

Samanta Schweblin,

MOUTHFUL OF BIRDS

(tr. Megan McDowell)

## IRMAN

Oliver was driving. I was so thirsty I was starting to feel dizzy. The truck stop we found was empty. The restaurant was big, like everything else out in the country, and the tables were littered with crumbs and bottles, as if a battalion had just eaten lunch and there hadn't been time to clean up. We chose a spot by the window, near a whirring fan that didn't move a hair on our heads. I desperately needed to drink something, and I said so to

Oliver. He grabbed a menu from another table and started reading aloud the options he found interesting.

A man appeared from behind the plastic curtain. He was extremely short. He had an apron tied around his waist and a grimy kitchen rag draped over his arm. Although he seemed to be the waiter, he looked disoriented, as if someone had plopped him down there all of a sudden and he didn't really know what he was supposed to do next. He walked over to us. We said hello; he nodded. Oliver ordered the drinks and made a joke about the heat, but he couldn't get the guy to open his mouth. I got the feeling we'd be doing him a favor if we kept our order simple, so I asked if there was a daily special, something fresh and quick, and he said yes and walked away, as though *something fresh and quick* were an option on the menu and there was nothing more to say.

He went back to the kitchen, and we saw his head bobbing up and down in the window above the counter as his small figure passed by. I looked at Oliver and he was smiling; I was too thirsty to laugh. Some time passed, much longer than it should take to choose two cold bottles of whatever and bring them to the table, and finally the man appeared again. He wasn't carrying anything, not even an empty glass. I felt awful. I thought that if I didn't drink something right away I was going to go crazy. What was wrong with this guy, anyway? What question could he have? He stopped at the table. There were drops of sweat on his forehead, and his shirt was stained under his arms.

He made a confused motion with his hand as if he was going to give some kind of explanation, but then stopped short.

I asked what was going on, I guess in a somewhat violent tone. He turned back toward the kitchen, and then, shuffling, he said:

"It's just, I can't reach the fridge."

I looked over at Oliver. Oliver couldn't hold back his laughter, and that put me in an even worse mood.

"What do you mean, you can't reach the fridge? How the hell do you wait on customers?"

"It's just . . ." He wiped his forehead with the rag. The guy was a disaster. "My wife is the one who gets things from the fridge," he said.

"And . . . ?" I felt like punching him.

"She's on the floor. She fell and she's—"

"What do you mean, 'on the floor'?" interrupted Oliver.

"Well, I don't know. I don't know . . ." he repeated, shrugging his shoulders, the palms of his hands turned upward.

"Where is she?" asked Oliver.

The guy pointed to the kitchen. The only thing I wanted was to drink something cool, and when I saw Oliver stand up, all my hopes were dashed.

"Where?" Oliver asked again.

The guy pointed to the kitchen once more and Oliver moved off in that direction, turning back to look at us a few times, as

though distrustful. It was strange when he disappeared behind the curtain and left me alone, face-to-face, with an idiot like that.

I had to sidestep around him when Oliver called me into the kitchen. I walked slowly because I could tell something was wrong. I opened the curtain and peeked in. The kitchen was small and overflowing with casserole dishes, saucepans, plates, and things piled up on shelves or hanging from hooks.

Lying on the floor a few feet from the wall, the woman looked like a marine beast washed up by the tide. She was huge, and she clutched a big plastic spoon in her left hand. The fridge hung above her, flush with the cupboards. It was one of those kiosk refrigerators with a transparent lid, the kind that stands on the floor and slides open on top, only this one had ridiculously been tacked to the wall with brackets, following the line of the cupboards, its doors facing outward. Oliver was looking at me.

"Well," I told him, "you came back here, now do something."

I heard the plastic curtain move, and the man came and stood next to me. He was much shorter than he'd looked before, now that we were both standing. I think I had almost three heads on him. Oliver knelt down next to the fat woman, but couldn't seem to bring himself to touch her. I thought she could wake up at any moment and start shouting. He brushed the hair from her face. Her eyes were closed.

"Help me turn her over," said Oliver.

The guy didn't even blink. I went over and knelt down on

the other side, but between the two of us, we could barely move her.

"Aren't you going to help?" I asked the man.

"I'm . . . ahhh . . . suspect . . ." babbled the moron, "she's dead."

We immediately let go of the fat woman and sat there looking at her.

"What do you mean, dead? Why didn't you say she was dead?"

