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# "Maternity Leave"

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# Maternity Leave

MATTHEW DULANY

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FRAN LISTENED TO DEBBIE TALK ABOUT BARBARA. Debbie had seen Barbara on the avenue earlier that week. A 'Barb-sighting,' she called it.

"I was in the bagel shop. I was just about to leave. There she was walking along the sidewalk. She had that canvas bag of hers she always carries instead of a purse. She had it over her shoulder and it was pulling her jacket back and I saw, I swear to you, she was leaking."

Debbie sipped her latte. A few of the other mothers did the same. Fran watched her daughter across the playground, pushing her stuffed tiger in a swing.

Debbie said, "It wasn't a spill. We all know what a spill looks like. This was a circle of milk around her right nipple. This was a leak. I couldn't believe it. I waited for her to pass by before I left the store."

Elizabeth said, "You should have told her."

Erica said, "Oh, no. You don't know Barbara."

Caroline said, "She left before you came."

Leah said, "She couldn't have someone who knew her tell her."

Giselle said, "That would be too mortifying."

Elizabeth said, "What's the big deal? It's only natural."

Debbie said, "I don't know about natural, not in her case."

"What do you mean? Haven't you ever leaked yourself? Wouldn't you want someone to tell you if it was showing?"

It was an informal group with no roster or schedule, but you would know it if you weren't in it. Barbara was no longer in it. If she was at the playground the other mothers wouldn't sit near her. Once she sat near them and they moved. Fran didn't, but that didn't seem to matter to Barbara. She followed the other mothers, and before long they all got up and left. It was enough to let her know she was no longer welcome. She seldom came to the playground anymore, and when she did she sat at a distance, nearer the nannies.

Erica said, "Did I ever tell you about the time I got my period and I was wearing white jeans and it bled through and I didn't know it. This woman came up behind me and told me. This enormous woman.

She looked so dire. And I looked down and I swear I hadn't felt it but the inside of my jeans was red almost down to my knees. I was all the way uptown. Can you believe it? I had to flag down a cab. I bled all over the poor man's seat."

Leah said, "You should have just gone someplace and bought a new outfit."

Erica said, "I wasn't thinking straight."

Debbie said, "And plugged yourself up, of course."

Giselle said, "I wonder if the next person in the cab sat in it?"

Caroline said, "Where else would they sit?"

While they continued on the subject, Fran informed Elizabeth that Barbara's son was five years old.

"What do you mean?"

"Her son is five and she still has breastmilk. Draw your own conclusions, but that's why it would be better if a stranger brought her attention to her leak. Get it? A stranger would just think she had an infant or a toddler at home."

Elizabeth still looked confused.

"She wouldn't be so embarrassed that way," Fran said. "Debbie was being tactful by hiding from her."

Elizabeth remained quiet.

Fran looked at her watch. She would take her daughter home soon. She looked at the nannies on the opposite benches, and she wondered what they were talking about, and whether it was so vile.

Elizabeth was saying, "That's just . . . I'm just . . . I don't . . ." Eventually she was able to express her opinion that if it was true it amounted to psychological if not sexual abuse, and that Barbara ought to be reported to the Administration for Children's Services.

Though she did not agree, Fran did find the response refreshing after all the sniping. Barbara's was an unfortunate situation, but while the others derived cruel pleasure from it, Elizabeth seemed truly concerned. Fran wanted to tell her that she was in the wrong mother's group, but then what was she doing in it herself?

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She had planned on taking off no more than three months. Three years had now passed. She doubted her firm would take her back. Kevin said, "So what, you'll get a job somewhere." He was right, she would, but that didn't make her feel any better about losing the job she had worked so hard to get, and worked so hard to do well at.

She had the excuse of the child, the excuse of motherhood, and that was a good excuse when talking to other people — it was perfect, actually — but with herself it was insufficient. Inertia had more to do with it than she let on. And so when Kevin said, “So what,” it didn’t make her feel much better. And really he knew, and so did everybody else, that it didn’t have to be this way. She didn’t have to stay home with the kid, not in 21st century New York City, not a woman with her degrees and experience. No, she had chosen to. So whom did she have to blame then? Not her daughter, of course, and — after some thought — not her husband either. It was her choice to stay home, and she did not have the excuse of circumstance.

They had been grooming her to make partner. At least at the time she would have said that they were. In fact, she remembered telling Kevin and her parents that. Now, three years on, she wasn’t sure why she was once so sure. Now it seemed just as likely they were planning nothing for her whatsoever. But how could they not, when they gave her that great raise? She earned it, she did more for them than anyone else in that office, but now she wondered how they could expect so much of a childless wife? She got pregnant almost immediately after the first paycheck from the new salary was deposited, probably that very night, after treating Kevin to dinner at *Palm*. Suddenly she was making more money than he was. They would be able to afford a weekend place in the country now, something they had talked about for years, for long enough to get used to just talking, and now that it was possible they found it hard to believe. And then, just a few weeks later, another schism opened between hope and reality when they learned that her IUD had failed.

