

## Adeline

Adeline. The name in his mouth like music. In his head it lilts—butterflies on an updraft, a little girl with pierced ears, tiny pearly studs, chocolate on the rim of her t-shirt and a drawing in her hand of mommy, daddy, and me, crayon blue sky and grinning sun. Of course, Adeline is not that little girl yet. She is on her stomach in pink pajamas in a crib beside their bed. But he knows she'll get there someday. She'll play softball, and boy she'll have a mean pitch. He'll come to all her games, just as later he will stick his head in her bedroom door and ask about her homework. Algebra? Done. English? Working on a paper. What about? Romeo and Juliet. And he will read her essay standing in the center of her bedroom, a magazine image infested space, the smells of powder and perfume, a zip-up sweatshirt tumbled across the back of a chair, a lipstick lying on the dresser next to a softball trophy, an algebra textbook, a pair of silver hoop earrings. Later, he will stand on his summer lawn and take photographs of her in diaphanous pink—a corsage blooming on her wrist. He will drive her to college, hug her fiercely, be capable and incapable of letting her go.

But that is all still fantasy. And he knows it. These meandering dreams of her future. He is breathless with her possibilities. They fill the long miles of highway.

Adeline is only eight weeks old, but his wife, Sharon, has quit to be with her full-time. There are the other children too, Sharon's from an earlier marriage, and it would have been too much, the older kids, the job, and then the infant. Jack knows this, and he's glad that Sharon wants to be there, but without the second income, money is tight. They sat in the buzzing light of the kitchen and tallied lists of numbers. He would have to keep the time between runs short, and so he is on the road again, and Adeline is not even old enough to know he's gone.

He pulls his eighteen-wheeler into one of the long parking spots outside the truck stop. Salt Lake City glimmers behind him, the lake mirrored in the pale dawn; the highway unfurls across the salt flats. It is six in the morning, and he has a long haul today. He needs some coffee, maybe something to eat. And he can call Sharon. She'll be up already, what with the time change, and the baby. He left a message last night, but he knows it's hard for her to call him back. If they can scrape together a little extra, maybe he can get a cell phone, so it would be easier to check in, to reach back East to Adeline.

The word trills in his head. He hums softly, the symphony of his daughter's name.

"What can I get you?" the waitress asks. She is middle-aged, pear-shaped and pale beneath a carefully pinned pile of brassy-blond hair. She waits patiently for him to scan the menu, flips over to a new page in her order pad; her hands are mildly swollen, the flesh around her wedding ring pinched and pink.

“Coffee,” he says, “and scrambled eggs, with hash browns, sausage, and rye toast.” The smells in the truck stop have made his vague desire for food concrete. “Sure thing,” the waitress says as she rips off the order and clips it up in the open window facing the kitchen. Jack looks around: vinyl booths, clean and faded tile floor, paintings of ducks in ponds and distant snowy mountains. Sharon would say they look like paint-by-numbers.

The waitress plunks a coffee cup down on the counter in front of him and fills it with coffee. Jack pulls the mug closer, lightens it with milk. He curls his hand around the side of the cup, and the steam carries the dark smell to his nose.

The pile of baby name books lingered on his bedside table for months. Sharon laughed at him. “It’s not that big a deal,” she said, “by the time you get to number three, you realize that the name is the least of your concerns.” But this was not number three for Jack. It was number one, his first child, and he needed to find the perfect name. He read the books from cover to cover, glasses on, in bed beside his wife: Margaret, Marge, Martha, Mary. And the boys’ names too: Jeffrey, Jeremy, Jesse. “If it’s a girl,” he said to Sharon, his hand on the blanket mountain of her stomach, “her name should be a song.”

“Where you headed?” the waitress asks as she sets down his food.

“Chicago,” Jack says, “and then the final leg back home.” Chicago is a trucker-friendly city, long underground roads that bypass the traffic, the city streets, and cut right through to the

loading docks. He likes Chicago, the wind off the blue lake, the flat spread of neighborhoods oozing out from the center.

“Where’s home?” the waitress asks. She looks down and runs one fingertip over the rough edge of a cracked acrylic nail.

“Upstate New York,” he says, forking eggs onto his buttered toast.

“You got a family back there?”

“Yep, wife, two step-kids, and a new baby daughter.”

“Oh yeah?” The waitress abandons the broken nail and looks up. “What’s her name?”

“Adeline,” he says, and there is a feeling of transcendence, fireflies lit beneath his skin.

“Beautiful name,” she says, her face suddenly lighter, still tired, but maybe she’s younger than he thought.

“Beautiful girl.”

“Can I get you some more?” She gestures towards Jack’s empty mug with the coffeepot and he nods. She fills it steaming to the brim.

“I know you’ve got some pictures to show me.”

“Really?”

She places her palms on the counter, “Bring it on.” So Jack shows her the pictures he has of Adeline, the typical shots from the hospital, a red and scrunched baby, pink hat, pink blanket.

He knows she looks like any baby, but he also knows she is not: she is his.

“Cute,” the waitress says and coos over the picture that shows Adeline’s new-opened eyes, blue and wet and wide.

“Is that your wife?” the waitress asks, pointing at a freckled arm crooked beneath Adeline.

“Yeah,” Jack flips through the pictures and pulls out another. “Here’s one that actually shows her.” Sharon’s face is flat to the camera, eyelids half-lowered, lips parted slightly, her mouth listing towards a frown. Adeline is a pink blanket bundle in her arms. “I kind of caught her off guard,” Jack explains sheepishly.

“Hey, the woman just had a baby,” the waitress says, “I’d be a little rough around the edges too.”

