

1. Little Things

On a cold day in October, a strong ocean breeze rattling the windows, two-year-old Ida Kaminsky, her dark brown hair in pigtails, sat on the living room sofa in her pink pajamas with a hardbound copy of *Treasure Island* open on her lap. Ida's mother Alice, a gorgeous brunette with sparkling green eyes, stood on the threshold between the kitchen and the living room watching her tiny daughter turn the pages of the big old book. She assumed Ida was looking for pictures because Ida loved making up stories to go along with the illustrations in her children's books.

"Sweetheart," said Alice, approaching her daughter, "I don't think that book has any pictures. Shall I get you one that does?"

"But I like this story," said Ida, who had begun to speak in complete sentences when she was nine months old. "About Long John Silver."

Alice had never read *Treasure Island* to Ida and wondered how her baby girl had learned the name Long John Silver. Ida's brother Howard could barely read, though he was eight, and Walter, Alice's husband, had never read anything to Ida.

"When did you hear this story before?" asked Alice, sitting beside her daughter.

"I hear it now," said Ida, looking at the page. "Down went Poo with a cry that rang high into the night." Ida looked at Alice and made a sad face. "Poo is blind."

Alice gently took the book from her daughter and studied the page and saw that Ida had read the name Pew as Poo, but otherwise had pronounced all the words correctly and in the order they were written.

“When did you learn to read, honey?” asked Alice, handing the book back to Ida. “Who showed you how?”

“I look at those little things,” said Ida, touching one of the words, “and you tell me the story.”

“You hear *me* say the words?” asked Alice, holding her breath.

“Yes,” said Ida, nodding. “I hear you, Mama.”

“Let’s try some other books,” said Alice, going to the bookshelf and choosing Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* and Kerouac’s *On the Road*.

Having determined that Ida could read anything, no matter how strange or difficult, Alice called the University of California in Berkeley and was referred to a professor who was supposedly an expert on such phenomena, and he agreed to do an assessment of Ida. But when the professor, a taciturn fellow, gave Ida a few simple tests, the little girl didn’t seem to be able to read at all.

“I’m afraid, Mrs. Kaminsky,” sneered the professor, “you have fallen prey to delusions of grandeur. Parents often do.”

As they drove home to Big River, Alice asked Ida, “Why wouldn’t you read for the man, my darling?”

“No voice talked,” said Ida, shaking her head. “I looked at the word things, but I couldn’t hear you.”

“Did you like that man?” asked Alice, recalling the professor’s sneer.

“No,” said Ida, shaking her head. “He scared me.”

So Alice, who believed in signs from the universe, interpreted their encounter with the unpleasant academic as a portent of what might happen if she were to make a commotion about her daughter’s remarkable ability, and thereafter kept her discoveries of Ida’s extraordinary talents to herself.

Extremely myopic, Ida got her first pair of glasses when she was four-years-old, and though she said she loved her new glasses, she was forever taking them off and putting them on and taking them off and putting them on again.

After a few days of this incessant taking off and putting on, Alice asked Ida, "Sweetheart, is there something wrong with your new glasses?"

"Well," said Ida, never wanting to disappoint her mother, "they certainly help me see everything much clearer now, but they don't let me see the colored clouds around people and Sophie and Mike and Elmer and flowers and things."

Sophie was their big gray cat, Mike and Elmer the family dachshunds.

"Colored clouds?" asked Alice, smiling curiously at her ever-surprising daughter. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Ida, taking off her glasses to see her mother's misty golden outline, "the color floating around you."

At which moment, Howard came rushing in from outside to get a drink of water. A gangly clumsy boy diagnosed as moderately autistic, Howard was digging a hole in the backyard he hoped would one day be a tunnel going all the way to the ocean a quarter-mile away, hence he was filthy.

"Does Howard have color floating around him?" asked Alice, afraid her daughter might be suffering from something more serious than nearsightedness.

