



*The ice cream fell right off the cone, like a head
out of a guillotine.*

YAHOO

Once a man said to me, *I got it! I've got it!*

I was walking in the mall with two scoops of strawberry ice cream on a cone, passing through a Dillard's, where the light from the parking lot was coming in so bright it was like we were heading for blindness. I was a young girl, and I was with other young girls, talking a lot. I still talk a lot. The ice cream fell right off the cone, like a head out of a guillotine. I was looking down at the tiled floor when he came up behind me, on my right. This was when he said it: *I got it! I've got it!* He was already reaching out his hand. He picked up the ice cream like you'd pick up a baseball. He straightened up and held it out to me.

Here, he said. What could I say? I did not say *yes*. Or *thank you*. I waited for the next thing that was going to happen. Which was that he looked down at his hand for what seemed like a long time. Then he screamed a comic book scream, an "Ahhh!" in round, goofy font above his head.

I find myself thinking of this man now, thirty years later. *I got it! I've got it!* A man who would yell this from across a Dillard's without a thought to what he'd got. I might have dropped a baby. I might have dropped a cotton-candy pink bomb. After screaming, he'd hightailed it out of the mall, disappearing into the parking lot light. Good bye!

This would be the last time that a man said this to me. If I told my mother about this she would have her own theories about why such memories are coming back to me now, and they would all have to do with *the type of man* that I am longing for, no matter how much I am *fooled by denial*. Denial is a tricky thing, she would say. *It hides the facts of our own lives from us*. With her hand covering her mouth, as

she looked away, looked thoughtful.

Yes Mother, I would say, I am looking for a man who will scream across Dillard's, 'I got it!' I am so exhausted I just want someone to pick up the ice cream, the ice cream of my life. I am still an unmarried woman, and this troubles her. Or should I say troubled her — my mother died a month ago. It was her time. Sometimes being unmarried troubles me — more often I am concerned by how unconcerned I am. Whenever the subject came up around my nervous former assistant Jane (who is a bit like a golden retriever — the kind from the pound), she would say, “Oh, but you’re *happy*, Miss O’Donnell. Some women wouldn’t be, without a husband, but you don’t *need* one.” Right on the latter, Jane, but wrong on the former. I wouldn’t call myself *happy*, though I do walk around some afternoons with a wide smile on my face just from observing tragedies and comedies and various absurdities at the gas station or the supermarket. I’m no stranger to happiness, exactly. But consider this: every evening, when I got home from the school library (when I still worked there), the first thing I always did was go to my bed, fall back into its center, push my palms out to the far edges, spread-eagled, and here I would imagine I was falling through levels of a jungle canopy, battering my back with thick branches, whizzing past the hoots and calls of spider monkeys, heading dead for the leafy ground and the centuries of compost to catch me. It was a thrill, the same kind of thrill you get pushing an empty shopping cart across a wide parking lot, the asphalt pitting and spinning the wheels, the rattle deafening. *Yahooooooo.*

This helped me go on with my life. Nightly, falling towards the forest floor, shot out of the sky from God knows what height, what cloud. *This* helped me go on with my life.

I had not always wanted to be a librarian but I have always had a wealth of trivial knowledge. When I was younger I liked memorizing species of fish and quotes of different famous women and flipping through *How It Works* books, especially the ones about boats. I liked

the randomness of elementary school, the fact that someone handed you a worksheet and asked, *Really, Georgia, how is metamorphic rock formed? And igneous? And sedimentary?* What glorious nonsense that all is, a roomful of children who are all being slowly murdered by whatever they put in the chicken nuggets, memorizing types of rock! And yet if I had to say one thing I loved in the world, it would be that nonsense. It would be the beauty of that, of children knowing rocks and birds and trees, of a building where this was posted on the walls like the most important news. Oh, sometimes I could hate myself for it. What was I doing with my life, with theirs? Whose time was I wasting, how foolish, how flighty, could I possibly become?

One of the last things one of my students said to me before I was fired was *You can take your Dixon Ticonderoga pencil and shove it.* Such verbal embroidery! If I have taught them nothing else, I taught them this. Also, that it was Stevie Wonder who sang "Sir Duke" and not Michael Jackson. This we played on Fridays, during musical chairs. The last round always ended with someone bruising a shin, but I couldn't give it up, and neither could they. Somehow it canceled out the letters I would have to write on Monday, in librarian lady cursive: *Dear Ms. Tompkins, Hope you are well. Barry has been making some violent artwork during library period, which I am required to report to his teacher.* This warning was the least I could do, but I would have preferred to sneak the art off Barry's desk while he wasn't looking and shred it before his teacher found it. Some of it was quite profound: a black allosaurus with two pistols and a bucket of bullets hooked on its tail, mowing down a smeary crowd of stick figures, all wearing the same blue shirt. *Ah, Barry! Still a warrior, before someone clubs it out of you.* These types of thoughts came to me more and more frequently in the days before my performance evaluation. I was already on shaky ground, having taken three weeks off to attend my mother's funeral.

