



Saramanda Swigart

The House of Rumor

1. Lexi and Amy, Age 34

It starts with polite knocking. As always, the neighbors stay quiet. I lie perfectly still, listening. It goes on for an hour and forty-seven minutes, and by the end it's pounding. I keep the bedroom clock six minutes fast, so in actual fact the sobbing begins at precisely 2:43 a.m.

I chew at a thumbnail. Since I quit smoking, all the chewing has made the surface of this one nail go wavy. I chew and chew, sometimes running my tongue over the wavy nail surface, until finally I get up and tiptoe to the door, pressing chest and ear against it. My twin sister cries on the other side. I can tell that she's leaning against the door, facing the opposite wall. I hold my breath.

The clock ticks—

The clock ticks—minutes leak from it.

When I open the door Lexi stops crying and slips inside. I haven't seen her in a few months. She wears a big Russian officer's jacket and her mouth is red at the corners. She twists a

ring around and around her finger. She looks pretty in her down-at-heels way, and my back teeth begin to ache.

“Hi, Amy,” she says, almost shy.

I say, “Take off your coat.”

She says, “No.”

“Take it off!”

She takes off her coat and I look at her arms. When I look up she’s staring into my eyes. I feel a little pulse of guilt, which makes me angry.

“Is this about money?” I flare. And then I say, “I mean, no. Sit down.”

Lexi sits.

It’s fucking late, but I pour us each a glass of juice with a little splash of vodka in it. I do this to preempt being asked for a regular-sized amount of vodka, which would almost certainly happen if I gave her just juice. Lexi and I spend a moment not looking at each other. I sit there grappling with resentment. In four and a half hours, I have to start getting ready for work. I can see the work-a-day bullshit ahead of me: I’ll adjust my collar in a storefront window on the way to the office and pause before the building to rotate my stockings. I might forget to change out of my comfortable shoes. Fatigue always drives home how low-status my office job is, how ghoulish my boss’s laughter is, how anyone could do the work I do—how much older I look since I started.

There are the small pleasures, too, that I’ll miss out on if I don’t get sleep. The slant of the morning light as I listen to the gurgle of the coffee percolator before I leave; the starched crispness of my light-grey office shirt against my skin; the minutes of idle pleasure talking to Emma, the receptionist whose youth and hope have the power to buoy me.

Two ice cubes melt to nothing in my drink. I begin, “Lexi, I’m...” but I can’t finish the sentence. I’m scared to ask her how she is. Misery leaks and seeps from her, and when I’m with her I feel it too.

“Do you remember the house of rumor?” she says quietly.

“I... well, yes.”

“I’ve been thinking about it.”

I don’t know how to respond. This reference to our private childhood language could mean she misses me on the one hand. Or, conversely, she could be referring to our father, who called us,

collectively, “the house of rumor” after a small passage from Ovid he especially liked. She could be talking about him. These are possibilities with opposite emotional associations, and I’m lost, adrift, between them.

Lexi stands and walks to my stereo. I’m distressed that I’ve lost the ability to interpret her psychic pain, even as I feel it acutely. She holds her drink tight. Once again, I’m struck by how graceful her hands are, slim, perfectly tapered, the nails not cheapened by polish or excessive length. One nail has dirt or grime beneath it and the nail is so pretty the dirt looks intentional. I look at my own hands. My nail polish has peeled off the side that I chew, and I somehow forgot to paint any of the nails on the other hand. Everything but my hands reflects my new leaf, including what I’m wearing, which is created in the factory for no other purpose than to be slept in. This distillation of function is new in my life, and I find it immensely satisfying. Clothes to sleep in, clothes to work in, clothes to run in, clothes to go on a date in every other month.

Lexi is skinny and punk rock. I haven’t heard of the band on her T-shirt. For my own sake, I look at and fret about the lines around her mouth and eyes. Are they worse than mine? Her short haircut partially reveals the thumb-sized scar behind her ear. Each time I see it I get a rusty taste on my tongue, as though my mouth were filling with blood.

Lexi picks out a record at random and stares at the cover, then replaces it. Then she picks out another. The record corner shakes in her hand. There is a graphic of a fat pink baby on the cover. The font looks as though it has been squeezed from a toothpaste tube.

“Didn’t you give me this?” she asks.

“Yes. You should take it. Take it.”

“I listened to it every day.”

“I know.”

“I don’t need money,” she says. “Well I do. But I’m not asking.” Tears form in her eyes, but she doesn’t let them drop. “I just... where do I go?” she says softly.

“OK,” I say. I think, *Please don’t leave.*

“I guess I’ll leave,” she says, but she doesn’t move.

