

UNSTRUCK

JULIE AND HER temporary brother, Pritchard, had been getting married every single day since they'd heard that maybe a family had been found for Pritchard, since school got called off for a week due to snow, since Julie's mother insisted every afternoon that they eat four to six orange halves, which they did, sucking out the juicy flesh, grinding their teeth against orange peel until their lips were on fire and they had burning red mouth shadows.

"Kids?" Julie's mother shouted from upstairs in the kitchen. "What are you doing?"

No answer from the basement. Julie and Pritchard were busy having a touching tongues contest. Besides, Julie's mother worked as a part-time channeler. She channeled a dead man from Sussex, England, named Mr. Darlton. If

she wanted to know what they were doing, she could go ask him.

Pritchard broke first. "I'm stinging. I'm dying. Fix me," he said to Julie. Pritchard was supposedly eleven. Julie was actually eleven. She sat across from him wrapped in the happy house afghan that her mother had crocheted for her birthday. Chartreuse, yellow, and lavender, every house was chock-full of holes.

"Sometimes I take my clothes off because it's a nice thing to do," said Julie.

Snow could make a person feel reckless! The not seeing out. The no one seeing in. Newscasters blathering about bread and milk, and Get Some Now. The packed, stuffy safety of it all, while outside the snow fell one flake at a time until its big fat beauty threatened to crush everything in sight.

Yesterday, Julie had heard her mother say the stripping thing while she was on the phone with Julie's father. Her mother was scrubbing a pan with a Brillo pad, but she said this as if she'd just woken up. Julie's mother, though slender, often complained of feeling heavy—not overweight, just heavy. The previous month she had her skeleton weighed in a special experiment at MIT for large-boned people. Eighty-eight pounds. Sometimes she just stared at her forearms on the kitchen table, calculating.

"Julie, fix me," Pritchard said, rolling on the brand-new green and orange Fiesta Time indoor/outdoor rug. The

salesman told Julie's parents that the rug was made with "wonder-weave" technology. Wonder-weave was wondrous! It could even be hosed down. Pritchard scratched his neck against it like a dog. Pritchard's hair smelled of dirt, chicken, grease, and wind. His eyes were a strange flat green like the back of a leaf. His mouth was too large for his face, and his puffy lower lip was creased in the middle as if it had once been folded in half. It was rumored that Pritchard was actually twelve. Once Pritchard told Julie he was thirteen. But then he took it back.

The Windbreaker that Pritchard wore (nonstop and zipped to his chin) featured over his heart one green wave and one blue wave that rose in tandem, touching each other, about to break at any second. A little white penguin was sewn where the tips of the waves met. Since he'd been with Julie's family, Pritchard wore the Windbreaker to school each day, and Julie's mother let him.

The Baimas, Pritchard's second temporary family, had given him this jacket. Pritchard was always bragging about how the Baimas bought the Windbreaker at a big famous clothing outlet, and how they'd given him money to buy his own food since he was eight. He used to eat at McDonald's every single meal, like a superstar.

Pritchard was already in trouble at school. On the top of every piece of homework he passed in, on his drawings in art class, on his desk, and all over his hands he wrote: *I Love My Wife Julie*. This was inappropriate, his teacher

had said. It suggested confusion within generally accepted family member roles. Julie heard her father read the letter sent from school to her mother. Still, this didn't stop Pritchard and her from getting married every day.

Before Pritchard, Julie was not feared or admired at school. She was a quiet person leaning against a wall somewhere waiting to go to the next thing. But now she was Pritchard's Sister—Pritchard who pushed down the hallway as if he were a man running through a wild meadow, a man about to jump aboard his own private helicopter, a man who shoved the other kids into their minilockers, muttering cryptic warnings such as: "Wish you didn't, didn't, huh? Too late. Too late. Cry. Or run." It wasn't like he was swearing, and he sometimes smiled when he said these things. Julie's mother had been called to school, though.

"Are you saying you want to discipline him for accusing people of regret?" she said to the principal. Julie's mother had a thing about regret. She called it "the useless emotion."

The principal admitted that Julie's mother had a point. He said this was just part of the school's new Stay Alert, No One Gets Hurt campaign. Just a little warning, he said to Julie's mother. No big deal.

That first night at Julie's house Pritchard refused to eat. He said he'd already been to McDonald's three times that day. Julie's father said, "Don't worry, pal, we're the type of folks who only eat when we're hungry."

“Right,” said Pritchard.

Such a tough, glamorous response, Julie thought. If only she could talk that way.

