

Susanne Grabowski

INDIAN FOOD

AFTER JOHN BARTH'S "LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE"

*The new ones always try to beat the old,
underneath the sirens try to take control.
The warm front's heading straight into the cold,
and everything's beginning to unfold.*

—Butterglory, "When We Sleep"

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when Alice woke up. She knew this even before she opened her eyes. Or maybe she didn't actually *know* this, per se, but she had a feeling that it was late in the day from the color of the inside of her eyes, a burnt rust red, the color of an ending day. It made her sigh. This is a story which begins *in media res*, or in the middle, as all stories do, in one way or another. This is an important tactic in story writing, as it would be impossible to start at the beginning of things: who's to say when the story of Alice really begins, when any story begins? If I began with Alice's birth, the reader may get the (false) sense that I was starting at the beginning, but this would involve a very lengthy exposition including irrelevant, or seemingly irrelevant details. The reader would get bored and most likely decide not to continue reading if I began this way: Once upon a time lived a girl named Alice who was born in such-and-such a year in such-and-such a town to such-and-such parents. I can't expect you to care where Alice was born and when and all that *yet*, so instead I begin this way:

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when Alice woke up. She knew this even before she opened her eyes. Or maybe she didn't actually *know* this, per se, but she had a feeling that it was late in the day from the color of the inside of her eyes, a burnt rust red, the color of an ending day. It made her sigh. She looked outside at the scenery, which included (but was not limited to) a wide sparkling green lawn, an ivy-covered dormitory, and several tall, respectable-looking trees, elms or

maples (I can't remember which is which) with leaves that had reddened but hadn't yet begun to fall on the ground. It had the quaint, idyllic look of a small privately-funded northeastern liberal arts college in the early autumn, and indeed, this is what it was. The sun shone cool gold on everything. Alice had slept through all of her classes. She closed her eyes and put her hands to her face, laying a thumb on each temple and pressing her pointer fingers into her eyes. She was surprised she had no hangover. Jerome Stern's book *Making Shapely Fiction* defines metafiction as "fiction that plays with the conventions of fiction." The same book defines a literary convention as "a feature that readers accept even though it violates what is considered real or probable." This story, "Indian Food," is an attempt at metafiction. I worry that it is failing. It is harder than I thought. Am I talking too much and not telling the story? Do you care about Alice yet? Jerome Stern's book, *Making Shapely Fiction* gives the following example of a literary convention: "In opera people sing while they are dying." If Alice read this, she would like it, the way it sounds, the idea of it. Does this clue you in to the character of Alice?

All in one languid swooping motion, Alice sat up in bed and picked her package of rolling tobacco up from her nightstand. She rolled a sloppy, ugly cigarette and lit it with a Zippo lighter that was not her own. In the 1920s, in the midst of the suffragette movement, cigarette companies employed a sly advertising tactic, marketing their cigarettes as "torches of freedom," the implication being that cigarettes were a symbol of the new freedom gained by women in the 1920s suffragette movement. (It had not been accepted in previous times for women to smoke cigarettes.) If mentioned in this story, "Indian Food," this information could be interesting, ironic, and perhaps strangely pertinent to our Alice and her situation. But now would not be the right time to insert said detail, since the reader doesn't yet know enough about Alice to have made any assumptions about her, and because it would slow down the already snail-paced course of events. I'll just skip over this whole cigarette section and save any important metaphors for later in the story. We must move on.

The phone rang as Alice was getting dressed. It was her mother. She asked Alice a series of questions, each of which Alice answered with a lie. Q: Where were you all last night? A: The library. Q: Did you get a

lot done? A: Yes. I even did my reading for my Thursday classes. Q: How was your day today? A: Fine. Sociology was boring, but French was fun. We discussed that movie I told you about, *Au Revoir, Les Enfants*. Q: How have you been feeling lately? A: Good. Much better than last week. Q: Have you been really trying to quit smoking? A: Yes, but it's hard, with all the stress from classes and everything.

Then Alice's mother sighed and said, "I made you an appointment with a counselor in town. Her office is on the same street as that pastry shop you brought me to. Marjorie O'Leary. Have you heard of her? Dr. Bradbury recommended her. Seven o'clock, will you remember?"

"Yes."

"Seven o'clock. I called the taxi place for you. It's all arranged. Seven, will you remember?"

