

## One

SOMETIMES WHEN YOU THINK YOU'VE FOUND a freestone peach, you take it home, cut a smooth line around the body and twist the two sides apart expecting it to give.

If nothing happens, you know you're dealing with a different kind of peach. You pry it apart as well as you can, pull out the stone and carve a hollow in each half with a sharp knife. It's so good packed tight with a thick paste of ground almonds and sugar, with a little orange juice to bind it. You put it in a pan, and pour over a little more orange juice, then bake it for half an hour.

This does not depend on particular proportions. Take a peach, stone it and fill it and bake it and serve it and eat it. Some things are so easy to do.

All you need is a paring knife.

## Two

WHEN JAKE AND I STARTED OUT we had the proverbial nothing—which back then amounted to other people's cast-offs. A couch that turned out to have fleas.

Second-hand towels all worn thin. Mismatched pots. A car we owed my mother for. It worked only on days when there wasn't a drop of moisture in the air. I can't quote rainfall statistics, but I know we got plenty.

I hardly noticed what we didn't have. I was either too stoned or too tired from working graveyard shift in the children's home—lousy hours, low pay. Stuff didn't seem important. All that mattered then was to have the house always full of people, party every weekend, somewhere.

One thing we had that was not a cast-off was a burl coffee table, made by Jake's buddy who built them in his basement, the whole place taken over by tools and wood shavings and something thick and gluey he layered on the table until it shone so you could almost ice skate on it. "Goddamn it. It's a bloody art," he told me. "The sheen, the density, the gloss. It all matters."

That shiny table was where we'd roll our weed, sift through it for grit, stems and seeds. I can still see Jake hunkered over it so low he was almost lying on it, using the dull edge of a paring knife to work his way through the stuff until he had enough for a joint.

I was sitting at that table alone late one night, when the front door flew open and three burly guys thundered in. They filled the house with their bulk and inten-

tions. I don't remember being afraid of them in their jean jackets and torn T-shirts until one told me they were cops. Flashed something at me that might have been a badge.

"You know Mac \_\_\_?" he asked, naming Jake's brother. Mac was a junkie and a dealer and I wouldn't have a thing to do with him, not since he punched out his own mother's front teeth for looking at him wrong.

"Yeah," I said, not about to give anything away. They wanted to know when I'd last seen him and I told them it must have been at least a year, then they turned the place upside down. I guess Jake was supposed to be his brother's keeper or a chip off the same block or something. They turned out the clothes hamper and the flour bin. Dumped the laundry soap.

I was a little nervous because just a few weeks earlier we'd lost a joint somewhere in the house. I just knew the cops would turn it up. We were always careful, never kept anything in the house, but housekeeping was not my strong suit then. Jake would have nothing to do with keeping up the house. He was Italian. He was a mother's boy who needed someone to make his meals and wash his clothes. "Women's work" he called it, without irony of any kind.

Luckily, those cops didn't find that joint, but they did find the paring knife stuck down the couch. One of them asked, "And what's this then?" "A knife, officer," I said, sweet as you please. "For apples. It works for oranges, peaches too." He handed it back to me, handle first, the way my mother taught me to treat sharp objects. I was impressed for a moment, then I remembered who he was. "So, you finished yet?" They were, it seemed. Left me with a whole pile of mess to clean up, said I could send a bill for the damage to the door jamb. I told them the door hadn't been locked, that they could have knocked. I'd have let them in, no problem.

### Three

WHEN I GOT PREGNANT AND HAD TO QUIT those night shifts, Jake found work at the prison. He worked there for almost three years, then decided he should go back to school. Study criminology.

It took him a while, but he's a lawyer, now. Usually he wins. We moved pretty soon after he started at the pen. Took the few household bits my mother had bought, pitying us for all the shabby second-hand stuff. I had a nice kitchen table, red arborite, with the pipy legs. Matching chairs. The baby's crib.

There wasn't room for the burl table in the basement suite we rented off Jake's uncle. He had a big green house in Coquitlam and we lived downstairs,

like ferrets in a hole. But I don't think the baby noticed. She was a good baby. Which was just as well, as I was a mess. The type of guys that Jake spent his time with at work started to affect him. He got mean and mouthy, but he was good with that baby. I had gone cold on him though, and didn't much like myself at the time. But loving the baby and feeling her fingers curled around mine was enough for me. Once when Jake came home drunk, he brought his buddy Bob with him—Mr. Universe type, always had his sleeves rolled up to the bulge in his biceps. Walked like he had chapped thighs.