"I'm not sure, it's just a suspicion."

"He said he's a suspect," said Oliver, "not that he suspects."

"I also suspect my suspicion."

Oliver looked at me; his face was saying something like *Any second now I'll beat the shit out of this guy*.

I lifted the hand with the spoon to check for a pulse. When Oliver got tired of waiting for me, he put two fingers under the woman's nose and mouth and said:

"She's a goner. Let's get out of here."

And then the damned little guy got desperate.

"What do you mean, 'get out of here'? No, please. I can't deal with her alone."

Oliver opened the fridge, took out two sodas and handed one to me, and took a few steps away, cursing. I followed him. I opened my bottle and I thought its mouth would never meet mine. I had forgotten how thirsty I was.

"So? What do you think?" asked Oliver. I breathed in relief.

Suddenly I felt ten years younger and in a better mood. "Did she fall or did he take her out?" he asked. We were still pretty close to the short guy and Oliver didn't lower his voice.

"I don't think it was him," I said in a low voice. "He needs her to reach the fridge, doesn't he?"

"He could reach . . ."

"You really think he killed her?"

"He could use a ladder, get up on the table, he's got fifty bar stools . . ." he said, motioning around us. It seemed to me he was talking loudly on purpose, so I lowered my voice even more:

"Maybe he really is just a poor guy. Maybe he really is that stupid, and now he's all alone with his fat wife dead in the kitchen."

"You want to adopt him? Put him in the back of the truck and set him free when we get there?"

I took a few more sips. The idiot was standing over the fat woman and holding a stool in the air, seeming not to know where to put it. Oliver signaled to me, and we left the kitchen. In the dining room, we went behind the counter, and, through the window that looked into the kitchen, we watched him put the stool aside, take hold of the fat woman's arm, and start to pull. He couldn't move her an inch. He rested a few seconds and pulled again. He tried putting the chair over her, one of its legs against her knee. He clambered up on it and reached as far as he could toward the fridge, but now that he had the height, the stool was too far away. When he turned toward us to get down,

we ducked and hid, sitting on the floor with our backs to the wall. I was surprised to see there was nothing under the counter. There were things up on the shelves, and above those, the cupboards and racks were also full, but there was nothing down at our level. We heard him move the stool. Sigh. There was silence and we waited. Suddenly he burst out from behind the curtain brandishing a knife. He saw us sitting on the floor, and far from being annoyed, he breathed in relief.

"I can't reach the fridge," he said.

We didn't even stand up.

"You can't reach anything," said Oliver.

The guy stood looking at Oliver as if God himself had come down to earth and told him the meaning of life. He dropped the knife and his eyes took in the empty expanse under the counter. Oliver was satisfied: the guy seemed to go beyond any horizon of stupidity.

"Let's see, make us an omelet," said Oliver.

The man turned back toward the kitchen. His imbecilic face took in the utensils, the casserole dishes, almost the entire kitchen hanging from the walls or the shelves. He looked astonished.

"Okay, so not that," said Oliver. "Make some simple sandwiches, surely you can do that."

"No," said the guy. "I can't reach the sandwich maker."

"Don't toast it. Just bring ham, cheese, and some bread."

"No," he said. "No." He shook his head; he seemed ashamed.

"Okay. A glass of water, then."

He shook his head again.

"How the hell did you serve this army?" asked Oliver, indicating the dirty tables.

"I need to think."

"You don't need to think, what you need is a few feet more."

"I can't do it without her . . ."

I thought about getting down a cool drink for him, I thought it could do him good, but when I started to get up Oliver stopped me.

"He has to do it on his own," he said. "He has to learn."

"Oliver . . ."

"Tell me something that you can do, one thing, anything."

"I carry the food she gives me, I clean the tables . . ."

"Doesn't look like it," said Oliver.

" . . . I can mix the salads and season them if she leaves everything for me on the counter. I wash the dishes, clean the floor, shake out the—"

"Okay, okay. I get it."

Then the guy stood looking at Oliver, as if surprised:

"You . . ." he said. "You can reach the fridge. You could cook, hand me things . . ."

"Say what? No one's handing you anything."

"But you could work, you're tall enough." He took a shy step toward Oliver, which to me didn't seem very wise. "I'd pay you," he said.

Oliver turned to me. "This guy's fucking with me, he's fucking with me."

"I have money. Four hundred a week? I can pay you. Five hundred?"

