

AMONG THE NATIVES

She had never talked much to adults about these things who never wanted to know the really important stuff anyway but only about sex and whether she had and not the important stuff but facts and whether she this or that of course she had doesn't everyone. Friends supposed to be her friends anyway had always been until they drifted apart but doesn't everyone never said either and it was the same thing, this way and that way and upside down, fucking she meant.

Now here was this woman Oriette who said she wanted to know what about it seemed to know what not the facts but something else about why whether she did or didn't. Oriette wrote sometimes in a tatty notebook with a pen that sometimes didn't work and asked did she think because she had to because doesn't everyone or was it something else.

Like what she said to this Oriette somebody or other suspiciously because why shouldn't she be like the others who only wanted to know that thing like how many times and fingers just because she was writing it down should that make any difference. No she said nodding her head yes, nodding the wrong way because everything was wrong now.

Now or had it always been now. That was it what Oriette wrote with her bad pen and showed her the page even she wrote always and like way back she said to this woman which was because you weren't supposed to talk about this stuff and now she did you'd have to go way back.

They talked at first on a bench in the park, but it was really too cold even in the sun. She shuffled her feet uncomfortably, making dust of the precious dry golden leaves, and

kept her eyes somewhere else like the clouds or an ice cream truck not yet flown south for the winter. So it was too cold for cement benches in the park but not in some office either like the social workers always did with their laptops. In the coffee shop across the street. They sat by the window.

This woman's name was Oriette Wilson. She drank black coffee with nothing in it. They talked on a couple of afternoons about nothing much until Oriette asked what it was you weren't supposed to talk about. Not what about last night but stuff that went way back. What stuff. Oh she said, there's always somebody, you know, like hitting on you. Always.

She was looking down at the table top. Wood, actually, a bit gouged up. She traced a scratch with her finger, and she knew that the other woman's round eyes, Oriette's eyes deep brown, as deep as they were serious. She turned her head carefully so as to see the people passing by in the street. The light at the end of the block changed and a slew of them were going that way and then the light changed again and another slew came by going this way. Back and forth. Not the same people, of course. That would be funny.

She turned the handle of her cup of chai to face the opposite way and it was like something had been unscrewed and the lid came off and a whole lot of old water came out, like when her fourth-grade class had a tour of the waterworks and there was all this crap in the water and everyone giggled uncomfortably about the condoms.

Like there was this boy, she said, meaning before — this boy she'd had a crush on. Maybe twelve, when you talked about crushes, you know? We would meet in a park — like that one, yes, in fact that one, over there by the bench where we were, and this boy was telling me about kick-boxing and was banging on my hip. I told him it didn't hurt so he kept

doing it, like maybe he wanted to see if he could make it hurt and sure it did — hurt. I don't know why I told him it didn't. Maybe he was being mean, but like I said, he had a crush on me. Yeah, I know I said it the other way around but it was both ways, you know? Him banging on me and me saying it. I don't know. I'm twelve, what do I know? Maybe it was like kissing or something. I mean banging on me like that was like kissing somehow, yeah. I don't know. All the girls felt like me. About that, like me. They don't want to talk about it. No, they don't say so, but you just know. Like, I know. This is happening all the time, all the time to everybody, and you're supposed to say it doesn't hurt, you know?

She stopped talking then and went back to looking out the window.

Yeah, it hurt. I was limping next day, with an awful bruise there where he was kicking me. On the other side of the window the people surged back and forth in the street and she wanted to see something, something shining, but it was only a lot of people going back and forth. Yeah, she said. Kind of a limp but it went away eventually.

II

This is not human nature, Oriette wrote later in the notebook for the girl in the park. There were dozens of them on the shelves of her study, one for each girl.

This is not some Kierkegaardian discovery she's made about the mixed nature of love and violence or cruelty. It's not some natural law that you can't have one without the other. It's that way because we want it that way. She knows that. Somewhere she knows that. It's what she means by saying we're not supposed to talk about it.

Oriette looked a while at what she'd written, took a sip

of cold coffee, and then underlined *want* twice. We want it this way.

After some thought she glossed her own remark with a note at the bottom of the page. The sadistic model of how to live together, Oriette wrote. Them. Who.

Then she glossed that in turn with some source reading to remind her that this was supposed to be research.

It's also a way of covering up, this girl's way of deracinating her anger. She can't live with the anger. But she can with the other.

And what about the men?

Oriette pushed aside her notebook to take a bite of the sub she'd picked up for lunch. The men who don't do it, don't buy it. Do they talk about it? Proud as gods looking down on the people they say yes, we understand, we feel your anger and pain, we'll just throw down some thunderclaps, smite a few people with some lightning, and we'll all feel better?

How lovely it would be to be a god and go about setting things right. Deciding what ought to be righted. It's so easy to be helpful.

Oriette put the sandwich down carefully on the green paper it had come rolled up in. It was going to make her throw up.

The poor girl actually had thrown up. She'd been talking about high school and suddenly vomited all over the table and in her chai and it dripped off into her lap. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve. She wiped the mucus from her nose and wiped the tears with the same filthy sleeve and ran out into the street, leaving her coat still hanging on the back of her chair.

And here it was now, the girl's coat now folded up on top of Oriette's laptop and iPad and phone. A nice leather jacket, dark reddish brown, that Oriette had no way to return to her except to wait with it on a bench in the park with the

crispy leaves hoping that the girl would feel safe enough to ask for it back.

Girl. She had been. So had Oriette who didn't want to talk about it either. Was it the same thing? Oriette the anthropologist, going about collecting specimens, trying to understand as if she were one of them —

As if. But she wasn't. She was a woman who wanted to do something to help and she had this box of thunderclaps and lightning bolts...

Claps and bolts. It wasn't something you were allowed to talk about.

III

Brian sighed and laid Oriette Wilson's latest notebook on top of those accumulating on the far corner of his desk.

He carefully picked the onions out of his salad and laid them aside on a napkin. Before long he had a pile, which he stared at for a long time before finally pushing it off the edge of his desk and into the trash. Then he shrugged on his coat and left a note saying nothing and locked the door and went down to the street, where crowds of people were going back and forth between two street-lights.