

DISCOMFORT

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by
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ABSTRACT

The stories in this collection are concerned with the lives of middle class Midwestern people who all feel some sense of discomfort or inability to feel at ease in their lives. Throughout this collection there are examples of characters who are discomfited by self-deception, racial profiling of others, misplaced goodwill, and anxiety about the future. In each case, the characters reach a metaphoric wall and find that they must recalibrate their internal compasses in light of what they've learned about themselves or their surroundings.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Discomfort,” presented by Anne K. Kniggendorf, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worth of acceptance.

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Pizza Party

Jen waited by the front door, watching through the curtains as her dinner guests made their way down the street perpendicular to her own, through the patchy green front lawn, and onto the porch. Jen was nervous but put on her biggest smile as she opened the door to greet Juan, Carolina, and their son Pedro. A strong, warm wind blew through the entryway and Jen squared her body with the door in order to close it.

Before Jen had a chance to say anything to the guests, she was surprised to see the oldest of her four children, Jaden, a fifth grader, take Carolina's hand as a smaller child might have, and usher her into their house, ignoring everyone else. Carolina looked slightly embarrassed at the attention, sheepishly raising her eyes to Jen's, but followed Jaden to the dining room without much hesitation. Jen stared after them not understanding what she was seeing.

The neighbor, Carolina, pronounced Car-o-leena, was a plump, short woman in her mid-30s, with the hint of a black mustache, and long dark hair that Jen wanted to get her hands on —she had no daughter or sister and longed for the time when she sat braiding her friends' hair, laughing, telling each other secrets — she was torn between being sure that such a feeling was childish and irrelevant, and a certainty that she needed that connection.

She stood alone by the front door after the others had seated themselves around the table, adjusting her ankle-length skirt's waistband, redoing her blond ponytail, and puzzling over how she had come to feel alienated in her own home within thirty seconds of the neighbors' arrival. She scooped up her youngest, eight-month-old Kingston, out of his toy pile and joined the rest of her family and the neighbors. Her husband Brian was hustling back and forth between the kitchen and dining room with beverages for everyone.

Jaden, Braegan, and Pedro had played together a lot over the years, but the two sets of parents had never made contact with each other. She found herself thinking of Carolina daily, watching her coming and going. Carolina could go anywhere any time she wanted with Pedro in school. Carolina didn't work. Jen had four kids and cleaned houses about twenty hours a week.

Jen had tried to get Carolina's attention in the past, but it seemed like every attempt was thwarted somehow: the time she asked Pedro to trick-or-treat with her kids and had expected Carolina to come along and chat as they walked the neighborhood, but she had declined; the time Carolina had come over to get Pedro for lunch and Jen had asked her in for lemonade while the kids finished a project, and Carolina had said *no, just send him home when he's done*; then there was the time when Jen had gone looking for her boys and Carolina stopped her to ask her opinion about a patio set in a catalogue that she wanted to get before a party—Jen had spent a week thinking that Carolina would invite Jen and her family to the party she was referring to.

Jen had tried, she knew she'd tried, to create opportunities, but it was almost like Carolina just didn't want to be friends with her. And now she, they, were in Jen and Brian's dining room, tiny, and half-hidden behind a stack of pizza boxes.

Jen had spread the boxes of pizza out like playing cards, opening each one ceremonially to show their guests all they had to choose from. "Jennifer, you maybe bought too much pizza," Carolina had remarked. Jen said, "Nothing's too much for you and your family," and immediately felt like she was a character in some movie from the 1940s.

Jen told herself that the only way she'd get to be friends with Carolina was to keep trying, so when Jaden had asked: can I spend the night *over there*? Jen told her husband,

Brian, it was urgent that they invite the neighbors over in order to gather information that would help them answer that question.

Jen and the mother of one of Jaden's friends had started cleaning houses together some years ago, tag-team style, so that one of them was always with the children — they never actually worked *together*, it was just a partnership. Most of the houses they cleaned belonged to other families from the elementary school. Jen had come across pornographic magazines sitting in plain sight in master bathrooms, guns left on nightstands, uncovered electrical outlets, and toddlers who were allowed unlimited access to four hundred or more channels. What bothered her most was that she never would have guessed any of what she saw from chatting with one of these mothers during a class holiday party. Brian always told her she should talk to people more, but over the fifteen years they'd been married she'd managed to become a social cripple. Nowadays she claimed that she preferred to approach understanding people first through their houses, then by talking to them.

Carolina and Juan's house might be like any of the ones she'd seen, she told Brian, but she had no way into it to check it out. When she'd asked Jaden what it was like, he'd shrugged and said *just normal*. Surely it was just normal. Brian was always hyper aware of possible dangers to his children, so he was immediately onboard with the idea of having the whole family over to sort of interrogate — that seemed like too strong a word to Jen, but that's the one that kept coming to mind — them.

"I think they're Mexican," Brian had said to Jen on more than one occasion, as if that were a condemnation — as if he might as well have said, "I think they have bedbugs." Jen

had been gathering information via Jaden and had learned they were from El Salvador, but she didn't correct Brian.

Jen was afraid Brian was prejudiced against people who weren't white. Or maybe he was xenophobic, in which case he wouldn't be able to help himself she reasoned. Brian was also Jen's only friend and she sometimes found herself tiptoeing around, or even ignoring, certain faults in order to keep their relationship strong.

From their front porch, Jen and Brian had observed that about three times a year Carolina and Juan would rally what there was of the greater Kansas City Salvadoran community and stage a big, and often brash, party. At these parties there would be a great swarming spectrum of cars and every manner of truck—little pick-ups with rusted-out doors, brand new white F-150s, delivery trucks, cement trucks, and so on. The visitors were exclusively Latino but Brian said he couldn't understand where they came from given that the neighborhood they shared was predominantly white. *Downtown?* Jen wondered.

The music was very loud during these parties, all Central American-sounding, or all in Spanish anyway. The hosts fired up the grill and Jen and Brian could smell the meats and spices and watch the smoke disappear up into the trees until late in the night when everyone finally went home and the porch light of the green house went dark.

These gatherings drove Jen wild because they underscored what Jen saw as Carolina's refusal to let her in. Only their two oldest sons had been in the Salvadorans' house. When Jen was honest with herself she could admit that she felt shunned; not good enough to be friends with the other woman. She did not know why that should be.

Conversation was not exactly clipping along during the pizza party, which Brian had predicted would be the case because of the language barrier, though their English seemed good enough to Jen. Juan appeared preoccupied, but it was impossible for Jen to guess if it was really preoccupation or just that he was very hungry.

Jen sat sullenly watching everyone eat, showing her teeth from time to time, smile-like, and wondering if she'd have enough pizza left to pack for her lunch break the next day or if it would be peanut butter as usual. In her mind she said to Carolina, "This is so much fun! I've always wanted to have you over but the time never seemed right, you know? But this is great, really great!" Then, in her mind, she made Carolina respond, "Oh, Jen, you were so sweet to have us. I have just been too shy to ask you over myself, but I've always wanted to."

She had been wishing for an instant connection with Carolina. After all those years of watching her she'd imagined they would feel something for each other when face to face, but so far such a feeling wasn't evident.

Before long, her two older children and Pedro appeared bored and asked to leave the table — or perhaps the palpable anxiety of their parents was driving them away. Jen tried to stop them for fear of being left alone with the neighbors. Kingston, the baby, began to cry, and McAlister, the toddler, continued to fuss in his chair next to Brian because he didn't want tomato sauce on his pizza and no one could completely scrape it off. "Let me take the baby," Carolina offered. Jen handed him over but flinched, thinking back on the loving way Jaden had taken Carolina's hand earlier.

Jen was secretly relieved when Kingston continued to cry through Carolina's cooing and gentle bouncing; what would it mean if all of her children were able to befriend Carolina

but she was not? She was delighted and grateful that Carolina refrained from suggesting that Kingston was hungry, tired, or needed a new diaper, even though he wouldn't stop crying in her arms. Why anyone ever thought they needed to tell the woman with four kids what *might* be wrong with one that's crying was beyond her, but it happened everywhere she went.

It was subtle, but maybe by not suggesting what could be making Kingston cry, Carolina was somehow in tune with Jen. Jen looked Carolina in the eye for the first time that evening.

"My sister has four babies, also," Carolina said as she handed Kingston back to Jen. "Is that a smile?" Carolina asked Jen as one might a petulant child. "I'm so glad to see that. You have such a pretty smile, Jennifer."

Jen blushed and shifted the baby from one side of her lap to the other, his weight familiar and reassuring. She noticed the sun brightening the reds in the tablecloth she'd chosen and, waving the baby's arm aside gently, she reached across the table for another slice of pizza, which was much better than last time they'd ordered from the same place.

"Jaden, Braegan — I have brownies," she called to them as they were putting on their shoes. "Won't you stay here for just a little longer and chat with us before I bring them out?" Jen asked between bites.

Braegan appeared from around the corner. He was wearing denim shorts and a shirt with a stain in the center of a yellow stripe. "Mom, we don't care about the brownies, we just want to play," he said. She couldn't blame him.

Jen wanted to go out into the warm spring evening, too. Maybe take wine coolers onto the porch for her and Carolina, put their feet up on the rail and just talk. Talk about all the stuff going on in their lives. Talk about their husbands. Talk about raising boys, or in

Carolina's case, *boy*. She'd opened the dining room windows and the breeze was so refreshing; it was warm but with a leftover note of winter.

"You can play in the house if you'd like. There are lots of board games right here in the cabinet. Pedro, remember the one with the hippo that you liked?" Carolina would see how Pedro and Jen had become friends.

"Oh, yeah, the hippos," Pedro said politely, laughing a little.

"Mom, we'll just be right here," Jaden said and twisted the top half of his body toward the front yard, his red T-shirt pulling up a little over his round belly.

"Don't start coming in and out of the house, though, boys," Brian said. "Commit to one or the other. You want me to get the soccer ball pumped up? I could kick it around with you."

"Oh, Juan. Brian enjoys playing soccer," Jen said, enunciating. "Pedro mentioned you're on a team. Maybe Brian could play with you some time." She looked at Brian and winked. "He was pretty good in college." She looked around the table for approval. The front door closed loudly and the boys were gone.

Juan looked at his wife. "The team I play on? It's a... We have too many players."

Carolina jumped in. "Umm, there isn't room for more players. They can only have, how many?"

"Fifteen," Juan said. "Fifteen shirts. Fifteen men."

"That's cool," Brian said. "Really, that would have been fun, but it's totally okay."

"I can call you, okay, if somebody dies," Juan said, looking Brian in the eye. Juan and his 11-year-old son, Pedro, were almost the same size. Pedro dwarfed both of Jen and Brian's older kids, but alternately, next to tall, broad-chested, Juan looked like a miniature

man. His features were rounded and bulbous, his nose and cheeks pock-marked, and he never showed his teeth.

“That would be great, Juan. Wonderful,” Jen said.

“If somebody dies?” Juan asked.

“No, if you —” Jen started.

Kingston continued to cry and McAlister began rocking his chair from side to side until Jen shouted because it looked as if he might tip over. Brian was now wearing his agitated face. He slapped his right hand down on the arm of the booster seat that was strapped onto the regular chair, looked McAlister in the food-encrusted face, and whispered angrily, “Enough.”

Jen noticed Juan and Carolina’s eyes meet uncomfortably. “I can take him?” Carolina asked. Each time Carolina spoke, regardless of the sound she ended on, her lips assumed a rounded shape, as if she were about to whistle—Jen found this really cute and later practiced doing the same thing in the mirror.

“Brian, maybe if you...” Jen knew that Brian was sensitive about being told what to do, but she also knew that McAlister would continue to rock as soon as Brian lifted his heavy hand. She didn’t want to keep handing the babies off to Carolina.

“If I let him down he’ll try to get outside after the boys,” Brian said.

“You could put him on your lap,” she suggested.

“I will hold him,” Carolina said firmly, stretching her arms out across the table.

Brian shrugged, unbuckled McAlister, and passed him to Juan, who turned and gave him to Carolina. She settled him on her lap, looking genuinely delighted to have her arms around a toddler, and began to sing to him and make her hand crawl up his chest like a

spider. He screeched and giggled every time her index finger tapped his chin or nose, and her spider-hand would start all over again at his belly-button.

Juan had been very still through most of the visit, aside from his eating motions. They had all had enough pizza, the boys were still outside, and Carolina was absorbed in entertaining McAlister. Jen bounced and rocked Kingston and was afraid the only way he'd be quiet was if she nursed him, which she thought might be rude with company. Juan touched the edge of the paper plate and, for the first time, took a look around the room. Watching him, Jen was glad she'd remembered to vacuum the cobwebs from the corners of the ceiling and dust the light fixture. Brian was latched onto his beer and watching Carolina.

Juan took a deep, loud breath and scooted his empty beer bottle a few inches away from him. "We are not here illegally," he said abruptly.

Jen stiffened and Brian squeezed her thigh hard under the table to agree with her reaction. "Excuse me?" he asked.

"We, I...are not here illegally," Juan said, tilting his chin up a few inches higher than it had been.

"We didn't think you were. I mean, we hadn't thought about it, but thanks for letting us know," Brian said, laughing in little, airy bursts through his nostrils.

Jen took a swig from Brian's bottle of beer, holding the beer in her mouth for a moment before swallowing. Everyone watched her. "She always does that. Must be like how a cat always wants to drink from the dog's bowl."

"We see you watch our house," Carolina explained in a calm tone. "Sometimes, well, sometimes we think maybe you are wondering, and—"

"No! No! It's only that our porch faces that way," Jen said.

“Well, we weren’t going to say anything, but we know you called the police on us a few weeks ago. Why did you do that? Everybody had to leave, even people who drove an hour to get here and weren’t ready to go. It was...” Juan was searching for a word.

“Forgive me, Jennifer, but it seemed...mean,” Carolina said.

Jen’s heart sank into her sandals. In her mind she explained desperately, “Carolina, Brian did that! I told him not to. It was probably my fault; I kept talking about how I wanted to crash your party and he must have gotten tired of hearing it. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Mean?” Brian asked, licking his lips. “We’re not *mean*. It was just loud that’s all. And I think it was probably already past eleven. Wasn’t it?” Brian asked Jen. She nodded and stood, hoping to silence the baby by pacing.

“So you’re telling me you didn’t invite us here to see if we’re legal?” Juan clarified, his hand finding its way to his wife’s hand, instantly met by McAlister’s wandering, dirty fingers. Juan didn’t seem to mind.

At this point it was on the tip of Jen’s tongue to come clean with Juan and Carolina that Brian had wanted to invite them over to check them out because of the slumber party invitation. She bounced still-crying Kingston. Instead she said, “No, really, that’s not why we invited you at all, Juan — we’re not interested in knowing if you’re here legally. I mean, we break the law all the time. You know, going five over the speed limit and not stopping at stop signs, that kind of thing. We’re cool. We just got to thinking that you’ve lived across the street all these years and we’ve never had you over. We love that our boys are friends...” Jen stopped talking to give Brian a look that said *jump in any time and tell them how much we like them*. “We love that they play together, but *we* never spend time with *you*.” Jen smiled. “And why not?” She felt like a phony, and her heart rate was rapid.

Juan and Carolina nodded, looking unsure of the situation. “In El Salvador we knew all the neighbors,” Carolina said. McAlister was fingering her long necklace. “You know, sometimes, Jennifer, I see you with all of your children and don’t understand how you handle them all alone. In El Salvador there was always some neighbor helping, especially if the family didn’t have money for a...”

“A nanny?” Jen offered. “That would be so nice.”

“Please, have another slice of pizza,” Brian said with a gesture toward the boxes, reaching out to squeeze Jen’s hand as she paced by with Kingston.

“Can I get you another beer?” Jen asked. “And I made brownies...”

“No. No thank you,” Carolina said. “Do you eat with the other neighbors?” she asked tipping her head and settling her lips into that O posture.

“Oh, well, no. Well, we had a block party once — the other block back, not this one in your direction...the block to the north, you’re to the south... That was with the other neighbors. Actually, it’s mostly just that the kids get together with the other — ” Jen stammered. Brian had told her in college that if she joined a sorority she would be better with people, but she had been too shy to apply to one — now she wished she had.

Jen slipped around the corner into the kitchen to refresh Carolina’s iced tea and Brian followed her so fast it was like they were connected by a rubber band. She immediately began shooing him back to the dining room, but he wouldn’t go. “You can’t just leave them!”

“I need a breather. I mean, they seem nice enough. Except for accusing us of whatever that was — wanting them deported or?” Brian said, sounding winded.

“How about get him another beer,” she said, giving him a nudge toward the refrigerator with her hip. He could see into the dining room from the refrigerator door. The other couple watched him take out two more bottles and he raised his hand in a nervous hello. “*She said he* doesn’t want one,” he said out of the corner of his mouth to Jen. “You don’t want to cross these women.”

Jen ignored him and rounded the corner into the dining room. She felt that she was getting so close to forging some sort of bond with Carolina. She was usually resigned to her own awkwardness getting in the way of new friendships, but this time she was concerned that Brian might actually be the obstacle.

She set the tea in front of Carolina who was smiling uncomfortably, McAlister still on her lap, and looking from Jen to Brian as if she wanted to ask something, her lips in their rounded posture. Jen pressed her own lips together tightly in a way that she meant to seem friendly, and stood for a few moments longer than was natural before sitting.

Carolina set McAlister on the floor and he stayed near her, running his fingers over the hem of her shirt repeatedly.

Jen wished Brian would do or say something sociable. It would help so much if he could find a topic everyone could join in on and if the baby would stop crying. And Juan just stared, that was the worst. Mostly at items on the table, but sometimes up at the light fixture or over Jen’s shoulder into the kitchen. He was like a sullen teenager who had been made to dine with strangers.

“Carolina, who does your hair?” Jen decided to try one more time to get something going. She thought of those early, and what had turned out to be the best, friendships of her life. It seemed that back then she and her friends had easily bonded over hair.

Carolina shook her head as if she couldn't comprehend the question or the intention behind the question.

"Because I would love to play with your hair sometime if you'd let me," Jen said. She handed the baby to Brian, who now also had McAlister, and made her way around the table, bunching the bright, red tablecloth with her thigh as she slid along the edge to Carolina.

Jen gathered Carolina's hair at the nape of her neck, both men looked on with expressions of alarm. Carolina herself seemed uncomfortable but not unwilling to continue with what was taking place. "I have this vision of what would look really good on you," Jen said, stroking the hair away from Carolina's temples. "I could do it right now if you'd like."

"Uhh, I think maybe later?" Carolina said, unable to move her head.

"I'm sorry," Jen finally said, dropping her arms. "You have really great hair."

"Thank you," Carolina said.

"Honey, were we going to..." Brian began. Jen knew he was looking for a way to bring up the safety of Juan and Carolina's house. He handed Kingston to Jen and put McAlister on the floor. McAlister didn't leave Brian and began pulling at the fabric of Brian's T-shirt just to see it stretch. Juan and Carolina were watching Brian expectantly.

"Does, um, Pedro?" Brian looked uncertainly at Jen as if he'd forgotten the child's name. She raised her eyebrows to tell him Pedro was the correct name. "Does Pedro spend a lot of time on a computer at your house?" Brian had repeatedly expressed his concern to Jen about the boys running into pornographic popups on a computer that didn't have child safety software on it.

“Computer?” Juan asked glancing up for a moment from whatever was troubling him on the table, then dropping his eyes again. “No,” he said and shook his head.

“Okay,” Brian said. “So, when my boys are at your house they’re not on the computer typically?”

“They just play,” Carolina said.

“Play me?” McAlister asked. “Da, play me?” he asked.

“Not this minute, buddy,” Brian answered.

The concern about house safety seemed irrelevant now that Jen saw what quiet people they were, and how warm Carolina was with the children. She couldn’t imagine there would be any more safety hazards at their house than there were at her own. She tried to catch Brian’s eye and somehow let him know it was okay to stop, but was unable to.

“Daaaa,” McAlister whined. Brian answered him *not now*. McAlister began crying and hopping in place up against Brian.

“Couldn’t Jaden watch him outside?” he asked Jen.

“He can’t be outside alone!” Jen said.

“I can take him out,” Carolina offered.

“Oh, no, he’ll be fine in a minute,” Jen said over her two wailing children.

Carolina went to McAlister and knelt on the floor beside him. She held her palm a few inches from his chest, spread her wiggling fingers wide, and began to sing the spider song again.

McAlister stopped crying and pressed back against Brian’s leg.

Carolina continued singing. And just as she came to the last words, her voice pitched high and she cried, “aqui aqui aqui,” grabbing at him all over his body with her wiggling

fingers. At first his face was startled and he almost fell twisting and trying to get closer to his father, but when Carolina began to laugh, so did McAlister and he shouted for her to do it again. Kingston had quieted, also listening.

Jen's eyes wandered back to Juan. She saw that he had been staring at his paper plate. "You always eat on these?" Jen and Brian stared across the table at him and Carolina rose up off the floor to look at him. "These plates?"

"Oh, no, I just thought they'd be fun for tonight. Partyish," Jen responded, trying to smile enthusiastically.

"You think we use maracas?" Juan asked looking at the little yellow rattles patterned between tiny, green organ-pipe cactuses around the edge of the red plate.

"No, I just..." Jen started guiltily. Had she subconsciously chosen these plates because of their ethnicity? No, she told herself, she had chosen them because Cinco de Mayo had been last week and these plates had been seventy-five percent off at the grocery store.

Seeing his wife backed into a corner by another man, Brian's hackles rose, and not just metaphorically—he puffed out his already expansive chest and sat up straighter than he had been, balancing the baby carefully on his leg. "Hey, she just wanted to be partyish. We never eat on *paper* plates," he said, his eyes darting between Juan and Carolina. "Do *you* eat on paper plates?"

"Brian!" Jen blurted out. "Please don't—"

"I think it's time for us to be getting Pedro home," Carolina said.

"Oh, no, stay!" Jen said, which startled Kingston. He began to cry again. She took him from Brian. "Let me get the—"

“No one wants brownies!” Brian said too loudly. He took a deep breath. “What do you do, Juan? For a living?”

“I work for the city. I’m a manager in city works. What do you do?”

“Work for an engineering company.”

“My cousin is an engineer. That’s a good job,” Carolina said, searching for something, probably her purse.

Brian was not an engineer; he proofread and edited engineering documents. Jen decided not to volunteer this. She tried again to decide if it would be inappropriate to nurse Kingston in front of their guests. She was so relieved that it finally looked as if they’d hit on a topic that might grow into a real conversation, but the baby was so loud now. McAlister walked around Brian’s chair to hers and patted his brother on the leg.

“Yes, he is a very good engineer. He is something like a city planner, I think, in Ohio,” Carolina continued. “And my nephew is getting a college scholarship from the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers,” she said proudly.

Jen cringed. She knew what Brian would say next. He had recently come home from work upset about the existence of this exact society — that, the National Society of Black Engineers, *and* the Society of Women Engineers. She decided she needed to go ahead and feed the baby. As soon as she had Kingston under her T-shirt, McAlister threw both of his arms across her lap yelled *meeee*, a sound like air leaving a balloon.

“Oh, those guys. Yeah, I’ve heard of them. There’s a club for every kind of engineer but a white male engineer. Did you know that? Why is that okay? And you know what’s the worst? Nobody says, ‘Hey, that’s not right; you’ve got to let everyone into your club.’” Brian shook his head.

Carolina got up to look out the window at the children. “Jennifer, really, it’s getting late. I will tell the children they have five more minutes to play,” Carolina said, going to the front door.

“Oh,” Jen started, then decided there was no use protesting a second time.

“I mean, if I started a club for white men only there would be so many people telling me that was jacked up. Then right there in plain sight the Hispanic people and the black people and the women — probably even white women — and the Asians, they make their clubs and the white guy can’t join and no one says a damned thing,” Brian went on.

“How sad,” Juan said under his breath.

“Hey, buddy, don’t take that tone with me. It is sad for whole groups of people to be excluded because of how they look. There used to be perks that came with being a white guy, now what good is it? I mean, now we’re the bad guy and quickly becoming the undefended minority it looks like,” Brian said sharply.

Juan rose and drank the last of his second beer.

“Wait a second. We had business. Didn’t we have business, honey?” Brian said.

“McAlister, please stop,” he said. He pulled the toddler from Jen’s legs and set him on the other side of his chair. “This isn’t easy, but there are a few things we want to ask you if we’re going to let our child sleep at your house. One thing I want to ask is if you have a gun or any other weapons.”

“A gun? Do I have a gun? You mean in my pocket? Right now?” Juan’s eyes were round and his mouth hung open. He reached toward his belt. Jen and Brian both tensed their shoulders, but he was only pulling up his jeans.

“Why would I have a gun?” he asked, his voice rising in agitation. *“Thank you for the pizza, blond people. I brought a gun to your home in case you have things I want? Is that what you think is in my mind?”* He shook his head and started toward the living room where his wife stood between the front door and the dining room. McAlister ran after him.

“Juan, there’s no need to raise your voice. Please, will you sit back down?” Brian said. “It’s a fair question if you want Jaden to spend the night at your house.”

Carolina and Juan looked at each other. “You have said that a few times, about spending the night. But, I’m not sure if I know what you’re talking about,” Carolina said.

Jen felt her face heat up. She blurted out, “Pedro asked Jaden to sleep at your house. You didn’t know that?”

“Pedro spent the night here a few months ago and we didn’t ask if you have a gun,” Juan said, staring hard at Jen and Brian.

“I didn’t know Pedro had invited him, but that’s fine with us, isn’t it Juan?” Carolina said. “And no, we don’t have weapons. He will be perfectly safe. We even have smoke detectors,” she said. Jen thought she heard irritation in Carolina’s tone and wished she could undo the entire evening. She felt sorry for herself, then sorry for her children by extension because they would most likely end up just as awkward as she was. She heard Carolina start up with her spider song again for McAlister.

Brian said, “My wife tried really hard to do something nice here. She made those brownies today; you know she doesn’t even bake our birthday cakes?”

“It’s been very nice. Maybe we can take a brownie home for tomorrow?” Carolina asked.

Jen felt herself nod at Carolina and tried to decide what she'd tell Jaden later about the sleepover. With her mind on Jaden, she pulled Kingston off her breast, fixed her nursing bra, and went into the kitchen to oblige Carolina's request for brownies to-go, leaving Brian behind. He rose to go after her.

"Your wife doesn't trust us alone," she heard Juan say. "You better stay here."

"What? She doesn't care if you're in here alone," Brian said in a raised voice. Jen was peeling the plastic wrap off the pan of brownies in the kitchen and paused, listening.

She heard Carolina's footsteps moving fast from the living room to the kitchen. Carolina entered, carrying McAlister who was petting her hair. "Jennifer. The men are going to fight. We need to leave now. Could you give me the brownies tomorrow? They look very good."

Jen closed her eyes and laughed a breath through her nose. "No, Brian doesn't fight. He's never been in a fight once in his life and I'm totally confident that he never will be in a fight. You just hang on a second and I'll finish wrapping these up. I really admire that you can say no to dessert, I know that I..."

"Go ahead!" Brian yelled in the dining room.

Jen and Carolina ran to see what was happening. Juan was holding all the spoons Jen had left on the table for ice cream, smiling teasingly at Brian.

"They're not real silver. They're from Target," Brian said. "Take them."

"Okay. Is this what you expect?" Juan shoved the spoons into the pocket of his baggy shorts. "And this?" he asked, unplugging Jen's iPod from its port.

"That's my wife's!" Brian shouted and took a long step toward Juan.

Juan poked the iPod into his back pocket, eyebrows raised at Brian, then turned and walked into the living room where the children's game remotes lay on the couch. "And these?" He put a remote under each arm and casually went to the game console and began to unplug it.

"I'll call the police! I swear!" Brian said.

Jen watched slack-jawed and Carolina's mouth was frozen in a tense O, her eyebrows knitted together.

"Call the police. I *am* legal," Juan taunted. "You got a bag for these things?" he asked Jen.

"Juan, come," Carolina said. "He never drinks beer," she said to Jen. "You gave him too many beers."

"He drank them on his own! Only two!" Brian yelled.

McAlister and Kingston both started crying in piercing, high-pitched voices.

Carolina handed McAlister to Brian.

"What else good you got in here?" Juan asked scanning the living room.

Jen squinted out at the children and hoped they'd stay where they were for now.

"You know, I think I will call the police," Brian said. "Why shouldn't I?"

Carolina said, "Juan, put everything back."

Juan laughed contemptuously, never taking his eyes from Brian's face.

"We still don't know if he has a gun, Brian!" Jen said and was immediately ashamed of herself and looked at Carolina knowing beyond a doubt that they would never be friends.

"Is this what you want? Is this what you're expecting?" Juan teased, tucking a glass candlestick under his arm, ignoring Jen.

Brian slung McAlister onto his hip and picked up the house phone to call 911, shushing him as he prepared to talk. Jen ran to his side to try to stop him, almost dropping Kingston, but he turned away from her and hissed, “The cocksucker is asking for it. This is how he repays our generosity? He can explain himself to the police.”

Carolina sunk down onto the couch, her surprised O lips turning down at the corners until her face seemed to be deflating through them.

The front door flew open and the children stood in the doorway. “What’s going on?” Jaden asked, breathless and red from running in the yard. “We thought we heard shouting.”

“Go back outside,” Jen barked and tried to push them out.

“Mom, what are you doing?” Jaden asked again. “Did you decide if I can spend the night at Pedro’s? Pedro and I were coming in so I could pack.”

“Papi, why do you have their game remotes under your arms?” Pedro asked his father.

“Do you want *me* to take the baby? Can’t you make him stop screaming?” Juan yelled to Brian who was standing with the phone limp at his side staring at the floor while his baby thrashed and howled.

“Mom, we want to go to their house,” Braegan said.

“No, Braegan, you weren’t invited. This is *our* sleepover,” Jaden said, putting an arm around Pedro.

“Hold on,” Brian shouted over Kingston. “Mom and I didn’t say anyone’s spending the night anywhere.”

“You said if his parents came over and you thought—” Jaden whimpered at his mother but was stopped by the look on her face that told him he would never leave the house again if he kept talking.

“Both boys are welcome. It’s no problem,” Carolina said with surprising composure.

“Wait, invitations aren’t the issue,” Brian said.

“But thank you so much, Carolina, that’s so sweet,” Jen said. Maybe if they could part on good terms she could ask Carolina for lunch some time.

“Tell me *the issue*,” Juan said.

No one spoke and Jen could hear police sirens approaching. Brian set down McAlister who ran to Braegan and said, “play me?” then started crying harder when Braegan shook him off.

“No issue. There’s no issue,” Jen said.

“And we’ve been trying to find out if you have guns in the house—you said you don’t, but come on! Do your kids have access to every channel on cable? What do you even do? What does city works mean? You drive that construction truck and you’re never home and for all I know you can’t really afford to live in this neighborhood on your wages with your wife staying home so I’d think you’d have to supplement somehow,” Brian said, his entire body seeming to flare up like an angry rash.

“My husband does not sell drugs,” Carolina said, the same slightly surprised but patient expression on her face that had lived there all evening. Jaden stood near Carolina, almost in a protective posture, it seemed to Jen.

Juan unloaded his pockets, tossing their contents onto the red couch facing the TV.

“And you’ve been here for two hours and I still don’t *really* know the answers to those questions,” Brian continued. “So, Jaden, I’m sorry, but I don’t think you’ll be spending the night over there tonight.”

