

## BIG SHADOW

My girlfriend had asked her brother well before he came to visit. Tanya wanted to give Roland time for careful thought. It was only after he agreed that my real apprehension set in. Awkward, I told Tanya—our apartment wasn't the clinical setting I would have preferred.

"The asking was the hardest part, Julie," Tanya said to me. "Once he gets here, it'll be a snap."

I'd known all along that the steps of our procreation would have to be deliberate. No carefree roll in the hay. Our baby would be Tanya's, we'd thought, or else it would be mine. Roland could offer us a potential work-around, Tanya had determined. He could get us as close as possible to *ours*. She'd looked it up on the internet: with a syringe and proper timing, we could do the entire thing at home.

Tanya and Roland's family had shifting sets of parents and sagging gaps between siblings. Roland was Tanya's half brother, in other words, and nearly twenty years younger than us. Roland played drums in a cruise ship band; he had his own cabin and earned tips and full buffet privileges, and for a teenager, this wasn't bad at all.

He got to our apartment in the late afternoon—he was going to stay with us while the boat refueled downtown. The next morning he'd be off again. Maybe college, eventually, Roland told us over cocktails when he arrived, or maybe not, and Tanya, who'd shaped herself into an animal behaviorist despite her lack of a terminal degree, pinned Roland's unambition to Roland's father. As in, not Tanya's own father.

"The thing you have to realize," Tanya told me in a low voice in the kitchen, "is that Roland's father never pushed him." I could hear Roland tapping his feet in the next room. "Imagine if he'd had a nudge."

"Your father never pushed you either," I said, which was true, because Tanya's father disappeared when she was a baby. A sore subject, but I was offering a compliment. Tanya was an expert in click training, fluent in zoological vernaculars, and she'd done it all herself.

"Our kid will be better off," Tanya said. With the two of us, she meant. But I wondered about Roland: how would he manifest in our unborn child? Tanya and Roland shared only their mother, a woman with strong opinions and luminous white hair. I wanted the half that was Tanya, not the father who hadn't nudged. The missing one instead, who'd given Tanya

that drive, who, through his absence, had made her into the complicated person I loved.

We planned to do the procedure that evening, but we had dinner first, with wine to smooth our nerves. Roland's cruise schedule was right in sync with my own cycle—I was ovulating, a little strip had announced that morning—and I seized this timing as a good sign.

"Ladies pass me their room numbers sometimes," Roland said at the table. "Exactly the cliches you'd expect." He slouched in his chair, smooth and untroubled. I wondered what he thought of his role in our reproduction. A godfather, a special uncle—if this all worked out, we'd have to figure out what he'd be.

"Do you take them?" Tanya asked. Both proud big sister and one-upping frat boy, and I found her duality thrilling and weird to watch. "The numbers, I mean."

"They aren't always enticing," Roland said. "There was one I liked, though. Great teeth. But she never approached me. So I went to her. On the deck, during the day. When I wasn't working."

His work was playing jazz standards that he said tired him; at nineteen his life was glamorous and already dull. At thirty-eight, I still wasn't bored. I did habitats at the zoo. A combination of interior decorating and ultra-light science, and with my degree in fine art, no one called my bluff. I'd met Tanya in a desert enclosure. She was measuring the distance between prairie dog caves. We were both bluffers, but she'd gone farther with what she didn't know.

"All creatures need surprise," Tanya told me then. "We'll position the terrain without sequence." My hands were wet with the red and orange of the mesa tableau, but I longed to touch her face, to learn that confident expanse.

Now, at dinner with her equally assured sibling, that knowledge that I'd once craved had become exactly what I feared. Roland was handsome, with Tanya's thick hair and lips. But even in the dim light of the candles, I could see each blemish, his ears that folded out.

"I was trying it on with her all week," Roland said. "The toothy chick. But then we got to Florida." After dropping the passengers in Vero Beach, the boat went north with just the crew on board. Three nights with an open bar, Roland said. No need for "Take Five."

Tanya's work was different, but she and Roland had the same aggressive nonchalance. They expected success. Tanya had developed her click training theories with Nibbles, our mastiff. Click the clicker, to encourage the right behavior. You can imagine, she said. The not barking. The not lunging. Stay on the ground, you might want to tell them. A cat could learn

the toilet; most pets were smart enough to benefit from assigned tasks.

I could imagine. At cleaning time, my colleagues wrestled the alligator from his enclosure, his long jaws securely roped. I had little contact with the animals at work for precisely this reason: tight spaces bring out our protective sides. Basic instinct, that we should need to lord over what little we can claim as our own.

But ten weeks with a clicker, Tanya said, and I could park the alligator with a blood popsicle and rest easy, those jaws working as I filled scuffs in the swamp.

It worked on humans too. Athletes who wobbled their landings, who tripped and froze and overshot because of nerves. Eventually they didn't need the click at all.

Roland refilled his glass. "I'm doing the Barcelona route next," he said. "Same set list, but better drinks."

"The women, too, I'm guessing." Tanya took a long swallow of wine.

"Absolutely," Roland said.

Although Tanya had the vernacular, she'd started at the zoo as a painter just like me. She was quickly promoted to habitat consultant, a title with salary and prestige. I was still freelance. I moved rocks in a pickup while Tanya got to evaluate and design. But the crucial difference was this one: I had no brothers. I couldn't offer Tanya a parallel version of me. Though she and I both wanted to have a baby, what would eventually be ours would have to first be mine.

"Maybe you need to modify your approach," Tanya said to her brother, "to get these ladies to respond."

Roland told us he'd been trying. "I've played the part of brooding musician," he said. "I've done compliments. I've done cologne."

