

EMA O.

Over again, I would once circle past the site of Ema's disappearance.

Ema disappeared from a strip mall consisting of a pharmacy and a supermarket, situated beyond a domed grid of parking spaces. Past the strip mall were rubble, unplanned vegetation, gaps in a chain-link fence. Northern Boulevard encircled the front of the lot like a moat.

Circling past slowly, late at night, after the shoppers had gone home, I believed I could remember everything just as it happened.

Once I painted an X to mark the spot she stood on before she went missing. When I returned the next morning before six, a bunch of dandelions was lying there, with dirt on their roots and a piece of twine tying them together.

Other changes also occurred. A sumac that had seeded in a crack soon sent out roots that buckled the asphalt. The pharmacy closed down shortly after the supermarket went out of business; then a wrecking crew appeared, demolished both, and left. Scavenger populations succeeded one another in waves: three-legged cats, vermin missing their tails, roaches. Finally a sea of ants so great it could not coexist with any other species swept over the rubble.

Circling past slowly, stopping, I observed the changes that occurred over the course of one year and fought the wish to assess this world against the world I knew before, and to give a name to the difference – such as good or bad. Things that were there ceased to be, others appeared. When I left, dust motes and the loosely packed constituents of air expanded to fill the newly created void.

Our name is Otto: My daughter's; My husband's; Mine.

Otto, as in I ought to remember the auto that drove off with my daughter, Ema Otto. Similar to Toto, who also went missing but

returned home to Kansas, unmolested. I might have kept my parents' name or hyphenated it with John's, and then our daughter could have been named Ema Odom or Ema Otto-Odom or Ema Odom-Otto. I resisted, for reasons that should be obvious. In any event, I am not a progressive woman, and I don't put stock in the tyranny of names.

But this story is to be about Ema, not me. If I were to write, "I was born thirty-one years ago, then I learned to walk, and shortly thereafter to talk, then I attended the public school where I made poor grades consistently until I got knocked up and dropped out and married shortly following," I would tell a very boring story. Ema, being a freak, makes a more interesting subject. And the matter of her disappearance, not to mention.

On the day she went missing, Ema was three months and twenty-six days shy of her fourteenth birthday. She stood seventy-two inches in her socks, weighed one hundred sixty-four pounds in Lollipops underwear and a training bra, and had hair, eyes, skin, and teeth that were the color of honey. Among Ema's identifying characteristics were several birthmarks. An archipelago of small brown moles reached around her left leg toward the dime-sized motherland mole on the inside of her thigh; four amorphous blots stretched across her shoulders like sky-written characters observed twenty minutes too late. Only during the investigation did I learn that Ema wore a ring in her navel. She had repeated the fourth grade, and on the same I.Q. test given at six month intervals, scored 121, 99, and 83, in that order. The trend in those numbers might explain the increasingly absent look on Ema's face, if it was a look of absence, and not venality.

Incredibly, at some moments, Ema was a beautiful child.

The calls are not necessarily irrelevant to this story. I remember the first hang-ups occurred in March, when the natural world has



the quality of incipience combined with doom. The magnolia tree in front of the abandoned wood frame house next door had bloomed early for a single day, before a frost returned everything to brown. Specifically, it was the March before the hypoxic March of large things vanishing. This was when the calls began, to continue for one whole year and after, although with interruptions of months at a time. I so loathe March and so coveted these contacts that the coincidence of the particular March that followed Ema's twelfth birthday with the first contact by this caller infuses my memory of this time with a bittersweet aspect, a state I don't associate with any other time in my life.

The calls came at one and four in the morning, and five forty-five in the afternoon, before John came home. They came at two, three, and eleven; initially, there was no time when the calls might not come. When the calls came after John had fallen asleep, I would pick up the phone immediately, before a full ring had sounded. But during the day, I would let it ring ten or twenty times. For nearly a week in early June, before they ceased for three months, the phone rang every day at three forty-five in the afternoon, within minutes of when Ema walked in the door from school. It seemed to me during this last week the caller remained on the line longer than he had before. The calls ended though as they had from the beginning: with the sound of the receiver being replaced into its cradle, the cradle depressing, and a soulful mechanical drone. At times, at night, I would leave the receiver beside my ear, stare into the starless sky that hangs particularly low over Long Island City, and while lying in my loveless, matrimonial bed, I would contemplate the absence of things.