“This was so stupid — ” Jaden started.

“Don’t you dare speak to us that way — ” Brian said hotly.

“I told you it’s fine over there. This was your idea. I said we didn’t need to do this. Why don’t you listen to me?” Jaden glared at Brian.

“Jaden, pequeña, shush now,” Carolina said.

“Why is there a police car in our driveway?” Braegan asked.

“Your parents insulted us, that’s why,” Juan said, “and I had to call the police.”

“You didn’t — ” Brian started.

Two officers were quickly on the porch and knocking at the storm door. Jen opened it and tried to smile in a friendly and hopefully innocent manner.

“We got a hang-up from this number but heard yelling on the other end?” the female police officer said — Anderson was her name. She was on the heavy-set side so that the buttons on her short-sleeved navy shirt were gaping.

“I’m sorry, that was a mistake,” Jen said in her warmest voice.

“Ma’am, it looks like there are a lot of you in the house and I can see beer bottles. Can we come in and see if the call was nothing?” the male police officer asked.

“These people insulted us. You won’t believe it... They have all these crazy ideas,” Juan said as Anderson collected driver’s licenses from him and Carolina.

“No. No, officer, this man is lying. All we wanted to do is find out if it’d be safe to let our son spend the night at their house. You can relate to that, can’t you?” Brian asked Anderson as she took his and Jen’s identification.

“You all just stay right here with Officer Higgins and I’ll run these cards,” Anderson said and returned to her car. Officer Higgins stood quietly near the storm door and kept looking over his shoulder after Anderson as if he didn’t want to be left alone. He had curly brown hair that almost looked permed, and seemed to Jen like the sort who would have a mustache, though he didn’t.

“You’ve really done it now, Brian,” Jen spat. “I thought you were faking about 911.”

All four parents sat on the couches now. Jen started nursing Kingston again. “Jaden, go find McAlister.”

“Are you getting arrested?” Braegan asked.

“No, Braegan, this is just a formality because I *accidentally* dialed 911. This is what happens if you do that,” Brian said.

Nursing cleared Jen’s head in a way that nothing else did. And the quiet it brought was so nice, like velvet stroking her cheeks. That’s what she always imagined when a room grew quiet. Carolina’s house was probably quiet most of the time. There was nothing rambunctious about Pedro and even if he did make some noise now and then, he was at school all day. Carolina must just lounge around the house or go shopping all day, Jen thought.

Her thoughts turned to the brownies she hadn’t managed to serve. Those brownies had been a real feat to bake. She’d had to promise Jaden and Braegan extra screen time in order to get them to watch the babies while she baked. She thought of sending the whole pan

in with Brian to work on Monday, but then again, he had reported that his female coworkers spent a lot of time complaining about the number of calories in each and every thing they shoveled in their mouths. She thought of the last time she had bothered to consider the number of calories in a dessert — one of the many perks of breastfeeding, she thought, was not worrying about calories as much as she normally did. Come to think of it, it had been the last time they'd seen Brian's family and had been over eight months ago when she was first home from the hospital with Kingston and worrying that she'd never get her figure back. The meal had been at a very nice Italian restaurant in a part of town she and Brian weren't familiar with. They had forgotten their GPS that night and had followed Brian's parents so they wouldn't get lost. Brian's father tended to drive very fast.

It was at this point that Jen remembered the summons Brian had received in the mail months ago. "Summons and supplemental notice of violation," the paper had read. On the summons, below their address, was a photograph of Brian's license plate and photographs of Brian's grey Toyota running a red light in order to keep up with his father's tan minivan, which was also visible in the photograph.

Jen's heart began to pound and her breath had quickened. She looked at Brian, but before she could remind him of the summons, which they had not paid because he kept telling her he wanted to appeal it, the officer reentered the house.

"Brian Dawson?" the woman asked.

Brian looked at Jen, first with confusion and a hint of terror in his eyes, then Jen saw a flash of understanding, and his face fell, just before he turned to the officer. Brian rose, held his hand out to her, and introduced himself. She did not look amused and didn't take his hand. "Will you come with me, please?" she asked.

Juan and Carolina looked at Jen with suspicion and some amount of judgment on their faces.

“Papi,” Pedro said, “can Jaden spend the night next week instead?” His father silenced him with his eyes.

Braegan went to Jen, stood by her, and held her arm. Jaden said, “Mom, What’s happening?”

“Yes, what is this, Jennifer? What has your husband done?” Carolina asked in a voice that now sounded cold.

“We just forgot to pay a ticket. I’m sure that’s all it is,” Jen said, though she secretly wondered if he could have done something else that she didn’t know about.

“I see you thinking,” Juan said. “Maybe it’s not just a ticket? He looks to me like the kind of man who maybe got in a fight somewhere, or maybe he drove away without paying for gas.” Juan stopped and appeared to consider other possible crimes Brian might have committed.

Braegan asked, “Is Dad going to jail?”

“No, baby, no, don’t you worry,” Jen said, putting her free arm around him.

Jaden sat next to Carolina and she put her arm around him.

“Honestly, ma’am,” Officer Higgins began to speak. They had forgotten about him over by the door. “Honestly, if he ignored a summons, even for a ticket, and missed his court date, which would have been noted on the summons... Well, it’s possible there’s a warrant out for him,” the officer said, shrugging apologetically.

Jen closed her eyes. Her initial embarrassment was beginning to fade into anxious resignation when the door opened again. The female officer said that Brian would have to go

to the courthouse in the squad car, but that Jen could follow, pay the fine, and he would be released.

The two officers stood on the porch conferring while Jen, Juan, Carolina, and Pedro gathered their belongings to leave. “Carolina,” Jen started, “I really hate to ask this, but it’s getting late and... Do you think... Would you mind maybe staying here while I go with Brian? It would just be so much easier if...”

“Yes, yes, I see. I will watch the children. No problem. You go, take care of your husband,” Carolina said.

Jen told the boys to be good and she’d be back soon, and hurried off.

Jen and Brian returned to their house hours later. Brian rushed straight to the basement when they walked in, without saying hello to anyone. Carolina was sitting on the living room floor with Pedro, Jaden, and Braegan playing Memory, laughing.

Carolina rose and asked if everything was okay and explained that she’d put the two babies to bed about an hour ago. Jen was relieved that they were already in bed — she never managed it that early.

“Mom, play with us!” Braegan said.

“I told them we can play one more game,” Carolina explained, sitting back down on the floor.

Jen set her purse on the couch and joined them on the floor. She had never had much patience for board games and had usually encouraged the boys to play them without her. They let her go first. She flipped two cards: a frog and a girl, and flipped them back over.

The three boys and Carolina took their turns; Carolina was last and found the girl that matched the one Jen had turned over. “I found her sister!” Carolina said.

“How many sisters do you have, Carolina?” Jen asked.

“Two: the one with four babies like you, and another who is too young for babies yet. But they live back home. Do you have sisters?”

“No, just a brother who’s a lot older.” Jen turned over an umbrella and a cake. Jaden immediately found the other cake and set aside the matched cards.

Everyone had made a match but Jen. On her next turn she flipped a bicycle and a boy with brown skin.

“It’s Pedro again!” Jaden yelled.

“Jaden, no! Don’t you say that,” Jen scolded, horrified that Jaden would say anything skin-color related.

Carolina laughed. “Jennifer, it’s okay. The boys have been making these jokes tonight. See, the blond boy is Jaden.” Carolina held up the two blond-boy cards. “These look like them, don’t they?” she asked, clearly amused.

“I guess they do,” Jen admitted. “My husband earlier... I feel so embarrassed by some of the stuff he said, and I just want you to know —”

“Juan was so much worse. Let’s forget about it,” Carolina said and turned over an umbrella card, quickly finding the one Jen had turned over moments earlier. On her bonus turn Carolina found a puppy and a stroller.

Each of the boys took a turn. Pedro matched the stroller. Jen still hadn’t gotten a match, but turned over the same puppy card Carolina had just flipped. “Where’s that puppy’s sister? Oh...” She wanted to match it but only had one shot at finding the right

card. She reached for one and Carolina said, "Take your time!" as if she knew Jen was about to choose the wrong card.

"That's not fair," Jaden said, "You can't give Mom hints!"

"She has no matches, Jaden, I can help her," Carolina said, keeping her eyes on the cards.

Jen chose right and matched the puppies. "Got it!" she said. Braegan congratulated her. He had a stack of three matches already.

"Do you have family here?" Carolina asked.

"No, I grew up in Nebraska. It's not a terrible drive, but no, no one's right here," Jen said, trying to memorize the pictures on the cards the boys were exposing, holding out some hope she might catch up to them in the game.

"So you're just like we are," Carolina said.

"What do you mean?" Jen asked.

"People like us leave their families in other countries. But, sometimes there are lots of us from one place and we find each other. We make a new family so we don't have to be alone. And I assume you do that with other people from Nebraska?"

Jen laughed. She laughed very hard and could not stop herself, though she tried because she felt like her laughter might be rude.

Soon Carolina started laughing also, out of embarrassment, and was barely able to say, "Same but different?"

10 Bucks

Joan had made the mistake of drinking one more cup of coffee that afternoon—drinking it down to the dregs and using the last drop of milk in the jug. By nine that evening, she was restless and regretted being out of milk. Her husband, who was at a State Farm conference for the weekend, never liked her to leave the house after dark, and Joan sometimes grumbled something at him like *we don't live by a national park*—thinking of nocturnal predators—or *I can go armed*—thinking of human predators—as she picked up a paring knife. But since she was glad to let him do the legwork when an evening trip was in order, she didn't protest much, just handed him her shopping list. But he'd be gone another two days. If she wanted her coffee with milk in the morning, she'd need to go out tonight.

As she unloaded the dishwasher, she tried to decide if his concern was something new or if twenty or thirty years ago he also had told her not to go out after dark. The neighborhood had changed a great deal in that time. In the past couple of decades, the surrounding farmland had been bought up and developed. Now there were houses just blocks from Joan and Ed's raised ranch that were worth upward of half a million dollars. She stood looking at a spot of peanut butter that had clung to a spoon through the wash cycle. She decided that if Ed had told her to stay home after dark twenty or thirty years ago, she would have laughed at him. But had their old working-class neighborhood been *more* threatening back then than this new more affluent one? Or less? Or was it just that she had been so much younger? She chipped off the peanut butter with her stubby thumbnail, catching the reflection of her wild, gray hair in the spot where the chip had been.

She was already dressed for bed in a T-shirt with a big, gray cat face on it and some of Ed's old pajama bottoms--the red and green plaid ones that he'd outgrown and she'd

grown into. But, what the hell, she thought, she saw kids out and about all the time in their pajama bottoms, even in giant fuzzy slippers. What harm would it do if she went out that way too? It was true that since the new developments had sprung up she'd been doing her hair and makeup and sometimes even wearing her church clothes just to do errands in an attempt to match the stay-at-home moms driving around with Starbucks in hand. But, tonight she was tired, so she grabbed the gray, zippered sweatshirt that Ed kept next to the front door and headed out.

For the past two years, Jeremy ended each of his evening shifts as grocery stocker by purchasing that night's meal. He had this game he played of going through product lines, working his way through each variety a brand offered. So, last week he'd bought a different variation of Kraft Macaroni & Cheese each night, and another week he went through all the Marie Callender frozen dinners. This week, it was the Dinty Moore meals stocked near the cans of beans. When he hated a dinner or loved a dinner, he'd flatten the package and slide it beneath his microwave, thinking he'd remember which food landed in which category and buy it again or not buy it again, accordingly.

Jeremy had chosen the Dinty Moore beef stroganoff not because that's really what he felt like eating, but because that's where it was in his progression across the shelf, left to right. He had worked twelve hours, was grubby in his baggy blue uniform T-shirt and khakis, and his arms and back were worse off than usual, so he carried the boxed meal next to his thigh in a limp grip. He thought of his old Aunt Lou who had raised him along with his mom, and how she would have blamed the weather for her aches and pains, but Jeremy wasn't old enough to start with all that. He just blamed the canned goods.

Any hot meal still caused him to think of his mother's cooking. She was only half an hour away, but his shame had caused a rift between them and he'd moved out of arm's reach.

He'd enlisted in the Navy after high school with the intention of learning airplane repair. But the same day the Navy shaved his head in basic training, he'd popped positive for marijuana and had been sent home. He still saw the trajectory in his mind. Maybe the whole thing had made a parabola: graduating from high school, knowing what career he wanted (up, up, up), enlisting just as his auntie had, actually being away from home, having his head shaved, popping positive (down, down, down), and back home again empty-handed and bald. Almost worse than his mother's deflated pride had been running into acquaintances who asked him what he was learning, what rank he was, and where he was stationed, each assuming he was home on leave. So... he moved and hadn't cut his hair since.

Joan looked nervously about her in the well-lit parking lot, feeling for all the world like someone who would be assaulted at any moment. Tonight she noticed a conspicuous absence of SUVs and minivans; instead, she saw American-made cars and trucks. She walked into the grocery store as quickly as her flowered Keds would carry her, grabbed her gallon of skim, and headed to the checkout, never looking around her. She had let the whole *after dark* concern spook her. She felt pretty silly, but maybe there was something to Ed's fear after all. It was funny, but in the dark it was like her neighborhood had become itself again—working people fresh off of their shifts picking up a few things before heading home to Dave Letterman. Shouldn't she be *more* comfortable now?

Jeremy saw that one of the two open cashiers was Juice, the Indian kid he liked to swap stats with about the Royals' chances of making it to the World Series. Just as he rounded the end cap with the magazines and brought his hand up in greeting to his friend, a plump older woman squeezed in front of him and set a gallon of milk on the belt, her bulky gray sleeves brushing his arm. He thought it seemed like she needed to use the bathroom and got out of her way.

Joan held four dollars in her hand (she had her payment ready as her husband had often asked her to do if she went out alone day or night) and watched the screen for her total. As she stood there waiting for the cashier to stop talking to the young man behind her, she began to feel eyes on her. She felt sure that someone was looking at her that very moment. Because she was feeling anxious, she reached for a pack of gum, just to be doing something. She turned a few packages over, pretending to be interested in the designs on the labels, selected one, and put it on the belt. Just as the gum approached the cashier's reach, she lost her patience and practically snatched it from his hand in order to hand it to him.

The cashier looked over his glasses at the boy behind her and suppressed a smile. She felt her cheeks and neck heat up and was sure that the eyes she'd felt were those of this mocker waiting with his Dinty Moore. She hadn't heard of anyone eating *that* since the 1970s.

The cashier read her total, and she was surprised to hear that it was approaching five dollars. She would have to go into her purse for another dollar. She sighed, hassled by this mistake she had made—she certainly didn't need a pack of gum—and dug through her large, flowered purse for her wallet. She hastily pulled out another dollar, handed the cashier five

singles, threw the change into her purse *without* counting it (as Ed would have had her do), and walked briskly out of the store.

Jeremy told his friend he had to be getting home—Beyoncé would be on Jimmy Fallon soon (they had a joke about Beyoncé—neither wanted to admit he liked her music, so they made fun of her). "See you later, man," he said. He picked up his bag and nearly stepped on a ten dollar bill. Jeremy thought of the older woman who had cut in front of him in line, but he was already unable to picture her. He picked up the bill and began to put it in his pocket. But then, he thought of Aunt Lou who was plump and old and who was always so good to him. He jogged out of the store to catch up with the woman, figuring there was probably only one old lady in the parking lot this time of night. As he scanned the lot for her, he imagined a big scale teetering—one side was for doing the right thing, the other was for doing what he wanted. He wanted the ten bucks, but his visual of the scale tormented him.

Joan had almost made it to her car when she heard the sound of hurried, pounding footsteps behind her. She drew in a breath and walked faster, touching the silver corner of her LeSabre's trunk like she'd reached home base. Then, dragging her hand along the length of the car as if it would protect her, she hurried to the driver's side door.

"Ma'am," Jeremy said. She didn't turn around. "Ma'am? Excuse me." Jeremy only had the courage to approach the stranger as long as he imagined he was talking to Aunt Lou.

Joan turned her head just a little, having once read somewhere that one should never look one's attacker in the eye because it could be interpreted as a sign of aggression. She was terrified, but another thing she'd read had said never to show your fear when being

confronted. And if she wasn't able to be brave, it would be like telling Ed he'd been right that she should never go out after dark.

"Is this yours?" Jeremy held out the ten dollar bill. He hoped she would say no. If she said no, he'd run back in the store and buy some Oreos and milk. Then again, he thought of that scale and would be glad to see the good side weighed down heavier than the screw-up side.

Joan felt confused and wondered if this might be some sort of devious trick on the young man's part. "Well, I..." She dared to eye him now. "I don't know," she said and took the money from him. "Let me..." She dug through her purse again for her wallet, pressing her body to the side of her car. "Sorry, would you..." She held out the ten to him (needing to free up that hand), regretting that she'd worn pajama bottoms with no pockets.

Jeremy stood two feet away from her holding the ten away from his body by one corner and beginning to feel very anxious watching this woman search her purse. She found her wallet and opened it, practically under his nose, and leafed through about fifty dollars broken up into small bills. He hoped Aunt Lou would never be this foolish in a parking lot at night with a stranger.

"Let's see... There *should* be two tens..." She looked up at him. "Well, I guess you did your good deed for the day." She took the ten from him and got into the car feeling shaky and wishing he would go away.

Jeremy stood next to the Buick and watched her fumbling to situate her purse and plastic grocery bag on the passenger seat. She hadn't closed her door and watching her in the

private world of her front seat felt like seeing past someone's curtains in the dark. He could see a stainless steel travel mug in the middle console, a Billy Joel cassette tape in the neighboring cup holder, a pine tree air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror, and an empty shoe box on the floor of the back seat. He reflected that this woman would be a terribly easy target if someone was inclined to target old ladies. He stood watch until she drove away.

Joan's heart was still racing as she pulled out of her parking space, but in her head she knew she'd been done a kindness. She wondered if she should call Ed and tell him about this young man. Would the incident make him more set on keeping her in at night or would he feel like the world was safer than he had thought? But why had the boy refused to walk away after she'd thanked him? Had she thanked him? She could only imagine that he had either expected some sort of reward for returning her money or was considering robbing her after all.

Joan decided she had, in fact, not thanked him and circled around to look for him. She squealed a U-turn around the median at the exit of the shopping center instead of entering the street that would take her home. She made a mental note to tell Ed her tires were low on air. It only took a moment for her to see the boy at the other end of the parking lot. He was going toward the street with all those duplexes that had been there for as many years as her house had.

Jeremy felt like a chump. He knew he'd done the right thing, but for what? The old lady hadn't even thanked him. He didn't want this beef stroganoff. *Stupid Dinty Moore*, he

thought. His game with the product lines now seemed like a dumb way to feed himself. He should just buy normal food like the rest of the world. A piece of meat. A bag of potatoes. And anyone else would have kept the ten.

Jeremy heard a car moving up behind him. He could tell from the way the tires crunched that it was moving very slowly and was deliberately staying behind him, though there was plenty of room to go around. He moved off to the right into the grass. He was in a spot where the parking lot turned into a road that ran perpendicular to the one he lived on. If he had to, he could turn and run back toward the store almost faster than a car would be able to turn around and follow him.

The boy wouldn't look at her, and Joan was unsure of how to get his attention since the presence of her car wasn't doing the job. Ed would say it was dangerous to be so lost in thought that you don't notice a car following you. Maybe the boy was listening to music. Or maybe he was on drugs. This stretch of road that ran between the parking lot and the next street was dark and no one would see if this boy stole her car or hurt her in some way. She stepped on the brake.

When the car that was following him stopped, Jeremy looked over his shoulder at it. He was far enough off in the grass that the headlights weren't blinding, and he could make out the silver LeSabre. The woman rolled down the passenger side window.

"Excuse me?" she said. "I didn't thank you. Thank you for returning my money." She watched him expectantly, smiling at him now, almost apologetically.

He nodded at her. He could carjack her so easily it was ridiculous.

“I’d like to give you a reward,” she said. “Will you come over here?”

To Jeremy this sounded like a trap, but he moved toward the passenger side window and bent down. Joan held out the ten dollars to him. “Take this,” she said.

“No, ma’am, it’s yours,” he said. All his efforts really would be for nothing if he took it now. He’d rather continue feeling sullen and annoyed that she hadn’t thanked him than take the money from her.

Joan couldn’t imagine why he wouldn’t accept the money when he could so clearly use a little extra. Stubborn pride was most likely the problem. He was standing next to the car with his hands in his pockets.

Joan thought hard. “Take my gallon of milk, then,” she said. “Please, I’m trying to thank you.”

It made more sense to Jeremy to accept the milk than the ten bucks, so when she feebly tried to raise the plastic bag off the seat with her extended arm, he reached in and took it from her, nodding in thanks.

Joan rolled up the passenger window and drove off, realizing she’d also given away her new pack of gum.

Jeremy put his Dinty Moore into the bag with the milk and walked the rest of the way home.

TONY

Returning Tony's Pillow and Plant

It was below freezing and the truck wouldn't start at first. Once it did, I circled my neighborhood a few times coming up with what I would say to Tony before driving the three miles to the apartment I'd found for him in one of the neighboring towns.

On the second time around the block I decided my sequence would be: knock on the door, tell him I was sorry not to have the chance to say goodbye to him, hand him his fern and lumbar support pillow, tell him goodnight. Simple. Of course, what I wanted to say was something more like, "Fuck you, Pop," but I knew my wife, Sarah, expected that I would say something exactly like that and end up punching his face in, so I moved those words to the bottom of my list.

I was talking to myself in the truck, heading his way. I played through the last few months. I played back farther than that, collecting evidence of his apathy, selfishness, laziness, until I knew I was getting angry again. Colby and Van were so little, only one and three years old, and they had grown to love him so much. My fingers were tight on the cold, plastic steering wheel and a pain shot through my jaw from clenching my teeth. At a stop light I tried to talk myself down, rolling my shoulders, saying stupid shit like *you got this, man and take it easy there*.

Snow was falling and I put the wipers on high so I could make out the numbers on the little, walk-up apartments. I pulled into the parking spot directly in front of his door. I sat for a few minutes, until the freezing air had robbed the cab of the warmth the heater had generated.

As I stood at his front door I could hear his old black lab mix barking around back. I knocked. His dog knew me and had heard my truck—he was barking out of excitement. It was after ten o'clock and I called to him to stop. I knocked again. I felt like an idiot standing there in the cold and snow holding his plant and pillow. I knocked again. I imagined each frond of the fern turning to ice. Then I heard the sliding door around back scrape open—pause—close with a dull thud—then the distinct sound of a broom handle clattering into place in the runner of the sliding door like Tony had dropped it quickly from a standing position.

His dog was out of the cold. He wouldn't answer the door for his son, though? When he still hadn't come to the door after the fourth time I'd knocked, I had a decision to make. I thought of what various reasonable people would say to do, not wanting to act on impulse. My wife would say to call for police assistance; my father-in-law, to leave his junk on the steps and go home; my mother-in-law, to call him in case he just hadn't heard me knock.

I walked around the side of the apartment to the kitchen window. The thin glass rattled when I tapped on it. He looked up, startled. I could see his long goatee wag like dirty steel wool against his plaid shirt as he searched the kitchen for something. He bent to pick up a shiny object from the table, something small and made of glass, probably a pipe. He stuffed the thing into the pocket of his ripped jeans, his hair falling over his face. When he tucked his hair behind his ear I could see a third piercing that must have been new.

His dog barked again, but after I called his name, quieted to a whine. Tony left the kitchen and the dog sat and stared at me. I thought Tony was about to let me in the front door and my heart softened a little. But, when I went around to the front he was not there. I knocked again. No answer, so I went back to the kitchen window, angrier than before.

This time I strained to see through the kitchen and into the small living room. I was able to make out Tony, positioned in a recliner, maybe about to watch TV. Apparently he planned on ignoring me, probably thinking: *don't make eye contact and he'll go away*. I rapped on the window. The dog barked once but Tony didn't look up. I tried to open the window which brought Tony back to the kitchen, phone in hand. He stood by the window not looking at me, like he was trying to figure out the quickest way to get rid of me. The dog paced and barked and whined. I tapped the glass another time and shouted to him that I was just trying to return some stuff. *Just open the door*, I shouted holding up the pillow.

When he still didn't look up I raised the fern and threw it hard through the window. The pot shattered on the kitchen table, dirt spilled across a newspaper and knocked over a glass of milk. I wiped the window frame with his pillow, tossed it onto the floor, and climbed through.

"Can't answer the door?" I yelled. "You lose your hearing?" I had my hand on a chair back and wanted to swing it at him.

He backed away from me. "Randy. Hey," he said, using the voice that was meant to be diplomatic and mature. "Can you sit down? Why don't you sit down. I was just making some tea. Can I get you some tea?" he asked and continued to back until he dead-ended at the kitchen counter.

"Do I want some tea? Not *hey, thanks for letting me live with you for four months?* Not *hey, thanks for feeding me for four months?* Not *hey, thanks for going \$7000 in debt for me?* Nothing?" I shouted. I heard a dripping sound and saw the milk slowly running off the edge of the round table, mingling with the glass. When the dog sniffed it I broadsided him with my leg before he could start lapping up the shards.

“I got this shit from Whole Foods — might be Japanese — it’s just fabulous. You’ve got to try it; I really think you’ll enjoy it.” Tony filled his teapot, repeatedly wetting his hand and sleeve as he ran the sink with his eyes on me. He was wearing these giant fake fur slipper boots like he thought he was a Sherpa or some shit.

“Oh, come on, sit,” he said. “Come on. There you go.” Without taking his eyes off me he found a burner and glanced away only for half a second in order to turn it on.

I couldn’t sit still. I bounced my leg and tapped my fingers on my thighs. “In those four months that you lived with me did you not notice I can barely afford groceries for my family or gas for my truck? That my wife isn’t working? Did you notice I’m still buying diapers for one of my boys? You said you just wanted a way to put gas in your car while you were looking for a job!” I knew *I* was the one who’d screwed up by giving him the card, though, which made me even angrier. Every time I trusted him he would shift the game just a little, find a loophole and leave me empty-handed and in worse shape than I’d been before I’d talked to him.

“Hey, man, you said it was cool. You *gave* me the card. How was I to know that wasn’t going to work out for you?” He had one hand on his hip, looking like a high school kid telling his mom that it was her fault he’d failed algebra.

I jumped up and started toward him. “I ought to rip you up and throw you away. *Throw you away,*” I shouted.

The tea kettle whistled, and still not fully turning his back on me, he managed to fill two mugs, spilling the boiling water onto the yellow Formica. “Look,” he said, holding the mug. He shuffled to the table, pushed the mug through the glass in a wiping motion, and

finally stopped it in a glassy pool of milk several inches from where I stood. More milk spilled onto the floor.

“Are you going to let your dog lick up the glass?” I asked.

“Do you think he would?” he replied, really seeming to wonder. “I’ve got... Not just the crazy-good Japanese stuff... I’ve got Tension Tamer! I’ve got Cozy Chamomile! Really, help yourself to whatever you want. Sit! I probably have some...cookies or...crackers somewhere...” he said, racing around the kitchen, gathering boxes and tossing them onto the table from a distance of three or so feet. “Let me get a towel for that milk!” He went for the counter again and stumbled over the dog who was growing agitated with all the movement and really wanting at the milk. Tony caught himself on the refrigerator and smiled at me. I couldn’t believe he was smiling, even if it was just out of embarrassment or nerves.

He wadded up the towel and threw it onto the laminate tabletop. Most of the cloth landed in the milk, but one corner made it into my mug and the boiling water wicked out faster than I would have imagined. “Hey. Hey, Randy. That’s no good. Here, let me get you a new one.” He quickly set down another mug on the only clean part of the table which happened to be out of reach from where I stood.

I sat back down. The dog came to me and put his snout on my knee. I’d heard of dogs visiting prisoners and started to see the sense in it. It felt good that the dog was being friendly and trusted me, even seemed to remember me. Tony stood against the sink watching us interact.

“You guys have pizza tonight? I’ve noticed lately that when the pizza guy comes this old dude doesn’t bark like he used to,” he commented.

I had already dropped the tea bag into my mug but wished I could unaccept now. “No, we did not have pizza tonight.” I shook my head. “You know, the difference between you and this dog is that the dog is grateful for the food and shelter I provided for him. He remembers and has the good grace to say thank you.”

“Who taught you all this grudge-holding?”

I tried to breathe through the anger like I’d read to do. Of course he didn’t know who taught me anything. He didn’t know how I learned to walk, or tie my shoes, or change the oil. Breathe through the emotion.

“Son, I think you’d feel a lot better in general if you’d just learn to live in the moment,” he said with a totally straight face. My breath caught in my throat.

“Tony, don’t you dare call me *son*,” I said slowly. I was ready to leave. I took a step toward him with the heavy mug in my hand. I was really only going to put it in the sink.

He grabbed his phone off the counter and dialed with what looked like spring-loaded fingers. He finally looked away from me.

He was reporting a break in. He put his head down and paced in that familiar way he always did on the phone, “Yes, possibly violent,” he said and hustled toward the living room. “He might have a weapon, I’m don’t know. Hurry.”

I looked to the window I’d come in through. I had been too focused on him to notice, but a great deal of snow had fallen into the kitchen and covered the glass scattered over floor behind where I’d been sitting. It didn’t look like a good way out.

In my head Sarah entreated me to stay where I was and explain to the police what was going on. But I ran. With the dog at my heels I ran from the kitchen, through the tiny, white

living room with the one leather recliner, elbowed Tony out of the way, and jogged right out the front door. I jumped in the truck which was still warm enough to start up immediately.

Halfway home, near an intersection lined with fast food restaurants, I saw a patrol car come up behind me, lights flashing. I didn't stop. Some part of me thought that if I made it home I'd be safe. I drove faster. Then a second car was behind me, then a third. I pulled into a Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Facing police officers I no longer wondered what my wife or in-laws would do in this situation; they would never *be* in this situation. I focused on what *Tony* would do. He would turn on the charm and pull his blameless victim mask on, and so that's what I tried to do.

"Sir, my father stole from me and was angry when I confronted him about it. You know how family can be." I smiled ingratiatingly but no one even made eye contact with me.

The female cop with the short hair and slim frame searched me, a real young guy with red hair searched the truck, and a huge older guy with a mustache cuffed me, then shoved me into the county sheriff's car where I was driven half an hour south to the county holding facility.

Tony the Terrific

Tony the Terrific went off mic at the same point in each of his shows. Part of his schtick was to pull a young woman, preferably an attractive college-aged girl, onto the stage with him for his straightjacket trick. As soon as she was on stage he removed his microphone and tied it to a rope that was dangling overhead.

It was at this instance — this was a show out at the Renaissance Festival in Bonner Springs — that Tony noticed the two boys in the third row. They were between twelve and

fourteen, he couldn't decide how old each was — definitely brothers. He noticed them because the blonder one had eyes exactly like his dead girlfriend's and the other had ears shaped just like his own father's — pronounced enough he could make them out even three rows away. They were dressed plainly in plaid shorts and solid T-shirts, no velvet hats or lace-up boots like other audience members.