She had never screwed up in her life. She had always done well in school, never really upset her parents, never been unpopular or too lonely. Even this wasn’t her fault. She had not been careless with Kevin. And yet she couldn’t help feeling guilty. Her firm was giving her all that money, and she took it and went and got herself knocked up. They must have been so pissed. Maybe they had assumed that because she worked so hard she had no plans to have children. They never asked. Maybe they assumed she was barren. Or, most likely, that she would work into her third trimester, push the child out, rest up for a few weeks while nanny-shopping, then get back into the office. She assumed it herself.

But that was not what she did.

She had Caitlin. She now had Caitlin.

Never had she been responsible for so much. From the time she

was a little girl and she made herself read so many pages a day and insisted her parents enroll her in more extracurricular activities than they cared to, then maintaining her marks on through high school and college and law school and then earning her salary at the firm — she did earn it — she had worked, worked, worked, all her life, but never for so much. So why should she feel like she was slacking off, wasting time? Was it because all her life she had been working to better herself, and now she was seeing to another? She was slacking off, then, when she thought about it that way. She was wasting her time. Not her daughter's time, but her own. Oh, but surely she didn't resent her own child? Indeed, she would catch herself doing just that, and would feel badly for days on end. This was more difficult than she expected. It was easily the most difficult endeavor of her life.

And why, then, should she feel beholden to her former firm? Because she was sure to make partner? Because of what they paid her? Did they think that bought them an overriding share of her motherhood? If they had paid her less, would she feel less beholden? Where might the lines cross then, on the child-salary ratio chart? How much might they have offered to get her to return to work right away? And how much could they pay her to leave Caitlin at home and not feel guilty at all? Just what was her child worth? So she got pregnant, was that her fault?

Well, in a way, yes, it was. But really it was Kevin's fault. Really. She didn't get pregnant, no, rather he impregnated her. That was how it happened. Sure, sure, it takes two to tango and all that, but he was the potent one, the one with the sperm that supercharged her egg. But if it was his fault, was it then her flaw? Was it a flaw that she wanted to protect and nurture her child, to stay with it? It certainly seemed like a flaw in the work world. Her choice to mother was to the detriment of her firm and thus her career. And as clear as that was, no one would admit it. No one would say so to her face. And so she had only herself to remind her of what she sacrificed. And she did it every day. And it was hard on her. These were supposed to be the happiest years of her life. Now who do you suppose supposed that?

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Kevin, her husband, made her go a mile for steak. Well, he said he wanted steak. He liked steak, broiled. He liked club steak, from the good butcher at the other end of the neighborhood. He didn't say any of this. All he said was that it would be nice to have steak for dinner,

but really he was asking her to walk a mile with an unruly child, and that was a long mile.

And she did it. And she was angry about it. She didn't know who made her more angry, Kevin for asking or she herself for complying. Or, more truthfully, him for preferring club steak from the butcher at the other end of the neighborhood or herself for going all the way there to get it. And didn't the confusion only feed the anger?

Caitlin, the squirmy little brat, ran into the street at an intersection. Fran yelled at the girl so loudly that other people stopped to look at her.

Okay, okay. If she was angry with her husband and herself, she shouldn't take it out on the kid, right? The kid didn't ask to go on the trek. The kid was told to. Nevertheless, that was no excuse for her behavior over the last ten blocks. None of the other kids they passed were acting up. This was no pleasure trip. This was an errand, and once children turn three they ought to be able to go on errands without making trouble. So Caitlin deserved the public reprimand, and she, Fran, did not deserve the cutting stares.

But she got them anyway. And so now she had become the sort of mother whose behavior appalled, whom people looked upon with scorn and disgust, whom people looked down upon.

As she looked down at her little girl, who cried, who wailed. What a nightmare. Not only did she feel put upon and weak, but monstrous as well. There she was, a mean old bag, mostly sexless, and careerless too, with a headache, and many a block to go, the dinner still to make, the laundry still to wash, the child still to bathe and put to bed, her husband's affections still to parry, before she might rest.

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Erica was sitting next to Fran. She was talking about discipline again. She said she was going to give her son a time-out when they got back home, explaining that he had run ahead of her before they got to the playground, and that he had ignored her when she called to him.

"Maybe he didn't hear you," Fran said.

"Oh, he heard me, all right."

Erica had scolded the boy after following him into the playground, but she wasn't satisfied with that. Fran felt bad for the boy.

"I put Cait in time-out when I have to, but I do it right away. She doesn't really get it if I wait too long."

"Oh, sure she does. Don't let her fool you."

Erica was the group expert on discipline. She couldn't be topped.

"How long do you put him in time-out?" Fran asked.

"It depends on what he does."