“So, Pritchard, what kinds of things excite you? What are your passions?” Julie’s father was a drama teacher at a private girls’ school. Apparently this was how girls liked to be talked to, even though he never asked Julie any questions like that. Julie could tell that Pritchard made her father nervous—the way Pritchard sat tipped at a forty-five-degree angle on the back legs of his kitchen chair, not answering, gripping the arms as if he might launch into outer space at any second. Then there was the wetness of his lower lip, and how a perfect bead of saliva collected in the tiny valley at its center.

Finally Julie’s father said, “Well, Pritchard, although we may take a little getting used to, we’re just regular folks, and we want you to know that while a family is being found for you, you are part of—”

“The earth has more than one moon,” Pritchard cut him off, and a little bit of spit flew from his mouth. “In 1986, scientists found Corinthe, the baby moon. The baby moon is three miles wide with a horseshoe-shaped orbit that lasts seven hundred and seventy years.”

“There you go,” said Julie’s father.

“It’s just as good as the first moon,” Pritchard said.

After dinner Julie followed Pritchard into his bedroom/canned goods/extra box room. He took his

unpacked Safari Boy suitcase off the bed and lifted it up and down a few times. Pritchard said he could pack the suitcase in such a way that it weighed absolutely nothing. He showed Julie how you had to tuck everything into the side pockets and put no items in the middle. The agency people would check for weight. Pritchard also told Julie you could tell an agency lady by the blouse covered in hopping birdies or the bright sweater with a big cat brooch. The men wore sickeningly happy ties. "It's a rule or some such," Pritchard said. "Some such." No one Julie knew used that phrase, and the way he said it with the two words carelessly exhaled, like he was smoking them, was almost more than Julie could stand.

"Do you kids want one last orange half?" Julie's mother called down the stairs. "Or you may have *one* real fruit Popsicle." The garage refrigerator/freezer, which sat just outside the basement door like a squat yellow guest too shy to ever knock, was packed tight with boxes of real fruit Popsicles made of sixty-five percent real fruit chunks.

"But don't you *dare* go out there in your bare feet. There could be melted snow out there! You could be grounded!" she shouted. Julie's mother constantly reminded them that when they were in the garage they should *never* touch the refrigerator/freezer door when they took their boots off after playing in the snow, because the garage floor could be wet, and then they'd get grounded, and they'd be stuck forever to the refrigerator/freezer, and all the thoughts in

their heads would be shaken to pieces and never come together in the right way again. "If you get grounded, you can't let go no matter how hard you try," she had cautioned. "And if anyone tries to save you, they won't be able to let go of you either."

"Julie, fix me, fix me, fix me," chanted Pritchard. Fixing always led to marriage.

Not touching his red-hot mouth shadows, Julie put her fingers on either side of his lips and they squeezed open, and this was how it happened the first time—it was a treatment to fix a burning mouth. But Pritchard would leave his mouth open way past shutting time, his too-big mouth with his slick lower lip, and this was always part of the treatment/accident/marriage. Then Julie would open hers, and get up very close to him and breathe into him, pretending this was her last breath on earth. She would give it to Pritchard, and he would hold it.

Today, after thirty seconds, Pritchard's eyes began to tear up. "Let it out, your heart will burst," Julie commanded. The white penguin pitched into the sea of Pritchard's jacket and drowned. Pritchard clamped his arms to his stomach, fighting to keep her air inside him.

"I've got someone coming in half an hour, you kids," Julie's mother called. A client, Julie thought. Not even a snowstorm could keep them away. "So I want you to shovel then." Julie's mother needed great privacy to properly make contact with Mr. Darlton.

Before he died, Mr. Darlton had been a merchant who imported Indian textiles to England, and he now came as a messenger to help people whose hearts had been trammelled.

Once a man had come to their house who'd been drinking from a broken heart, and generally Julie's mother didn't accept that sort of thing, but this time she said if the man would sit down at the kitchen table and eat a little something, she'd channel while he sobered up. No sooner did she make contact with Mr. Darlton than the man decided to rest his head in his plate of pasta. Julie's mother murmured that he really shouldn't be so discouraged over his love life because there was, at that very moment, a special word coming through from Mr. Darlton.

"Anaharta," she whispered, then paused. Obviously it was the type of word that needed no other words around it because it meant so much. Apparently Mr. Darlton picked up this word in India. Everyone in India, even little kids, knew it meant the unstruck heart. The unstruck heart was one that could never be hurt for good.

Pritchard still held his breath. He stared out the window, concentrating on the sun, which just now looked like the tip of a finger pushed through a dark blue afternoon sky. The sky was brooding, about to snow again. Later that afternoon a solar eclipse was to occur. The moon was going to swell up and roll in front of the sun. The sun would go out, then suddenly it would reappear. They'd

been told at school not to look directly at any of this. Not even if there were clouds covering the sun, because the clouds could suddenly part, and if that happened, they'd been told: STOP LOOKING IMMEDIATELY!

