

The Butterfly Lampshade

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I'm still asleep,
but meanwhile facts are taking place.

—Wisława Szymborska, “Early Hour”

Part One
TENT

CHAPTER ONE

We cannot tend to her. There is something wrong with her.

What do you mean? What is wrong with her?

We do not know. Something.

She seems like such a normal little girl to me. Last visit—

It is hidden.

Did she do anything? Did she do something bad?

No.

Then what?

We cannot handle her. I cannot.

But what do you mean by that? Is she misbehaving?

No.

Is she getting in trouble in school?

You have to come get her.

I don't understand.

You are the godparents. You have to come. That is your job.

But you are alive, Elaine.

I am telling you I can't do it.

Where's that new guy you were telling me about?

Camping.

Is he coming back?
I don't know.
Are you going to do something, Elaine?
I could call social services. Maybe I will. Are they listed?
Will they do foster care if other family is still available?
Can you put her on the phone?
No.
Is she nearby?
She's right here. She's looking right at me.
Can you tell her to come on the phone?
Francie. Francie, dear, your aunt Minnie wants to speak to you.
Hello? Francie?
Hello.
Francie? Are you okay?
Yes.
You've been listening to our conversation?
Yes.
Your mother is very worried about you. Do you think you might be doing anything wrong?
No.
Have you been going to school?
Yes.
Are you behaving properly in school?
Yes.
Are you going to bed on time?
Yes.
I have to tell you, I'm more worried about your mother. Do you think she might be getting sick again?
Yes.
Can you tell me what she's doing?
No.

You can tell me. I know she's probably listening, but it's okay. Really. She knew I would ask you. Is she hurting you in any way, any way at all?

No.

Is she—dressed?

Yes.

Okay. That's good. Are you feeling okay?

Yes.

Do you need me to come up there?

Yes.

Yes?

Yes.

Can you tell me what you mean by yes? As in why?

No.

Is your mom's friend there?

No.

He's out of town?

I don't know.

Is anyone else there?

No.

Is your mother hurting herself?

No.

Sweetie, I'm so sorry, I just can't come this time, not right now. I'm too pregnant. I'm not allowed to go on a plane. Your uncle can, though. You want your uncle to come?

No.

Oh, Francie. Who is the best grown-up for you to call?

It's me again, Minn. She dropped the phone. She's standing by the wall now. She puts her nose right up against the wall. It's touching the wall.

What is happening over there?

Like she is talking to the wall. She has this look, Minn.

Kids have looks.
No, no. Other kids don't have this look.
Elaine, she can hear the whole conversation for God's sake!
Like she is judging me. All the time.
Kids don't judge, not like that.
She does.
You're still on the Abilify?
I cannot be around her. There's something in her. There is a bug in her. I cannot even trust myself around her! Are you listening to me?
Yes. I'm sending Stan up. The minute he gets home. Morning flight.
Not Stan! You!
I can't fly. What do you mean, a bug?
A bug in her. Something crawling inside her.
Can she stay somewhere else? Where can she stay?
I don't know.
A friend?
I don't like her friends.
A friend of yours?
She loves her babysitter.
Ask the babysitter. Of course. Tomorrow. Or, I'll call her too. We can both call her. Okay? This is the one who also works at the school?
Shrina.
I have her number. We'll work something out, honey. You have to call your doctor. We'll both call the doctor.
I know I should. I know I do.
And I will too. So that's a start. We have a plan then. We do?

We'll both make some calls in the morning. Okay? Let's go over the plan. What are you going to do tomorrow?

I am going to call my doctor.

Good. And?

I am going to call my doctor.

And, if you feel able, ask the babysitter.

Right. And I will ask the babysitter.

What are you going to ask the babysitter?

If she will take my sweet girl, Francie. But what do I mean again? Where will she take her?

You know what, I'll call Shrina. Don't worry about that. You take care of yourself. Maybe Francie can stay with her for a couple days while we get you feeling better. Do you know where she lives?

She is very young.

Francie?

The babysitter.

It's just until Stan can get up there. I'll tell her he'll be coming as soon as he can.

How many months are you again?

Eight and a half. So that's the plan for tomorrow. But what about tonight?

Tonight? Exactly!

Does she have a lock on her door?

Her bedroom door? Yes. She does. She asked for that.

What do you mean? She asked for a lock?

Last year. For her birthday.

You're kidding me. Did she ask for anything else?

Is that odd?

Just a lock?

Yes.

Unbelievable. But okay. She's a smart girl. It's very useful. From the inside?

Yes.

And how about you?

We can both lock our doors from the inside.

Okay. You need to do that then. Why don't you do that as soon as we get off the phone. Use the bathroom first. Then go to bed. You'll call me tomorrow morning?

Yes.

You'll call the doctor?

Yes.