We continue to stand in the same position until it feels like we’re cast members in a play, waiting for curtain. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes the House of Rumor as an unpeopled place full of murmuring, whispering, tall tales

wandering, mingling together with truth. Now Lexi and I are just people, no words, secret language vanished. I'm reminded of a photograph our father took a long time ago. He squared us off with the sun behind us, so that we looked like one of those bi-stable images of vases that are also faces in profile.

The clock ticks like a leaking faucet. There's no other sound in the building.

2. Lexi and Amy, Age 29

I come in from work a little later than usual, and Lexi, who has the key to my place, has been alone in here overdoing it with drugs. When I speak to her, she doesn't say anything, just flips her head to the other side, slumped against the back of the couch. There are two little bubbles at the corner of her mouth that grow larger and smaller with her breath. She doesn't resist when I pull her into the bathroom. I push her head under the cold tap and wait, her cheeks in my palms, thinking about a cigarette, and how far away the pack is, both physically and temporally. I don't feel any worry or guilt or sympathy yet. It's coming. I start to hum.

I lift Lexi's head from the water, and she opens her eyes and smiles. Her make-up makes ghoulish circles beneath her eyes. "Oh?" she says.

I remove my jacket first, then the shirt beneath. I cup cold water and dip my face in it. I take a washcloth and wash Lexi's face.

"Oh," she says again. And then she stops smiling, and that's when the sadness zings into my body. It ricochets around like a pinball. She says, "Sorry," in a tiny voice.

Her apology is my chance for indignation, which I can exploit or not, and I do. "Why, then?" I ask.

Lexi shakes her head at me. She's trembling and goose-fleshed.

"We need to grow the fuck up," I say.

"I know," she says. She takes my hand. I look into her eyes. Drugged, her eyes are filled with the most unalloyed sympathy.

We don't have to wait very long at the ER.

"You're a lucky young lady," the doctor says to Lexi. "Not everyone has a sister who cares." His eyes are haunted. He was probably a track star or cyclist in his youth, but his looks are going to seed. It's obvious he's sick of us and has other places to be. I slow my mind and think, *be nice*. I tap *S.O.S.* in Morse code on my

thigh. I make my expression concerned and neutral, hoping I don't smell like cigarettes, because he wouldn't like that.

Our father, the classicist, loved Seneca. He used to make us translate. "*We have walls,*" he wrote, "*not so that we might live safely, but so that we might sin secretly.*" Lexi and I can't seem to build walls to save our lives. It was our father, the hypocrite, who hid behind walls. Lexi sits shamed and patient and trembling, and so exposed.

"Treatment's an option," the doctor says hopefully.

"Thank you, doctor, but we're OK," I say. "Sir," I add.

Lexi nods.

When we get out the sunset is perversely bright. We walk downtown and I think of Seneca again: *it is our bad conscience that stations the doorkeepers, not our pride*. I'm Lexi's doorkeeper, of that I'm sure. Of that I'm fairly sure.

On the way home Lexi insists that we buy some cat food for the strays that live behind my apartment. She doesn't want regular cat food, she wants the macrobiotic kind with proper human-grade meat in it. The guy in the store, if asked, will eat it to prove its suitability for consumption. I stand outside and smoke a cigarette and scan for dealers who, I swear, have put a homing device on Lexi. She comes out with a bag full of products and five-and-change from the forty dollars I gave her. She looks really happy.

"You're a crazy cat-lady," I say. "A twenty-nine year old crazy cat-lady."

"It's downhill from here."

"You'll be building, like, cat duplexes in the alley."

"What makes you think I haven't already?"

Back home, she sits on the toilet in a bathrobe while I drum up some bedclothes. She wears the blanked-out, middle-distance stare of the penitent. I wipe off her make-up and carefully apply moisturizer to her face. I put some on my own face. In the full-length mirror on the door, I'm momentarily disoriented, unsure which of us is which, even though we don't look that alike anymore. Even though she's a fuck-up and I'm a bill-payer, we move with the same small, jerky movements, both as high-strung as prey animals. Lexi shivers. I pull a sweatshirt over her head and lead her to bed and get in bed with her.

"You'd be better off without me," she snuffles in the dark.

"Not so," I say, but I don't say it until she's fallen asleep.

3. Lexi and Amy, age 25

I sit with Lexi and our boyfriends around a coffee table, playing poker. Lexi's boyfriend is Tim, and mine is a guy who calls himself—embarrassingly—"Mr. Bix." We use pills for the pot. Xanax is the ante, and two of them are worth one Tylenol with Codeine, two of which are worth one Vicoden and so on. By far the most valuable are Lexi's Roxys. Their value, we agree, is 20 units, and they are the standard around which the game is built. I have my eye on them. This hasn't been fun for a while, but I do what I can to prolong the evening, because the thought of it ending pinches my heart like a nerve.