"Georgia," said my supervisor, a large-chested woman named Adeline Grey, who wore nothing but matching skirt-suits. *Lady Grey*, I call her in my head. "You're quite a bit over in the vacation depart-

ment.”

“It was a funeral,” I corrected her.

She glanced down at her clipboard. “A three week funeral.”

“Bereavement,” I said, my hands flopping, to illustrate – what? A bereaved trout? “A bit of bereavement.”

My mother, before she was dead, wrapped her bathrobe around her chest, and looked across the midnight table at me. *If only you could believe a little more in God*, she said to me. This was several years ago, before she bequeathed me every single album of Mahalia Jackson’s as well as my father’s old heating and cooling van, with the paint peeled so it read *O’Donnell Heating and Cool* on the side. What an inheritance! For some time I played the album at night, while cooking dinner, and tried to believe a little more in God. If I imagine God as Mahalia Jackson, sometimes something happens. But it never lasts. The van stayed parked in front of my house like a sad draft horse.

“And how do *you* think you’re doing?” Lady Grey crossed her legs, ladylike.

“We’ve been reading such wonderful books,” I began, but – “There have been some complaints,” she said.

What an old and boring story! A big-chested administrator fires a loose-bolted librarian lady over literature choice! There is always something they don’t want the kids reading. Last year, they asked me to pull all the books that mentioned rape from the middle school section, even though these kinds of books are the most frequently requested, by far. I kept the books in the bottom drawer of my desk and all the girls knew about it.

But their real reason for firing me was probably nothing this noble or righteous. I was out of their budget, and poorly-paid Jane would do just fine filing and shelving. Or, it was even less: I was forgetful, I did not quite succeed at my responsibilities. On my way out I pulled all the rape books out of my bottom drawer and put them in a cardboard box, hauling them to my car. Also, *The Runaway Bunny*. Take that! On the drive home I realized that Adeline Grey wouldn’t exactly be

crawling around in her pantyhose griping about where *Runaway Bunny* was, that I had in fact stolen from some blue-trousered kindergartner instead. It was too late to return it. I piled the books by my Mahalia Jackson albums, on the living room floor.

Barry had been my secret favorite. He had been held back a grade, so he was part of my beginning reader group for two years. He had sharp eyes, extremely focused, so much so that when I'd first met him I'd actually avoided his direct gaze. A baby! He was six years old and fat as a beach ball. Barry wanted to kill things. He discovered the *How Things Work* books early on, and ran his dimpled finger along the diagrams of military tanks and rifles and the triangular ridges carved into hunting knives to let the blood run out. He terrified Jane. "These are bad things," she'd say to Barry, trying to close the heavy hard-cover, but then he would stick his fingers between the pages so that she couldn't close it without hurting him, and when she did begin to press the cover down he would scream. The first time this upset Jane so much that I found her behind the YA section an hour later, dabbing furiously at her eyes with a Kleenex. The third time, I saw her push the cover down just a little swifter than she needed to, a hard crinkle around her eyes. This is what the children do to you, if you are not careful (and it is so hard to be careful.) You look at them and think *I could pick you up and shake those brains in your skull like beans in a maraca!*

This is the part of the job that always made me want to throw books off the shelves and say, Just *read* them, would you? I'm not writing any notes home, I'm not giving you stars, I'm not withholding five minutes of recess time on that slanted asphalt you call a playground. I'm not even standing behind you, blowing coffee breath over your shoulder, asking you to read aloud and show me your mastery of beginning consonants. I'm not asking you to reshelve, I'm not demanding gentle page turning. I'm just asking that if you read a word, if the letters click together like a skeleton jumping to life, that you stand up and you scream, *I got it! I've got it! EUREKA!*

But I have already told you that that afternoon in the Dillard's would be the last time a man would say this to me, and so you can guess how my days in the library could sometimes go, as though as I were moving through a watery dream, a fantasy constructed by someone else, possibly the principal (a man with a sharp goatee and cartoon ties), or possibly someone even bigger, someone writing these memos that Jane would deliver to my desk, drilling out the learning objectives, spotted with tacky clip art. A script I kept falling behind in, as though I had read an earlier draft and everyone was zooming along with a new one. I looked up pink-faced from musical chairs and saw Lady Grey with a piece of bright white paper in her hand, her fingernail to the bullet points there, the sheet still warm from the copier. "These are your missing reports," she said, thrusting it at me. "Due last week."

