

WE NEED MORE ELEPHANTS

By

STEPHANIE HARRISON

A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2003

Copyright 2003

by

Stephanie Harrison

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ABSTRACT	iv
ARPEGGIO	1
MARY JANES	2
MATH LESSON	3
DROPPED	4
LISTS	5
METROPOLITAN HOME	6
BLUE.....	7
BEREFT	9
WE NEED MORE ELEPHANTS.....	10
A CURIOUS BOY WHO LIKES TO FLY	11
WHAT ZACH WON'T DO.....	28
SERIOUS BUSINESS	55
VENUS IN THE TWELFTH HOUSE	86
SOLVE FOR THE CUBIC FEET OF REGRET	89
WAITING FOR AUGUST TO END.....	98
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	121

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

WE NEED MORE ELEPHANTS

By

STEPHANIE HARRISON

May 2003

Chair: Jill Ciment
Major Department: English

What follows are two partially completed longer works. *Arpeggio* is a grouping of short shorts that happened by accident, while I was playing around with the idea of telling a story in one sentence. My intent is to fill in the gaps, at some point, so that it works better as a whole. *We Need More Elephants* has been a difficult project, which I have worked at, off and on, for several years. It, too, needs some refinement.

On good days, when the sun is shining and there is ice cream in the freezer, I dare to hope there might be something here worth finishing.

ARPEGGIO

ar•peg•gio

n., pl. -gios.

1. a broken chord.
2. a chord whose notes are played in rapid succession rather than simultaneously.

MARY JANES

She wore homemade dresses and store-bought black patent-leather shoes (Mary Janes), and she loved her shoes, the crescent of white anklet sock that showed between the toe and the strap, and how that crisp contrast drew attention to her feet (and away from her dress), and she loved how her Mary Janes provided entrée into an exclusive circle—a world of pretty girls wearing pretty things—so that at recess she was one of the girls who jumped rope and worried about whether or not the boys on the monkey bars could see the reflection of her underpants in her shoes' shiny patent-leather; and she loved, best of all, the click of her Mary Janes against the worn linoleum in the girls' bathroom, the acoustics in that room amplifying and rounding the tone of her tread, giving it the elegant pitch of an old soft-shoe routine, and how, in the girls' bathroom, she might really be Rita Hayworth: beautiful, impetuous, and destined to marry a prince; and so, when her kindergarten teacher, Miss Pritchard, asked her to show-and-tell her most prized possession, who could blame her for choosing her Mary Janes, for carefully slipping off first the right shoe, then the left, and presenting them to her class like a pair of onyx slippers?

MATH LESSON

The only movement in the dingy gas station bathroom, besides the slow drip of the rusty faucet, is the pink line blossoming in the center of the small white circle, and as she watches, bare midriff pressed against the sink, the fuzzy line gains definition, becomes a pink dash—a pink gash—and her hands begin to shake, and her skull feels too full, with all the voices and choices careening inside her—“Pretty in pink,” her boyfriend said, as he pulled down her pastel panties, “you’re so pretty in pink”—and on the edge of the sink, the rose-colored minus sign seems to glow, become a symbol of subtraction, a lesson in lessening, and she hears her father say, “Who do you think you are—You’re nothing, just a kid,” and she remembers her mother’s rosary beads, and she calculates the number of hours she’d have to work at minimum wage to afford childcare and college tuition, and as she steps over a used paper towel and unlocks the door, her hands are barely shaking: a decision has formed and embedded itself in the lining of her life.

DROPPED

She has always had too many friends, except for now, when she has left her old life behind for a Holy Grail of sorts—she looks *grail* up in the dictionary and finds that it is only a cup, and *Holy Grail* is only a legend, and she sighs and looks out the window of her waterfront condo—and now that she has this Holy Grail in the form of a man, she has far too few friends and the tradeoff, she knows, is nowhere near equal; still, she is lucky, when she returns for the holidays her oldest friend plans a party around her visit, invites dozens of other old friends and acquaintances, and she is flattered and dresses carefully in a black silk pantsuit, but because she is nervous, she and the Holy Grail have a drink in the hotel lobby bar, and then another and another, and she arrives at her party alone and two hours late, and kisses her hostess on the cheek while avoiding her eyes, then kisses her hostess' husband, and then much later, after several more drinks, the husband, who has been out of work for over a year and looks like a frightened poodle, hands her a resume and asks her to give it to the Holy Grail and she says, Of course, but ten days later, back in their waterfront condo, she drops it in the wastebasket—she doesn't know the husband well, cannot, after all, gauge his qualifications—and forgets about it until her emails to her oldest friend go unanswered and unanswered and unanswered.

LISTS

Every time she opens the windows to let in the salt-sea air, dozens of her lists—they're scrawled on the backs of envelopes or torn from spiral ring notebooks—blow about the house like small kites, then settle to the floor with a sad sashay; he teases her about this, the grocery list (broccoli, bread, capers) in the bathtub, the movie recommendations (*Beyond the Clouds*, *Larks on a String*, anything with Charles Laughton) between the cushions of the couch, but his tone implies that this is an allowable eccentricity, until he finds, beside the toaster, a notebook containing a list of names, and then he butters his toast and pours himself a cup of coffee, and sits down at the breakfast table to tell her again that he's too old to have more children, that he's already had a family, and didn't they have an agreement, and she listens and nods, and her grief feels unanchored, like dandelion fluff, and for months afterward, she is tempted to do what many have done before her, but she doesn't, instead she hopes he'll change his mind, and time passes, and she adds more names to the list, and attends, when invited, other women's baby showers, and buys them pretty pink and blue gifts, and then one day, she notices that her grief is no longer a floating thing, but has begun rolling through her, like a round, hard pellet, and that's the day she stops adding names to the list, and begins, instead, once a month, to cross them off.

METROPOLITAN HOME

The trouble with having embraced minimalism is that when her mother and grandmother come to visit, she doesn't have any chairs, except in the dining room, that her grandmother can sit in—or get out of—comfortably, and so that's how she and her mother and grandmother end up spending the entire week playing pinochle at the dining room table, and her grandmother, who can no longer remember her own middle name or how to use a microwave, can still play well—it's uncanny how well she plays—although she has to be reminded often of the trump suit, but when she takes a trick, her old exuberance returns, and she shouts, “Yabba dabba doo!” and then between hands she sings *Danny Boy*, ending, with a convincing catch in her throat, on the line, “I'll kneel and say an Ave there for thee,” and they (she and her mother) wonder out loud what will be left of their lives when everything is peeled away, what phrases, silly or otherwise, will define them, and her mother thinks (hopes), for her it will be, “But the greatest of these is charity,” and she thinks (hopes) that for her it will be something from a song by Tom Waits.

BLUE

Sometimes he leaves before she's awake, and then they communicate via Post-It notes tacked to the alarm system, and today's note reads, "Lunch?" and she's not sure what to make of this—in the past she would have known: blue-light specials, they used to call them—and so all morning, as she weeds her garden and picks the last of her tomatoes, she feels uneasy, resentful even—there should, after so many years, be some certainty, she thinks—but when he comes home early from work to pick her up, things seem normal, and lunch is pleasant, and if it's not quite reminiscent of other past lunches, well, they are a bit older; he wears glasses now, gold wire frames with bifocals, and she has creases along her throat, from nodding too often, or from lowering her head too much, and today, over pecan-crusting salmon, they talk about his job, and their upcoming vacation, and bemoan their neighbors' barking dog, and that feeling she'd had all morning, that premonition that this would be the afternoon where one or the other of them says that perhaps it's time they make a change, well, that fades into the cool October light and the mellowness of wine, and for the moment they are happy, she thinks, or at least content, and later, when they are home and he is sitting in his chair facing the television, she takes the initiative—yes, *she* initiates—and kneels in front of him, rests her cheek on his knees, then slides her hand along his thigh, and he doesn't move, doesn't look at her, and in

this light, and from this angle, the only thing reflected in his glasses is flickering blue.

BEREFT

At night, and sometimes during the day, the phone rings and it's him, and his voice sounds so far away, but no longer in pain, and the people in her support group tell her these are ADCs (After-Death Communications), and that it's normal, or at least she's not crazy, but what she really wants to know is why, if he's going to bother to call at all, he doesn't say something more important, why, for example, he calls to tell her he hates her shoes, or that she doesn't really *need* another set of candlesticks; and these calls are particularly annoying when she hears, at her Wednesday night meeting, that other men are calling to report on the whereabouts of missing documents, or to confess to hidden bank accounts, and so lately, when she sees on the caller ID that it's him, she's tempted not to pick up.

WE NEED MORE ELEPHANTS

It all went to smash.

—Sherwood Anderson,
Winesburg, Ohio

A CURIOUS BOY WHO LIKES TO FLY

Effortless, like floating in the Great Salt Lake.

Forty years ago, as a boy, Zach McKenna did this while on vacation in Utah, and he's never forgotten the sensation of lying still on the surface of the water, arms and legs spread wide, perfectly buoyant. Lately he's been thinking that in the span of a lifetime, these moments are too goddamn few. Everything requires too much work, too much worry. Even now, in the predawn, as he reads the newspaper before his family gets up, he feels a churning, a tugging at the center. The niggling knowledge that the laws of entropy are at work— and he's been helping them along.

Upstairs, his wife, Diane, and his twelve-year-old son, R.J, are sleeping, the tension between them wrapped in dreams and put away for the night. For the moment, he can rest; in their sleep, they don't need him to act as their buffer. Before she went to college, this was his daughter Afton's role: the cushion, the lubricant, the shock absorber. Without her, Zach tries his best. But he longs for the brief moments when he doesn't have to try. In an hour or so, he will be in the bed of his lover, Kate, with a long morning stretched out before them like an empty beach. And, if he's lucky, there will be a moment—or two, or three--without effort, without weight, without thought.

Upstairs, the toilet flushes and Pavlov, their Westie, sits up. He listens for a moment, then trots away, nails clicking on the ceramic tile. Sighing, Zach sets

aside the sports page, anxious to pass along his instructions and be gone before the sun is fully up. This afternoon, Diane and R.J. will work on R.J.'s science project, making six batches of chocolate chip cookies, each with a different type of fat or fat substitute. Zach has orchestrated this effort, after a call from R.J.'s sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Paulus, in part, to bolster R.J.'s grades. Apparently R.J. has been forgetting to turn in his homework, even the homework he's finished, even the molecule project that Zach spent one whole weekend on, gluing sticky M&Ms to foam board. Still, the news during their parent-teacher conference hadn't been all bad. Mr. Paulus had given them a copy of one R.J.'s poems, which, he said, "showed great promise." Zach, on reading the poem, had ached for his son; the awkward lines showed a purity and naivete that R.J. kept well concealed. Zach had tucked it into his wallet so that he could read it when he needed to be reminded of this.

While he waits for R.J. to come downstairs, Zach retrieves the butter, margarine, Crisco, Parkay and I-Can't-Believe-It's-Not-Butter from the refrigerator and lines them up on the counter to soften. He worries that a temperature variable will creep into the experiment. This is just one of the reasons he shouldn't let Diane and R.J. do this alone: they won't think of it as *science*.

He's scribbling a last-minute note about the applesauce batch— the nonfat substitution--when R.J. shuffles into the kitchen with Pavlov on his heels. He blinks at the lights, then says, "What up, dog?"

"Sup wit' you?" Zach says, relieved that he knows that R.J. is talking to him and not Pavlov. Lately, Zach has been holing up in his office during his lunch

hour—shoving aside half-finished briefs and avoiding the occasional walk-in client—so that he can surf the Net. He studies Ebonics and rap dictionaries, just so that he can reel off these *bon mots* at a moment's notice. Diane, on the other hand, has declared that she simply will not talk to R.J. unless he speaks English.

On his tiptoes, R.J. reaches for a cereal bowl. Pavlov is right beside him, sturdy tail wagging hopefully. A boy and his dog, Zach thinks. And R.J. still so small, not even grown into his teeth. So why is Diane so hard on him; why is it so easy to forget that he's just a boy? He watches R.J. tuck a box of Golden Grahams under his arm, grab a spoon, then open the refrigerator and pull out a gallon of milk. Both hands full now, he shuts the refrigerator with a kick. If Diane were up, she'd be yelling at him, telling him to make two trips. Automatically, Zach takes R.J.'s side.

Damn, he's arguing with Diane already--and she's not even up.

R.J. sits down at the table and begins reading the comics. He hunches over, concentrating, absentmindedly shoveling the cereal in: an eating machine. Zach normally likes to watch his son chow down, feels that at least when he's eating, R.J. is happy and well cared for. This morning, though, he doesn't have time. The furnace timer kicks in, reminding him of how early it is. He thinks of Kate, just a few blocks away, still asleep, tucked under a pile of old quilts. Or maybe she's awake, watching the clock, waiting for him. Zach begins to hum as he sets out six cookie tins. Outside, the sky is just beginning to lighten. It's late October and R.J.'s tree house, half-way up the old oak tree, is clearly visible now that most of the leaves are gone.

“Dad, why are you humming *Puff the Magic Dragon*?”

“Am I?”

“Yeah.” R.J. turns in his chair to look at him. “Are you, like, entering your second childhood?”

“Is that an option? I kinda liked my first one.”

“Ha.” R.J. says. “Shows how much you know.” He turns back to the comics.

Now that Zach knows what he’s humming, the words are a tickertape in his brain: *Little Jackie Paper loved that rascal Puff, and brought him string and ceiling wax, and other fancy stuff ...*

“Hey,” Zach says. “What’s ceiling wax? You ever heard of it?”

“What?”

“Ceiling wax. Is it some kind of caulk? Something they use in England maybe?”

“Who knows?” R.J. rolls his eyes.

Then, with a laugh, Zach realizes it’s *sealing wax*, not *ceiling wax*. His first thought is, *I must tell Diane*. It’s Diane, The Family Storyteller, who used to collect these little anecdotes, embellishing them until they were full-fledged stories. She was particularly fond of wordplay: Afton, at ten, who’d thought the Rolling Stones were singing *I’ll Never Be Your Piece of Curtain*. Or R.J., at four, who’d grown attached to Father Randolph, the priest who worked with his pre-school class. When Father Randolph had filled in for the regular priest at mass one day, R.J. had shouted, “Mommy, Mommy, it’s my father!”

Funny, Zach thinks now, he doesn't remember any of these instances, only her telling of them. And how long has it been since Diane has told a story? Has it been since Afton left? Or since he began his affair with Kate? Zach himself is not sure how these events are related—if, in fact, they are at all—despite the one pretty much leading to the other. He'd begun his affair with Kate—accidentally, he still believes--several months after Afton left for college.

Kate owned the vintage clothing shop, located at street level, two floors below his law offices, where Afton bought most of her clothes. Afton's Christmas list that year had been explicit: only clothes from The Faded Frock. It was while he was buying Afton's gifts that Kate had mentioned her broken water heater. Seven hundred dollars--can you believe it? she'd said, and he knew her worry was genuine. She couldn't have been making much money selling poodle skirts and peignoirs. After work, he'd stopped by her house to take a look--sometimes, he told her, all that's needed is a new thermostat--and things had just, well, happened.

Still, with respect to Diane's unhappiness, Zach wouldn't know where to begin a root cause analysis. And truth be told, he doesn't see the point. After twenty years of marriage, cause is a taproot as thick as his fist, and blame is a thousand tendrils wound around events further back than he can remember.

Finished with his cereal, R.J rinses his bowl in the sink. Eyeing the ingredients Zach has amassed on the counter, he says, "This whole cookie thing is wack, you know."

Zach reacts immediately to the word; these days, everything R.J. doesn't want to do is wack. He almost launches into parentspeak--*What was wack, Dude, was not turning in any of your science homework*--but stops himself just in time. It occurs to him that the whole idea *is* wack. R.J. and Diane, alone together for six hours. There are so many ways for that to go wrong. Zach might clean a dish with the counter sponge; or clean the counter with the dish sponge. Diane might decide that this is the time--while he's a captive audience--to lecture R.J. on his missing homework. R.J. might slip and call something *wack* or *tight*. It's an indication of how desperate Zach is, that he's concocted a plan so clearly doomed.

"Yeah, well," he shrugs, "it's just six batches."

The logistics of having an affair are so difficult that Zach wonders why anyone does this casually. He rarely sees Kate on the weekends, because it requires weeks of intricate preparation. But here he is, on a Saturday morning, planning to drive five blocks in his restored '67 Mercedes convertible (red)--not exactly a car that *blends* --to see her. He's told Diane that he's playing golf, a tournament, which is meant to explain why she wouldn't know the rest of his foursome. He's devised a science project that will keep his wife and his son busy for the morning. He has his cell phone, so that if he calls home, it won't be Kate's number that displays. (This isn't the time to think about why Diane suddenly needed to get caller ID.) And still, despite his preparation, he feels as if he's forgetting something.

Zach turns his key in the ignition and the pop-punk sounds of Blink 182's *Enema of the State* fill the car. Last night, on the way home from soccer practice, he'd let R.J. play his homemade tape. And, really, it's not terrible music; if he tilts his head just right and focuses on a spot far, far in the distance, he can almost like it. But not this morning. He turns off the tape player and backs out of the driveway.

He hasn't taken the time to warm up the car and the steering wheel feels like cold pipe beneath his hands. Various breezes are circling around him, originating where the canvas top doesn't quite seal. Driving an old convertible anytime except summer is like driving an igloo. Every winter he regrets that he owns one, and every summer he forgets how miserable the winter was. Also, he should have dressed more warmly, instead of leaving the house in just a shirt. He fiddles with the heat, but it blows cold air, so he shuts it off again. He glances at the temperature needle, which is left of cold, so there's no hope of warm air before he reaches Kate's. When he looks up at the road again, there's a small white furry thing--a kitten--darting out from under a minivan parked by the side of the road. He steps on the brakes, but it might be too late; he's not sure if he's been able to avoid running it over. He looks in the rearview mirror and there it is: a white bundle in the middle of the road. "Shit," he says, letting his head fall back on the headrest, "shit, shit, shit." He's still looking in the rearview mirror when he sees the kitten move, then scurry back to the safety of the minivan. Zach's heart, which was beating very fast, slows a little.