"Howie has dark blue," said Ida, watching her brother lean over the sink to gulp water from the faucet. "Yours is gold, Mama. Elmer has yellow, Mike has green, and Sophie has yellow, too, unless she's mad at another cat and then she has red."

"What about Walter?" asked Alice, wincing as Howard slammed the door on his way out to resume digging.

"Papa doesn't have any color," said Ida, slowly shaking her

head. "I don't know why, but he doesn't."

"And when you put your glasses on, the colored clouds go away?"

"Yes," said Ida, putting her glasses on. "But I still love them because they make everything so clear."

2. Golden Buddha

“At first I no want rent Ida,” says Duyi Ling, telling Ralph Canterbury, his brother-in-law, about leasing three-fourths of the Ling building to Ida Kaminsky who intends to open a bakery and coffee house there. “She say have two maybe three big oven for make many muffin and bread. I think maybe too much competition for me. No want competition next door.”

Duyi, sixty-nine, short and chubby and entirely bald, and Ralph, seventy-two, tall and lean with a full head of silver gray hair, are sitting at a table for six in the otherwise empty dining room of Golden Buddha. The late June sun is shining through just-washed windows into the large square room with yellow walls, lime green ceiling, blue linoleum floor and seating for seventy people. Golden Buddha is the only Chinese restaurant in Big River, a coastal town with an official population of 4,789, a hundred and eighty miles north of San Francisco and a hundred miles from the nearest freeway.

Open seven-days-a-week for lunch and dinner, closed from three to five in the afternoon, Golden Buddha has been in operation for thirty-six years, the extensive menu immutable, the food consistently superb. The time is now four in the afternoon and Ralph has come to help string (actually destring) snow peas in preparation for the Friday night dinner rush. Duyi is always at the restaurant save for those few hours late at night when he goes home to sleep, his house two blocks away.

“Why did you change your mind?” asks Ralph, an English teacher at Big River High, the only high school in Big River. Descended from Philadelphia Brahmin, Ralph has been married to Duyi’s sister Far for twenty-five years and very much enjoys being part of a large family that is entirely Chinese save for Ralph.

Duyi sips his lukewarm tea and explains, “Ida say, ‘Please no worry Mr. Ling. We no compete. My people come for muffin and coffee, go you lunch and dinner.’” He chuckles recalling his meeting with Ida. “She thirty-one but look teenager. Have so long brown hair and so pretty face behind so big glasses. You see her?”

“Oh, I know Ida very well,” says Ralph, smiling at memories of the delightful wunderkind. “I was her teacher for two years when she was in high school here before she went off to conquer Harvard. Beyond brilliant. But I haven’t seen her in... gosh...at least ten years.”

“So,” says Duyi, not sure what *conquer Harvard* and *beyond brilliant* mean, “I say her, ‘You no open lunch and dinner? How you make money?’ She say, ‘Yes, I open lunch but no open dinner and no compete you. Sell muffin and coffee and bread and kind food you no make. Send people you for best Chinese.’”

“I seem to recall,” says Ralph, tapping his fingertips together, “that Ida and her family ate here all the time, didn’t they?”

“Yes, she come here when little girl many time with so pretty mother and crazy brother and fat father.” Duyi frowns sadly as he recalls Ida and her mother deciding what to order — the crazy brother ripping his napkin into hundreds of tiny pieces, the fat father never once looking at the menu. “And when older she come here with giant boy Donald and drink much tea and talk very excited.”

“The odd couple,” says Ralph, remembering the huge boy with orange red hair and brilliant green eyes holding hands with the little girl with long brown hair and shining brown eyes behind oversized glasses — holding hands as they walked home from school. “She so brilliant, he the rock of Gibraltar.”

“But I think maybe she too much competition for me,” says Duyi, nodding anxiously. “So I make rent very high. First and last and big deposit for maybe damage. I think scare her away, but she say okay. Want pay for whole year. I say, ‘Whole year?’

