

SARAH COATES

Bang!

Bombs happen. Lots of them. Most places in the world are made of fire. It's sad, but also everyone kind of wanted it to happen. Just like they really wanted the Cold War to come to some sort of conclusion. People like conclusions. And so Tom made his leap of faith.

And that's how it happened.

Tom's father was bearded now. His beard was rough and uncouth. His nose stood out among the bristles like a boiled beak, a river stone, a large rat. He had just eaten a cheeseburger, so there were little bits of crumbs and other crumbly things taking shelter in his auburn tangle. He smacked his lips, thin and meaningless in the shadow of his beard. His right hand was holding a margarita in one of those thick glass cups with a blue rim. There were tiny bubbles in the glass, and the salt slicked over the cup lip was patchy from the advancements of his thirst.

His left hand held a rope. Tom's father was smiling.

Bye! Bye!

Sally got up after paying without a tip and tapped her way to work. She walked through the lab doors, put on her coat, and worked for nine straight hours in three acts of mediocrity. Pipette party, pipette charades, pipette sanctuary. The doldrums. The feeling of cars going by at enormous speed. The sounds of little animals clawing your eyes out because you want them to, because your eyes have become blind with work and can't look away but the image of living is so empty of life. It has been reduced to glass and plastic shapes, to the bright lights slicked long on the sides of the tubes by bacterial solution. How the lights cut up the space like razors and confuse the planes of reality with something more sinister. Light can be sinister. Darkness can be warm. Light and dark are brothers.

She took off her coat in the morning. Her drive home was long because she drove bleary-eyed. As she pulled into the driveway, she had a near hit with the neighbor's cat. It ran away into the night. A few seconds later, small green orbs popped up on the neighbor's roof. She was sad she had missed.

Her key slashed at the lock sides. After thoroughly mauling the already scarred brass, she finally thrust the key in and turned. She went in, set her keys down on the ledge near the door, and looked into the mirror. It showed her beady eyes and the pointy nose. A thin smile guarding two fake front teeth. There was a small, almost triangular gap in the middle, but not a sexy gap. She couldn't whistle out of it. Sally sighed, kicked off her shoes, and fell into bed. Her vibrator was on the nightstand and she halfheartedly used it. Not really feeling much, she attacked her clit with the pad of her hand. It helped. It hurt. It got her off. And it was a little more than slightly satisfying.

Sally closed her eyes and hummed. She hummed her favorite song by Beyoncé. It made her feel almost nice, almost above average. But she couldn't tell. She fell into a deep sleep rimmed with images of pop-eyed limp cats and pumpkins having sex.

Then she dreamed of being picked up in a large airplane filled with Nazis who had roasted pigs as faces. They weren't dead, but they also weren't alive. She was sad and scared because she didn't want to die. But she also, surprisingly, felt bad for them. And so Sally pushed them one by one out of the airplane until they all had gone. They were complacent, even thankful. One waved good-bye as it fell through the clouds.

She lay down and slept on beige-and-green cargo netting. Her toes curled into the holes. She felt happy.

Tom was depressed at fifteen. He had braces and lots of freckles and his friends were in Math Club. He was smarter than them, but he hated Math Club. They sat around a laminated table with stains (some blood) and silvered plastic around the edges. The legs—the bendable kind—were rusting through, and one of the hard rubber tips was missing on a foot. This made the table wobbly, especially when the math was getting fast and furious. And believe me, these nerds got into it.

They thrust their little pencils at calculus like they needed the equations' completion for survival. Their toes curled in their fuming teenage sneakers, skidding soles on the schooltime tile. For some reason, all of Math Club wore old tennis shoes. The collective bands of rubber holding the soles to the fabric tops were the color of bile. They blended in with the floor. The floor of Math Club, of some daytime Spanish classroom, was never mopped. This gave the linoleum (the kind with little colored bits and a white base) the illusion of a vast sea of vomit. With the constant foot fidgeting of an entire club, the puke floor churned.