He's turning onto Kate's street when he remembers that he has a jacket in his golf bag; he'll get it out when he reaches her house. Then, with a jolt, he realizes that he's *forgotten his golf bag*. He is, ostensibly, playing golf—and his golf clubs are at home, still in his garage. Quickly, he weighs his alternatives: hope that Diane doesn't notice that he's left behind his clubs, or drive back through his neighborhood—it's almost daylight, now—in his conspicuous little red car. He turns the car around.

Back at his house, he leaves the engine running and jumps out of the car, then has to wait for the garage door. He's never noticed before how loud the garage door is when it opens, or how slow. When the door is high enough, he runs in, grabs his clubs and throws them in his trunk. For the first time, he's grateful that Pavlov is such a terrible watchdog. As he backs out of the driveway, he checks for Diane at their bedroom window, but there's no movement behind the curtains. Driving back down his street, he watches the sidewalks for people he knows. He passes an occasional dog-walker, travel mug of coffee clutched in one hand, leash in the other, scooper tucked under the armpit—is there any significance to the fact that they are all men?—but there's no one he recognizes.

Like everything else, this is just too hard.

At Kate's house he has to deal with *her* garage door—she keeps the second bay of her garage open for him—which is old and rotted and groans as he lifts it. She doesn't have an automatic opener, or anything else invented in the last three or four decades. Zach usually finds this charming, but not at the

moment; he feels very exposed, here in the daylight, and makes a mental note to talk her about this.

After parking the car, he hurries through her back yard. Kate's bedroom is at the back of the house in what was probably once a breakfast room; it's round and full of windows and looks to have been added at the same time as the porch off the kitchen. These additions give the back of the house an off-kilter look, not so much eccentric as who-gives-a-damn—which, now that he thinks about it, suits Kate. He can easily imagine the previous owner strolling through his backyard and suddenly deciding that what it really needs is--yes, of course!--a bulging breakfast nook; in the same way that Zach's watched Kate get dressed in the morning, pulling clothes out of her closet without looking, not at all concerned about whether or not they match. Afton, one of Kate's best customers, says that Kate has good fashion sense; but so far as Zach can tell, it's just luck.

He raps on Kate's window, then goes to the back door and waits for her to open it. She unlocks the door, then turns around to go back to bed, allowing Zach to let himself in. He follows her, catching up when she stops in the doorway of her bedroom and takes off her robe. She hangs it on the door, then crosses the room, naked, and crawls into bed. Her body is slim and pale and familiar. Watching her, Zach stops worrying about whether Diane heard him come back for his golf clubs, forgets about how many people may have seen him on his way here, can't remember why he was ever concerned about six batches of chocolate chip cookies. He takes off his pants and drapes them over the door of the

armoire, then hangs his shirt on a doorknob. When he's naked, Kate holds out her arms to him.

He slides into bed with her, covering her with his body. Without makeup she's fair and freckled, seeming much younger than the thirty-three he knows her to be. She's warm, the bed is warm, and he touches his cold hand to her cheek. Her skin feels soft and powdery. She smiles and lifts her head to kiss him. Osmosis, he thinks. Heat transfer. She warms him; he cools her. Hot meets cold; cold meets hot. Soon he and Kate are both warm, so the cold must be somewhere else, out there, beyond this bed. He imagines her strange, circular room is an ice floe, feels it begin to melt, hears the groan as it breaks away from land and floats away.

Zach wakes to an empty bed. He finds Kate upstairs, in the room she uses as an office. She's at the computer, the one modern device-- besides a microwave--she allows in her home. When he lets himself dream, he imagines all the improvements he would make to Kate's house if they were living together. He would start with the stove--the one Kate has doesn't work--and then proceed to central air, an automatic garage door opener, a finished basement. It would be fun, helping her with all of this. But this vision of the future is like the city of Oz glistening in the distance; the problem is he can't see a path through the poppies.

When Kate doesn't look up, Zach circles the desk to come up behind her. He wraps his arms around her shoulders and rests his chin on her head. She's showered, and her damp hair smells of flowers and vanilla.

Kate says, "I thought you'd never wake up." He glances at the clock: already ten. He should be home by two.

"I love sleeping in your bed," he tells her.

As she scribbles a few numbers on a notepad, she says, "You might consider doing it more often." Then, as if she doesn't want an argument, she immediately points to the monitor. Her best vintage clothing is purchased through contacts on the Internet. "So, what do you think of this dress?" It's a plain beige dress with a striped vest. The model is wearing a stocking cap, the kind elves wear at Christmas.

"How much?"

"Three thousand."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Kate Hepburn wore it in *The Philadelphia Story*."

He kisses her neck, whispers in her ear, "With the stocking cap?"

"*With* the stocking cap."

"You know, it's a wonder you make any money at all." He tugs at her arms, trying to lift her away from the desk.

"Funny," she says. But she lets herself be lifted.

They're in bed again when the phone rings. It's only when he tells Kate to ignore it that Zach notices that the sound isn't coming from her bedside phone. In fact, it's the kind of high-pitched ring that sounds out of place, anachronistic even, in Kate's home. Finally, after three or four rings, a worrisome notion penetrates his cloud of contentment, and he realizes that it's his *cell phone*.

His adrenaline kicks in.

He tries to leap out of bed to get the phone, but his feet get tangled in the sheets. He reaches down to unwind them, and nearly topples backwards off the bed. When he twists his body around and finally gets his feet on the floor, his ankle gives way. Hopping, he tries to find the phone, then remembers it's in his pants' pocket. By the time he's found his pants and fished out his cell phone, it's stopped ringing.

The number displayed is his home phone.

His first thought is that Diane knows where he is, what he's up to, that she's on her way over. Someone saw him opening Kate's garage door or letting himself in the back door. Or Diane heard him come back for his golf clubs. As these thoughts race through his head, he's already looking around for somewhere to hide—only half-aware of how closely this resembles slapstick--when he realizes that the person on the other end isn't Diane, it's R.J.

Diane would have called Kate's number--she'd be looking for confrontation, for corroboration. Only R.J. would have called *him*.

"Who was it?" Zach can tell by Kate's voice, which has grown even deeper, that she's already guessed.

He barely registers her question. Sitting down on the bed, he lets Kate take the phone from him. She reads the number displayed, then sets the phone down on her bedside table.

"Zach, talk to me. What's going on?"

He waits for the phone to ring again. Surely if it were an emergency, R.J. would call back? When it doesn't ring, he begins to relax slightly.

He turns to Kate, who is staring at the phone as if it is something alien, as unexpected and unwelcome, here in her Ohio bedroom, as radioactive waste. "What do you want to know?" he asks, although he wishes she would be quiet so that he can think.

"Who called?"

"I don't know. Probably R.J." He should never have forced R.J. to do this project with Diane. It was an ambush.

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Zach, talk to me. I'm in this too." Of course she is, but what about their *understanding*: the promises to avoid, the confidences to keep, and, most of all, the things to never discuss. Did he make that up?

He tries to find a way to explain his behavior, stutters through a number of starts: "R.J. and his mother--I left him--R.J.'s--"

Kate pulls her knees up to her chest and circles them with her arms. "R.J.'s what?" she asks.

Bruisable, he wants to say. *R.J. is still bruisable*. Instead, he says, "He's alone with his mother. They don't get along."

He can practically see her thinking, trying to find a way into the problem. Her mouth opens several times, as if she's about to say something, then she

stops. Finally, she says, “You never talk about him. Why don’t they get along? What’s R.J. like?”

Impossible to explain. Somewhere along the line R.J. has stopped being a list of accomplishments—*He walks, he talks, he ties his shoes!*—and has become an enigma. A complicated person. Zach searches again for the words, but none come. Then, unable to think of any other way to make her understand, he pulls out his wallet and hands her R.J.’s poem. He crawls over her, so that now they’re sitting side by side, then leans back against the headboard to watch her read.

I AM: A Collection of Mixed Thoughts

by R.J. McKenna

I AM a curious boy who likes to fly

I PRETEND that I am invisible

I WONDER why people can’t love each other

I FEEL electricity flow through my body

I DREAM about being so high in the sky

I TOUCH a cloud and it is cold

I UNDERSTAND that I have to go to school

I SAY that I am bored all the time

I HOPE that people can get along

I AM a curious boy who likes to fly

Zach waits for her verdict, vulnerable, afraid that to a stranger's eyes R.J. will seem weird. Like the kind of boy who makes pipe bombs in the basement.

She tosses the paper aside. "Jesus." He can't see her face, but her voice sounds hard.

Annoyed by her reaction, he says, "Why does that piss you off?"

She looks at him now and he sees that she's crying. "It doesn't piss me off," she says, and suddenly Zach's so proud he's ready to run out into the yard—never mind that he's naked--pumping his arms like Rocky. *Hoohah*. A poem written by his son has moved Kate to tears.

Still, he didn't mean to hurt her, and he knows that he has, although he's less sure of how or why. "Kate," he says helplessly, "you wanted to know."

Now she's crying harder. He reaches over and puts his arms around her. "So, what should I do?" he asks.

She pushes his arms away. "Don't do that. Don't ask me to make this decision for you."

He pulls away from her, lets his head flop back against the headboard. "Kate—"

"Don't abdicate. Don't ask *me* to be the one to tell *you* that there's only one thing worth considering."

"There is?" He'll be goddamned if he knows what it is.

It isn't as if he hasn't given this any thought. He has. Lots. In fact, he rarely *stops* thinking about it, looking for the way out where nobody gets hurt and nobody gets blamed. It's not an easy thing, trying to define and come to terms

with words like *sin* and *sacrifice*. For a while he'd held out hope, when Diane began seeing a therapist, that *she* would leave *him*. But even then, he'd had misgivings about what a shared custody arrangement might mean for R.J.. (Afton he's never had to worry about.) The best scenario he can come up with—the only one in which no one *really* gets hurt—is, he readily admits, ridiculous. In it, Kate marries a rich and busy man—a cardiologist, perhaps—who ignores and neglects her. After a while, she begins to call Zach when she's lonely —and vice-versa— and they remain linked, lovers forever, until death parts them.

He knows better than to suggest this.

Now, side by side on the bed, their bodies aren't touching. To Zach, this absence of contact seems strange. He wants to reach out and stroke Kate's hair: change the subject. Stop her from speaking. But she's staring straight ahead, and even in profile he can see her slumped shoulders, her slack mouth. She's tired—of him, of his indecision.

Kate points to the poem, facedown on the floor by her bed. "Him. Just worry about him."

"What?" It's not what he wants to hear. This is her great revelation? Does she think he doesn't know this? He gets out of bed and starts pacing. "You don't even know R.J.. You read one lousy poem and now you're an expert? How do you know what's best? How to protect him?" He pauses, knowing that what he's going to say next will hurt her. He says it anyway. "How do you know what it's like to have a son?"

Kate seems to crumple. She draws her legs back into her chest and lays her head on top of her knees.

“Christ, I’m sorry,” Zach says. “That was unforgivable. I didn’t mean—“

The phone rings again, startling them both. Zach walks over to the bedside table, and looks at the number displayed on his cell phone.

He already knows it will be his own.

WHAT ZACH WON'T DO

Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years. A temporal safety zone, if you will. No need to make decisions now. Not necessary to draw conclusions. Divorce and her seven-letter cousin, Custody, they're big words. They can wait. Zach said and I agreed: *Let's just get through the holidays. For the children.*

Easier said than done, I'm thinking, as I set the Thanksgiving turkey in the sink and pull the giblets out of its bony cavity. A twenty-four-pound turkey, it's far too large for my family of four. But somehow I couldn't tell my poulterer at the Eastside Market—such a sweet, confused, strangely-dressed old man, with his orange tennis shoes year-round—how our numbers have diminished. My parents in Arizona, my sister and I estranged, Zach's father dead, his mother in a nursing home.

That's where Zach is this morning, visiting his mother. Sitting in the atrium chapel of the Eliza Jennings nursing home, turning his mother's hymnal pages, her hands so knobby and arthritic she can no longer hold a book. Or so he says.

I shove a fistful of stuffing deep into the cavity of the bird. There is enough Grand Marnier apricot stuffing here to feed a score of people; really more, because no one in my family will touch it. *Eeew*, my twelve-year-old son, R.J., will say. *What are these little orange things? Pancreas of oriole? Pickled worm brains?* Afton, my twenty-one-year-old daughter, will be silently calculating the calories. Pork sausage. Tick. Slivered almonds. Tick. Dried apricots. Tick. And

Zach. Yes, Zach. It's hard to know anymore *what* he likes. We've long since abandoned honesty.

As if to prove my point, Afton enters the kitchen, and looks over my shoulder. "Mom," she says, "why do you bother?" Hands on hips, she inspects the array of pots on the stove, then lifts the lid on one of them. The aroma of onions and something vaguely sweet fills the air. Pavlov, dozing on a rug by my feet, sits up, sensing opportunity. Afton leans toward the pot, sniffs, then looks at me questioningly.

"Yam soup," I say.

"Huh." She puts the lid back on the pot.

Why, indeed.

She fumbles in the refrigerator bin for a grapefruit. "How did you sleep?" she asks, and I wonder—not for the first time—from whom she's learned her morning etiquette. Certainly not from me and Zach, who rarely talk, and never in the morning. I tell her I slept fine. "Do you need me to pick up anything on my way home?" she asks. She pulls out a yogurt carton, reads the label, puts it back. The stove timer beeps—my cranberry bread—and I place my hand briefly on the small of her back to let her know I'm behind her, as I reach in the cabinet next to the refrigerator for toothpicks. Afton shuts the refrigerator, leans against the counter, watching me. "Like," she says, "maybe an army?" With the oven door open, I poke at the bread. Sweet breads baffle me. Doughy to dry is like zero to sixty in a Ferrari. Steam begins to gather around the edges of the window over the sink while I deliberate.

“Army, navy, whatever,” I reply absentmindedly. I shut the oven door. “I’m going to give it another minute or two,” I say, then set the timer for five. “And, Afton,”—I resume stuffing the turkey—“don’t bring home any animals this time.” When she came home in May declaring that her new major was pre-vet, Zach and I were both concerned. After all, this is the girl who cried for two days when we put the old Formica kitchen table out on the curb. How would she handle putting animals down? It was Zach’s idea that she work as a veterinarian’s assistant during her vacations to get a more realistic view of the profession. And how has she been handling the work? So far, not well. It’s the kittens mostly; the ones that are dropped off at night in cardboard boxes.

“Okay, no animals.” She sits at the kitchen table, slices her grapefruit, sprinkles it lightly with sugar. “I’m thinking about becoming a vegetarian,” she says.

“Today?”

“Well, if I feel really strongly about it, it would be hypocritical to wait, wouldn’t it?”

That’s the thing about Afton, she can be so goddamned earnest.

“What kind?” I hope I sound more patient than I feel. “There are different kinds aren’t there? Vegan? Lacto-something? Ovo ... whatever? I think you should know what kind.”

“I just know that I can’t eat anything with a face ever again. Not after what I’ve seen.”

Lordy.

“So when do you think you’ll be home?” I ask. The animal emergency hospital, she tells me, is as busy on holidays as the human ER.

“I’ll need to stay until at least four, I think.” There’s a whoop from upstairs, accompanied by the sound of what must be computer-simulated intergalactic death. Afton catches my eye, nods in the direction of R.J.’s room. “Doesn’t he ever come out anymore?” she asks, and I feel the morning’s first real twinge of pain. R.J.’s been avoiding me, sliding along walls like a crab, ever since we teamed—disastrously—on his science project. Lately I’m amazed at how, in this household, even the smallest event can go bad. I know much of it has to do with my simmering frustration, my anger with Zach, my unhappiness with the way things are, my fear of the way things will be. I’ve become dangerous, prone to fearsome pyrotechnic displays, and R.J. is usually the spark that sets me off.

“That should be fine,” I say, ignoring her question about R.J. “I’m not sure when your father is planning to come home, but dinner will be ready around six.”

Afton doesn’t ask where her father is. She scoops out the last section of grapefruit, eats it, then sets her plate in the sink. “What will you do today?” she asks, as she grabs her coat and purse. Her tone is light—polite—but she’s watching me closely. She wants me to be self-actualized, or at least to announce the day’s adventure, the way I used to do when she and R.J. were little. *Darlings! Today we’re going to go to the grocery store and buy Spaghetti-Os! Your favorite! Then we’ll go to the park and swing on the swings!*

I state the obvious: “I guess I’ll be cooking.”

She gives a half-shrug of disapproval. I haven't worked for twelve years, not since we moved into this house. Before that I was an English teacher, but when Zach's law practice began taking off, I quit. At school, Afton's been infected with feminism; she takes women's studies classes and tells me, when she comes home, that I'm an indentured servant. The thing is, I like to cook. There's an old saying—put in good, come out good. Start with the best ingredients, follow the recipe, and the results are predictable. I like that.

“Have a good day,” I say, watching her collect the car keys from the hook by the door. She's beautiful and smart and good, as near perfection as Zach and I are ever likely to attain. The sadness I'm feeling must be in my voice, because, hand on knob, she turns back with a look of concern. For a moment she seems ready to run back and give me a hug, the way she did when she was little. But sympathy from my daughter is not something I'm ready for, and I step back in alarm. Pavlov—underfoot again—yelps.