"I gave Cait five minutes the other day for spilling her crayons on purpose. She gave me this impish look as she tipped the basket."

"I gave Ronnie ten minutes just this morning. He'll get another ten when we get home. A full ten too. I watch the clock. Do you watch the clock?"

"Not really. I have things to do."

"Did you make her clean the crayons up?"

"We cleaned them up together."

Erica shook her head. "You should have made her."

"I yelled at her yesterday, when we were out shopping. She ran into the street and I started yelling at her."

"Better that than she gets hit by a car."

"I feel bad about yelling though."

"It's good for her. She's got to learn."

They watched the kids playing. Ronnie was climbing up the slide. Erica yelled at him. He kept climbing. She rose and he promptly flopped on his belly and slid down. She sat again.

"I spanked her the other day," Fran said.

"I spank him all the time."

"I spanked her with a broom." It wasn't true, and Fran couldn't help smiling as she said it. She couldn't wait to hear how Erica would top it.

"The straw end?"

"Yeah."

"I've had to spank Ronnie with the handle a few times."

Again the boy was climbing up the slide. Caitlin and Joan were waiting at the top. They seemed afraid of him. Fran wished they would slide down together, take the poor boy with them. It was probably what he wanted. He wasn't one to explain himself though.

His mother yelled again, rose again. This time he defied her. She went to him quickly. He gripped the sides of the slide, his butt in the air as if waiting to receive a whack. She pulled him off. She set him down and, holding his arm, warned him that if he misbehaved one more time they would be going home. She told him that when they got home he was going to have two consecutive ten-minute time-outs. She said it so Fran would hear her. She was a nut. As soon as she released the boy's arm he ran off to the other side of the jungle gym. The two of them were in an endless cycle of discipline and chaos, each

feeding off the other. Fran imagined there was a whole lot of yelling in their house. It would be better if Erica went back to work, if only for her child's emotional development. She was a lost cause herself. But then, maybe she had no place to go, no field to re-enter. Maybe motherhood was all she knew. Maybe that was why she felt it was okay to be such a nut.

Giselle was another one. If you let her, she'd tell you all about how it was best to expose children to germs. Whenever she offered her son a snack, something — a pretzel, a cookie, a french fry — inevitably fell on the ground, and she always gave it to him. A mother's group session was not complete without that ritual. You could tell her that rats pissed on that very spot the night before, but it wouldn't matter. She would only laugh and call you silly. She disdained antibiotics. They undermined the immune system, she said. Maybe there was some truth to it, but there was something about the way she said it, about her absolutism — it was like she was trying to out-mother you. Her boy was usually underdressed on cold days.

Leah, on the other hand, overdressed her little one. She put her in petticoats and plumed hats, and shoes, gorgeous shoes, that were never not unique. She worked in a boutique. She made many of the outfits herself, and if you asked she would tell you all about her plans to open her own place one day. Either her ex-husband gave her an enormous alimony or she was some kind of heiress. She knew about all the best places, and she shopped them frequently. She constantly recommended them to Fran. She had to be nuts if she thought Fran had any intention of dolling up Caitlin like some runway model. You couldn't pay Fran to do that to her child.

Elizabeth had not shown up today. Fran sort of missed her. Elizabeth had to be the only one in the group she could miss. Either that or she was anxious to know if Elizabeth had gone and siced ACS on poor Barbara. But that was doubtful. Elizabeth seemed too level-headed to do something like that.

The other mothers were all nuts, of course, but their company helped pass the time and, more than that, Caitlin did get along with their kids. Though it was an informal group, Debbie and Erica were understood to be the founders. Everyone else had been accepted. Most had proved their worthiness in some way. Caroline, for instance, had thrown a successful birthday party for her daughter, renting a space, hiring a musician, handing out goodie bags with items to please both children and parents, and ending it before the kids got too rowdy, all of which left a good impression and brought her from the periphery



into the core of the group — Fran didn't even know her name until the day Caroline handed her the invitation. Elizabeth, on the other hand, was included by happenstance — her husband was a colleague of Erica's. Fran respected her for that, that she did not have to work for her acceptance. It was closer in nature to her own. Caitlin had become friendly with Debbie's younger daughter during a show at the local puppet theater, and afterwards the two girls continued playing while their mothers talked. Debbie extended an invitation to the group after Fran confessed she had given up a six-figure salary to do what she was doing. It might have been an extension of pity. In truth, Fran might have been looking for some.

Debbie was upset today. She was complaining about how the *trompe l'oeil* she commissioned an art student to decorate one wall of her daughter's bedroom had begun to crack and peel after less than a year. She described the decay gesturing with her latte. She said it made her daughter cry.

Doing her best to ignore the lament, Fran looked to the nannies across the playground. Again, she wondered what they were talking about. They were laughing a lot. What could they be laughing about? Black people, you had to hate them, hate them in their freedom. Those women, barely making enough money to get by, leaving their own children behind to take care of those of their social superiors, those damn black women, they appeared happy. They had to be nuts too. Otherwise, Fran thought, how dare they be happy when she herself was so miserable?