Tony was distracted thinking about these boys. Usually it was the twenty-something in cut-offs and a tank top who did the distracting. But today his temporary assistant, Allison, seemed bent on showing her father that he shouldn't have volunteered her. She *was* a pretty girl with long, brown hair, and the requisite tank top and cut-offs — he would have chosen her even if her father hadn't forced her arm into the air when he asked for a lovely assistant. She eyeballed Tony, smirked at her father, and began tightening the straps of Tony's straightjacket. He smiled charmingly at her and tried to keep his head angled up so that he could talk into his hanging microphone and the audience would be able to hear the next step of what he was telling Allison to do.

“I did this before a live TV audience once for one of those *America's Got Talent*-type of shows. My TV career was short-lived!” Tony said in a self-deprecating tone that inspired a laugh. “Sometimes I really can't escape,” he added for an additional chuckle from the audience.

While he spoke and twisted this way and that, his brown and grey hair in a braid laced with a leather string, Allison secured all four back straps. Tony the Terrific kept his eyes on those two brothers. He had made up his mind to talk to them after the show and was nervous that they might leave if they felt restless or, provided that they were who he *thought* they

were, if one of their parents came along and saw him up on the stage — the boys would be gone in a hurry if *that* happened.

“Now, Allison, after we’re done with this next part you’ll know me better than a lot of other women,” he told her. “You see that strap hanging down between my legs?” Laughter from the audience. “I need you to reach, very carefully, between my legs and pull that strap through to the back clasp,” he said, enunciating each word. Sweat had beaded on his large forehead and the act of straining upward in order to speak into the microphone was causing some of those beads to break and slide down his sunburned nose. He licked his lips like a nervous dog, darting his eyes right and left for comic effect. “You ready, Allie?” he asked, nicknaming this young woman he’d only known for two minutes. She nodded and looked out at her family in what might have been real disgust or might have only been an attempt at melodrama.

As she began to reach through his legs from behind Tony noticed that the brothers were whispering to each other as if they were growing bored. The girl had to search through great folds of coarse brown fabric that hung loose at his crotch — the Renaissance-wear was roomy — and was having a harder time than most “assistants” finding the strap. “Whoa, there, Allie!” he shouted. “When you grab, grab low, okay, buddy?” The younger of the two boys thought that was pretty funny and the older one stopped whispering. “Allie, I want you to tighten that strap now, okay?”

The girl pulled up on the strap that was now between Tony’s legs. “You can do it harder,” he told her. “It’s okay, come on, you won’t hurt me. Harder.” The brothers looked at each other as if they thought they were the only ones who got the joke. “Allie, I know

you're stronger than that!" he yelled. "Give it to me!" And Allison pulled up on the strap as hard as she could, but she was quite a bit shorter than Tony so the upward angle was wrong and she found that to tighten the strap in the clasp she had to yank it repeatedly.

Tony bounced up and down on his toes as she tugged again and again. Her face was already bright red and some of the more inebriated audience members howled with laughter. As he jerked himself around with her movements he said, "I feel like I'm in high school again! Don't stop, Allie!" And the brothers laughed loudest of all. Tony could make out one of their laughs over the noise of the crowd because it was identical to his sister's.

"Thank you, Allie, you can sit down. I think you're done with me! You did a great job," he said, sending an air kiss in her direction as she returned to her parents who did not look thrilled with what she had participated in.

These brothers were certainly his grandsons. It just wasn't possible that they were anyone else, not with the way they'd laughed.

"This is the do-or-die part. When I did this live on TV it took me 72 seconds — that was way too much dead air, which explains why I'm back here at the old Renfest again this year. I love it, though, I love it," he said, hoping he hadn't offended anyone who might mean to tip him after the show. About half of the audience was costumed as various Renaissance-era characters; Tony knew that a lot of them bought season passes to the festival, which lasted six weeks, and attended every weekend it was open. He worked at an office supply store during the week; no one can survive on the pay of a Renaissance magician. But the season ticket holders were his bread and butter. They were the ones milling around eating enormous turkey legs, their custom-made staffs in hand, bowing to the women in velveteen bodices.

“Does someone out there have a timer?” Tony addressed the brothers directly, though a man on the other side of the audience answered, holding up his cell phone. “A drumroll, please!” Tony was losing his audience, but one of the brothers began a true-to-goodness drumroll on the wooden bench between his spread knees and that made a few of the people who had started to walk away pause. A couple other boys jumped in and Tony nodded, smiling through his shaggy goatee at the noise he’d inspired just by asking. And he somehow felt proud that one of the brothers had started it. His *own* grandson at the ready to assist him with just a word.

“Gentleman with the stop watch, are you ready? Okay! Go!” He nodded at the man. Tony began violently throwing his shoulders from side to side, glancing up at the brothers as often as he dared. The last time he’d looked at them the older one had immediately whispered something to the younger. Little by little Tony loosened the grip the straightjacket had on him until he was able to pull one arm all the way into the body of the jacket. The other was quickly freed, too, and through gasps for air he shouted into the hanging microphone, “Everybody clap your hands.” He stamped a beat and the audience followed it. “I won’t be able to see you and it helps to know you’re all still out there,” he said and somehow ducked his head down into the grimy white jacket.

Tony the Terrific bounced, jumped, shook, and contorted until finally he stepped out of the jacket. The audience clapped, not with a huge amount of enthusiasm, and many people walked away before he could bow or entreat them to throw a few dollars into his floppy, velvet cap with the peacock feather on the side.

Tony saw the brothers stand. Neither one was facing the stage and they seemed to be searching for someone — Tony assumed they were looking for one or both of their parents,

who he did not want them to find just yet. Tony imagined they'd leave the festival altogether if they knew he was their grandfather. So, he hastily gave his thanks to the audience, which, he added aloud, was the *best* one he'd had that season, and asked that they contribute anything they were willing to give, he needed all the help he could get, and so on. He hopped off the stage and approached the brothers just as they were leaving their row of wooden benches.

“Hey, guys, enjoy the show?” Tony asked them.

The boys shrugged, the older one looking slightly annoyed and suspicious — a face Tony knew the boy's mother often made.

“Yeah, it was funny,” the younger one said.

“What was your favorite part?” Tony asked the younger one.

“I guess the part when you ate the fire?” the younger one said. Tony couldn't remember which boy had which name. He knew one was Colby and one was Van.

“We *don't* have any money,” the older one said, also as his mother might have. In fact, one of the last times he'd spoken to his son and daughter-in-law he had heard those exact words from her mouth.

“Hey, whoa! I just wanted to know how you liked the show! I do fine for myself, thanks,” Tony said in his best “Renaissance” accent, bowing to the older boy smiling his most charming smile.

“Let's go,” the older one said to the younger.

But Tony didn't want to let them out of his reach. He wanted to look at them just a little longer, maybe tell them who he was and show them the place he could occupy in their

lives. He wanted to show them what a cool world they lived in. A world full of interesting stuff. He was sure they weren't getting the glory of life at home.

And something had been gnawing at him for months. It was common knowledge, not opinion, among his sisters, mother, and ex-wives that Tony was self-serving and self-centered — they'd told him that repeatedly over the past fifty or so years. Telling them he did not agree had never done any good, but in the years since he'd last spoken to his son, Randy, he had kindled a relationship with his nephew, Kyle, that he thought might show everybody what a good guy he could be.

He'd been borrowing money pretty regularly from Kyle. Just fifty or a hundred bucks here and there and he almost always paid him back. His sisters and mother had long since refused to speak to him about money. But Kyle was a champ, a real gem of a nephew — he would have made a great son, Tony thought. Kyle had gotten married sometime in the last few years, a beautiful wedding that Tony had gladly attended, he'd even bought a nice gift of towels, or maybe it had been a blanket. Tony had spoken to him a couple weeks ago when he was preparing for the festival and needed a little extra money for jumping pompoms, the Emotional Intelligence Three Phase Mind Reading DVD, and the new Extreme Card Manipulation DVD. To his surprise, Kyle had said something like, *Sorry, Unc, no can-do this time. I'm about to have a baby. Babies are expensive!*

What had given Tony pause during that call was that his response to Kyle's news had been anger. Tony was no stranger to self-reflection but he wasn't exactly intimate with the practice either. Tony had been dumbfounded, only lamely saying, *Oh, a baby*, once he'd found his voice. But he'd wanted to be happy because he knew babies were amazing; babies were like, how had he put it to himself? They were like transcendental travelers in the soul-

realm. But he'd thought of the money, not *that*, and he would sooner die than agree with his family that he was as low as they all estimated.

Tony had paused too long after the older boy had told the younger boy it was time to go. The boys turned to walk away and Tony blurted out at their backs, "I'm also a mystic," surprising himself. "Really, I can see things about people and sometimes even tell their futures!" He hadn't finished the new DVDs or books that he had eventually gotten from the library, but had the gist of them.

The younger boy hadn't yet outgrown his childish interest in magic and anything resembling a traditional gypsy art form. "Okay!" he shouted. The older one rolled his eyes but didn't walk away.

"You like that stuff?" Tony the Terrific asked. "You first then," he said to the younger boy. "First things first..." He held his fingers to his forehead and closed his eyes. "Name and age..." he mused, "I'm seeing something that starts with a C or maybe a V."

"C!" the younger one sang out, delighted.

"Ahh... C... Is it Chris? No. Corbin? That's not right. Could it be Colby?" Tony asked, aiming one open eye at the boy with an expectant smile.

"Wow! Yeah, that's it! You said V, too, because my brother's name is Van! How'd you *do* that?" Colby asked.

"Sit down, boys," Tony directed. "Please. I can feel that there's a great deal to tell about you two."

They sat as they were told, but Van appeared uneasy and continued looking around.

"Can you guess how old I am?" Colby asked.

“Oh, you bet. Let’s see.” Tony put his fingers on his forehead again. “You were certainly born in this century. But I’m not seeing all zeros. Something’s telling me you’re twelve,” is that right?

“Yes!” Colby shouted, properly amazed.

“Come on, Colby. We were supposed to find Mom and Dad after the show,” Van said, beginning to rise. Tony knew what he had to do to keep them.

“And you, Van,” Tony said, smiling the most mysterious smile he could summon. “You are fourteen. You live in Olathe. And... What else am I getting...? You’ve had that scar on your arm since you were two — am I right?” Tony pointed at the two-inch scar on Van’s arm. Tony recalled the story about the accident; Randy, his son, had told him all about it over the phone. Van had tripped on a power cord when Randy was refinishing the kitchen floor. He had fallen against a circular saw Randy had left out near the back door.

Van narrowed his eyes at Tony. “*How* did you know that?” he asked Tony.

“He’s *really* a fortune teller!” Colby blurted out.

“That was my *past* and *how* did you know that? *And* what’s *the past* got to do with my *fortune*?” Van asked, almost angrily.

“An excellent question,” Tony said. “Your past has everything to do with your fortune!” Tony said, trying to sidestep the other question.

“Okay, so then what *is* my fortune?” Van asked, crossing his arms over his chest. He was really a very tall 14-year-old. He looked so much like Randy that Tony had to look away for a moment.

“Hey, I was first!” Colby said.

Tony was delighted that they would argue over who was to have his attention first. This must be how it was to be a grandfather, he thought. *Me first, no me!* He smiled at them indulgently and raised his hands in mock protest.

“Colby *was* first, Van,” Tony said. “So, Colby. You will have great fortune as a...” he paused here to remember what Colby had been interested in last time he’d heard from Randy —the kid must have been just out of diapers then. “You’ll make a fortune building. Let’s see. Architecture, yes. The next Frank Lloyd Wright!” Oh, that’s right — they’d talked briefly in the courthouse when Randy and Sarah were trying to get the \$7000 back from him.

The boys looked at each other. Tony was thinking of Legos and all the crayon drawings Colby did when he was smaller.

“And you, Van.” Tony sized him up. It was different with a teenager. Maybe he’d veered from his interest in cats and dogs. His hair was fairly long but not to his shoulders, just over his ears and pushed out of his eyes. “You, my boy. You will be a great zoologist. Not the kind that works in a zoo. The kind that will travel the world in search of new species!”

“Hmm. That’s possible,” Van said, softening his voice a little. “Why did you guess that?”

“Tony the Terrific never guesses. He knows,” Tony said, recalling that the boys’ mother loved the *Wizard of Oz* and refashioning his voice to sound like Professor Marvel’s. He felt certain that the boys would get his reference and maybe feel some sort of kinship.

Tony could have gone on and on. It was exhilarating speaking to his grandsons. He hadn’t seen them since they were about three and five, maybe younger than that, actually —

he couldn't remember when the thing with the court had wrapped up. Tony hadn't sent a card or made a phone call since the incident, but neither had Randy and Sarah.

What finally stopped their little meeting was the ringing on a walkie-talkie Colby was carrying in his pocket. His mother's voice followed, sounding irritated, but when did it not? "Boys? We've been waiting by the jousting arena for half an hour. Your show over?" she asked.

"Yeah, Mom, sorry. Over," Colby answered.

"Okay," she said, her voice trailing off. "You on your way over here? We're ready to find some lunch."

"What's up with the walkie-talkies? Don't most kids have phones?" Tony asked.

"Our grandpa got them for us last year so we could walk around the festival on our own," Van said a little slowly. He looked at Colby and seemed sad suddenly.

Tony remembered seeing their other grandfather's obituary in the paper. Before he could stop himself he said, "Oh, hey, yeah, I'm real sorry for your loss." He immediately knew what he'd done.

Both boys fixed their eyes on him, wordless. He could see the understanding crawl across Van's face. Colby saw it too but didn't understand. Van took the walkie-talkie from his brother.

"Mom, Dad. You there?"

"Wait, wait, wait," Tony said quickly reaching toward the walkie-talkie.

Van turned his back to Tony, grabbed Colby's arm, and started walking. Tony went after them and over the noise of the crowd heard Van say, "Turns out *Grandpa* Tony is

here.” And Tony could hear his mother begin to reply, *what!*, then squawk off, then Randy came on and said, “Where is he? Where are you now?” with some urgency.

Tony thought maybe it wouldn’t be so hard to rejoin his son’s family after all.

The Bait

“*How* many times?” Sarah asked, raising her voice.

“Three times now,” Randy answered.

“Three times since when? The Renaissance Festival? Or were there calls before that you didn’t mention? And what does he say he wants?” She handed him a pair of shorts to fold.

“Just last week. He only wants to see us.” Randy stood with the shorts in one hand and his cell phone in the other.

“Just to see us,” Sarah repeated. She locked her arms and pressed down on the folded clothes in the basket closest to her. “What’s his trouble now? You know he has one or he wouldn’t be calling.”

Randy folded and tossed the shorts into one of the laundry baskets and reached around Sarah and into the dryer for a T-shirt. “Well, he said the boys need him.”

“What?” Sarah nearly shrieked.

“He says,” Randy hesitated, knowing how mad this next bit would make his wife.

“He says that Van seemed more jaded than a kid his age should be and it *breaks a grandfather’s heart*.” Sarah stopped moving but didn’t look at Randy. “And that Colby is starved for...wonder.”

“What shit. What bullshit!” she shouted. “Wonder!”

“I know that sounds stupid. But... But what if there’s some truth to it?” Randy asked cautiously. “I mean, Van’s been in all those advanced classes since fifth grade. You know how hard he works and how stressed out he is a lot of the time. What if he is jaded?”

“He is not jaded. He’s just fourteen and a serious student. You’re not going to tell me that’s bad,” Sarah said and went back to folding.

“And maybe, I hate to mention this, but maybe we haven’t done enough with Colby’s interest in the theater and — ”

“That’s bull, Randy,” Sarah hissed. “He’ll do all that when he gets to high school. And we got him that marionette class for his birthday. He’s not starved for ... whatever he said.”

“So, can we go?” Colby shouted down the stairs.

“Go where?” Sarah asked Randy.

“The grand-dude — he said we have to call him that — wants to take us to Worlds of Fun. All of us!” Colby shouted, but stomped into the basement just as Sarah was about to tell him not to yell across the house.

For Sarah, this invitation had a nightmare quality to it. Tony was the black cat across her path; she imagined that for Randy Tony was more like a ladder he’d be wise not to walk under. She turned her back on Colby and Randy and reached back into the dryer. She wasn’t sure if Van would also want to see Tony, but if he did she couldn’t imagine how she would fight all three of them on it.

“He’s going to pay for all of us to go?” Colby asked Randy.

“Sounds like that’s the plan. If it’s okay with Mom.”

She could feel them watching her as she rooted through the dryer trying to match socks.

Randy stage whispered to Colby, “Why don’t you go back to whatever you were doing and I’ll talk to her.”

Colby whispered back, “Okay. I’ll tell Van,” and laughed.

After she knew Colby was out of earshot, Sarah said, “They don’t know what a big deal this is.”

“I think they do. They know he’s their grandpa. And they know he wants to see them now but he never did before,” Randy said, sounding as if he had to strain for an answer.

“But they don’t know what Tony does. They don’t know about the fall-out. Seriously, when he comes around it’s like an earthquake hitting — it can be years between the big ones, but eventually there’s always a big one.”

“Maybe nothing will happen this time. That whole jail thing was forever ago. Over a decade? I don’t know, seems like we might just try it one more time,” Randy said, scrambling to help with the laundry.

“Okay, and then what? He will at *least* break the boys’ hearts — that’s best case scenario. What’s worst?” She threw the socks she had just paired into the basket and missed. Halfway into the dryer she stopped. “I find it a little hard to believe that it only took three phone calls to hook you again.” She turned around to look Randy in the eye.

Randy looked away. “Can I carry up one of these baskets?”

“Was it just three calls?”

“Just three,” he said, picking up the basket.

“And? Why do I think there was something else?”

“Okay. I met him for lunch the other day,” he said and set the basket back down on the bare concrete. “It had been, like, twelve years! It’s no big deal.”

“You’re like a relapsing heroin addict.”

“Crack addict would be funnier.”

“There’s nothing funny about being a crack addict. Why do people always think that’s funny?” she asked. “It’s really disturbing that you’d want to go back to him.”

“He’s not an old girlfriend.”

She picked up the laundry basket and headed to the stairs. “Might as well be,” she said.

Van was sitting at the kitchen table eating a bowl of cereal. She passed him and then turned around. She couldn’t think when she’d ever seen him at the table alone simply eating; usually he was reading or watching something while he ate. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said, losing some milk out the corner of his mouth and quickly trying to catch it with his bare hand.

She continued to her bedroom with the basket. She began to assume that there was more she didn’t know — maybe Randy and the boys had met Tony without her knowing. It didn’t seem possible unless he’d taken them out of school, and surely that would have gotten back to her.

When she thought of Tony she sometimes also thought of an English teacher she’d had in high school who liked to say that being an adult meant taking responsibility for one’s actions. Tony had shown he was incapable of ever admitting a fault or offering to repair what he’d broken; he was concerned about “wonder” because he’d never mature past thirteen.

After she'd put away about half of the clothing, Van came into the bedroom and fell across the bed in an exhausted way. "This is making me crazy," he said.

She knew to wait, not speak, if she wanted him to go on. For her, learning to be a mother had been a lesson in patience and self-control.

"This Tony thing," he said, rolling onto his back and tossing a ball of socks toward the ceiling. "You know it's just that Colby wants to go to Worlds of Fun, right? It's not that he wants to actually see stupid Tony."

She again stopped herself from rushing into a series of questions. *Why does he say Tony is stupid? Why would this make him crazy when they all knew Colby had been asking to go to Worlds of Fun for at least a year? What's really bothering him?* She looked up from her sorting and met his eyes.

"How about you?" she asked.

"I think Tony's a dick." Van rolled onto his stomach again and pulled apart the socks he'd been tossing, then put them back together in a way that made the ball more compact.

Dick. Sarah wanted to laugh but stopped herself. She wanted to agree with him, too, but thought that might be inappropriate. She finished putting the clothes away and sat on the bed next to Van.

"I don't want to go anywhere with Tony," he said. "I guess Dad and Colby can go with him."

"Well, maybe." Sarah wondered how much she should say. "But the trouble with Tony is... once he's back he's back. Know what I mean? At first he might just send a text every week, but the next thing you know he and Dad will be on the phone every day. At

least that's how it's been before. I'm just saying that I think if Dad and Colby go with him to Worlds of Fun we'll all be seeing a lot more of him after that."

Sarah and Randy had raised the boys knowing that Tony just lived in the next town over. They'd openly talked about how Tony was another *sort* of person, not like the grandparents they were used to, or any other adult for that matter. The sort of person who put himself first, who took from others when he had an opportunity to, who didn't help someone unless he was legally forced to. Sarah had been worried for a long time that if they weren't up front with the boys about where Tony was and who he was, that they'd somehow be more drawn to him as teenagers. She imagined the boys being lured away by Tony somehow, and blindsided by him the way Randy had periodically been most of his life. And how she'd been blindsided by him. She wanted to demystify him to the children as much as possible.

"They're like long-lost twins when they're together," she said.

"So, what? Dad turns into a dick?"

She heard Randy walking toward the bedroom. He came in the room and asked if he was interrupting something. Sarah said they were just chatting. She heard Colby yell from the living room, "Where are you guys? Weren't we about to have lunch?"

"In here, Colby," Randy said. They all waited quietly in an effort to help Colby break his shouting habit.

When he came in, Sarah suggested that he and Randy run out for some sandwiches while she and Van finished up the housework. When she heard the front door open, she called to them, "We'll be done by the time you get back." Randy yelled back, "That's why *he* screams across the house!" and closed the door.

She wanted Van to understand about Tony. Understand Tony as she understood him—not in the emotionally mired-down way Randy thought of him. Van might be old enough to hear more about the situation and show discretion with the new information. She couldn't tell if he was still interested in continuing their conversation, though. He had left the bedroom and was searching for something in his dresser. She watched him from his bedroom door.

He pulled a post-card from one of his drawers and studied it. “I guess you don't know about this?” he asked, holding it out to her.

It was a note from Tony, written to Van on his birthday several years ago, when, as far as Sarah had known, they'd all been out of touch with Tony. “When was this?”

“My tenth birthday,” he said. “It was taped to Colby's handlebars but had my name on it.

“Why...?” she asked, feeling queasy.

“It says right there not to mention it,” he explained.

“So, did you see him?” The note was an offer from Tony to deliver lunch on Van's birthday and eat with him in the school cafeteria. She thought she might be sick.

“Nope. I wrote and said okay. I told you I was doing a project for school and needed an envelope and stamp.” He took the postcard back from Sarah, looked at it for a long moment, then began tapping it on the top of the dresser.

“So you told him yes and he stood you up?” She wondered how she could have not known that Tony had already done his *thing*, his — she didn't even know what to call it — to one of her children. In her mind she imagined a surfer riding a wave up, only to have the

entire ocean disappear when he reached the crest. That's what Tony did and she didn't know a word for it.

Part of her wanted to tell Van everything he still didn't know. In a way she wanted to tell him how she'd been one of Tony's victims, too, but knew it would be wrong for her son to know when Randy did not.

Van looked at the postcard again and ripped it into quarters. "I mean, I know it was bad I didn't tell you.

"Did Dad know?" she asked.

"I told the lunchroom monitor because she asked why I wasn't eating. But nobody else," Van said. He started out of the room with the scraps of paper and tried to squeeze around Sarah.

"So there was a day when you just didn't have lunch?" That idea bothered her almost as much as the idea that Tony had made secret contact.

"Yeah. Mom. Excuse me," he said, trying to go around her.

He was taller than she was now, which she hadn't gotten used to. She held each of his arms above the elbow, stretched up to kiss his cheek, and continued to hang onto him in the doorway. "Do you know if he's done anything like that to Colby?" Van shook his head and broke away from her.

"You had no idea at all?" Sarah asked Randy later that night. They were sitting in their family room trying to relax with a bottle of wine.

Randy said he really hadn't known about the postcard and seemed as troubled as Sarah — a relief to her. She had thought she'd mention it to him and get some *what's the big*

deal response since he seemed so sold, *resold*, on Tony. As far as each of them had been concerned, at least a decade had gone by with no word at all from Tony. To find out that was not true seemed to make their entire house list to one side. Right in the middle Tony had made a completely unexpected move.

“What does this mean?” he asked. “Which way do we go, then, you know? Doesn’t that mean Tony does want to be part of our lives?” If anyone else had tried to secretly communicate with one of the boys — a coworker, neighbor, even an uncle — Sarah was sure Tony would be furious.

“Is what *he* wants what matters?” Sarah asked, exasperated. She thought that maybe he really didn’t understand the big deal after all. Maybe what she heard as concern was really a note of desperate hope in his voice. “I don’t care if he wants to be part of our lives. No. I do care if he wants to, but what he did wasn’t normal and it gives me the creeps.”

“Tony’s never normal.”

“It’s not endearing. And that’s all you have to say? He’s not normal and adults don’t secretly contact children for dates.” She heard footsteps on the floor above them. “Colby’s still up.”

They sat and waited, knowing that when Colby walked around after they’d said goodnight he was thinking and would be down to talk; he’d done it periodically since he was a toddler.

When he came in he didn’t sit, just stood near the darkened TV in his grey knit shorts, bare-chested. He looked at Randy. “How’s the thing with Van getting stood up at lunch any different from when you say you’ll take me somewhere on Saturday and then don’t? I don’t decide I’m never speaking to you again when you do that.”

“You don’t?” Sarah asked, laughing now. “You do! Or at least I know you’ve said *I’m never speaking to you again!*” No one laughed along with her.

Randy looked perturbed by the comparison. “It’s a lot different. It’s different because we see each other every day, I take care of you, I provide for you, I teach you to play chess and tie your shoes, and we do fun things all the time. Every now and then if I’ve gotten ahead of myself about something I thought we could do, *I* get a free pass. Strangers don’t get a free pass.” Randy sounded resolute. She thought Randy had only designated Tony as a stranger to pacify her about the situation; she couldn’t imagine he had decided Tony had to go by “stranger” rules.

“So we can’t go to Worlds of Fun?” Colby asked, pitching his voice higher.

“I don’t think we can, Bud,” Randy said gently and sounded apologetic.

“Maybe he won’t do whatever you think he’s going to this time,” he said in a still-optimistic tone.

“It’s the history, Colb,” Sarah said. “I’m sorry it’s that way, but people make patterns they don’t usually break.”

Colby grunted, sighed and threw his head back in a defeated way. “Fine,” he said, drawing out the word.

When Sarah and Randy were alone again she said, “I know this is hard for you. What are you going to tell him?”

“Tony?” He stared at his hands. “I’ll tell him never to contact any of us again.”

Grocery Store Carnival

Tony had been trolling the two groceries closest to his son's house for most of the past month. He kept thinking that if he was there at a variety of times he would eventually run into Randy and find a way to reconnect.

Tony had encountered his two grandsons, Colby and Van, at the Renaissance Festival and subsequently attempted to rekindle his relationship with his son Randy and daughter-in-law Sarah. For a while Randy had returned his calls but had abruptly stopped after a few weeks. So, Tony visited each grocery at arbitrary times every Saturday and Sunday.

He was loitering in the Halloween candy at ten on a Saturday morning when he noticed that there were an unusual number of children in the store. It dawned on him that squeals of laughter weren't par for the course in a grocery store, and he left the seasonal display to check out the commotion.

In produce, he found that there were easily thirty kids crowded around a woman dressed as a cowgirl-clown making animals and hats out of long, skinny balloons just past the salad bar. As his eyes adjusted to the scene, he also saw a teenaged girl painting designs on kids' faces near the bins of apples, one store employee making cotton candy against the display of bagged salads, and another running a cookie-decorating station where the produce department turned into the seafood department. For Tony this was like a bizarre dream in which his expectations about a place were completely skewed by, say... well, clowns by the salad bar.

"Are you in line?" a youngish woman asked him after her child slammed into his thigh.

“No.” He smiled at her but didn’t move from his spot by the avocado display, which had felt out of the way a moment ago. “Hey, uh, could you tell me what’s going on here?” he asked the woman.

“The store has this kids’ club thing, and once a month there’s this…” She paused trying to think of what to call it. “This carnival sort of thing? It’s like customer appreciation or something?” She excused herself and pushed her daughter around him to line up for the cowgirl-clown.

“The wheels are turning, the wheels are turning!” he muttered to himself, smiling and heading to customer service. He stood behind a crusty-looking sort of guy in a Veterans of Foreign Wars hat who was buying lottery tickets. Tony hated to see these old vets. He had been admitted into West Point fresh out of high school back in the early 1970s — his dad had insisted he apply — but Tony had hated every second of the two months he spent there and had managed to drop out, not easy to do. From that time on he had kept his hair long and worn necklaces and bracelets and multiple earrings.

Tony clapped his hands and the VFW man jumped and turned to see who’d made the noise. Tony rubbed his hands together making a sound like sandpaper blocks rubbing out a rhythm. He nodded at the man as if they were in agreement about something. “Best of luck to you with those, buddy,” he told the man who was holding several scratch-off tickets. “I got a good feeling!” He meant about getting a job at the monthly grocery store carnival, not about the man’s chances of winning, but the man smiled at him anyway.

A buxom girl with a blue nose ring waited silently behind the counter for Tony to state his business. He found her seriousness unnerving, but was so excited by his idea he didn’t ask to speak to someone else, as he sometimes might have.

“How can I get in on this kids’ carnival thing you’ve got going?” he asked, squinting his eyes a little in an effort to show that he meant business.

“Sir?” she asked.

Tony put his left hand to his heart and said, “I’m a magician and a fortune teller. Tony the Terrific, at your service.” The young woman looked unimpressed. Her name tag read *Nanine*. “You don’t have anyone over in produce with my skill-set. And you put on this carnival every month, correct? So, every month you could be delighting your customers and their children with magic!” He smiled as if he’d just offloaded a box of expired bananas on an unsuspecting geriatric.

Nanine wasn’t moved to respond so he continued, “Is there someone I can talk to or a form I can fill out to apply, Nanine? Is that nah-Neen? Or Nay-neen?” He was having a great time. The idea of working a grocery carnival had super-charged him and, more importantly it greatly increased his chances of running into Randy or one of the boys again. “Or is it maybe Nay-Nine?” He turned down the corners of his mouth and showed his teeth a little, a face he meant to be apologetic.

Nanine looked him over and worked to dislodge a foreign object from between her front teeth with the tip of her tongue. “You want me to believe you can tell my fortune, but you *can’t* tell me my name even when it’s right in front of your face?”

Tony did a double-take at a woman entering the store just to the right of the customer service desk. He hadn’t seen her in over a decade, but the forty-something who had just walked in bore a striking resemblance to Sarah, his daughter-in-law. “Hold that thought, Nan,” he said and sidestepped away from customer service in a theatrical manner.

The woman, Sarah or not, hadn't seen him. She had turned left into the store, going straight into the produce-carnival. He sashayed behind the salad bar, trying to keep some object between them until he decided if she was Sarah and if he would try to speak to her. The woman had straight, short brown hair, a non-descript face, at least in his opinion; Randy talked like she was a goddess but Tony had only found her remotely attractive. She wore one of those fleecy zip-ups, an off-white one — typical gear for women in this part of the county. Medium build. She paid no attention to the spectacle around her, just went on examining the lettuce and adding bananas to her bag as if she were there alone.

He drew closer to her, sliding between the apple display and an enormous man wearing an alligator balloon headdress, almost tipping over several five-gallon jugs of apple cider. He grabbed three apples and began juggling about ten feet behind her. A few kids in line for the face-painting tugged at their mothers to watch him. He hammed for them, pretending he might drop an apple but catching it just before it hit the floor. A little boy laughed. Tony tossed the apples higher and higher until the spectators were making quite a racket. The whole time he kept his body angled to Sarah, waiting for her to turn his way.