Most people have experienced that series of moments—during a car accident, for example—that expand and slow and stratify, so that it's possible to think of several things at once and quite calmly. Several years ago I tripped on a can of paint at the top of the basement stairs and during that moment when I first pitched forward and the split second it took to hurtle to the basement floor, there was time to think, *So. This is it. This is what it all comes down to.* And while I was thinking this, I was able to orient myself in the air, tuck my legs into a cannonball position, picture the things at the bottom of the stairs I needed to avoid, and wonder who would find my broken body.

This is how time expands before the breakup of a twenty-year marriage, when love that was one-sided to begin with has long since died and there are children to consider: So.

This is it.

The potatoes have come to a boil while I've been thinking this, and water is splashing over the rim of the pot and sizzling on the burner. Steam has filled the kitchen and the windows have turned opaque. The doorbell rings, startling me, and wine sloshes from my glass. I know it's only ten o'clock, but I am in need of vices. I may learn to smoke. Cigars. Big, fat, smelly ones I'll order from a connoisseur catalog.

Jessica, my next door neighbors' ten-year-old daughter, is at the door.

"Did you know that you have a chair in your tree?" she asks.

We do, and I recognize it. Someone went to great trouble to hoist the neighborhood La-Z-Boy, upholstered in Cleveland Browns tee-shirts, into our maple tree. It's perched—precariously, it looks to me—twelve feet up on a makeshift plywood platform. This chair has been making the rounds for years. People have found it on their roof, in their garage, in their swimming pool (drained), and in their living room when they return from vacation. When you get it, you own it until you can find a way to get rid of it.

"Tag," I say and shrug. "We're it." Now there's going to be a La-Z-Boy in the garage where a car should be, and dear god, who can find the energy for this sort of prank? As I shut the front door, I wonder: If Zach weren't living here, would we still have been next on the rotation? Without him, would I be included in

the neighborhood's goings-on? Could I even afford to live here? Thinking these things, my jaw clenches. It's Thanksgiving, I remind myself, these things can wait.

In the kitchen, R.J. is emptying a box of Little Debbie's into his pockets.

"Whoa there," I say. "Not for breakfast." Then, trying to soften things a bit, I ask, "How's the game going? Are you winning?" He gives me a look that clearly tells me I'm pathetic. He's right. I don't know what I'm talking about. The truth is, I never know what to say to him.

He ignores me while he bangs open cupboard doors, trying to find something to eat. On the second pass through, he seems to settle on cereal. He pulls a box of Golden Grahams out of one cupboard and grabs a bowl from another. Then he pours milk into the bowl until it reaches the rim. Watching him pour, I have to bite my tongue to keep from yelling at him. But when he starts to carry the bowl across the kitchen, making for the stairs and his bedroom, I have to say something.

"Stop!" Would it be awful to admit that right now even the way he looks annoys me? Everything about him is in disarray. His jeans don't fit properly and his tee-shirt hangs down to his knees. His feet are too big for his body. Even his face has lost the even neatness of childhood.

He stops, and milk sloshes from both sides of his bowl. "First of all," I tell him, "you should be eating that in the kitchen. And secondly, your bowl is too full. You're going to get milk everywhere."

"So?"

“So there’s nothing harder than getting the smell of sour milk out of carpet.”

“So?”

“So I’m the one that has to clean up the mess. And all you have to do to prevent it is empty your bowl a little.”

“So?”

I want to—as my mother used to say to me—wipe that smirk right off his face. But the phone rings and he is saved. Afton is calling to ask if she can bring home a guest, someone whose cat swallowed dental floss and doesn’t have anywhere to go for Thanksgiving dinner. Only Afton could find someone to adopt for the day so quickly. While we’re talking, R.J. walks to the sink and pours some of his milk out, then leaves the room without looking at me. I hear him run up the stairs and know that, of course, there will be milk spilled on the carpet.

I take a deep breath. It was a typical exchange between mother and son. Anyone listening would agree. So why are my hands shaking?

Dominick, Afton’s stray, is an appreciative guest. “What a glorious room! What a feast!” he exclaims, as Afton ushers him into the dining room. In his fifties, still handsome, if a little jowly, a little puffy around the eyes, he is the kind of man who can get away with speaking in exclamation points. Or so it seems to me. Zach, standing at the head of the table and beginning to carve the turkey, raises his eyebrows at the word *glorious*.

R.J. snorts. Sitting on Zach’s left, he looks as if he just stepped out of a Norman Rockwell painting—somehow Zach has gotten him to comb his hair and change into a clean shirt—and he wears the pained expression of a boy being

forced to sit through his sister's piano recital. A weird déjà vu sensation settles on my stomach and flutters there as past, present, and future collide and I remember this from somewhere—the raised eyebrow, the snort. A series of scenes with these gestures runs through my mind, and suddenly I know that our plan for a holiday reprieve—*Let's just get through the holidays!*—is in jeopardy and we're fooling ourselves if we think we're in control, or that families (and marriage) are anything other than a runaway train.

“Did you cook all of this, Diane?” Dominick asks.

He's oblivious. I usually consider this a character flaw; now I'm praying for it.

I tell him I have, it wasn't much trouble, Thanksgiving is an easy meal, how can anyone mess up turkey? He notices everything and comments enthusiastically. The Wedgewood dinner service: exquisite. The yam soup with cardamom cream: luscious. The hand-plastered celadon walls: radiant. (Zach has always called the color of these walls “bottled hangover.”) Before I know it, everyone has been served and I'm telling him about being first alternate on the Olympic synchronized swim team twenty-five years ago.

Afton has changed for dinner and is wearing what she calls her LBD (little black dress). It's vintage Chanel. She's forsaken her usual ponytail and her hair is down and brushed to a shine. Dominick tells her she looks like a young Catherine Deneuve and she tosses her head back when she laughs. I've rarely seen her so animated. The energy between them is charged—sexual, even—and I think, *Oh no*.

R.J. tosses his head back and laughs, imitating Afton.

Afton says, “Cretin,” and flicks her hair from her shoulder.

R.J. flicks imaginary hair from his shoulder.

“Stop that!”

“I’m so beautiful,” R.J. says, hand on forehead, heroine-style. “I’m soooo beautiful I *drool* with beauty!”

“R.J.!”

“Ignore him,” I tell her, although it’s hard. A gob of spit is slowly rolling down his chin and will soon be swaying over his plate.

I try to catch Zach’s eye, to communicate telepathically that it’s time for him to be bad cop. But Zach’s watching R.J., and anyway he’s a sucker for gross humor. Here’s a little ditty he taught both kids to prepare them for kindergarten: *You pick your nose, you belch, you drool, you constantly are scratching. I don’t know what your problem is, but I hope that it’s not catching.*

“It’s a long story,” I tell Dominick, with a what-can-you-do-that-won’t-make-it-worse shrug.

Now I have Zach’s attention. “Go on, tell it, Diane,” he says. It’s an anecdote I’ve often told at dinner parties—sans real drool—and one of Zach’s favorites.

“That’s okay,” I say. “You go ahead.”

Zach is at his benevolent best. “Well, you guys are going to have to help me with the details.” He takes a deep breath. “Okay. When Afton was—what?—nine? Ten?”

“Nine,” Afton says, helpfully.

“—she and her friends decided to enter the Miss Old Fashioned beauty contest.”

“They don’t have Old Fashioned Day anymore,” Afton says. “It used to be a festival downtown. They blocked off Main Street and there were games and stuff.”

“Let Dad tell it!” R.J. says.

“Well, that’s right,” Zach says. “They blocked off Main Street. Anyway, Afton and her friends entered this contest and they were all doing pretty well, but it looked like Afton had it cinched. Even back then she had a thing for clothes, and she spent weeks searching for the right dress. Diane had to drive her to every vintage clothing store in the state. Finally she decided on a little pink flapper number, with fringe that shimmied around her knees when she walked. For the talent part of the show she was going to dance the Charleston. Well, it came down to three finalists and Afton was one of them. So were two of her best friends. And backstage while they were getting ready for their performances, they got to thinking and talking and wondering what it would be like when one of them won and the other two didn’t. So they all decided to throw the talent portion. The first girl came out and sang *Send in the Clowns* a little off key. The second girl played the drums with one hand. Then it was Afton’s turn. She walked to the front of the dais—calmly—she definitely got points for poise—and said, very slowly, very distinctly, ‘I drooooool with beauty.’ Then she started to drool. Like this.” And Zach demonstrates Afton’s award-winning drool.

Dominick hoots. “I drool with beauty. I must remember that. And did you win?” he asks Afton.

“I came in third, which was almost like winning,” she says. “I did the worst.”

I’m amazed at how well Zach has told this story, that he remembered details like the color of Afton’s dress. Out of the corner of my eye I watch him wipe his mouth with his napkin. He enjoys this anarchy—drooling at the dining room table!—almost as much as R.J. He’s a cool dad, a hip dad, a dad who raps with the songs on the radio and says, *I’m Audi 5000* instead of goodbye when he leaves the house.

Now Dominick is telling us about his brother, a world-class belcher and not untalented spitter. There is a manic energy around the table, each one trying to top the other.

“Oh, and what about the pink marshmallows in the toilet?” Afton says. This is a familiar story. When R.J. was about six and sick with the measles, I bought a bag of strawberry marshmallows for him. He loves marshmallows, and I don’t like him to eat them. Pure sugar. But he was sick and I thought the pink marshmallows would be a special treat. But he didn’t like them, and ended up trying to flush them down the toilet.

“I looked down and there they were,” Zach is saying, “like fairy turds, all pink and fluffy ...”

Afton is laughing so hard wine is sloshing out of her glass. “And they were there for weeks! Floating! Who knew it took them so long to dissolve?”

“Remember how they turned orange when you peed on them?” R.J. asks. You can just see how much he loves to say *pee* at the table. “Especially first thing in the morning? That was dope.”

Afton wrinkles her nose. “Gross! You are so gross!”

“Why especially in the morning?” Dominick asks. He’s really trying to follow this.

“You know,” R.J. says, “in the morning, pee’s more concentrated.”

“What about the nice pink pillow they made when you—” Zach says.

“Yuck!” Afton wrinkles her nose. “Dad!”

Just one of my problems: I’ve never been able to practice this sort of scatological one-upmanship. I feel as if I’m in a movie. I’m a character who’s dead and come back to earth, like Spencer Tracy in *A Guy Named Joe*. No one can see or hear me, but I exist.

“I don’t understand,” Dominick asks. “Why didn’t you just fish the marshmallows out of the toilet?”

Everyone is silent for a moment. No one has ever thought to ask this question before. In the hall, our grandfather clock signals the quarter hour—*Hark to the chimes*—adding an artificial significance to Dominick’s question. After what seems like an unusually long lull, Afton says, “Who would touch them? Would you?”

“And,” Zach jumps in, “you have to understand. They were kind of an experiment. You couldn’t help but wonder how long they were going to last.”

“What about you, Diane?” Dominick asks. I look around the table. Afton’s head is thrown back in laughter, her long hair gliding down her back. R.J. is nearly out of control, moving spastically, his face a bright pink. Zach is tilted back in his chair and tears of laughter are gathering among his crow’s feet.

Watching him, I wonder if it’s his training as an attorney that allows him—unlike me—to be so comfortable, so able to ignore things while they pend. And *impend*. Or could it be that he’s chicken? Or just playing chicken? (*Chicken*: Another seven-letter word.) Looked at one way, it’s a gift, this ability to live in the moment. Looked at another, it’s paralysis, a way of never being wrong, of never needing to make a decision. It seems to me that this, more than anything, is the biggest difference between us. If it’s true—and I wish it wasn’t true—that neither of our children was an “accident” as I’ve claimed, would this, as Zach once told me, *change everything*? If they were unaccidents, but also unplanned—sort of a gamble: the first to catch, the second to keep—would this, as I sometimes wonder, make me a terrible person? Or could you argue that someone, at some point, has to be responsible for making a decision? Even if it’s the wrong one? And if it’s true that I trapped him, it’s equally true that I’ve trapped myself.

“What about me?” I repeat, trying to refocus on the conversation. Slowly, I move the mashed potatoes around on my plate, stalling. “Actually, I don’t remember being bothered by them. Then again, I don’t use the children’s bathroom.” It doesn’t seem to be the time to discuss one of the lessons of motherhood: How to pick your battles. “And anyway,” I add, “sometimes you have to let nature take its course.”

Even I'm not sure what I mean by that, but Dominick seems satisfied. "I'll drink to that," he says, lifting his glass. He is, I notice, drinking water. "To nature taking its course!"

"To pink marshmallows in the toilet!" Zach says, lifting his glass as well.

"Hear! Hear!" Afton says, and clicks her glass against Dominick's.

Over his wine, Zach looks at me, and for the moment, he's no longer performing. He looks tired and sad. After a moment I raise my glass, too, in salute. At least, where the children are concerned, he tries.

"I know I'm going to regret asking this, but—" Dominick looks around the table, "Why were the marshmallows there in the first place?"

Silence. Another question no one has ever thought to ask. Now everyone is looking at R.J. "Well, duh," he says in a too loud voice. "I don't like strawberry marshmallows." He's tipped his chair back on two legs—copying his father—and is holding onto the table to keep balance. He's rocking ever so slightly. I picture him toppling backwards and taking the tablecloth and everything on it down with him.

Zach says quickly, "You know how it is. Kids do strange things. And anyway, why does anyone do anything?" He looks over at Afton and winks. "Why did we catch Afton eating peanut brittle while she was sleepwalking?"

Dominick says to Afton, "You were a sleepwalker? You never told me—"

Afton glances quickly at me. Dominick, seeing this, stops and looks at me too. I pour myself another glass of wine, giving no indication I've heard any of this. The sloshing of liquid against glass is amplified, like the sound in a beer

commercial. Afton, I notice, hasn't eaten any turkey. As always, her plate is orderly, each helping separate and distinct. She doesn't like different foods to touch each other.

Dominick returns to his original line of questioning, "But that doesn't answer the question. Why not just throw them away?"

R.J., who is overexcited, doesn't know what to say. When he gets like this he's incapable of reflection. The question—and his inability to answer it—flusters him. And I'm thinking, *Why did* he flush the marshmallows? Was he afraid of me even then? Afraid of hurting my feelings? Was this when things started to go wrong? Obviously, somewhere along the line I missed some signals, but pink marshmallows? Come on.

With so much attention trained on him, R.J. grows more and more agitated. He rocks further and further back in his chair. Suddenly he tips forward and sets his elbows down on the table. One of them catches the lip of his plate and it flips over. Turkey and gravy and mashed potatoes cover his lap. The plate clatters to the floor and breaks.

"Goddamnit, R.J.!" I yell, and Zach sends me a warning look. R.J. shrinks into his chair, seems to grow smaller. He can't be more than six now. I want to sit him on my lap, read him a story, make him Spaghetti-Os. Redo or undo the last six years.

I've gone over it and over it. Like tongue to the hole left by a missing tooth, I can't leave it be. R.J. and I alone in the kitchen, baking cookies for his ridiculous

science project, a comparison of fats and fat substitutes. Afton back at college. Zach spending the day with his mistress. Oh, my feelings about that are complicated. Our carefully constructed life dangling over the edge of a cliff while Zach holds on with one finger. Barely. He's sloppy, wants to be caught. But even more than that, his method enrages me, validates my deeply held belief that men will concoct wild-ass lies, suffer untold humiliation, live in indefinite conflict, all in order to avoid making a decision.

They leave that to women.

But the day of the science project. Certainly I was angry that Zach was forcing my hand. Maybe that had something to do with it. Also, the science project was Zach's idea. R.J.'s grades had been slipping and Zach had come up with this idea for extra credit. But where was he when it came down to getting it done? Before we'd even started, R.J. was already well along the belligerency scale. Starting with the first batch, he wouldn't listen to me when I explained that there's a reason the ingredients are listed in a certain order. The butter and sugar need to be creamed, then the eggs added. The flour, baking soda, and salt need to be mixed in a separate bowl. He ignored me and instead dumped everything into the mixer and turned it on high. Flour spurted everywhere. Little gobs of butter and egg spattered the counter and cabinets. I turned off the mixer. *Look*, I yelled. *Look what you've done!* I wet a sponge and began wiping down the cabinets, my hand moving in furious circles. R.J. stood with his arms crossed and watched me. Then he reached over and turned the mixer back on. *I don't care!*

he screamed at me. *I just want to get this fucking thing over, so I can be Audi 5000!*

I gripped his shoulders, which were narrow and bony and shook as hard as I could. He wasn't resisting me then. He'd gone limp as a dishrag. His head flopped back and forth, like that time when Afton was a baby, such a colicky baby. I'd pick her up, she'd cry. I'd set her down, she'd cry. In her swing, she'd cry. Taking a bath, she'd cry. Unless you've been through it, you can't know what it's like to spend hour after hour, day after day, week after week with a baby who won't stop screaming. *I can't help you*, I'd whisper into her neck. *I don't know what to do*. Then, once, I picked her up and shook her. *Stop!* I screamed into her red squinched face. *Please, please stop!* It wasn't until the English nanny went on trial that I realized the damage I could have done. And I was shaking R.J. like that, the way I couldn't shake Zach. *Listen to me!* I screamed. *Why can't you ever listen to me!* But if he hadn't heard me before, he was even further away now.

He was unreachable.

"Kids," Dominick says now. "They're work."

"You have children?" Dominick is helping me with the dishes. The table's been cleared, the broken dish thrown away. Zach has taken R.J. outside to work on getting the La-Z-Boy out of the tree—and I've sent Afton out to supervise. I don't know how they plan to get the chair down, but I'm hoping she'll be able to keep someone from being killed in the process.

"In California with their mother," Dominick says. "Now I have a cat."