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As she had been casually accepted into the group, so she decided to casually remove herself. She didn't state any grievances or bother to excuse herself. She simply stopped showing up.

It was not a difficult decision to make. She could not recall one conversation she had with any of the other mothers about literature or music, politics or religion. If they talked about parenting techniques and child development they did so competitively — and she knew it would only get worse, only uglier, once the children reached school age, when their fretting and boasting would turn deafening — and it always gave way to the usual talk about clothes, about beach vacations, about renovations and the real estate market, and the usual jabber about the achievements and ambitions of their husbands. No, she would miss none of that bourgeois bullshit. They were all unhappy,

and they had made her unhappy, and she wanted to be happy again. She did not want to feel like she was pledging some bitchy sorority. She had shunned that kind of life fifteen years ago, how had she let herself slip back into it now? No. No more.

She started taking Caitlin to other playgrounds, in neighborhoods adjacent and far-flung. The little girl was thrilled by the expanding horizon. Every day she asked to be taken somewhere else, somewhere new. She liked the planning as much as the going. After breakfast they would sit together on the couch perusing maps they had downloaded from the internet before setting out to the appropriate bus stop or subway station. A few times on the train they passed the station nearest Fran's old office and she would recall herself dressed up, carrying a briefcase, and she would begin to wish that she had something not so basic to occupy her, and that she was alone. But each time the doors closed and the train moved and the windows got dark these wishes blurred, and she would look down at the little girl beside her holding her stuffed tiger and, of all things, a map, and then there was hardly any longing or guilt at all.

Not incidentally, an outing might take up all the time between breakfast and Caitlin's early-afternoon nap. It was those late-afternoon hours, then, after she had cleaned the living room and after Caitlin had risen from her nap to wreck the living room while bombarding her with requests and demands, when she watched the clock — three hours until Kevin got home! — and for the first time in her life she felt undeniably past youth and just as certainly depressed. Those were the hours that weighed on her. Those were the hours that smothered her.

They recounted their travels to daddy at dinnertime. Mommy was, after all, proud of her little girl's will to explore, of her interest in the world beyond, and she wanted to encourage it. It indicated curiosity and self-confidence. No daughter of hers would grow up to be a fearful, limited woman. This girl would scale the Alps one day. She would catamaran the South Pacific. Or, if she chose to follow her mother's path, she too might become a prodigiously valued lawyer at an esteemed white-shoe firm, and then, perhaps, if she so chose, she too might throw that in to tour the playgrounds of New York City.

\* \* \*

Caitlin and the boy played around each other, gradually moving closer until they were traversing the jungle gym side by side, but still

separately. They didn't speak, but they did laugh together. Fran and the man behaved similarly, stealing glances at each other, then offering quick smiles, and then tentative hellos. They started by talking about the weather.

The kids came over and stared at them. Caitlin held Fran's hand and briefly leaned her head on her leg. Seeing their parents speaking, the kids finally spoke themselves. They didn't seem to understand each other very well — the boy was a little younger — but they liked what they saw, and went back to playing. Up the ladder, over the bridge, down the slide, again and again, they romped and laughed. The boy was quite light-skinned, and Fran thought the man's wife was probably white. He was not dark himself.

They managed to move on from the weather. He told her he was a painter, that he was going to be showing his work soon in a nearby café. She could tell already he was a gentle man. His name was Sasha. It being a weekday and there he was in a playground, she guessed his main occupation was looking after his son, Pablo. She felt sorry for him. She was feeling sorry for herself. There they were, two sacrificial halves of marriage, two victims of parenthood. It made her feel worse when he told her his wife was an investment banker. He actually said, "I couldn't ask her to give up work and stay home, not with the kind of job she's got, that would be unfair, and I just couldn't do it," running on with it, not knowing how each word wounded her.

"My husband did ask me," she told him.

"And what do you do? Or did you do?"

"I was a lawyer."

"Oh."

"I lawyered."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry?"

"I mean, I was just telling you I couldn't ask my wife —"

"It's okay. I'm adjusted. Sort of. I plan to go back."

"When?"

"When I'm ready."

"You mean when she's ready?"

They both looked at Caitlin.

"Yeah, her too."

She found nothing aggressive in it, and she liked that, as she had come to expect the opposite. In general, he was nothing like what she was used to — he wasn't white, he wasn't a woman, and, as far as she could tell, he wasn't insane. She couldn't pretend to consider painting

on the same level as corporate tax law, but who said they had to be on the same level to be friends? She recognized the cattiness of the thought as symptomatic of her withdrawal from the mothers' group, and she had the rather contradictory thought of returning to the group with him as a recruit, so that they could see what a nice person was like, that she, Fran, knew nice people, and that in fact she was one herself. It was only fantasy. She would never go back there. But she wouldn't mind seeing this man again, this nice man who stayed home with his child. He resembled James Blake, her favorite tennis player. She wanted to tell him so, but she was afraid he would take it wrong. Maybe he didn't agree and would construe her observation as racially insensitive. He didn't seem so uptight, but then she only just met him. What did she know? Perhaps if she told him he looked like James Blake he would take it as flirting.