Already Pritchard was looking. Still, he wasn't breathing. Upstairs they heard Julie's mother drop the cast-iron pan on the stove. Maybe she was going to make them fried chicken because they'd been so good at eating oranges.

Pritchard and Julie weren't going to let anyone take him away, no matter what. They would control this with their brains. Originally, Pritchard was supposed to stay with Julie's family for "just a little while," but it had turned into five months. The agency hadn't found a family for him until just last week. Pritchard said it sometimes took three or four years to really check a family out, and by that time he and Julie could be living in their very own dream home. Julie had felt a pinch of disbelief in her chest, but she didn't let on.

Julie watched Pritchard struggle not to breathe, watched a place in the front of his neck suddenly pop out as if there were a tiny hand inside. She thought about how the previous night Pritchard had told her that they could get jobs as dishwashers at the International House of Pancakes so they could save up for their dream home. Pritchard knew an older kid who would get them in. The kid said that lots of children worked there; nobody minded. Pritchard had said the Baimas lived next door to the International House

of Pancakes, and that if he asked them, they would probably let Julie and him sleep in their garage during the week. That way they could get to work in less than ten seconds and really impress the bosses.

Pritchard made a small abrupt sound inside himself like something had been knocked off a shelf. He was turning the color of a bruised peach.

There had been something else about the Baimas. Pritchard told Julie they were Jehovah's Witnesses, and that in exchange for sleeping in their garage, all he and Julie would probably have to do is walk around with the Baimas one day a week and tell people things like, "In 1914, Satan was kicked out of heaven with the rest of the demons." Pritchard had done it plenty when he lived with them, and he said it was fun. People always wanted to know the whole story—why 1914? What happened to Satan then? Where did the demons live after that? It could take all afternoon to explain these things. Sometimes people brought out snacks. Pritchard had been allowed to sit quietly on the sofa and fall asleep if he wanted. He wasn't to offer any comments about Satan. And he definitely wasn't supposed to mention anything about the demonized sofa in the Baimas' living room, and how they got the demon out by yelling, "Jehovah! Jehovah!" really, really loud.

Upstairs, oil was starting to spit in the frying pan, and Julie imagined her mother with her long chicken-cooking fork, jumping at the chicken, quickly stabbing it and

flipping it. She simply had no use for spatter screens. "You can't let fear rule your life," she would say.

At last Pritchard exhaled, and his breath sounded like a small bus pulling into a station. "Fifty-four seconds," he said. The higher the number, the more he loved her.

"Fifty-four," she repeated. Chicken smoke trailed downstairs.

Pritchard had a certain look in his eyes. Julie could see it coming.

Pritchard grabbed Julie and pushed her on the floor facedown. He lay on top of her, and she could feel his heart beating into her back. He locked his calves around her ankles. "Do you like me? Do you love me? Or what?"

A snowplow started down the street, the second one that hour. The plow dragged its scraper along the street, hungry for snow. Julie couldn't breathe.

Pritchard pushed his forehead into the back of her neck. His Windbreaker was sliding around, and some of it had bunched up on one side. "It's *love me*, right? Love me, right?" and he sounded scared, like he was running toward something and trying to get away, at the same time. From behind her he kissed her right cheek hard and in the same place over and over. Now Julie was breathing. She was breathing the rug. And once she kissed it. And at that moment she thought of Pritchard as not smelling of dirt, chicken, grease, and wind, but like the Fiesta Time rug, which smelled like new rubber bands and the tissue inside

shoe boxes times ten, and that was just one of the wonders of wonder-weave. Wonder-weave, wonder-weave. Pritchard and Julie were a wonder-weave. Now *this* was being married! Pritchard tried to drop into Julie's mouth from the side. Julie reached back and pinched the dent in the bottom of his neck. Pritchard grabbed Julie's hand and bit at her thumbnail. Julie pushed against the rug like a lady holding up a building. Still Pritchard was able to pull up her shirt. From behind he pressed her right nipple like an elevator button that wasn't working. Julie's breath stopped again, stopped in a funny way, and crouched somewhere against her back. Pritchard was crying a little and saying *please*. His big front teeth scraped the back of her skull. Please, please. Pritchard was a dog head, pushing. Pritchard was a man whose head had fallen in a plate. They were pressing hard together, getting nowhere, doing nothing, being married.

The smoke alarm went off. The entire house smelled like burnt chicken. Julie's mother turned on the radio loud to try to cover up the fact.