Sometimes Tom would come with Dick and Harry to the curdled white compounds of Math Club. He licked the problems with his eyes and, in one fell swoop, solved them all. He didn't like to get his hands dirty. It felt below him, lifting a pencil. The drying graphite on his delicate fingers irritated his wet wantings. Tom loved soup. He loved liquids. Sometimes he would drink up to seven different liquids at a time. While habitual, Tom loved options. His multitudinous desires were extremely predictable. He hated things that made his skin sink in almost-mummification. One time he took a drawing class, and, being naturally gifted at all things, he finessed with his pencil like the next da Vinci, in the end possessing a drawing of magnanimous beauty. It was of a world where everything felt pleasant. Where the body and the psyche smiled in a state of constant quickening. His teacher swooned. She would have slept with him, out of artistic respect. In fact, although she would never breathe a word of this to anyone, his drawing made her wet. Made the liquid pour out of her under-velvet blowhole and drip silky down her right thigh. She regrettably wasn't wearing underwear. That liquescent strand of womanhood slipped to her knee-back, stopping just before the end of her skirt. Pity for Tom.

And his hands despised the buildup of graphite on the side of his left palm in the aftermath of arting. So, after this revelatory incident for Ms. Kambell, Tom never drew again, or only drew with the aid of tech-

nology. First a mouse, then a little laptop clickity slick, then a tablet, and finally that sexy 3-D interface all of us handsy people are looking forward to (some with bated breath).

But Tom was bored, dissatisfied. Although he didn't exhibit an extremity of self-pity, his sadness was definitely a product of what he saw as a general unfairness.

C'est la vie, Tom.

One day in Math Club, with the thrumming of pencils and the squeaking of anxious sneakers on linoleum, Tom aired his grievances in the form of a long quadratic poem. No one understood it except for him. But that scrap of mathematical hyperbole elated his angsty teenage soul. The lilting theoretical numerology of the poem caught the eye of his underling peers. They cooed at his genius, not even knowing the poem wasn't just a random series of numbers, letters, and lines. The head teacher walked in as he finished the last little Joycean flourish.

The teacher scolded Tom for “being a dumb-fuck show-off dipshit” and made the other math-heads keep work-horsing their way through equations. Of course Mr. Jones was too dumb to know what Tom was up to; he just liked to feel in charge and was threatened by any student genius. Sometimes he would masturbate to visions of himself controlling himself. He would take his throat with one hand and choke-hold his cock with the other. Often he would do this in front of a mirror. Or a series of adjoining mirrors. Ultimate self-control?

Tom made a note in his head to kill him.

And he did. But that happened much, much later.

Sally wasn't a good girl growing up. Not everyone hated her, but just about everyone. She had two long braids that were very pullable. And they were yanked a lot. She secretly liked it, liked the pain, got off on it, and always wanted more. But of course she never told anyone and pretended horrible tantrums, showing the greatest injustice had been done to her when someone "vrooomed vrooomed" her head like a motorcycle. Ride baby riiiiide.

One day in eighth grade, Sally sat in science class next to the tarantulas. Mrs. Parsons loved her tarantulas. She thought they loved her, too. On the other side of the class there were two hissing cockroaches who were big-winged, tiny thinkers. Duties were to eat, piss-shit, and hiss. Perfect.

But Sally sat next to the tarantulas in her eighth-grade science class. They were having a quiz that day about ancient Egypt. About their mummification practices and death rituals. Sally loved the idea of an elaborate death ritual. Something that would make her into a god. Into The God. Funerals were no fun. The disgusting scrunched-up faces, the weird puffy lacing of the coffin, the terse smell of the mortuary—Sally despised these human ways of shuffling out life. She wanted gold leaf and personal strength from her gaggle of devoted friends and family. Sally wanted them to know that she was their better, and that through her death and the potential mellification of her body (this was something she threw in, embellished on the already glitzy Egyptian burial, as honey is the more tasteful gold), she would be immortalized in their minds as a feared, beautiful, and dangerous angel. And as Sally's spirit grew larger and more powerful, in their minds she would be born again. They would see her in every bowl of unfinished cereal, particularly Cheerios. Her little palms floating up through the milk, reaching out to bless or curse the morning muncher. Sometimes her face would appear on stop signs or stoplights, ready to help or trick the driver in terrifying traffic. Sally smiled at this point, thinking that even after her death—especially after her death—she could crush them. That maybe if they had spoken her name in vain and didn't see a busy intersection with a red light speaking their name, Sally would distract them further with her memory, haunting their eyes so they were blinded to the honking cars, red-eyed lampposts, and final crunch.