I conceived my daughter when I was seventeen. Her paternity was never in question, except in her father's mind, where it remains a source of doubt and insecurity, I hope. Ema's paternity was quite certain, not just because John was the first and for many years the

only lover I had. Sometimes, someone would put forward a simple proposition. "The quotient of any real number divided by zero is infinity," for example. The activity in John's green eyes that sometimes passed for intelligence would dissipate, and a small dark gap would form between his two lips. I read the same look on Ema's face every time I looked at her.

Then when I was seventeen, I chose John because of his long, green eyes and his full, dark lips, his hips that were narrow and low, quick when turning, but slow when walking. John didn't understand the effect he could have on others, when the hair above his lip was as soft as the dashed line of down that disappeared into the lip of his jeans. He knew though when he was being watched.

I am less sure of the circumstances surrounding Ema's conception. I tend to believe I conceived Ema on the night on Ward Island, where John's brother lived as part of a construction crew that was building a recreational area for the asylum. He went away one weekend and left John a key to his apartment. Although I never saw the inside, I have an impression of dark carpeting, pornography, sordidness. This impression must come from what Juan has told me about unencumbered men in their squalid barracks.

I remember standing in a corridor underneath a fluorescent light. I had my head turned to look into the mirror in the ceiling corner, which was positioned to reflect a second corridor perpendicular to the one in which we stood. I noticed a greenish cast to my skin and the darkness under my eyes. The moment John unlocked the door something made of glass crashed against it from the inside, and a woman's voice yelled out a profanity. John entered, I heard his voice and that of John's brother. Then John emerged, grabbed my hand, and led me down three flights of stairs and out into the cold night. Not fifty yards from the asylum, with grass sharp and dead following the first frost stabbing my ass and a few cold stars visible, I believe I conceived Ema. But other than that I was cold and the grass was dead, I



can't place this night, can't mount a single argument for why I must have conceived Ema on this night and not one of the nights in John's room, while his mother sat smoking in the kitchen or, yes, in his car.

My body rhythms run with a precision that, one might say, betrays my Teutonic ancestry, if one were given to the neat turn of phrase, which I am not. I began having cycles when I was twelve years and four months and had begun a new cycle every twenty-eight days from that time until I conceived Ema. On the twenty-ninth day, I knew immediately. I knew I would leave my parents' home and marry John.

John was the only obstacle to this inevitability. I did not tell him until I was three months gone. I didn't show, save a small, firm spot in the shadow of my breasts, which had a heft to them that I found novel and amusing.

"I missed my period," I said. John and I were in one of the girls' bathrooms of the public institution where I would conclude my formal education, sharing a cigarette. A low persistent hiss came from the radiator, and the bathroom was very hot despite the January air that blew in from the window, which had been raised three inches.

The first thing John said was, "What?" He then asked me what I was missing and eventually, without my having to say another word, he talked himself into the realization that I was pregnant.

John seems more fully present in his angry state than at any other time. His features are most active then, and the energy in them seems animated by a strange intellect the locus of which is the gut and not the mind. He threw the lit cigarette against the wall, swore, and put an open palm on each of my shoulders.

"Who else are you fucking?"

I didn't answer, but bowed my head so my hair hid my face and crossed my arms over my belly. He pressed my shoulders together, as if by putting pressure on my neck he could force me to raise my head and look at him. So I looked at him.

"Everyone else always wore a condom."

His palms dropped to his sides, then he lifted one and slammed it against the stall. I watched his back as he walked out of the bathroom, and I thought I could imagine him as an adult man, prematurely stooped. I knew I had won this exchange. I knew, because he had stopped himself. I believed then I could exploit this reserve of conscience. I didn't know that I could consume it, and there wouldn't be any left.

The wedding was what one would expect. We held it in a church of indeterminate denomination, guests threw rice, my parents wore expressions of astonishment and rue. I passed them as I left the altar, but in my memory they are receding, becoming small, vague forms with only eyes and empty Os for mouths, and I am standing perfectly still.

In the last months of my pregnancy, I developed a fierce appetite for potting soil and bits of plaster that had come dislodged where the toilet pipes joined the wall of the bathroom in apartment no.1 of the brick row house in Long Island City. My belly was a firm ovoid like a prop, and my arms and legs were thin and bulging with veins. I was completely firm. One day in July, three weeks after the expected date, I delivered a ten pound, two ounce girl child the color of a wound who cried noiselessly and often. So begins my daughter's story.

