

## Asterisms

By Heidi Vornbrook Roosa

I can't get past the page with the pictures.

I put the book down on my desk. The cover is shiny, slick and new. Her copy must be worn, but this one has not a crease, not a dog-ear, not a single split in its paper spine.

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I went to the huge chain bookstore near the new industrial strip — the one with the coffee. I went to the fiction section, labyrinthally long, and stood before the shelf that began with V. I scanned and had to stoop and ended up sitting on the floor. They had thirty-five copies of eight different ones he'd written. I counted them all as I sat, trying to decide. I pulled out one of each and stacked them in a little pile by my foot and stared.

A young woman eased by me, paper cup of steam in her hand. She smiled down at me, saw my stack, and smiled again.

I looked at the stack and didn't smile.

She walked past, turned from R to Q and P. When she was gone, I checked my stack for coffee stains.

I found none.

I have them here now, the stack eye level on the shelf above my desk, seven in a row. The missing one lies splayed face down, its bold title letters smaller than the author's name.

I sneer at the cover.

"I could never understand a man who didn't like Vonnegut," she said in the lunchroom. She was talking of him then, the one who had given and taken away the gold band that was gone from her finger, an indented white impression left behind.

I said nothing.

I glance at the clock that hangs over my office door. She is late and I am already hungry. Only grad students climb the steps that I can see through my open doorway. It is dark already and they let the night creep in with them through the entrance.

She is late and I have no papers to grade. The book whines at me to continue.

I pick it up.

The clerk bobbed his head in approval as I approached with my stack. He bagged it and handed me my receipt.

"Thanks," I said.

"Great choices," he said, and gave me a thumbs up. I checked my receipt for error and walked to my car. The books sat there, in the empty passenger seat, for a week.

She called last night.

"How about dinner?" she said.

I agreed and went out to my car for the bag.

The clock eases forward and I try again. The pages are white-white. Her copy must be yellow, mine has nary a smudge.

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The outer door opens. She struggles in, a boy and a girl attached to either hand. I smile and wave through my open doorway. The book goes into my coat pocket as I put it on to meet her.

She is breathing hard, her hair a little damp. It must be raining.

She has to pee, she says and leaves the little ones in my doorway. They watch her walk quickly down the hall and then turn back and look at me.

The boy is some not-little-boy age and the girl is short with big eyes, and her nose is runny.

I have no tissues.

"Are you a doctor?" he asks, old enough to read. His eyes move from my door to my face and back.

"Biology," I answer, as if it were an answer, and he stares at me hard.

The little girl has to pee too, I suspect, as she hops lightly from one foot to the other and sniffs.

I do not ask her.

Their mother returns. Her head freshly combed, her mouth newly lipsticked, she appears above their hooded faces.

"Ready?" she asks.

The kids' eyes echo her question. I feel the book in my pocket, weighing me down slightly on one side.

I nod and walk toward them.

She drives erratically — too fast, then too slow, depending on the conversation. I listen as she tells me about the teacher of the girl, who kept her late, talking of something.

They are quiet in the backseat and I wonder if they are real.

I don't want to turn around to check.

We drive in the rain, which she doesn't seem to notice. Her lights are on, but not the wipers.

I wonder how she can see.

I tell her about my class, the students who are no longer excited now that it is mid-semester. She tells me of assignments her own professors insist on, despite her lack of interest, her age. She is not adjusting well to being back in school. The little girl's teacher thinks the same of her daughter.

Or maybe it's about her dad.

She has to stop at the grocery store. Some stuff for dinner, some wine. She parks in the pick-up lane and switches on the hazards. I watch her walk into the store, then glance back at the kids. They sit, hunched down in coats, staring after her too.

I choose not to speak.

The hazards blink on and I take out the book, so stuck on that page that it falls open there now.

The boy unbuckles and climbs to the front, challenging me from behind the wheel. I look down at my book as he pretends to drive.

The rain patters down. The little girl kneels up in her seat and draws hearts in the fog between wiping her nose with her hand. The rearview is skewed from when the boy crawled over and the girl looks at me in it now.

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She appears through the rain, her keys at the door. The boy clambers past me to the back, his still wet shoe leaves a light print in the book across my knees. As she ducks into the car and hands me the bags, he stares at me in the mirror.

I move it back to where I see nothing but window and rain.

We run in the house, wet and cold, and silently take off our coats. The house inside is dark and warm. An old dog comes up to sniff and then lies down.

The kids walk straight to the small room next to the kitchen and pick up toys and play. It is the family room, I know.

I stay in the kitchen.

The kids are quiet and I wonder if they ever talk or make a sound. She takes out pots, her own noise, and I think it is nice to watch her move. She runs water and switches on flames, and turns a dial.

I sit at the table and wonder how it will taste.

She talks of the neighbors and the yard and the house. I can see her planting something, something red.

The girl brings me a doll and some blocks and walks away again. I set up the blocks as her mother talks, and sit the doll on top. The girl comes by and nods her head, and almost smiles.

I want to knock it down, but I don't.

I watch her mom reach to a shelf and bring down plates and bowls and napkins. I offer to help, but she motions me to sit.

I wonder if she'd mind if I read.

At dinner, the boy sits to my right, holds his fork in his left hand, and bangs my arm with his elbow. I inch over and pull my plate with me. He makes a pile of limas in the corner of his plate, separating them from the corn, which he eats. He looks at my plate and sees a matching pile, and looks away fast. I watch as he spears a lima and chews it slowly.

She takes them upstairs and runs water and I hear splashing. I go to the hall and take out the book from my coat and find a seat in that room by the kitchen. I open it and read the words over again.

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I lean back and take in the room, layered in fabrics, and strewn with toys, and bathed in the lingering smells of dinner.

I cover my face with the book and hope that I will still be able to breathe.

Feet come padding down the hall. I listen as they stop, then move, then stop at my arm. I look up and the girl is there, humid and pink, and holding a book of stories.

She climbs up on my lap, as if I'd always had one, and opens her book to the middle. She names things quietly with her short, chubby finger and turns the page. Her body is clad in fuzz and warmth and the weight of her is settling. She points again to her book and names names and I wonder if she reads, or remembers.

She pulls an afghan down onto us two and closes her book. I open mine and show her the pictures. She looks and smiles and asks me a question.

I do not have an answer.

Her mother appears, half around the corner of the wall, watching me with a look I'm not sure I want to see. She calls the girl, who says goodnight, and tumbles from my lap, and they climb the stairs together.

I take up my book and look at the pictures.

I hear her singing softly to them and wonder what the words are. I think of a song, and hum, and I read the last line of the page with the pictures.

I hear her come down. She lets the dog out and the sound of rain reaches me on the couch. She calls to the dog, waits while he comes, and calls him "Good dog."

I turn the page.

She walks in, sees my book, and laughs quietly. I lie the book down on the cushion nearby, splayed open to the next page, and reach my arm out to her. She comes and straddles my legs, facing me as she sits, and kisses my hair. I lie back on the cushions, sinking all the way in, and pull her with me.

We kiss with the book underneath us.