

Excerpt from “The Riser”

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When we first moved to Brooklyn, my papa bought half a dozen rhinestone and leopard-skin sunglasses from a street vendor. His eyes glittered with mischief; he ran around the apartment and placed a pair by every window. Owning so many pairs of sunglasses made us feel like we were always on vacation.

Let me paint a map for you.

Here on my map is the wind off the harbor. Here are my braids, tossed askew. Here are the pigeons pecking pretzel salt. Wings everywhere whoosh! Here on my map are my mother, Meredith, and my father, Andy, dance partners, strolling down the Promenade in Brooklyn Heights. My little sister, Nessa, and me, Caroline, playing tag; Nessa’s puffy jacket blue, green and purple, and mine red, orange and pink. Here I go, round and round Papa, orbiting him a planet, spinning away the cold.

Can you see her? Papa asks, pointing across the choppy water. Can you see the Lady? I see her. Holding up the whole sky with just one arm. Here’s our building: a white block of ice, and our building’s twin across the street with a necklace of barbed wire (Mom calls it a “detention center” but Papa calls it a “jail.”) Here is the lobby, with a

jungle of ferns. Here is apartment 11-B. Here on the map is the softness of my blanket: blue, with yellow and red fish that swim through my dreams. And here is me, lying on my back, drawing two circles around my nipples, mapping my smooth plane. (Did I think about growing breasts? If I did, the possibility seemed unlikely as sprouting a unicorn horn). Here is an eleven-year-old girl who loves being eleven more than anything. Here is a girl peering into the dark cave of twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen...

Here’s the capitol of our city: the kitchen. Here’s where my mother stacks so many tins of lasagna, so high to the sky, I know she will feed every hungry person in New York, no, everybody in the world. And here is where Nessa takes an egg from the carton, kisses it, holds it to her cheek and says, “There’s a baby turtle in here, did you know that?” Here is where Papa drowns a mouse in a vase. The mouse’s ears pink as my new erasers. Here is me, crying like I was nine or eight, not eleven. Here is where I scream, “MURDERER!” And here is a map of the music my mother and father love: bursting and sparkling and shaking the floor. Here is a map of my parents dancing. Here is the laughing; there are the feet.

(End of Excerpt)