Jack grins and tucks away his pictures. The waitress moves down the counter. He finishes his breakfast, leaves her twenty percent.

The payphone is at the back of the restaurant, where no one is sitting. Jack pulls out his phone card and dials the number.

Sharon picks up on the third ring. She sounds confused.

“Hello?”

“Hi, it’s me.”

“Oh, Jack, hi. I wasn’t expecting you to call so early.”

He leans into the wall, into the phone, “I left a message last night, and I’m pulling a long shift today, but I wanted to talk before I got on the road.”

“Where are you?”

“Just outside Salt Lake City. How’s Adeline?”

“Asleep, finally, she kept me up half the night.”

“Is she okay?”

“She’s a baby, that’s what they do.”

A pause.

Jack breaks the telephone stillness. “How are you?”

“Tired. Billy got in a fight at school, I had to go down to meet with his teachers. Mike’s basketball team won their semi-finals game on Saturday so they’re going to the state finals. We’ve been really busy here.”

Jack thinks of their boxy house, of the grey pilling couch in the living room, the clean yellow pattern of the kitchen counters, the lacy pillows Sharon insists on piling on the bed they share. He kicks them off as he sleeps and Sharon is mock angry as she picks them up in the morning. He thinks of Adeline asleep across the room, the shades pulled against the morning light, her baby body in shadows. He imagines Sharon nursing, the two of them folded into the

armchair in their bedroom, a towel draped over Sharon's shoulder, Adeline's soft head pressed to the breast, her mouth a tiny whispered 'o' on the nipple.

"Well, tell Mike congrats," he says, "and don't worry about Billy. Boys will be boys, you know."

"I know," she says, "Damn it."

"What?"

"I'm leaking through this nursing bra again. It's driving me nuts. I'm going to put Adeline on formula."

"Do whatever you think is best," Jack says, "I'm just a beginner here. Thank god you have some experience."

"Right."

The static silence vibrates.

"It's pretty beautiful here," he says, "the hills around the city are red. I mean, really crimson. I think they're red clay or something. It's a sight, red hills rising from the lake." He can hear Sharon rattling dishes and pans at the other end, maybe unloading the dishwasher. His voice breaks in over the clatter; he tries to feel the distance between them closing. "You know the lake's really salty, well of course, it's the great salt lake, but the salt kind of rises above the water in a mist, like the ocean. A salt mist below the red hills."

“Sounds nice,” Sharon says, “you becoming a poet on me?”

He can picture her grinning in the kitchen, drying her hands on the red-checked towel.

“Maybe I am,” he says.

There is a rising cry in the background on the other end of the line, a cry that settles into a rhythmic wailing.

“Oh god, she’s crying again,” Sharon says. The cries grow louder as Sharon walks into the bedroom. They are almost deafening; she must have scooped Adeline up, must be holding her with the phone pinned between ear and shoulder. Jack wants to take the soft bundle of Adeline and hold her safe from all the world, rock her quiet. He will sit by her crib, one large hand a blanket over her, and see her almost translucent eyelids tremble closed. He will watch her sleep and Sharon will come in behind him, backlit by the hallway. She will rest a hand on his shoulder and the three of them will be suddenly connected, bodies linked by touch. He’ll look back at Sharon and reach out to wind up the mobile above the crib. To the sweet soft lullaby they will slow dance. He will dip her giggling to Adeline who will murmur in her sleep. They’ll both lean over the crib, and Jack will draw a finger down their daughter’s milk-soft cheek and turn. He will kiss his wife.

“Jack, is there anything you actually need to tell me right now? Because I really can’t talk. I have about a thousand things to do.”

“No no, I just wanted to say hi, tell you how much I love you.”

“Okay,” Sharon says. He’s not sure she heard him. The connection must be bad.

“I’ll talk to you soon,” she adds.

“Sure, and tell Adeline I love her,” Jack says, but the line is already dead.

He crosses the salt flats by early afternoon and rises through green and brown forests, the red clay hills left far behind. By early evening he has risen ten thousand feet, crossing the tree line between leaf and needle. He turns the heat on in his cab and winds through the mountain cuts. He knows that by morning he will descend again, be back in the summer of the valley, open the windows, roll up his sleeves. The artificial seasons of ascent and descent distort his sense of time, make him feel like he’s been gone for years. Like he will come home to Adeline grown up, Adeline gone, Adeline a woman. It is like no love he has ever experienced, he thinks, the love he has for this child of his body. He would do anything for this baby girl, for his Adeline.

A few more days, he reminds himself, turning up the defrost to melt the scratch white patterns that are forming on his windows. Tomorrow he will stop for food and sleep outside Chicago. He will call Sharon and she will be glad he is almost home. She will make a joke about finally being able to sleep through the night. You’re used to night shifts, she’ll say, so staying up with Adeline will be easy. And of course it will. And he’ll make dinner, to give her a

break, and she'll watch him feed Adeline, holding her bottle gingerly, and she'll tell him how much she loves him. How much she loves Adeline. How could you not? He'll say, and Adeline will lift her milk damp mouth from the bottle, reach out her tiny hands and grasp their fingers; she will be a bridge between them.

Jack can feel this. He knows it will be. His truck hums certainty beneath him, a steel frame, an engine, eighteen wheels hard to the pavement. It must be, he thinks, as his truck rises towards the cold and he downshifts and slows, turns his flashers on. At the peak of the rise the clouds are humped to the horizon. The snow starts slowly, fat wet flakes that stick to the truck's grill, to the headlights, to the windshield. Jack turns on the wipers and sweeps away the white. A storm is nothing new, he thinks, and in the morning, in the valley, it is green and growing. In the morning it is already summer.