"Do you like it?" she asked. "Staying home?"

He smiled. "I'm in the playground," he said. It was a nice smile.

"You know what I mean."

"You mean being the primary caregiver to my offspring? Yeah, I like it. I can't think of anything I'd like better."

She liked the way he smiled.

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At night, after they had gone to bed, and the lights were out, when Kevin got close to her, when he kissed her neck and slid his hand up her legs and around her breasts, she pushed him away. If he persisted she might receive him, but it was no sure thing. She usually pushed him away. If she did roll toward him and he came into her, it could be good, but again it was no sure thing. She had learned to do it when she was not in the mood — because that was what he wanted and she was his wife — and to do it without displeasure, but that didn't mean she liked it. Mostly she pushed him away, careful where she pushed, lest he take it as encouragement. Yes, he could have it when she didn't feel like giving it to him, but, again, it was no sure thing.

She just didn't like to do it anymore. She felt unattractive. Fat was more accurate. Even though she had lost weight, had worked hard to lose it soon after delivery, and was now only a few pounds heavier than she was beforehand — before all this happened to her — she felt deformed. She knew she looked better than she felt she looked, but how she felt mattered more than what she knew. She suffered, and she didn't feel sexy. They did it less than ever now, and when they did

she was always glad when it was over. And so what? Was constant fucking a requirement of married life? Wasn't she allowed some time off? Maybe she'd get in the mood next spring. Wouldn't that be natural? Why was there this expectation to fuck all the time? Was that what the movie stars did? Or, more to the point, why did she have to feel like something was wrong if they didn't? Was it not natural for a man and a woman who had been fucking for a decade to back off every once in a while? If her husband would only put his damn dick away, she might want to see it again in the future. And what if his supersperm bested the latest contraception. Her ob-gyn said that was almost impossible. She didn't like that "almost" part. It wouldn't be the first time, would it? If she got pregnant again, she might never get back to work. The thought of that was motivation enough to grasp his boner and twist it. She didn't, of course, for she loved her husband. She just didn't want him to touch her.

She knew there was nothing inherently wrong with not wanting to have sex with your spouse, but she felt otherwise, as if she was supposed to think there was. It was like there was this great pressure to succeed, to have it all, that included a robust carnal relationship, and the pressure itself ruined it. It had been three years since the event in the maternity ward of the hospital, and she was still not attracted to Kevin the way she was beforehand. Should she conclude she never would be again? And was that bad? Why should she expect to be, after he had already staked his claim to her ovaries? And with the thrill of the pursuit gone, how could he keep wanting to fuck so much? And then he wanted to deviate. Not a chance, not these days. Just get him off, he pleaded, any old way, for crying out loud. But she wouldn't. She simply didn't want to participate. Maybe the healthiest thing for their marriage would be for him to get a girlfriend. Then he could stop being disappointed, and she could stop feeling disappointing, and they could just get back to loving each other. The problem with that of course was that he was the one who did this to her body — it was his doing, his fucking to be specific, that transformed her so, that ruined her desire — so why should he get rewarded with more fucking? How typical of this man's world. No, he should not get that. Let him have nothing extramarital. If he needed an outlet let him masturbate. He knew how. She'd seen him. She wouldn't hold it against him. After all, he tried with her, didn't he? But, still, it did bother her. It was yet another thing he enjoyed that she didn't, that she couldn't find it within herself to enjoy. Every once in a while, when she was in the shower maybe, if the mood came upon her, but

that was not often. Poor Fran, not even attracted to herself.

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On his way out the door in the morning Kevin told her that since it was raining and it was supposed to rain all day he hoped she was not going to take Caitlin out. Fran was, in fact, and she told him so. He left her with a few choice words of disapproval. She didn't like that. Housewives got dressed down by their husbands. She didn't consider herself a housewife, at least not a permanent one, and certainly not one who must bear admonishment. She had been planning on braising veal chops for dinner, but to hell with that now. The chops would be going in the freezer. Tonight they would be having take-out, and Kevin would be paying for it. And today she would be taking out her daughter.

She dressed Caitlin well, in rainboots and a raincoat, and opened her little umbrella for her. The little girl was always enthusiastic about her little umbrella. They had fun walking in the rain. Caitlin jumped in puddles while they waited for the bus, and on the bus she drew rainbows in the foggy window with her fingers.

Behind another window, on the second floor of a somewhat crumbling brownstone in a different neighborhood, a little boy was waving. Caitlin tilted her little umbrella back to rest on her shoulder and, laughing as rain tickled her face, waved back. Already Pablo was the best friend she ever had in her short life.