“Hey, kid, grab a yellow one and toss it to me!” he said, too loudly. It had worked. Sarah heard his voice and spun around just in time to see a four-year-old pitch a Yellow Delicious into Tony's chest. Tony smiled at Sarah, showing every one of his big, white teeth. The child's mother reprimanded the boy for throwing the apple too hard, but Tony said, “He's fine! See I didn't drop the other ones! I love kids; work with them all the time. Between you and me, I expected him to have a strong arm.” The woman blushed as if they'd shared a secret, and turned her face to the broccoli.

“Sarah! Is that you?” Tony caught the three apples, swooped down to pick up the fallen yellow one, fished a card out of his pocket and handed it to the still-blushing woman. “I do parties,” he said, and did a cartoonish about-face to deposit the apples back into their boxes. Sarah had already begun to walk away. He sped after her.

“Hey, lady,” he said, sidling up next to her. “Long time no see! Shopping?”

She bit her top lip, sticking out her bottom jaw. He remembered that he hated it when she did that. She looked just like one of those little underbite dogs. She turned into the condiment aisle.

“What’s up, girl?” he asked, still pumped from juggling.

“Leave me alone,” she said, and picked up a jar of pickles, eyeing the label.

“What you’re doing now... This is exactly what I’ve been worrying about,” he told her, bending down to put his face level with the pickles so she’d look at him.

“What are you talking about?” she asked and put the pickles in her shopping bag. She moved onto the peanut butter.

“Just — would you just go out on a limb and give me a minute? You know? Do you do that at your house? Ever? Go out on limbs?”

“Do not ask me about what we do at *my* house,” she said.

“But, I just think that Colby and Van could use — ”

“And especially do not speak to me about my children. I do not want to hear you say their names.” She picked up her pace and rounded the corner into the soup aisle.

“Sarah. Look at me. Come on. I can pay you back now,” he said in what almost sounded like a whine, which instantly embarrassed him.

“Oh, you can pay me back. Great. How about we put on our calendars that I’ll...hmm...maybe *thank* you in eleven years, give or take a few months.” She threw a can of tomato soup into her bag. “I never should have,” she started to say and then lowered her volume, “I never should have trusted you for a second. And it makes me physically sick to think that I could have been that stupid.”

“Sarah, come on, don’t be that way. Remember what fun we had? With the boys when they were little? Remember all those mornings we’d get doughnuts and coffee and take them to a park?” He touched her elbow experimentally and she violently jerked away.

The look in her eyes almost scared him. She clearly hated him. She walked briskly to the prepackaged deli meats in a case perpendicular to the aisle they were in.

“Come on, Sarah. Then you got all sour. Why’d you go sour on me?”

“You took advantage,” she whispered ferociously. “You knew how little we had but what mattered most to you was to gather up more for yourself.”

Tony had sort of forgotten the unpleasant parts of his time with his daughter-in-law. He now recalled that she had just quit working when he came to stay with his son’s family after his bankruptcy. Sarah had some money set aside for emergencies, like car repairs, and had been good enough to share it with him during those rough months he couldn’t find work.

“You know what I think? I think you saw who your husband really was back then and you don’t want to admit that you had more fun with me,” he said, paused, and tried touching her elbow again. “I mean, I love the guy like a son...”

She dropped her head to the side and rolled her eyes at him.

“I love the guy, but you’ve got to admit he’s not a lot of fun,” Tony said. “Let me carry that for you.” He attempted to take her shopping bag from her shoulder and she swung

it away from him, almost hitting an elderly woman reading a package of hot dogs. “You shared with me and I *so* appreciate that. Won’t you let me tell you that now? And pay you back?” He pulled out his wallet.

“Done talking,” she said and started toward the front of the store.

Tony followed her. He hadn’t actually fallen for her back then, had he? He was pretty sure she’d developed a thing for him. They had enjoyed each other’s company all those fall mornings sitting on a bench with their hands wrapped around hot coffee cups, watching the boys play. And Randy was boring. Boring as shit. He knew she knew it back then and she sure as hell knew it now this many years later.

There’d been a day back then when he’d come into the kitchen and found her rummaging through the freezer and cabinets. She said she didn’t think she could scrape together dinner with what she was finding and Randy’s payday was still two days off. Tony had suggested that she take just a little money out of the emergency account she’d mentioned and he’d run out for fried chicken.

He’d brushed her hair out of her eyes and felt this really tender feeling. At the time, he now recalled, he had almost thought the feeling might be paternal. Like maybe it was how a father would feel helping out his distressed daughter. It seemed to him that she needed permission to dip into that account for groceries, and he gave it to her.

She made Tony promise not to mention to Randy that she’d used her personal account that held her last two paychecks for fried chicken and French fries. She said Randy would die of shame and a feeling of inadequacy if he knew she’d drawn from it for something as little as food for one night, but there hadn’t been enough in the household’s main checking account to cover a few extra meals.

In a matter of two weeks Tony had convinced Sarah to give him access to that account, saying that if he was able to make withdrawals she could have groceries or a new item of clothing any time and she wouldn't have to feel like she was going behind Randy's back. "You wouldn't actually be making the withdrawals yourself, see?" he'd said.

They were staunch allies by this time, Randy gone to work twelve hours a day but still not making enough to run the household. She had hesitated about handing over her access code, but he assured her it would be great to be able to "treat herself" from time to time for all her hard work with the kids and the house. He said he would put ten or twenty dollars somewhere in the house where only she would see it and it would almost be like the money wasn't from savings, but was appearing by magic. She'd laughed at that — the notion of the money from that now-forgotten job appearing magically for her pleasure.

Tony positioned himself by the wall that faced the check-out stands and waited for Sarah. She made small talk with the cashier, and when she took her change and smiled he remembered that he had once found her lovely. As soon as their eyes met she scowled again and dug her keys out of her purse.

He did an exaggerated jog alongside her as she hurried to her car. It had just begun to rain and the wind was picking up. "So, what'd you decide?" he asked her, thinking to confuse her and buy some time.

"About what?" she asked sharply. "*Letting* you pay me back?"

"Randy doesn't...?" he started.

"No, I never told Randy that I let you clean me out. I told him I'd just been careless with my money until there was nothing left. Which I guess is true. Will you move?" she

was trying to push around him to her car, now holding her purse over her head as a shield against the rain.

“How about all of you meeting me tonight for pizza. My treat. I’ve got this buddy who has a regular Saturday gig at this pizza place over by my apartment. He’s really good. He’s got flaming business cards and does this thing with live birds! It’s a hoot; Colby would love it.”

She had found a way around him and opened her car. She sat behind the wheel staring straight ahead. He wondered if that was resignation. It had been so long he couldn’t remember all of her non-verbals. He saw a strong breath steam beneath her nostrils as she lowered her head. Her jaw was still set. She shook her head.

“Sarah?” he said, leaning down to look at her through her window after she’d closed the door. She backed out and drove away.

Tony decided not to take Sarah’s response as an entirely bad sign. He put his hands in his pockets and went back into the store to resume his conversation with Nanine at customer service.

Cinematic Life

My husband and I watch movies the way other people watch TV. That is, we don't flop down on the couch at the end of the day and flip through the channels, or put on a particular show at a particular time, rather, we watch two or three movies every week—time and child-permitting.

I do not know if this movie-watching is a good thing or a bad thing in general, but I can say that sometimes the movies seem to dictate the mindsets we fall into, both with each other and outside our relationship. I know that it is certainly the case that I begin to adopt stylistic and word choices from an author I am spending a lot of time reading, so it makes some sense that if I watch a series of international espionage films I might cross a public space, say a grocery parking lot, in a more defensive manner than I otherwise would, regarding everyone who looks at me with a fair amount of suspicion.

The other night a movie hit us pretty hard. We don't get into anything that is deliberately frightening, and I can't say that this movie was frightening exactly, but it somehow caused us to stutter in our actions for an hour or so after we finished it. I won't get into the plot, but I will tell you that we had each consumed a couple glasses of wine while we were watching it, and we knew that it was due back to the video rental place by midnight. I had had less wine than my husband and he said he thought it would be best if I drove to return the movie. However, by the time I reached the front door he stopped me and said that he would take it back. I said I was fine to go but he said if I went, most likely something terrible would happen to me and he would have to live with that for the rest of his life. I said we should just return it the next day and pay the fee. He said we had another movie that was also due back and that the fine would be something like \$6 because they were new releases.

I said, even so, that would probably be the smartest thing to do. He said that no, he was fine to drive and he would go ahead. So, he left, and I looked at the clock, trying to calculate how long he should reasonably be gone, yelling after him to make sure he had his cell phone with him.

I did some hand-wringing after he left, waiting for the worst, though he was only going a couple of miles away and would be traveling on our familiar streets and probably not at more than forty miles per hour. I forced myself to sit at my computer and research microwaves in order to keep my mind off of the awful fate I was sure he would meet.

I can't recall when we'd had that much trouble figuring out who should return a movie, or when I had been so on edge about his leaving the house. There was something in the movie that had unhinged us. But identifying the element that unsettling element has proven difficult over the past several days. The only killing in the movie was a cop shooting a bad guy. There was some ambiguity about how bad the bad guy really was, and how good the good guy really was. Perhaps I am not used to grey areas in my movie-watching because we tend to go for films that cast big-name American actors, and those so often either tell us what to think or give us the situation in black and white so that what we're supposed to think it obvious. The unsettling feeling could have simply stemmed from the ambiguity about the characters' true natures.

Then, as I replayed the evening in my head, I remembered being concerned about my husband's cell phone after he left the house. It was then that it hit me that though the movie seemed to be set in present day and involved wealthy politicians, teenagers, and policemen, no character had a cell phone. I recall that there were several points throughout the movie when I cried out, "Call for help!" or "Just text someone to get you out of this mess!"

The little detail of the missing phones must have been enough to untether us from reality. I can't imagine that anyone would set a film in present-day then inexplicably eliminate all automobiles, but if someone did I think I would be similarly distressed afterwards.

Stylist

“That little one is sweet. What’s her name?” the young, brunette customer asked Anita.

Anita looked away from the customer’s hair and up at the photos she had taped to her mirror next to her Kansas Board of Cosmetology license. Sometimes she thought it was a bad idea that she had her children on display—she ended up divulging personal information that she otherwise wouldn’t. Other times she was glad they were there to keep her company and as conversation starters with people she had nothing in common with. “The little one is Fiona,” she said, letting down the last layer of the woman’s hair. She didn’t like that this woman had focused on only the youngest, as if the others weren’t good looking also. The two older ones had dark eyes and hair and were thin and strong; the youngest was fair and a little plump in her cheerleading photo. “The oldest is Ashley,” Anita continued. “She’s in a culinary program at the community college. And Jess is the middle one—there in the scout uniform. He’ll make Eagle in the next few months.”

Anita was proud of all her children, but she often felt extra proud of Jess. He didn’t have a lot going for him most of the time. He didn’t care much about school, he hated sports, he never seemed to have a girlfriend, but he’d more or less put himself through the entire scouting program from Tiger in first grade to Eagle. Anita had never been married to any of the kids’ fathers, and none of them came around to help very often, so the men in scouts had sort of adopted Jess. She knew he was so much better off than he would have been because of those scout leaders. Anita often felt guilty because she never did a thing with him other than go to the annual picnic and sew on his patches.

It was seven on a weekday and only one other stylist was working. Anita's current customer showed some interest in Ashley's culinary program, telling Anita how she and her husband had once owned a restaurant, but Anita was ready to move this woman out of her chair. She watched the other stylist in her mirror and saw that she was also just about done. The stylists openly competed for customers but, in theory, attempted to take turns. If Wanda finished her customer first, she'd get the next customer. Anita brushed off the brunette's shoulders, tore off the cape, thanked the woman, and collected her money. She told the elderly woman in the waiting area she was next and that she'd be right with her. Anita had been cutting hair for years but still got a rush each time she claimed the next customer before her coworker could.

Anita swept and then stood impatiently next to her black swivel chair, staring into the reception area and waiting for the old lady to put down her magazine. The woman was maybe 70 and taking her time. She finished her article then worked to leave the waiting area nicer than it had been when she had first sat down. Anita's head fell to the side, and she silently chanted *come on come on come on*; the other stylist was done now and would get the next person who walked in the door.

When Helen was finally seated, Anita saw two more customers enter: a middle-aged married couple. They each told Wanda they just wanted a trim. Anita looked them over but didn't know them. The man was tall, had a round belly, and wore a heavy wool shirt and heavy socks with sandals. The woman looked similarly outdoorsy and wore a purple fleece jacket and jeans. Wanda said she would take whoever wanted to go first, so the woman walked back to Wanda's station, and the man sat down in the chair Helen had been using.

Anita estimated that Wanda would be ten minutes on the woman whose curly dark hair was not especially thick and didn't need much done to it. Anita wondered if she could finish Helen in eight minutes and move on to the husband—that would make three customers in thirty minutes; she never wanted fewer than five in an hour.

The salon was small, the waiting area no bigger than a modest kitchen, and Anita worked knowing that conversations with her clients would be overheard by the other stylist and customers. The man was the only one in the waiting area now.

“How're those kids of yours?” Helen asked, pointing a pale, crooked finger at the row of photographs on the mirror.

“They're doing great,” Anita said.

“What's that?” Helen asked. “They doing okay?”

Anita remembered Helen now. She knew all her regulars, people who came in once or twice a month, but there were some clients she only saw a few times a year, and it took a little talking to jog her memory. “They're awesome,” Anita said, raising her volume several notches. “Fiona is in 4th grade now, Jess is almost halfway through his senior year, and Ashley is studying cooking at the community college.” Anita glanced around the room, self-conscious about her high volume.

She used to be embarrassed for her coworkers to hear her repeat herself all day, but a couple years into styling she'd quit worrying about that. She could recite each of her coworkers' regular comments, knew where each of them fell politically and religiously, knew every single detail about their aging parents' health, and each activity their kids were involved in. She even knew her coworkers' kids' grades on their spelling tests.

Anita had pinned up Helen's fragile, gray ringlets and was beginning to cut the bottom layer of hair, when she stopped, her eyes resting on the man in the waiting area. She decided he was familiar, but she still couldn't place him. Most likely he was an irregular customer like Helen.

"They sure are cute." Helen looked hard at the photos. "Now, honey," Helen said, as if she were getting down to business, "aren't you the one whose boy had a run-in with the law?" The women's eyes met in the mirror. "See, I remember that because I was a schoolteacher a long time ago, and schoolteachers always remember when a child is having trouble."

It was true that Jess had been caught shoplifting at a dollar store earlier in the year. The store's owner had agreed not to file charges because it was Jess's first offense. The owner asked that Jess come back and sweep at closing time for several months without compensation, and once that time was complete the owner had offered him a job. Anita was pleased with how the incident had played out and was confident that Jess had learned his lesson. Being used to awkward comments and questions from customers, she responded as she always did when she was uncomfortable—she smiled and nodded and pretended to be concentrating.

"What did you say he did, now?" the woman called out, as if she were speaking to someone on the other side of the room. "He damaged something? He stole something?"

Anita wanted desperately to stop Helen without broadcasting her child's crime to the other customers. She laughed weakly as if Helen had lost her mind and tried to judge the effect her sham was having on the man in the waiting room who was sitting with his hands folded in his lap, looking around as if he were people-watching in a crowded theater. She

noticed the man's wife watching her in the reflections of two mirrors—the wife and Anita had their backs to each other but could still make eye contact.

As Helen shouted, “Honey, I haven't gotten senile just yet and I know it, but you sure are making me feel like I must have a screw loose.” Anita knew where she'd seen the man before.

This man in the waiting room was one of the fathers from Jess's scout troop. Anita had always dropped Jess off at meetings but never stayed because she had her younger child to tend to. She had never gone camping with the troop, either. But, yes, she felt sure that this was one of the men—maybe she'd met him at a picnic years ago?

Jess had already been accepted by two universities, both times with the sense that it was his potential rank of Eagle that had gotten him accepted, not his grades, which were never better than Bs, and certainly not his level of involvement in school or sports. He was working on multiple scholarship applications open only to Eagle scouts. The heavy piles of papers Jess had in stacks around his room suggested that his entire future rode on his attaining the rank of Eagle.

“Oh, you're not senile,” she told the woman, smiling again and looking at the man as if to say, *you and I both know better*. She couldn't tell if the man had placed her as being one of the troop's absentee mothers.

Anita no longer wanted the man in her chair, never mind what he might tip her or how many clients she got through. She knew he would see the picture of Jess taped to the mirror and might even ask what Helen had been referring to. Would Jess be expelled from scouting for shoplifting? She didn't know, but she thought there was some rule like that.

“Well, so then what was it?” Helen asked.

Anita tried to hear what was going on at the other stylist's station to again gauge which of them would be done first. A picky client could easily double the time normally spent in a chair, but it sounded like the man's wife was pleased so far, though she was giving more direction than a stylist ever wanted from a client. Anita knew she'd have to slow down her work on Helen if she wanted the other stylist to end up with the man.

"Where did you teach?" Anita asked Helen as artfully as she could manage. She took the clips out of Helen's hair and rewetted it to kill time.

"I know it's hard when you realize your child hasn't learned right from wrong. It's heartbreaking when you've just about got them safely to adulthood and then there they go stealing a car or vandalizing a playground." Helen paused, staring at her reflection.

"My son *has* learned right from wrong. He just made a mistake, that's all. That's what children do," Anita said. She accidentally made eye contact with the man, and he nodded at her. Had he nodded to agree with her statement? Or to acknowledge that he now recalled her face?

"Over my years teaching junior high school—that was at Roosevelt just down the street—I learned that sometimes it's not the parents' fault when a boy or girl goes bad. Sometimes that's just how the kids *are*," Helen said.

Anita was in agony forcing herself to work *slower* when she wanted to chop off all of Helen's steely old hair in one swipe and be done. The woman in the other chair had begun whining like a kindergartner about her new cut, though, so Wanda was no better off than she was—and not moving any faster. Anita paused and closed her eyes for a moment; they were stinging.

“I always found that, for the most part, parents could see all along that their son was a bad apple,” Helen said.

“Oh, now, do you really believe in bad apples?” Anita asked, creating the impression of good humor with her voice.

“Yes, I *do* believe in bad apples. But, like I was saying, if you *have* a bad apple, you generally know it by the time he’s walking and talking,” Helen said, arching her penciled-on eyebrows at herself in the mirror.

Anita had re-clipped Helen’s wet hair and was cutting at the pace of a nervous student stylist. The man, she was pretty sure now that his name was Steve Holman, was facing the window as if looking out into the parking lot. But the windows were no better than mirrors at seven-fifteen, and she was able to catch a look of intense focus on Steve’s face. She tried hard to remember which boy was his, hoping it was that one who had been pulled from scouting for a while because he’d failed a couple of classes—Jess had said it was the parents’ call on that.

“My children have always been good. They’re caring, smart, and funny, all three of them, and they’ve never been anything but,” Anita said, trying to stand so that she could keep watching Steve. She was sure he was listening to every word and had recognized her and was thinking about Jess this minute, deciding if he should tell anyone that Jess had had a problem. She suddenly remembered that Steve’s boy was the one named Jasper whose mother, the one in Wanda’s chair, had called years ago to complain that Jess had hit him with a rock. Jasper Holman—that boy Jess said was always telling on the other boys. She didn’t know anything else about him. Speaking of apples, she’d be willing to bet that one didn’t fall far from the tree.

“That’s what you *thought*, right? That they’re so good?” Helen said with too much familiarity in her voice. “You thought they were all good, then that boy of yours went and got arrested. *Now* you know.”

Anita leaned forward and spoke directly into Helen’s ear. “He did *not* get arrested.” Anita was beginning to think it would be better to finish quickly with Helen and just see what happened with Steve Holman once he sat down. At least then maybe she’d be able to explain the situation and it wouldn’t seem so bad.

Then Anita had an idea. She would just tell Helen what she wanted Steve Holman to know.

“My son is a very hard worker and a good person. Yes, it’s true he was caught shoplifting, but he paid back the owner, he was never arrested, and now he works at the store where the incident happened and is a prized employee,” Anita said, proudly and pointedly.

Helen’s eyes rested on Anita’s reflection. Anita was working faster on Helen’s hair now, more than ready to be rid of her. Anita raised her eyes to meet Helen’s in the mirror. Helen shrugged as if to say *I suppose we all think the best of our children, whether it’s true or not.*

Anita saw Steve look at his watch. Wanda was blow-drying the woman’s hair. Maybe Anita wouldn’t have to cut Steve’s hair after all. She pulled at the moist, limp, tendrils of Helen’s hair. Maybe her speech would shut up the old woman. Maybe she had gotten worked up needlessly.

Then Helen licked her teeth and said, “I once knew a young lady, much like yourself, who had a boy who robbed a gas station and was sent away for three years. The mother’s life fell apart after he was gone. She neglected her other children until they were taken into

protective custody. By the time the boy left the detention center, there was *nothing* left of his family.”

Anita said sharply, “*Oh*, are you talking about yourself?” She saw Wanda whirl around to look at her. She continued in a hiss, “Were *you* that young lady? Is that how you know what happens when children are bad apples?” She caught her own angry face in the mirror and felt ashamed. She had stopped touching Helen’s hair and felt that she might not be able to gently put her hands on Helen again. She was almost done with the cut, but the quality was nowhere near as high as the standard she normally met.

Anita saw that Steve had taken his seat again, hands in his lap, staring around the room, beginning to wear an unpleasant expression. Was it impatience? Or maybe it was annoyance at having to listen to the conversation that was quickly turning into an argument.

“I see where your boy gets his lack of control,” Helen said.

“Why are you doing this? You don’t know me or my family,” Anita said. She walked away as she was always telling her children to do when they felt they were going to lose control of their emotions. Anita waved Wanda to the back of the store and explained the situation. Wanda agreed to finish Helen’s hair if Anita would sweep up after her client.

Anita cleaned Wanda’s station trying not to look up at Steve or over at Helen. Steve's wife returned to the waiting area, glancing at Anita with what looked like contempt. Anita had no choice but to seat Steve. She called him over and tied the black, plastic cape around his neck. “What are we doing today?” she asked him, her voice barely audible.

Steve said he only wanted a trim, not too short on top. Then he said, “I couldn’t help but overhear the discussion you were having with that woman.”

Anita's face burned, and she kept her eyes on what she was doing. "Yes, I'm sorry about that," she said, hoping he'd mind his own business.

"You were pretty hard on her," he said, without moving a muscle. "Anita?"

"Yes?" she answered.

"That's right, then. I thought I recognized you. I didn't think you'd know me, though. Steven Holman from Jess's scout troop."

"I know." Anita gave him a tight-lipped smile in the mirror and braced herself. She saw Helen paying, about to leave.

"Jess is a great kid. I haven't worked with him a lot, but I've seen that he's really taken off as a leader in the past six months."

Anita didn't know what to say to Steve. She felt sure that anything she might come up with would be incriminating, and Jess would lose his scholarships and never be able to go to college. Every time she looked anywhere but at Steve's head, she could see that Steve was staring hard at her, probably waiting for her to volunteer more information about what Helen had brought up. "He's a good boy. And he lives for scouts," she finally said. "He's stopped playing sports, his grades aren't real great, just good enough, but he loves camping and doing all the stuff you guys do." She felt herself sweating as she waited for Steve to reply. She stepped up the pace of her work. She'd once trimmed a man's hair in three minutes. She'd already gone longer than that, but she thought of her top speed and did her best to match it.

"I'm glad to hear he's been enjoying himself. Now, Anita, I'm only a leader because I'm an involved adult, but I don't actually have an official position in the troop. We're all here for Jess. We're here for you, too, for that matter."

Anita told Steve to look down, and she briskly ran the clippers over the nape of his neck. “Thanks, but we’re fine,” she said, not trusting Steve the more she recalled about his son, Jasper.

“I know all about what happened at the dollar store,” he said.

“It’s really no big deal. He hardly even did anything. We’ll take care of it, but thanks for your concern,” Anita said, working faster than ever.

“Do you know John? The scout master?” Steve asked.

Anita did not know John, but she’d met him. She had heard him speak at the annual picnic, but she’d never had a reason to make personal contact with him. “Not really, why?”

“I just thought you might feel better if you spoke to him.” They made eye contact in the mirror. “We done *already*?” he asked.

“That’s it,” she said, trying to infuse her voice with a little pep. She brushed the hair from his shoulders, and he stood and fixed his collar.

“Jess is going to be fine,” he said and touched her arm.

“Yes, he *is* going to be fine,” she repeated.

Steve nodded. “All right,” he said and pulled out his wallet, no longer looking at her. “Let me give you my number,” he said and tore off a piece of the coupon he was using.

“I’m sure I won’t need it,” she said as he handed it to her.

He smiled and gave her some cash that included an unusually large tip. He and his wife exchanged a look that was between pity and maybe disgust? She wasn’t sure. After they left she felt small and dirty, like some terrible little child who didn’t understand how anything worked and broke rules without meaning to. She wanted to crawl into a hole.

No other customers came in, and Anita and Wanda closed the salon five minutes early.

At home, Ashley was making a late dinner, Fiona was doing some homework, and Jess was watching TV. Anita sat next to Jess and hugged his boney frame hard until she made herself cry for loving him as much as she did.

“Will you mute that?” she asked him. “Did you ever talk to your troop master or anyone about what happened at the dollar store?” She still had her hand on his shoulder.

“It’s *scout* master, Ma. Yeah, they know all about it. Why?” Jess asked.

She told him what had happened at work that evening. “So, I don’t want to upset you also, but I think if Steve goes and says anything to John you might... I think you might not be able to make Eagle.”

Jess laughed. “What? No, listen it’s not like that. Look at you, Mom!” He hugged her, and his arms around her felt almost paternal. “You’re crying again! It is *so* hard to get kicked out of scouts. The only time anybody I know got kicked out it was for shredding the upholstery in some mom’s van. And I mean this kid took a knife and *destroyed* all the seats. We all knew he was like a sociopath or something.”

“What was Steve talking about then? That you’d be fine?” she asked.

“Hmm. The only thing I can think is that maybe he meant about quitting my job. I feel like I don’t have time for it because of the scholarship applications and my Eagle project and stuff, but I didn’t want to mention that to you yet. I know if I quit that makes stuff even tighter around here, like with gas and my car insurance and stuff. I’ve been kind of worrying

about it,” Jess said, staring at the muted TV, his jaw looking angular and more defined than she’d noticed before.

Anita sunk into the couch. He turned back to her, and she had to look up at him to meet his eyes.

“But, Mr. Holman’s right. It’ll be okay,” he said and smiled with his lips together. She thought he looked kind, and a feeling of reassurance covered her and warmed her.

“You do what you need to do, Jess,” she said and tried to sit up a little taller.

As Jess nodded, Ashley called to them that it was time to eat.

Leprechaun

“Talk about being left holding your dick,” Jeff said to Angie outside Dairy Queen. They were sitting in their Jeep, holding hands, watching a heavy man dressed as a leprechaun pace in front of the Cash 4 Gold store, trying the locked door each time he passed it.

“That’s sad,” Angie said, licking a drip from her dipped cone and accidentally taking in a strand of her own medium-length straight hair. She separated it but Jeff could see that a hair, or maybe mucous, still attached her head to the cone the next time she put her mouth to it. “Maybe he wasn’t scheduled but thought if he came in they’d let him work.”

The Cash 4 Gold leprechaun had become an expected sight at this intersection since the store opened a year or two ago but they’d never gotten to watch one up close for this long.

“Let him work? They couldn’t pay me enough to dress like a leprechaun. Look at that enormous head. You can’t tell me he can see through those eye-holes. And it’s frickin’ cold to be standing out there for so long.” Jeff shook his neatly shorn head and laboriously sucked his shake up through the straw. All the crap he put up with at work seemed like nothing compared to what this leprechaun must go through every day. “Hey, Ang, easy with the cone-crumbs; I just vacuumed.”

The leprechaun sat on the bench in front of Dairy Queen, but only a few beats before he sprang up again in a business-like manner to check the locked door again.

“Shit, he’s like a tiger in a cage the way he’s pacing. I hate to think he’s losing money this whole time. He’s probably trying to clock in,” Angie said and bit into her cone.

“Maybe I should call the number on the door. You think I should? It’s like 20 degrees. This is inhumane,” Jeff said, staring at the door. He started to get out his phone.

“No, no, I wouldn’t do that. We don’t really know why he’s there. This is probably normal for him and someone will be by any minute with the key.” She started brushing the crumbs from her coat.

“Come on! Open the door and do that outside!” She sighed and did as he said, giving him a look that said, *I’m only humoring you because we’re in your car.*

The man passed by their car again. He was walking the length of the small shopping strip, disappearing around the corner by Little Caesar’s, then reappearing around the same corner.

“Gymnastics is over in twenty minutes,” Angie said.

“Already?” Jeff was surprised every Saturday afternoon when it was time to pick up their daughter from her class. “What’d she say she wanted again? Reese’s Blizzard?”

“Yeah, that sounds right. Will you grab me some water while you’re in there?”

“Sure, baby,” he kissed her and got out of the Jeep.

While Jeff ordered Sonia’s Blizzard he felt his phone vibrate. A text from Angie. *His head’s off!!* Jeff ran to the window. The leprechaun had walked away, though, and Jeff wasn’t able to see his face. Another text: *I think we know him!!*

Jeff came to her window and she lowered it to take Sonia’s Blizzard. He raised his eyebrows at her like he was about to do something clever. “Is that my water?” she called after him, but the cup was steaming, so he decided she could answer that herself.

Jeff approached the leprechaun—he had decided he was a dad from their daughters elementary school. He was a black guy, about three inches taller than Jeff, about two hundred and fifty pounds, clean cut, no facial hair. He was tidy and Jeff appreciated that.

“Hey man, coffee?” Jeff asked.

The man seemed surprised, possibly even nervous, but took the cup and murmured his appreciation.

“Jeff Brennon,” Jeff said holding out his hand. “I’m pretty sure my daughter Sonia is in class with your daughter, Haylee. Is that right?”

“Oh, Jeff, yeah, sure, I think we met at some school thing once. Right?” the man said.

“I feel really awkward about this, but I couldn’t help but feel terrible seeing you out here... doing this,” Jeff said and waved his hand at the suit. “I won’t ask what happened to put you out here. A guy has to provide for his family. Now, whether or not he keeps his dignity intact is another thing.”

“*Dignity intact*,” the man echoed strangely, almost saying it at the same time Jeff had. “I couldn’t have said it better, Jeff.”

“Anyway, I wouldn’t normally approach someone like this, but we’re sort of friends by association, right? Through our girls?”

“Oh, sure, sure we are!”

“So listen, I know this is really forward, but if you’d like to get back into some regular clothes, I work at Halifax & Rich and I think there’s something there you might be able to do. It’s nothing that takes a surgeon, but, like I said, I’m not going to ask what happened to put you out here.” Jeff waited.

The man bit his lips together and stared down at the sidewalk as if the mere consideration of accepting help pained him, but that he might see the benefit and/or necessity in it. “Jeff, you’re a good man to offer. I would only be hurting myself and my darling family if I didn’t hear you out,” he said.

Jeff smiled, relieved. “You know, I have some time free this afternoon. If you want to come with me we can go over your qualifications and let you get a feel for the position. If you want.” Jeff realized he was zipping and unzipping his coat like a little kid, just a few inches up or down. Making such a spur-of-the-minute move like this had his nerves on edge and he thought he might have diarrhea soon. He took a deep breath to combat the sensation in his bowels.