"WKBL the Paaaarrrty Station!" Now her mother was dancing to the classic disco station, stamping her big heavy-boned feet. She was trying not to regret the chicken.

From where Julie and Pritchard lay on the floor, they could see the snow pile up against the window. The sun looked so tiny and pale now. Pritchard looked out, staring at it harder than ever. How could the sun hurt you just for looking at it?



JULIE DOUBLE-TIED her snow boot laces for luck as she always did. Pritchard left his undone, and they flapped around like two small hapless arms as he stepped out into the garage. He didn't bother to flip the light switch. They weren't little babies. To the side of the door the yellow refrigerator/freezer sat humming its electrical anthem, cheery against all odds. It seemed to glow and appeared larger than usual—a sun that had eaten the moon whole. Even though their feet weren't wet, even though they wore boots, even though there was absolutely no chance of getting grounded, they kept their distance.

They took their twin snow shovels—which had been purchased at Sears, and weren't just kids' shovels but real small adult ones—and they stepped out into the cold.

Everything was covered in snow with the same equal and unabiding love. The lawn, the trees, the toolshed, the telephone pole, all seemed far more dignified than just the day before. It was the same old world, but better. Julie and Pritchard walked the few feet that Julie's father had shoveled that morning and then lifted themselves up and over into the deeper snow, where they stood unmoving. For a moment it was too beautiful to break up and smash with their stomping. They were the only two on earth, it seemed.

Then came the crank and rumble of a snowplow and the

eerie sound of machinery dropping, or maybe it was lifting, but it was like a woman singing. A woman with a cold.

"That's an E," said Pritchard, and he started to spin like mad, his arms straight out to the side. In less than one minute he would be in Funny Time. Funny Time was the whole world whooshing in big bright glimpses past a person's head. Funny Time was a chance to see things for the first and last time ever—again and again and again. Funny Time was a strange up-thrown feeling in the stomach, just like love. Pritchard had taught it to Julie, and now she started to spin too. The yard was flipping by them in its huge white glory. Roof tips were jaggging. The sky held fast. Julie and Pritchard were wild with joy in their happy, tilting world.

Then there was a man coming up the driveway. They saw—saw—saw him from the corners of their eyes. A man—a man—a man swirl. A black coat. A flying head. A man. Right there in the middle of Pritchard and Julie's Funny Time.

The man looked at Pritchard and Julie, then just at Pritchard. Pritchard looked at the man. The man looked at the sky. "Don't look at the sun," Pritchard said under his breath, and he lifted his shovel to his shoulder like a gun.

"Don't shoot," said the man, and he patted his gloved hand over his heart in a theatrical way, in a way that looked like nothing so much as where a person should aim. The man wore a dark coat with a high collar that snapped. Around the collar a paisley silk scarf was tied in

a complicated way. No one Pritchard or Julie knew wore such a thing. And certainly not in winter. He looked like a man from another time.

"Mr. Darlton?" Julie called, because even though Mr. Darlton was supposedly dead, maybe he wasn't, maybe he just lived across town.

The man started walking toward them again. He wasn't smiling. He carried a black bag. He did not swing it. No sickeningly happy tie was visible. He walked the purposeful walk of someone who gives you a shot. Someone just doing his job, even when that job is to hurt you. He never took his eyes off Pritchard. He was a helpful man come to help. Anyone could tell.

Pritchard zagged left to the side of the yard. He was elbowing needlessly. He zagged right. He ran in a circle around himself. "Wish you didn't, didn't, huh?" he shouted. In the blank white space his words sounded like begging.

The man edged toward Pritchard. Then he stopped. "Pritchard," he said. "Pritchard?" and there was something kinder than expected in his voice. Perhaps he was a man who had waited all day to come and save a boy. He reached out his hand.

"Stop looking at me," Pritchard called. "Stop looking now!" For a moment the man looked at his shoes.

The air was so cold it burned. The man took one quick step toward Pritchard.

“Julie,” shouted Pritchard. Already he was pulling off his boots, stumbling in the snow. He ran the way people eat who will never get enough. He turned back only once and his face was hoping hard against the cold, the taking away, and trammed hearts everywhere.

The man in black set down his bag. He didn't chase after Pritchard. People like him didn't chase. He watched the boy go. He let him. Still the world went turn, went turn.

Pritchard vanished into the mouth of the garage.

Julie was having trouble with her double-tied laces. She yanked one, and it snapped in her hands. But Julie was ready. She was believing hard. Soon, she thought, she and Pritchard would never let go. Soon they'd be unstruck. Soon they'd pull the light from the sun, and their hearts would weigh less than nothing.