Sasha opened the door for them. He told her he was surprised she had come, considering the weather. They could have postponed the playdate, he said. She thought quietly of her husband, not sure what she was feeling. She told Sasha, as she gave him Caitlin's coat and then her own, that she had lost his phone number and didn't want to stand him up.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm just here at home," he said. "It's not like I'm waiting on some corner for you."

He offered her tea. She sat on the couch in the living room. Caitlin and Pablo were already playing in the boy's room. The apartment was a mess. Pablo's toys and clothes were all over the floor. The couch was in order, but Fran couldn't get comfortable on it. She started to think about Kevin again, and the spat they had that morning. It was unnecessary. And it was unnecessary that she came here today. She did feel ridiculous. She stood up just as Sasha came in from the kitchen with the tea.

He set it on the coffee table between them. He said, "I'm happy you did come, despite the rain." And she began to feel better.

She sat down again, and, as before, they soon moved on from the weather and she found she was at ease with herself and with him. As before, they talked about the role they shared, rearers rather than earners — stayers-at-home, homemakers.

"Homemakers? Is that the word?" he asked.

"They call people that on *Jeopardy*, people who are otherwise undefined," she said. "Do you watch *Jeopardy*?"

"Not really."

"I can't believe I do. Not too long ago I was advising major corporations on how to appease the government while securing their millions. Now I watch game shows on TV."

"What other ones?"

"Just that one, actually."

"Honest?"

"Yes, honest. Otherwise I'm too busy cooking and cleaning."

"I know what it's like."

It was funny to hear him say that. "If you were on *Jeopardy*, how would you have them describe you?" she asked. "As a homemaker or a painter?"

"Well, I can't really call myself a painter since I've never sold a painting."

"Don't you have an exhibit coming up?"

"'Exhibit' makes it sound like it's in a museum. A guy who owns a café has agreed, after I harassed him for a year, to let me hang my work on his wall for a month."

"That's something."

"It doesn't mean I've sold anything, or will."

"Van Gogh never sold a painting during his lifetime."

"Van Gogh was crazy, and he killed himself."

"The guy who murdered his grandnephew was crazy. Grandnephew, was it?"

"That was pretty outrageous."

"You know, prior to that, that guy cut a police officer in the neck with a knife and got only three months in jail for it. Now that's outrageous."

"Cutting a cop or getting only three months for it?"

"Is either reasonable?"

"What did the cop do?"

"Oh. I don't know."

"Then I can't say, can I?"

That was perplexing, but she left it alone. "So, on *Jeopardy*, would you have them announce you as 'Sasha, a homemaker from New York'?"

"I don't like the sound of that."

"How about stay-at-home dad? Would that be better?"

"I don't know. I don't want to go on *Jeopardy*. How about that?"

"How about stay-at-home dada?"

"Hey, that's pretty good actually. Maybe I could go on with that."

"What is your work like?"

He said, "Do you want to see some of it?"

And so he brought her into the little room that was his studio and showed her his paintings. They were mostly abstract, blending background colors with splashes and lines of complementary colors over it. They weren't bad. There were a few representational pictures, nudes. They weren't so good. He knew it and he apologized and turned them around to face the wall. She liked the others though, and she told him she believed they could be sold. She thought of buying one herself, but not so soon, and she kept the thought to herself.

\* \* \*

She did not miss the mothers' group at all, and now considered herself completely removed from it. She did miss the playground where it convened, however, as it was the closest to home. And Caitlin did miss her friends from the group, less so now that she had Pablo, but enough to badger her mother about seeing them. So Fran called Elizabeth, the least vexatious of her former acquaintances, and set up a playdate.

They met at a bookstore that had a large children's section. Fran and Elizabeth each took a turn minding and reading to the kids while the other browsed. They let the kids pick one book each to buy. On their way to the cash register Elizabeth stopped to pick up a book of photographs taken during and just after 9/11. The little girls were curious, and Elizabeth showed them a few pages. Joan pointed her chubby little finger at one picture of a fireman in the smoking rubble and, astonishing Fran, said, "I know that. That's on my 'frigerator at my home."

Fran hoped to keep Caitlin ignorant of that event as long as possible. She got Elizabeth to close the book by asking her about the novel she had tucked under her arm. They continued up to the register while Elizabeth explained that it was the latest output by a writer she had



admired in college, and that she was ashamed to have read nothing of hers since then.

"I used to spend whole days with one of her books. Like, reading it and hardly thinking about anything else, for days. I loved it. I can't believe she has a new book out and I didn't even know about it. I'm so busy taking care of my kid that I forgot about myself. The funny thing is I'm afraid I'm like one of her characters now. It's like I've become the very person I used to read about and once swore I'd never be like. I'm almost afraid to read this." She wagged the book before putting it on the counter.

