Referential

By Lorrie Moore

For the third time in three years, they talked about what would be a suitable birthday present for her deranged son. There was so little they were actually allowed to bring: almost everything could be transformed into a weapon, and so most items had to be left at the front desk and then, if requested, brought in later by a big blond aide, who would look the objects over beforehand for their wounding possibilities. Pete had brought a basket of jams, but they were in glass jars and so not permitted. “I forgot about that,” he said. The jars were arranged by color, from the brightest marmalade to cloudberry to fig, as if they contained the urine tests of an increasingly ill person. Just as well they’ll be confiscated, she thought. They would find something else to bring.

By the time her son was twelve, and had begun his dazed and quiet muttering, had given up brushing his teeth, Pete had been in their lives for six years, and now four more years had passed. The love they had for Pete was long and winding, with hidden turns but no real halts. Her son thought of him as a kind of stepfather. She and Pete had got old together, though it showed more on her, with her black shirtdresses worn for slimming and her now graying hair undyed and often pinned up with strands hanging down like Spanish moss. Once her son had been stripped and gowned and placed in the facility, she, too, had removed her necklaces, earrings, scarves—all her prosthetic devices, she said to Pete, trying to amuse—and put them in a latched accordion file under her bed. She was not allowed to wear them when visiting, so she would no longer wear them at all, a kind of solidarity with her child, a new widowhood on top of the widowhood she already possessed. Unlike other women her age (who tended to try too hard, with lurid lingerie and flashing jewelry), she now felt that that sort of effort was ludicrous, and she went out into the world like an Amish woman, or perhaps, even worse, when the unforgiving light of spring hit her face, an Amish man. If she was going to be old, let her be a full-fledged citizen of the old country! “To me, you always look so beautiful,” Pete no longer said.

Pete had lost his job in the recent economic downturn. At one point, he had been poised to live with her, but her child’s deepening troubles had caused him to pull back. He said that he loved her but could not find the space he needed for himself in her life or in her house. (He did not blame her son—or did he?) He eyed with somewhat visible covetousness and sour remarks the front room, which her son, when home, lived in with large blankets and empty ice-cream pints, an Xbox, and DVDs.

She no longer knew where Pete went, sometimes for weeks at a time. She thought it an act of vigilance and attachment that she did not ask, tried not to care. She once grew so hungry for touch that she went to the Stressed Tress salon around the corner just to have her hair washed. The few times she had flown to Buffalo to see her brother and his family, at airport security she had chosen the pat-downs and the wandings rather than the scanning machine.

“Where is Pete?” her son cried out during visits she made alone, his face scarlet with acne, swollen and wide with the effects of medications that had been changed, then changed again, and she said that Pete was busy today, but soon, soon, maybe next week, he would come. A maternal vertigo beset her, the room circled, and the thin scars

on her son's arms sometimes seemed to spell out Pete's name, the loss of fathers etched primitively in an algebra of skin. In the carrousel spin of the room, those white webbed lines resembled coarse, campground graffiti, as when young people used to stiffly carve the words "*PEACE*" and "*FUCK*" into picnic tables and trees, the "C" three-quarters of a square. Mutilation was a language. And vice versa. The cutting endeared her boy to the girls, many of whom were cutters themselves and seldom saw a boy who was one, and so in the group sessions he became popular, which he neither minded nor perhaps really noticed. When no one was looking, he sometimes cut the bottoms of his feet—with crisp paper from crafts hour. In group, he pretended to read the girls' soles like palms, announcing the arrival of strangers and the progress toward romance—"toemances," he called them—and sometimes seeing his own fate in what they had cut there.

Now she and Pete went to see her son without the jams but with a soft deckle-edged book about Daniel Boone, pulled from her own bookcase, which was allowed, even though her son would believe that it contained messages for him, believe that, although it was a story about a long-ago person, it was also the story of his own sorrow and heroism in the face of every manner of wilderness, defeat, and abduction, that his own life could be draped over the book, which was simply a noble armature for the revelation of tales of *him*. There would be clues in the words on pages with numbers that added up to his age: 97, 88, 466. There would be other veiled references to his existence. There always were.

They sat at the visitors' table together, and her son set the book aside and did try to smile at both of them. There was still sweetness in his eyes, the sweetness he'd been born with, even if fury could dart in a scattershot fashion across them. Someone had cut his tawny hair—or, at least, had tried. Perhaps the staff person hadn't wanted the scissors to stay near him for a prolonged period and had snipped quickly, then leaped away, approached again, grabbed and snipped, then jumped back. That's what it looked like. Her son had wavy hair that had to be cut carefully. Now it no longer cascaded down but was close to his head, springing out at angles that would likely matter to no one but a mother.

"So where have you been?" her son asked Pete.

"Good question," Pete said, as if praising the thing would make it go away. How could people be mentally well in such a world?

"Do you miss us?" the boy asked.

Pete did not answer.

"Do you think of me when you look at the black capillaries of the trees at night?"

"I suppose I do." Pete stared back at him, so as not to shift in his seat. "I am always hoping that you are O.K. and that they treat you well here."

"Do you think of my mom when you stare up at the clouds and all they hold?"

Pete fell silent again.

“That’s enough,” she said to her son, who turned to her with a change of expression.

“There’s supposed to be cake this afternoon for someone’s birthday,” he said.

“That will be nice!” she said, smiling back.

“No candles, of course. Or forks. We’ll just have to grab the frosting and mash it into our eyes for blinding. Do you ever think about how, at that moment of the candles, time stands still, even as the moments carry away the smoke? It’s like the fire of burning love. Do you ever wonder why so many people have things they don’t deserve but how absurd all those things are to begin with? Do you really think a wish can come true if you never ever ever ever ever ever tell it to anyone?”

