GEORGE SAUNDERS, LIBERATION DAY (2022)

SPARROW

She was small and slight and her eyes were dark beads on either side of a beaklike nose. She moved quickly, head down, as if, we sometimes joked, scanning for seeds. She had a way of seeming to dart from place to place. She had a way, too, of saying the most predictable things. When a truck went off the road in front of the little store where she worked, she said, "That's too bad. I hope no one was hurt." When it started to rain, whether drizzling or pouring, she'd say, "It's raining cats and dogs." When someone said the sandwich she was eating looked good, she'd say, "It's a good sandwich." If someone said the sandwich didn't look good, she'd say, "Yeah, not great."

If you found yourself in a car in which she was riding and someone suggested rolling down a window, she'd say, "Some fresh air." Or you'd pass a guy riding a horse and she'd say, "A horse." If someone, goading her slightly, asked, "You like horses?" she might say, "Well, they are pretty," and if that person, goading her further, asked if she'd like to someday own a horse, she would, because that possibility was so out of the question (she didn't make much at the store and rented half a

duplex), just go quiet and blink, blink, as if something happening outside her cage had startled her into stillness.

Of course, one day she fell in love. He was a man she worked with at the store. I can see her now in the brown apron they gave her. I don't imagine he had given her any romantic signals, but they were there together every day and likely he did for her the sorts of small kindnesses people do for one another when working with one another and in time she decided he was the one for her. She started dropping his name. "That's what Randy thinks too," she'd say, or "I said that same thing to Randy the other day." We imagined that Randy thought about her the way we did; that is, in his early days of working with her, he'd waited to discover what might be special or interesting about her only to find that she didn't have, as the expression goes, much to recommend her.

She always seemed to be reading directly from a book on how to be most common. "Are those apples fresh?" someone would ask, and she'd say, "I suppose they are pretty fresh." "Was that an earthquake just now?" someone would ask, and she'd say, "If it was, it will be on the radio."

Then came a change. Because she was in love, or fancied herself to be, with Randy, and because, I expect, she could feel that not only did he not feel the same way, he didn't feel much about her at all (and why would he, given that she was, as mentioned, experienced by most people as a slightly puzzling blankness), she started, perhaps, to panic a little, to sense, maybe for the first time in her life, that her natural way of being was not interesting enough to get the attention of (much less delight or captivate) someone like, even, Randy, who, I should say, was no font of originality himself but at least had a big truck he loved and would wash with pleasure every Friday after

his shift and sometimes would at least make a dirty joke or pick up a strange-looking damaged orange and do the funny voice in which he imagined such an orange might speak, and was, for example, a passionate advocate for, and defender of, his mother, a mean old thing who lived a few houses down from the store, a strongly self-certain lightning bolt of constant opining who presented as a fierce pair of black men's glasses moving around on a tanned, agitated face.

But Randy, as they say, thought his mother hung the moon, and this was because she thought he hung it. It was a kind of mutual admiration society. He got along nicely with her. And she got along nicely with him. Which was, I thought, we all thought, part of the reason he'd never married, perhaps.

It was a small town, and we did a good deal of talking about such things.

The woman, who we called Sparrow among ourselves but whose real name, funnily enough, was Gloria, noticed this about Randy, the way he was with his mother, and added it to the growing list of things she liked about him. That is, she would say he was a good man; that you can tell a lot about a man by how he treats his mother; that mothers were God's special gift to us all. And so forth. Just all the things you would expect her to say, all the first-order things someone might say had she made no attempt to think anew about the thing in question.

Noticing that she was having no effect on Randy, she started trying new things, such as having opinions of her own. But it was as if she were just manufacturing these in order to have them. "Oh, I know what!" she'd say. "We should put the fudge up there, with the olives." Or "So-and-so is such a good actor. I think I have a little crush on him." And it was always whatever

actor was on the cover of some magazine that month, and if you pressed her on it you'd find she'd never seen any of his movies.

You would never have described her as feminine. But now she decided that the way to Randy's heart was to become more girlish. Somewhere she got hold of a curling iron and some perfume. Imagine that trip to the mall in Werthley. Or the one in Clover. She didn't drive. So would have taken the bus. Soon the store smelled of her new perfume. She started, based on an article in one of the women's magazines she'd begun reading, to laugh more. She would laugh at anything Randy said, and not just the things that he meant to be funny. He would look over, startled, at such a time.

We could all see a fall was coming. Randy's mother owned the store and would come in behind those big glasses, judging everything. Who the hell put the fudge way up there? she would demand. What was that terrible smell? "I'm wearing perfume," Gloria would say. "Well, why?" the mother would snap. "Are you going on a date?" That was the punch line: the idea of Gloria on a date with some unlucky bastard. The mother would laugh her low alcoholic growl of a laugh as if this was the most far-fetched idea ever. But she wasn't only mean. She had an honest, caring side to her, too. "Don't get your hopes up, sister, men-wise," she'd tell Gloria, in the lettuce-smelling corner of the stockroom where they piled the cardboard boxes. "You're not much to look at but . . ." And she'd think to add something like "you've got a good heart" or "you're a hard worker," but because she prided herself on being lacerating-ly honest, as these thoughts came up, she felt she had to not say them, because this Gloria had never shown any evidence of having an especially good heart, and as far as being a hard worker, well, no. She showed up every day, sure, but had never,

in the mother's memory, taken any special interest in the workings of the store or had a single fresh, helpful idea about anything at all. It was strange to have had someone working for you for nearly two years and not be able to recall a single occasion on which she had suggested anything to improve or liven up the store, such as, that gal they'd fired, Irene, had at least had the idea of putting a glass jar on the counter into which people could drop spare change, which would then be given to the local children's hospital, but which, it turned out, Irene was cleverly pocketing about half of. Which was why she'd been let go. So, not that clever. Although pretty clever. Because it had taken them nearly a year to catch her. But at least that Irene had shown some gumption, some desire to, well, improve her condition, one might say. She wasn't some inert thing letting life just happen to her.

