

THE
Grief of Others

LEAH HAGER COHEN



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1.

Shortly past noon on the first Friday of the month, Biscuit Ryrrie approached the low brick building where she attended fifth grade. She had ridden her bike a mile already and her lungs were sharp with the sweet-onion sting of early April. Against the wind her cheeks felt tight as marble. The day did not look like spring. It was white: white sky, a pallid sheen on every surface, clumps of snow lingering here and there. In a week's time, these last remnants of winter would be gone.

The sight of her own classmates gave her a start. She'd counted on their being safely ensconced in their classroom around back, instead of filing out of the building just as she drew even with it. Each student was carrying something, she saw, an identical brown sketch pad. Only then did Biscuit remember Mr. Li's announcement that today they were to begin making a visual record of the shape and size of the buds on the trees and bushes

around the school. Too late to avoid being seen, she scrunched her already small frame lower over the handlebars and veered toward the far side of the street.

“Hey!” shrieked someone, importantly, hilariously. Most likely Vanessa Sett. “There goes Biscuit Ryrice. On a bike!” Laughter followed, and hooting. Biscuit kept her gaze forward, her speed steady. Someone whipped a chunk of petrified snow into the road; it smacked against her front tire and flew apart as stinging crystals. A few of them sprayed her hand and cheek.

If Biscuit had simply stayed at home like other truant children, watching reruns on cable, eating chocolate chips from the bag and peanut butter from the jar, informing her parents when they got home from work that she’d had a stomachache and could she please have a note to bring to the teacher in the morning, nothing might have come of it. But it would no more have occurred to Biscuit to skip school in order to watch TV and eat junk than it would have occurred to her that she wasn’t entitled to make her own decision about attending. She did not look around to see who had flung the chunk of ice, nor did she look when Mr. Li himself called her name in his diffident baritone, which seemed to trail along after her, lofted on a question mark, before she pedaled past the northern edge of the school and went safely around the bend, heading toward the Hook.

That Biscuit was small for her age (newly ten) suited her. She regarded the fact of her size like a convenient bit of camouflage. If she’d been in command of picking her form in the first place she might have chosen different, might have opted for that of an aquatic mammal, or perhaps something avian. But all in all, diminutive human female was acceptable. Of course, she’d had no

say over what she would be called, either, yet this, too, had worked out to her satisfaction. Her given name, Elizabeth, had been dispatched by her older brother within days of her birth. Paul, then three, had fixed exclusively upon the last syllable, which he'd rendered *bis* and gone around the house proclaiming with great gusto. Their parents had been so charmed by his enthusiasm that they'd followed his lead, and from there it had been only a matter of time before they'd appended the *-cuit*.

Now, with school well behind her, she let up on her pedaling and even coasted a bit. The air blew gently against her forehead. She thought not about school, not about consequences, but about her destination, her intention. She thought about the *tchok tchok* sound the teaspoon had made as she'd gathered ashes from the fireplace earlier, the bowl of the spoon tap-scraping the charred brick each time she scooped another heap of gray powder from the hearth. These ashes now resided in a folded-up washcloth stuffed inside the pocket of her parka, along with a few chicken bones she'd fished from the kitchen garbage that morning after everyone else had left. Into her other pocket she'd slipped an egg.

Tchok tchok. She had a thing for certain sounds. She had a thing for lots of things. Images, too, but usually only the narrowest bits. Slivered images, fragments: the way a little piece of ice had been nestled in a crook of the split rail fence in front of the neighbor's house when she'd left. Even though she had only just set out, she'd had to stop and get off her bike in order to examine it, this piece of ice all curled in on itself like a tiny hand, when nearly all the other ice and snow around it had melted. She'd leaned her bike carefully against the fence and squatted

down with her face right up close to the frozen coil. She'd noticed the play of colors in its semi-transparency, and also the gleam of wetness from which she'd deduced, with a moment's grim satisfaction, that this bit of ice would shortly be going the way of its brethren. *The melt is upon it*, she'd thought, not in her own voice but in that of a white-coated scientist confirming with a brusque nod a colleague's more tentative speculation.

She'd gone more than a mile and it was one mile more, straight along Broadway, from her school to the Hook, whose sheer rock face she could already see looming in jagged patterns of red-brown and gray. It appeared deceptively close. Although it was near midday the sun was barely distinguishable from the overcast sky: a white dinner plate on a white tablecloth.

Broadway stopped abruptly at the foot of the Hook, where a small wooden gatehouse, closed for the season, announced the entrance to Nyack Beach State Park. Biscuit flew past it and rode the brakes down the steeply winding road, at whose bottom she coasted to the end of a small parking lot, dismounted, and propped the bike against a tree. The kickstand was broken. It was a boy's bike, having first belonged to Paul. It had five speeds and was the metallic gilt-green of a bottle fly.

The wind coming off the Hudson held some warmth, or a promise of warmth to come. Biscuit inhaled, open-mouthed, and got a foretaste of rain. Oh well, she had on the hooded parka (another of Paul's hand-me-downs) and two pairs of socks inside her scuffed work boots (Paul again). She set out along the cinder path that ran north from the parking lot, banding the Hook like a hat brim. To her left rose wooded and talus slopes, broken up by the occasional jumble of boulders. These always looked heart-

stoppingly precarious, as though they might resume tumbling at any moment, even though Mrs. Mukhopadhyay, the children's room librarian, had taught her that the cliff had been formed some two hundred million years ago, at the end of the Triassic Period.

To her right the river spread broadly. It was smoke-colored today and choppy, its stiff-looking waves patterned like cake frosting. Biscuit's father had made a cake from a mix yesterday, a yellow cake with whipped cream for her mother's birthday. The thought of the cake, and of her mother's subdued reaction, made her bite the inside of her cheek.