Much of Ema's story has already been told. Initially, only the outdated black and white reprint of Ema beneath the word MISSING was public, and the fact-based fiction I'd created when asked her height, weight, and the circumstances of her disappearance. Then the same photograph appeared on the backs of milk cartons, on pamphlets of coupons from the video rental store, on buttons of all sizes, encircled by the words "Leave a Light On, for Emma." There were newspaper articles, beginning with the one I wrote for the free paper, followed by others, such as the one inside a magazine's glossy cover with Ema's name spelled correctly in 3/4" letters atop the same



picture, only printed in color. There were the renderings of the sketch artist, her charcoals pinned to the same police bulletin board, reprinted beside the Ema update in the free paper; Ema's portrait in ink at the post office; Ema enormous and done great justice by images spray-painted on the cars of the N and the R. Ema's name, transmitted across the airwaves, bounced off of satellite dishes, echoed across the universe. I'll tell the parts that are missing. I'll create Ema all over again.

Ema entered the world at five thirty-six in the afternoon on a day when heat made the hard surfaces of Long Island City inhospitable to life. She spent that day as she would spend much of her first year, with her eyes closed and her mouth open, producing no noise. She was mostly purple, save a few blue bruises on her forehead.

John looked skeptically at his newborn daughter when he arrived at the hospital early that evening.

"She doesn't look like you in the least," I commented with malice for having been left alone during most of a twenty-two hour labor and painful delivery.

"She doesn't look human."

"She's beautiful," I said, not because I believed it, but because I still wanted John to want the family we'd created. I would imagine the things he desired and distort the things I could give him until the two almost converged.

John swung his long arm absently down my leg, landing his palm on my knee, then absently stroked my thigh up and down. Before he'd left that evening, he had kissed me on the forehead and pressed Ema's palm between his thumb and forefinger.

Ema would never resemble John and lacked completely his physical lyricism, a state of grace that was devoid of morality. In her first days on earth, after we brought her home, I thought I recognized my

own symmetrical features and alienness, but whatever semblance existed passed quickly. From the time she was six months, Ema did not look like either of her parents but carried traits of each as telling as a sixth finger.

I'm not sure why I told mothers of Ema's classmates, the detectives, and everyone else whenever the issue arose that Ema was a mute until her fifth year. The first indication was that Ema would progress in her speaking exactly at the pace one would expect, assuming a mentally intact child of parents whose averaged intellects surely fell not far from the norm. Where she could have learned her first word is a greater mystery. I operated in my family life by manipulation, not groveling, while John survived by sullen compliance. In all events, we did not attempt to instill manners in our daughter, whether because we were apathetic and unfit or because we believed they would prove to her detriment. Before she reached her first year, our stout infant sat upright in her crib one night, held her arms out from her body, and surveyed the four walls of her room while she repeated unprovoked, in response to nothing:

"Please."

After several months, she tired of this term and said little else in my presence during the next eleven years and eight months, approximately. At the same time, words between John and me, never the primary currency in our relationship, became scarcer still. Deprived of stimulation, Ema withdrew.

When she was eleven she made a friend. Some mornings, a girl wearing coordinating jeans and a jean jacket printed with a patchwork pattern rang our buzzer so she and Ema could walk to school together. She carried her books in a suitcase, instead of a knapsack, and wore her hair in a skinny unkempt braid tied at the bottom with a rubber band. The first time I opened the door for her, she assessed me with a look of contempt as unquestioning as a fundamentalist faith. Lou's hatred was groundless and self-assured. I think of her



now as a messenger, preaching the imminence of the abyss with her furious gaze. In all my meetings with different arms of the law, I identified one possible suspect in Ema's disappearance: a ten-year-old girl. She was Ema's only friend.

Ema disappeared on a stunning Saturday in March. The air was so thin that objects and living things seemed to exist in a medium of nothing at all. I remember being disoriented by the wind and the bright sun as I turned to bid my daughter wait. Her expression was both hostile and torpid, if such an expression is possible. Ema squinted into the sun.

"Wait here for me, Ema."

I have described these moments and the hour that followed over and over again, in terms for the most part truthful. I left Ema not fifty yards from a telephone booth, located, oddly, on the strip of pavement in front of the pharmacy, as if to accommodate casual strollers who find themselves in need of a means of communication while ambling through the boulevards, car washes, and storage facilities past the strip mall.

There was Ema squinting as I was turning.