The news about my mother came on a Thursday, and it was not expected. She was older, certainly, within range of death, but she was a sinewy old bird, with all her teeth still in her head. When she dropped the cap of a bottle, she could still bend down and get it with barely a grunt. She was not my best friend, though people seemed to expect that, seeing as I was unmarried and had no overnight friends who knew the smell of my neck and my miscellaneous secrets. A person without this is at least expected to be close to her mother. But the truth was that after I'd graduated high school I'd barely seen her. When I was growing up she had been airy and distant, fully immersed in her husband's life, working as a secretary at his business, uninterested in the books I read, drowning in something that was not liquor or Vicodin but something else, something that kept her on the porch for hours, smoking long thin cigarettes, even in winter. My father, setting the table with his back to the window, through which I could see my mother's tall back and her tight braids, told me, "Your mother needs a little more space than the rest of us." Once he leaned towards me. "Did you know her parents sent her to Europe? Just for a painting

class." He shook his head at the marvel of this.

My mother still painted, on pieces of old sheets stapled to wooden frames that she nailed together herself in the backyard. These were the moments she came alive – I'd wake up in my bedroom and lie there grinning to hear the sound of her hammer smacking wood, to peek out the window and see her in loose jeans and my father's shirt, the short hairs around her face sticking to her temples with sweat, the sinews in her wrists flexing to swing the hammer. Sometimes she came alive like this to dance with me and my father in the living room, or switch an album my father had put on, and refuse to put his back. On the truly thrilling days she slid his album back into its case and snuck into their bedroom to hide it, while he chased her.

After my father died my mother stayed in the house they'd lived in most of their lives, and during this time, three times before she died, she called to ask me to come over there at midnight. The phone would ring and her voice would be clear on the line, as though it were the middle of the day and she'd already had coffee and breakfast. "Georgia," she'd say. "What are you doing?"

"Sleeping, Mother," I said. The second time, I said "Dancing, Mother."

"Come over, please."

It was a forty minute drive out of Boston to my parents' little house – but considering the rarity, that first time, I went. On the second call, I began to worry – you know, first a woman begins to visit her mother at all hours, then she finds that her mother is the only person who really knows her, and who else does she know but children, who are more like joyful reptiles than people, and soon she will be so alone she will just *become* her mother, and there will be nothing left of her but the leaves that have blown through her open front door into the hall. But I was convinced I would have plenty of time before this happened. That there would be some warning signs.

That first time I went over, she had Mahalia on, and was sitting at the kitchen table in her light blue robe, the front door unlocked.

There I saw what my mother had been doing in the free time of her retirement: swarming the wallpaper, overlapping in thick swabs of paint, were animals—turkeys and chickens and cows and horses, galumphing along the paneling. One old sow had made her way onto the red metal teapot on the stove. My mother looked up from the table. “Georgia,” she said. “How good of you to come. Do you want tea?”

My mother still wore her hair long, instead of the usual cropped white halo women her age wear. When I was young she’d always braided it up, and now with it down around her shoulders I realized how thick it was, almost entirely gray, practically glowing. As I sat down across from her, my skin suddenly prickled with an overwhelming anticipation. My mother, the distant artist, was going to impart some hard-won wisdom. She was going to slide a slim bag across the table with a gleaming gun inside—*always protect yourself*, she’d say. She was going to lean back with a deep sigh and proclaim, *There’s only one thing a woman can do in this world*. And I would hold my breath.

Instead, she poured me a cup of tea, then slumped luxuriously onto her elbow on the table, tilting her head onto her hand to look at me. “Georgia,” she said again. “Are you entirely all right?”

I stuck a fingertip into my tea to see if it was too hot. “Well, of course not,” I said. “Not *entirely*.”

“I mean, Georgia—are you happy? Do you feel that your life has a purpose? Do you feel that you are loved?”

“I’m fine, Mother.” I was disappointed by these questions. I wanted declarative sentences.

She sighed. “Georgia, I worry about you. I worry about you being *lonely*.” She looked hard at me as though to quell any protests, but I was quiet. “You can spend your whole life not needing companionship, but then one day you’ll need it. And where will you be?”