"Yes mom."

"Are you sure?" said Alice's mom, her voice thin.

"Yes mom." (Yes mom yes mom *yesmom YES.*)

After they'd hung up, Alice went into the bathroom to take a shower. The housekeeping woman had been there, and the sink area smelled like Pine Sol and lemony glass cleaner, and the showers smelled like Lysol, and as Alice stood in the shower all those smells swirled in the steam from the water and they combined in her stomach into a thick sharp-smelling mass and she felt queasy. She sat down on the shower floor and closed her eyes and tilted her head up so the water sprayed onto her face. She opened her eyes again, watching the water. It looked so pretty pouring down, so shiny-clean, and then there were silver sparks running through the strands of water, and they were splatting onto Alice's head all tingly-sharp. (I think I have overdosed on alliteration.) Alice's eyes went dim, with black around the edges. Here is where you wonder: is this a headrush caused by low blood sugar, or is it a strange hangover effect, or is Alice crazy, or about to be? I won't give you the answer. What's to say I even know the answer?

This is all taking too long. I can't seem to make things seem the way I want them to seem. My tornado won't come; everything refuses to unfold. Something's wrong—it's taking too long. At this rate, we'll never get to Alice's mother's sister and Alex Worthington and the Indian food, followed by the dash to the counselor and then afterwards, waiting for the taxi. The glass of the door will reflect what's inside and

obscure what's outside, you'll see, and the Indian food will not agree with Alice. If I can ever get us there, you'll see.

So Alice was walking to the bookstore to get a candy bar or something. She was hungry, as hungry as someone who has not eaten in weeks. Alice drank gin and tonics all last night with Alex Worthington, and at the end of the night she vomited all the food she'd eaten in the last four hours. So now she was starving, and this made her feel very thin, and so she was smiling as she walked through the crisp and dimming late-afternoon air. She began to play a little game that went like this: pass a boy and move your eyes to the side, pout, be thin and mysterious and beautiful. She was smoking a perfectly rolled cigarette; she was a glowing exemplar of understated European style and sophistication in her medium-blue jeans and fitted cream-colored cap-sleeved T-shirt topped off with a powder-blue cardigan. Approaching the library, she watched from the corner of her eye the group of boys standing outside smoking. Turn your head to the side, exhale smoke, lick your lips. You are sophisticated and beautiful and they all love you. October sun was shining on her hair, she could feel it warming her head, and she saw from the corner of her eye that the boys weren't looking at her. She fingered one of the little rose-shaped buttons on her sweater. Inhale smoke. Exhale and push back your hair. Suck in your stomach. They love you. They are only not looking because they know it would make them seem eager and uncool. Alice feels their eyes on her back as she passes them by. They must be looking, they must.

The afternoon light is beautiful, so sharp and gold; everything looks the way it is. Or should be. Alice squints and begins to pretend she is in a movie, that some artist is making a movie about her. It seems I have switched to present tense. The artist is filming her as she walks and tells her story. (What is her story?) I grew up on a house on a hill, Alice's voiceover says, I grew up tiny and sickly, swathed in a big grey ominous house on a hill with a lawn that takes the gardener five hours to mow. I was a silent child with sad grey eyes and my mother dressed me in bright expensive dresses and wished I were more like Shirley Temple or one of those adorable sitcom kids. I couldn't sleep back then, and my face was sallow and I had dark circles under my eyes every day. Now the camera pans around and fills the movie screen with Alice's face, showing ginger-blonde hair, smooth pale skin, crooked

black eyeliner. She looks up at the sky with squinting eyes, and there is something tragic about her as she furrows her brow, and this is when the viewer notices that there are still dark circles under her eyes and thinks *isn't that sad, the poor girl still can't sleep after all these years*. Alice continues with her voiceover. My sister Sandra. . . . (Deep tragic intake of breath.) My sister Sandra died when I was three. My sister Sandra killed herself. (Drop cigarette on ground. Grind out with bottom of shoe.) I was three and she was nineteen. She hung herself with bedsheets. Alice is lying Alice is lying CAN YOU TELL SHE IS LYING? My sister, Alice's voice says, is dead. I am the one who found her. Indian food does not agree with Alice. She does not know this as of yet.