Jeff opened the car door. “Angie, you won’t believe this. It’s Michael Jenkins, Haylee’s dad.”

The two men stood awkwardly, looking in at Angie who peered back with some mixture of confusion and curiosity. She said politely, “Hello, Michael, Sonia talks about Haylee all the time — I didn’t quite recognize you.”

“Oh, sure, sure, the suit, no one ever knows me in the suit. And, I’m sorry, I actually can’t remember your name, ma’am.” Michael said, looking at Angie then at Jeff.

“It’s Angie...” she said and he almost simultaneously said *Angie* also. His voice was only a nanosecond behind hers. Jeff tried to understand if that meant he actually did remember her name or if he was just letting her know he’d heard her.

“I got to tell you, I’m a little embarrassed for you to see me this way.” Michael smiled, took a sip of coffee, then climbed in the back seat.

“Jeff?” Angie asked.

“I told him there’s a position at work I want to talk to him about,” Jeff whispered.

“Really? Something for a surgeon?” she asked.

Jeff gave her a look that said he couldn’t believe how insensitive she was being.

“Shoot, we’re going to be late to get Sonia,” Jeff said.

Jeff sped up the on-ramp, noticing the litter along the shoulder of the highway; he made a mental note to call public works about it.

“Is one of you in the army?” Michael asked cheerfully about a mile down the road, as if trying to fill the silence.

“That’s weird, how did you...” Jeff started, but stopped when Angie pointed to the base sticker in the corner of their windshield. He laughed, “Yeah. Were you in? I’m a reservist. ”

“...a *reservist*,” Michael repeated on the heels of Jeff’s voice. “Oh, yes sir, I’m a veteran. I actually did four years active duty, but that was a long time ago, back in the early ‘90s.” Michael looked out the window at the bare winter landscape along the highway. “I was actually in boot camp during Desert Storm and by the time I finished training in my MOS it was over, so I didn’t get to see any action.”

“What was your MOS?” Jeff asked, looking at Michael again in the rearview mirror.

“I was actually a 92S.”

“92... God, that’s not the one that deals with KIAs, is it?”

“Can we be done with all the acronyms?” Angie asked impatiently.

They pulled up to the gym, and Angie went in the building to find her daughter.

“Your wife seems real sweet,” Michael said.

“Oh yeah, she’s great. Wait’ll you meet our little girl,” Jeff said, reviving that cramp in his gut. He didn’t know why.

Angie and Sonia approached the car. Sonia, who was eleven and a little small for her age, appeared especially tiny lugging her black duffel bag and wearing only her long-sleeved red leotard.

“Daddy, you’ll email Miss Young, won’t you? Tell her she has to let me keep working if I can’t get my routine right. I was so close,” Sonia said, throwing her bag into the Jeep. She startled when she saw the big head in the middle seat and the bigger man next to it.

“Sonia, you know Haylee’s dad,” Jeff said.

Most people might narrow their eyes in disbelief, but Sonia’s eyes grew larger as her mother’s did, until they threatened to leap from their sockets. She looked at the head as if waiting for the man to move it, then slid into the Jeep. “Mom, do you have my Blizzard?”

As they drove, Jeff kept tabs on Sonia and Michael in the mirror. Michael smiled at her but didn’t say anything.

“Is Haylee coming over, too?” Sonia asked Michael after several moments.

“Haylee? No, no, actually, your dad and I are having a business meeting,” smiling brightly at Jeff in the rearview mirror—or perhaps he was smiling at his own reflection. He took up more than his half of the Jeep’s back seat, and Sonia had to hold his leprechaun head.

“Why would you have a meeting when you don’t work together? I thought you were a doctor or something and that’s why you’re never home when I’m at your house.”

“Smart girl, smart girl—actually, that’s just what we’re going to talk about in our business meeting.” Michael leaned closer to Sonia, seeming to be about to confide in her.

“Your daddy thinks he can get me a job.”

Sonia eyed his leprechaun suit and didn’t respond.

“Michael, have you worked for an engineering firm before?” Angie asked.

“Ang, let me talk to Michael about all the specifics when we get home,” Jeff said.

“Oh, goodness, I don’t mind at all,” Michael said, rubbing his hands together as if he were about to create something. “I’ll be up front with you that I’m not an engineer,” he said.

“Daddy’s not either,” Sonia volunteered.

Michael smiled and his eyes roved the Jeep as if searching for something. He nodded to himself and clapped once as if he’d had an epiphany. “I’ll tell you what I am, though, Sonia, I am detail-orientated, yes ma’am. Give me a job with a lot to keep straight—facts, figures, and so forth—and I’m a happy man.”

In the house, while Michael was in the bathroom, Angie made some coffee. “Can you fill me in on what’s happening?” she asked quietly as she filled the carafe with water.

“You are so cool to be okay with this. Listen, there’s a lot going on—more than you think. I don’t want to sound greedy, but get this: we have this position at work that’s hard to fill. It’d take someone super sharp who doesn’t necessarily have to know engineering. This guy’s a surgeon... maybe he lost his license... malpractice or something... I don’t know. The point is he’s smart, right? You know I wouldn’t take a chance like this unless I felt like it was a sure thing—” He stopped because he heard the bathroom door open.

Michael came around the corner. “Hey, coffee! Great!”

“I’ll bring it out to you when it’s done,” Angie said in a friendly tone.

Michael smiled and followed Jeff into the dining room where Jeff had set up his laptop.

“So you like a lot of detail, do you?” Jeff asked. “Have I got the job for you. It might take you out of the country for a while, would that be okay? To tell you the truth, the job I’m

thinking of is on a project in Saudi Arabia and, I'll be honest, we're having a terrible time filling it because no one wants to travel back and forth all the time."

"Jeff, Jeff, I'm an old veteran, I'm game to go anywhere. How's it pay?"

"Before we get to that I'd better find out a little about your resume. What's that look like—I mean beyond medical school? That sounds really stupid, sorry."

"Well, now, I don't have it on me." Michael leaned back in his chair in mock-defeat, hands going to where pockets would have been in regular clothing. "What do you need to know about me? I'm an open book."

"How about I'll just tell you what we're looking for. I'll be up front with you that this is a pretty tough job, like you said, lots of detail work is required. But, it's basically a liaison position between the home office and the job site in Yanbu, Saudi Arabia. We don't usually use a liaison, but this job has gotten really complicated, so..."

"Sounds great!"

"Well, I've got to tell you, you're going to be away from home a lot and I know that's really hard on a family. So, yes, if you qualify it'd definitely be better than what you've been doing, but it's going to be rough," Jeff said, and waited eagerly for a response.

"Jeff, rest assured that I've travelled plenty and that my family is so strong we'll all get along just fine. And actually, if you can give me an idea of the kinds of qualifications I'll need..."

"Oh sure, sure," Jeff said, relieved that the plan might work. "Let me just print off the job details and that way you'll have the requisition number and everything. And when you fill this stuff out you just say that I sent you."

“Here’s coffee guys,” Angie said holding two mugs. “Michael, do you like milk or sugar?”

“*Milk or sugar,*” he echoed. “I suspect this’ll be the sweetest coffee I ever had—no need to add a thing,” Michael answered.

“Thanks, sweetie,” Jeff said, taking the coffee from Angie and the documents from the printer. “We’ll just be another minute—I want to go over some more details,” he told her.

Sonia peeked around the corner gesticulating wildly for her mother to follow her.

Michael glanced at Sonia and said, “And it must be the year of cherry red kitchens! I actually just did mine up in the same color as yours—it’s just lovely. You have a lovely home, Angela.”

Jeff noticed that Angie tried to smile in thanks, her attention divided between Sonia and Michael. Angie held up her index finger to her daughter to make her stop what she was doing, but that never worked with Sonia.

“We’re planning on a complete remodel,” Jeff chimed in. “We did the walls first. We’re thinking of going with solid cherry cabinetry, but that’s so expensive—do you have any idea what solid wood runs?”

“Will you excuse me?” Angie said and slipped around the corner.

“Oh my goodness,” Michael said, looking up from the papers in alarm, “I seem to have completely forgot I told the family we could see a movie.”

“What’re you seeing?”

“Something with cartoons and princesses. You know how it goes,” Michael said.

“Sure, sure. Well, I’ll get you right home, then. One thing I know is that you never want to tell your family you’ll do something then not do it,” Jeff said. “Ang,” he shouted, “taking Michael home now.”

“See you in a minute,” Angie said in a choked voice.

Later, when Jeff returned from taking Michael back to Cash 4 Gold—he hadn’t wanted to be dropped off at his house—Angie was pale and her eyes were bulging out of her face. Sonia’s appearance was similar. They were sitting at the round kitchen table.

“Daddy!” Sonia jumped up when Jeff entered the room. “That wasn’t Haylee’s dad!”

He looked at Angie for confirmation.

“Well, who is he then?” Jeff asked, not quite comprehending.

“Sonia called over to Haylee’s house a bit ago to see if Haylee could come over during her ‘father’s’ visit,” Angie explained.

“Haylee wasn’t home, but her dad was!” Sonia said, with her hands clasped together against her chest. “He was like, ‘What? I’m a neurosurgeon, not a leprechaun.’”

Angie took a deep breath. “So, I called back over there and talked to Theresa. You know, she’s dramatic already, but she said we should call the police and maybe *they* should, too, if someone’s trying to steal Michael’s identity. I’m really trying not to freak out here. And I was so proud of you for trying to help that family.”

Jeff sat down heavily in the straight-backed chair. His wife and daughter kept trying to talk to him but he said he needed to think. They silently watched him for a few minutes

until they couldn't stand the silence any longer and left the room speculating about identity theft and what the police might do.

That evening, Jeff told Angie that Michael, or whatever his name was, would most likely not follow through with the plan to write a resume, fill out an application, and walk it into human resources. "What are the odds that he'll actually do all that leg work?" he asked.

"And, if he *did* do all that leg work, whoever he is, what are the odds that he'd get called in for an interview?" Angie asked.

"Well, if he applies for the liaison position I think it's pretty likely he *would* get called in because we can't find anyone for it."

"But he wasn't honest with us about who he was."

"Wasn't he? I mean, I just thought he looked like Haylee's dad and I asked if he was Michael Jenkins," Jeff said.

"And he nodded and smiled, but he didn't actually say 'Yes, I'm Michael Jenkins,' so you feel like he wasn't dishonest? Is that it?" Angie asked, her eyes beginning to bulge.

"I mean, I made an assumption. Shit, the one time in my life I really go out on a limb and... Shoot, I think I've only met Michael Jenkins once and they look enough alike," Jeff said.

"But, do you see what I'm saying? It's not like he said, 'Haylee who?'" Angie said in a deep voice and wobbled her head around, then continued, "'I don't have a daughter named Haylee.' He couldn't have been more dishonest."

A few weeks later the human resources department called Jeff. They told him he would receive a bonus in the amount of \$2500 for recruiting someone named Michael Thompson.

Jeff called Angie. “You’re not going to believe this. They hired Michael but, when I got the notification about the bonus, his name was Thompson, not Jenkins.”

“So, maybe he didn’t even hear you say Jenkins. Maybe he just thought you had misremembered his last name and was being polite,” she said hopefully. She tried to soothe him with the idea that he had helped someone in need, even if he hadn’t helped who he’d intended to.

He didn’t buy the soothing or the idea that Michael had acted out of politeness, but he was glad she wasn’t rubbing his nose in it. Jeff had been feeling as if he might vomit since he got the call. “At least I got you your cabinets,” he said in an attempt to regain his footing.

Jeff was left wondering if it was a good or bad outcome that this strange man had just been hired. Maybe Angie was right—it was a good thing that he’d help someone get a better job. But Jeff had wanted to help a family from school. All he could do was try to talk through with Michael. He decided that the direct approach would be most professional, so he steeled himself and stood up.

Michael was given the empty cubicle near the bathroom. Jeff cautiously drew near. He could see the stacks of binders and papers that Jan, the project manager, must have put together to train Michael. Jeff was surprised at how good Michael looked. He was wearing a crisp blue button-down shirt and pressed khakis. His black shoes were either new or freshly polished. He was big around the middle, the leprechaun suit had made that plain enough, but all in all he was passable as a member of the team.

When Jeff congratulated him, Michael said, “Oh, this is awesome, Jeff, just awesome. I don’t know how to thank you. We’ll have lunch, okay? Sometime soon I’ll buy you lunch.”

“That would be great,” Jeff said, his legs feeling weak. “Hey, I wanted to ask you about something. You know how when I met you I thought you were someone I knew? And a surgeon?”

Michael maintained eye contact with Jeff. Jeff squirmed but willed himself not to look away.

“I don’t remember that,” Michael said.

“I mean, I kept saying stuff about Haylee, who I thought was your daughter, and referred to your job as a surgeon more than once and you didn’t stop me,” Jeff said. He allowed his eyes rest on the cluttered bulletin board across the hall that he hated the site of.

“Sorry, man, I don’t know,” Michael said and shrugged.

“You don’t remember that...” Jeff had used up what little tolerance he had for confrontation, which left him nothing to do but walk away and regroup.

At home over the next month, Jeff surprised even himself by backing off with the kitchen remodel and allowing Angie to choose what she liked. She reacted in disbelief that he would miss the opportunity to execute a plan, but he knew that as it was, he would think of Michael for years any time he was in the kitchen, so the less he had a hand in it, the better he imagined he would feel in the long run.

Sonia continued to come home from gymnastics every Saturday and Wednesday ranting about the teacher's tyranny over the uneven bars and nagging Jeff to do something about it. "Rules are rules," he kept telling her. "If everyone gets fifteen minutes on the uneven bars, so do you." And he told her she'd have to find a way to perfect her routine during those fifteen minute slots or else be a big girl and negotiate other arrangements with Miss Young.

At work over the next month he came upon Michael, more than once, leaning back in his chair, hands behind his head, whistling the ode-to-joy theme from Beethoven's Ninth, his bank account up on his screen. Jeff caught himself clenching his teeth each time he thought of Michael.

"Whatcha got going here, Michael?" Jeff asked as lightly as he could.

"Pay day," Michael said as if that explained everything.

"Sure, and might as well get caught up on bills while you're at work... Hey, how's that training going? You going to be up and running and off to Saudi in a month or so?"

"I don't see why not. I've been flipping through these files and what not." Michael swiveled his chair toward Jeff, arms still clasped behind his head. "Did you need me to help you with something?"

Jeff wanted to shout, *you think you're going to help me? Help me by going away!* Michael had become a reminder of Jeff's own terrible decision and his own inability to effectively handle a problem. "Nope, just wondered how you were doing." Jeff watched Michael slowly rock in his swivel chair like he owned the place. "Hey, you know, do you think if I give you a little portion of the schedule I'm working on you could update it, you know, like you're going to have to do when you're on the site? You up for that?"

“Actually, yeah, I have some time. Sure, send it on over.” Michael gave Jeff another once over then started tending to his incoming text messages.

Jeff sent the file to Michael that afternoon and received nothing back that day or for the rest of the week.

The following week, Jeff decided it was time to talk to Jan, the project manager. He passed his colleagues, one after the other, intently staring at their monitors or making pencil lines on the process diagrams they had developed in a meeting that morning. Every person in the home office was sweating it because the Saudi government had started pressuring them about the millions of dollars they’d gone over budget. He kept trying to put the business with Michael into perspective by thinking about what was really at stake for the company.

Halifax & Rich very often went over budget, but typically had some contingency built into the execution plan so that a few million dollars on a project this size could be absorbed or recovered through a mitigation plan. But the Saudi client was angry and threatening to reject further invoicing until Halifax & Rich’s senior leadership admitted to the alleged budgeting errors and provided a cost-to-complete re-estimate for the remaining work effort.

If the client stopped payment even for a few weeks, Halifax & Rich would feel more than a pinch in their cash flow and might be forced “sub out” large portions of the engineering scope and lose revenue to none other than one of their main competitors. If Jeff and his colleagues didn’t watch their steps they’d end up with a full-scale audit of this project’s records. Auditing might lead to steamlining, which might lead to lay-offs.

On his way to Jan’s office, Jeff rounded the corner and saw the back of Michael’s head. His body was reclined dramatically. A manual lay open next to his keyboard, an iPhone rested on his leg, and the screensaver was up on the monitor. Michael was asleep.

Jeff surveyed the rest of the room. He could see the tops of some heads, hear the clack of several keyboards, and was able to catch bits and pieces of what his coworkers were saying to those on the other end of the phone. The hum was soothing, a sort of officey white noise.

Jan was eating lunch. “I have twenty minutes before I meet with the Saudi client. You can talk if you don’t mind me eating,” she said, looking up from her salad.

Jeff settled himself in her paisley-covered spare chair. “Hey, umm, this probably isn’t really my business, but how’s Michael doing? Do you think he’s learning the project okay?” “Well, his resume is awesome, so I don’t think he could possibly be struggling. You brought him in, so you’ve seen it, right? Looks like he’s been in project controls for years. Looks like a real go-getter,” Jan said, wiping ranch dressing off her dark green blouse.

He guessed that she hadn’t seen him sleeping or watching ESPN after all. He wanted to blurt out all the transgressions he was aware of, but how would that make him look? Everyone thought Michael was his friend—it’d look pretty awful if he threw him under the bus now. Worse than simply looking awful, it was possible that Jan would think he was jealous. He’d noticed that a lot of people seemed to like Michael. Jeff wasn’t terribly popular. So, he only said, “Well, that’s good news; I’m glad you think he’s in good shape. And, no, I haven’t seen his resume.”

“Want to? I probably shouldn’t pull it up, but if you’d like a look at it... Just don’t tell anybody.” Jan started clicking through files on her computer.

Jeff went around to the other side of the desk and leaned over her shoulder. He could see flakes of dried skin on her shoulders and noticed some on her desk. She was a heavy middle-aged woman who had clearly gotten comfortable in her management position and

didn't seem to aspire to keeping herself in shape or moving her career to another level.

"Should I close your door?" he asked as Michael's name appeared on the screen. She didn't answer, just moved her salad and bag of chips aside to give him space at her computer.

According to the resume, Michael had completed an MBA from some school in Texas Jeff had never heard of. Jeff *didn't* have an MBA, but did Michael really? Michael had allegedly worked for a public utility in Ohio and a phone company in Missouri. Surely these were fabrications. The rest sounded like bullshit to Jeff, but maybe HR didn't know better: he "had expert-level knowledge" of the very software Jeff had been trying to get him to use; he "worked on the schedule in various capacities;" he "oversaw the schedule adaptation from P3 to P6"; he "assisted with the overall migration of standalone scheduling software into the latest web-based server."

Jeff's first impression was that Michael must have hired someone to write the resume for him. From the conversations he'd had with Michael since they'd been colleagues, there was no way he could have written these things himself; nothing he'd ever said had suggested any sort of business or technical savvy or know-how.

Jeff found himself wanting to prove that the information was false or misleading, but the longer he looked at the claims the clearer it became that each statement was so vague it could never be disproven; "assisting" with something or "overseeing" a transition may or may not give him a working knowledge of the systems he was being called upon to use.

"This all sounds pretty decent," Jeff said. "I've got to tell you, though, Jan, I don't see him doing much over there."

"Well, he's just supposed to be training," Jan said, rummaging through her purse and pulling out her lipstick.

“I assume you checked his references? Or HR did?” Jeff asked.

“Jeff, what are you getting at? We hired him because a *valued employee* recommended him and we did it in record time. I’m sorry to cut you short but I’ve got to get to this meeting. I think Michael’s fine. Everyone loves him. Let’s just hope the whole division isn’t about to be torn to pieces.”

Jeff’s stomach lurched now that he had a slight opening to tell Jan he thought Michael was a fake, that he thought Halifax & Rich had only hired him because he said he’d travel back and forth to Saudi so often, or worse yet, because he was black and a veteran. But he couldn’t bring himself to say any of those things for fear of what Jan would think of him and for fear of being wrong somehow.

Toward the end of February, Jeff broke down, shouting to Angie and Sonia at Applebee’s one Friday evening. “Sometimes I think that if I have to look at him one more time, rocking his big body in his little chair, smiling, whistling, playing with his bank account, I’ll knock him over! You know, yesterday I had to pee so bad but I held it for hours because I couldn’t trust myself to walk passed his desk. I really thought that if I looked at him one more time I would hurt him. When I finally just *had* to hit the bathroom I passed him and he was sleeping again—totally dead to the world. You know what I did? I slapped the back of his chair with a binder. I hit that chair as hard as I could,” Jeff said, laughing in a manner which startled his wife and daughter into their bug-eyed expressions of surprise. “You should have seen his face, he was like ‘What, what, I was just reading my training manual.’ What an idiot!”

Angie and Sonia looked at each other. After a long pause, Angie took a sip of her Coke and said, “Isn’t anyone else seeing what you see, honey? Is all this sleeping you talk about bothering your coworkers?” Angie asked, disbelief edging her tone.

“Yeah! It is! I was talking to Jan earlier this week. She said she’s noticed it too and said she’ll talk to him about it. But I think she’s scared to! It’s like she’s so desperate to get someone to go to Saudi, just anyone, that she doesn’t care that all he does is sleep at work. But you know what they’re paying this guy? I just figured out they’re paying him ten grand more a year than I am! And when he starts travelling he’ll get even more! I work my ass off....all I do is work! It’ll be years before I see money like that!”

“Are you sure about those figures? That’s totally nuts.”

“Yes, I’m sure! I can see everyone’s salary because they charge their hours to the project and I am in the project’s budget all the time! That’s what people make who are hired in at level six. Six!” Jeff took a bite of his burger that was too big to chew comfortably.

“But he’ll be gone a lot soon, right?” Angie asked.

“Maybe he’ll get put in jail in Saudi, Daddy,” Sonia said. “Isn’t that the place that arrests people for chewing gum in the wrong place?”

“What?” Angie asked.

“I can’t see him going, honestly. In fact, if anyone asks me if I think he can do it I’m going to say no.” Jeff started shoving fries into his mouth one after another, not chewing the first ones before he added others.

“I think you’d better let him get out there and if he fails he fails,” Angie said.

“You know what, I’m going to tell Jan Monday—no, I’m going to email Jan tonight—that he needs to be on probation. You should see what he did with that little chunk

of the schedule I gave him a few weeks ago.” He stopped and looked at Sonia who had raised her hand to ask a question. “Yes?”

“Dad? If you’re so mad, why don’t you just do like you told me to do with Miss Young?”

“Sonia, Dad is in the middle of saying something.”

“You said to negotiate, right? And that rules are rules and they apply to everyone,” Sonia said, not looking at Angie. “And that I’m only in charge of me, not anybody else.”

“Negotiate? I’m not sure if you understand the problem, Sonia,” Jeff said.

“Then tell me so I can!” she said.

“You want to know what the problem is? I’ll tell you exactly what it is! I do things how they’re supposed to be done. I work really hard and get paid okay but don’t seem to ever get a leg up on anyone. This guy, this lying man, doesn’t do a thing all day and he gets paid more than I do *and* people like him more than they like me! There. You’ve made me say it!

“Daddy, people are starting to stare at you,” Sonia said.

“Oh Jeff, people like you. You’ve known some of those guys for ten years, how can you say they don’t like you?”

Jeff stared sullenly at his plate. So he was jealous after all.

The server walked by their table. “Will you please clear our plates? We’ve been done for several minutes and we’re just left staring at this mess.”

The young woman apologized and quickly began stacking the plates.

Angie looked toward the door.

When the waitress was gone Angie attempted a lighter tone and said, “Hey, how about we see a movie next? Would that be fun?”

“I think I need to go home,” Jeff said.

“You’re not seriously going to let him ruin another weekend, are you?” Angie asked, mouth gaping.

“I’m not letting *him* do anything, I just don’t want to see a movie. Why don’t the two of you drop me off and go without me.”

Angie and Sonia did not go out. He felt that she had decided to stay home and babysit him. He knew what she was thinking.

A few years ago they had hired someone to remodel the master bathroom and the contractor they’d used had outsourced the most difficult parts of the work to fairly unskilled laborers who’d botched the job. Jeff hadn’t been satisfied with any of the contractor’s attempts to remedy the issue. He would bet good money that Angie had that catastrophe on her mind.

For weeks, Jeff ate, drank, and slept the issue with the contractor, as he was now doing with the Michael issue. Angie had gone on a weekend trip to her sister’s house with Sonia during that tedious time, and while she was gone Jeff filed a claim with the Better Business Bureau against the contractor, stayed up all night writing letters to the chambers of commerce in their town and the surrounding towns to warn them of this contractor’s work practices and to urge them to publicly blacklist his business. It had been weeks before Angie had stopped upbraiding him for his actions. “You can just stop doing business with him, you know” she’d said. “Your problem doesn’t need to change our way of life or the guy’s!”

Once they were all in bed, Jeff couldn't sleep. He noted Angie's steady breathing and quietly went downstairs to his computer.

Monday afternoon Jeff called Angie. "Ang, HR wants to see me in an hour. I feel like I'm panicking but then I think that I'm not the one who should be panicking, *he* is."

"They just called you out of the blue? They didn't say what they want to talk to you about?"

"No, just that the meeting would be with Jan and with the head of HR," Jeff whispered into the phone.

"What are you thinking this'll be?"

"I don't know, but I haven't done anything wrong, I'm just trying to save the company time and money. This guy's got to go. And saved all his stupid, confused emails, and I've taken notes on how he's been spending his time, so I have proof if they need it. I'll take it all to the meeting."

"Shit, Jeff." Angie stopped talking and sighed into the receiver. "Good luck," she said and they ended their call.

Jeff ate his peanut butter sandwich at his desk and ran back over the file he'd started on Michael until it was time to go downstairs.

An hour later, HR's admin showed Jeff into a conference room. He spread out his evidence against Michael as if he were about to be seen in court. And then Michael walked in.

"Hey, man!" Michael said pleasantly. Jeff felt his blood pressure rising. Jan and the head of HR, a guy in his early thirties Jeff had never met, followed Michael into the room.

“Scott,” the head said, shaking Jeff’s outstretched hand. He had short-cropped blond hair, a pink tie, and dry-cleaned white shirt. “So, it looks like we have a challenge,” he said, seating himself at the head of the table. “And you’ve been sending out a lot of email.” Scott did a disbelief-chuckle. “Want to tell me what’s going on, Jeff?”

Jeff spoke carefully and ran down his list of complaints against Michael, pointing to the pages before him.

“So you’re telling me that you recommended this man to us,” Scott said, using an open-handed gesture toward Michael, “and now you’d basically like to *unrecommend* him? Is that *basically* what I’m hearing?”

“Yes, I’m sorry, but from what I’ve seen the past couple of months I realize I made an error and I’m sorry and would like to undo it,” Jeff said levelly. He reached for the pitcher of lemoned water in the middle of the table.

“But, Jeff, you didn’t hire him, did you? We hired him. You think we had a lapse in judgment too?”

“Scott, let me save you some time here,” Michael said. “I’ll tell you what’s going on. Jeff’s been sneaking around my desk. Half the time I look up from what I’m doing and he’s actually over my shoulder checking out my screen. He’s seen my bank information and he knows I’m making a lot of money now—I think I make more than he does and... It hurts my heart to say this, but I think he’s mad to have a black man outrank him.”

“That is not true!” Jeff hadn’t imagined race would play a part in this meeting. “Didn’t you hear what I said a minute ago? He doesn’t do the work. He doesn’t know how! It’s like he’s never seen a schedule or opened Excel in his life. He sleeps at his desk. He plays on his computer. I’ve seen him watching ESPN!”

“Really, Jeff, you’ve been in my office multiple times to complain about Michael’s performance. I’ve heard what you’ve told me, and I will admit it is taking him more time than I’d hoped for him to learn the project. But he is learning.” Jan paused and stared at her hands, playing with her rings for a moment. “And it’s like you went out of your way to undermine me this weekend with those emails you sent out. It was humiliating. You can’t email the project’s chief of party about a personnel issue; I was on the phone with him for over an hour this morning assuring him there isn’t a problem.”

“But there is a problem!” Jeff shouted. “I practically found him on the street! I never told you that! He was wearing a leprechaun suit and— And his name wasn’t even what I thought it was when I recommended him!” Jeff had finally said it. “I thought his name was Jenkins, then he gets hired and it turns out it’s Thompson!” He hadn’t meant to say that much. He had lost control. In a way he wanted to go further and admit that he’d been in it for the bonus and for the glory of filling this impossible position, but then he would look worse than Michael, if he didn’t already.

Michael had been carefully observing each person in the room, in what Jeff thought was an unnerving manner. He looked at Jeff in an almost sympathetic, pitying way now. “Jeffrey, we met at an especially low time in my life that I’d actually really like to forget.” Michael smiled winningly, turning his head slowly from Jan to Scott, his perfectly white teeth flashing across the room like the beams of a light house across a rocky shoreline.

“All right. That is enough,” Scott said slowly, holding out his hands as if to stop traffic. “I have papers for each of you to sign. Read them over. Ask me if you have any questions. Sign them.” Scott rose and leaned out toward the middle of the conference table, then spread his arms to slide one stack of papers to the left, the other to the right.

“Angie, it was a nightmare,” Jeff said that evening as they made dinner.

“But you don’t think they’ll fire you when the probation period ends?” Angie asked.

“No, but it’s like a restraining order practically. I’m not eligible for raises or promotions for six months. I’m more or less not supposed to talk *to* Michael or *about* Michael. They want me to send every email that I write to him to Jan first so she can decide if it’s appropriate. It’s ridiculous. I’m not out to get him and you know I don’t care if he’s black!” Jeff popped the seal on a jar of marinara sauce and slapped it on the counter splashing sauce up the face of the new cabinets. “Now would you look at that!” He frantically grabbed for paper towel.

“And what’d he get?”

“Jan said he has six months to learn the project now (up from three) and in the mean time they’re finding someone else to be a liaison to Saudi, probably me! After all that! But he’ll still be making more than I do unless they bust him down a few levels, but I’ve never heard of that happening.”

“And they’ll terminate him in six months if he still doesn’t know what he’s doing?”

“Sounds like it, but they won’t if he hints again that all this has anything to do with race. This is like some weird inverse discrimination kind of thing. I don’t even know. And it’s not fair. I’m doing all I can to save the company this money they’re throwing away on a sleeping employee and then I end up on probation.”

“You’re going to have to let it go, you know,” Angie said, stirring the sauce.

“I know. I will. I’m just not the bad guy. I should move to another company,” Jeff said, glancing at his laptop in the next room.

“You brought all this on yourself,” Angie said, shaking her head. “Actually, you brought this on all of three of us. And more than just the probation thing. I mean, what if he’s pissed at us for using him and then getting him in trouble. Would he hurt us?”

“Using him!”

“Well, without him we couldn’t have finished the remodel until the tax return was in.”

“You’re telling me you think *we* used *him*? That liar is practically wealthy now,” Jeff said, staring at her in disbelief.

Angie turned away from him to cut the garlic bread.

“You didn’t complain when the cabinets were going in,” he said to her back.

“I’m not complaining now, Jeff, you are. I’m just glad you didn’t get fired over this.”

“Fired!” he shouted over the buzzing electric knife. “I haven’t done anything. You really think I’m stupid enough to get fired?”

Angie took the basket of bread to the table. “Oh, don’t start with the whole *stupid* thing; you know you’re not stupid and you know I don’t think you’re stupid; you just don’t think things through sometimes.”

