ODETTE AUGER

Waiting

The dew on the grass shone in the early morning light, tiny many-coloured glints catching my eye. Wet bracken brushed against my three-year-old legs. Papa's hand unfolded; in it sat the first wild strawberry of the season. Crouching down, he watched me light up when I tasted it. He did this every year, his eyes full of love, but that was the first time I remember, along with the first rainbow I saw, too. Seatbelting me into the truck, he pointed it out, and we sat in the truck marvelling at the soft light filling the valley. Back at the trailer, I waited in the truck when he ran in to get something. It was the first memory I have of waiting in cars.

Sometimes it was the whole family waiting in the car, parked at the start of a driveway, in front of a new, custom-built home. We'd watch Papa walk up the driveway to the house and hear warm greetings as he entered. We sat in silence, watching the back of my mom's head from the backseat. We knew better than to squirm or fidget, and although there were friendly *hello*'s and *come-on-in*'s at the front door, there was tension in the car. The friendly homeowners owed my dad money, and for him to knock on the door to ask was hard. Bills would pile up before he'd give up on phoning and go in person. We were probably along for the ride, moral support, or to be small faces in the distance when he gestured out the big picture window: "I have a family to feed."

Waiting in the car for forty-five minutes, I had time to think, seeing him in my mind's eye coming in the door with the drywall knife wipes on his work jeans, or paint freckles spattered all over his hat and face. "Damn shoulder," he'd exhale, lowering himself slowly to a kitchen

chair. Injuries from his earlier work at the sawmill had used up his body, ruining his shoulder and wrist. He worked through the pain when it flared up, the weight of it accumulating and settling over him like a yoke when he was home. Usually, the customer would give him something to send him on his way again, not the full amount. He'd be smiling and thanking them at the door, a prolonged goodbye with shoulder pats and handshakes. But we'd see the disappointment in his walk down the driveway, his eyes a little downcast if he received only enough for some groceries. His cheeks would be hollow, eyes searching the mountains that walled the town, whenever he received nothing.

We'd wait outside doctors' offices, since a botched first shoulder surgery had left him with ongoing issues that required further surgeries over the next ten years. He eventually found a good doctor, two towns over. While waiting, we'd spend the afternoon going to a bakery for bread to feed the ducks outside the hospital. The round, rock-walled pond was protected by a large weeping willow, the long, gentle leaves brushing over my face as I walked to and fro, tilting my face up to the sensation. When we were tired, my mom would drive us back to the doctor's office, where we'd sit in the car and wait for him.

It's only now that I wonder how much of the waiting was my mom's reluctance to sit in a waiting room. Her long black hair drew silent disapproval or over-bright chirpy conversations about how different her kids looked from each other. "I'd know those eyes anywhere, I know the father—but who are you?" Years later she spoke of it: "It meant, this can't be my kid, with those light eyes." She gave a short laugh and said, "What's funny is that the eyes are from my father's side; your eyes come from my father's mother."

Prejudice wasn't clear until later; we grew up with my mom thinking that not speaking of it would somehow diminish it, maybe by not dignifying it with recognition. As we got older, we'd sense it, sometimes instantly, and eventually label it as racism. I've never heard my mom say the word racism, though. "Prejudiced," she'd simply comment, and only when our confusion required it. So we sat in the car and waited. I don't remember bringing books to read, despite ours being a car full of voracious readers. It must have been a general hope each time, thinking we wouldn't be waiting long, and wouldn't need a book—a stuffed toy would do.

In grade nine, the wait was longer. It was a Workers' Compensation Board hearing for one of the injuries, and Papa'd gone with the good doctor. It was January, and we only briefly visited the ducks, mostly to introduce the younger siblings to the tradition of bakery and pond. We waited in the car for a long time, then suddenly Papa was in the driver's seat, talking to Mom. The fight with WCB was finally getting some-

where, and the doctor had been able to explain how the first surgery had done more harm than good. He was going to be compensated.

"Doctor wants to show me something," he said. Their voices comforted me, and I fell asleep in the warming car. When I woke, it was cold again. We were parked on a steep hill outside another hospital, one more town over. "Where's Papa?" I asked, and my mom shrugged, looking out the window, away from the hospital. I ached to stretch my legs out, but complaining would make it harder on everyone. I entertained my little sister with her teddy bear dancing over our knees.

The sun had fallen behind the mountains by the time Papa opened the car door. He smelled like snow and night air.

"Doctor wanted me to meet someone. I was talking about how long this damn WCB has taken—it takes a toll. So he said, 'I have someone I want you to meet.'" Mom was quiet, listening.

"There's this man, he needs a wheelchair. And his own family doesn't visit him and isn't going to help him get a new chair. The doctor told me this while we were walking in. So we sat with him and talked a bit; he was a good man. After we talked for a while, I asked how much this new chair cost. I just felt so bad for him—he didn't even have a family." He looked over the seat at us kids in the back, and then at Mom. "I said I'd help."

I saw Mom nodding her head, yes. It could have been, yes, you should do that, or yes—you would do that. In any case, Papa was moved to help, in a moment of being able to. He looked calm and content, a mixture of pride and gratitude. That's what we had been waiting for.