There's a Russian movie on my TV that's sometimes in color. The sound is off. Tim, the graduate student, says, "This is a masterpiece: watch." He says it twice.

I watch. The plot is intricate as scrollwork, and it seems to be full of valuable epiphanies. Two people walk in a golden field, talking about something. I can almost follow the subtitles. One of them pokes the toe of a tennis shoe into the earth. I realize I won't be able to predict when the end of the movie will come, and anxiety squirts into my stomach like squid ink. The film switches to black and white like it can read my thoughts. I concentrate, but the story moves in weird upward jerks: bubbles in a glass of champagne.

A sylvan panorama, and then there's some kind of bunker. I give up.

Lexi puts a pill on Tim's tongue, and I say, "Hey!" so she slides one over to me as well, and I pretend to swallow it, but really slip it in my pocket.

Cigarette ash drops from Tim's hand to the floor. He's handsome, I admit. His pompadour is thinning at the temples, but he's got a couple of good years left with it. He has an American flag ring on his finger, and when he runs his thumbnail across its grooves, it makes a neurotic little sound. Then he opens the ring hand to Lexi, who takes it, and that makes me jealous. His arm rests on the coffee table that used to be Lexi's and mine. Since she moved in with Tim, I feel strange roving pains all over my body, and almost always in the back of my jaw around my wisdom teeth. I meet up with Lexi for haircuts. We both have bangs, slabs across the forehead. Most of the time we're high. We meet at the

Laundromat to do our laundry together. At the end, we unscientifically divvy the laundry up and take home whatever. I wear Lexi's concert T-shirts, and she wears mine, because we've been to all the same concerts and don't remember whose is whose. On the street, we link our free arms and walk in step. Our twinness delights people. It's obvious we're up to no good. We're ruffians, gutter punks. But people smile at us, and we smile back. No one can resist how much we like being sisters. Gene-enjoyment. I know, in my heart, that we're maybe six months off from evictions and needles and alleys—and from here the men will get much worse—but no one on the street's concerned about us because we've got each other.

My curtains are beginning to glow yellow, the color of a partially healed bruise. Horrifying. Mr. Bix passed out awhile back, his head against the couch and his cards held against his chest. Two cards have fallen, face up, on the floor. The jack makes a lewd face at the queen. Mr. Bix is alert sometimes, and when he is, his intellect sparkles dangerously. I don't know when it will happen. I'm sick of him, but he loves me and he usually has pills. I find his mouth erotic, twisted in sleep. I'm frightened to be alone with him.

The movie's still going on, which is a relief, but Tim looks like he might take Lexi away without finishing it, and I start to tap my fingers against my leg. *S.O.S.*

"Tim, I'm concerned," I say, stalling. "As a student, how can you support my sister in the lifestyle to which she's accustomed?" I gesture around the room.

He has a nice, rumbling, car-engine laugh. "I guess she'll have to support me in the lifestyle to which I'm accustomed," he says. "Or better yet, she comes to school and makes no money *with* me. Her looks and smarts: she'll clean up." Nails on his ring: *crick*. "You too, of course."

"Going to school is selling out," I say.

"Yeah," says Lexi. "School's what we were *supposed* to do."

"Ah. Academic parents," says Tim. "Say no more."

Lexi gives me a smile that's excruciating in its intimacy. "*Inter execrationes parentum crevimus*," she says. She doesn't often use the Latin our father forced on us. I am touched almost beyond words. I clear my throat.

“It has a double meaning,” I say to Tim. “*We grew up among our parents’ prayers*, it means. But *execrationes* means ‘curses’ too.”

We sit in silence for a minute. *Crick*. “That’s deep,” Tim says. On screen, someone lifts a bugle.

“You girls are peas in a pod,” Tim says.

“Our dad called us ‘the house of rumor,’” says Lexi.

This savages me and I nod.

“It was a collective noun,” she says to Tim. “We always whispered. No one could understand what we said.”

Tim nods respectfully.

Lexi says to me, “It was just fragments of speech echoing around in the house, some truth some lies. It was a tumult of stories. Like the sound of the sea. Like the last rumble of thunder after Jupiter is finished crashing dark clouds together.”

“Isn’t that strange,” I say. I’m afraid I’ll cry.

Lexi and Tim get up to leave. The film is still going, and he goes to get it. I say, “Leave it?”

“It has to get returned,” he says.