Where will I be? I will be falling through the canopy of a jungle, I will be toothless and rattling hard across the grocery store parking lot. I will be dead on a park bench. I will be painted into a painting, somewhere. I will be smearing ice cream across the floor of public

places with abandon.

“It’s not so bad, Mother,” I said. “Loneliness.” Because I do believe it, or at least I believe this: loneliness is a horse you can learn to ride. And I know who I learned this from.

The funeral was three days after her death, planned by her younger sister, whom I had met twice or three times before. She was from the West Coast, and wore lots of silver jewelry. She and I were the only two in attendance. I had a front row seat. And I surprised myself, how soothed I was by Aunt Jo’s overwhelming floral-and-baby-powder smell and the jingle of her earrings when she hugged me. The room where the funeral home served coffee and dry cookies had a white tile floor, and we shuffled around on it, and then I drove Jo to the airport.

For the eighteen days that followed, I took train rides from the tip of the Blue Line and back, and car rides, too, that took me far from my mother’s house, and finally, finally back to it, to pick up my father’s company van. The van coughed and creaked its way down Comm Ave, like a dragon. It hadn’t been driven in years.

Other days, I hung eighteen Lipton tea bags over the lip of a glass bowl and brewed gallons of tea, then poured it into jugs of ice. I cut lemons. I sat outside and I drank this, and I might have even read a book or two. I sat in my porch chair in the bright afternoon, with the cars rolling by at 25 mph on my side street, blowing leaves towards me, and I leaned back and pretended to be falling into the rain forest. Doing this out in the sunshine was exhilarating. *It made me feel alive!* I brought out some of my oldest *How Things Work* books, which tell you how things no longer work, and I flipped and flipped through these.

While I was busy on the porch, Adeline Grey left six messages on my machine. Jane left three. Jane is a wee slip of a thing, as my mother would say, just out of librarian school, and I could barely hear her voice on the machine. I called her back.

“Miss O’Donnell!” she said. “Where have you been?”

“Traveling, a little,” I said.

"The children have been *asking* and asking about you. I wish you'd come back."

"Do you really need me?"

"Of course!" She was a little breathless. "They've been walking all over me."

"OK, then, Jane," I said. "I'll be back soon."

She sighed. "Thank you, Miss O'Donnell." I heard a faint sneeze, as though she'd turned her face from the receiver. "Where were you traveling?"

But this, as you already know, did not last long. A week later I was peeling out of the school lot with a cardboard box of stolen books. But I did not quite make it to my car before I saw Barry, who was beating a stick into the ground at the edge of the playground. He looked up at me and I could practically see the panicked excuses scrolling across his eyeballs: "Miss! Miss! Mrs. Adams sent me out here! To get a scientific sample!"

See? I am (I was) surrounded by tiny geniuses.

They soak the nuggets in ammonia, Barry, I wanted to tell him. *And Mrs. Grey keeps her bulk bag of Reese's on the left side of her desk.* But he probably already knew all that.

I parked my car by a supermarket, and took the train back to the Blue Line, directly. A woman my age can step onto the Blue Line and a slouchy young man in a baseball cap and white headphones will stand up and offer his seat, shuffling past me. If you take the Blue Line as far as Revere Beach the walls around the train begin to look like they are crumbling, the tiles peeling and the wires hanging low like vines, but I didn't need to ride it that far. I got out at the Aquarium stop and headed for the harbor, where the waters flash and blind you, where the boats leave on the half hour and the hour. I paid seventeen dollars in cash for the ferry to George's Island, where I got a gleaming white plastic seat near the front. This is where the spray was, the polluted, brilliant spray, splashing over the deck. This time of day it was just

me, the captain and two truant teenage girls in purple lipstick. After ten minutes or so, as we steamed away from the city, I stood up and leaned over the silver bars. I imagined flinging my purse off the deck and a man running up from behind me, screaming, *I got it!* Then he'd swan dive over the bars. I laughed out loud at this and grinned at the girls, who glanced sideways at each other, disturbed. The hem of my dress was soaked.

"What will you do now?" Lady Grey had said at the close of our meeting.

I had something in mind. I could fill the back of the Heating and Cool truck with stolen books and drive around throwing them at children. *Here! For you! Read, read, read!* A citywide Drop Everything and Read, in which you drop everything because a rogue librarian has brained you with a paperback, and in the following shock there's simply nothing left to do but read, right there on the sidewalk. And one fat-fingered boy seeing the truck coming a half block away would run towards it on his stocky legs — as a five-pound hardcover comes bombing out the driver's side window he would scream, *I got it! I've got it!* ■