“All I do is think things through! I think for a living! That’s how I pay for all this,” he shouted and thrust his hands into the air.

“What freaks me out more than all this stuff with Michael is something Sonia has been doing. Have you noticed?” She paused, waiting for a reply. “Of course you haven’t.” She began to set the table.

“What?” Just when Jeff thought he couldn’t possibly feel more agitated Angie was going to push him to another level.

“Well, she stopped trying to get me to email Miss Young about the uneven bars thing. But,” she said and leaned in closer to him to speak more quietly, “she took what you said to heart about how she’s in charge of herself. Somehow she interpreted that to mean that she should take matters into her own hands.” Angie stopped speaking, her eyes popping out at Jeff.

“So? What’d she do? Are you blaming me for something?”

Angie said, “I just learned she’s been calling the girls in her class and offering to pay them for their allotted time on the bars. A few have apparently agreed, but when one said no Sonia told me she would just tell Miss Young that the girl’d said yes and already accepted three dollars and that it was a done deal.”

Jeff scowled.

Angie gripped the back of a chair.

“You’re saying she got that from me?”

“Well, I’m not always obsessing over everything that doesn’t go my way, and believe me, that’s a lot!” Angie said and tossed a fork across the table to Jeff’s spot chipping a tiny piece of blue porcelain from the edge of the plate.

“I don’t *always* obsess, I just try to make things right! At least I don’t have my head in the clouds always thinking people will do the right thing so I can sit on my ass and let everything that’s happening just *happen*,” Jeff shouted.

“That’s what I do now, huh? I sit on my ass and let stuff happen? Right now I’m bringing something to your attention that I’m worried about,” she said.

“But why didn’t you stop Sonia from making those calls? Why didn’t you call the teacher and tell her what was going on?” Jeff said, pitching his voice higher in a bitchy tone.

Sonia slowly entered the kitchen, tears streaming down her cheeks. Angie looked at Jeff with accusation, realizing that Sonia must have been just around the corner the whole time.

“I just,” Sonia said through a sob. “I almost know my routine. I just keep messing up this one part.” She sucked in four rapid, staggered breaths, trying to steady her breathing. “And the other girls already know theirs. I’m horrible at uneven bars.” Sonia’s chin was dimpled and she’d pressed her lips together so hard they were turning white.

Angie leaned her elbows on the back of the chair and ran her hands through her hair. Jeff stared at the floor.

“Sonia, Mom’s made dinner. Can we sit down and figure this out?” Jeff said after a few moments.

Reunion

The night before their trip to Kansas, Danielle and Grant lay in bed chatting. Her spirits had lifted now that the date of her twentieth high school reunion was in sight, and she had entered into a euphoric physical state from weeks of dieting and jogging—more than was probably advisable.

All that week her husband had been talking about his own high school days. “If I met one of those hockey players now I’d kick his ass, that’s what I’d do,” Grant said in his thick New Hampshire accent, his –ers sounding like –uhs. She heard his glasses frames click against the night stand and turned off his lamp. The room went from lavender and white to nighttime-grey but she could still make out the silhouette of his thick, dark hair.

“Mhmm.” Dani smiled in the dark. She continued to rub her feet with rosemary mint foot lotion, somehow imagining that her former classmates would appreciate baby-smooth heels. “At a reunion? You’d kick someone’s butt at a reunion just because he’s there?” She rooted down into the blankets to face him.

“Well, it would depend. I mean, if the whole hockey team was there and they were just drinking beer and being cool, I probably wouldn’t unleash. But if one of them looked at me wrong, yeah, he’d go down. I’m sure I’ve aged a lot better than they have.” Grant was twirling the end of her long brown hair around his finger, winding and unwinding, staring up at the ceiling.

Unlike Dani, who had moved from Kansas to New Hampshire at 18-years-old, Grant had never left the high school or the state he’d grown up in. As the years passed, she had noticed he was finding more and more ways to prove his independence and individuality—exactly the opposite of what she had done during that time. She knew he was driven by fear

of failure and was embarrassed each time he crossed paths with an old friend who had moved to the west coast, or even Boston. She never saw anyone at all from her past and had gone from being a teenaged rebel Kansan to a conformist New Hampshire mother and accountant.

Grant taught geometry at Central, the same high school in Manchester, New Hampshire he graduated from. She knew he'd never gotten over being pushed around by the hockey team twenty years ago and even now would be anxious facing them.

“Since *you've* aged *so* much better than everyone else, I wish you would go to your reunion,” Dani teased, squeezing his bicep which he immediately flexed. “Look at me, I’m old and shriveled up and here I am going to mine. I really don’t know why...”

Grant threw his arm over her and kissed her all over her face until she was laughing and squealing for him to stop. “So old...so shrivley...but so delicious...” He bit at her neck with his lip-covered teeth.

“Stop,” she said trying to catch her breath, “you’ll wake the girls.”

“You’re making the noise.” He kissed her one more time and flopped back onto his pillow.

She and Grant had been celebrating that evening and were both in high spirits. Grant had started a nanobrewery in their cellar a year ago and had received a write-up in the *Union Leader*. His beers had been so successful that he was thinking of applying for a manufacturer’s license so he could distribute to restaurants. He had begun to dream of quitting his teaching job and buying a space for a full-blown microbrewery. She supposed that would leave her at the hospital accounting job for the rest of her life. And probably handling Grant’s books, too.

In bed, though, Dani's reunion was all he wanted to talk about. "Is there anybody you're nervous about seeing in... what, a few days?" he asked.

Her smile had faded. She sat up and took a sip of water from the glass she kept on her nightstand. She knew what he was fishing for. She took a deep breath and tried to steer away from his intended topic of Chris, the father of the baby she'd given up just before she left for college. "Well, I almost don't care who I see."

"What about Chris?" Grant asked.

"Oh," she groaned, and said, "you remember his name."

"It's a big deal; of course I remember."

"Can't we go back to talking about what we're going to call your saison?" Dani had discovered a type of beer called a saison that fermented at a higher temperature than most. He had agreed to try brewing it—she hoped she could steer him away from his current line of inquiry by appealing to his excitement over his experiment.

"Dani..." he said to let her know the distraction wouldn't work.

"Okay, it's a big deal, but it isn't a big deal," she said quickly.

"A baby is *always* a big deal."

Dani didn't respond. She counted her boy's birthdays each year, secretly toasting him in some way or another. One year, early on, she had gotten a small tattoo on her thigh on his birthday. It was just a thin grey, wavy line, like ripples on water or the readout of a fetal heart monitor, something that was only for the two of them that she never let anyone else see. Other years she'd made drastic changes to her hair on that day. She mostly kept her hair its natural color now, but she would cut off several inches or get a perm, attaching covert meaning to every alteration.

She twisted so her upper body pressed flat against the bed but her knees still pointed at Grant. A car's headlights swept across the ceiling in an arc. "The baby thing is a big deal, but it isn't," she lied. "And it's extremely unlikely that Chris is the sort of person who would attend a reunion; he was a total skinhead."

"If I'm going to have to look at this guy...or *maybe* have to look at him... I'd at least like to know where you are now with what happened and, I don't know, just some details about the whole thing."

"I feel sure I've told you," she muttered.

Grant rolled onto his elbow to look down at her. "You've told me some, I just don't want to be in a position where I know less than he does, you know?" he said.

"Okay, but honestly, it was a situation where all that exists is basic information and I've given it to you before: We did it in a closet. It was during some Thanksgiving break party." She felt angry talking to Grant about this but she tried to keep her voice level and light. The memory of that evening twenty years ago was embedded in her like a nail in a tree. "I drank too much because I could. That's it," she said, trying to look away from him, but as she turned, his face followed hers until his shoulder was resting across her chest. "Grant, you're crushing me," she said. He was tenacious in his good intentions.

"Did you love him?" he asked.

"No! He was sort of attractive and that was all. It was just that I had had too much to drink. The whole thing was... It's not something I ever did before or after that, it was just this fluke—actually, it was the only time I ever remember seeing him at a party—which makes it even more of a fluke. I really didn't know him—nobody knew him. He was someone with these weird parents who were always sending him away to a special school

every time he got a C.” She paused and took a deep breath. She continued speaking hastily, wanting the words to end. “I remember hearing one time that his parents found a cigarette in his backpack and tried to send him to rehab for it... So, he’d be around for a semester, then off to military school—or rehab, or whatever—then back, then away... It’s not like I hung around with him. He was just this... I guess he was mysterious.” She knew very well that the mystery had been the allure and that other girls had felt it too.

They stopped talking because they’d both heard Lauren call out. Grant slid out of bed without saying anything. Lauren was three but woke easily, and not a night went by when she didn’t call for a drink around 11:30. As soon as Grant’s feet hit the floor Biz, the older one, started calling for Dani. Sometimes that just happened. Sympathetic vibrations and they were both up.

Dani checked on Biz who was five and often insisted on falling asleep with a pile of blankets on, only to wake hours later sweating and having nightmares. Dani heard Grant in the bathroom filling a cup for Lauren. All four of them went through these nightly motions, not one of them really thinking about what they were doing, but operating harmoniously all the same.

She had made reservations for a red-eye from Manchester to Kansas City International, booking a late flight in the hope that Lauren and Biz would sleep through it. She decided to work a few hours that day to keep her mind on other things, and planned to get home just in time to pack and race to the airport.

As she headed to her office at the hospital that morning, she couldn’t stop thinking about Chris. She hadn’t actually looked him up, but then she’d assumed he wouldn’t be on a

social network because his family had not been real main-stream as far as she could tell, so why would he grow up to do what other people do? Aside from sending him to military school when he displeased them, his parents were also strict with him about church services, having him attend three times a week, she remembered hearing him say. They weren't Catholic and they weren't Jewish...it was some denomination, or maybe *nondenomination* of Christianity. He was an only child and it was like they thought they needed to make everything he did count for something. She did an internet search for him from her desk but didn't turn up anything but his placing in a 5K he'd run in 2003.

The rest of the day she was distracted wondering about Chris' life and wondering about the baby she'd given up. She'd never allowed him, the baby, much space in her mind as a fellow human being—only as this lost infant—but now she was thinking about him as a real person. For a long time she'd resented him—she'd equated losing her punk edge with having mothered a child.

She decided she was doing something that amounted to mental fidgeting. Now that she was really thinking about Chris and the baby, she recognized it wasn't actually Chris she was interested in learning about. But, the adoption had been closed and there was no hunting for the nameless baby on-line.

The next evening, with their children settled at her mother's Kansas home, Dani and Grant left for the reunion in their rental car. An alumna had volunteered her farm for the occasion, about fifteen miles out of Kansas City.

She felt that her life had begun when she went away to New Hampshire for her freshman year; the years preceding college were just preliminary life-stuff that, as far as she

was concerned, was like the contents of a shoddy mattress—it was there and sometimes made her uncomfortable, and it was part of her life every day, but not something to look at or think about.

It was still light when they parked in a vast grassy area off a narrow dirt road. Red and black balloons on a metal mailbox marked this as their destination. The person the farm belonged to was not someone Dani had known, but any discomfort she felt about parking in the grass melted away when she saw the set-up.

The party scene reminded her of a retirement reception she'd gone to at the home of an attending physician who worked at her hospital. It was not quite opulent, but certainly elegant, and made her instantly feel excited about the possibilities before them.

There was a band playing cover songs from the 1990s, a bit on the nose in her opinion. They were belaboring "I'm Too Sexy." Several white tents were set up at a distance from each other so that they formed what looked like a little village. As they approached the tents, she could see that each one housed a banquet table full of food, a small bar, complete with a uniformed bartender, and several round tables with chairs.

"Danielle Stewart, don't you look awesome!" said a loud voice from behind her. "Where's your blue hair?"

Dani couldn't place the face or the voice. The speaker was plump with greying hair, feathered back from her face—a nightmare from another century. Her nose appeared to have been pinched off at the end and her lips rolled up in a perpetual Ronald McDonald grin.

"It's Tanyaaaaa! I have *not* changed that much, girl! You get all settled and come see me over in tent four and we'll get you a nametag. I can't wait to catch up!" Tanya squealed.

Dani wore a black sundress with a black bow at her hip, and simple black sandals. Her mother had helped her with her hair—something they'd never done together. Dani found herself being more indulgent with her own mother now that she was the mother of two girls. She pretty firmly believed in karma and didn't want her girls treating her the way she'd treated her mother in those last few years before she left home.

Dani flattened the collar of Grant's already sweat-soaked, short-sleeved, dark green button-down and kissed him while she was already up close to his face. He'd gone for a haircut at a chain salon that morning and the stylist had shorn off so much of his brown hair that his head appeared smaller than usual—she didn't understand why, but he was most appealing to her at times like this when he looked the part of the math teacher he was—who would he be if he quit teaching to become a full-time brewer? Grant took a breath and opened his mouth to speak but changed his mind.

“What is it?” she asked, afraid he was somehow reading her mind which hadn't stopped thinking of Chris and what he might be able to tell her about the baby. A desperation and dread was creeping in as she watched car after car park and unload.

Grant took her hand and said, “I wasn't going to say anything. You look great.”

The nametag table covered in white linen sat at the entrance to tent four under a Mylar, four-shaped balloon. Grant took care of the nametags, intuiting that she didn't want to bend over the table with her back to the entrance.

There was Tanya again. “I see you looking around, Danielle. Somebody in particular you want to see? I can tell you who’s here. Can’t let you peek at the list but I’ll tell you if you ask about somebody,” Tanya said teasingly.

Now Dani remembered Tanya. She was the girl always grubbing to be in charge of everything, always looking to hang onto paperwork for this or that club, telling people she had the documents under lock and key even when the “documents” were something simple like orders for club t-shirts or a roster. “No, just looking around, thanks, Tanya.”

Grant held out her name tag, her name in neat block letters as if he’d used graph paper. “I’m gonna put mine on my butt,” he said, then turned and pretended to do that. She shushed him but laughed, glad he was there to break the tension before she gave herself a headache.

“I’m going to put *mine* in my purse,” she said, also meaning to be funny.

Grant squeezed her arm. “You *naughty* girl. You’ll be just like people remember you—bucking the system.”

“Grant.” Her impulse was to be offended and tell him that was exactly the sort of insensitive comment that was going to make her tense up. Then she realized the truth of what he’d said and didn’t respond.

They found a bar in another tent. Within each tent they’d looked into were homogenized clumps of people—the same people who had stood together at every dance and football game. She hadn’t expected that. She had imagined this would be more like a party she might attend back home in New Hampshire, like maybe a hospital Christmas party or a barbecue at a friend’s house where she knew everyone and could talk to anyone she pleased;

at the reunion there were groups closed to her—she realized these people weren't her friends now any more than they had been back then, yet each person seemed to think they knew her.

As they waited for the cash bar period to end and the open bar to begin, over and over she was approached by people who craned to read her nametag. “Danielle? My God, you don't look anything the same!” “Danielle, you look like—just like a...” She was sure the next words would be “normal person.”

She'd wanted to come to this reunion, she'd *had* to come to this reunion, so why couldn't she find it in her to be sociable? Most of her senior year had been eaten up by paranoia, afraid that Chris would tell, afraid that someone would figure out that she hadn't simply gained weight in those two months before graduation. In fact, most of her first two years of college had been tainted by the pregnancy too, because she'd been so scared of repeating the accident.

She'd retreated into herself in the worst way. Grant took her arm and tried to pull her out onto the empty dance area. “Are you crazy?” she whispered to him and shrugged away from him. People were still arriving and no one had a drink in hand.

Grant held up his hands in mock self-defense. “I'm just kidding!” He shimmied his shoulders at her keeping his face dead-pan.

She scowled at him, but immediately remembered how ugly the two wrinkles between her eyes made her, and relaxed her face. “We'll dance in a bit,” she said in a tone that suggested way too much patience. Her paranoid thoughts returned the moment Grant was silent.

The bar opened and within half an hour of that the buffet line opened; food and drink lifted the tone of the event considerably. Dozens more people flooded the shelters until there

were around two hundred people talking over the band's rendition of Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You," and moving from table to table searching for lost pieces of their old selves. She watched for Chris to come in but didn't see him.

To her surprise, several people came looking for her over the next hour or so. Lisa came by the table where she and Grant were eating. Lisa had been a big-bottomed, foul-mouthed girl in her youth, but had matured into a very thin, professional-looking woman who mouthed and whispered obscenities rather than shout them.

Lisa waved Donna over, Donna who had been such a beautiful girl but now looked literally weathered, wrinkled and spotted from the sun. Before long Donna waved Briney over—homely, quiet Briney who now looked to Dani like any middle-class woman in her late 30s and had an opinion about everything—mostly politics.

Soon there were chairs surrounding Dani and she was honestly delighted by this show of interest in her—it turned out all these women had stayed in town and knew every detail about each other, but no one had heard a word from Dani—they were hungry for news. It crossed her mind that if she'd been back then who she was now, that is, willing to play along with a crowd and look like everyone else, she might have had all sorts of friends.

They asked about her hair, her job, her family, what New Hampshire was like. They were envious of the leaves, the mountains, the ocean, her "cool" husband's nanobrewery that she had casually mentioned. As they chatted away, and she felt more and more at ease, the evening became night, and strings of white Christmas lights spiraled down the tent poles.

Grant had found a classmate's similarly left-out husband to chat with and Dani could see him amiably going on about something in a back corner, a beer in hand that he wrinkled his nose at after each sip. She surrendered herself to the friendliness and fell into a rhythm of

running to the bar for another drink each time a new woman joined her table. “Oh, mine’s nearly empty, let me go with you!” she would say cheerfully to the newcomer.

On one trip to the bar, she noticed a somber-looking couple of men who appeared out of place. They were seated at an otherwise empty table. The younger man followed her movement with his whole body. The older man looked everywhere but at her. Lisa said, “Hey, that dude’s totally checking you out.”

Dani quickly appraised him and she said, “Too young,” and kept walking.

“Oh, come *on*, you big dork,” Lisa said at the top of her voice. “*Never* too young!” Lisa laughed wildly and by now Dani had lost herself in the alcohol and felt giddy with all the attention she was receiving from these women who’d never quite liked her twenty years ago. Dani laughed with Lisa, wobbling along to the bar with her sandals loudly slapping the bottoms of her feet.

On the way back to her table, with Lisa still at her side, Dani looked hard at the man who’d been watching her. Something seemed familiar about him, though he *was* young. She shook her head to show proper disbelief at whatever outrageous thing was coming out of Lisa’s mouth. They had passed the table where the men were sitting, but a feeling she didn’t recognize caused her to look back.

Dani hadn’t really paid much attention to the older of the two men, but now that she looked at him again she saw he was Chris. She looked at Lisa who was going on about someone’s *fucking baby shower* she’d just attended. Dani’s face had paled and she had slowed down to scan the room for Grant but couldn’t see him. Lisa walked and talked on at full speed.

Back at the table, Dani excused herself and disappeared into the dark as quickly as she could manage. She steadied herself on a tree about fifty feet from the bonfire. Her body knew before her mind did that the young man with Chris was her own child, her own son. She felt cold, weak, and shaky. She was about to vomit. There was nowhere more private to turn, so she bent, facing the oaks, vomiting up bits of cordon bleu, raspberry tart, and white wine into last autumn's leaves.

She moved to a different tree, several feet away from her mess and pulled a compact out of the tiny purse she had slung across her chest. The face looking back at her from the mirror with the firelight crackling behind her was a character straight out of a zombie movie in which *anyone* can turn at *any* time—even the mild-mannered New England mother in a sundress and sandals. A sliver of her brain was aware that under different circumstances she might have found this funny, but not now.

It was one thing to want information about the baby, but to meet him? She hadn't even considered meeting him. She knew she must look awful. "That's not him. Can't be him. My imagination," she said too loudly to the poison ivy underfoot.

She was trying to force the image of Chris and the young man out of her mind and trying to figure out how she'd ever fix her makeup in the dark, when she heard voices behind her.

It was loud Lisa and raisinlike Briney. "What is it?" Briney asked? "You can't be smashed already! We've just started! God, *what* is that *smell*?"

"Did you *puke*? Who pukes by 10:15?" Lisa asked.

Dani ignored them.

"Pull yourself together, girl, come on!" Lisa's voice echoed in Dani's head.

“I’m fine,” Dani managed to say. Briney had pulled out her own compact and was touching up Dani’s cheeks and brow where Dani had wiped away sweat with her forearm moments before. Dani kept turning away in protest but was unable to speak.

“I’m not offering you my lip gloss, though—sorry,” Briney said and she and Lisa shuddered and guffawed at the idea of letting someone who had just vomited borrow a twenty dollar tube of Sephora.

Dani let the women lead her to their tent. Lisa was right. Dani needed to pull herself together, and she would. “Just because he’s here doesn’t mean I have to talk to him,” she said to herself. Lisa was closest and nodded in the way people do to humor the unstable. She caught Briney mouthing *whatever* to Lisa.

Lisa held Dani’s hand all the way back to the table and brightly announced, “We found our little Joan Jett!” to the other women, and laughed.

Dani felt her face heat up. With a smaller amount of alcohol in her stomach the women didn’t look quite as friendly as they had. Briney and Donna laughed a bit too hard at the Joan Jett crack. Dani looked for Grant but he was still nowhere in sight. He could be in any tent, or somewhere out in the dark, or in the barn, or maybe even in the house. If anyone had wanted to talk about beer or Euclid he’d be gone for hours.

The band was on a break and the sound of the partiers’ voices reverberated in her skull like a muted trumpet. There was no stemware, only red plastic cups of beer and wine, and the absence of clinking almost seemed sinister. She had to get ahold of herself.

She sipped from a cup of someone’s water. As the women babbled on, she could feel Chris’ concentration on her. She imagined that he desired her to go to him and remembered that she had had that exact sensation on the night she wound up in the closet with him.

“Oh shit, was I just obeying him?” Her eyes were wide and she raked her hand through her hair. A very grim new suspicion crept into her brain: maybe she had not been quite the resistor of authority she remembered being. But who had she been if not someone who gave the middle finger to the principal right to her face and carved “fuck the man” into the paint on the toilet stalls?

“Danielle Stewart! Are you talking to yourself? You’re just as crazy as you ever were over there.” Tanya of the big, feathered hair, had arrived at the table during Dani’s absence and now leaned down to hook Dani’s arm in hers playfully. “Come on and let’s get you another drink!” Dani answered her that she was fine with water for now. “That is *not* the Dani I remember!” Tanya said.

“But, I think it might be!” Dani began to protest, but willed herself to at least pretend to get another drink, though that would mean another pass by Chris’ table. She really did want a second look at the men, just to prove she was wrong about them, and she knew that Tanya could help her.

But before they were even half way to the bar, and before Dani had been able to get a word in to ask about the guest list, Dani heard a man say her name from off to her right.

Tanya and Dani stopped as if they’d hit a wall, and they both turned to look at the men. A line of sweat crept down the runnel of Dani’s back. Lisa walked up behind the two women and held her cup upside down to show why she needed to accompany them to the bar. At first Lisa smiled, but after she followed their gaze to the men she said out of the corner of her mouth, “There’s that kid that’s hot for you again. But, who the fuck *is* he?” Dani couldn’t respond.

The younger man stood and started toward them. Dani noticed the older man—and yes, he certainly was Chris—reach out for the younger man’s arm but fail to make contact. Chris more or less looked as he had when he was young: no longer a skinhead, he had short, straight brown hair, now lightly frosted with grey. The hair reversal almost made him seem to have aged backward. He had the same medium build, straight nose, proportionate mouth and brown eyes. He was dressed in a plain polo shirt like most of the men present. Plain enough to have been a nice-looking teenager, but now mainly just nondescript.

The young man was handsome. He was well-groomed in a pressed, white button-down shirt and slacks, his hair was a decent length and he had a clean shave. He was not very tall and not really remarkable looking in any particular way, but he seemed polite and the expression on his face made him appear open and honest. “Danielle?” he repeated, now standing by his table about six feet away from her.

It was true: *this* man really was *that* baby. A warmth of fear and tears rushed into her chest. She had never felt more truly paralyzed or stunned. The young man lunged toward her as if to catch her.

“Are you okay?” he asked and his hand moved to take her arm, but he checked himself.

Dani scanned the area for Grant again, moving only her eyes. She licked her lips and found that the water cup felt heavy in her hand, her wrist turning to rubber. Maybe she wouldn’t be able to play it cool.

“What the fuck is going on?” Lisa asked the young man.

Tanya chimed in, “He’s with Chris,” and she pointed to him. “Remember Chris Redding?”

Chris stood and was quickly by Dani's side. He smiled at Lisa and Tanya and shook hands with each of them. "We'll just be a minute, girls." That was enough to send them back to their table whispering energetically. Dani could see them dishing whatever dirt they'd imagined they'd collected.

"I'm so glad to meet you," the young man said. He beamed and looked expectantly at his father, then at his mother, adjusting his weight from one foot to the other.

Chris took a deep breath. "Will you walk with us?" he asked her.

She nodded and the three of them left the tent. She was teetering between incredulity and collapse. "How do you *know* him?" she asked Chris, but still had her gaze trained on the young man. Chris and their son looked at each other the way any father and son would if asked that question.

Chris said, "Uh, this is harder than I thought it would be."

"He's my dad," the younger man said, staring hard at Dani with an obviously confused expression.

"I've always had him," Chris said.

They were near the fire now and she could no longer stand. Her lips were parted and she wasn't functioning well enough to breathe through her nose. "Someone adopted him," she said very quietly. The heat of the flames combined with already hot night was excruciating.

"Dani. Dani," Chris said. He looked at his son and waved his hands around for him to do something. The boy jogged back to the tent and returned with three folding chairs.

"Dani, I was sure that's not what you *really* wanted. I know it wasn't what *I* really wanted.

Johnny has been my whole life.” Johnny. Chris had named her child Johnny. She hoped it wasn’t for Johnny Rotten, but knowing how she and Chris were back then, it likely was.

Johnny gestured for her to sit in the chair he’d just opened. “Mom,” he said in an experimental way.

There were other groups of alumni sitting around the fire, but they were so animated telling their own tales that they didn’t look twice at Dani.

“We signed him over,” she said, facing the embers, squinting against the pressure in her brain.

“Signed me over?” Johnny asked.

“Well, it was on the table to have another couple adopt you,” Chris said. “I’ve told you that, buddy.”

She could hear the blood coursing through her body over the din of the band which had just begun playing again. She was almost scared to look too closely at Johnny, but made an effort to focus on him for a feature she recognized. She’d been desperate for news about him, but having him in the flesh was so... unmediated.

How bizarre it was that the band continued to play—“I’d Do Anything for Love (But I Won’t Do That)”—and that people all around her were laughing and drinking and talking at the tops of their voices.

She breathed deeply and closed her eyes for a moment. “How are you?” she asked him because that is what she had wanted to know for years.

“I’m good!” Johnny said. “I’m just so glad to meet you. I really am. I didn’t know how I’d feel when it finally, really happened. But, it’s you!” He stood up and stepped

toward her awkwardly, then bent and wrapped his arms around her as if he'd never hugged another human being.

At first she found it hard to reciprocate. "Let me stand up," she said, also awkwardly. Her stomach flipped and something between a sob and a laugh escaped her and she hugged him tighter. When they separated she felt as she had after Grant had proposed to her: happy, but sort of embarrassed with a distinct uncertainty about what was supposed to come next.

She sat and turned back to Chris. "So. What'd you do? Just throw away the papers I signed?" Dani asked.

"Well. Shit. We didn't think this meeting through very well," Chris said to Johnny and put hands in his hair. He grabbed a couple more chairs and moved his and Johnny's so the three of them formed a triangle, his back to the blaze. "I just took my son home from the hospital. That's all. Hey, John, you want to maybe take a walk for a minute? Get something to drink?" Chris asked.

"No way! I'm not missing a minute. No," Johnny said firmly.

Dani said, "This is unbelievable. All this time? You've just had him? And you didn't tell me?" Dani was sobered up and beginning to fume over the idea that she'd endured years of needless private anguish.

"Shit. Okay, listen," Chris said. "First of all I didn't—"

"No, you listen." But she was so flustered she couldn't finish. "My baby! This seems— There must be something illegal about what you did," Dani said, clenching and unclenching her fists.

And where was Grant? She wondered if his presence would make this harder or easier.

“A boy has to know his mother loves him. I believe that’s so important,” Chris stammered.

“What? Love him?” She looked at Johnny again. “Do you think I gave him up because I didn’t love him? You know that’s not true.”

“You told me you wanted me to take care of him,” Chris said, putting a hand on Johnny’s back. “And you clearly chose college.”

“I don’t recall *ever* saying that I wanted you to take care of him. And I have two daughters. I’m very capable of—”

“Wow!” Johnny said forcefully. “Wow! This is what having two parents is like. Should I think this is awesome?”

“Come on, John,” Chris said.

“If you don’t mind, Dad, I think I would like to take a walk after all, but I’m taking her with me.”

She couldn’t fathom this person as her son. She detected a deep pull toward him, she was sure she did, but the maternal instinct that governed her behavior with her daughters was not as easily summoned to deal with this man.

Johnny folded up two chairs and they walked away from the bonfire out toward an open field of grass and weeds. As soon as they were away from Chris, Dani felt a first-date giddiness. She even raised her eyes to the stars, wanting to find the moon, but it must have been new.

“Mom, Dani, not sure what to call you, but I’ve got to know something about your side and Dad would just keep saying stuff if we didn’t get away from him,” Johnny said. She

marveled at his Kansas accent that she normally was unable to hear in people. When he said her name it sounded like *Dyanni*. So different from her girls' accent.

Johnny went on. "You don't know what it's been like living with only one part of a story, eyes that don't match anybody I know, a nose that's more or less like his, and whatever. You know?"

"I'll tell you anything," she said, and was instantly embarrassed because on a date that would have been too enthusiastic too soon.

"Well, he always makes it sound like you were this pitiful, weepy girl, but I just can't see that. Like, he said when you were pregnant with me he went to see you—I guess Grandma made him or whatever—and that you sat there holding his hand like you were totally lost and afraid. I mean, I can see how you *would* be in that situation. But were you?"

"Well, he only came to see me that one time before you were born. And, I know I was really lonely—I'd been sitting in the same spot in my living room since graduation because I was so ashamed to be pregnant," she said and wondered if that felt insulting to him. "I don't mean..."

"No, I get it," he said, and she believed him. "Did you tell him to fix the situation. Something like that?"

"Uh..." In a way that day was hard for her to recall, but she could remember details like the heat coming off of Chris' black leather jacket that he refused to abandon, even in July. She could still smell that jacket. And she did remember taking his hand. "I think he asked if there was anything he could do. He probably meant could he go pick up a carton of ice cream or some fries. I think I said something like, 'just make it better.'"

“That’s it. But what did you want him to do? He said that’s why he couldn’t let someone adopt me.”

She stopped walking. “Oh God! Because of that? I was just feeling sorry for myself. I hadn’t seen anyone but my mom in about two months and she was gone to work all day. I never left the house. My friends thought I had already moved. *And*, I didn’t want to be pregnant, but you were the only person I’d had to talk to for...”

They had walked to the point where the fire’s light on the tree line faded into black and the song’s words were no longer discernable. He set up their chairs so that they were facing the party.

She said, “I wanted the whole situation to go away. I didn’t want to deal with having you or not having you.” How intimate the word *you* had just become. She wondered if anything she was saying to him was worth his years of waiting. The drum beat was loud and the tinny cymbals carried across the field.