Because this opinionated and sometimes caring old lady was a sharp observer, she picked up on the fact that her son was in Gloria's sights. And told him so. He just laughed. But then started to think. Not about Gloria, exactly, but about the fact of her liking him. He liked the idea of her starting to work there two years ago in a neutral state and then noticing this man who worked there, that is, him, Randy, and coming gradually to prefer him over all of the men in town and over all the men in the world, apparently, coming to like him the most, in some special way he didn't really know about yet but would like to know more about. What was it about him that she liked so much? It was interesting. He liked, also, the way they seemed to agree on everything. That wasn't the case with other women. Other women often disagreed with him. If he said it was about to rain, they might say, "I doubt it" or "Doesn't look like it" or "That's not in the forecast." But she, Gloria, would say something like "I bet you're right." Which confirmed they were

simpatico. And when it did start to rain, she'd say, "It's raining cats and dogs," which seemed, to him, like a forthright way of acknowledging how right he'd been. And then (he found this generous) she'd smile, as if it pleased her to be able to acknowledge how right he'd been. Which he liked. He liked the way she noticed and enjoyed the way he tended to get most things right. She seemed, in this way, confident. It didn't bother her, the way it did most women, when he was shown to be right. If a person was right, he was right, she seemed to feel, it was no skin off her ass.

So, imagine you are a woman who, all your life, people have shied away from and avoided, and whenever you said something it went out into the world and just hung there, causing a neutral or slightly adverse reaction, and every time this happened, you felt it, and so, behind you, in your life there had accrued a series of light but painful little blows, conspiring to convince you that there was something wrong with you, and now you find yourself in the daily presence of a man who seems to be coming to like you and has even started to leave you little presents on the break room table (a chocolate mint, a single Twinkie). And imagine that this man's mother is against it, against this thing that is the thing that, now, propels you, Gloria, out of bed every morning. And that she, the mother, finds all of this amazing and laughable and disappointing and even, one day, tells her son that his interest in you is causing her to downgrade her opinion of him. And imagine that the man shares this with you. But, far from discouraging him, he says, this has actually made him feel, for the first time, that he is the protector of some woman not his mother. Which, he says, blushing, has made him feel tender, toward you, or whatnot.

Imagine the kind of month that would be for you if you were that woman.

And imagine you are that man, who, for the first time, feels he is protecting a woman not his mother, a woman who is so much more full of life than his old, tan, bent-but-agile mother, whose smug eternal certainty is, for the first time, coming to seem tiresome, as are those big honker glasses that once belonged to his father, into which she, for some reason, put new lenses last year, that is, eleven whole years after your father's passing. That woman, that young, energetic woman with whom you often now find yourself in pleasant agreement, might suddenly start to seem even prettier to you, even if no one else seems to notice it. But you notice it, this uptick in her prettiness, and say so, in one of those notes you've begun leaving on the break table, with those snacks, notes that are getting longer and longer lately and sometimes even border on the passionate, in which your grammar will sometimes go a bit off as you struggle to express these new feelings, and that might even include a drawing of, for example, a cartoon man with stars pouring out of the open top of his head.

And one day there comes a kiss. In the stockroom. After it, you say, "Not bad," to which she replies, "Not bad at all," which you take as confirmation that you are, as you have always felt yourself to be, an excellent kisser, and now someone has finally noticed it, thank you very much.

And then the two of you are off to the races, and no matter what we, the people who live in that town and shop in that store, think about it, or how we snicker about it in the parking lot, saying unimaginative things ourselves now, such as "Well, good for them, really, why not?" or "One thing I would not want to be is a fly on the wall of wherever it is they go to be alone" or "I guess you never can tell, with people," and no matter what the mother with the men's glasses might hiss at night at her son in the house, her house, that she and the son share

but that she owns, there would still be, as if willed by some force bigger than any of us, a wedding, in July, in the church just up the block that had formerly been a private home and that the current pastor had crowned with a bell tower of sorts but without any bell in it.

And all of us would go to that wedding, because how could we not? And because the new couple looked so naïve, happy, and clueless, standing there at the altar of the church with no bell in its tower, we would think: "Oh, this is not going to end well."

And it may not. It still may not end well. Life being, as they say, long. But it has not ended badly yet. It has not ended at all. When we are in that store, we will often hear him singing her praises, whether she is nearby or not, and same with her: she is always singing his praises, whether he is nearby or not. Seeing her now, one does not think "looks like bird" but "small, glowing lady." And he; he moves around the store with a theatrical beneficence, seeming to take a fastidious pleasure in helping customers with even the smallest things, sometimes even helping a customer too much, for too long, not at all ashamed now, it seems, to be seen working in his mother's store, as he had so often seemed to be formerly. And over time, the mother has become, one might say, subservient to, even adoring of, the couple they have become, and, whether they are nearby or not, but especially if they are not, will sing their praises, saying that they are devoted, absolutely devoted to each other, is the way she will most often put it.