You'll call me if you need anything, absolutely anything?

Yes.

Tell Francie goodbye. Tell her I love her.

You're on speaker. She can hear you.

Jesus. Goodbye, Francie. Did you hear that about locking your door?

Yes.

I love you, Francie.

She doesn't say I love you.

I will say it anyway. She doesn't have to say it back. I love you, Francie.

Goodbye, Minn. Thank you so much. I love you.

I love you too, Elaine. We'll figure this out.

Thank you. I love you.

I love you too, Elaine. Go to your room now, honey. Good night.

CHAPTER TWO

My mother had placed a tape recorder in every room of our apartment. They were cheap and easy to find at secondhand stores, as were the tapes. When she brought them home, she tried to hide them by placing one piece of folded white paper over each device like a little tent. Each room, with its white paper tent. She had started buying them weeks before that phone conversation with Aunt Minn, and when we were in a room together, she would casually drift over to the tent and sneak a finger underneath to find a button and press Record. Then she'd make breakfast, or play cards with me, or we'd watch *Toy Story 2*, or I'd do my homework. I understood implicitly that they were not to be discussed, that I was to think the little white tent was an actual cover, and her pressing of the button invisible to me. I suppose I liked the idea of a shared secret, even if she did not know I shared it. In fact, had she looked carefully, my mother might've seen a few more white tents on appliances in my bedroom as a tribute: a white piece of paper over the clock radio, a white piece of paper folded over a broken camera. This field of tents, this camping ground of

our home. In the other rooms, we would play our games and eat our meals, and I grew used to the rubbery click of a cassette running out, a button upending as the closing point of most activities. At some point, while I was at school, or asleep, she must've flipped the tapes, but I never saw that part. They were always prepped and ready to go. When the volunteer mothers from my school were packing up the apartment and going through her and my things, they mentioned nothing to Aunt Minn about any bag full of labeled cassettes, any grand-plan documentary, which was not a surprise; Mom just wasn't generally that organized. I never ended up asking her about them, but it didn't seem like a long-term project. More like she wanted some proof in case I did something bad. And, as I think of it now, probably keeping an ear on herself, too.

Before those volunteer mothers arrived, when I was gathering a few of my own things to take with me before I went to live with my aunt and uncle in their home in Burbank, California, I lifted each little tent like the boxtop of a present and took the tape recorders, slid each one into my purple drawstring bag along with a stuffed brown bunny I didn't really care about and some word search books in which I had already found all the words. I had no idea what to bring. The scrim of meaning had floated off of everything.

I brought the recorders with me on the train for two days, and then into the car and up the walkway to my new home, on the quiet street of well-tended lawns and a bright blue tire swing across the road hanging from the gnarled branch of an oak tree. Supposedly, when I rang the doorbell, and my aunt answered, holding a tiny fretting brand-new infant in her arms, hair frizzed, face etched, I pointed to myself

and said, “Francie.” “It was the most heartbreaking thing in the world,” she told me years later, pressing my hand, “as if we were acquaintances at a party.”

That morning, she hugged and kissed me as she led me up the stairs. My room was to be at the top of the staircase, with windows that looked out upon the street, and a faint odor of yoga mats. It had been previously used as an exercise room and an office, and so all the equipment had been shoved to one side, shrouded by a few old green sheets, and by the closet they’d set up a futon draped in a too-large comforter and a nightstand made of a packing box covered by a towel. She had no spare reading lamp, so she’d placed an industrial flashlight on the towel in case I liked to read at night.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, bouncing the baby, who was wrapped in a blanket. “We’ll get this into shape. We just have been so consumed.”

“I like the flashlight,” I said.

“We’ll go online. We’ll order whatever you like.”

“What is the baby’s name?” I asked, still standing in the doorframe.

She blushed. Her eyes seemed to have constant water in them, a vivid hydrated health. She looked nothing like my mother. “Vicky,” she said. “Your cousin Vicky. Or, maybe—your sister?”

“Cousin is good,” I said, holding out a finger, which the baby grabbed.

Months later, after extensive shopping, once I was settled in my new room, with its yellow skirt on the bed, and cloud-painted lamp, and painting of rainbows perched on clouds on the wall, and art table, and cardboard dollhouse, on an afternoon when I had nothing to do, I emptied

the purple drawstring bag of its devices, inserted a tape, and pressed Play on the one from the Bathroom, and then the Kitchen. I had been missing my mother very much, but it turned out I couldn't stand listening. Hearing my squeaky voice, hearing hers. The cracking of eggs for breakfast, her laughing as she brushed her teeth and sang me a song about spitting. The dim sounds of Go Fish. The conversation from the Living Room recorder between us all was the only one I could listen to in full, because it was the last I had, and the easiest to rewind to, and didn't cause the same kind of ache.