"So you really do have a cat? And it really swallowed dental floss?"

“Yeah, her name’s Shiloh. She didn’t swallow dental floss, though. She had a bad case of anal sacculitis last July. She was in a bad way for a while.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say. Since July!

“You know, I feel pathetic when I talk about that damn cat, but I love her. When I was going through my divorce and I was drinking way too much, she was all I had to keep me alive. You can pretty much drink yourself to death when you own a wine store. It got so I couldn’t get out of bed, I just kept a bowl by my bed to throw up in. And my cat, she started bringing me things. I had a box of winter stuff in the spare bedroom. Hats and mittens and stuff like that. Well, she started emptying that box. All day, she brought me things. She covered my bed. I don’t know what she was thinking. It must have been a little like boiling water when someone’s having a baby. You don’t know why you’re doing it, but you need to do something. I think she was panicking and didn’t know how to help. So she covered me with outerwear.”

I’m rinsing off the turkey platter, which is too big to fit into the dishwasher. “That’s so sad. All Pavlov’s ever brought me is a chewed-up shoe.”

“Maybe that’s all you ever needed.”

“Good lord,” I say. “Did Afton bring you here to practice dime-store psychology on her mother?”

“No, I’m just saying that pets know more than we think they do. So do kids.”

He’s a nice man. A little strange and too old for my daughter, but nice. I relent. “I know. When R.J. was a baby he could always tell what I was thinking. If I was upset when I was breastfeeding him, he’d reach up with his little hand and

stroke my cheek. His fingers were so soft.” I put the platter on top of the refrigerator and lean against the counter. “I’ve never in my life known anything as gentle.”

And now, in front of a stranger, I do what I’ve been trying not to do all day: I start to cry.

Once, on a flight to L.A., Zach and I were seated with a boy whose mother was in first class. There was a lot of harrumphing from Zach, as I recall. But I thought, Good for her! What mother hasn’t wished, at one time or another, that she could send all that need, all that noise, all those mind-numbing questions to the back of the plane? Close the curtain. Another bloody Mary, please. And perhaps a pillow when you have a chance?

The boy was eight or nine. Sitting in the window seat next to me, he never said anything during the entire flight. Never went to the bathroom, either. The comparison with our children was inevitable. He seemed mesmerized by the view outside the window. The clouds moved past us quickly, as they do when you’re traveling a thousand miles an hour, providing an ever-changing landscape of shapes. I thought maybe he was playing the cloud game, something I played often with the kids when they were little. Its main virtue is that it can be played anywhere—as long as there are clouds, and there usually are—and it’s free. Now, inside the plane, a flash version of the game was possible: cat, house, cow, frog, pear, rose. I played along silently with the boy, reeling off shapes, trying to keep up with the clouds.

After dinner they showed a movie, *The English Patient*. The boy bought a headset—and who was I to suggest that the material might be inappropriate? It was during the part where Ralph Fiennes carries his lover's body out of the cave that the boy's mother emerged from first class. She walked unsteadily down the aisle, using the seatbacks to pull herself along. I thought she might be headed for the bathroom, but she stopped at our row. Not sure what she wanted, I took my headset off so that I could hear what she said. The boy, I noticed, didn't. Beside me, Zach radiated annoyance. She was blocking his view of the movie. She wore a tight, low-cut dress, and when she leaned over to whisper to her boy, her breasts were all I could see. *I was once loved like that*, she told him.

Since then, I've often wondered about that boy. Did he hear her? When he's older, what will he remember of that day? Her unsteady walk, the smell of alcohol on her breath? How embarrassed he was by her cleavage? Will he ask himself why they weren't seated together and think her a bad mother? Will he forgive her? When he thinks of her, will he ever think of her as a woman—a woman with problems, yes—but still ... a woman?

The La-Z-Boy comes down the way I thought it would. I'm wiping my eyes with a dirty napkin when we hear the crash. (Dominick, bless him, has ignored my tears.) When there are no accompanying screams, I relax.

"Son of a gun. No one got hurt," I say to Dominick. "Let's go take a look."

The chair's a little mangled, but basically okay. Zach is still in the tree and Afton is maneuvering the ladder to get it closer to him.

"Where's R.J.?" I ask, hugging myself to keep warm.

“He’s around,” Zach says.

“Around where?” It’s dark out, but the streetlight sheds enough light. I turn around in a circle, surveying the neighborhood. He’s not here.

“Dad told him to get out of the way. Maybe he went inside,” Afton says.

“I don’t think so.” But I check anyway.

R.J. isn’t in his room, or in the garage, or in the basement, or anywhere else in the house. I knew he wouldn’t be.

He’s run away.

In the cold and silence, I wait. A stray leaf or two scurries across the walk, but nothing else on our street moves. My breath condenses and I count—one ... two ... three ... four—as it dissipates into the air around it. The La-Z-Boy has ended up on our front porch and I’m bundled in blankets on top of it. A glass of wine and the portable phone are on the table next to me. Dominick is patrolling the neighborhood on foot; Zach and Afton are searching by car. Every few minutes or so I call to hear them say, Nothing yet. Time slows to the drip of a faucet. My cheeks are numb, whether from cold or wine or worry, I can’t say.

There’s nothing for me to do here but bargain with God, who is, I’m finding, a tough negotiator. *I’ll never lose my temper again*, I pledge. *I’ll change. I’ll appreciate R.J.—no, both my children—for who they are and not for what I want them to be.* But even to my own ears these promises sound hollow. It’s not that easy. I don’t understand my son, and worse yet, I think I might, in my own unhappiness, be damaging him. He’s not like Afton, an easy child, who can ride the crest of any wave. No, R.J. travels underwater, where strange, unknowable

things lurk, and communication with terrestrials, like me, is difficult. And now, somehow, I've got to find a way to get him back to the surface. Which means, I realize, getting myself there first. *Okay, okay, I bargain, if you'll return R.J. home safely, I'll do what Zach won't do.*

Which is: Act. Be the bad guy. Make the decision. Say the unsaid. Take responsibility. Invite the seven-letter cousins into our home. (Divorce, there's a seat over there. Custody, can I get you something to drink?) But even as I decide this, fear is bubbling up from somewhere near my toes. I take another sip of wine and try not to think about the financial implications, the social awkwardness, the impact on both children, especially R.J., the admission of failure, failure, failure. What matters most now is the boy, I tell myself. His safe return.

It's after two when a police cruiser pulls up to our house, lights and sirens turned off. Dominick has gone home, after calling the police and all five hospitals. Zach and Afton have gone back out, although they've returned to the house several times to regroup. The last time they checked in, Zach's jaw was clenched and there was a muscle throbbing at the base of his neck. He looked like he was trying not to cry. Afton was unusually quiet.

When R.J. climbs out of the back seat, relief hits my bloodstream like a shot of Dewar's. He seems okay, unhurt. Two policemen join my son, and he shuffles up the walk, baggy gray sweatshirt flanked by blue uniforms.

I don't care what he's done. I'm just so glad he's home.

"Mrs. McKenna?"

“Yes?” I wipe under my eyes with my knuckle. It takes me a moment to untangle myself from the blankets and when I stand up, I stumble a little. The three of them stop at the bottom of the steps. The porch light is yellow and it casts a ghoulish glow, making us all look sick, like we’ve had too much turkey. I can’t make out anyone’s expression.

The policemen look like Laurel and Hardy, one short and fat, the other tall and slim. The short officer speaks, and his voice is surprisingly gentle. “Your son was caught taking computer parts from the dumpster in the Springtree office park,” he tells me. “He and his friends have been raiding it for the last week. Somebody in one of the office buildings asked us to keep watch.”

“My son was stealing from a dumpster?” A dumpster! That’s all! I want to laugh. I want to send up rockets. I want to give lots and lots of money to the people who put pictures of missing kids on the sides of milk cartons.

“Yes ma’am,” the officer says.

“And that’s a crime?” I look at R.J., whose head is down. I wish he would look up so that I can catch his eye, let him know I’m glad he’s safe and that I’m not mad. Later I’d like to say, *Stealing from a dumpster? That’s bogus, man.* But I know I won’t.

The officers tell me the dumpster in question is on private property, so they had to pick him up. They say something about a curfew that is rarely enforced. Then they ask if they can speak to me alone. I tell R.J. to go on in, go to bed. He finally looks up at me, his face tearstained, and my heart lurches.

When the door is closed behind him, the tall officer says, “He seems like a good kid. We had a long talk. You might have the next Bill Gates there. He even gave me some tips on how to equip my Sylvan Unit to get past the Black Widow’s Nest. But Mrs. McKenna?”

“What?” I say, but I’m barely listening. He had a long talk with R.J.? This must be my tax dollars at work, what it means to live in a community where the police are camp counselors with guns. This *stranger* had a long talk with R.J. Even Zach doesn’t have long talks with R.J.

“Maybe you should make some coffee and relax a little before you talk to your son about this.”

I’m embarrassed. They’ve seen the wine glass, noted the mascara smudged beneath my eyes—the lost sixth grader probably didn’t help—and now they think I’m drunk. “Thank you for coming by,” I say, dismissing them.

I sit back down on the La-Z-Boy and pull the blankets around me. There’s nothing I can say to R.J. right now that won’t be misinterpreted. He’s tired—and although he’d rather die than admit it—scared. Later I’ll go up and check on him. He’ll be sprawled on his bed in his clothes, unbothered by the books and CDs beneath him. His room will have that boy smell, part locker room, part forest floor. I’ll take his shoes off and spread a blanket over him. I won’t kiss his forehead, that might wake him.

The officers are making their way down the walk, between identical rows of boxwood, when I remember something they said. “Officer?” I call as they’re about to get into their cruiser. They both turn. I direct my question to the one who told

me my son might be the next Bill Gates. “What kind of unit did you say he helped you with?”

“My Sylvan Unit.” He says each syllable distinctly.

“Oh.” It’s not going to be the magic word. I have no idea what a Sylvan Unit is, couldn’t use it in a sentence if I tried. There isn’t going to be another way out: My bargain still stands. I take a deep breath, and let it out slowly. A cloud forms in front of me—one ... two ... three ... four—then disappears. The policemen drive away as headlights—moving very slowly—appear at the other end of the street. This second car speeds up; Zach must have recognized the shape of the cruiser, a talent he’s developed over many years of trying to avoid speeding tickets.

As his car approaches, I move into that strange double-time of crisis. I think about what I’m going to say to him, at first and then later. I consider running out to the car and throwing my arms around him—and Afton—in joy and relief, then reconsider when I realize how awkward that might be. Now isn’t the time for mixed signals, and anyway, it’s been too long since Zach and I have touched each other. I think about R.J., upstairs in his bed, and that little sound he makes—*pfff pfff pfff*—in his sleep. And while I’m thinking all of this, I’m also thinking about the woman on the plane, and how often I’ve resembled her, and how much I don’t want to *be* her. I wonder where she is now, and if she’s happy. And whether her son is happy. Is he a whiz at math? An amateur photographer? A thespian? And then my mind moves to the warning flight attendants give at the beginning of every flight: In the event of a drop in cabin pressure, secure your own oxygen mask first. And I wonder what every mother wonders when she

hears those words: Will I be strong enough to watch my child gasp for breath while I grab the mask for myself, place it over my own nose and mouth, fumble for the ear straps?

I'm about to find out.

SERIOUS BUSINESS

Eddies of snow swirl around Zach's ankles as he stands on the sidewalk outside The Faded Frock. It's midmorning, two days before Christmas, and people walk past him, tilted into the wind, shopping bags swinging. Green banners emblazoned with gold trumpets hang from streetlamps that glow dimly against the yellowish gray sky. A storm is coming. The windows of Kate's shop are steamed up, but he can still make out blurs of light and color. Looking in like this, he feels a little like a shipwrecked sailor. Someone who has traveled a long way, and suffered great hardship, to deliver an important message. He needs to share the things that have recently—just this morning, in fact—become clear to him. There's more than just snow swirling around him, he thinks. There's truth. Big truth. And the person who needs to hear it is Kate.

Inside, he looks around for her. A gust of wind keeps the door from closing behind him, and a girl about Afton's age rolls her eyes and rushes to shut it. Then Zach sees the sign, PLEASE PULL THE DOOR SHUT BEHIND YOU, hand-lettered and propped on a chair three feet in front of him. On her way back, the girl gives him a hard look—how has someone so young learned that look already?—and he is zapped again by the *bad man* vibe. Since Diane threw him out he's been getting this a lot, waves of staticky disapproval, emanating mostly from women. It's as if Diane has found a frequency on which to tell everyone what a louse he is.

The problem is, things have been happening too fast. When Zach's father died three years ago, Zach was prepared for the requisite stages of grief, even though he could never remember exactly what they were—anger, denial, something, then something else after that. He'd expected to feel empty and regretful, to suddenly sense his own mortality. But the thing was, by the time his father finally did die, all he felt was relief and a strange sense of freedom. Like he'd been assistant manager of his own life for almost fifty years, and he'd just gotten a promotion. And so he'd expected to feel that same sense of relief when his marriage finally ended. But instead, this time he seems to be going through the goddamned stages of grief. When Diane slid into the kitchen chair across from him, on the day after Thanksgiving, saying calmly, "Let's end this charade, shall we?" he'd felt like a tsunami was headed straight for his chest. In his surprise, he'd had a hard time catching his breath. And Diane, he noticed, was gripping the sides of the table so hard her thumbnails were white. He'd wondered then, with the small part of him that was still able to think, if it was to steady herself or to turn the table over on top of him. And he'd wanted to scream at her, "Go ahead! Do it! Dump the whole fucking thing!"

And that night they'd told the children over dinner, and Afton had cried a little, until Zach started to tear up too, and then she'd become solicitous. And R.J., ignoring everyone, had pretended his knife was a barbell: *up, down, up, down*. Diane's turkey croquettes—traditional Thanksgiving leftovers—sat untouched in the center of all their plates. In better days, Zach would have

pointed out how much they looked like miniature camel humps, or silicone breasts gone bad. But he didn't.

He fast-forwarded, mindlessly, through the next few days. He found an apartment not too far from the house, packed his clothes, bought some furniture at Goodwill, connected his utilities. Then, on Friday, he stopped by to see Kate, and the conversation was disastrous. He was too tired to think clearly, and somehow it ended with her telling him she never wanted to see him again. And since then, he's been functioning—he eats, he sleeps, he watches TV—but it's getting harder without Kate, and with all these *bad man bad man bad man* vibes everywhere he goes.

The truth, he realized this morning, is this: Nobody's ever ready.

Someone touches his elbow; says, "Sir, can I help you?"

"Huh?" He unbuttons his coat. The air in here is thick, like a swimming pool locker room's.

"Sir, can I help you?"

Zach doesn't recognize this girl, she must be another college student hired for the holiday crunch. The store is more crowded than he's ever seen it. He shakes his head. "Just looking." He heads purposefully toward a rack of eveningwear, says "Hmmm," in a considering manner. A woman near him, who has been methodically working through the same rack, looks over to see what he's discovered. When she realizes it's nothing, she goes back to checking the labels of the dresses. She gives each sleeve a quick tug, checks the tag, shoves the hanger to her left. Tug, check, shove. Tug, check, shove. Zach knows this

kind of label checking bothers Kate—it stretches and sometimes tears the clothes. It's why she has her sales staff flip the tags to the outside.

Tug, check, shove. It's like being around someone who won't stop clicking her pen. He steps forward, points at a hang tag. "You shouldn't do that. The store tags have the sizes marked. You don't have to look inside the dress." Saying this, he feels chivalrous. He's protecting Kate, protecting Kate's property.

"Yes, I *know*. But I need an extra-small for New Year's Eve and sometimes the tags are wrong." The woman's voice is angry, and when she turns to glare at him, he's skewered by the *bad man* vibe. He steps back and turns away.

Kate must be in the back room, in her office. Behind the green velvet curtain. It's the reason he fell for her, this curtain, which just goes to show how unscientific the whole thing was. It was two years ago, just before Christmas. On a day much like today. He'd stopped in to buy a few gifts for Afton, who had said she'd be happy with anything from The Faded Frock as long as someone else picked it out, and not Zach. When Zach entered the store, he quickly realized why. To him, everything looked like it was only *moonlighting* as clothing. Its real job was something else: carpetbag, afghan, living room rug. So he waited for Kate to finish with the customer she was with—someone, he remembers now, upset with her for selling out of something she'd wanted. "You know," he'd said, when it was his turn, "if inventory ever gets really low, you can always make a few dresses out of that curtain." He'd nodded towards her office. It had taken her a moment to laugh—she seemed to *decide* to laugh—but when she did, it was like Garbo's laugh at the end of *Ninotchka*: unexpected and infectious. Then,

while she picked some things out for Afton, she'd explained that she'd *rescued* the curtain from an old theater that was being torn down. And she said it like she'd taken in a stray, which he found weird and touching. And by the time she was ringing up his purchases, he was imagining himself with her behind the green velvet curtain, imagining her naked, imagining her clothes in piles around her, abandoned and unrescued.

He feels something ram against the back of his shins, and turns to see a woman with a stroller. She apologizes in a loud voice as he leans against a table to let her through. He recognizes the items on the table: hats and mittens made from recycled sweaters, impulse items with lower price points. Kate had been arranging this display on the day he'd come by to tell her that Diane had kicked him out. She was in a rotten mood, he'd seen that immediately. She was angry with him for not calling, for falling off the radar for over a week. She'd been worried about sales. So he'd told her what? That he couldn't see her for a while. That he needed to work on himself. *Euphemisms*, she had shot back. More euphemisms for still not being able to decide. And maybe that was part of it. But really he'd been panicked—he'd wanted to run from anything that made him look as guilty as he felt. Including Kate.