"You could learn something from your sister about aversive stimulus," I said. "Even if something is technically a reward, if the animal doesn't like that cookie, he won't respond as though it's a treat."

"Good point," Tanya said. "Cologne isn't a boon."

Roland was nodding. He frowned. He'd have cabin numbers before the first port, of that I was already sure.

Maybe part of me wished that he'd said no. Tanya and I had other potential routes of course—anonymous donors or adoption, choices that offered a little less pressure to recreate. I remembered another click training experiment Tanya had described. A study conducted on med students, those fortunate sons who'd never worked with their hands. As future surgeons, they had to learn to get the scalpel handling right. And with enough clicking, those crucial fine motor skills would fall into place. Instinct could be cultivated, Tanya explained. Nature could be shaped.

After dessert, Tanya and I sat on a bench down the block while Roland stayed inside. He'd text me as soon as he was finished, he said.

"As soon as you're ready," I told him, a phrasing I preferred.

Outside, Tanya told me about Roland as a young boy. "He would chase his shadow," she said. "I'll get you, shadow, he'd yell."

There was something poignant about that stalking, a sentiment human and raw and profound. We can never quite reach what we want, but we always see it in front of us. "A slight darkening of our own familiar shape," I said.

Tanya nodded. "Aspiration is primal," she said. "We see it across species. At least the potential for aspiration." Tanya needed less of everything than I did—food and sleep, external motivation—and yet she could do more with those limited materials. Like a camel, a lizard—I didn't have to look far for an analog. Our baby would inherit Tanya and Roland's brisk conviction, and I wondered then, would my own child make me feel small?

When my phone vibrated, I kissed Tanya and went inside. Roland had left the Tupperware jar for me on the counter. A double-feature, a very long walk, we'd decided. Tanya would stay out as well. Much too weird, Roland said, for her to be involved.

In the bathroom, I assembled the syringe, reviewed the steps I'd learned online. I was restless, though. I thought again of Tanya and Roland's mother, a woman who spoke in full paragraphs and wore a skirt much shorter than my own. Was all this worth it for that shared piece? I paced around the apartment, leaving the equipment on the sink.

Tanya's latest interest was friendship between species. A dog who ran to the beach each morning to commune with a dolphin, a horse and a goat who lingered together at the farm. Tanya wanted to experiment—mixed-use exhibits, cohabiting traditional predators and prey. The zoo already did this when they wanted animals to kill and eat. Bored lions could hunt. Tanya's proposal was much riskier, placing together creatures whose survival was paramount, even if their antagonisms were clear.

"Major implications for diplomacy," she said. "If I can get the clicking right." A Kodiak and a Bighorn, a bison and a sheep.

"But who will click for them," I asked, "after everyone at the zoo has gone home?"

Tanya was forgetting about the ways they needed her, the role she'd written for herself.

"At first it will be difficult," she said. "There may be shrinkage. But the goal is to get them to behave correctly on their own."

Maybe I imagined those little beats—the continuing ed catalogs left for me on the kitchen table, or Tanya's pointed bed-exits at the first sound of

the alarm. It was possible that I invented these repetitions, tuned to my shortcomings like the lone alligator after visiting hours were through. But I did know this: with both of us getting close to forty, we didn't have much time.

I returned to the sink, lifted the jar to the light. A specimen cup, actually—Tanya had brought it home from work. I looked at the sink and the bathtub, lined with our soap and shampoo. How easy it would be, there in the stillness, to tip the jar over the drain. That viscous slip entirely without sound.

The tub's tiled ledge was the same color as the porcelain, a smooth, translucent blue. When Tanya and I moved into this apartment last year, I'd painted the bathroom walls to match. When creating landscapes for the zoo's exhibits, I'd learned that color was everything. Depth came from layering, from harnessing and tricking the light. My favorite part of my job: I could give the animals the sense of infinity—a line of canyons, a stretch of tundra—with my careful application of paint. Tanya loved our blue bathroom. An oasis, she said. A place to think.

There beside the faucet, with my walls casting their cool glow, I could understand what Tanya meant. The room was her refuge, one that came from my touch. Those vast zoo backdrops were an illusion—the animals knew exactly how far they could run. But the idea of expanse was a comfort for the creatures; it lent shape and meaning to their lives. And what was love if not a shared illusion? The chance to gaze together at the horizon despite its subtle seams.

Across the hall, in our bedroom, I did my work and waited. I held my hips up high. Cashing in on gravity, that force of nature easy to redirect.

Roland was due back at the boat the next morning. Tanya woke earliest, got us going with traffic talk on AM, with coffee beckoning from the drip. Roland was sheepish, sleepy in the kitchen; he carefully averted my gaze. I thought again about titles, the question of naming what we'd done.

As we drove to the pier, Tanya told Roland that we'd be in touch. We'd let him know.

At the dock, the giant ship waited, festooned with flags. The gangplank bobbed subtly on the tide, and I watched the passengers push forward as we embraced Roland in the lot.

"Good luck, little brother," said Tanya.

"I'll need it," said Roland. Barcelona, Mallorca, Marseilles.

On the way home, Tanya touched my shoulder, combed her fingers through my hair. "Penguin babies nest on their fathers' legs," she said. A role for both of us, she was telling me, no matter how it all worked out.

"The parrots in the rainforest exhibit are eating from the trash cans

now." I let my head rest against her hand. "Pigeons have found their way in."

Nurture, I was saying. That's all I wanted, another bird to take my lead. To find resourcefulness, clever thinking, a shimmer in the mundane. I heard a foghorn bellow from the harbor behind us, a clear deep sound, and by that point I knew it already—the boat was on its way.