Changes in the tenor of the calls perhaps bear mentioning. Initially he called, said nothing, hung up; I answered his calls, remained on the line, and told no one. Precisely my activities when, after several months, he began talking. I should say mumbling, stuttering, tarrying over his sibilants, attacking his "p"s, "k"s and "t"s with something like ardor. When I told the officer I could not remember a single sentence from the dozens of calls I took up until the very last one, I was not indulging in another of my convenient feats of amnesia. I might have mentioned during those interviews at the station house, but did not, those few discreet words that floated in the sea of audial babble. For example, I recall the word "prick."

Yes, and other words of a similar nature that bear no repeating. Suffice it to say I deciphered "prick" and "twat." Yes, and on more than one occasion I seem to recall, "hymen."

All I did was to listen and not tell until one day he uttered with uncharacteristic clarity and an accent that might have been British, or not, a proposition composed of verbs, subjects, and objects, arranged to convey their meaning without ambiguity.

"Call me from a pay phone and I'll pick you up in my car."

To which I answered with the first and only words I would ever speak to him.

"Yes. Please."

In light of this revelation, a modest expression of regret at never seeing Ema mature and prosper may appear disingenuous, particularly considering the scant chances that Ema would ever mature, the astronomical odds against her prospering. Like many mothers, I had the experience of observing my daughter's ascendancy from the perspective of my own decline. No longer hulking, profane or inscrutable, Ema became Innocence Lost. A sculptor in Hoboken placed an empty terrarium on a pedestal and called his work "Ema." The police department received unsolicited calls from psychics. One who divined my number, newly unlisted to avert the hang-ups that began again in April, called to tell me that though she had led parents to their adolescent scion, contentedly smoking hashish in the most derelict quarters of other continents as well as to sad burial mounds on the properties of next-door neighbors, she knew nothing about where Ema was. News anchors interrupted imbecilic banter to convey by their knitted brows the collective mourning that, after all, probably exceeded my own.

Ema remains a missing person. Juan, the young detective who by six at night would have a few soft whiskers beside the corners of his mouth, explained to me the procedures in the absence of physical or



other evidence, such as a body, that a crime had been committed. Although detectives interviewed John shortly following Ema's disappearance, at the station several weeks after, and again at the station not four weeks ago, neither suspect nor motive were established. A young mother strolling her sleeping infant toward the market that day in March gave the only eyewitness report thought credible: a green car pulled in front of Ema; Ema, perhaps weighing her options, stared opaquely into the front compartment; then indifferently Ema boarded her ride.

Juan confided in me other sightings that occurred after she'd gone. Initially, the station received reports a few times a week. Juan diligently relayed them; the department investigated; inevitably hopes dimmed. Only I believed them all. My credulity did not strain in learning of my daughter in Sioux Falls, fleeing as the divestiture of blood from an unidentified 20 to 28 year-old male stained the brilliant snow. Surely no one else believed that it really was Ema, hatless, scarfless, without mittens, deftly steering a kayak amidst the ice of Baffin Bay as the passage between the floes diminished to a razor's edge.

For that year and several months, while Ema grew always more obscure, I slept with Juan as frequently as my nominal marriage and his putative conscience would allow, until he irrevocably concluded that what we were doing was wrong and eliminated my last reason for staying.

I left in July. Where I live now vines tie the fence of my house to various structures of my neighbors, all laid out at odd angles in a small rise not far from the groves of trees lowering into the swamps. A canopy of vines and moss protects us, shielding us even now when the rain has fallen for six days. I have fewer needs here. For example, I have yet to install a telephone. I removed the window unit, though the air is closer to me than my own sweat. Each day, I wake

after ten in a miasma of damp skin and a blanket of air that lies across my body in a way that reminds me of Juan. Plant life thrives here, yet none of us have gardens. No amount of nurture could triumph over the vines.

At last I feel connected to the world. I think I would have been a moral person had I lived here all my life.

Now, when everything of significance is behind me, I bring parts of this world to my old one. In my mind, I still wind past the debris of razed structures scattered over a lot -- only I have sowed vines that creep across the rubble. The vines are stretching their tendrils over the field as I locate the familiar spot where still, in air as dense as the first matter that in time erupted into everything, no one stands. In her place, she has scrawled her perverse testimony. "I was never here." Even as I reflect how like my daughter to encrypt in a paradox her only words from the afterlife, vines advance over the characters, until even her message is lost.