On the ride home, she and Pete did not exchange a word, and every time she looked at his aging hands, arthritically clasping the steering wheel, the familiar thumbs slung low in their slightly simian way, she understood anew the desperate place they both were in, though their desperations were separate, not shared, and her eyes then felt the stabbing pressure of tears.

The last time her son had tried to do it, his method had been, in the doctor’s words, morbidly ingenious. He might have succeeded, but a fellow-patient, a girl from group, had stopped him at the last minute. There had been blood to be mopped. For a time, her son had wanted only a distracting pain, but eventually he had wanted to tear a hole in himself and flee through it. Life, for him, was full of spies and preoccupying espionage. Yet sometimes the spies would flee as well, and someone might have to go after them, over the rolling fields of dream, into the early-morning mountains of dawning signification, in order, paradoxically, to escape them altogether.

There was a storm looming, and lightning did its quick, purposeful zigzag among the clouds. She did not need such stark illustration that horizons could be shattered, filled with messages and broken codes, yet there it was. A spring snow began to fall with the lightning still cracking, and Pete put the windshield wipers on so that they could peer through the cleared semicircles at the darkening road before them. She knew that the world had not been created to speak just to her, and yet, as for her son, sometimes things did. The fruit trees had bloomed early, for instance—the orchards they passed were pink—but the premature warmth precluded bees, and there would be little fruit. Most of the dangling blossoms would fall in this very storm.

When they arrived at her house and went in, Pete glanced at himself in the hallway mirror. Perhaps he needed assurance that he was still alive and not the ghost he seemed.

“Would you like a drink?” she asked, hoping he would stay. “I have some good vodka. I could make you a nice white Russian!”

“Just vodka,” he said reluctantly. “Straight.”

She opened the freezer to find the vodka, and when she closed it again she stood there for a moment, looking at the photo magnets she’d stuck to the refrigerator door. As a baby, her son had seemed happier than most babies. As a six-year-old, he was still smiling and hamming it up, his arms and legs shooting out like starbursts, his perfectly

gapped teeth flashing, his hair in honeyed coils. At ten, he had a vaguely brooding and fearful expression, though there was light in his eyes, and his lovely cousins beside him. There he was, a plumpish teen-ager, his arm around Pete. And there, in the corner, he was an infant again, held by his dignified, handsome father, whom he did not recall, because he had died so long ago. All this had to be accepted. Living did not mean one joy piled upon another. It was merely the hope for less pain, hope played like a playing card upon another hope, a wish for kindnesses and mercies to emerge like kings and queens in an unexpected twist in the game. One could hold the cards oneself or not: they would land the same way, regardless. Tenderness did not enter into it, except in a damaged way.

“You don’t want ice?”

“No,” Pete said. “No, thank you.”

She placed two glasses of vodka on the kitchen table. She sank into the chair across from him.

“Perhaps this will help you sleep,” she said.

“Don’t know if anything can do that,” he said, taking a swig. Insomnia plagued him.

“I am going to bring him home this week,” she said. “He needs his home back, his house, his room. He is no danger to anyone.”

Pete drank some more, sipping noisily. She could see that he wanted no part of this, but she felt that she had no choice but to proceed. “Perhaps you could help. He looks up to you.”

“Help how?” Pete asked with a flash of anger. There was the clink of his glass on the table.

“We could each spend part of the night near him,” she said carefully.

The telephone rang. The Radio Shack wall phone brought almost nothing but bad news, and so the sound of it ringing, especially in the evening, always startled her. She repressed a shudder but still her shoulders hunched, as if she were anticipating a blow. She stood.

“Hello?” she said, answering it on the third ring, her heart pounding. But the person on the other end hung up. She sat back down. “I guess it was a wrong number,” she said, adding, “Perhaps you would like more vodka.”

“Only a little. Then I should go.”

She poured him some more. She’d said what she needed to say and did not want to have to persuade him. She would wait for him to step forward with the right words. Unlike some of her meaner friends, who kept warning her, she believed that there was a deep good side of Pete and she was always patient for it. What else could she be?

The phone rang again.

“Probably telemarketers,” he said.

“I hate them,” she said. “Hello?” she said more loudly into the receiver.

This time when the caller hung up she glanced at the lit panel on the phone, which was supposed to reveal the number of the person who was calling.

She sat back down and poured herself more vodka. “Someone is phoning here from your apartment,” she said.

He threw back the rest of his drink. “I should go,” he said, and got up. She followed him. At the door, she watched him grasp the knob and twist it firmly. He opened it wide, blocking the mirror.

“Good night,” he said. His expression had already forwarded itself to someplace far away.

She threw her arms around him to kiss him, but he turned his head abruptly so that her mouth landed on his ear. She remembered that he had made this evasive move ten years ago, when they had first met, and he was in a condition of romantic overlap.

“Thank you for coming with me,” she said.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, then hurried down the steps to his car, which was parked at the curb out front. She did not attempt to walk him to it. She closed the front door and locked it as the telephone began to ring again.

She went into the kitchen. She had not actually been able to read the caller I.D. without her glasses, and had invented the part about its being Pete’s number, but he had made it the truth anyway, which was the black magic of lies and good guesses, nimble bluffs. Now she braced herself. She planted her feet.

“Hello?” she said, answering on the fifth ring. The plastic panel where the number should appear was clouded as if by a scrim, a page of onionskin over the onion—or, rather, a picture of an onion. One depiction on top of another.

“Good evening,” she said loudly. What would burst forth? A monkey’s paw. A lady. A tiger.

But there was nothing at all. ♦