I stand at the window watching them walk through the haze of morning to his old Fairlane, which can hardly make it to a new parking space before the engine starts smoking. I feel sorry for myself. I feel like I missed out on something that the movie might have explained, something about the evening—the trajectory I’m on. The sky looks dazed. A sharp ache springs into my elbow, and I rub it. It moves to my shoulder, up my neck and finally to my back teeth. Lexi leaving is flesh severing from bone. I take the pill out of my pocket. Mr. Bix is awake, I see with a start. This is the last night I’ll spend with him. I promise. His head swivels on his neck and his mouth opens. I swallow the pill.

4. Lexi and Amy, age 19

We’ve escaped. We live together. Lexi’s all mine. You can see our optimism in our clothing. Lexi wears little go-go dresses from the thrift store. I wear bangly earrings. We’ve escaped our home—*pater et penates*—with our potential (precious, inchoate) more or less intact. The world feels perfectible. We have a great many years left to waste. I work at an art bookstore, where my duties are so slim as to make the workday nearly unbearable. I take a Percocet to get myself through, and wedge another one into the

credit card slot of my wallet. Lexi smokes a joint with short, rapid drags while getting ready for her cafe job.

“Do you want some?” she asks through a lungful of air.

I feign shock. “The gateway drug?” I say.

“The slippery slope,” she says. She has an amazing smile. I love her one tooth that juts over the other and is whiter than all the rest.

Lexi gets serious. “We’re doing the soup kitchen after work,” she says.

“Ah yes,” I say, “our *noblesse oblige*.” Lexi’s face falls, so I say, “The soup kitchen, check.”

On the train, we stretch the headphones over both our heads, and sing out loud. I tap out the rhythm against my thigh. I have a memory of our father, reading student papers in some happy, sepia-toned past, while Lexi and I sat side by side on the carpet beneath his chair. The *Well-Tempered Clavier* played in the background. He hummed along with it, and then played the right and left hands of the harpsichord on the tops of our heads. There’s no undercurrent of danger in this memory. We kept so still. The memory swells in my breast, and then curdles and I stop singing. Lexi, who seems to know what I’m thinking, stops singing too. Our bodies stiffen at the same time. The train rattles.

I walk Lexi to her job at a cheap eats hole-in-the-wall with mismatched chairs, tables and couches. It has a French name, *Café Mimi*, but serves hamburgers and the like. I sit drinking coffee, watching the chubby owner yell over the phone. He claims to be French, but he speaks in what sounds like Arabic. After screaming he sits and plays backgammon with his girlfriend or daughter, a teenager who has the bearing of someone used to ducking hurled objects. I trust the two of them. I like his tenderness toward her. I don’t think he’s the one who damaged her.

Lexi negotiates her tables with supreme grace. She’s firm but polite when customers make passes, and she can talk with a column of dishes stacked on her arm. She slips broke patrons free cups of coffee when the boss isn’t looking. In the middle of taking an order, she flicks a cockroach off the table so they don’t even see it. Her flattering haircut hides the scar above her ear. She has tragic-heroine cheekbones, and her posture, unlike mine, is flawless. She’s like a lesser character in a Greek myth, who’s about to be ruined by a capricious and unjust god.

“Lexi, I’m out,” I say. I point to the door.

The owner looks up from his game. He grins. “Going?” he says. “We take care of Alexa, no problem.”

His jailbait gives me a haggard smile. She likes us. Sometimes she stays in the bathroom a long time. When I ask her what she’s doing in there she says sleeping. I ask if it isn’t dirty and she shrugs and says, “Sure, but some people go camping and sleep on dirt and worms, so.” This has become a private joke between Lexi and me.

She and the owner and Lexi will smoke pot during the dead periods, out the back door off the kitchen.

Lexi fills up my coffee before I go.

“I’ll pick you up when I get off,” I say.

“OK,” she says, “but remember the hats.”

“Yes, the hats. I’ll pick them up. Tonight?”

“Tomorrow. Tonight’s the soup kitchen.”

Every year at Christmas when it gets cold she buys a mess of woolen hats and hands them out to homeless people near the shelter. They’re not always grateful, so I come with her for safety. I hand out hats, pepper spray up my sleeve, and I feel sorry that selflessness isn’t hard-wired into me like it is into Lexi.

I finish my coffee and say, “Alexa, the patron saint of bums.”

She takes my hand and squeezes it. Her eyes look shy and venerable, and they humble me.

5. Lexi and Amy, age 13

We’re running away from home.

“I want to sit,” Lexi says.

We squeeze into our old hiding spot under the privet. After our father’s garden, there’s a quarter mile of trees down a hillside, and then there’s the road. We’ve just learned Morse code in school. I tap on my leg, *dot dot dot, dash dash dash, dot dot dot*.