What if you big competition for me? Better three month at time.”

“Fear not,” says Ralph, smiling as Duyi’s wife Jiahui approaches with a silver platter heaped high with snow peas. “She’ll bring you loads of business. People will flock to Ida’s for coffee and muffins, they’ll smell your fabulous food and...”

“Wife say same,” says Duyi, glancing furtively at Jiahui before checking his cell phone to see how the stock market closed. “I not so sure.”

“I listen from kitchen when he talk to her,” says Jiahui, fifty-two, lovely and slender, dressed for work in black slacks, black shoes, white dress shirt and gold bow tie, her black hair stylishly short. “So I come here and say to Ida, ‘What kind muffin you make?’ She say, ‘All kind. Blueberry, banana, chocolate chip, pumpkin. Also kind for people allergic wheat. Also many kind bread and cookie. Also best coffee in whole world.’” Jiahui laughs in delight. “She so confident. And all kind coffee drink, too.”

“Sounds marvelous,” says Ralph, thrilled by the prospect of an excellent coffee house and bakery right here in Big River.

“I bring you fresh hot tea,” says Jiahui, winking at Ralph and hurrying away.

Duyi begins to swiftly string the snow peas. “So...wife say Ida, ‘We can put Golden Buddha menu in your place?’ Ida say, ‘Oh, yes. Right next cash register. We send many people you.’ Wife say, ‘Okay. We rent you. Only not so high as husband say. Half so much.’”

“You have a shrewd wife,” says Ralph, picking up his first snow pea. “You won’t regret this, Duyi. Ida has always been a powerful people magnet.”

“I think Ida happy now,” says Duyi, with a humble shrug. “She so pretty smile. Jiahui happy, too. I think she want Ida muffin and best coffee.”

“But are you happy, my friend?” asks Ralph, smiling

wistfully at his dour brother-in-law.

Duyi shakes his head. “I want happy, but afraid Ida bad competition for me.”

3. Shrimp

When Maeve gives her son Donald the news that Ida is back in town, he has to sit down before he falls over, and being six-foot-seven he has a long way to fall.

“Sara Jordan saw her at Harvest Market,” says Maeve, who is Irish, fifty-three, buxom and girlish with reddish brown hair ever so slightly turning gray. “Sara said Ida’s boy is taller than she is now, and he’s only just ten-years-old, isn’t he?”

Next thing Donald knows he’s crying his eyes out because Ida was his very best friend and sweetheart starting when he was nine and she was six and for all the years thereafter until he was seventeen and Ida went off to Harvard at the ripe old age of fourteen. After that he only saw her for a few feverish weeks the summers she was fifteen and sixteen, and they kissed passionately and verged on becoming lovers, but never did, and then she stopped coming home at all. And though they had never gone all the way with each other—though nearly so—and they were both sexually engaged with others, Donald always felt jilted that Ida had gone away to Boston and only wrote to him once in a great while, while he wrote to her constantly.

Then Alice died when Ida was nineteen and Donald was twenty-two, and Ida came home for the funeral and to look after her father Walter who suffered a mild stroke when he learned of Alice’s death. And for seventeen glorious days, Donald and Ida were ecstatic lovers and Ida swore Donald was the love of her life and she wanted to marry him and have his children, and he swore the same to her, and then she left town without so much as a fare thee well, and Donald was shattered.

Two years later, on a hot summer night, Donald had a vivid dream in which Ida was sitting in a rocking chair nursing a

baby and looking more beautiful than Donald had ever seen her. She gave Donald a sleepy sexy smile and said, "He's got the best of both of us."

The dream seemed so real to Donald, he decided to visit Walter, Ida's father, and see if there was any recent news from Ida. When Walter came to the door of his old falling down Victorian, Donald was shocked at how frail Walter had become, the little roly-poly man roly-poly no more.

