

FICTION



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BABEL BEAN CHINQUEE GOSPODINOV GRANDBOIS MARCHE MIRSKY
OATES PEREZ POWERS REED STERN STROM SULLIVAN TAL TRASK
UDELSON ZARCHI VAPNYAR



TABLE OF CONTENTS

LARA VAPNYAR	3	“L and D”
AMY REED	20	<i>Under the Wall</i>
ISAAC BABEL	27	<i>Foreword</i>
	29	<i>From: The Unpublished Letters of Isaac Babel</i>
RAYMOND STROM	39	<i>The Tattooed Arms</i>
JOHN SULLIVAN	43	<i>Love, Vaguely</i>
JON UDELSON	60	<i>Eva</i>
JOYCE CAROL OATES	65	<i>The Blind Man’s Sighted Daughters</i>
GILA TAL	85	<i>Brass Knuckles</i>
JASON TRASK	91	<i>From: Putting Out the Sun</i>
KIM CHINQUEE	100	<i>Doll</i>
MARK JAY MIRSKY	112	<i>Lake</i>
LUIS AMATE PEREZ	123	<i>Florenxia</i>
STEVE STERN	134	<i>From: The Frozen Rabbi</i>
NURIT ZARCHI	151	<i>Sailor</i>
GEORGI GOSPODINOV	158	<i>A Living Soul</i>
ZACK BEAN	163	<i>Lucky Dog</i>
STEPHEN MARCHE	174	<i>For the Other Eugene Schiefflin</i>
WILLIAM POWERS	180	<i>November Shoot, Rain</i>
DANIEL GRANDBOIS	187	<i>The Wife</i>

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THE TATTOOED ARMS

Raymond Strom

One rainy day my father picked my brother and me up from school, brought us home, and sat one of us on each of his knees at the kitchen table. We sat there quietly for a moment, and then I put my head down on the table and cried. I watched television—I knew what was happening.

“Your mother and I haven’t been getting along lately. She hasn’t been coming home or calling. I saw her the other day and we’ve decided to get a divorce.”

Graham cried, my father cried, but I was already done crying. Fifteen minutes later, the sun came out and my brother and I went outside to play one-on-one baseball in the backyard. We played until dark. When we came inside we played Gin Rummy until we fell asleep. These games didn’t stop all summer—we picked up in the morning where we left off the previous night. Graham and I didn’t hear from my mother, but we lived in a small town so eventually I heard of her.

That fall I began fifth grade. Our desks were placed in groups of four, so two students sat next to each other and these students faced two other students. Across from me was Natalie—the red haired girl—and I thought she was beautiful because I had never seen hair

like hers. I knew my chances with her were finished when she told this story.

“Every day I go home after school and I see a pair of arms in the upstairs window of the house across the street. They are all covered in tattoos. The left arm places beer cans on the window sill, the right arm slams the window down on the can to crush it, and the left arm throws it out of the window. There is a mountain of beer cans in the yard just below the window. Every time this pair of arms does this a woman laughs so loud we can hear it in my house with the windows shut. And that woman is your mother.”

I wasn't surprised to see her short finger pointing at me. I was surprised that my mother had only moved across town. I hadn't seen her for months. I had assumed she had left the country.

“My mom says that your mom is trash. She said only common trash would think that's funny.”

My brother and I followed Natalie home that day. Across the street from her house there was a house with beer cans in the yard, but Natalie was exaggerating when she said there was a mountain. There were no more than thirty.

I led Graham into the entryway and up the stairs. The door had a plastic number 2 on it. I could hear music through the door, then a man coughing. I knocked three times.

“Who is it?” my mother asked without opening the door.

“It's Jason,” I replied.

“Who?”

“Jason, and Graham, your children.”

“Oh,” she said and didn't open the door.

I heard a man ask her who we were and she said something about her fucking kids and to fucking put that out so she could let them in. He said that we wouldn't know what it was and he could just pretend it was a regular cigarette. She said she didn't know what we were fucking doing there anyways. Graham and I stood outside the door, silently looking at each other. Ten minutes later the door opened.

“Hi,” my mother said the way she always did when she didn't want to see someone. It was musical: hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii. The first part of the word had a nice high tone and it dropped as it progressed. “I'm so glad to see you,” she lied. “Come on in. Have a seat in the living room. I have to use the phone.” Then she turned and left us in the entryway.

We walked past an open door on our right. Inside the room was a

mattress on the floor. It was without sheets, it had a pillow and a wool blanket. There was an ashtray and some beer cans on the floor, and some dirty socks. Another wool blanket was attached to the wall to block the window.

There was another door, closed, it must have been the bathroom, then we were in the living room. There was a couch and a small square table. A radio sat on the floor near the outlet that it was plugged into. The pair of tattooed arms sat on the couch. They were attached to a man with long dark hair and a thick beard. He wore a sleeveless leather jacket and dirty blue jeans, so dirty they were nearly black. He looked at us. We looked at him. He lit a cigarette.

“So you’re . . . Marilyn’s kids, huh?” he asked.

“Yes,” we both answered.

“I’m Richard.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” we both said. Silence ensued. My mother’s voice floated into the living room when she got my father on the line. . .

“What the fuck are they doing here, Joe? I told you I want nothing to do with you or them so . . . I know that, but if you’re going to send them over here all big eyed as some sort of ploy to get me back, well, it’s not going to work.”

Richard tried to distract us with his tattoos. He put his right arm in the air and showed us the skull on his elbow. The jaw was below the joint and the rest of the skull was above it. When he moved his fist back and forth, the skull would open and close its mouth. He told his elbow a joke.

“Knock, knock.”

“Who’s there?” the skull asked.

(my fucking kids)

“Impatient cow,” Richard answered.

“Impatie . . .”

“Moooooooooooo,” the impatient cow interrupted.

(I don’t know what they’re fucking doing here anyways)

Richard laughed, the skull laughed, Graham and I sat and listened to my mother talk. Richard gave the skull a drag of his cigarette.

“Well, I’m sending them home . . . I know they miss me and they want to see me, but I don’t have time right now . . . Okay. Bye.”

She walked into the living room. Her dark hair hung to her shoulders. She wore a black sweatshirt and black sweatpants. She was larger than I remembered—larger than she was that time I walked into

the bathroom and she was naked. Jason! Look away! I'm your mother, you pervert. She had covered her eyes with one hand and her vagina with the other. Her nipples had entranced me. I stood there like a deer in headlights. Shut the fucking doooooor!! I couldn't stop staring. She pushed me out and shut the door.

"I'd love for you guys to stay, but Richard and I have plans. Next time you should call first."

I looked down and away. My eyes found the table and I studied the things on it. An ashtray. Two beer cans. A book of matches. A lighter. A small book-like box with the word Zig-Zag. A pair of scissors with a clamp at the end instead of shears. All of these things covered by a thin layer of dust.

"Are you listening to me?" my mother asked and grabbed my arm. I looked at her.

"I don't know your phone number," I yelled. "I didn't even know where you lived until today."

"Don't yell at me! I'm your mother." She picked me up by my arm and led me toward the door, where Graham was already standing.

"How can I call you when I don't have your phone number?" I asked quietly, politely.

She opened the door and pushed me outside. Graham followed me. "I'll call you," she said and shut the door.