was on the couch. Television on. How many hours had passed? A

weather map, garish in orange and magenta. The smell of Earl Grey. Someone in the doorway. I smiled. "Still here?"

"What'cha doing, Dad?" Katie, blanket in hand. Hair tousled. Rubbing her eyes.

My jaw tightened. "Katie, you're supposed to be asleep."

She plopped next to me on the couch. I fought tears. Could feel them escaping down my cheeks.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

A cartoon cloud moved across the weather map, bringing rain to the entire northeast. I put my arm around her, and she nestled into me, her blanket on my chest. I didn't want to be disappointed to see my daughter.

"Nothing, kiddo. I'm just tired."

The blessing and the curse of self-employment is you get to be your own boss. I had become too good at avoiding work. Wednesday afternoon, three-thirty. Katie a few minutes late from school. I stared out the window, which overlooks a hill and a small playground with a spiral slide that Katie has always loved to ride. I pondered what I might cook for dinner.

A shadow caught my attention, out the corner of my eye. I watched. Saw nothing out of the ordinary. Reached for a cookbook. But it happened a second time, my eye drawn to movement outside. This time I let my gaze linger. A cold sensation grew in my belly. I moved to the window.

Katie in air, arms extended, walking slowly, carefully, confidently across the power line that ran between our house and Lauren's.

I've seen squirrels walk that wire. I was not prepared for the sight of my daughter there. It took a minute to register. I opened the window.

"Katie."

She turned her head in surprise, had to steady herself, waving her arms, this five-year-old, twenty feet above solid ground. "Daddy," she said. "What are you doing?"

"What are *you* doing?"

"Practicing."

I breathed deeply. Shifted gears inside. Nodded my head. "Practice is good, honey. Practice is a fine and noble thing. But you're awfully high up."

"I know, Dad, but the important thing is not to look down. Like the Ferris Wheel."

"And that's an electrical wire. It's dangerous. If you touch a part of it that's not covered with rubber, you could be electrocuted." I was trying hard to be the competent parent, responding to a natural phase in my daughter's development.

Katie's voice. "What's electrocuted mean?"

"It means hurt badly. Maybe even killed. Please come back in."

A squirrel hovered on the red maple, on its way toward the wire. Head cocked, it regarded this child in the air, as if trying to connect the moment with the rest of its experience, so that it might know what to do next.

"I just want to cross there." Katie pointed at the corner of Lauren's roof, no more than ten feet beyond her.

"No. Katie. Come back."

A sound drew both Katie's attention and mine. Lauren's head emerged from her second floor window. Her face wore a startled expression. She stared at Katie, at me. I looked back at her.

There seemed little to say. No way to explain.

The squirrel had turned itself sideways on the tree, watching. Wary. Katie's lack of movement was becoming a problem; she teetered.

"Dad, I've got to move." She took a step toward Lauren's house.

I thought about running downstairs with a sheet, following under her, judging wind conditions, gauging the trajectory of a potential fall. But I couldn't make myself

move from this place of coaching, coaxing, a place from which I imagined I could take action if needed. I was so close. But a part of me knew the futility. That she was beyond me. That if she truly lost her balance, I was helpless. I couldn't get there in time, even if *I* could walk on air.

Katie wobbled. Took a step for balance. Hovered. Hindered by her concern about disobeying me.

"Dad," Katie said, voice urgent, arms making small circles in the air.

Lauren was less than ten feet away. Eyes alert. Arms ready.

I had no choice. "Do you mind?" I asked her.

Lauren answered without moving her head, without letting her eyes waver from the child who took slow, small steps toward her window. "Not at all." The words, too, came slowly, as if to speak them faster would upset a delicate balance. "That would be fine."

"I'll make hot chocolate," I heard myself say.

I doubt that Lauren even heard me. Her eyes were riveted on Katie's feet, moving a few inches at a time, unerringly toward her goal. We could do nothing but watch as she negotiated the final few steps and sat down on Lauren's window sill, as Lauren wrapped a quick arm around her, and Katie shot me her most triumphant aren't-you-proud-of-me-Daddy smile, before Lauren pulled her inside, and I went downstairs to make hot chocolate.

Some people seem able to hold memories uncomplicated by paradox. Mine are full of contradiction. Fall: a park near Pittsfield. Monica, Katie and I. A family at play. Windex-blue sky. Monica pulling four-month-old Katie out of the Snuggli, holding her up, in her arms, above her, then down. Mother and daughter, eye to eye, dappled sunlight, spinning slowly, side to side, baby as airplane, the smile up to Katie's eyes. I bent to gather a perfect acorn. Stood to see mother and daughter

fall. Disappear from sight. Sound ceased. The universe compressed into the space between my family and myself. Ran, horror images playing in my brain. Looked over a leaf-covered rock ledge. Below, a few feet below, Monica, on her back, in a bed of leaves, Katie held above her, safe, laughing.

Two mugs on the coffee table. Steam rising. Monica gone to get a blanket.

Katie appeared in the doorway. "Can't sleep."

I patted the couch beside me. "Have a seat, kiddo."

She sat. We stared at the glow from the street light. "What'cha thinkin' about, Dad?"

"About your mom."

Katie touched my knee, traced a line with her index finger. "What was she like?"

Pain fresh, a wound re-opened moment by moment. "What do you remember?" I could hear Monica pattering through the linen closet.

"She had a pretty voice. She used to sing me the song without words."

Echoes of a voice. A melody.

October afternoon. Liver-colored sky. Yellowing leaves dotted the back yard maple. Returning from a meeting on the North Shore, I parked the car, gravel crunching under tires. Heard Katie, her laugh, in the back yard, Joel encouraging her.

I walked back. "Hey."

Katie, perched on a rope Joel and I had strung from myrtle to maple in our back yard, three hammocks bridging the gap underneath, providing the security I needed.

"Hi, Daddy." Katie walking toward me on the rope, gracefully, naturally. I had to remind myself she wasn't on the ground. Joel, the proud coach, watching.

I touched Joel's elbow. He grinned. On the porch next door, Gregory dozed in Lauren's arms, tucked close to her chest. "Katie's been practicing something for you," Joel said. "She hasn't quite got it, but she's close."

A scattering of fallen leaves had begun to cover the climbing structure, the domain of other children her age.

"Do I want to see this?"

Lauren's voice wafted across the driveway, a distant lullaby.

"What do you think, Katie? Are you ready to show your Dad?"

"Sure."

Joel looked over at me. A yellow leaf drifted past his ear. "Brace yourself," he said.

I sat on the grass, legs crossed.

Katie turned, her back to me. Took three steps away and hurled herself backward, into air, into sky, legs gently propelling, upside down, floating above the rope, my body resisting the urge to leap forward, to catch her, her feet spinning back toward earth. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Joel, smiling, confident. Katie's face a big, blurry grin. In her element. *Where did this come from? Where will it lead?* I can't answer those questions. What I can do is wait for Katie to land, and hold her while she's here.