

Water Children

Midge Raymond

I found her at the Pottery Barn in the Atrium Mall on Route 9. She was working the register, and she caught my attention when a slip of hair slid from the barrette that held it off her face. I felt a sudden, maternal impulse to tuck the hair behind her ear.

Her name is Julie, and she's a college student in Boston. I'd asked her how her day was going, entering into the type of conversation I usually try to avoid, and when I found out she'd be alone over the holidays, I'd invited her to spend the holidays with me, my husband, and our two prickly teenagers. Moments later, as the elevator sank down to the parking garage, I wondered how I'd explain to Bill and the kids what I'd just done. Impulsivity is not something they recognize in me.

I jerk through rush hour traffic, knowing that if they balk at spending the holidays with a stranger, it's my own fault. The kids take Christmas seriously because I'd always insisted on reserving the day for family, an attempt to assuage my guilt for working so much the rest of the year. My office closes for the week between Christmas and New Year's, and I don't know what would become of our holidays if it didn't.

At home, I see light glowing from the windows, a warm yellow that softens the winter landscape, buttering the dead trees and icicles outside. The kids are home already, maybe Bill too. I turn off the engine and sit in the quiet of our detached garage, thinking of what I'll say to them.

In my early twenties, I interned at an advertising agency, and I've always remembered a story I heard about a creative director who used to insert an image of his own thumb somewhere on the mock-ups of his ads. Clients would notice it immediately and demand that it be changed,

usually neglecting to suggest any other changes. A client always finds *something* wrong with a project, he believed, and if you can control what it is, you get to keep the stuff you love.

Twenty years later, as a book editor, I use his trick a lot. I instruct our designers to add a random yellow box to a prototype; I ask our copywriters to add a random line of text. And it works.

I try the trick at home sometimes, when I need to distract my family from something they may not like. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Tonight, I'm hoping it will.

"You what?" Cate says.

"Who?" Justin says.

Bill looks up from his food.

I regard my family, all of them looking at me expectantly. Justin is thirteen, sarcastic, a vegetarian, obsessed with the environment. Cate is fifteen, melodramatic, a carnivore, obsessed with her cleavage. Bill, my husband of sixteen years, is intense, eats whatever I put in front of him, and is obsessed with his law practice.

I explain. "She has nowhere else to go. She's a college student and can't afford to go home."

"You should have asked us first, Mom," Justin says. Cate folds her arms and looks at me.

"It's very generous of you, honey," Bill says to me. "I think it'll be fun."

"Fun for who?" Justin says.

Despite his protests, Justin can hardly take his eyes off Julie as she tries to get comfortable in our living room. I'd neglected to rearrange the furniture, and Julie ends up sitting on an ottoman she's too tall for. She balances a glass of wine in her hand, keeping her legs together under Justin's relentless gaze. He takes in her long legs, her chestnut hair, her high cheekbones.

Julie asks Bill about his work, and I'm grateful that she's keeping him from getting on his cell phone and somehow turning Christmas into billable hours. Cate darts poisonous stares from

across the room, where she's curled up in Bill's favorite chair, arms crossed under her push-up bra. She and Justin look so much alike — both tall, fair skinned. Justin is skinny while Cate is curvy, but their heads tilt at the same angle as they watch Julie, though they wear different expressions. I look for parts of myself in their faces or gestures, but the resemblance is never obvious to me.

I have an hour before my twin sister Bee will arrive with her husband and daughter, about two hours before dinner. I've done most of the work already, and I added Julie's place setting that morning, feeling thankful that this year, I won't have to stare at an empty seat.

In the kitchen, I unwrap a wheel of brie and pull out the sliced almonds and the bourbon. There's more to it, but I can't find the recipe. I open the fridge, hoping that some item will jump out at me and tell me what its role is.

Domesticity doesn't come naturally to me; everything I cook comes from a recipe of Bee's or our mother's and is hastily thrown together. I often think that if I could do it all over again, I'd feed my children better, spend more time with them, make the house more of a home. I spend so much time peering into their faces, looking for recognition, because they are growing more unfamiliar to me every day.