Alice was very sad, all of a sudden. The inside of her head was buzzing with a song or a scream, low and mournful. She rubbed her eyes. Indian food did not agree with her. She did not know this yet. She began to speak inside her head. Walk to the bookstore. Just walk. Low blood sugar can make a person feel like he or she is going crazy. Bookstore. Go. GOGOGOGOGOgogo. It has become a sort of convention to indicate a character's madness or mental disturbance by fucking with punctuation and word spacing. I have read many stories which employ this method but I cannot think of the names of them. You have to believe me.

Alice had a date tonight, she remembered. It cooled her mind off. Alex Worthington was taking her to an Indian restaurant. Most people at her small northeastern liberal arts college did not go on "real" dates; however, Alex Worthington was a rich boy who prided himself on his classy ways of doing things. What a terrible sentence.

Five o'clock: Alex knocks on Alice's door. Jerome Stern's book *Making Shapely Fiction* warns against giving characters "names that are phonetically similar. Barry and Larry, Kim and Jan." Alex and Alice. "This confuses readers. Names that have different shapes, sounds, and lengths help to differentiate your characters." I should have named him something else—Jeremy or Ian, Dan or Michael.

Alex sat down in Alice's chair and lit a cigarette as Alice rolled one. Alex was rich, as I said, and arrogant and good looking. He had wavy hair the color of sand, brown eyes, and a soft pink mouth which he held in a careful firm smirk/pout. Alice wasn't sure she liked him very

much. She lay on her bed smoking as he described what had happened last night after she'd passed out. She was only half-listening. The smoke from her cigarette was beautiful—stringy clots swirling through the air. She blew smoke rings, quivering buttersmooth o's of smoke, watched the bluey-silver particles shivering, swirling, dissipating. She imagined smoking forty cigarettes at once so the smoke just poured from her mouth and nostrils like a river, velvety-smooth, the specks of smoke jiggling in the air forever, never fading away. She imagined being a poor little rich girl, hard and mean and sad like someone from a Velvet Underground song, doing everything like there was no tomorrow but really knowing that there was, that everything was always ending and she would end also—like a lightswitch her brain would shut off and she'd die, stop, end. Perhaps she didn't imagine this. Perhaps she was this.

She remembered the summer after seventh grade, when she'd gone skinny-dipping at night with her two best friends. Their arms had cut through the thick warm black water and everything oozed around them, the night and the hazy drunk moon, and they were so young and they swam pale-white through the water and shrieked and Alice had this feeling, this feeling of wild full exuberance, like everything was beginning, like the whole world was in her mouth, if that makes any sense. But then Alice wondered if that had really happened. It sounded like a song, or a movie, or a dream. Maybe it happened to *me*, not Alice. I don't know. Alice doesn't either.

Alex stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray. He was laughing and Alice was too. She knew how to fake it. She stared at the ashtray, convinced for a moment it was going to fall off the desk and break. It had already broken twice, and she had glued it back together with Elmer's glue. Elmer's glue is amazing. Alice was—is?—constantly afraid that it will break again. Perhaps this seems like a metaphor, or a metonymy (I can't remember which is which). Perhaps you think I included this to suggest that Alice, like her ashtray, has broken in two places, and twice has mended herself with glue. But I didn't mean to do this. I have no idea why I included this. I fear that it will make you recall Sylvia Plath's "Daddy," the part which goes:

At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.

This would be the wrong impression altogether. Alice is not a Sylvia Plath-like figure, and anyway, she has never attempted suicide. I didn't mean it to be like this, I swear. When you find out soon that Alice is from Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, it's going to get even worse, since Plath grew up in the next town over, Wellesley, Massachusetts. Why am I doing this to myself?

Once when Alice was in high school she handwashed a slip and because she had no place to hang it up to dry, she put it on a hanger and hung it up on a hook in the ceiling, the type of hook on which you are supposed to put a hanging plant. There was no hanging plant on this hook, so Alice hung the slip up on the hook. It made sense. Her mother had already gone to sleep. In the middle of the night, Alice was awakened by her mother's scream. She rushed downstairs into the living room. Her mother was crumpled on the floor, holding the damp slip to her chest. She was crying. "Alice," she whimpered, "Alice. I thought. . . ." She didn't finish. She didn't have her contacts in. She had thought for a moment that it was Alice hanging there. The slip had been blowing strangely, swaying under the ceiling fan.