A salesgirl carrying a stack of shopping bags ducks through the curtain, and as she does, he sees an arm reach toward the coffee machine. His heart leaps with recognition. He's positive it was Kate's arm, Kate's red sweater sleeve. He's always felt he can tell when she's near, although, to be fair, it hasn't been much of a trick. Their places of business are two floors apart. He'd always found this

comforting: safe harbor just a few floors away. Sometimes, on Fridays, when she worked alone, he'd been able to get her to lock up for a little while. He remembers how young and carefree he'd felt then. How he'd made up a little tongue twister for the occasion—*Fair, freckled, funky, frugal Kate fucks me on Fridays!*—and danced a jig to it afterwards. How he'd repeat it over and over, until he was out of breath, the words jumbled, and she was laughing.

Childish stuff, of course. And if ever there was a time to put away childish things, that time would be now. At least that's what he had thought until this morning, when his mind had opened again to the promise. Now, he thinks, what he needs is a second chance. He imagines Kate in front of him again, arranging her table of hats made from sweaters or sweaters made from socks. This time it would be different. There wouldn't be an edge of anger in his voice when he told her. And she would touch his cheek with her palm, letting him know she understood his sorrow and confusion. Her face would be open and kind, and he'd be able, for once, to speak what is in his heart. He would kiss her hand, hold it to his face, say the words he feels swirling around him: *I'm not afraid anymore. I was, I admit, because I've always been with the wrong women. But you could make something of me. I'm material. I've got rich possibilities in me no woman has ever touched.* And these words, as he thinks them, have the feel of truth.

Naturally. In his mind he's a goddamn poet.

Behind him, another salesgirl asks, "Is there something special I can help you find?" She stares at him accusingly, as if she suspects him of shoplifting. Or worse.

Help him find? Something special? These girls, he realizes suddenly, must be some kind of special ops unit, in place to keep Kate from having to see him.

He shakes his head and rushes to the door.

Outside, the sky has darkened to the color of an old carburetor. Zach looks up at the windows of his office and thinks about checking in, just to keep himself honest. It's what he'd told the kids when he'd left—both Afton and R.J. had spent the night in sleeping bags on his living room floor—that he just needed to run into the office to take care of a few things. And if the bigger truth, or whatever it was that had swirled around him a few minutes ago, has escaped him for now, at least he can pursue this smaller logistical truth. The day-to-day verity of being where he says he is, when he says he is, with whom he says he is.

“Nice of you to drop in,” Johnae, their office manager says, and Zach wonders, yet again, why they don't fire her. But, of course, he's afraid to, and Jim won't. Jim brought Johnae with him from his old firm when he and Zach formed their partnership, and technically, she works for them both. But only technically. For Jim, she'll even make coffee, but on Zach's dime she writes poetry. What he did to offend her, if he did anything at all, is a mystery. Once, when she was away from her desk, he fished one of her poems out of the wastebasket. It was a haiku:

Conservative might

Sad, school vouchers helping white

Men's goals souls soar

“Everything okay?” Zach asks, heading straight for his office.

Johnae shrugs elaborately, like R.J. when he’s caught in a lie, all rubbery limbs and attitude. Zach’s annoyance level—always at a low hum around Johnae—spikes. Jim is in the Caribbean second-honeymooning with his third wife, and Zach is officially on vacation until the new year. So chill, Sister, he wants to say. No reason for the ‘tude.

As he closes his door, the *bad man* vibe hits him like a gamma ray burst.

He tosses his coat over the arm of a chair and switches on his desk lamp. A banker’s lamp, it fills the room with a green glow. His office feels overly warm. There must be something wrong with the heat in the whole building. He sits down and puts his feet up on the desk, leans his head against the wall in back of him. For a full five minutes, he stops thinking and gives himself over to a waking dream. He likes that his thoughts, like well-trained children, can be left without supervision. Supervising is too much work. Everything is too much work.

The phone rings. He lets it go until he realizes it might be Kate.

“Dad?” It’s Afton.

“Yeah? Anything wrong?”

“No. I just wanted to remind you that you’re taking R.J. shopping this afternoon.”

Damn. He’s taking R.J. shopping this afternoon.

“Don’t worry. I hadn’t forgotten. I’ll be home in an about an hour.”

The thought of going home suddenly makes his office feel luxurious. God, how he hates his apartment! The walls are too close together. And somehow,

although he's not sure how he would go about proving this, there are too many of them.

He gets up, and in ten paces he's at the window. In his apartment, he can't take four steps without hitting a wall. Outside, snow is beginning to fall. The effect of being on the third floor is haunting; flakes float past, as if in slow motion. It's going to be a white Christmas, he thinks. As if that matters this year.

In the outer office he can hear the muffled sound of Johnae talking to someone, probably on the phone. It occurs to him then that Afton may have called earlier, before he got to the office. That might account for Johnae's coldness, she may have suspected he was with Kate. Lately she seems to have been watching his comings and goings with particular interest. But no, he was downstairs for less than ten minutes. He could have been anywhere. And Johnae's *always* given him the cold shoulder.

This, he thinks, is exactly what has to stop. This paranoia. This constant second-guessing.

Johnae knocks on the door and opens it. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Yeah?" Without meaning to, he screws up his eyes as if preparing for a blow. Just what he needs: a confrontation. She's finally come up with something actionable. Some kind of racial discrimination, or gender discrimination. Hell, maybe both.

"It's about my nephew."

"Well then," he says with relief, "have a seat."

He sits down and Johnae sits across the desk from him. With the glow of the lamp, and the snow falling like a translucent curtain, the room is cozy and intimate. It feels like a fireside chat, he thinks. Except that every conversation with Johnae is rife with danger; she's a goddamned minefield ensconced in the outer office. "So what about your nephew?"

She focuses her gaze on the painting behind him and leans forward in her chair. "He's had an accident. He was on one of those elephants. You know, the kind they let you ride? And the elephant just goes apeshit and suddenly Tramell is on the ground and the elephant is on some kind of rampage."

"Jeez, I'm sorry. Is he okay?"

"Not really. There's Tramell on the ground and the elephant stomping all around him, and now he can't walk. So—my sister wants me to ask you if she can sue."

"She wants to sue?" Is this a joke? Is Johnae bored enough to make this up to pass the time? Or to make a fool out of him?

"She's having trouble with all the medical expenses." She rubs her palms on her knees and rocks forward a little. Just like one of his guilty clients.

"Okay, from what you've told me, it sounds like she might have grounds."

"Will you represent her then?" Her eyes are still focused on the painting behind him. She's either lying, he thinks, or she can't stand to beg.

"I don't have the expertise in that kind of case," Zach says. "You know what we do here. We defend drunk drivers. We don't have a contingency practice."

"You don't just do DUIs. I've seen you do wills for people."

“Just as a favor.” Zach feels trapped. He’s not even sure if this is a real conversation. “For friends, or friend of friends.”

He realizes too late what he’s just said.

She stands, walks to the door. “Well,” she says coldly, “thank you very much.”

Bad man, bad man, bad man.

Watching her leave, Zach pulls at the collar of his shirt. A bead of sweat forms at his hairline.

“Dad? Is that you?” Afton leans on the counter that serves as a divider between the kitchen and the living room and tilts her head sideways so that she can see him from beneath the row of upper cabinets. “Do you have any pesto?”

Zach throws his coat on a metal folding chair and sits down on another. Three uncomfortable chairs and a card table: his dining room furniture. He leans down and unlaces his shoes. His feet are damp and cold, but the rest of him feels overheated. There’s no temperature control anywhere, it seems. His coat fills the apartment with the sharp smell of wet wool. R.J. is watching some version of *Star Trek* and the volume is so loud Zach can’t understand the dialog; either the sound is distorted or his mind just won’t take it in. He has a sudden and intense desire to haul his son up by the collar and shake him. Obviously his nerves are shot, as his mother used to say. Still says, actually. And that’s another thing, some time in the next two days he’s going to have to squeeze in a visit with her. Along with all of his Christmas shopping. And he doesn’t have a tree, either,

but it's probably too late for that. Then, with a jolt, he remembers that he has nothing to do on Christmas Day. The kids will be with Diane. And Kate, well ...

"Dad?"

"What?" He takes off his socks and massages his feet, wishing Afton would just leave him alone. Annoyance seems to be his emotion *du jour*. Afton repeats her question, louder this time.

"No, I don't have pesto," Zach tells her. "I'm not even sure I have flour."

"You didn't, but I bought some. How about—" She retreats back into the kitchen for a moment, then pops her head back through the opening. "—Dijonnaise spread?"

"Isn't that mustard?"

She frowns at the magazine she's holding. "I don't think so. What about olive paste?"

"R.J., turn that thing off. I can't hear myself think," Zach shouts, walking around the divider. He stops in the doorway of the kitchen, which, he notices immediately, has a new lived-in feel. Tea towels, embroidered with lemons, are draped over the handle of the oven. Matching potholders hang from a hook over the sink. Afton had clearly made an effort to match the fruit-themed wallpaper. On the floor are a half-dozen bulging grocery bags, and more food is spread out on the counters. On a baking sheet there are two loaves of French bread, sliced in half, lengthwise. Vegetables are soaking in the sink.

"I thought I bought everything I needed, but it looks like I forgot a few ingredients." Afton looks at him hesitantly, seeking his approval.

“It’ll be more exciting that way.” *She’s* trying to take care of *me*, he thinks.

“So what are you making?”

“Panini,” Afton says.

“Leeetle sandwiches.” R.J. has turned off the television and is now leaning over the half-wall, kicking the folding chairs behind him. “It means leeetle sandwiches,” he says again.

“Well, can I help?”

“There’s really not room in here,” Afton says. “I’m almost done.”

In his old house, that would be Zach’s cue to wander into the living room to watch a little television, or upstairs to take a quick nap. Here, though, *wandering* is out of the question.

R.J. continues to kick the chairs behind him. *Thud ... thud ... thud.*

“R.J., stop that! Let’s leave your sister alone.” This morning, as he slipped past his son on his way out, R.J. had appeared small and flat in his sleeping bag. Normal-sized for a twelve-year-old. Awake, though, it seems he’s capable of expanding like a bullfrog, filling Zach’s little apartment with this great, vast *boyness*. When they pass each other in the hall on the way to the bathroom, or sit together on the couch, he can sense the reverberations as the perimeter of his personal space collides with R.J.’s.

Zach switches the television back on and turns down the volume. *Star Trek* is just ending. When he turns around, R.J. is already sprawled lengthwise across the couch, leaving him barely anywhere to sit. For a moment, Zach thinks about telling R.J. to sit up straight, but it feels like way too much effort. Instead, he

squeezes into the spot between R.J.'s feet and the arm of the couch. As he sits down, he can almost hear a scraping sound—like a car being sideswiped.

The kitchen, Zach can't help but notice, looks like it's been through a blender. The counter—all two feet of it—is cluttered with half-empty jars of olives, sun-dried tomatoes, and some other things that Zach doesn't recognize and will never use. An overturned box of croutons is soaking in a puddle of olive oil. The sink is a graveyard of salad makings: carrot tops, onion skins, scallion tendrils. And there'd apparently been a little trouble with the vegetable peeler: strips of cucumber skin are sticking to the side of the microwave with a slippery kind of suction. No one, he'd warned Afton last night, was ever actually meant to *cook* in this apartment. As kitchen's go, he'd continued, this one was strictly ornamental. Then he'd shown her how you had to take the handle off the silverware drawer in order to open the dishwasher. And how you had to open the dishwasher in order to pull out the silverware drawer. And how he suspected the freezer—not that he had anything in it—was only slightly cooler than the refrigerator, but anything in the vegetable bins—so far it had only been beer—froze solid. She'd been undaunted. And he has to hand it to her: with one pot, one pan, a handful of utensils, and a lot of determination, you could almost say she's worked a miracle.

She ladles a spoonful of soup and holds it out for Zach to taste, cupping her other hand beneath the spoon to catch any drips. "Wild mushroom. What do you think? Is it okay?"

The soup mix pouch is on the counter: the kind, Zach knows, where you just add water or milk. "It's perfect," he nods.

“Okay then, I guess we’re set,” she says. “I’ll get R.J.”

Afton’s table isn’t quite up to Diane’s standards, but her mother’s influence is apparent. There’s more food than will fit comfortably on his little card table, and most of it, he already knows, will go uneaten. He’s lost interest in food since that ill-fated slice of pumpkin pie, and R.J.—well, R.J. is R.J. There’s a Greek salad that will wilt, then grow slimy, in his refrigerator over the next week. And sandwiches that are, in fact, very little. Almost, as his father used to say, not worth dirtying your mouth on. There’s even mulled cider, garnished with a cinnamon stick. And Afton hasn’t forgotten the festive touches: a pink poinsettia presides over the center of the table, and red paper napkins stamped with white snowmen wish them all a Merry Christmas. Zach knows he should appreciate his daughter’s effort, but instead he feels like one big bristle of annoyance. Or maybe he’s a whole porcupine. *Enough already!* he wants to say. It reminds him of the endless games of hopscotch he’d played with Afton when she was ten—when she wouldn’t quit until *he* won.

It takes R.J. less than a minute to begin complaining. “Yuck. What are these little brown spongy things?” he says, poking at his soup with a spoon. “Pass me the leetle sandwiches. I want to try the leetle sandwiches.”

And meanwhile, Afton—bless her over-achieving, earnest little heart—is carrying on a conversation all by herself. Zach hears her words—something about organic chemistry and taking the MCAT in the spring—but it’s as if she’s on the opposite side of a navigational lock. The gate is down and he’s on the side that’s filling up with water. He’s not just wading around in doubt and uncertainty,

he's up to his ears in it. Until a few weeks ago, he'd thought they all had an understanding. If any of them—he, Kate, Diane—did anything, they would do it carefully. See that no one got hurt. Now no one seems *unhurt*.

He shouldn't sit down. He thinks too much.

R.J. is picking apart his sandwich and pushing the red things—roasted red pepper?—to the edge of his plate. He pops what's left of the sandwich in his mouth and says, "Pass the leetle sandwiches. I like these leetle sandwiches."

Zach passes R.J. the sandwiches, thinking resentfully of how easy Diane must have it. Their house—*her* house, now—seems to absorb noise and activity; his apartment only amplifies it.

"Dad, is it okay if Dominick comes over tomorrow night? I was thinking I could make something nice for dinner and then we could open gifts."

The last person Zach wants to spend another holiday with is Dominick, but the question is apparently rhetorical.

"I was thinking," Afton continues, "that since we don't have a tree or anything, we could make stockings out of your tube socks and stick oranges in the toes and fill them with candy, the way Mom used to. And we can buy some white tinkle lights when we're out shopping and string them up around the windows. And I'll bake some cookies tomorrow and you and I can have eggnog and brandy and R.J. can have plain eggnog." She has the enthusiasm of a troop leader teaching a bunch of girl scouts how to make a fire with two sticks and an egg carton—but who also knows she can go home the next day.

“And we can stay up late and watch the Kung Fu marathon.” R.J. starts to move around in his chair, fingers splayed like a rap artist. “My Wu-Tang logo on the back of a kimono, beat played in the background, on the phono. My Kung Fu, be the tough Wu. Look for the dragons when they come through ...”

Afton asks Zach about his morning.

“Johnae asked me to represent her sister. Apparently her nephew was trampled by an elephant.”

“Cool!” R.J. says.

Afton swats at her brother. “Are you going to do it? What happened to the elephant?”

“I have no idea what happened to the elephant. I imagine they put him down. That’s what they do with dogs, don’t they? I mean, when they bite.”

“You should help her, Dad,” Afton says.

“I wish I could.” He tries to make his voice sound regretful. “It’s just that I don’t know anything about that kind of law. She’d be better off with somebody else. And if somebody from our firm is going to represent her family it should probably be Jim. She likes Jim and she doesn’t like me and my helping her won’t change her mind.” He shakes his head. “I’m telling you, it just wouldn’t work.”

“You should help her, Dad,” R.J. says. “Because she’s black.”

“And she’s disenfranchised,” Afton says.

“She’s what?” Oberlin, he thinks. Goddamn Oberlin.

“Yeah, Dad,” R.J. says. “Buy her a McDonald’s.”

“You just don’t want to see that you’re part of the power structure. That you’re the establishment. For people like Johnae there aren’t a lot of options.”

“Johnae can take better care of herself than I can. That woman’s tough.”

R.J. starts to rap again, “Here’s to mad cow disease and all that yummy MSG. Here’s to Mickey D’s serving all those mutant chick-a-dees—“

“R.J., will you *please* just shut up for a few minutes!” It suddenly occurs to him that he’s been too indulgent with his son. Not truthful enough. He’s been this way with everyone, actually, all down the line. And look where it’s gotten him, where it’s gotten *them*. “I hate to break this to you, dude,” he says, “but you’re not a dangerous gangsta. Take a look in the mirror. You’re a white kid in the suburbs.”

R.J. stops moving around in his chair, and his expression—well, it must be what people mean when they say *crestfallen*. Afton’s brow is furrowed, as if she’s confused by the lack of a punch line. If there’s anything worse than seeing your own kids disappointed in you, Zach realizes now, it’s hard to know what that might be. Something in his chest—it must be his heart—actually *hurts*. After all these years of silently condemning Diane’s temper, it turns out his boiling point is only a few degrees higher.

Uncomfortably hot, he unbuttons his collar. Then he goes to the refrigerator and pulls out a beer.

When he returns to the table, Afton seems to have decided the best route is to pretend the last exchange never happened. “About Johnae,” she says. “All I’m suggesting is, we need more—“

He holds his hand up to stop her. He must have known it was coming; the opening was too wide. “I know, I know.” And he *does* know. “You don’t have to say it.”