She watched the hairy tarantula legs while thinking this. Shuffling through the gritty sand of their aquarium, the little monsters were happy.

But there is such cruelty in this world. The suburban fanatical mother; the father poised with his dick half-up, pants half-down; the sons and the daughters of the sprawling houses along highways and grocery stores and concrete monuments to the middle class—their idea of cruelty is a dish too cold, or a lie too heavy, or a cancer too soon. It is not blood in the eyes. It is not a house made of the bones of your children in the middle of a country that has vanished into knives and fire. Where the call for freedom comes from people who eat cronuts on the train. Instead it is the continual snore, the pants too tight, the ice cream that has fallen on your favorite chemise.

The cruelty is the mother, is the father, are the children.

We've jumped forward a bit. Tom made this thing. It's about to kill a lot of people. We'll get to that. Marcella's mom visited her. It was a disaster, obviously. Marcella (Tom's sister) is pregnant with Lil's baby. Lil is scared but happy. Fatherhood was always in his future. Marcella might not keep it. Her mother didn't particularly inspire her toward parenthood, especially in the face of a bright, albeit strange, career. Her mother is also dead. They found her hunched over in bed, a romance book open on her lap, martini in hand, and a couple of empty pill bottles parading on the floor. Tom and Marcella made up at the funeral. Their dad cried the entire time. They hated him for it.

Sally is the same as always. She is now Tom's girlfriend. They're in love.

Marcella's mom was coming to visit her in Sapmi soon. She was thrilled. They had grown apart since Marcella left for college. Or, really, they had never known each other. Marcella hoped that this trip could bring them closer together. She knew nothing about her mom other than cigarettes, thin lips, and distant admiration.

Marcella smoked now. You had to, up here. Her lips cupped the cigarette tip, and in the darkness there was a beautiful warmth, a slow SOS glow. The slick crackles of the suck glanced off the walls. Marcella sat in her small room. The walls were almost beige. The floor was thin and the bed was a twin on the ground. Her blankets were brown. Her dresser was brown. Her chair was an old wooden wine crate. It was brown.

She had made one friend here. His name was Lil. He was in her room with her. On the floor. His feet were bare and he sat sprawled, comfortable. But he watched her intently. Marcella went to perch on the bed, animal-like, smoking out the window. She wasn't looking at him, but his eyes peeled off her face with their burrowing concentration. Marcella puffed and he looked. They didn't talk for a long time. Not out of awkwardness. Out of heat. They were limp on the hook of thought.

Slowly they flopped themselves free and regarded each other with a blurry firmness. Lil asked Marcella if she wanted to make some coffee. Or fish. Or both. Marcella stubbed out her fourth cigarette, shrugged her shoulders, got up, and walked down to the kitchen. Lil slinked behind her like a pup.

It seemed like the kitchen would never come; the trek through the hallway in the dark was long, the floor rolling out in front of them like a tongue beckoning them deeper to the throat. As Lil slouched behind Marcella, he watched the way her shoulders were firm and stationary, the way her arms moved like a general's, and how her feet spread solid and broad as they marched on top of the gray, recently vacuumed carpet.

Marcella's ass drooped slightly, bending to gentle gravity. Lil's eyes graced over the beautiful rhythm of the buttocks responding to the floor's constant inclusion of itself in her body. He loved her bum. Wanted to feel her cheeks on his. Rub his face all over them, forever.

But then the kitchen came. Its floor tiles were white and black, small. Possibly linoleum. It was hard to tell in this constancy of darkness and flickering fluorescence that plagued the wintered house.

"Do you want fish or coffee?"

"Both."

They took out the salted char. Put the coffee on. And waited.