She said, “You have two sisters.”

“Do I? That’s cool,” he said, looking steadily at her.

“And since I became their mother, something I’ve thought about a lot is that the only thing harder than being a mother is suddenly *not* being a mother. I didn’t have those words then, but that’s what I was feeling with you and that was really hard,” she said.

Dani couldn’t think of what else to say. Part of her wanted to open up her brain and empty everything she knew into his arms, but she felt strangely still and peaceful also. She let her eyes wander over Johnny’s face. She had yet to reconcile his face with the tiny one she’d only seen once or twice in the hospital, but there hadn’t been anything memorable in his features or skin—no devastating birthmark or hideous, large nose.

The only feature she could remember, if you could call it a feature, was his hairline over his forehead. His hair had whirled there as water whirled when behind a circling hand. Now his hair was slightly too long in the front for her to see his hairline. She had the urge to sweep it back and examine him closely as she would one of her daughters after a fall.

“Can I just...” she began to say as she reached for his face. He sat forward in his chair and bent toward her slightly. His eyes were big in the darkness.

Foreheads are the domain of mothers. She’d had that thought before but never sorted out why. His skin was soft under her palm as she smoothed his hair. The look of adoration in his eyes unexpectedly made her chin quiver and she pressed her lips together hard. The whirl was still there.

She had breastfed Biz and Lauren and spent a great deal of time examining the upper halves of their faces. It seemed to her that the hairline was to a mother’s eye as a fingerprint was to a police file.

How could she explain an adult brother to her girls? And she had forgotten about her husband who was still somewhere not too far away in the dark.

She took her hand off him and sat back. “You’re the baby,” she announced and shrugged stupidly. She was suddenly curious about something. “Did you have any pictures of me growing up?”

“Yeah, the yearbook ones. I cut out your senior picture and Dad was pissed. I wanted it on my wall.”

“That’s the worst picture ever!” Dani blurted out.

“I didn’t think so,” he said. This time it looked like she had insulted him.

“I just wondered if you knew the sort of person I was back then. It’s kind of dumb, but before you came along I was pretty punk-rock,” she said. She thought that might be an outdated term and felt self-conscious of her wording. “I mean, I resisted anyone and everyone who told me how to be or what to do. I had this feeling that if I didn’t fight the world I would have to be part of it, including the parts I thought were for, I guess, weak people.”

“Uh, that sounds like how everybody feels in high school,” Johnny said.

“You think so?” She’d been sure she was alone in feeling as she had. “Well, I didn’t feel typical. I felt powerful and like I could take on anything.”

“And then you got pregnant,” he said.

“Yeah. And it was like right then, as soon as I knew you were in there,” she said and rested her hand on her stomach, “the system had me.” She thought she could make out Grant’s form by one of the tents. It would be time to find him soon and clue him in on who she had disappeared with.

“Seems like if you were all anti-authority, in-your-face, you’d have just put your belly out there, like, *deal with it.*”

She blushed. Just last week her five-year-old had told her she had bad breath—Johnny’s observation struck her as the same type of comment. If she’d been as bad-ass as she made herself out to be, a pregnancy wouldn’t have scared her. She had felt for years that *the baby* had changed who she was, had caused her to melt into “society.”

“I was pretty spooked. The first thing my mom said after I told her was, *what are you going to do?*” Dani thought he couldn’t possibly see, but this was their history and she wanted him to understand it. “My mom didn’t tell me what we needed to do next. She

didn't scold me or blame me. So, that was it, I was no longer who I had been with my radical half-shaved blue hair and studded dog collar.”

“So you put on one of those Amish skirts and called it quits?” he asked.

She stretched her legs out before her and flexed her feet, beginning to feel the chigger bites. “Sounds about right.”

The party-goers must have just about used up the alcohol. Several of them were now singing along with the band—a chorus of men's voices doing “Stand By Me,” every word audible. The flames had risen higher as if an enormous log had been added and she was able to make out the crackling across the field and over the voices of the men.

“Hey, let's go find my husband; I want him to meet you.”

Grant was sitting with four men who she recognized as former varsity football players. He was tipsy enough to be loudly telling a story. Johnny stayed at a distance as she approached the table.

She forced a sociable smile and rested her hand on Grant's shoulder until he finished describing his time locked in the janitor's closet once at Central High. The other men were roaring with laughter and looking at each other as if they were delighted to meet, as an adult, the type of person who had survived bullying by their own kind. It wasn't like Grant to pander to an audience, but it appeared the alcohol and low stakes of the interaction had turned him into a hysterical orator.

When he was done, she whispered to him and he made his exit, shaking hands all around. A couple of the men grasped his forearm as they shook and told Grant how great it had been to meet him. Mr. Popularity.

Johnny left the tent a few paces ahead of them.

Dani wanted to break the news to Grant in semi-privacy, but there were people moving all around now, bumping into each other—all arms and mouths. “I’m glad you’re having such a good time,” she said and squeezed his hand. “I had a surprise tonight.”

“That’s fun,” Grant said. He stumbled on the uneven ground and grabbed her arm.

Johnny approached them and Dani raised her shoulders to communicate that the timing wasn’t going to matter much.

“Grant? This is Johnny,” Dani said.

Grant shook Johnny’s hand as chummily as he had the football players’ hands moments earlier. “Johnny? Good to meet you,” he declared. He started to walk away, still holding Dani’s arm.

“Grant. Johnny’s the baby I had in high school.” By now she liked Johnny so much that she almost didn’t feel nervous telling Grant.

“For real?” Grant asked.

Johnny jumped in and said, “I’m sorry to just suddenly…”

“No, no, it’s cool.” Grant stepped closer and peered into Johnny’s face. He smiled and said, “He’s got Lauren’s eyes!”

Dani hadn’t noticed the similarity to their daughter but was relieved that Grant immediately had. “Lauren’s your three-year-old sister,” she said.

Johnny nodded and looked grateful for the inclusion Grant had suggested.

Chris stood when they approached. He had stayed near the fire. “Grant,” Dani said. “This is Chris.”

The men shook hands. “*The Chris?*” Grant asked, looking at her.

“Yeah, I’m the one,” Chris said almost proudly, which annoyed Dani.

Grant nodded.

“Don’t sound so pleased to meet him, Grant,” she said, trying to sound as if she were joking.

He explained, “It’s just that I was never *that guy*, you know? The teen pregnancy guy.” He raised his hands up and wiggled his fingers in the air.

“Grant?”

“Honestly, in this weird way I’m jealous that you had the nuts— Wait. Dani, did you say this guy’s the baby?” Grant pointed at Johnny.

“I didn’t just have the nuts to make him, I had the nuts to keep him,” Chris said smugly.

“Oh, shit!” Grant said in a thoroughly impressed voice.

“How long are you guys in town?” Johnny asked.

“Just a couple days,” Dani said. Grant found a folding chair to sit in.

“I just pitched my yeast and I’ve got to check my temperature,” Grant said dreamily.

“His beer. He’s doing an experiment...” Dani said quickly.

“I’m really glad we got to do this,” Chris said to both of them, gesturing as if to point to the event of their meeting. “I wonder if I could ask something.”

The band droned on and had forgotten the decade appropriate to the night, meandering into pop hits from the 1980s with a Cyndi Lauper tune.

“Our boy is really smart, Dani. He’s been taking college-level courses since his junior year of high school.” Chris paused and seemed more uncomfortable than he had yet.

“He’s gotten into Dartmouth. He’s done a lot of the pre-med classes already so I know it’s something he can pull off. And it was totally his idea, something he really wants.”

“Dartmouth is by us!” Grant interjected. Dani looked at him and wondered if he’d done more than simply drink too much; he sounded as if he’d lost brain cells.

“Well, I admit that I took a chance when he applied,” Chris said anxiously, looking ashamed. “We filled out the application as if he lived in-state.”

“Oh, okay.” And Dani honestly thought that was okay.

“*Okay?* That’s a relief,” Chris said.

Johnny had run off and returned with a few more chairs. He sat between Dani and Grant, angled to her. His focus was on his father. Chris’ eyebrows jumped when they made eye contact.

“Here’s the other thing. The school asks that parents who are not married fill out separate financial aid applications,” Chris said.

“Well…” Dani said, knowing where this was headed.

“And they might come back and say there’s a portion of the tuition they want you to pay,” Chris said visibly tensing.

Grant was poised to cast off his geometry teacher identity and open a microbrew. His beer not only had a strong enough following to warrant the expansion, but he’d saved up several thousand dollars which she would have to report to the financial aid office if she decided to help Johnny. Grant didn’t appear to be listening to them at all.

The pride she already felt in Johnny was bursting in her chest and she was so relieved that his aspiration was to be a useful part of society. She would have felt guilty for the rest of her life if he had grown up to be a strung-out drummer, thirty pounds underweight.

“Hanover is close enough to Manchester that you’ll be able to stay with us during your breaks,” she said. Her breathing had quickened, she felt light-headed and like she wanted to cheer or scream or run as fast as her legs would carry her.

Sandie

Sandie sat on the floor with her legs spread and patted the carpet in front of her with an open palm. The four cub scouts, including her son, James, visibly held their breath and didn't move from the folding chairs or the brick hearth where they'd been stationed with their lengths of rope for the past twenty minutes. Her eye was on Jack, but her attention could just as easily fall on any one of them.

"Jackie, why don't you come on over here," she said in her southern Missouri drawl, rubbing the twelve inches of carpet between her knees. She worked her lips to achieve an expression that would not alarm Jack.

Sandie was an old hand at leading these meetings. She thought of herself as a professional scout leader. She signed all her emails *yours in scouting*, sometimes just *YIS*. She loved all of it, from the den meetings to the pack campouts. James only had a year left before he crossed over into boy scouts, which was all boy-led, so her services wouldn't be as crucial after that. She hated to think of it. There was a time a few years back when she'd seriously considered having a third child for the off-chance it'd be another boy, just so she'd have another round of cub scouts.

Her older boy, Riley, had been a cub once, as his brother James was now. Since fifth grade Riley had been in and out of the scouting program, but now, as a freshman in high school, there didn't seem to be a thing Sandie or her husband, Roger, could say or do to steer Riley away from being any more than a juvenile delinquent. Roger worked at the Ford dealership down the road and had gone so far as to promise Riley a car, probably a used one, he couldn't say it would be new, if Riley would stop smoking, bring his grades up to a C average, and rejoin scouts.

But, Sandie liked to say, we all make choices and Riley's making his now. James, on the other hand, thrived on back-pats and bowls of good-behavior ice cream before bed, and Sandie had the sense that all she had to do to keep him on the straight and narrow was cup her hands over his eyes like horse blinders.

“Well, come on!” she said to Jack. “We don't got all night, do we?”

Jack, a fourth-grader, took a few moments setting his rope on the floor, finding a spot for his scout manual, first behind him on the chair, then on the floor by the rope, leaning it against the metal leg. He stood and straightened his plaid scarf, tightened the metal slide that held it in place, and turned to shuffle across the plush beige carpet in his socks to Sandie, six feet ahead of him.

“Well, now, Jack,” she began, in a tone which conveyed *you're a real dumb-ass*, “aren't you gonna need that rope?” As much as she loved this job, she often had a rough time knowing what to do with the individual participants.

Jack reversed course, walking backward to his chair, not taking his eyes—shaded by his shaggy brown hair—off Sandie, one feeler-hand out behind him. He located the chair without looking, bent back into a crabwalk pose, found the rope, stood and began toward her again.

Jack sat by Sandie's feet and held up his segment of rope to indicate he was ready.

Sandie leaned forward with the elasticity of a teenaged gymnast, took hold of Jack's scrawny biceps, and pulled him toward her until he had no choice but to aid her effort. She turned him so he faced away from her, and scooted him closer and closer until his was tailbone was nestled in her crotch. “There we go,” she said, grasping his shoulders so that she could peer into his face for a moment, flashing her teeth in attempt to reassure him.

Her skin was cratered by old acne scars, her brown hair was too long for her age and stringy in her face, and her teeth bore stains from years of coffee drinking and cigarette smoking. She reeked of Pall Malls and Wrigley's Winterfresh.

Sandie had gotten wind of conversations the boys had been having with their parents about her smoking. She understood that in 2013 smoking was as frowned-upon as using heroin and that some of the kids were nervous around her for this reason. She'd overheard Jack's mother telling Jack that Sandie surely knew she had a problem and must be working to correct herself. And Colin's father had once whispered too loudly, "Why do you think James's brother is the way he is?"

But Sandie was older than all of the other parents who were anywhere from thirty to forty years old — she had just turned fifty-five. "It's just generational," she told Roger who also smoked. "They don't get it. And Riley would be having the same problems he is now whether we smoked or not." Roger did little to cushion her feelings on the topic, but, she thought, that too was generational. *All the simpering, bullshitting husbands holding nets under their skeletal, bleached-blond wives the second they come home crying cause someone said their teeth aren't white enough*, she had recently muttered to herself. *That ain't Roger and that ain't me.*

"Now hold the rope up like this," she said to Jack. She raised her eyes to the gaping boys who looked scared to death they would be her next victims. "You all do it too. Go on," she said. She had her arms around Jack and each of his hands in hers to control what he did with the rope. "Hold it so both ends are up. Just like this," she shook Jack's hands for emphasis.

“Are you going to do that with all of us,” Colin asked, his fair skin splotched red. The boys tried not to talk to her, James had broken down and told her, because she had a habit they found unsettling whenever anyone was speaking. She had this way of watching the speaker’s lips and moving her own to try to match the words that came out, mirroring the other person. She did that to Colin and Colin shot a look at Tyler who stifled a laugh.

“Oh, no, we got too much to learn for me to do this for every single one of you. Jack here,” she said and pulled him away by the shoulders again, speaking into his face, “Jack here’s gonna be your teacher and you’re all gonna practice square knots together for a minute so I can take a break.”

“So we have to sit like that with Jack?” Tyler asked, snickering and looking at the other boys, not only because of what he’d asked, but because he’d tried to speak so fast that she wouldn’t be able to imitate him before he stopped speaking. That was one of the games the boys played, even James did it.

Sandie had been a den leader for nearly eight years, if she counted her time as assistant den leader of Riley’s group, and knew that as soon as someone made a joke her teaching time would be cut short, their attention likely to atrophy within about thirty seconds. She’d tried putting jokers in time-outs in other rooms, but had gotten complaints from parents. She’d also scolded jokers, but parents didn’t like that either.

“Hold ’em up!” she said too loudly and Jack jerked his head away. “Sorry, Jackie,” she said. No one else called him Jackie she’d been told, not even his mother, but she persisted because she felt like having nicknames for each boy helped them bond with her.

“Cross the right side over the left,” she said again and exaggerated the motion with Jack’s hands. Jack’s hair had gotten in his eyes and he tried to swing it to the side. “Gonna

get that cut soon? Get much longer you're gonna look like a girl!" she told him with a laugh, and realized immediately that she'd be hearing from his mother later that evening. As she thought of the inevitable phone call, she raised her eyebrows and shook her head; the boys frequently imitated her behind her back for her dramatic reactions to what went on in her head.

"Pay attention," she said, knowing she had only seconds left before she lost them. It was beginning to happen already — Tyler had put the rope's ends in his nostrils rather than crossing them as she'd instructed. "You cross the right *over* the left. Good. Now poke the end of that right side under the left so it looks like when you're startin' to tie your shoe." She sighed thinking that maybe Colin still didn't know how to tie his shoes. "Hold those ends up again. You see the one that used to be the right end is now the left end?" She held Jack's hands up over his head, the odor from her underarms rising like steam. "So now cross the *left* side over the right and poke the end of it through the hole." She pulled the knot tight and patted Jack's back.

"Am I done?" Jack asked, sounding desperate, as if he needed to use the bathroom.

"Well, do you got this? Do you think you can help the other boys?"

"Yeah," he quickly answered and leapt away from her like a mouse whose tail had just been released from a trap.

"Good work. I'm gonna take a little break. You boys practice that square knot and when I come back in you all are gonna show me what you can do," she said. She left the living room and picked up her purse that was next to the sewing machine in the kitchen, which wasn't so much a separate room from the living room as it was an extension of it

marked by a switch from carpet to linoleum. She disappeared into the garage and the big door to the driveway rattled open.

Sandie found Riley sitting in the driveway with his back to the brick trim between the garage doors. She told him to push over and lowered herself down next to him. The night air was cool but not cold and he was only wearing a T-shirt. “Want me to grab your hoodie before I light up?” she asked. He shook his head but didn’t look at her.

Her mom and dad had been older parents just as she and Roger were. When Sandie graduated from high school her parents were already sixty. Back then a sixty-year-old might as well have been eighty and her parents presented themselves as too old and decrepit to participate in any school activities. They’d died long before her children were born.

She knew she was getting on in years to have a fourth-grader, but she didn’t want to seem as ancient as her parents had — gnarled old country folks who couldn’t take a joke and never drank a drop in their lives as far as she knew. Sandie had started smoking because that’s what kids did at that time and her parents had been too detached to notice or, if they had noticed, to say anything about it.

But now she had this situation with Riley and couldn’t help but wonder if Colin’s father was right that Riley wouldn’t be a smoker and flunky if she and Roger hadn’t set that example. There was one thing she hadn’t tried with him: showing him she could quit.

“Hey, Ry,” she started, taking a drag and pressing her side into his bare arm. “I was just thinkin’. What do you say you and me quit together? Wanna make a pact?” she asked, eyeing him peripherally.

“You’re gonna quit,” Riley snorted.

“That’s what I said.”

“Why?” he asked.

“I just think that’d be a good change. Don’t you? Come on, we’ll do it together. What do you say?”

“No thanks. I honestly don’t see the point,” he said, mashing the tiny butt of his cigarette into the metal coffee can they kept in the driveway. He rose and headed into the house through the garage.

“Stay away from the boys,” she called after him. Several of the parents had expressed concern that their boys had learned certain inappropriate language from Riley.

When she opened the door to the house she could hear the boys laughing and screaming, still, at nine and ten, not much different from girls, she thought. “What are you all doing?” she shouted through the kitchen.

They had each tied their ankles together with the ropes and were hopping around the house. “This is what it would be like if we only had one leg,” Tyler yelled to her. Her face was serious listening to him, her eyes glued to his lips, but he’d spoken so quickly her own hadn’t been able to mimic fast enough.

“Crazy little fucks,” Riley roared at them. “You freakin’ the hell out of my cat.” He stormed into the living room, pushing over Colin, and kneeing James in the thigh, so that he also fell. As James fell he knocked into Tyler and Tyler went down hard against the hearth.

Tyler cried, “Shit!” and struggled to roll to a sitting position, his ankles still bound. He held his arm near the shoulder and tried not to cry.

“Riley, god dammit, what the hell are you thinking?” Sandie screamed up the stairs after Riley who had run off cradling his cat. “Get your ass back down here and apologize.”

The other boys glanced around at each other uncomfortably. Jack started trying to untie his legs. “That a square knot?” Sandie joked as she pushed Jack aside to get to Tyler.

“Lemme see that, Ty,” she said to Tyler, taking his arm and pulling up the sleeve of his blue uniform shirt. “Oh, that’s gonna be a nasty one. Your shoulder’s not out, is it? Well,” she said, her voice rising. The boys were quieter now and seemed to be wondering when their parents would pick them up. “What do we do cubs? How do we help someone with a bruise?”

The doorbell rang and Jack, who was now unfettered, ran to answer it. It was Tyler’s mother. “Tyler’s really hurt,” Jack told her.

Tyler’s mother raced into the living room, paisley silk scarf streaming behind her.

Sandie rose. “Hello, Chandra, it’s good to see you!” she said with an effort to sound cheerful.

“What happened?” Chandra asked, ignoring Sandie and kneeling by her son.

“He just bumped himself there. He’s all right,” Sandie said, her tone dismissive.

“How did this happen?” Chandra asked Sandie.

“Oh, you know how boys are,” Sandie answered. “Just horsin’ around. Anyway, cubs, the answer is that you want to ice a bruise. James, run on and get a bag of frozen peas.” She laughed in a sort of raspy bark which turned into a cough. She balled her fist and covered her mouth.

Jack said, “She’s not coughing like a vampire.”

Tyler said, “She never does.” These days, every child older than five had been trained to cough into their elbows as opposed to their hands, to stop the spread of germs.

“Oh, whatever,” Sandie said, laughing in Chandra’s direction like they were the only cool people in the room.

Chandra shook her head and helped Tyler up off the floor.

That night when all the boys had gone home and Sandie and Roger were in bed, Sandie said, “I think that woman’ll try to get me fired.”

“Did you actually do something?” Roger asked.

“Well, I took a smoke break. And Riley wasn’t supposed to be near them.”

“You coulda called me; I was just watching my shows. I coulda come up,” Roger said, turning off the TV and setting the remote on the nightstand beneath the dusty, red pleated lampshade.

“I coulda,” she said. She felt overwhelmingly sad as she snapped off her matching lamp. She felt certain the pack’s executive board would give the den to another parent for the time the boys had remaining until they crossed over into boy scouts.

The next morning, Sandie woke with a feeling of dread. Without a den to lead after all these years, she would be set adrift. The boys were her lambs and she’d shepherded them through innumerable fights and friendships and sports and projects since they began as Tigers in first grade. For the most part, they listened to her and gave her mothering an outlet that she felt she’d lost in her own home. James had never needed anything from her but a thumbs up, and Riley had long since broken contact.

The boys were gone to school by the time she’d dressed, smoked, and had her first cup of coffee. Her heart pounding, she took a deep breath and dialed the cubmaster’s work

phone from her corded kitchen line. As the phone rang three, four times, she sank into the wooden chair at her kitchen sewing table.

“Yes?” Glen answered.

Glen was the vice president at the local US Bank. He had a massive house overlooking a lake in a private community north of her neighborhood. She always wondered if being the cubmaster got him promotions or tax right-offs, or some other sort of professional recognition that was off her radar.

“Good morning, Glen.” Her mouth was dry. “This is Sandie, den five leader. May I please have a moment of your time?” She heard some sound of assent. “See, there’s something I want you to hear from me first. Last night at our den meeting, Tyler fell against my fireplace and hurt his arm. Then my older boy, Riley, came in and used quite a bit of profanity.” She could hear his keyboard and wondered if he was taking notes or just going about his business and not really listening to her.

“That’s unfortunate,” he said.

“Yeah. Yeah it is. I’m really sorry about it. So, I imagine some of the parents will be calling you. I plan to call a special meeting to straighten things out. Just wanted you to know I’m aware that there was a problem,” she said with her mouth in a smiling position.

“All right, Sandra. I appreciate that. I’ll keep that in mind,” Glen said and excused himself.

She heard a thud against the rickety garage door. She recognized it as the sound of Riley returning home on his bike. She stayed seated and waited.

Riley let himself in through the front door and slumped through the house toward the refrigerator. He stopped when he saw her.

“Young man, what’re you doing home?” She tipped her chin down and looked up at him as if she had glasses she was peering over.

“I thought you were working today,” he said, no longer looking guilty. He had a way of pulling out of unpleasant feelings.

“Come on, let’s get you drove back,” she said and peeled herself out of the chair. “You forget your lunch money or something?” she asked to give him an easy out.

“No, I just didn’t want to be there.” He took a Coke from the refrigerator and turned to go into the garage.

“Hey, mister, I’m not done with you,” she said, still using the sing-song voice that she thought softened the blow of her disapproval, but that Roger said sounded condescending.

Tyler left the kitchen without looking back at her. She followed him and was just in time to see him ducking beneath the rising garage door opening a new package of cigarettes.

“Tyler William,” she called. She ducked beneath the slow, old door and was blinded by the morning sun. It had become spring and she realized that this year she hadn’t noticed the budding trees, now in full leaf. “Give ’em here,” she said and held out her hand. “You and me are gonna talk.”

He tapped out a cigarette then casually handed her the pack.

“Here’s the thing, Ry. You’re only fifteen. You know that? It’s not okay for you to smoke. You don’t want to be a bad influence on James, do you?” she said, but knew that had been the wrong move; he would love to be a bad influence on his brother.

He looked at her and took a long drag, eyes squinted like the Marlboro man. The wind whipped along the contours of the house and he quickly drew up his black hood.

“You know what. If you’re gonna smoke, you’re gonna smoke. I know that better than anybody. But you can’t do it till you’re eighteen. How ’bout that? You and me, and dad too, we’re all gonna quit and then you see how you feel about it in three years. Deal?”

“I wanna get my GED,” he said morosely.

“Uh, no, Ry, not an option. It’s also not what we’re talking about,” she said in the sing-song voice again and forced a smile. She loved Riley, but for as long as she could remember he’d rubbed her the wrong way. Roger said Riley and Sandie were just alike, that’s why they didn’t get along. She wasn’t so sure about that, but couldn’t come up with a better explanation.

“So what I’m gonna do is, I’m gonna throw away those cartons we’ve got on the high shelf and me and dad won’t be buying any more. Okay?”

He finished the cigarette and pressed it out in the coffee can. “Do what you want,” he said and returned to the kitchen.

By the time she reentered the kitchen he’d disappeared, probably to his bedroom. She took the cigarette cartons down off the high shelf and went back into the garage. She lifted, then loudly dropped, the garbage can lid, but kept the cartons cradled in her arm. Roger kept the garage organized neatly like his shop at the dealer’s garage where he worked. Not many hiding places, but she found one at the back of his chest of red, metal drawers behind his nail and screw collection.

She slid the drawer closed quietly and felt only the smallest twinge of guilt for having not really thrown the packages away. But when she turned around, Riley was standing in the door to the kitchen. His face had been so expressionless in recent years she almost wondered if something had gone wrong in his brain.

“That where we’re gonna keep ’em?” he asked.

“Look, mister. Cigarettes are for people over eighteen. How ’bout me and you go out and have some late breakfast and get you back to school?”

He shrugged.

At Denny’s, Riley and Sandie both ordered Grand Slams with their eggs scrambled. He surprised her by ordering coffee and drinking it black as she did. She had consistently felt that she knew him, whether or not she had any control over him, but lately she’d started to think he might have changed into a new person.

Before their food arrived, her cell phone rang. “Shit. It’s the cubmaster,” she whispered as she held her finger over the green button. She was looking at Riley as if he could save her. He stared back at her drowsily.

“Hello, Glen?” She plugged her opposite ear and hunched her shoulders against the imagined noise of a public space.

Glen was angry. He was telling her that he was the vice president of a bank. That he was at work. That he’d had calls from the mother of every single child in her den that day. He wouldn’t be interrupted at work like this again. Second time in a year. Unacceptable. Lisa Wright had agreed to take the den leader position. Can’t be left alone with the boys any longer. He thanked her for the time she’d put into scouting, her dedication, and hoped she would continue to be an active member of the pack in some other capacity.

She set the phone down on the table next to her meal, which had just arrived at the table. Riley ate a few bites of his hash browns and watched her.

“Well,” she said, picking up her fork. “Seems my time in scouts is over.”

“You got fired?”

She tried to swallow a drink of water but it wouldn't go down without a fight. “Yep.” Her fingers felt limp but she was able to run a few clumps of egg through with her fork and slowly raise them to her mouth. She felt like an invalid. Sick as she had been during her pregnancy with Riley when she was on bed-rest for three months and couldn't keep anything down. The eggs were large and dry in her mouth and her jaw was flaccid.

“Are you gonna cry?” he asked.

Sandie choked the eggs down. She reached for her cup, but just as the cold water touched her top lip, her breath abruptly switched direction sending the water out onto her hand and down her forearm. She set down the cup and coughed, hiding her face in her napkin.

“I hate that guy,” Riley said.

Her crying became audible and she nodded her head.

“What a cocksucker. Scouts is all you have, Mom. I mean, that's it, right?” he said.

She lowered her napkin. His face was earnest. He seemed to be defending her. She nodded and said, “That's how it feels.”

“Scouts can go to hell if they don't want you anymore,” he said, working his jaw.

She wiped her eyes. “Thanks. Thank you, Ry.”

Old

The priest read, “And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, ‘The old is better.’ The Word of the Lord.”

Darren and his boys fidgeted in their pew, not listening, the boys asking for mints or gum every few minutes, or Darren leaning over and telling one of them to knock it off or share the crayons.

Later in the service Darren stood in line for communion at their small, Episcopal Church. He wrangled the two boys, hooking one, then the other by the collars of their striped polo shirts to keep them in front of him and to keep them from crawling or wrestling on the red carpet that rolled up to the altar. Ginny leaned around her husband, Jim, watching the commotion, smiling as if she were involved.

Ginny’s husband cut ahead of Darren and his boys because a spot had opened up at the rail and Darren hadn’t stepped forward quickly enough. What followed was something Darren never could have imagined.

Darren looked back at Ginny and made a quick jerking motion with his head, inviting her to also cut ahead of them and kneel with her husband. She’d responded by lifting her lip in a comical snarl, and shrugging her shoulders—the movement said she’d stay where she was, thanks. Their eyes locked. He smiled at her and nodded, feeling his arms prick with goose bumps. Ginny took a small step back, momentarily losing her balance.

A silent something had passed between them in that moment. Ginny hadn't looked 68 or 72, or however old she was, when she had made that face. To Darren she had looked cute—most-popular-girl-in-school cute. He took the body and bread with his boys, distracted by the stirrings in his groin and his quickened breath.

Ginny returned to the pew her husband was sitting in after Darren had already sat back down. She caught Darren's eye several times as she made her way back to her seat. She could hardly believe it was happening again—the first pangs of love. Unintentionally, she distanced herself from her husband a bit and didn't hear another word of the service.

Darren had carried certain prejudices with him about old people his entire life, most likely learned from his contact with geriatric relatives. He was forty, and had lived more or less dismissing the old as not quite regular people—can't hear well, can't eat this, can't sit on the floor, etc. For Darren the list went on. His prejudice wasn't something he'd ever sat and parsed out, but simply put, he thought there were two categories of people: old people and everybody else. He knew that was an ignorant way of thinking, but it seemed that everybody else could *do*, and could be whoever they wanted to be, as opposed to old people who'd just been used up—they'd had it. Not that he'd ever say any of this to another living being.

Ginny had liked Darren from the first time she had seen him. He and his wife had become members of the congregation what seemed like yesterday to her, but was a matter of several years. She could easily recall watching him with his wife, so fresh and young; they must have been newlyweds and in their mid-thirties. He had worn a maroon golf shirt and grey slacks that first day, a standard office-looking guy not unlike her husband had looked

every day before he retired a few years back. She thought he was a terribly handsome dark-haired young man.

Darren and his wife had attended services regularly for a year or two, then after the babies were born—two boys twenty months apart—the wife had stopped coming. Darren was faithful about hauling both of the little guys in every Sunday on his own—they were three and almost five now. Ginny had wanted to ask him about his wife but felt that such a question might come across as flirtatious or too forward. She thought of herself as a peer to Darren, not bothering to consider their age difference which she knew had to be upward of twenty years, really probably closer to thirty.

Each Sunday after the ten-fifteen service there was coffee and usually enough food to count as lunch, in the newly carpeted and repainted parish hall. The congregation was small, never more than thirty or forty people attending a service, and only maybe twenty or so people who regularly hung around afterward to socialize, which worked out for all involved because the room could handle no more than forty if they wanted to push it to bursting. It was mostly the old people who stayed. The old people and Darren.

Darren liked to stay and talk and let his boys run around with the few other kids, grabbing a cookie or piece of celery off the table in running swoops like pelicans crashing into the water to scoop up a fish.