It would be easy enough to call Bee and ask her to read me the recipe, but I dread the fact that she'll fix my mistake, that she has an answer for everything. Usually, when I see someone who has her act together, I tell myself that this woman possesses something elusive to me — she's independently wealthy; her husband stays home with the kids; she's got a good plastic surgeon. But with Bee, I feel as if it's me who's doing something wrong. After all, we're identical.

I've read dozens of books about twins, and most emphasize the bond twins share rather than the competitiveness. I've always remembered one story in particular, about twin girls separated at birth, adopted into different homes as infants before they finally met as adults. The women had never seen each other before, not even a photograph, and yet they showed up wearing exactly the same outfit, right down to the color and fabric. They parted their hair on the



same side. They worked in the same profession. They each had a German shepherd named Molly.

It doesn't surprise me that Bee and I often meet wearing similar clothing, or that several times we've gotten the same haircut, or that we're both artistic. But deep down, I feel something lacking in our connection, and it has frayed more and more over the years.

The small oven beeps at me, heated and ready. The recipe, I remember, involved creating a paste to spread across the top of the brie, some special concoction that would brown nicely on top and sink in to suffuse the cheese with flavor. But without the other ingredients, I'm at a loss. So I sprinkle the almonds on top, pour the bourbon directly over it, then shove the whole thing in the oven. I straighten the kitchen and check the big oven, where the turkey is cooking. I trace a finger down the list of what still needs to be done. Everything is running smoothly, right on schedule. It's the one day of the year I actually have time to cook, the one day I have no excuse for things not turning out the way they should.

I flip on the light in the small oven and kneel down to watch the brie. After only a few minutes, it's not looking good — the bourbon has run right off the top of the rind and is pooling in the dish. Maybe it will burn off in the heat, I think hopefully.

I wander toward the living room and stand in the hallway, listening. Julie's talking about her major at college — Asian studies — and I hear Cate's voice rise into a question. She must be warming up, finally.

When I hear the buzz of the timer, I return to the kitchen to take out the brie. The almonds are nicely toasted but the bourbon is still runny. It also smells strange.

I put the dish on the range and try to sop up some of the liquid with a paper towel, which helps only a little. I want to drown it in the sink and run the disposal, but I don't have anything else to serve. Finally, I take it into the living room, where Justin is ranting about an oil spill off the Spanish coast. I hand out cocktail napkins and warn, "It got a little burned on top. But otherwise it seems okay."



Julie says, “It’s not burned at all. It looks perfect.”

“Yeah, it looks great, Mom,” Justin says.

As they spread the melted brie on crackers, they don’t notice the slippery almonds, the bourbon dripping from the serving knife. Like a roomful of good clients, they see what I want them to see.

I excuse myself and head upstairs, toward the master bathroom. For the past few months, I’ve been carrying an extra seven pounds, and it’s been especially hard to lose them during the holidays. Putting on fresh lipstick keeps me from eating too much.

It doesn’t surprise me that after years of practice, I need to trick even myself.

At the top of the stairs, I turn and walk down the hall, noticing that Justin’s bedroom door is open. I step toward it to pull it closed — not that Julie or Bee would venture up here, but I don’t need them to see the blue recycle bins Justin keeps in his room, to house his empty soda cans. I don’t need them to see the rolls of recycled toilet paper, or the stack of dirty clothes he lets pile up so as not to waste a drop of water on laundry.

Cate’s door is also ajar. Her room is neat and clean, brimming with lace, imitation Victorian furniture, and dried roses, but I close the door anyway.

Over the sink in the bathroom, I reapply my lipstick, then step on the scale. Those seven pounds. My pregnancy had been too brief to have sprouted more than a couple of them, but the number is misleading. Cate had been seven pounds at birth, Justin a half-pound shy of seven. Strong, healthy babies.

Bill and I had been planning to tell them today, on Christmas. We both thought the idea of a new baby needed some positive spin, and it seemed fitting to present the news as a gift. I never imagined I’d be pregnant again, not at this stage of my life.

You can’t lose what you never had, my father told me once, early in my career, when I’d narrowly lost a job offer to someone else. I try to tell myself this now, that I never had this baby,



but the extra weight reminds me. The evidence clings stubbornly to my belly, my butt, my thighs.

As I walk back downstairs, I think back to losing out on that job. Afterward, I'd switched from advertising to publishing. I gave up everything but the trick.