Tom is just a man. His last name is Michael. His middle name is Bernard. He grew up with a green tricycle that had white-and-green tires and white-and-green pom-poms on the handles. He had a basketball hoop in his driveway, and he hung out with all the other kids on his block regularly. After school he would come home and plop down, eating a Pop-Tart on the curb. Like clockwork, the other kids would join him, snuggling their eager little asses into the concrete. They liked to feel the temperature of the cement through their clothes. When the weather was extremely hot or cold, the concrete's aggression on their bums put small fractures into the banality of their short lives. Tom's friends varied their snacks. Sometimes they ate fruit gummies, sometimes Kit Kats, and occasionally they would even have vegetables smothering in dip cups, the kind that are small and plastic with foil tops. The tops would get that small ring around the edges, and the kids would stick them to each other's foreheads or forearms. Tom never did. He ate only one Pop-Tart. His yard got a lot of sun and was very green also. His father drove a black sedan and his mother drove a slate-gray minivan. They secretly coveted each other's vehicles and wished that they were their own. Tom's sister was strawberry blonde and her name was Marcella. She had stunningly white teeth and an impressively deep laugh that sometimes sounded like cathedral bells. Tom missed his sister. Their souls were too far away. They had migrated apart.

Every Thursday, Tom and Marcella would attend church. Their father insisted that they go to the Thursday service. The pews were very severe and sometimes had splinters—hard old wood stained with the sweat of remorse over centuries. Tom loved them. The edges of the pews would cut off circulation at the backs of his knees. His lower half did a vanishing act. After church, Tom couldn't walk because his legs had disappeared. He pretended to float. You could tell the direction of his movement by the turbulence of jostled hymnals, hats, and hip replacements on his hobble toward the chapel doors. The doors were also very old. Red paint and gold leaf flecked off their detailing, and for some reason they had the peculiar smell of a used bookstore. Aromatically curmudgeonly.

The old neighbor couple at church thought Tom was a "satanist retard." Suburban Thursday churchgoers are rarely forgiving, especially those with hydrangeas. And Tom's clubfooted tango out of the worship service appeared like devil mischief. The old couple's primary evidence came from One-Eyed Widow Ginger, who was ninety-eight and standing only

by the grace of her walker. She usually found her ear to the floor as Tom trampled by, the wrong eye peeping up at decades' worth of chewing gum stuck to the pew's underbelly. Ginger claimed that the gum smelled like sulfur and leered at her Lucifer-like and laughing. Neither she nor Tom learned. She always heaved ho as Tom's jellied limbs swept her walker off its feet. But to Tom, this was an act of divine affinity. His floating numb-lust was a sign of love for religion and the sadistic structure of the pews. The pews were his soul turned inside out. Marcella didn't think about them at all. She used to bang her thighs together during the sermon just to hear the noise and watch them blubber-blubber. It was the very specific sound of flesh slapping flesh that made the preacher blush in his pulpit. He enjoyed Thursdays very much.

On Sunday mornings, with coffee in hand and dawn still scratching the corners of their eyes, the Michaels drove the minivan to the mountains just east of their house and watched the sun rise. It was an orange-pink ball of flaming sorbet. Tom would remark on the sun's girth. Its direction of arrival and the specific math of the earth's distance from the golden disc. Marcella would hum atonally, feeling the colors. Each one speared a different place in her body. Orange tickled her throat. The parents would sit muddling the moments in their life when they could have chosen better paths than this one. They would think about the diminishing returns on sex and how tradition was everything.

It was a Thursday. Tom got out of his bed under a breeze flapping his curtains to near hysteria and had an idea. Sunlight hit his face and, because of a slot between the window and the frame, made a perfect rectangle around his eyes. The sun was nauseous that day. Sick in its space-cradle, it burped out looping waves of radiation, throwing up particles like rotten lunch. Tom's eyes glowed in that rectangle. His pupils were tiny points of hematite, pencil heads, arrow tips. Though the rest of his face had faded into a cool blue background with the thick interjection of this rectangular sun onto his mouth, his teeth glowed. They fed off the light like thirty-two sharp, tiny moons. He realized what he needed to do.

Bang Bang go the people! Boom! The thing is, you don't want to know the dirty details. If you do, I'll tell them to you later. Just know that lots of people died. Lots. People on mountains and people riding waves, people in towers and people on trains. Bloody sidewalks and mouths without lips.

Tom's sister was furious and cried for hours or days. Eventually she ate some reindeer and sat in the sauna with a middle-aged woman whose child had died in a train wreck weeks earlier. They ended up making each other feel better in slow, circular waves.