"Hey Walter," said Donald, trying not to show his surprise at how changed Walter was. "Long time no see. Not since Christmas."

"Shrimp," murmured Walter, squinting up at the giant man with the bushy orange beard and unkempt reddish brown hair. "How you doing? Still fishing? What's the name of your boat again?"

"*Delilah*," said Donald softly. "After Josh's wife. Josh Schneider. My boss."

"I know who Josh Schneider is," said Walter, his accent unmistakably that of a child of Brooklyn Jews. "I'm not stupid, Shrimp. You think I'm stupid?"

Shrimp is the name Ida gave Donald when she was six and he was nine and they were in Mrs. Davenport's class at Lucy Dobbs Elementary, Ida having gone directly from kindergarten into Third Grade. Donald had just moved to Big River from Newfoundland and was a head taller than any of the children his age. He had a thick brogue because his mother is Irish and his father was Scottish, and the bullies delighted in teasing him.

On Donald's third day at school during morning recess, Cyd Schneider and Vince Collins and Arnie Carville were shoving Donald around and making fun of the way he talked, when Ida appeared in their midst and said, "Quit acting like buffoons you guys or I'm going to call your moms and tell them you're picking on the new boy."

"He your boyfriend?" said Cyd, sneering at Ida.

“He’s my friend,” said Ida, glaring at Cyd. “And he could be your friend, too, if you’d stop acting like a primitive moron.”

“I can take care of myself,” said Donald, embarrassed about being rescued by a tiny child.

“I’m sure you can,” said Ida, smiling up at him. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t use a little help sometimes, too.”

And Donald noticed that Cyd and Vince and Arnie were completely disarmed by Ida and listening to the conversation as if it was the most fascinating thing they’d ever heard.

“For instance,” Ida continued, “Cyd is a superb running back and Vince is an exceptional quarterback, but they can’t win without a good front line blocking for them. Right, Vince?”

“Right,” said Vince, looking at Donald. “You a good blocker? Whatever your name is?”

“I’m a very good blocker,” said Donald, who outweighed the biggest of them by forty pounds. “My name is Donald, but you can call me Don.”

“Shrimp,” said Ida, smiling sweetly. “I’m going to call you Shrimp because you’re such a big handsome guy.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Arnie Carville, who was and still is a literalist. “He should be like...Gigantico or something.”

“Call him whatever you want,” said Ida, taking Donald’s hand and leading him away. “He’ll always be Shrimp to me.”

And for the rest of their childhood, whenever Donald and Ida would see each other for the first time in a day, Ida would shout, “Shrimp!” and Donald would reply, “Gigantico!” though she was small and he was huge, though he never felt huge when he was with her. He felt normal.

“I would never think you were stupid, Walter,” said Donald, smiling down at the frail little man. “Never in a million years. How you doing?”

“I’ve gotten way too inward,” said Walter, sighing. “You know what I mean? Way too inside my head.”

“But doesn’t that kind of go with the territory?” asked Donald, moved to tears by the poignancy of life and Walter seeming so old now. “I mean it must be a constant challenge for a writer to balance the inward with the outward. No?”

“What are you talking about?” said Walter, grimacing. “I’m not a writer.”

“Well,” said Donald, caught off guard. “But you were, so…”

“I never was,” said Walter, growing angry. “Why would you say that?”

“Because that’s what Ida always told us,” said Donald, wondering if Walter might be suffering from dementia. “You know, when we were kids and we’d talk about what our parents did? My dad was a carpenter, Cyd’s dad was a fisherman, Arnie’s dad owned a liquor store, Alice sold real estate, and you were a writer.”

Walter’s mouth falls open. “Is that what everybody thought I was?”

“I don’t know about everybody,” said Donald, wanting to pick Walter up and cradle him like a baby, “but that’s what us kids thought.”

“I never did anything,” said Walter, squinting painfully. “I lived in the attic. I watched television and smoked cigarettes and went out for Chinese once in a while. That’s about it.”