Back in the living room, I see that the brie has disappeared, and Bill has replenished the drinks. Julie still has everyone's attention; now she's speaking in a foreign language.

"Julie knows Japanese, Mom," says Justin.

"Just a few words," Julie explains. "I spent the summer in Tokyo, taking classes."

The doorbell rings — it's Bee, with her husband, five-year-old daughter, two vegetable dishes, and more wine. I can tell she's surprised to see Julie in the living room; she's gracious, as always, but I notice the telltale twitch at the corner of her lips that means she's confused, or irritated, or both.

In the kitchen, Bee whispers, "You met her at the mall? And you invited her, just like that?"

"You wouldn't want Linnie stranded at college with no place to go for Christmas, would you?"

"It's not that," Bee says. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did."

"No, you didn't. You never mentioned it."

Bee turns away. She opens the large oven and bastes the turkey, then puts her vegetables in the small oven. She pours herself a glass of water and looks at me expectantly.

"What's going on?" she says.

I've also read that twins vie for space in the womb, that though created equal, one twin eventually becomes dominant, nudging the other one out of space and food. As the older and bigger child, Bee would have been the one pushing me aside.



“Nothing’s going on,” I tell Bee, remembering how Julie’s hair had fallen into her face, how much I’d wanted to smooth it back. I haven’t known that feeling for a while; Cate bristles nearly every time I go near her. “What’s the problem?” I continue. “She’s having fun — the kids think she’s great.”

She shrugs. “I just wonder why you don’t tell me these things.”

“I forgot, that’s all.”

I was born twenty minutes after Bee. Though only minutes apart, I have always felt like a younger sibling, with that innate desire to do everything differently, to set myself apart. When Bee decided she would become a full-time artist, a painter, I chose a “real” career. When she had tumultuous love affairs with sculptors and musicians and her graduate students at the art institute, I married a lawyer and had two children.

Much later, Bee settled down. She married a businessman and had Linnie. She is a full-time mom, but she paints when she can. Her work, represented by galleries in Boston and New York, sells for thousands of dollars. And I still feel that we’re floating around in the same primordial place, breathing the same liquid air, battling for space despite having outgrown our environment.

As we enter the living room, I’m taken aback to hear Justin say he’ll never have children.

“Have we set such a poor example?” I ask, sitting next to him on the sofa.

“It’s not that,” he says. “The world’s overpopulated. It doesn’t need me to bring more kids into it.”

“All the better,” Cate says. “If you don’t procreate, it’ll strengthen the gene pool.”

Justin throws a crumpled cocktail napkin at her.

“What if you change your mind?” I ask him.

“Then I’ll adopt,” he says. “It’s not like there aren’t enough unwanted babies in the world.”



“Speaking of unwanted babies,” Cate says, “Amanda Whistler had an abortion last week.”

“How do you know that?” I ask. Amanda Whistler is a girl at Cate’s school, a junior. I’ve heard her name emerge from the sea of gossip seeping out from under Cate’s bedroom door.

“Everyone knows. Besides, she missed three days of school.”

Before I can say anything, Julie breaks in. “In Japan,” she says, “women pray to a deity called Jizo, who looks over aborted children.”

“Really?” Cate looks at her, interested.

Julie nods. “That’s what Buddhists believe, that Jizo looks after the *mizuko* in the afterlife.”

“The what?” Justin says.

“It means *water child* — a child who is aborted or miscarried. I went to a temple outside Tokyo,” Julie continues, “where women bring food, toys, and clothes. They say prayers and light candles.”

“Why are they called water children?” Justin asks.

“Because of the womb,” Cate says.

“Actually, it’s because Buddhists believe that life is fluid, like water,” Julie tells her.

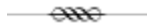
“Do pro-lifers picket the temple?” Justin asked.

She laughs. “No. It’s not like that at all. It’s a sacred place. They also believe in reincarnation, you know. So offerings to Jizo are supposed to help calm the babies who are angry at being sent back so soon.”

“I should tell Amanda about this,” Cate says. “I wouldn’t want her to be haunted by her water child.”

“Don’t you think she might want to keep this private?” I say.

“Take it easy, Mom,” Cate said. “I was only joking.”