I can't write. This is too long. Nothing is being revealed as it should be. Alice can't see straight, or I can't. How does a writer know how to write? No one knows. I only know that F. Scott Fitzgerald did it with drink; I can imagine him sitting in the afternoon sunlight with a scotch and soda, clinking icecubes ambery gold fizzing burn. And Jack Kerouac did speed and he wrote *On the Road* on a single long reel of paper, just sitting there awake for many days, probably shaking, smoking cigarettes with pale clammy fingers. I don't have speed and I don't have scotch all I have is a pack of cigarettes and this is taking too long, too long, you are bored, you don't want to read this anymore. Indian food does not agree with Alice. Her memories are all fake. The window reflects, the window obscures, Alice can't see and the man who passes

by her thinks she's crazy, stark raving mad. I don't know where Alice starts and ends, where Alice ends and I start.

So Alex drives to this Indian restaurant, and he tells Alice what to order because she has never had Indian food before. Everything is strange here—the food is bright and strange-smelling, and Alice's head is going to pop. She smiles sweetly at Alex, and he smiles back and says he loves Indian food, and there is something so condescending about how he says this, like he thinks Indians are very quaint and they make their food just for fine upstanding Americans like himself. He holds his chin high, and smirks as he chews, and Alice knows *she knows* he thinks she is pretty and empty. She gulps a sneer back and smiles, sweet coy coquette dear Alex you are so beautiful and rich, you are a big robust boy, "Alex I'm full already do you want to finish this?" She sucks in her stomach and rubs it, and her forehead glows hot and he thinks she is blank and insubstantial, flitting prettily for him like a balloon tied to his wrist at a fair. Alice looks up at him through her eyelashes as he pulls her plate over and begins to finish her strange garish curry and chickeny food. She is giggling softly at something he's said, and her stomach is whirling, she's afraid she might puke, the Indian food doesn't agree with her. Smile smile coy laugh, grab his knee under the table, suck in your stomach and keep it in. Christ christ she is too good at this she is afraid she'll never slip out of it. She tries to pretend it's a power—ha ha I can fake it so well that you'll buy me dinner and give me all your cigarettes, and I know just how to do it so you think you're getting what you want but really I'm the one calling the shots. But it isn't working right for Alice; she doesn't feel joyful and free. Yes, something is going wrong, she is going to puke and she is going to kill him.

"Where are you from?" asks Alex.

"Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts," she says. He smiles a recognition smile—as if he's thinking gleefully, *hooray she is a rich girl hooray it's okay for me to want to fuck her!*

Wellesley Hills, he has family there, his father's cousin, Edward Wilkinson, does Alice know him? No, she doesn't think so. He explains where Uncle Eddie lives, what his house looks like. Alice knows how to talk and think about other things at the same time. But it doesn't help—she'll puke, she'll die.

In John Barth's story "Lost in the Funhouse," Barth quotes a potential critic, writing, "Is anything more tiresome, in fiction, than the problems of sensitive adolescents?" All right, I admit it, this story was written as a brazen emulation of John Barth's story. Barth pulls it off, the tortured teenage schtick, but can I? "The new ones always try to beat the old." Is that what this is? A contest? I can't do it. I can't beat them.

Don't you wonder why I haven't mentioned Alice's father? Isn't it strange that I have not shown Alice interacting with her peers at all, except for Alex Worthington? Don't you wonder about Sandra's suicide, whether Alice was alive when it happened? Are you wondering if the climax of the story is going to happen, or if it already has, and you missed it? As Mr. Barth says, "This can't go on much longer; it can go on forever." The window is opaque. No, the window just isn't see-through. It reflects, it obscures. You'll see.

Alice was talking and giggling with Alex and at the same time, she was in a movie again. The cameras were hidden in the walls. The voiceover said: My parents are divorced and I see my father occasionally. I do not like him because he is mean and has an even meaner girlfriend. I don't have any female friends. I was not alive when Sandra died. I do not want to think about the climax of this story right now because I cannot help thinking about semen and Alex Worthington's plans for me. (Now I am the liar; Alice didn't say these things. Or perhaps she did, but she didn't want to. I forced her to do it.)