People passed, not many. An elderly couple, the woman wearing a clear plastic rain hat, heading toward the lot. A thin young man with reddish hair and a bearlike dog, off-leash, who overtook Biscuit and soon disappeared around a curve. A middle-aged woman carrying a folded umbrella, who looked Biscuit over appraisingly. Biscuit made fleeting eye contact, gave a curt nod, and did not slow. This was a routine she had perfected. When her father had taken Paul and her to visit their mother and brother in the hospital—this had been a year ago; they'd been twelve and nine—he had explained to them that the policy was no visitors under twelve, but that he didn't suppose anyone would stop them if Biscuit carried herself the right way. "The trick," he'd said, "is to walk like you own the place," a concept and phrase that appealed to her appetite for self-sovereignty. With no further coaching, she'd adopted a cool-as-you-please, look-straight-ahead saunter that had gotten them all through the vast lobby without a hitch. By the wordless glance he'd cast her once the elevator doors had closed behind them, she saw that

her father had not been expecting such quick mastery of the technique.

The same instinct or skill served her now, although the farther she walked along the path, the fewer people she encountered. The threatening weather seemed to be a factor, for those she did see were all heading in the direction of the lot. Sure enough, just as she found a spot suitable to her purpose, it began to rain, or to mist, really, a speckling sort of moisture breaking out all around her. She left the path and climbed down onto a rocky slice of beach framed by a short spit of rocks on one side and the natural curve of the shoreline on the other. A squat, bent-necked tree craned out over the vertex of the little cove. Biscuit understood that if anyone were to see her doing what she was about to do, it would invite scrutiny, or possibly actual intervention. But she also saw that from this position, the ashes would not reach the water.

She peered over her shoulder. The cinder path was empty. The mist had become rain. The chances of anyone else coming along seemed slim. All right, she'd do it properly. She left the shelter of the tree and the ice-littered shoreline and went onto the spit, picking her way out along the rocks.

Light rain dashed her face. At the end of the spit, a few inches back from the darker, slippery outer rocks, bearded with yellowish rime, she stopped. The egg first, she decided, and removed it from her pocket. She squatted, tapped the shell smartly on a rock, and broke it over the water. The yolk slipped out, seemed to float on the waves, then was swallowed by them. Strands of the white hung from the broken shell in long, viscous trails. Biscuit let go. The halves of the shell floated like two round-bottomed boats.

She straightened and took the washcloth out of her pocket, unfolding the corners carefully. It felt heavy to her. She almost forgot it wasn't the real thing. She checked again over her shoulder. No one. Then looked out across the heathery expanse of water, squinting past the drops. Along the opposite shore, a train snaked silver past Philipse Manor and Tarrytown before slipping beneath the Tappan Zee Bridge. Biscuit imagined, as she sometimes did, the gray lady riding that train, the lady who was able to look out the moving windows and take note of her far across the water. Biscuit could not remember a time when she hadn't had this idea of the gray lady. She was a kind of friend, or not quite. She was sad and just and mute, and she traveled along the border of Biscuit's life and could see all Biscuit could see and all that she could not.

Biscuit gathered a small handful of ashes, along with one of the chicken bones, and threw these gently toward the water. A lot of the ashes blew back and stuck to her jeans. The rest floated on top of the waves like pepper. The bone floated, too. She paused to see whether she felt anything.

Her mother had not liked the cake. She hadn't said so, but Biscuit could see that she hadn't. She had said, "Thank you, John," and Biscuit's father had smiled at her with such relief that Biscuit had felt a little sick, and let down by them both, and then the cake, which she had been looking forward to, had tasted just so: of disappointment.

She was here on the spit because of them, because of the way her mother and her father had fallen down behind themselves. She thought of it like this, like the way a book can fall down behind all the others on a shelf, and in this way it's missing, only

you don't know it to look at the shelf: all that you see looks orderly and complete. Her parents seemed like the books you could see: they smiled and spoke and dressed and made supper and went off to work and all the other things they were supposed to do, but something, a crucial volume, had slipped down in back and couldn't be reached.

She was here, too, because of Mrs. Mukhopadhyay and the library book. Mrs. Mukhopadhyay whom she hadn't seen in almost a year, and the library book which she'd stolen.

And of course she was here because of the baby. To sever *its last earthly ties*.

The rain was falling harder. Biscuit raised her hood and fingers of rain tapped on it: *Hello, hello, Biscuit*. Silver drops like Mrs. Mukhopadhyay's silver bangles, which fell up and down her wrists, singing, as she checked out books. *Good girl*, tapped the rain, in Mrs. Mukhopadhyay's lilting, practical voice. *Come on, then: get on with it*.

She ought to speak, Biscuit knew, or at least to think some words. She squinted through the rain, trying to remember the words from the book, which had been too fat and heavy to stuff inside her parka and so was back at home where she kept it hidden underneath her bed. She was supposed to beg the water to bear the ashes safely away. *Please, dear water*, she began, but that didn't seem right and she faltered. Then words did come: *Blessed be*, less for meaning than pure sound: *blessed be, blessed be, blessed, blessed, blessed be*. It was something you might skip rope to. She saw girls skipping rope, tap-scraping the ground with their hard-bottomed shoes.

But she was not here for skipping-rope girls.

This was about the egg, the ashes, the bones, the baby.

The baby's name had been Simon.

Blessed be, Simon Ryrie.

She reached again into the nest of ash and bone. Before she threw the second handful, something big and hard and soft pushed against the backs of her legs, and her knees buckled, her feet slipped out from under her, and she slid, as if amenably, into the river.

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