What she was going to say was this: *We need more elephants*. R.J. had said it first, when he was three, referring to a family portrait Afton had painted in art class. He’d tapped a blank space next to Zach’s likeness and pronounced, like an oracle, “We need more elephants.” It was about the same time he’d been asking what kind of dinosaurs were grazing in the field across from the church, and so Diane had incorporated it into her collection of family stories. And over the years it had become a private family phrase, meaning, roughly, that something was missing. “It needs more elephants,” could mean the soup needed more salt, or the couch needed another pillow, or Zach’s shirt needed a different tie. “We need more elephants” often meant help was required, but sometimes had something to do with karma.

The thing is, Zach has always felt R.J. had spoken the literal truth, that the words were neither childlike nor chimerical. There *had been* something missing—and it felt *exactly* like an elephant. And now, if he could send Afton a telepathic reply, it would be this: Be patient, I’m doing the best I can. I know how bad we need more elephants.

He swallows the last of his beer, gathers his silverware and sets it on his plate. “Come on, hurry up. We’ve got a lot of shopping to do.” He puts his plate on top of R.J.’s and picks them both up. “Come on, R.J. Let’s Audi 5000.”

On his way to the kitchen he avoids looking at Afton.

The mall parking lot is filled with the cars of desperate procrastinators—not an organized soul in the entire city, it seems. Zach circles the parking lot twice looking for a space, while R.J. barks out Jingle Bells along with the radio: *Woof woof woof, woof woof woof, woof woof all the way ...* From the backseat, Afton shouts out parking space suggestions—“The white van is leaving! Two aisles over and half-way down!”—which disappear miragelike by the time Zach reaches them. Both children have adopted a professional manner with him, as if they’re only acting like his kids because it’s their job. It’s still snowing, and when he lets his eyes unfocus he’s mesmerized by how the flakes appear to be sucked into the car’s headlights. He imagines his Mercedes is a big vacuum, and has to keep shaking himself out of this reverie; his convertible doesn’t get much traction and it takes all his attention to keep from fishtailing. Without visible parking lines, people have abandoned their cars almost haphazardly, in what seems to Zach a very inefficient use of space.

Afton points out a woman in a red hooded coat, three aisles over, juggling several shopping bags. “She must be leaving. Let’s follow her.”

The red coat makes it easy to zero in on her. He nudges his car up to her, then creeps along behind her like a john trolling for a prostitute. Because of her hood, the woman has to turn all the way around to glare at him. *Splat!* The *bad man* vibe hits his windshield. She quickens her pace. He knows he’s making her nervous, following this closely, but a parking space is a parking space. After a few more yards, she stops and gives them the finger. With a sixth-grader’s lightning reflexes, R.J. returns the gesture with both hands. When she reaches

her car, she puts the bags in the trunk, then gets into the driver's seat. After a few minutes, he realizes she's waiting him out, that she's not going to start the car until he leaves. A muffled *bad man* reaches him through his rolled up window.

"Son of a bitch," he says, driving off.

"Well, that went well," Afton says.

"Why don't I drop you kids off? I'll come back and look for a spot and we can meet up later."

When he's dropped them off, he circles the parking lot three more times. On the last loop, he notices an empty handicapped spot. Snow has covered the wheelchair symbol on the ground and has obscured most of the sign. He could always claim ignorance, he thinks. Sign? What sign is that, officer? As a lawyer, he knows this would never pass the "reasonable man" test. But then again, he's not a reasonable man anymore.

Two hours later, sitting on the edge of the fountain where they'd agreed to meet, Zach sees where he went wrong. First off, he hadn't made a list. He'd lost precious time, standing by the "You Are Here" map, deciding who he most needed to shop for. In the end, he'd settled on R.J., Kate and his mother, in that order. Afton was already covered—thanks to Kate, who had been setting aside things all year—and everyone else would just have to understand. But if he'd made a list, he would have had to put some *items* on the list. He might have started paying attention to commercials, might have asked around for ideas, might have even asked R.J. himself what he wanted. And then it had occurred to him that something was wrong with that picture; what a boy of twelve wanted for

Christmas should be self-evident: a Red Ryder carbine-action air rifle or an Armada Optimus prime semi-truck with mini-con transformer. But he hadn't heard R.J. mention a thing.

His second mistake had been allowing himself to be seduced by the one-stop-shop appeal of a department store. In retrospect, a specialty store like The Sharper Image or a sporting goods store would have been smarter. But Marshall Field had seemed like a good idea at the time. What had actually happened was that he'd been trapped in a people jam in the perfume and beauty-products area, and when he'd finally broken through he'd gotten confused about what merchandise was on what floor. He'd found himself back at the perfume counters while looking for an elevator and had ended up buying chocolates—why they were displayed with beauty products, he can't begin to guess—as a sort of safety present. Then he'd gotten lost again.

So now here he is, with nothing but a shopping bag containing a dozen boxes of Godiva chocolates pressed between his knees.

The marble floors near where he's sitting are slick with tracked-in snow, and yellow plastic tents are randomly placed in a futile attempt to warn people. Zach watches person after person slip without falling. He lets his brain idle for a moment, turning the scene before him into a silent movie. Then the young woman sitting on his right taps him on the shoulder and asks if he can suggest a good present for a married couple. "Candles," he tells her automatically, as if he'd been waiting for her to ask. "They're the new consumable." Then he

wonders who decided on yellow as the color for warning. Somehow orange seems more appropriate.

“No, I don’t think so,” the young woman says, shaking her head. “But thanks anyway.”

The smell of wet wool is starting to give him a headache.

He wonders where Kate is.

It was Friday, eight days after Thanksgiving, and unseasonably warm. Neil Young was on the radio as he parked the car, reminding him that he’d forgotten to take his records when he’d moved his things out. Walking to The Faded Frock, he added that to his mental list of things to do. With this weather, everything, even nature, was confused. That morning he’d been almost sure he’d seen a flock of sandhill cranes flying *north*. And on the way over, he’d driven by his house—the car still seemed to want to veer that way—and he’d noticed that some of his neighbors had left their Christmas lights on all night. In the morning, and in this weather, their weak glimmer had stirred up within him a strange dissonance.

He paused outside Kate’s shop and looked in. He liked seeing her when she didn’t know he was watching. Today she was arranging some items on one of the tables in the center of the store. Her lips were moving as she worked. Someone else might think she was singing, but he knew she was talking to herself.

The door chimed when he opened it. Kate looked up, but didn’t stop what she was doing. “Hey,” he said and circled around the table to come up behind

her. Putting his arms around her, he rested his chin on her head. Garlands were draped over all the doors and windows, and twisted around support beams. On Thanksgiving, when he'd watched her spray paint a mound of ivy she'd pulled from her garden, he'd had some doubts. "The ivy looks good. Very festive."

"Yeah, well." She shrugged. "It's not helping. People just don't think about the holidays when it's warm out. There's no sense of urgency."

"Be patient. Winter's coming. Technically it's still fall."

"*Technically* winter comes too late for those of us in the retail business."

She turned around and sat down. He placed his hands on the table on either side of her and leaned in to kiss her ear. She wasn't wearing any perfume.

"So where have you been?" she asked.

"I moved out."

"When?"

"Monday."

"And you're only just now telling me?"

"I thought you'd be glad."

She studied his face, saying nothing. The tiny lines beneath her eyes were more pronounced than usual; it was rare to see her looking her age. The green sweater she was wearing made her appear washed out. It wasn't like her, he thought, to make a bad fashion choice.

"I'm sorry, I just needed some time to myself," he said. "To work some things out."

"The children?"

“They’re fine. It’ll be fine.”

“So now what?”

He hesitated. “I think I still need more time.” He stroked the lines beneath her left eye with his forefinger.

“Okay. It’s been two years, but okay.” She pushed his hand away and stood up. She turned around and began clipping mittens to a revolving mitten tree.

“Take all the time you need.”

“I’m just trying to spare you.”

“Don’t try telling me that what *you* want will make *me* feel better. Why do people always do that? Is it so hard to put yourself in my shoes for a change and try to imagine what would make *me* happy?”

He grabbed her elbow and turned her around again. “I’m trying to do the right thing.”

“*Euphemisms*,” she said. “That’s just another euphemism for not being able to decide.”

“I don’t think so.” He really didn’t.

“What do you think loving somebody is about?” He knows his face looks blank, because he feels blank. It’s one of those questions he can never answer correctly.

“You have no idea, do you?” she said.

Ten minutes ago, before he walked in, he’d imagined this going very differently. He’d even had a vague hope that they might have sex. Now he was losing an argument he couldn’t even follow.

“What’s wrong with involving me in the messiness?” she was asking now. “You help me with my mess. I help you with your mess. But it never even occurred to you that I might need help right now, did it?”

It’s true, it hadn’t. He’d always thought of her as capable and independent, not as someone who needed help.

“The truth is—“

She paused, and in that split-second, his heart began to constrict. *I don’t love you*, he completed for her. *I never loved you. I’ve met someone else.*

—“I’m only real for you on Fridays.” She spoke distinctly, carefully. “That’s all it is, isn’t it?”

Standing there, challenging him, she looked old and unglamorous and unbelievably sad—and he loved her more than ever. He had a sudden urge to gather her up, carry her like a bride into the room behind the green velvet curtain. He wanted to tell her to stop talking, tell her she was wrong. But he had the feeling he’d probably say something wrong and make things worse.

So when she told him to leave, he left.

He has his cell phone out and is punching in Kate’s number when he sees Afton and R.J. making their way toward him. Anonymous, they look different somehow. He recognizes R.J.’s jacket and Afton’s scarf, but otherwise they appear to be imitations of his children. Afton’s features are sharper than he remembers, and R.J. seems the opposite: more amorphous. If he were a cartoon, Zach thinks, his name would be something like Puddle Boy. Have they

changed this much since the separation, or has he just not been very observant? He closes his eyes to try to get a mental picture of the faces he expected, but they morph and melt in his mind. If he had to work with a police sketch artist, he's not sure if he could come up with a reasonable likeness for either of his two children.

Afton spots him and waves. When he waves back, she tries to quicken their pace, but the crowd is a slow moving conveyer belt. "How'd it go?" she asks, finally reaching him.

"Okay."

"Did you find something for R.J.?" She pitches her voice lower.

"Not yet," he says, still a little mesmerized by his son's new features. He wonders how much he's to blame for the change. "Come on." He puts his arm around R.J. "I've been waiting for you. I'm going to buy you a set of golf clubs, but you need to pick them out." He hadn't known that's what he was going to do, but now that he's said it, it seems like a perfect solution. He can fix his problem with Kate later, right now he has to fix his son. He imagines their bonding at the driving range over proper club selection. He imagines father/son tee times in the spring.

In the sporting goods store, he takes R.J. straight to the golf section.

"Okay," he says. "Anything you want."

R.J. stares at the aisle of golf clubs with the same enthusiasm he'd give an aisle full of steak knives or washing machines. "That's okay, Dad," he says. "Just give me the money."

Ignoring him, Zach picks out a 5-iron and hands it to R.J., who dangles it between his thumb and forefinger. "It's not a snake," Zach tells him. "Give it a try." He shows R.J. the correct stance, then leads him to the practice pad, where customers can hit a ball into a net, then see its probable trajectory and distance displayed on a screen. They wait while a big man wearing a University of Texas sweatshirt tries several drivers. Afton wanders toward the exercise equipment, humming "Five Pound Box of Money" along with the muzak. Two teenage boys pass by, then stop and watch. R.J. moves away from Zach, and stands alone a few yards away. When the big man is done, Zach waves R.J. forward. "Go ahead," he says. "Think of it as a big video game."

R.J. ignores him, and Zach realizes he's pretending they're not together. Then, as if it's all his own idea, R.J. ambles up to the tee and sets up a ball. He swings at it like he's holding a baseball bat, not a golf club, and Zach cringes. The ball dribbles toward the net. On the video screen, a little white dot bounces several times, then stops. "4 Yards" is displayed in digital letters. The watching teenagers laugh, and R.J. reddens.

"Set another one up," Zach calls out. R.J. isn't exactly a natural athlete, Zach reminds himself. Playing soccer, there always seemed to be a lag between the ball's movement and R.J.'s reaction to it, so that, usually, by the time he went for the ball it wasn't there anymore. It was like watching a transcontinental phone call, always a beat or two off. Fortunately, R.J.'s coach liked to see everyone play, otherwise, on merit alone, he would never get in the game.

Maybe, Zach thinks now, with a few lessons, golf will be his sport.

He picks out a few more clubs and takes them to R.J., reminding him to keep his left arm straight. R.J. ignores him and the next ball he hits goes no farther than the first. One of the teenage boys says something unintelligible, and the other laughs. Then they both leave. R.J. sets up another ball and swings so hard he misses the ball.

“Dad.” Afton taps him on the shoulder. “He’s tired. We’re all tired. Let’s go home.”

“Just a few more minutes. We haven’t found the right set yet.”

“Dad.”

“I gotta pee,” R.J. says suddenly, dropping his club. He glares at Zach, then lopes off toward the restroom. Afton gives Zach an I-told-you-so look, and he shrugs, annoyed. Whenever things get rough, R.J. runs away.

He gathers up the golf clubs he got out and puts them back. Then he motions to a salesperson, “We’ll take this set and that bag.” He points to black golf bag.

“Dad,” Afton says. “He doesn’t want them.”

“Tough.”

It’s been one hell of a long goddamn day, he thinks, standing in the checkout line with Afton. Obviously mad, she’s quiet. Too quiet. His chest feels damp with sweat. He can’t wait to ditch his coat when he gets to the car, to get this smell of wet wool off his back. When they get near the front of the line, R.J. is still hiding out in the bathroom, and Zach tells Afton to go find him. He’s still standing in line when they return. “We’ll wait for you outside,” Afton says, and he

nods. It's another fifteen minutes before it's his turn to pay. He sends Diane a mental thank-you for having spared him this holiday hell for so many years..

Outside, Afton and R.J. are stamping their feet to keep warm. When they see him approach, they stop talking and look at the ground. It's dark, and a half-dozen cars idle in the fire lane, clouds of exhaust billowing from their tailpipes. Two teenage boys barrel through the doors and run to a waiting car. Zach stops to shove his coat into the golf bag while he tries to remember where he parked. He's pretty sure it was near one of the main entrances, but he has no idea which one. It feels like days have passed since the red-hooded woman gave him the finger. He decides arbitrarily on a direction, and Afton and R.J. follow behind. Every twenty yards or so, he stops to shift the golf bag to the other shoulder. Both kids wait silently for him to continue walking. As soon as he gets home, he thinks, he'll figure out a way to make it up to them. As soon as he gets home, he'll figure out a way to make it up to everyone.

At each set of outer doors he scans the parking lot for his car. Finally, outside the south entrance, he sees his convertible sitting in the first parking spot, covered with a layer of snow, but still somehow conspicuous. There isn't a ticket under the windshield wiper, and it hasn't been towed—the only luck he's had all day, he thinks with relief. He crosses to it and unlocks the passenger door, then leans down to push the seat forward so Afton can get in the back. When he straightens, he sees she has stopped walking and is gazing toward the handicapped sign. Her expression reminds him of something he's seen recently.

Something from a movie? Television? Then he remembers the salesgirl in Kate's shop, the hard disapproving look she gave him when he didn't close the door.

He stands and waits for the *bad man* vibe to hit him like a wall of heat.

VENUS IN THE TWELFTH HOUSE

It's after midnight when Zach knocks on my bedroom window. The snow is still falling, but languorously now, with a gentle side-to-side motion, like a courtesan shifting her skirts. Through the window, he's looking up at me, and I realize that I've been expecting this all evening. Behind him, his tracks are uneven, as if he's stopped several times to reconsider or to watch the house. Otherwise, my backyard is pristine, like a soft and freshly laundered sheet. It's the type of night described in hundreds of Christmas carols—I've been listening to them while I pack—and has the effect of folding time, of blurring centuries. I nod at Zach through the window and point to the back door. On my way to meet him, I turn up the thermostat. I'm bundled in a big cable-knit sweater—my furnace doesn't work well and I'm trying to save money—but for some reason he isn't wearing a coat. When I get there, he's hugging himself and stomping his feet to keep warm.

"Where's your coat?" I ask him, holding open the door.

"That smell. Wet wool," Zach says. "It's driving me crazy." His car is parked askew, in the alley behind my garage. It's not like him, this carelessness.

He pushes past me, heading for my bedroom. In the doorway he turns to me. "What are you doing?" he asks. His face is red, but not from the cold; he looks almost feverish.

What I'm doing is obvious: an open suitcase is on my bed. Tomorrow afternoon, when I close up the store I'll catch a flight to Florida and spend the holidays with my parents. "What are *you* doing?" I ask him. "Shouldn't you be at ho—" I stop, change direction. "Your apartment?"

"I wanted to see you." His eyes are bloodshot and I wonder if he's been drinking.

He pushes aside my suitcase and sits down on my bed and suddenly I'm angry at how one-sided all of this is. He hasn't wanted to see me or talk to me since Diane threw him out, something I hadn't expected. I always thought—when I thought about it at all, which I tried not to do—that I would help him through this, loan him pots and pans, sew curtains for his windows, buy a few throw pillows for his couch. I thought I would be the first place he came to for comfort, but I wasn't. His reasons for this are complicated—after all, he's a complicated man—and I can only guess at them. But now he's here in my house, and I know it's not because my father is sick and my business is failing and I'm in need of comfort, too.

"I was in your shop today," he says.

"I know."

A nerve is twitching beneath his right eye and there's something in his expression I've never seen before: fear.

"What happened today?" I ask.

"Ugh!" He laughs, but it's not a healthy sound. "It looks like I'm going to be representing Johnae in a case against an elephant."