They went to a child-friendly restaurant nearby. They sat in a booth and ordered a pizza pie. The kids doodled with crayons on the paper that served as a tablecloth. Fran mentioned Barbara and, after some subtle probing, became confident that Elizabeth had not called ACS.

Fran said, "I'm sure it was just a spill. I've never seen Barbara without a cup of coffee in her hand. She walks and drinks at the same time. And I wouldn't trust everything that comes out of Debbie's mouth anyway. She likes to talk about people when they're not around. It makes her feel better about herself."

"We haven't seen you for a while."

"I've been busy. Do you still go much?"

"All the time. We miss you."

The kids were getting antsy. They were on the inside of the booth, against the wall, but that didn't quite contain them. Joan was standing on her seat and making faces at the people in the next booth, and Caitlin had slipped down under the table. Mercifully, the waitress arrived with the pie, and they settled down to eat.

Elizabeth was sorry she did not get the book about 9/11. She said she would go back for it another day. Fran ate quietly, cutting up her daughter's slice between bites. Elizabeth spoke some more about the novelist she would read again. She asked Fran why she had not bought anything, and Fran said, "I guess I forgot about myself."

They laughed. Fran thought she would probably call her again. She could do without Debbie and the rest of them, but she could get along with Elizabeth without too much effort. Anyway, the girls got along.

\* \* \*

Fran called Sasha when she got home. They agreed to meet the following day, Saturday, without the kids. It was his idea. He said it was his day off and he wanted it to be good and she was good

company. He was leaving his son with his wife, and he asked her to leave her daughter with her husband.

They met in the city, at a diner just south of Central Park. He was there when she arrived and he stood to greet her and kissed her cheek. They had soup and salad and drank two glasses of iced tea each. They talked almost exclusively about their children.

Afterwards they decided to visit an art museum together. She suggested MOMA, but he said he had a craving for the Met, and they walked into the park. They passed crowds of children around the entrance to the zoo. Sasha spoke idly about how good it was to have a day off. She told him she had missed him. He said thank you or something just as ambiguous that she didn't quite hear.

They walked on. The sky was cloudy, but the air was warm. It was the first warm day of the year. They each walked with their jacket draped over their shoulder the same way, and she started to feel self-conscious. She felt foolish for having told him she missed him, though really she had meant nothing more than that. It occurred to her, being in the company of this man she had missed, that she never really missed her husband, not anymore. He was just there or not there. He left in the morning and he came back in the evening, and that was that. If she thought about him at all in the meantime it was as likely to be because she was washing his underwear as anything else. In his absence, she thought about him in practical, matter-of-fact terms. Would he be home late tonight? Would he stop for groceries on his way? Would he be willing to watch Caitlin all day Saturday? Now, however, she contemplated him in a more angular light. She was feeling the way she felt when he questioned her about money. She had begun accepting an allowance from him, something he had offered as soon as she stopped working but did not find necessary until recently, and while convenient it was equally humiliating. Almost immediately after he began giving it to her he began asking her what she spent it on. She wondered whether money was the reason Sasha preferred the Met to MOMA, and she felt badly about splitting the check with him at the diner. She could have easily covered it herself, and taken him to MOMA, and put him in a cab home, all of it without a second thought. That was another difference between them then, aside from occupation and race, money. She might have surmised that from the neighborhood where she met him, but then there were now plenty of people with money living there, just as there were still a few in her own neighborhood without it. Where a person lived did not determine their status, not these days. Kevin, her husband, the

man she married and whose child she bore, who went away in the morning and returned in the evening, recently introduced the idea of moving to the suburbs. He didn't say he wanted to, but he did ask her to think about it. He was planting the seed, and it was likely to grow. She envisioned herself fatter, uglier, stupider, irretrievable, never to return to her position at her old firm, never to work again, her career destroyed along with her body and her happiness and her interest in worldly affairs, doomed to the life of a homemaker, her fat husband's kept soccer mom, kept in some Twilight Zone called Manalapan, or Chappaqua, or Ronkonkoma, some indecipherable, indescribable locale whence women never return. No, no, no, she couldn't allow that. She hadn't worked so hard all her life to get to New York City only to stumble past it and fall on her face in Ronkonkoma.

"Have you ever heard of Ronkonkoma?"

"Ronkonkoma?" He pronounced it a different way. "Out on Long Island?"

"How do you know where it is?"

"I passed it on a train once or twice, or never made it that far," he said. "A former life. Don't ask."

"Oh, really?"

"There's not much to tell."

"Where are you from?"

"Georgia."

"You don't sound like it."

He smiled. "Do you sound like where you're from?"

"You tell me. I'm from Michigan."

"How would I know what Michigan sounds like? What do they do, make cars there, right?"

"Now that sounds like something somebody from Georgia might say. My husband, he's a New Yorker, born and bred. He's from Brooklyn."