They came home late, noisy drunk, and I was so scared when I heard them rattling around the front door I pulled open the kitchen drawer, groping for a weapon, not knowing what I might have to defend myself from. But I only came up with a paring knife. When they found me standing holding the paring knife, all I could get hold of, Bob laughed. I felt stupid standing there. I could tell from the look in Jake's eyes that he wasn't about to start anything with his friend there. He shrugged. Flipped his jacket back over his shoulder so it was hanging on his thumb. He smoothed one hand down his cheek and looked at the lino, then backed off. Bob steered him out of there.

Jake tried family law for a while. Now, he only works corporations. Less blood. More bucks. I could say a lot about Jake. But I still remember loving him.

#### Four

I DID EVERYTHING RIGHT FOR THE BABY, as far as I could. And I tried to keep things up when she got bigger. Baby gym. Dancing classes. Even got her horse riding lessons one summer. She loved me then, like no one else did. She was a good baby, and she stayed good as she got bigger. She would look at me like she knew every bit of me inside and out, and it didn't matter to her. "I'm never gonna leave you," she told me enough times. "You wait," I said.

It wasn't long before Jake found himself someone smart and rich with the shiniest hair of anyone I've ever seen. It seemed she couldn't have kids, and Jake knew enough about the law to get the one we had away from me. I'm not much good when I'm confronted by men in suits, and in front of a judge is even worse. Anyway, all the fighting was not good for the child, us yelling in doorways, over the phone, and once in the middle of Safeway where Jake ran into me and figured that was as good a time as any to make his case.

"What kind of life does she have?" he yelled, rooting through the groceries in my buggy. "Sugar cereal. Kraft Dinner. Not one single green thing here. What do you do for vitamins?" Like he'd ever noticed what was put in front of him at dinner time.

All the time our child was hiding behind me, crying so hard, shuddering and gasping. I turned my back on him and bent down to her. But all she could say was, "You don't love Daddy. I do. Can I? Can I?"

That night I watched her sleeping, remembered Jake years ago. We'd been in bed late one night watching an old movie, eating slices of apple right off the blade of the knife, the way his Uncle Sol did. Between bites he pulled my chin towards him and ran his tongue along the inside of my lower lip.

"Apples," he'd said. "You are the apple of my eye."

"The apple of my eye," I said, as I picked up the child's Raggedy Andy from the floor and tucked it in beside her. I closed the door quietly so she wouldn't wake. I didn't want her to hear me tell her father to come get her.

## Five

TIME GOES BY SO QUICKLY when you're not watching. I went back to school, just like Jake had done years ago. I liked nursing, especially taking care of the newborns, wrapping them up until they're like little flannel mummies with just their faces showing. Tiny blinking eyes. My baby looked like a bottle brush when she was born. The nursery's better for me than the emergency ward where you get the drunks who throw up over everything and druggies who'll lie about anything to get their hands on the pills. And the blood. I didn't used to mind the blood so much, from gunshots and car accidents and occasionally a broken bottle slashed across someone's face. But I got them to transfer me out of there after my daughter died. I wasn't there to see what happened when one of her adopted brothers threw the knife across the room, pretending he was some kind of circus performer. I hadn't seen her for years. It's a long way away and I'd never had enough money to visit.

Jake would send the school picture every year, though, and they're lined up on the dresser in the hall. There would have been one more picture for the line-up at least, if Wayne, Dwayne, whatever it is that adopted brother is called, hadn't decided to act up one night when she was babysitting. Jake told me she did it often, the kids liked her. She'd let them get away with stuff, but nothing that would get anyone in trouble. And he said the boys had been warned enough about knives. They were allowed to use them as long as they were sharp. "Dull knives are more dangerous than sharp ones." Jake told me on the phone. The knife was very sharp, and the boy had wanted to pin her to the wall through her clothes, the way they did in movies. But she turned when she heard it coming or just by chance. She turned into the knife and it caught her at the neck and at first

they must have thought it was just surface, but soon there was so much blood it wouldn't stop and the kids didn't know where Jake and his wife had gone and the boys tried to help her, tried to stop the blood, and they were scared and crying. By the time they called 911 it was too late. She was still alive when they took her away in the ambulance. But she was dead on arrival. That's how Jake put it. His voice sounded as if his mouth was full of ice cubes. I'd never heard him cry before.

I didn't ask what kind of knife it was, although I did know from my daughter's letters that her new mother didn't like to cook. And Jake had never learned. No need. They ate in restaurants or picked up food to go. The boy won't be charged, I hear. Jake and his wife have undertaken to give him more supervision, and Jake told me the knives have been moved. "We're treating them as if they were guns," he said. All I could think of was that line about horses and stable doors.

It's hard to get through life without seeing a knife. I can't see one without imagining the blood.

I've had to find ways to cut a peach or an apple without it all being tied up with what went on in that kitchen.

With whatever went on in the past.

But there are so many uses for a paring knife.