I look away and catch sight of Bee, on the other side of the room. She looks shaken; holding Linnie in her lap, she's staring out a window, appearing unaware of the conversation around her.

Then she turns back and sees me watching her. "It's a shame, isn't it," she says, "that we don't have anything like that?"

Back in the kitchen, Bee and I put the finishing touches on dinner. I find myself wondering, for a strange, surreal moment, whether she does have some sort of innate, twin-related sixth sense, whether she knows, somehow, about the miscarriage.

But she doesn't say anything; she is too busy making the food pretty and instructing our spouses on what else needs doing.

I light the candles on the table. We sit down, in the same seats we occupy each year. I glance at Julie, who sits directly across from me. Her place setting fills the usually vacant spot, though in past years the bread basket and the wine have ended up there. The table will be more crowded this year because of that, one more thing I neglected to plan for, and it's then that I realize what I've done: I've made Julie the thumb in my family portrait, to distract myself from the empty place I'd otherwise be facing through dinner.

After we begin eating, Bee announces, "I have some news."

We turn to her expectantly.

"We're having another baby," she says, smiling as she looks around the table. "Due next June."

What surprises me the most are the reactions from Justin and Cate. They seem thrilled with the news; Cate even asked if she could feel Bee's stomach, even though she hasn't begun to show yet. It should have been my stomach, I couldn't help thinking — my daughter's hand on my own belly, my daughter sharing this moment with me, not you.



Bee joins me as I'm scraping plates and loading them into the dishwasher. "Let me help," she says.

"No, you're the mother-to-be," I say. "Go rest."

"I'm pregnant, not sick," she says.

"I've got it. Go, enjoy."

But she lingers, leaning against the counter and nibbling on a green bean. "I can't believe I'm going to pull this off," she says. "I mean, at our age."

I can only nod.

"I've never told you this," she says, "but we've been trying for a long time. It was amazing, listening to Julie talk about Japan, how women have a place to mourn their lost children."

She hadn't been thinking about me at all.

"I don't know why I never told you," she says, "but I've had two miscarriages since Linnie was born." She picks up a tea towel and begins to dry the clean wineglasses I set on the counter. "I feel sort of guilty about it now. I always envied that you had two kids because I wanted another one so badly. I didn't think you'd understand — isn't that silly?"

I turn off the faucet. "Yes," I say, watching her thin, freckled hands on the delicate glasses. "It's sillier than you can imagine."

"Well," she says. "Now you know."

I can't bring myself to reciprocate her secret with mine, not now. I feel I should wait until later, much later, when her baby is safely on this side of the world.

Bee folds the damp towel carefully and lays it on the counter.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she says. "How'd the brie turn out?"

At the door, laden with bags of leftovers, Julie thanks us and hugs everyone, much to Justin's delight.



Bee puts her arms around me. “Sorry I gave you a hard time about Julie,” she whispers. “I thought I wanted to have just the family today. But it’s almost as if she was meant to be here, isn’t it?”

As soon as the front door closes, the kids go to their respective rooms, and the house feels oddly quiet.

When Bill joins me in bed, I slide close to him. We talk about Bee’s news. He wants to know if I think we should try again.

“No,” I say. “It wasn’t meant to be, for us.”

We lie silent for a few minutes. I’m thinking about Bee’s pregnancy again, and suddenly I sit up.

“What is it?” Bill murmurs sleepily.

“Nothing,” I tell him. “Go to sleep.”

I realized just then that Bee and I got pregnant at almost the same time. In the same month, give or take a week, with neither of us telling the other.

I settle back down. I hear Bill’s breathing grow steady as I lie next to him. For all the things I try to control, it still amazes me how little I actually can — how one egg can grow while another slips away, how a piece of hair falls from a barrette at a certain moment in time — how despite my trying to set myself apart from my sister, we keep showing up wearing nearly the same life.

Bill snores softly, and I ease myself out of bed. The kids’ doors are closed, and I hear the normal, comforting sounds of Cate on the phone in her room, of Justin’s music playing softly in his. Downstairs, I wander through the kitchen and into the dining room. The table has been completely cleared, with only the setting remaining in the middle. Remembering Julie’s story, I light one of the candles. I sit at the table, watching the candle burn down, and let the shadows play tricks with my eyes.