“You mean after Alice died?” said Donald, trying to make sense of this unexpected summation of Walter’s life.

“Ever,” said Walter, shaking his head. “Ever since we moved here.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Donald, overcome with sorrow. “I always thought…”

“What do you want?” said Walter, glaring at Donald. “I

have things to do.”

“Right,” said Donald, nodding. “Of course you do. The reason I came over is I had a dream about Ida last night, so I thought I’d see if you knew how she was doing. I mean...I dream about her all the time, but this was a particularly vivid dream. You know what I mean? Seemed as real as me standing here talking to you.”

“She’s still in Boston,” said Walter, grimacing. “Finishing up her doctoral whatever. You knew she had a baby, didn’t you? A boy. Simon.”

“A baby?” said Donald, stunned. “How old is he?”

“Three months?” said Walter, shrugging. “Four months?”

“Is she married?” Donald could hardly breathe. “To the father?”

“Yeah, he’s...aw fuck, I don’t know what he does. He’s a poet or something. Philip somebody. At Harvard. He’s a professor. Yeah.”

“Okay,” said Donald, barely able to breathe. “Thanks for the info, Walter. I...okay. I’ll see you around.”

Donald staggered home and gathered up every photograph he had of Ida from the time they were kids until she was nineteen and they were delirious lovers. Then he went to the beach, built a fire, got drunk, and burned those pictures one by one—saying goodbye to his beloved.

When Donald was twenty-six, Josh Schneider stopped fishing, took a job at Deaton’s hardware, and sold the *Delilab* to Donald for seventeen thousand dollars, the money borrowed from Donald’s mother. And for the next two years Donald tried to make his living as a fisherman, which turned out to be impossible because every dollar he made selling fish went to paying the fellows working for him. So with great reluctance he sold the *Delilab* for nine thousand dollars to a man with a summer home in Big River, the boat to be used thereafter for

private fishing trips.

When that same man with a summer home asked Donald for the name of a good carpenter, Donald cleared his throat and said, "That would be me."

Which was not entirely true, but true enough, for Rufus Covey, who died when Donald was eighteen, was a master carpenter and furniture builder, and Donald had been Rufus's apprentice since he was five-years-old until the day Rufus died. Thus Donald was a most excellent carpenter, though he had never wished to make carpentry his profession.

"You will work with me," said Rufus in his utterly humorless way on those few occasions when young Donald got up the nerve to say he wanted to do something other than follow in Rufus's footsteps. "You may have your little hobbies and play your stupid ball games, if you must, but when you're done with that useless high school, you will buckle down and work six days a week as my apprentice and go to church with us on Sunday. I won't hear otherwise and I'll take the rod to you if you dare defy me, and you know I will not strike lightly."

What surprised Donald most about picking up saw and hammer again after ten years of defying Rufus's ghost, was how very much he enjoyed the work, for Rufus had always been such a grim and punitive teacher rather than one who celebrated the beauty and elegance of masterful carpentry.

Now five years a licensed contractor, Donald has no end of work and plenty of money and ample free time to read novels and poetry and play basketball and coach the Big River High basketball team and take his dog Geronimo for long walks and spend three weekends a month with his girlfriend Laura who comes up from San Francisco. And if yesterday someone had asked him if he ever thought about Ida, he would have honestly replied, "Now and then."

But when Maeve tells him Ida is back in town, and he weeps for such a long time, he realizes he has never stopped thinking about Ida, not even for a minute.

“It’s good to cry,” says Maeve, putting the kettle on for tea. “Don’t we all need a good cry now and then, Donald? I know I do.”

“Yes,” he says, feeling much relieved. “I did need a good cry, Mother. I wonder why she came back.”

“Aw, didn’t you hear?” says Maeve, bowing her head. “Walter is in his last days. The hospice people are caring for him now, so I’m guessing Ida came home to be with him until he crosses over.”