Our father calls, “*Where are you?*” from the house. His voice sounds so sad. The screen door scrapes.

“Does it hurt?” I whisper.

“No.”

There’s still enough light for me to look above her ear. Blood pulses out of the wound there, and down her shirt. There are chips of plaster in the gash. A hospital comes next, I know, but I don’t

know the protocol of getting to one. I try to calculate. The air is sweet because some white flowers bob right in front of the hedge. They look like little shrieking mouths. There's fright and heartbreak everywhere you turn in this garden. All winter it sits empty, and then it just rears up all at once, as though on cue, in a violent rut of flowers, a vegetable rampage. I don't know how my father has this power, but things around him happen with appalling suddenness. The rug is always pulled from under. Lexi sniffles. Responsibility weighs on me like a very heavy set of wings.

A few months ago my father took me aside and said, "I never worry about you, Amy, but Alexa worries me."

"Why?" I said, though I knew. *Dot dot dot.*

"She thinks everyone means well," he said. "She trusts too much."

True. Yes. But then, just now, it was *him* standing there, holding the broken and bloody bust in his hand, and looking surprised at having driven it into the wrong daughter's skull.

"Foof," he said.

He didn't mean to, I know he didn't. He hit her in the head, cracking her skull with the likeness of a poet who looked shocked to be mixed up in such a thing. Our father was going for me (he was always going for me, but I know how to duck and dodge, and I can usually get away—*dash dash dash*), but Alexa stepped in, my heroine, and took it on my behalf. He didn't mean to. He hits sometimes, sudden, quick as a flash, but underneath it he wants the same kind of balance—the same kind of grace—we all want. I know he does.

Understanding and contrition began to flood our father's face almost at once, and that's when I knew it was time to go because I love it too much when he's sorry. I wouldn't be able to trust myself for long. The bust dropped—*thunk*. I felt suddenly very tired, but pulled myself together. I yanked Lexi's arm, pulled her out of the house and into the garden.

And now into the privet. *Dot, dot dot.* And next comes the hospital. But where is that?

"*Come back!*" says our father. We can hear him on the wrong path, the one leading to the summerhouse.

I want to put my head against the cool leaves of the ground, clutch the grass with my fingers, and just cave into myself like a

time-lapse film of a decomposing animal, let the spring pull me flat and dry.

"Where is the house of rumor?" our father calls, knocking his knuckles against the summerhouse. It's an old joke. He used to say it during hide-and-seek when he was about to find us. We always hid together and we couldn't stop ourselves from whispering, whispering, whispering. We couldn't be quiet enough to win.

Back then we'd sit with our father at the breakfast table, doing the crossword puzzle. He asked us for answers, and if our words were too long, he fit two or three letters to a square. When our mother left him, though, she put the kingdom under a spell, and our father became a different kind of father, a father from a different kind of story. After that, Lexi and I only gave crossword answers if we knew the solutions.

"Non habemus illos hostes sed facimus," I whisper to Lexi in the dark.

"He's not an enemy," she says. And then she says, "don't quote him." I feel blood, sticky, on my hands. How do people get to the hospital? *Dot dot dot.*

"Did it get your teeth?" I say when I see blood seeping from her mouth. My own teeth hurt.

"No," she says. "I bit myself."

"If we just keep going he won't find us," I say.

We both know this isn't true.

Lexi says, "We should go back."

"Where is the house of rumor?"

I put my arms around Lexi and rest my head against her shoulder. It's me who starts to cry. She strokes me. There's a quarter mile of trees to go before the road.

"Come on," says Lexi, "He's coming. Let's just go inside. Let's just get it over."

Can our father hear us whispering?

"Wait," I say.

I sit still a moment, holding Lexi. There's blood in my hair, down my dress. Our father crunches past us on the path in front of the hedge. I'm not sure if he doesn't know or is pretending not to know where we are.

"Don't whisper," I say to Lexi.

If she whispers, we'll never get out. If she whispers, this poison will spread through the veins of our lives, of all the years to come.

“Don’t whisper,” I say.

Saramanda Swigart is thrilled to be writing fiction exclusively after years of writing advertising copy and corporate literature. She completed an MFA in creative writing from Columbia University and a supplementary degree in literary translation. Her short fiction has appeared in *Fogged Clarity*, *The Literati Quarterly*, *Ragazine*, *Superstition Review*, and *Thin Air*; her work has received an honorable mention from *Glimmer Train*. Saramanda is working on translating some of the more salacious stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as co-translating a cycle of ancient Tamil poems with her husband.