“You get those potatoes out of the ground yet, boy?” Stu might ask Darren while they sat with their elbows on the plastic tablecloths. “You’d better! They’ll rot by tomorrow!” Stu had been the chief of police years back and spoke in a loud booming voice.

The men had adopted Darren as one of their own, an adopted son or sometimes grandson, and Darren went along with whatever they said, good-naturedly, setting aside his

old-person prejudice once a week for these men who gave him so much attention. He didn't relax much at home, Beth asking him to do one thing and then another when he wasn't at work. Chores, or sometimes it was that she wanted to go out with a friend and leave him with the boys, which was okay, just not real relaxing. So, he would linger after church and eat doughnuts or carrot sticks bathed in ranch dressing, drink coffee, and chat with whoever wanted to chat, taking a lot of ribbing. "Where's that little woman of yours? Give her a hug for me; tell her we miss her here," Frank would shout at him as he crossed the parking lot—Frank liked the ladies.

This Sunday's coffee hour was no different, but Darren was. Darren filled a mug with coffee, stacked some brownies and pretzels on a plate for his boys, and sat down at a table. In his mind he kept asking himself how it could be that he'd had *feelings* for Ginny—that question was the only thought he could hold in his mind. Ginny, Jim's wife. Ginny, *one of them*.

"Looking kinda green," Jim said, slapping Darren's shoulder, nearly spilling his coffee. "Your stock take a dive? You put your money on those Monster Drinks, didn't you," the old man chuckled. Darren smiled weakly, not following. "That stock fell almost 6% last month!" Jim grinned. Frank sat nearby and chuckled, a dry, cough-like laugh, sniffing and nodding at Jim.

"Give the boy a break, Jim, enough with the market," Stu broke in.

Darren tried to smile.

"You done with that board yet?" Stu asked in his always too-loud voice. He'd flown in WWII and raised four boys, and Darren found himself wanting Stu's approval. "Don't tell me you've forgotten about the board, kid."

Some weeks back the men, nearly all veterans and all retired from some form of public service or government position, had commissioned Darren to create a photo board of old service pictures of members of the congregation who were veterans. Darren was a veteran, too, and since he was the youngest one in the group they all imagined he'd do the best job creating a display for Veterans' Day.

Darren stared blankly at Stu, trying to focus his thoughts on something other than Ginny. "No, I haven't forgotten. It's not done yet, but it will be," Darren said into his coffee.

"Oh, it'd better be done," Frank, who had been listening, told him in a menacing tone. "What the hell is eating at you today? You get your old lady pregnant again?" All the men laughed, observing that at just that moment Robert and Blake, Darren's boys, were standing at the snack table throwing grapes and M&Ms into each other's mouths, mostly hitting their eyes and foreheads.

Darren raised his eyebrows and sighed, "My old lady," he repeated, and shook his head. The men laughed at this and the nearest ones slapped his back.

Later that afternoon Ginny called Darren. When he saw Jim Matheson's name on caller id his heart seemed to stop.

"Darren? This is Virginia from church. I have a photo I've decided to include on your board. Is it too late?" Her voice didn't sound like an old lady's voice. On the phone she could have been anyone. Someone from the insurance office where he worked, calling from a few cubicles over.

"No, it's not too late," he'd told her, maybe a bit too eagerly. And she said she'd be by in twenty minutes if that was okay.

It was one of those days when Darren's wife had taken off to walk with a friend shortly after finishing her coffee, skipping church of course, then left for a manicure with her sister just after Darren and the boys had arrived home. Darren had been chasing Robert and Blake around the yard and was feeding them lunch when Ginny pulled up in her blue Subaru.

He let her in. She smiled and her eyes wandered over the rooms as he led her from the front door to the dining room where the boys were eating, not wanting to take his eyes off them lest they choke. She ran her knobby fingers along the furniture she passed and wiped the dust off on her jeans. She noticed that nearly everything, the bookshelf, both tan couches, the walls, had smudges of food on them. Again, there was that impulse to ask about his wife, but she didn't want to sound accusing, or imply that the mess was the wife's fault. She had raised a boy and remembered how it was. In a way, stepping into Darren's house was like coming home for her, coming home to another time in her life.

"Please, have a seat," he offered, wanting to be polite though he figured she would just hand him the picture and go, not yet seeing her longing for him. She sat immediately, her hands folded calmly in her lap, smiling and looking as if she'd been waiting to hear him offer her a seat at his table for some time.

"Boys, you know Mrs. Matheson from church, right?" The boys nodded and looked at Darren, not knowing what he wanted them to do. Darren understood that the boys felt she was *one of them* and didn't press them to say anything. "You brought a picture for the board?" he asked her.

"I did," she said, still smiling, handing him a manila envelope. "I wasn't sure if I wanted to put it up but my son—Tom, I think you may have met him last Easter—said I might as well. I don't know, though, it's sort of embarrassing."

Darren sat across from her—she was in his wife’s chair—and took the photo from her hand. “I thought you were bringing pictures of your husband,” he said, not looking up from the picture.

“No, no, he was never in—Frank, Stu, a few of the other men, they all were, but not Jim. He would have gone if he’d gotten called up, but he was one of the lucky ones. I went because I needed to get out of the town I grew up in.” She realized she was nervous, and when she was nervous she spoke quickly, sweat a lot under her arms, and volunteered too much information. “I’d lived there my whole life, knew everyone and everything, every stray dog, and I was just so tired of it. Looking back I can’t believe I joined up during wartime like I did, but I just couldn’t take *home* any more, you know?”

“This was Vietnam?” Darren asked, then felt stupid for his uncertainty.

“Well, it wasn’t WWII!” she answered and laughed raucously, not realizing how meaningless every war before the Gulf was to Darren since he hadn’t lived through any of them. She looked at each of the children as she laughed, then it dawned on her that Darren’s children were younger than her grandchildren, and she understood his confusion, and felt pretty stupid for laughing so uproariously. “Sorry. Yes, Vietnam. I was a medical assistant.”

The photograph had nearly startled Darren. It showed Ginny sitting on a fence laughing through crinkled eyes, just as she had here at the table, facing the camera as she had him, with another girl, woman, standing next to her with her arm around Ginny’s waist. Ginny’s hand was palming the other woman’s head. Darren felt his breath catch in his chest, almost as if he were about to say something, but he remained silent. Ginny was so beautiful in this photo. The picture was in color, just barely, it was faded so that it had taken on a sort

of pinkish or orange hue, but he could see that her hair had been dark brown. Her hair was cut then as it was now, short, almost a boy cut, just without the white. And she was nearly the same size as she was now —medium slender, an average-sized woman.

Ginny watched Darren examining the photo. She knew it was a good one of her and hoped he would find her attractive in it. Bringing that picture over had felt like a gamble. It was lovely of her and she knew it, but she also knew that right *before* it was taken she'd realized that her period had leaked through her uniform pants, and that right *after* it had been taken a stray Vietnamese dog had bitten her ankle hard enough to break the skin and she'd spent the next few weeks in pain and receiving endless shots for rabies and tetanus and whatever else the army could think to give her. She also knew that Rosie, the girl next to her, had gotten pregnant by the guy who'd taken the picture and been sent home three months later. That's what she saw when she looked at the picture. However, she understood that to Darren it was a static moment, unconnected to real living action.

“All done,” Blake, the younger one said. Darren and Ginny had nearly forgotten about the boys at the ends of the table.

It took Darren a moment to come back from the photograph and answer. He looked at his boy. “All righty. You too, Robert?” As he was helping Blake down from his booster seat, chunks of over-ripe fruit dropping from his corduroys onto the floor, Ginny hopped out of her seat and assisted Robert.

“Can I help you wash your hands?” she asked Robert kindly, bending and putting her hand on his back to lead him to the kitchen, but not before he jelly-stamped the prints of three of his fingers on her light grey t-shirt that was peeking out from beneath her cardigan.

Darren listened to her voice and watched the agile way she was still able to move, and really *got* that she *was* the laughing girl in the photograph. It was a revelation for him. He'd seen plenty of pictures of his grandparents and parents from other decades and never thought much about them as anything but frozen people in now irrelevant moments.

From the kitchen, drying Robert's hands, she called to him in the dining room, "Thank you for putting together the photo board, Darren."

"Oh, it's no problem," he said. "I'll finish it in the next few days."

Again, as she so often had at church, she had the impulse to ask about his wife. Where was she? But again she had that old feeling of not wanting to seem like a flirt and stopped herself from asking.

She lingered a touch too long at the door, almost as if expecting a kiss, it seemed to Darren. He blushed and felt a queasy but couldn't help but want to kiss her. When he didn't and the moment grew awkward, she ran her hand the length of his arm and left.

Later that night Darren sat on the floor in front of the TV arranging photos on the folding display board. His wife was leafing through the newspaper and halfway watching the news, her feet up on the coffee table. "Beth, look at this," he said. She took the picture of Ginny. "It's Ginny Matheson from church."

"Huh, looks just like her," she said, handing the copy back to him absently.

"It does. It looks exactly like her. You don't see too many old pictures like this, where you can see that the young person is the same as the old person you know now."

"Guess not," Beth said. She picked up the mug she'd been drinking wine from and said, "Darling, won't you?" pitching her voice unnaturally high and looking at him over her

glasses. It was an affectation she had begun on their honeymoon in Hawaii that used to make him laugh.

Several relatives had paid for them to have a “proper” honeymoon. They had been pretty poor at the time of their wedding, so in Hawaii she had “lived the good life,” as she put it, and created this over-privileged character who held empty glasses to servers and said things like, “Won’t you, please?” “Would you mind?” “Could you be a dear?” Ten years later the joke had grown stale and had ceased to be a joke. He knew he was supposed to laugh when she did it now, or at least be reminded of that time when their life together was fresh, when the seeds of doubt had not yet been planted. He got up and refilled her mug.

Beth worked for a charity and her days were filled with phone calls and organizing fundraising events. It was noble work and Darren felt proud of her for it, but if she wasn’t thinking of ways to raise money for diabetes, she was thinking of ways to *stop* thinking about raising money for diabetes, and somehow those ways rarely involved him.

The workweek began and Darren replayed the pre-communion scene between him and Ginny as he sat at his desk. He remembered how he’d knelt at the altar afterward, his stomach full of butterflies, feeling like a teenager who’d just gotten a look from the prettiest girl in class, but also feeling guilty because he already had his own girl. He had tried to avoid Ginny’s eyes as he and the boys returned to their pew, but his breath had come faster than usual and his heart rate had been up. He also replayed their interaction at his front door—what had she meant by running her hand down his arm? Would he kiss her next time they were alone together?

Ginny felt slightly panicked with these dusty old feelings unexpectedly shining bright within her, and she, too, was replaying the moments they'd spent focused on one another. She and Jim had been married for forty-three years and their marriage had had its ups and downs like any other, but one way or another they'd gotten through the growing pains, the financial strains, and marital indiscretions on both their parts.

Later in the week at dinner, at the Chinese place they went to a couple times a month, Jim asked Ginny if she was feeling okay. She looked down at her rice, feeling both silly and guilty, and swallowed hard. She thought about all those years Jim had spent traveling and how much freedom she'd had back then when she was younger. He'd been retired for, what, nearly five years now? All that togetherness had created what amounted to a whole new marriage arrangement.

Ginny didn't know how much weight to give the feeling she'd felt pass between Darren and herself Sunday. Once it hit her, though, she had understood that it wasn't exactly a new feeling for him. She was tempted to shrug it off, knowing that she had no intention of leaving her husband after forty-three years, that this young guy would not be running off with someone older than his mother, *and* that mentioning what had happened could only upset Jim, or worse, make him tell her that she was being foolish.

"Well, Jim," she began, not knowing what she was going to say. "Something funny happened at church."

"It did?" he asked, slurping up the remains of his egg drop soup. "I didn't see anything," he said.

"You know Darren?" she asked. He nodded, not looking up from his meal. "Well. Well, this is pretty silly." She stopped talking and went back to her hot and sour soup.

“What?” Jim asked, holding his hand up to stop the server for more water. The teenaged Asian girl lifted his glass from the shiny cherry-finished table where it had suctioned itself in a pool of sweat, refilled it, then walked away, neither the young woman nor Jim thinking to refill Ginny’s glass which was also empty. He looked back up at her waiting for her to tell him what had happened at church.

She couldn’t think of how to frame it. She didn’t know if it was even worth saying, but since she felt different, like some new life had come into her, she knew that what had happened *was* significant. But significant enough to tell her husband about? Especially when it was so unlikely that anything would come of it? After all, she wasn’t a hormonal thirty-year-old looking for a fling. Even if Darren reciprocated her feelings she wouldn’t be *unable* to resist him like some hussy who had no self-control. Then she wondered if she would *want* to resist him. So, the whole thing was probably not worth mentioning to Jim.

“Did something happen or not?” Jim asked, his attention fully on her now.

“Well, not really. I just had a feeling, that’s all.”

“What about? Something about Darren?” he asked, trying to position his chopsticks right.

“Well, yes. Like, well.” How to frame it? Put it on Darren. “Like maybe he has a crush on me.”

Jim chuckled and worked at picking up some noodles with his chop sticks. “Why would that kid have a crush on you? Don’t get me wrong, I think you’re as hot as you ever were, Gin, but you’re probably older than his mother.”

“Probably,” Ginny said. “It’s just that... Well, I felt a maybe like I might have a crush on him, too. I know it’s dumb,” she rushed to say, “and you don’t need to say

anything, I just was thinking of that time when you..." she stopped herself, unsure if she wanted to continue because she knew this would change the tone of their evening. "Well, do you remember after you had that thing with that woman from the bank, and we decided that we'd always tell each other if we felt something coming on with another person?"

"That was when Tom was still at home! Don't tell me you still think about that. And why didn't you say 'remember that time I had the fling with Tom's basketball coach'? Don't bring up the lady at the bank to me."

"Either way then, your bank lady or my basketball coach," she said, thinking she should have kept her mouth shut. "At any rate, that's not really my point, Jim. I'm thinking about how we agreed to talk to each other more about what we might be feeling. Like that counselor told us to do. Remember? She said that if we started to have feelings for someone outside our marriage and didn't say anything about it, those feelings would grow into something else that might put our marriage in a position..." She stopped again. "It would be like keeping a secret."

"Okay. I can appreciate your honesty," Jim said, sounding calmer again. He added soy sauce to his chicken and broccoli. He suddenly laughed—she assumed it was at the idea of his wife having a crush on someone who had to be about their son's age.

"I'm sure it's nothing. I just felt that feeling, you know?" she said, remembering how Darren's bare arm had felt in her hand—soft, smooth, firm.

"I know. I know the feeling. I won't worry about it, okay?" he said.

That evening at Darren's house his wife was shouting at the boys because they wouldn't settle down and stay in their beds. She didn't shout real often, but when she did

Darren felt contempt for her rise in him like bile. Usually the sound of her elevated voice needled him into shouting at the kids himself just to scare them into being quiet so she would quit. He hated to raise his voice at them and see their hurt faces like he'd just broken some kind of pact the three of them held dear.

Darren was at the dining room table shuffling some cards. He was keeping his hands occupied so he wouldn't reach for his work computer and start worrying over details of his regular Monday meeting. Beth slumped into the chair across from him, her chair, thunked her elbows heavily onto the table and sighed. He hated when she sighed like that, like their children were such a hassle and inconvenience that she didn't have breath enough in her to carry on with life after caring for them.

He started dealing out the cards for a game of rummy. He pictured Ginny sitting opposite him. The feeling that had passed between them earlier in the day was still nagging at him. He repeatedly dismissed it as ridiculous, but the feeling was persistent—he could feel it in his stomach still.

“What's on your mind?” Beth asked, fanning out her cards. “You have that look like you're working on something.”

“No,” he said, setting down three kings and the 2, 3, and 4 of clubs in two neat piles. “Do you think you'll start going to church with us again?” he asked.

“You say ‘with us’ like it's this thing you do with Robert and Blake and I'd just be tagging along. To tell you the truth, I feel like it's just another one of those things the three of you do like playing with Legos, watching those Japanese cartoons, I don't know what else...riding bikes. Does it matter if I go to church or not?”

“You can be with us any time you want to be; you can play Legos. I only asked about church because it’s been several months, but it’s no big deal,” he said, gathering the cards to reshuffle.

“Has it been that long?”

“It’s been since about the Fourth of July. I’ll keep taking them either way; I like to give them that routine. Keeps us all stable and grounded,” he said, dealing the cards again, never looking up at her.

“With or without me,” Beth said.

“That is totally up to you, I just think stability and routine are important, so…” He approached everything in terms of routine. Beth rolled her eyes at him. Darren’s love of routine had become something she ranted about from time to time—shredded wheat every morning, in bed by ten-fifteen and so on—no room for adventure she said.

Two nights later Darren was at Walgreens, still in old, grey sweats from his visit to the gym. He was searching for some cough medicine for Robert when he saw Ginny at the photo counter. The moment he saw her he felt an almost electric impulse through his middle, that feeling that is so knee-jerk it can’t be fabricated, as if something deep inside him was reaching for something deep inside of her. At first he didn’t think he should approach her, but that feeling in his stomach was strong, raw nerves it seemed like, and he came around the aisle closest to her, pretending he hadn’t seen her before that. She laughed and said she was so glad to see him.

“My son asked me for a copy of that picture I gave you the other day,” she said, shrugging again in a way he now found irresistibly cute.

“The laughing picture?” he asked and was aghast that he’d made a name for it in his head that he’d just unwittingly shared with her.

“Yes, that’s the one. He said he hadn’t seen it before.” The photo clerk handed her a cardboard envelope and rang up and bagged a few other items she was buying.

“What were you laughing about?” Darren asked, wondering if she would remember and not wanting to sound as if he were stalling for time.

“That was my girlfriend, Rosie, next to me. She was something else. I don’t know what she’d just said…” Ginny said, pulling out her phone to check the time. “Well, that’s not true,” she said, looking at Darren now with her dark eyes. “It’s just that what she’d said was embarrassing at the time and would be just as embarrassing now if I tried to explain it to you. But it *was* funny. She had a crude sense of humor,” Ginny smiled again. “Nothing you’d like to hear about, a good boy like you,” she said, winking.

“I don’t mind crude,” Darren said, almost shyly, which was unusual for him.

“Oh Darren, I couldn’t,” she said, pleased that he was interested.

They walked toward the check-out together where Darren still needed to pay for Robert’s cough medicine. The cashier was a bored looking girl with dyed black hair whom he had noticed on his way in trying to amuse herself by stacking Snickers bars until they were so high they toppled over. “Your *mom* have a cough?” she asked, looking at Ginny. Darren didn’t reply and didn’t look at Ginny, but he felt horrified like that time his older sister had read a note that he’d given to her best friend—*You fill up my senses—come, let me fill you at Applebee’s Friday at 7:00*. His sister had laughed until she cried, so had her friend, and it was years before he put a feeling in writing again. But the cashier couldn’t possibly be teasing him, couldn’t possibly know what was inside his heart.

In the parking lot Darren looked at Ginny expectantly, easily making out her face in the parking lot lights. “What?” she asked him, as if she thought she might have a dab of food on her cheek, putting a hand to the corner of her lips.

“Oh. Were you going to tell me what your friend said? You don’t have to, maybe the moment’s passed.”

“Goodness, you really want to know, don’t you?” she asked, delighted, even clapping her hands a few times. “Well,” she began, looking around, “should we sit somewhere? Ah, I know,” she said, a gleam in her eye. “Let me buy you a beer!” She felt giddy now that she had made a move.

At first he didn’t know if he’d heard her right. “Did you say a beer?”

“Was that too forward? Or do you not drink beer on Thursdays? Or are you worried...”

All at once Darren felt unsure of himself. He was drawn to her, but he didn’t want to be the kind of father who sleeps around—he stopped his thought. This was just an old woman from church, he told himself. They’re friends, he’s friends with her husband; a beer is okay.

They drove separately to O’Donnell’s. He talked to himself in his car, once again reasoning through why it was okay to go for a beer with her, getting more and more keyed up about the enormity of this sin he felt he was about to commit. He was sure that he was already committing adultery.

As he drove to O’Donnell’s, following her and watching the back of her head in the streetlights they passed, he felt *sure* he was doing something wrong, but he couldn’t say that

he really thought it *was* wrong, what they were doing. An old lady from church. There was certainly nothing less harmful in all the world than an old lady from church.

Ginny kept her eye on Darren's Toyota in her rearview mirror. She wasn't comfortable driving at night and Jim had been badgering her to do her errands during the day, which she mostly did. It wasn't that she couldn't see, but sometimes things appeared blurrier than they should in the glare of taillights and reflectors on the roads.

She had always joked with her family that when she got to be an old lady, and from the look of her hands on the steering wheel she must be one, that she would start doing things that young people do—things she'd never cared about when she was young—like get a tattoo or some piercings where they didn't belong. *How freeing to be old*, she thought. She felt wonderful, happy deep down and thrilled to have someone to talk to who really wanted to talk to her and seemed to be seeing her for *her*.

They began to sit at the bar at O'Donnell's, but got a look from the bartender, a shaggy guy probably in his fifties, that seemed to say *I know what you two are up to*, and they changed direction to sit in a booth toward the back, moving together the way birds and fish do as if they're of one mind. They sat facing each other again as they had in his dining room, the green naugahyde-upholstered benches patched all around them with strips of duct tape. "Do you come here a lot?" he asked, then realized how that must have sounded.

She laughed. "We've been her a couple times. They had a good blues band every Friday a few years ago."

The shaggy guy from behind the bar shuffled up to their table. "Get you some drinks?" he asked. Darren thought the bartender was smirking at him.

“A Boulevard, whatever’s on tap.” Darren looked at Ginny, eyebrows raised. She nodded. “Two of those. And—is your kitchen still open?”

“Oh, their poppers were so good last time we were here,” Ginny said to Darren.

“Kitchen’s closed. I can bring you chips and salsa, but not much else.”

“Okay, good. And two waters.” Darren realized he was terribly nervous that one of them—well, Ginny—wouldn’t be able to get home safely after a beer or two. Or what if he had an accident or got pulled over driving home.

“And could you put on some music we can dance to?” she asked playfully. In the car she had begun to imagine how it would be to touch Darren’s toned arms and smooth skin for longer than a passing moment.

The bartender and Darren exchanged glances. Darren suddenly felt slightly queasy.

“Sorry,” the bartender said, shaking his head at her, “speakers are busted.”

“That’s a pity. This place isn’t what it used to be.” She looked around appraisingly.

“Ah, but you want to know about the picture anyway.”

“Please,” he said, feeling more at ease.

“It was really nothing much, just crude, like I said,” she shook her head and chuckled at herself. “It was just...oh, goodness, it’s really pretty awful,” she said and he thought he could make out a faint blush on her cheeks. “Rosie had just learned she was pregnant a couple days before this shot. I...well, I’ve never told anyone this. It’s such useless information, and embarrassing, and there’s just never been a reason...I was at that...I was,” she said, lowering her voice and leaning closer to Darren, “I was having my period that day,” she said, closing her eyes as if she’d just admitted to the most shameful thing in the world.

“And we’d been training all morning, hadn’t even stopped for lunch, and, well, it had leaked through my pants.” She closed her eyes again.

Darren felt his heart rate rise and his palms began to sweat.

“I can’t believe I’m telling you this,” she continued. “But, anyway, Rosie saw what had happened, slapped my ass hard, and said, ‘Guess ol’ Donny’s been firing blanks—Eh, sweet stuff?’ That last part is how *he* talked. Donny was this guy I’d been seeing over there—four guys for every girl they told us.” She stopped, wondering if that sounded slutty. “I didn’t have four guys, just Donny. Anyway, that’s what I was laughing about. Right after she said that, her boyfriend—these days you’d say her *baby daddy*—pulled out a camera and she told me I’d better sit somewhere fast so no one would see my pants.”

Darren was fascinated. He stared at her, a crooked smile on his face, not having the slightest idea how to respond. He laughed.

The bartender slid the waters, beer, chips, and salsa onto the table, with a clearly puzzled expression on his face. *Do we look that strange together?* they each wondered.

Ginny took a long drink of beer.

“Ginny, I want you to know I’m not the kind of person who...” Darren said.

She reached across the table and brushed her thumb over the knuckles of the hand that rested on his beer. Darren had observed dark patches on the backs of her hands and did not look down at the one touching his.

“I know, I know,” she cooed at him. “If you were that sort of person you would be much less...attractive.” She decided she should speak her mind. What did she have to lose? Her son was grown and would probably think her feelings for him were about as

inconsequential as Jim did the other night. And it was certainly too late in the game for Jim to leave her because of a *lapse in judgment* on her part.

It felt like there were hundreds of bees stinging his stomach lining now. Her hand on his was so much different from how he'd thought it might be. It was just a woman's hand. The hand of a woman who was not his wife. He found it difficult to look at her. He was not a bashful man at all; he'd been with plenty of women before Beth.

Darren's cell phone buzzed in his pocket. Before he had even said hello Ginny started moving, in short scoots, out of the booth. She didn't say anything—that was exactly how his grandmother would have left the table to give him privacy on the phone. He watched her walking toward the bathroom and noticed that her shoulders were slightly stooped.

Beth asked why he'd been gone so long. She said that Robert had been crying for an hour because he couldn't stop coughing. He told her he'd be right there and apologized for being gone longer than usual. He should have known to go straight home to Robert.

As if she knew exactly how long Darren would be on the phone, Ginny came out of the bathroom and made her way back to the booth. "You okay?" she asked, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"It was Beth about the cough syrup."

"I know it," she said.

"I'm sorry, but I need to get home."

"You go on, then, dear. Get on home. We can pick this back up any time."

"I hate to just leave you. You're right, though," Darren said, and waved at the shaggy bartender for the check.

“Hey, this is on me, remember?” she said, producing her wallet and putting some cash on the table. “Drink up,” she said, smiling.

Darren took another sip and laughed out his nose before he could swallow, a drop of beer landing on his hand. “Drink up,” he said.

In the parking lot, Ginny offered Darren her hand. They shook, Darren stealing a look around the parking lot. He felt the urge to kiss her. She abruptly pulled her to him in a strong hug. He jerked away rigidly before relaxing into her arms but once he did he felt like a Hershey’s Kiss left in the sun, its insides held together by nothing but the foil. He moved his head away from her to see her eyes, still thinking he might kiss her. He bent to her upturned face and she eagerly met him the rest of the way.

It was like the first kiss of every significant relationship in his life: his whole body reverberated, responding to the closeness of her skin.

“Oh, it’s been much too long,” she said to herself. “When can you sneak away again?”

He felt his body shut down. He didn’t think he’d exactly been *sneaking*. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to do any *sneaking*. He would sooner die than give Beth a reason to take his boys from him. “I’d better get this cough syrup home,” was all he could think to say.

She smiled sadly, he thought, and said, “I’ll see you Sunday, right?”

He nodded.

Darren watched her drive away and wave as she passed his car. He put his key in the ignition but it wouldn’t turn. He rocked the car with his body and tried again. If he called the auto club for help he’d be another hour. If he called Beth to explain something was wrong with the car and he’d be at least another hour waiting for help, she would call the

neighbor to sit in their house for the ten minutes it would take her to get him and return home, telling him the car could be taken care of tomorrow. He rocked the car again. “Shit,” he shouted and hit the steering wheel.

He mindlessly peered under the hood, not knowing what he was looking at. He paced in circles around his car, nearly frantic at the idea of getting caught in a lie, in this *sneaking*, as it had turned out to be. It had already been twenty minutes since Beth had called and asked him to come right home. Who could he call who wouldn’t ask why he was at this bar alone on a weeknight. He decided to call Stu—he’d been a police officer and would know what to do about the car. He’d tell him the bare minimum—just at a bar, no big deal.

When Stu’s car pulled up, quite a bit later than Darren had expected it to, Darren saw that Stu was not alone; Frank and Jim were with him. Darren felt the blood drain from his face. He had gotten out of his car to greet Stu, but now backed up against it, feeling sure he should run. He held up his hands in protest. “It was nothing guys. We didn’t do anything—just talking. Please. I’m so sorry, Jim.”

The men stood in a semi-circle around him. Stu put his hand on Darren’s shoulder. “Easy there, kid,” he said, the loudness of his voice rattling Darren.

“I think I might need to apologize to *you*,” Ginny’s husband said. “The other day she was going on about how she has a crush on you, you have a crush on her...”

Darren thought he would die right there in the parking lot.

“So, I should have called you right then,” Jim continued. “I knew the look in her eye.”

“It was an accident, really. We were just at Walgreens at the same time, that’s all. She didn’t do anything,” Darren protested weakly.

“Son, you don’t have to tell me how it was. The important thing is not to get your wife involved. You leave Ginny to me and put the whole thing out of your head.”

“I shouldn’t tell Beth?” Darren asked. “You want me to lie to her?”

Frank chuckled dryly. “Look, it’s not lying. You just don’t want to tell her, okay? You’ve got a little beauty there and two real good boys. You tell her about this she’s not going to trust you the same and you don’t want to go down that road, believe me. And, no offense, Jim, but I don’t know if this episode with Ginny really counts as *infidelity*.” Frank gave Darren two quick pats on the arm.

“Doesn’t count?” He wrestled with the idea of omitting his feelings and kissing Ginny from his marital record.

“I see you thinking...don’t do it, kid,” Stu said. The three men watched him. “Let me see what’s wrong with your car.” Stu took the keys from Darren’s limp hand.

Darren heard his car’s door chime. His mind raced.

“Young people don’t do things the way we used to,” Frank commented to Jim. “Before Sheryl and I were married we must have gotten together with at least three other partners. Free love, right? Even after we were married there was some of that. The ‘80s ruined all the good stuff if you ask me. Now you kiss some old broad from church and you’re going to hell,” he chuckled again and Jim joined him.

“Ginny’s *that* way,” Jim said to Darren. “How about this. What if I absolve you? In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, forget it?” he made the sign of the cross over Darren’s chest.”

Darren heard his Toyota crank to life. “You numbskull,” Stu said, getting out of the car. “You shut it off while it was still in drive. What are we gonna do with you?”

“You get on home to that peach of a wife you have,” Frank said, squeezing Darren’s shoulders in a one-armed hug.

Darren nodded and thanked Stu and Frank, shaking Jim’s hand solemnly. He climbed behind the wheel and stared after the three men as they disappeared, laughing, into O’Donnell’s to fill their bellies with beer.

VITA

Anne Kniggendorf was born in Indiana and raised in Kansas. She earned her B.A. in western philosophy/historical mathematics from St. John's College, Santa Fe, in 1997.

After working on an M.A. in linguistics at the University of Kansas for two semesters, she enlisted in the United States Navy in 1999 in order to study Arabic at the Defense Language Institute/Foreign Language Center in Monterey, CA. After completing the Arabic Basic Course, she served in the intelligence community for four years.

In 2005, she separated from the Navy and moved with her family back to the Kansas City metro area where she began writing and editing business seminars for National Seminars and Fred Pryor Seminars on an occasional basis while caring for her two young children.

In 2012 she began the Master of Fine Arts program in creative writing at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. In 2014 she was awarded an internship with the *Kansas City Star* to write book reviews.

Her creative nonfiction has appeared in *The Moon*, *The Gadfly*, and the *Shawnee Journal-Herald*, her book reviews in the *Kansas City Star*, and her poetry and fiction in *Number One Magazine*.