"You pay five hundred a week? Why don't you have a palace in the backyard? This asshole . . ."

I got up and stood behind Oliver: he was going to throw a punch any second. I think the only thing stopping him was the guy's height.

We saw the guy close his little fists as though squeezing an invisible mass between his fingers, compressing it smaller and smaller. His arms started to tremble, and he turned purple.

"My money is none of your business," he said.

Oliver kept looking at me every time the other man spoke to him, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. He almost seemed to be enjoying it, but I know him better than anyone: no one tells Oliver what to do.

"And judging by the truck you drive," said the guy as he looked out toward the road, "judging by your truck, one might say I manage money better than you."

"Son of a bitch," said Oliver, and he lunged at the guy. I managed to restrain him. The guy took a step back, without fear and with a dignity that added a few feet to his height. He waited until Oliver was calm and I'd let go of him.

"Okay," said Oliver. "Okay."



He stood looking at the guy; he was furious, but there was something else underneath his composure. Then he said:

"Where's the money?"

I looked at Oliver without understanding.

"Are you going to rob me?"

"I'm going to do whatever the fuck I feel like, you piece of shit."

"What are you doing?" I asked.

Oliver took a step, grabbed the guy by the front of his shirt, and lifted him into the air.

"Where's your money? Let's have it."

The force with which Oliver had lifted him up left him swinging a little side to side. But the guy looked Oliver directly in the eyes and didn't open his mouth.

Oliver let go of him. The guy fell, then adjusted his shirt.

"Okay," said Oliver. "Either you bring the money or I'll break your face."

He raised a tightly closed fist and held it an inch away from the guy's nose.

"All right," said the short man; he took a slow step back, crossed the bar in the opposite direction from the kitchen, and disappeared through a door.

"Piece of shit."

I moved closer to Oliver so the guy couldn't hear us.

"What are you doing? He's got his wife dead in the kitchen, let's go."

"Did you hear what he said about my truck? The asshole wants to hire me. He wants to be my boss, get it?"

Oliver started looking over the shelves above the bar, rifling through bottles, boxes, papers.

"The fucker's money must be around here somewhere."

"Oliver, let's go. You're crazy."

He picked up a wooden box. It was old and had the word "Habanos" hand-carved on the lid.

"Here we are," said Oliver.

"Get out of here right now," we heard a voice say.

The short guy was standing in the middle of the room, and he was holding a double-barreled shotgun aimed right at Oliver's head. Oliver hid the box behind his back. The guy clicked off the gun's safety and said:

"One."

"We're going," I said, and I took Oliver by the arm and started to walk. "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. And I'm sorry about your wife, too, I..."

I had to use all my strength to get Oliver to follow me, the way mothers pull on stubborn children.

"Two."

We passed right by him, the shotgun a couple feet from Oliver's head.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

We were close to the door. I let Oliver go out first so the guy wouldn't see that he was carrying the box.

"Three."

I let go of Oliver and ran to the truck. I don't know if Oliver was afraid or not, but he didn't run. I had to wait a few seconds clutching the handle of my door for him to open it. He put the box on the seat, started the engine, and we went out the same way we'd come in. The truck bumped a few times over the curb and then we were finally on the road. Only a while later, without taking his eyes from the highway, did he say:

"Open it."

"We should . . ."

"Open it, you faggot."

I picked up the box. It was light and too small to contain a fortune. It had a fake lock, like a toy treasure chest. I opened it.

"What's in it? How much? How much?"

"You just drive," I said. "I think it's only papers."

Oliver turned every once in a while to look at what I'd found. There was a name embossed on the underside of the lid; it said "Irman," and beneath it was a photo of the short guy when he was very young, sitting on some suitcases in a terminal. He looked happy. I wondered who had taken the photo. There were also letters headed with his name: *Dear Irman; Irman, my love*; poems he had signed; a mint candy turned to dust; and a plastic medal for the best poet of the year with the logo of a social club.

"Is there money or not?"

"They're letters," I said.

Oliver grabbed the box from my hands and tossed it out the window.

"What are you doing?" I turned around a second to see the things scattered over the asphalt, the papers still in the air, the medal bouncing farther away.

"They're letters," he said.

And a while later:

"Look . . . We should have stopped here. 'All-you-can-eat barbecue,' did you see the sign? How much was it?"

And he shifted restlessly in his seat, as though he really did regret it.