"I thought everybody was from somewhere else."

"Not so."

"Not your husband. Does he sound like he's from Brooklyn?"

"Sometimes. When he starts talking about moving to the suburbs."

Sasha laughed at that and said, "Not me."

"No, he's not like you at all."

"How's that?"

"He's bigger. He's white. He works. I mean, he doesn't stay home to watch our child. He's not an artist. Why are we talking about him?"

He laughed again and gave her shoulder a little squeeze and she

felt all right, and they walked on with the conversation finished and behind them. She no longer felt self-conscious or foolish or worried. And then, further on, closer to the museum, when she began to let off some residual gripes about the mothers' group she had been fleeing when she met him, about the competitive women who tried to make her feel poorly about her parenting and herself, Sasha again so easily put her at ease, again so simply helped her to put it behind her. Just a squeeze and a smile and she wasn't bothered by anything at all. It was her day off, wasn't it? It was their day off together. They walked on.

They never made it to the Met. They meandered across the park. They passed other men and women walking together. She wondered which of them were lovers and which were like them, just a man and a woman who happened to be walking in the park together, and which of those were potential lovers, and which of these were they.

Only when her cellphone rang and she pulled it from her purse to see that it was Kevin calling, only then did she realize the hour she was due at home had passed. She heard herself lying to her husband, telling him she had indeed gone to the Met, alone, and had lost track of the time there. She told him she had some shopping to do, and would be a little longer still. As she spoke she watched Sasha, who had politely stepped away. He was strangely unexpressive, pretending to be distracted. She could tell he was listening.

She closed her phone and went to him and put her hand inside his arm and they walked on together at the same pace as before. None of it was planned. It was just happening.

"Has anyone ever told you that you resemble James Blake? You know, the tennis player?"

"No. Do you like James Blake?"

"Yes. He's my favorite."

He wanted to go to a movie. She wanted to as well, but didn't have the time.

\* \* \*

He kissed her a few days later in his apartment.

It was not a day off. The kids were napping on the bed in the next room, in the bed he shared with his wife, his wife whom Fran had never met.

He just sounded so insecure as he was telling her about the opening for his exhibit, so she reached out to him and squeezed his hand, the way he had reached out to her when she needed it and squeezed her

shoulder and made her feel instantly better. She wanted to make him feel better. She wanted to make him feel good. Then suddenly he was with her on the couch, kissing her, and she knew that wouldn't make either of them feel good. She knew she would feel bad about it. She knew that before she felt it. And, if she knew him as she thought she did, she knew it would make him feel worse.

None of it was planned. It was just happening. And as it happened the children, her daughter and his son, came tottering into the room together, Caitlin clutching her stuffed tiger, Pablo his little blanket, both squinting and rubbing their eyes, trying to get the sleep out, and perhaps in disbelief. Sure, they saw it. Taking their tiny, tentative steps all the way from the bedroom door across the long living room to the couch, they witnessed the grown-ups doing their grown-up thing.

Fran knew it was the end of her friendship with Sasha. True, she had not pushed him away, but it was his doing, his transgression, his fault.

And the life she was living was not the life she wanted. She believed her actions were unbecoming. It was to her utter surprise that she found herself, so suddenly, in a sexual encounter with a man other than her husband. It was not complete, though, if not for the children, it might have been. What if they had not interrupted them? She could only hope Caitlin was too young to remember the day the strange man had his mouth and his hands all over mommy. Was it foreplay when they put their children close together in the bed to nap? Surely that was not how a mother should treat a child. And that was not Sasha's fault, that was hers.

Back home, while Caitlin played in her room, Fran cleaned and then marinated some short ribs for dinner. The ribs were fatty, but Kevin liked them that way. He arrived a little after six as usual, and they had a drink together, and were congenial. He read Caitlin a story when she asked him to, and they ate at seven-thirty.

Afterwards they gave the girl some ice cream and let her watch a movie while they sat at the table and had another drink and talked. She felt more comfortable around him now after her minor betrayal — her peccadillo, she thought, grinning — than she had before, when she had done nothing yet was distressed by the possibility. He asked her why she was grinning and she shook her head and told him to forget it, and he did forget it, or at least didn't press it, and she told him she loved him. She did. He really was a good guy, maybe overweight but not unattractive, and smart, and funny, and loving. He had a good heart. She reminded herself of when he took a month off work to help

out at home after Caitlin was born, and of how much she missed him when he went back.

She was waiting for him to say something offensive, to criticize her cooking perhaps, or comment on the order of the apartment or the undone laundry, or interrogate her over her spending habits, but she had cooked well that night, and she had cleaned thoroughly that afternoon, and she had come home empty-handed from her supposed shopping trip on Saturday, and she got tired of waiting. Really, she needed no excuse. She was her own woman.

"I have to go back to work."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going crazy."

"By all means, then," he said, almost as if he thought she needed his approval. "Go back to work."