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

“I doubt it,” he says. “It feels like a disaster waiting to happen. But if I don’t do it my children, who don’t like me very much right now—“

“I thought you said they were fine.”

“They were.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Let’s not talk.” He sits up, pulls me towards him.

SOLVE FOR THE CUBIC FEET OF REGRET

The ferret is a test. I get it.

R.J. balances it between his hands like a fur-covered slinky while Afton reads from an article on ferret care: “When you first allow your ferret to have access to your home, limit him to one room and place a litter box in every corner. Clean it daily, but be prepared for accidents.” She looks up, knowing this is unwelcome news. My taking care of the ferret is her idea; she rescued it from an irresponsible pre-med student in her college biology class. Now she’s come home for the weekend to ask *me* to take care of it until she’s off for the summer and can focus on finding it a new family. I’m maintaining a stony silence while I continue to mix up a batch of banana bread, but we all know I won’t—can’t—say no. Still, I don’t want either of my children to think I’m that easy.

Afton lowers her head quickly and continues, “Experiment with different sized boxes, different litter, different locations. You may need to leave a “starter poop” in the litter box so that your ferret gets the right idea. Patience is not only a virtue; it is a necessity when you litter train a ferret.”

“Starter poop, starter poop ...” R.J. singsongs, shifting the ferret from one hand to the next. Lately he’s taken to wearing a fedora and a skinny tie, which makes him look ridiculous, and has me recalling his recent gangsta/grunge phase with fondness. I’m sure this hat is related to his obsession with Frank Sinatra, and I’m sure *that’s* related to Zach moving out. But I’m not sure how.

Afton puts down her magazine and gets up from the kitchen table. “I better call Dom and tell him I’m home. Do you mind if he comes over tonight?”

She doesn’t even wait for my shrug before she begins dialing. Dominick is her boyfriend, although he’s about forty years past boyhood. I don’t mind him—like him, in fact—as long as I can keep from thinking about him having sex with my daughter. That’s a visual, as R.J. would say, I’m not ready for.

While she waits for Dominick to pick up, Afton leans toward me confidentially, “John did say he was almost litter trained so that’s good news, anyway.”

“Is that so?” I peel another banana and toss it in the food processor. There’s Clorox under the sink, and I already want to use it to hose the house down.

“And he’s fun,” Afton continues, “once you get used to him. You just have to be careful not to leave things lying around. His fetish is watches. That’s why his name Timex. It’s really—” She stops and her voice becomes husky, “Hey, it’s me.”

This is a test, I tell myself. They need to know I’m here for them.

I peel the last blackening banana, stuff it in the food processor and press *pulse*. As I watch the bananas liquefy—I’ve always thought there’s something strangely erotic about this: sex and violence in a plastic bowl—I try to find a little perspective. The muscles in my neck are beginning to bunch and I know from experience that this is a bad sign. Since I asked Zach to move out five months ago, anger has kept me tense and I’ve been even more prone than usual to

eruptions. It's all been much harder than I ever imagined. At first I felt heroic, like I'd saved myself and my family from a fatal plane crash. My marriage was the fuselage of a doomed airliner, oxygen masks falling from the ceiling, luggage bins flying open, suitcases slamming against seats, dishes shattering, and I was the only brave one, the one keeping her head, calming the other passengers, checking the exits.

Or something like that. The whole idea is fuzzy to me now.

R.J. bends over the ferret, cradling it in his arm like baby, his hat obscuring his expression. I want to kneel down and scan his face for clues, check him for damage. It's been hardest on him, this schlepping between two houses every Sunday. He's always had periodic trouble at school, but lately his classmates have been stealing his supplies and this is the third hat I've bought him. In my saner moments, of which there are admittedly few, I wonder: What he hell was I thinking?

I put the bread in the oven and sit down at the kitchen table with R.J. Pavlov, our dog, is scratching on the mud room door, reminding us to let him out. The ferret is giving off a musky odor that reminds me a little bit of R.J.'s room. My divorce papers are on top of the refrigerator, where they've been for several weeks. I can ignore them as long as I keep moving. When I sign them, there's no going back, something that usually occurs to me when I sit down.

I get up and mop the floor near the door, where Afton has tracked in mud.

Outside it's raining, and has been for several weeks now. That's Columbus in May: one big sogfest. I'm beginning to think I suffer from Seasonal Affective

Disorder. I look over at R.J., who is letting Timex bite his hand. The ferret follows his finger with his eyes, teeth bared, then lunges. R.J. seems charmed by this. He stops and strokes the ferret's head. "My what big teeth you have ..." he says, his voice Sinatralike, full of cool cat jive.

A thud comes from the roof, and for a moment I think a tree limb has fallen on the house. Then another thud comes from the deck, just outside the kitchen window. A squirrel lies motionless near a tub filled with pansies. R.J. looks up at me—the first eye contact we've made all day—and says, "Seasonal Affective Disorder."

For a moment I think he's been reading my mind, then I realize he's referring to the squirrel, who isn't moving. "Is it dead? I've never seen a squirrel fall before."

"Jumped. Definitely a suicide."

"Maybe he fell. Even the Wallendas fell eventually."

"Nope. It's the rain." The squirrel is lifeless, just a fuzzy brown lump, like cottage cheese mold left for a very long time.

"I always thought, except for cars, they were indestructible."

"Dad will be glad." Every summer the squirrels stripped our peach trees of fruit and tossed down the pits. For a while Zach shot at them with a BB gun, but he always missed. When he gave up on the gun, he started trying to knock the squirrels down with their own discarded pits, and then, when that didn't work, he settled for just calling them names.

"Yeah, he'll be glad," I say.

When Afton hangs up the phone, I capitulate swiftly. “I’ll take care of the ferret,” I tell her, “but only until you’re home for the summer. After that he’s entirely your responsibility.” Then I hand her three twenty-dollar bills. “Buy as much litter as you can fit in car. And a treat for Pavlov.” I wait for her to thank me, but she’s already pulling on her raincoat.

“Afton?” The face she turns to me is so open, so full of life, so like mine at that age, I want to capture it in a chloroform-filled jar and keep it forever.

She smiles, waiting for me to continue. “It’s okay. You’re doing a good thing, Mom.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I’m a saint,” I hold up my arm like the Statue of Liberty. “Just give me your poor, your tired, your huddled masses yearning to be free ...”

She laughs, whirling toward the door, her raincoat poofing around her.

You’d think she believed me.

Janet, my sister, is three years older than me and a self-proclaimed witch. She’s the sort of witch that attends the Unitarian Universalist church here in town, wears loose-fitting, multi-colored dresses, and howls at the moon, both literally and figuratively. Besides being a social worker, she’s Co-Director of her coven, which does not, she tells me, worship Satan. Until Zach moved out, she and I had been estranged for fifteen years. She loathes him, and it’s absolutely mutual. But since he’s moved out, she’s been surprisingly faithful, remembering to call me every afternoon.

“Have you thought any more about that tutoring job?” she asks. Her next door neighbor is looking for a math tutor for her teenaged son. I used to be a high-school math teacher, so Janet thinks this is the perfect way for me to ease back into the workforce.

“Janet, I’m just not ready.”

“Balls. You need to get out of the house. You’re scary. It’s time to get a job. In fact, it’s *way past* time—”

I let her voice fade into the background, like Charlie Brown’s teacher: “Mwa mwa mwa.” I pour myself a glass of wine and watch the rain. Despite my seasonal depression, there’s something comforting about how fuzzy and impressionistic the world becomes during a storm. I love being inside and safe, in a house furnished with beautiful things. While Janet drones on, I amuse myself by making up a story problem:

Q: Zach and Diane are getting a divorce. Assume that when the papers on top of the refrigerator are signed, Zach will be legally bound to pay a \$1500/mo mortgage until his youngest child is 18, (6 more years). There will be 12 years left on the mortgage at that time. If Diane, 44, is making \$7/hr as a tutor, a) how many hours per month will she have to work to pay the mortgage? b) How old will she be when the mortgage is paid off?

The answers, whatever they are, are not something I want to think about. Interrupting Janet, I say, “Afton brought home a ferret today.”

Silence. “You’re kidding.” Then she chuckles, “Well, maybe it’ll loosen you up a bit.”

"I'm loose."

"Yeah, you're loose. You're so loose you freaked out over your son wearing a fedora."

"It makes him stick out. It's why the other kids pick on him."

"I doubt it. And anyway hats are also for hiding."

"Stop with the social worker stuff."

"You've always worried too much about sticking out. Remember Kresge's when we were kids? I wet my pants in the jewelry department and *you* started to cry."

"You were eight. It was embarrassing."

"For who?"

"For whom."

"See? You should take this tutoring job."

"Forget it. What I need is to win the lottery. Or to find someone to support me in the manner to which I've become accustomed."

"Honey, have you got it wrong."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. How did you say R.J. was again?"

Janet: still queen of the non sequitur. I hang up the phone, miffed.

Some children just don't *blend*.

I mutter this while slathering white paint across the top of my bedside table. (I've wanted to do this for ten years now, but you know how men can be about

natural wood.) I'm alone, but I'm still talking to Janet. R.J. is just one of those kids that never fits in, I tell her. You wouldn't know, but he's always been like this. When he was four he failed circle time. *Circle time*. The rest of his preschool classmates were able to sit cross-legged in a big circle while Mrs. Keene read them stories or taught them to sing *The Itsy Bitsy Spider*. But R.J. wandered *around* the circle singing something entirely different. "There's something wrong with him," I told Zach after Mrs. Keene called. "He's failing *circle time*. Shouldn't we have some tests done or something?" Zach just shrugged.

Recently I saw a photograph of the two of us at about that time. Zach is seated in a chair, and I'm on the floor leaning against his legs. He has his hand on my shoulder and we're both smiling into the camera. It's hard to believe we were ever that casual with each other. I barely remember it. Anyway, it's possible our real problems started with circle time. Zach wasn't concerned. After all, he argued, R.J. could already identify every car on the road by make, model and year. (Who do you think taught him that?) And he could quote the Gettysburg Address verbatim. The way he saw it, the fact that R.J. couldn't sit still while Mrs. Keene read *The Little Engine That Could* was a sign of intelligence.

So the pattern continued. When R.J. was five he insisted on wearing his superman cape to kindergarten. Every morning I had to convince him he was James Bond in order to get him to wear street clothes. (He wouldn't go as Clark Kent unless there were glasses, and sending a five-year-old to school with fake glasses was more than I could bear.) Several times he talked me into allowing him to wear the tuxedo he'd worn as a ring bearer in my cousin's wedding. And

every morning I had to check his backpack for “weapons” like my red pumps (poisoned shoes), Zach’s camera (miniature Geiger counter), and even, one time, the toaster (Solex Agitator).

When he was seven he wanted to wear his hair in cornrows and asked everyone to call him Mustapha. When he was ten he was into Civil War reenactments, which cost hundreds of dollars in costumes, and involved weekends in hotspots like Perryville, Kentucky and Danville, Missouri. And even as recently as last fall he was wearing baggy pants that didn’t cover his underwear and calling Zach and me his *peeps*. Now this spring he’s Frank Sinatra and he wears short-sleeved shirts, skinny ties and a silly hat. And his classmates pick on him?

Go figure.

WAITING FOR AUGUST TO END

This is how I remember it: I'm ten or eleven, lounging with my cousins and Aunt Corinne on her sun porch. She's wearing a pink Chanel-style dress, like Jackie Kennedy, and she's sipping iced tea from a hot-pink metal tumbler. She's just discovered, she tells us, that someone is living in her house while she and my uncle are at work. Her crossed legs are bare and one of them jiggles up and down while she talks. As she grows more excited--telling us about her strange feeling, the little things she couldn't put her finger on--her false teeth slip occasionally. (I loved to hear her tell that story: how when she was pregnant her unborn babies—my cousins—just *sucked* the calcium right out of her.) But on this day she's describing the scent that she couldn't quite detect, the certainty that things weren't exactly where she'd left them. How she told no one, afraid that we'd think she'd finally gone round the bend. And how, one day—her eyes snapped triumphantly as she told this part—she noticed the stranger's mistake: He left the bathtub ring an inch too high.

Now that I'm a bit older (thirty-five)—and the circumstances of my aunt's divorce are common knowledge—it seems obvious what was going on: My uncle was having an affair. But then again, who knows? Maybe it's just my experience as the "other woman" that sends my mind hurtling towards clandestine bubble baths for two.

It must be the music that has me thinking about this at three o'clock in the morning on a homicidally hot August night. The soundtrack of *The Music Man* is on the turntable, the needle bobbing up and down, static competing with Shirley Jones as she sings goodnight to her someone, goodnight to her love. Last year when my parents downsized to a condo, I swiped this album, along with a stack of others. I play it when I'm feeling down. Since I can't sleep, I'm sitting on the living room floor, sorting through stacks of records, tapes and CDs.

As I pick through our musical past—(Did I really buy that Billy Ray Cyrus album?)—I wonder about Aunt Corinne. Crazy as she was, I think a part of me understands how she felt. Ever since Zach moved in six months ago my house hasn't been the haven it used to be. I won't say it's *haunted*, exactly. Just that his son, R.J., who lives with us every other week, is as obtrusively unobtrusive as Aunt Corinne's phantom bather. Even when he's not present, he's a *presence*.

Every Sunday, as part of the shared custody arrangement between Zach and his ex-wife, Diane, R.J. totes his things from Diane's house—three miles north, two blocks east of here—to our house, or vice-versa. When he visits, he doesn't bring much. He has a closet full of clothes here, and, I imagine, just as many at Diane's. He uses our guestroom, with its monstrous mirrored wardrobe, antique cherry four-poster and matelassé duvet. On the floor is a rag rug my grandmother made, and botanical prints in gilded frames hang on the walls. R.J. must hate this room—I would have, when I was thirteen—but he doesn't say anything. I've offered to redecorate it for him, but he just shrugs. Anyway, he doesn't sleep in the four-poster: he sleeps *on* it, in a sleeping bag. *Why doesn't*

he just tell me I have cooties? I asked Zach once, as if that were the worst accusation a boy his age could make. *I don't know*, Zach laughed. *Do kids say that anymore?*

Afton, R.J.'s sister, on the other hand, has been moving effortlessly between our two homes this summer while she's on break from college. The only time I've ever seen R.J. comfortable in our house is when Afton is here with him. She's the sweet, smart, charming kind of girl, who will become a sweet, smart, charming kind of woman, who will coast from cradle to grave—who couldn't like her?—unless she falls in love with the wrong man, which I think she already has. Zach adores her.

As if he can tell I'm thinking about him, Zach appears in the doorway. "Kate?" His face is slack and sleepy, his hair all moist and tufted. I have to smile at this: Zach sleeps as soundly and sloppily as an eight-week old puppy.

"Sorting through our music," I tell him. The overhead fan is on high, pushing humid air around the room and gently ruffling a few naked album sleeves. "You know," I hold up a Phish CD, "for someone your age you have shockingly contemporary taste. I'm feeling very uncool right now." It's a preemptive strike, focusing his attention on this CD. I don't want him to ask me why I can't sleep; I'm not ready for the discussion that will follow. I don't want to talk about R.J.—safe at Diane's for another two days—or about us, or about hope or marriage or any version of the future. "Huh," he grunts, and for once I'm grateful that he wakes up so slowly.

“*Billy Breathes?*” I ask. “It was in the box with your Miles Davis tapes. I’ve never seen this side of you before.” As I say this, it occurs to me that the CD might belong to R.J., that I’ve unwittingly brought him into the conversation.

“Oh. Present from Afton. Before she met Dominick and started listening to opera. It was the period when she was all hot to drop out of college, hit the road, find herself.” He leans against the doorjamb, looking like he might slide down to the floor any minute now. “She was hoping to marry a—what did she call them?—a Trustafarian.”

I laugh, relieved that we’re talking about Afton and not R.J. I like Afton, and I think she likes me. “Your daughter,” I say, “*The Liberated Woman.*” My laugh sounds like a snort and I search Zach’s face for a sign that he’s offended—any comment about his children can erupt into an argument—but he’s still sleepy and befuddled. If he’s heard my accidental snort, he’s letting it pass.

“She got a B in chemistry and thought the world was ending.” He wipes his palm across his forehead. “Son of a bitch, it’s *oppressive* in here.”

“Well, we could get central air instead of fixing the stove,” I suggest. The previous owners of this house left a magnificent antique Roper—circa 1930, with six burners and three ovens—that I’ve never had the money to refurbish. So I’ve lived without a working stove for six years; before he moved in, I could get by with a microwave and a toaster oven. He’s offered to pay to have the stove fixed, but so far I haven’t been able to make the call. “Working stove,” I say, imitating a scale with my hands, “Central—“

An unhappy yowl drifts in through the open window, cutting me short.

Zach raises an eyebrow. "Fiddler must have heard your voice."

I take a sip of iced coffee, then get up and walk to the window. Fiddler, the stray cat I've been wanting to adopt, is pacing back and forth between the boxwoods. "Hey there, you little homeless ragamuffin," I say, giving the screen an encouraging pat, "I'd let you in, but the big old meanie here doesn't like cats. I told him you're no trouble at all, but he says we have enough to deal with." Fiddler stops pacing and looks up hopefully, and I'm glad he doesn't understand me. Not long ago, Zach refused to let R.J. bring his ferret with him when he came to stay with us. It was difficult, under the circumstances, for Zach to say no. A stray cat doesn't stand a chance of winning him over.

"Honey, do you have to do this on a weeknight?" Leather scrunches as Zach falls into a chair behind me.

I watch Fiddler through the screen. It's clear he's spent some time on the streets—his tail is badly broken—but otherwise he's sleek and beautiful, with fur the color of a polar bear's. When he struts across our roof, the tip of his broken tail revolves slowly, like a windsock. I used to haul out the extension ladder every time I saw him up there, assuming he didn't know how to get down. But he never let me catch him, and after awhile, I gave up. I realized he doesn't need rescuing—he just wants me to come up and play.