This is what the voiceover really said, or should've said: In eighth grade, we had to write a composition about our hero, you know, saying who the person was and why he or she is heroic. Practically everyone wrote about John F. Kennedy or their mothers. I did my Aunt Sandra. I gave a brief biography, then explained that her heroism lay in the fact that she was brave enough to kill herself. Of course it was full of teen-angsty bathos, but I was in eighth grade, after all. I never saw the paper after I turned it in; Mrs. Williams sent it to my mother with a note saying I seemed to be emotionally disturbed and including the names of a few good counselors. My mother just cried when she got it, and when I asked for the paper back she said she'd thrown it away. (Camera angle changes; Alice and Alex are seen from above. Alex is still eating. He is telling a long story.) Alice's voice resumes, drowning out Alex's

story: My Aunt Sandra got married when she was eighteen to a man named Carl with a thick beard and mustache who was a hippie and enjoyed leatherwork. All day long, Sandra would act as the gorgeous gleaming hippie housewife, wearing fringed leather vests and thick elaborate leather belts, cooking and cleaning. Carl was a mean man. Sandra used bedsheets for a noose. I wonder what made her decide on bedsheets when she could've used one of Carl's belts. Sandra used bedsheets. She chose to hang herself with bedsheets, a symbol of the sick unhealthy domesticity which was smothering her. I never knew Sandra. My mother won't talk about her. My mother was sixteen.

Indian food doesn't agree with Alice. She is going to die. She is going to puke. She is going to kick Alex in the stomach.

Skip ahead: Alice has Alex drop her off at the library in town and it's already seven and she has to get to this appointment. She has told Alex that she needs a book to write a psychology paper and they don't have it in the library at school but it's here. She runs as fast as she can to the counselor's building and Marjorie says even though it's 7:15, Alice can still have the full fifty-five minutes because this is her last appointment of the day. This detail, about the fifty-five minutes, is very apt, since everyone who has been to a counselor (and almost everyone has, these days) would know that the appointments are always fifty-five minutes long. Finally, something that rings true. Marjorie looks like a mouse and a cow, both at once.

The counseling session went the same way most first sessions with counselors go; you must have some idea.

Afterwards, Alice is standing in the hallway, watching out the window for the taxi that is supposed to be coming. She expected it would be here already. She worries that the taxi driver was mad that she stood him up earlier and now refuses to come. She is looking out the window, trying to watch for lights. The window isn't working right. She is trying to see outside but it won't let her. Instead all she can see is the hallway where she is standing; it is reflected. The black sky has saturated the reflection, but has obscured itself. There is an old bicycle leaning against the wall. The hallway is dim and dusty and very sad. It is thick cold sharp black night outside. It will bite her if she goes out there. She is going to puke. Everything she's smelled and seen all day has combined in her stomach. She'll die. Indian food doesn't agree

with her. The artist who was making the movie about her is gone; maybe he's dead. Maybe he's dead by his own hand, by one of Carl's embossed leather belts. She can't see outside. She can't see. She wonders if the hallway goes on forever with its thick dusty old bicycle dimness. A man walks past her, out the door. Another counselor. He thinks she's crazy. Not thinks, *knows*. He can go out there but she can't. Her head is thick and buzzing: her broken ashtrays, her torch of freedom, the cold black sky, its stupidity, its infinity. "This can't go on much longer; it can go on forever."

Alice starts to think of the counselors she's been to, four of them, counting Marjorie. She doesn't think they help anyone. She used to believe they knew the answer but wouldn't tell you because they wanted you to figure it out yourself. She asked a counselor once to just tell her, but the woman just smirked and shook her head, and Alice realized then that none of them knew any better than she did. All Marjorie said really was that Alice should write. "You are a very intelligent young woman, Alice," she said in her thick voice, "It may help to write." Now Alice thinks: *Help what?* and more importantly, *write what?*

How do I end this? Alice can't see outside; the hallway goes on forever; her story goes on forever; Indian food doesn't agree with her. Alice wishes windows were made of non-reflective glass. She wishes there was a class in school to teach boys that it's wrong to be like Alex Worthington. She wishes the taxi would come. The window has begun to fog from her face being so close. She can't see. There is nothing she can do. Alice likes that sentence: There is nothing she can do. She imagines it written in her handwriting in one of her notebooks. Her stomach turns and whooshes and Indian food doesn't agree with her.

Alice repeats the sentence over and over in her head: There is nothing she can do. There is nothing she can do. She'll write it down later. There's nothing else to do; there's nothing better to do.