

Jennifer Wolfe

Accident at Madeleine's House

I

Carlo sits in the swimming pool
and cries, pulling the yucca
spear out of his right arm,
his body rigid, his blood

forming a loose aura.
The accident exiles him to
Big Bear where he walks around
the lake 3, 4 times daily,

anything to keep the pain
away, as if pain were
a person he could avoid
just by not being home.

II

I never actually saw the accident, I was living in Lake Tahoe at the time, on the South side, with a family of butchers. I didn't like

meat and thought that lake was a poor, dingy excuse, but the forest leading off behind the house I lived in was wonderfully empty, always sunny and always clean.

It was in this forest that I read the note my mother sent me telling me about Carlo's accident. The note was written on the inside of a card handmade by Mexican schoolchildren. She had drawn red hearts all along the margins and taped a silver pendant to the inside of the envelope. The pendant design was called Laguna Lady, and she wanted to know if I recognized it from when we had all lived in Laguna Beach together. Carlo had hurt his arm, fallen off the roof, but he was all right and they were living in Big Bear while he recuperated. I remember not knowing where Big Bear was. I wore the pendant every day. I think that it's pretty ironic, now, that we both spent our summer walking around dingy lakes, waiting for time to pass.

Time has passed. I don't wear the pendant anymore, it needs a longer chain. Carlo doesn't think about the accident anymore, he has other things to think about; his heart ticking itself away each night; other pains to walk off.

Carlo talks to me in the kitchen. He says, "Men must have their driving goals." I think, he can't be talking to me, he can't be looking at me and saying those words, he must be talking to someone else, he must not know that I'm here. Men must have their driving goals. Men must get in their cars and drive someplace and when they get there they must drive someplace else. I'm thinking about the coffee I'm making and getting the crumbs off the counter I just wiped down five minutes ago. I amaze myself, how I cluck and nod and get coffee and placemats and napkins and then shake them out and put them all away again. Carlo's voice weaves in and out of the sound the sink makes when I run the water through. He tells me about New York, wearing Zoot Suits and carving the Last Supper in stone, the chisel slipping on Jesus' hands, crippling him. He does not think of the crippled Jesus, he thinks of the stone, of the chisel.

The doctors want to cut open Carlo's rib cage, take out his heart and tie it up in knots, speak to him in strange languages, tell him to be careful. Carlo is not careful, he screams himself into a foaming gray sweat and howls like a wounded coyote in the back of the ambulance.

The last time he was in the hospital I paced the hallway outside his room, listening to him cry for his sons, for Madeleine. I remembered Madeleine's face suddenly harsh in the light over the dining room table, "You'll die a lonely old man, Papa," and yet I am there so it must not yet be time.

I am his protector. I breathe out fresh air, forgiveness, a second chance. And yet he forgets, impatient with the poems I chant over him, the weak coffee I serve, the rise and fall of my voice with all of its words he can't understand. He has refused food I have touched, suspicious of my sudden womanliness, fearful of pollution. And yet I forgive him.

I don't think I am being clear enough, I don't think you can see the man I see and I see him so clearly, all surface and bone, his face a sculpture, his stained long-sleeved undershirts, baggy jeans, the smooth brown bald spot perched on the back of his skull. You need to know about his energy, sparking, tireless, manic. Too hungry to eat. Too tired to sleep. Too busy to get anything done.

Carlo the tyrant.

Shhh. He's working.

Shhh. He doesn't feel well.

Shhh. He's sleeping.

Shhh.

Seven years old and seeing the over and over again crash of the Swedish crystal. Waiting for him to come home, waiting for the cloud to cross his face as I tell him, waiting on the doorstep to be let back in, waiting in my bedroom to be let back out.

Thirteen years old and I am peeing on the front lawn at three in the morning, crying, ashamed, afraid to make noise, flush the toilet, cross the squeaky floorboards, wake anyone up, afraid to wake him up. Peeing on the front lawn. Afraid.

Three years old and sobbing my guts out in a restaurant, "My skin is leaking!" Carlo, bewildered, empty-handed, open-handed, "Jesus fucking Christ! Can't you get the kid to stop already?"

Jesus fucking Christ, didn't she just go?
 Jesus fucking Christ, don't you have anything else to wear?
 Jesus fucking Christ, what do you mean she doesn't like it?
 Jesus fucking Christ, does she have to make so much noise?
 Jesus fucking Christ, isn't there anything to eat around here?

Somebody pat him on the head and give him something to eat. He'll calm down. Calming Carlo down. Feeding Carlo. Washing his clothes, ironing, mending, twenty-five cents a shirt, ten cents a button. Making Carlo tea. Listening to Carlo while he tells me he will move us all to Italy and buy us matching leather jackets and fast cars and he will paint only the most beautiful women, or only the oldest women. Admiring his newest treasure, a leather suitcase large enough for his paints and a French easel, something we can take with us. Listening to Carlo while he tells me that what I need is an older man, someone who can appreciate me, someone who can buy me refrigerators and fur coats. Standing there, incredulous, watching Carlo work himself into a frenzy over jewelry made out of popcorn, solar energy, the best way to make toast. Watching over Carlo.

No. It still isn't right. Now you hate him and you haven't even seen him yet. Haven't even. Carlito. The household genius. Holding open doors, holding out chairs, pouring drinks, lighting cigarettes. Generous. Handing out gifts like door-prizes, picking

up the check, bringing flowers. How can I tell you how I have cared for this man? Without making you wince. Without making you think I don't know my own mind.

Carlo once gave me the universe; an eight carat chunk of lapis lazuli with me, a ruby, stuck into the side. I hung it on a gold chain and put it in my jewelry box and on especially bad days I take it out and think, This is the universe and this is me within the universe. This is me within the universe.

Time is still passing. I can sit in my own kitchen now and listen to him talk, connect his words with other words, other events. His voice is soothing. I like my kitchen, I know that when he gets too excited I can give him something to eat. For two years he has been dying. He is stubborn and does it slowly. Carlo is bored, he is tired. He tells me he wishes it were all over. I cluck and find him an apple. He gnaws on it morosely and gives me instructions for his funeral. Madeleine cannot be there. I hand him some raisins and remind him that I don't go to funerals. Ridiculous! he snorts. Ridiculous! I put the kettle up on the stove and tell him about the new coffee shop on La Brea. He wants to know if they have good omelettes and tells me we'll go there for dinner. I pat him on the head.

When I was younger, Carlo used to paint me all of the time. I have a photograph of the best one he did of me: I'm wearing a brown felt hat with tattered silk flowers and a pink bathrobe. It is in a picture cube my mother gave me for Christmas the year Carlo hurt his arm. Next to my picture is the one he did of my mother with the queen of hearts hanging over her face. Next to that is a picture of both of them, sitting with friends, on the steps of their old art gallery. The top of the cube has a picture of an old friend of the family in a ponytail and with his dog. The bottom of the cube has a picture of Madeleine, beautiful and mysterious with a son on her lap and two stupid little dogs on each side. I would like to show you this picture cube. It is the best one I have ever seen and it could probably tell you what I am trying to say with so much more simplicity. It's the best thing.