Zach lets out a long groan, which ends in a sigh, and when I turn he's nearly horizontal, lying across the chair with his head flung back and his arms dangling. "From the ridiculous to the sublime, or something like that. Besides my daily dose of elephant law, I redid old lady Tritipo's will for about the fortieth time

today,” he says to the ceiling. “Don’t ask me why. She’s still leaving everything to her garden club.”

“Crazy Mrs. Tritipo.” For some reason, Mrs. Tritipo always mixes up the addresses and wanders into my place instead of going upstairs to Zach’s offices. It’s as if, in her experience, it isn’t at all unusual for an attorney to work out of the back room of a dress shop. I sigh, picturing the frail woman lost amid the seed pearls and tender seams of dresses that may very well have once belonged to her. How did she make it to Zach’s office this time, without an escort?

At the thought of my business—reminding me that it’s been closed for two months—my mood plummets to despair. The city’s already behind schedule, and if they aren’t done soon, I’ll lose the back-to-school shoppers. I don’t even want to think about what will happen if I’m not open for the holidays. Zach tries to be encouraging, but he doesn’t understand. Unlike retail businesses, law firms aren’t hurt much by roadwork. And besides, he knows how little money I make, even when my shop is open. He thinks I should be enjoying my time off.

When Fiddler cocks his ears, I realize my fingers are drumming the windowsill, my nails clicking dully. *Oh shit, Fiddler, I think, what a mess I am.* Taking a deep, ragged breath, I turn and crawl onto Zach’s chair, facing him. “She’s a sweet old lady, though,” I say to him, with effort, trying not to let my mood show. I straddle his hips. “And you’re sweet to be so patient with her.”

Zach pulls himself upward, struggling against the leather, until he’s holding me in his lap. His hands on my waist are hot. Out of habit, I glance down at his ring finger—no tan line or indentation—and feel relieved that at least we’ve come

this far. When he was still living with Diane, and this was just an affair, the groove from his just-recently-removed wedding ring would send me into a downward-spiraling, near-suicidal funk.

When he slides his hands up under my shirt and begins to move his hips beneath me, I grab his wrists. “Zach?” I ask. “Are you awake enough to finish what you start?”

“Party pooper.” He grows still. With his eyes closed, it’s hard to tell what he’s thinking. Warm and expressive, they’re the first thing I noticed about him, or at least the first thing I liked. I’ve often thought that his eyes are the antidote for his attorney’s uniform of starched white shirts and suspenders.

I lean back and gaze at his face: it’s his flaws that I like best. He has a faint white scar in the center of his forehead from a fall off the monkey bars when he was six, and his nose has been broken twice (by his brother), so that it’s wide and slightly crooked. I reach out to smooth his right eyebrow—it always has an unruly gray hair--then let my finger follow the slope of his eyelid. Touching him, I begin to relax. The skin beneath his eye feels crosshatched and puffy; lately he’s been pouring two or three tumblers of scotch every evening. As I note each familiar feature a word forms in my mind: *Behold!* I long to say it out loud—*I hold you, behold you, am forever beholden to you for loving me*—but instead I lean down and nip his earlobe.

“You look good,” I tell him.

He opens his eyes and reaches up to ruffle my hair. “For someone my age, you mean,” he says, and I lean my head into his hand.

“Fifty’s not so old.”

“Kiddo, it feels *ancient*.”

I snuggle down and lay my head on his shoulder. Beneath me his chest rises and falls. Breath warm in my hair, he’s almost asleep again. Outside there’s a muffled rumble: thunder, or just a train? I close my eyes and listen to the familiar songs, let myself be comforted by them. There’s a pause, the speakers crackle and hiss, then Robert Preston begins singing *Ya Got Trouble* and I feel like I’m ten years old again.

Quietly, I sing along with the record: *Ya got trouble, right here in River City, with a capital T and that rhymes with P and that stands for pool ...*

“You know,” I tell Zach, lifting my head to look at him, “I’ll never stop feeling guilty when I hear this song. Dad used to sing it when we did something bad.”

“Really?” he asks without opening his eyes, “My dad used to just beat the shit out of us.”

“Well, occasionally he did that, too. But usually it was just the singing. After the singing a beating was redundant. When we did something really bad, he and Mom would do a duet. Mom sang background.” I sing her part along with the record: *Trouble, trouble, trouble, trouble ...* “They thought they were pretty funny. Of course, I would have rather had a beating. But usually I just got the song and a lecture.”

“And the guilt,” Zach says, eyes still closed.

I nod, though I know he can’t see me, and settle my head back on his shoulder. This is something Zach and I share: guilt. I’ve helped him pull apart his

marriage. And although I know it's serious business—nothing like dismantling a dress to see how it's put together—I was pretty naïve, all the same.

Zach stirs. “You're doing it again, you know.”

“What?” I ask, but I know what he means.

Lately I've been sorting things: labeling, *purging*. I've tagged the tomatoes in the backyard with shiny zinc markers—*Better Boy, Early Girl, Italian Gold*—that glint behind the softening fruit. The tools in the basement have been arranged on a pegboard wall, with thick black outlines drawn underneath in case they're mislaid. The perennial seeds I've collected this summer have been tucked into tiny glycerin bags and stored in the refrigerator's butter keeper. And the sheets that ride up, springing from the corners of the mattress whenever we roll over? All gone.

When I sort things, the pressure in my chest eases, and the hours—endless since my business closed—no longer seem like enemies. Still, there are days when I can't find enough to do, and my restlessness has only increased with the temperature.

Five days ago, triple-digit heat settled over the Midwest like a shroud. From the moment I woke up—cheeks wet, eyes puffy, throat like corduroy—I felt unsettled. Zach was gone, already at work. R.J. was gone too; Zach had driven him back to Diane's the previous evening. Too many words had been said-- words between R.J. and Zach--about me. I got out of bed and shuffled to the

kitchen, my nightgown clinging to my skin, damp and uncomfortable. I had the sensation—much like my aunt must have had twenty-five years ago—that strangers were living in my house, their words, like dust, coating the furniture.

I carried a mug of coffee out into the garden, where heat-mist hung in the air like fine, white gauze. Spittlebugs had covered the chrysanthemums with milky bubbles and a new spider web stretched between the gateposts. Fiddler appeared from beneath a hosta leaf and rubbed against my leg, then ran out ahead of me and flopped on his back. I stopped to rub his belly, grateful for his uncomplicated friendship. He followed me to the shed—tripping me several times as he darted between my legs—where I keep his food hidden behind the potting soil. While Fiddler ate, I wondered, not for the first time, what I was afraid of. Surely if there was a presence endangering the precarious balance of our relationship, it was R.J. and not Fiddler.

After that, I inspected the garden, weaving my way through the rows of vegetables. There were cucumbers, some nearly a foot long. I wondered how they managed to successfully hide until they were inedible, tough and full of seeds. The lima bean and green bean bushes were heavy with dangling pods, which needed to be picked while the weather was dry. The summer squash seemed to have doubled in size in one night. Scores of tomatoes were ready to pick. As I looked them over, I noticed that the fruit near the ground had holes bored through the skin. The copper collars I'd placed around the base of the plants hadn't deterred the slugs. The day already seemed dangerous.

There was so much work to do, I couldn't think where to start: tomatoes, squash, beans, cucumbers? It was too overwhelming. So instead, I decided to sort through the scraps of recipes I'd saved, trying to find ways to use my superabundant harvest.

It was around noon, and I was on the back porch watching a spider swaying in the nonexistent breeze, when I heard footsteps in the adjoining kitchen, then the click-hiss of a can being opened. Zach, sipping a beer, came to sit down on the porch rail across from me. I was startled by how tired he looked: slumped from the inside out, as if everything within him had grown heavy and begun to sag. I worried about his manic behavior during the holidays, but this scares me more.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"What are *you* doing? Shouldn't you be at work?" I nodded towards the beer.

"I wanted to see you." His eyes—and maybe this was just the angle of the sun—seemed washed out, the color of beach glass.

"Oh," I said, edgy. I held up a stack of recipe cards. "What do you think it says about a person when they have a hundred and fourteen cookie recipes and only three recipes with any kind of vegetables in them?"

"I don't know. That that person needs to call someone to fix the stove, I guess. Have you done that yet?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Because I don't want to spend your money, which is all tied up in the divorce, and I don't have any of my own. And because Diane is a good cook, and I'm not. "I don't know," I said. The spider I had been watching earlier was crawling towards the ceiling, reeling in his invisible line. "I just never find the time."

Zach seemed about to say something more, then stopped. He took a sip of his beer, then set the can on the porch rail. "Come here," he said.

He kissed me so deeply it seemed he was trying to *become* me. With one hand in my hair and the other on the small of my back, he crushed me to him. I felt claustrophobic, unable to breathe. Struggling to break free, I wedged my hands between us. "Don't fight me, please," he whispered, grabbing my waist and turning me, propelling me inside, onto the couch. Then he began to undress me, but so gently it seemed as if he thought the skin under my clothes had been recently burned. When he kissed my right collarbone, my breasts, my left collarbone—slowly and reverently—I understood that he was trying to erase, within the limitations of the male lexicon, the words R.J. had screamed the night before: *slut, leech, home wrecker*; to erase the echoes of his still-wife, Diane, because what thirteen-year-old boy uses the phrase *home wrecker*?

Later, when he was running a cool cloth over my body, he asked, "Do you think of yourself as beautiful?"

"No."

"But you know you're beautiful to me, don't you?"

He held my gaze, obviously trying to convey something urgent and important. “Zach?” I lifted myself onto one elbow, stilling the movement of the cloth with my other hand. “Yes.”

Zach’s looking at me now with that same inscrutable expression. Inching backwards, I stand and grab his hands to pull him up. “You know what would hit the spot?” I ask. “Ice cream.”

In the kitchen, the air is heavy with the smell of coffee. I switch off the coffeemaker and rinse out the pot, while Zach grabs two spoons and a carton of chocolate chip out of the freezer. Leaning against the counter, we eat from the container, passing the ice cream back and forth. Zach knows I like it slightly soupy, so he leaves the soft stuff along the sides for me, carefully limiting himself to the frozen blob in the middle.

“So. Are you still in oven paralysis?” he asks.

“Mmm hmm.” It occurs to me to ask why *he* doesn’t call someone about the stove. But then, in my mind, I run through this conversation and realize there’s too many ways for it to go wrong. It will start with responsibility and division of labor and careen, out of control, like it always does, into a discussion about baggage: his and hers.

“You know, a working stove doesn’t have to be so *meaningful*,” Zach says. “Sometimes a stove is just a stove.”

“Funny.”

Zach hands the carton back to me, saying, “Don’t forget. R.J. needs a ride to rehearsal tomorrow.” A positive sign: R.J. has gotten involved with community

theater. He has a small part as the gravediggers son in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Sometimes I can hear R.J. in the shower practicing how to sound mysterious. Zach looks at the clock, “Or today. Whatever. Diane’s busy with something and I have commitments.”

“Commitments.” I nod. “Yes, I haven’t forgotten you have eighteen holes of *commitments*.”

“Kate.” He uses his disappointed tone of voice and suddenly I’m tired of being careful.

“Do you know how many lights there are between here and the playhouse?” I ask. “Twelve. Why do I know that? Because I count them. Because the only thing worse than being trapped in a car with a silent thirteen-year-old, is being trapped in a car *at a red light* with a silent thirteen-year-old.”

“Kate, you’re overreacting.”

“I am not. His silence is malicious.”

“No, it’s not. You just don’t have much experience with teenagers. Anyway, keep trying, okay?” He points his spoon at me. “We all need to be working at this.”

The muscles in the back of my neck tighten and I search his face for some acknowledgment that he knows that I know this, that he knows I’ve been trying, that I’ve run out of things to try.

“Really,” I say, letting my voice drop angrily on the last syllable. I dig a heaping spoonful of ice cream out of the center of the carton and thrust it back at him.

Zach gazes at the hole I've made in his island of ice cream. He looks up at me, says, "That's a little childish, don't you think?" in the same voice he uses when R.J. squirts milk out of his nose.

"Oh, please." I leave him in the kitchen to put away the ice cream, and go back to my records.

When Zach returns to the living room, I've already sorted through everything in his box. The only artist we have in common is Van Morrison. "Hey!" I say, hoping our fight is over. "Can you believe we have so many copies of this?" I hold up four copies of *Bang Masters*. "We both have it on tape and CD."

Zach perches on the arm of the leather chair. "What are you going to do with those?" he asks.

"I don't know. Goodwill?" I take aim, about to toss Van the Man on the discard pile.

"Don't!"

"What?" I ask, startled. It's not like Zach to be possessive; I've never known him to put much stock in *things*. He didn't even get upset when R.J. lost control of his skateboard and dinged the door of his Mercedes. "Why not? Why do we need more than one copy?"

"I just want them, okay?"

"Do they have some kind of special meaning? Was your grandmother from Ireland? Did they play it at your senior prom?" Six cups of coffee and I can't stop myself. "Or is this what you used to listen to when you got laid?"

Zach just looks at me.

“Oh.” I drop the CDs and stand up. I picture Zach and Diane doing it to *Brown-eyed Girl*. “Oh.”

He sighs. “Do you have to do this now? It’s the middle of the night.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “What are you saying?”

“Nothing.” He holds up his hands in mock surrender.

“You’re not sure we’re going to make it. That’s what it is, isn’t it? That’s why you have to hang onto your CDs.” As soon as I say this, I wish I hadn’t. The ceiling fan seems to catch my words and send them whirling around the room. I want to reach out and pull them back to me; some things shouldn’t be loose in the world, some things come true that way.

Zach sighs loudly. “Oh, for God’s sake.”

Fiddler begins to meow.

“Doesn’t that damn cat have a home?” Zach asks, getting up to look out the window.

“Stop changing the subject!”

He turns. “Look, I’m tired. You’re tired. We’re hot and grouchy. And you’re jumping to conclusions.”

“Why can’t we talk about her? Why do you have to be so damn discreet? Why did you leave her if she’s so perfect?”

“She’s not perfect.”

My hands are clenching and unclenching; I can’t think what to do with them. “But she would have had the stove fixed by now, right? And she’d be cooking meatloaves and tuna casseroles and birthday cakes, wouldn’t she?”

Zach leaves the window and comes to stand behind me. He kisses my neck and cups my breasts with his hands. "Let's not do this now," he whispers. "Come on, let it go."

"Stop." I push his hands down and step away from him. "It isn't the answer to everything."

Behind me, Zach swears and kicks a pile of CDs, but I don't turn around. I walk right out the front door.

Outside, the sky is smudged with purple. The air smells of grass, bee balm and rain. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. The people on our street are sleeping, but everything else seems to be stirring, excited by the promise of a storm. Crickets are calling to each other insistently, scraping out a ragged rhythm. Mosquitoes and moths flit in and out of the misty halo of streetlights, disappearing for a moment before their next drunken flyby. Slugs ooze in the moonlight, streaking the sidewalk with glimmering graffiti. Occasionally, lightning flashes in the distance. Fiddler rushes to my side, rubs against my leg, then lopes off.

Walking to the edge of our property, I look back at the house. Inside, Zach is squatting on the floor, gathering up tapes and CDs. The screen door turns his image fuzzy, like a newspaper photograph that's been enlarged too many times.

Fervently, I wish I had somewhere to go.

The Douglas fir next to the house shakes, then a branch lowers to the roof and Fiddler scrambles off. He climbs to the peak of the roof and stretches out, his paws extended in front, his tail spread out behind. He looks down at me and

meows. Without thinking, I walk back to the garage, drag out the extension ladder and climb up to join him. The pitch of the roof is steeper than it looks from the ground, but the openness is exhilarating. I feel my way to a spot next to the chimney and sit down cautiously. Fiddler stretches out beside me, purring.

“Things aren’t good,” I tell the cat, stroking his head. “I think we’re fucked.”

Fiddler licks his paw, then begins to wash his face.

Wrapping my arms around my knees and rocking a little, I wonder how bad it really is. When you steal another woman’s husband, reality sets in slowly. At first it doesn’t feel like stealing: it feels like destiny. But then, after all the splendor and excitement, the awesome luck of finding your true soul mate, along comes this reckoning. Reality on your doorstep in the form of a sullen, Mountain Dew-guzzling, *Edwin Drood*-singing thirteen-year-old and his still-beautiful mother, who knows your husband better than you do, remembers the expression on his face when his children were born, saw him play basketball in college and city leagues, long before he blew out his knee. Three miles north and two blocks east of here, they’re sleeping in a house with central air and a working stove, a house that smells of banana bread and Pledge.

Tipping my head back, I watch the stars blink on and off as clouds parade past them. The air seems cooler up here and a breeze is moving through the tops of the trees. Leaves shimmer as they turn in the wind. Fiddler’s tail flicks twice, then settles across my feet.

As I concentrate on locating first the Big Dipper, then the Little Dipper, I feel myself begin to lose balance. I thrust my hands down hard, bracing myself. The

world wobbles, then rights itself. I haven't moved at all, I note with surprise—I just went too long without blinking. Sighing, I lean my head on my knees, too tired to climb down to safety.

The ladder creaks and a familiar silhouette appears at the top of it. Hesitantly, Zach crosses the roof and sits down on the other side of Fiddler.

“Hey,” he says. He draws up his knees, then dangles his hands between them.

“Hey,” I say. Fiddler yawns and stretches. I reach down and scratch his ears.

“About those records?” Zach's staring straight ahead at the swaying trees. “It's just that it's my stuff. That's all. It's all I've got. I left with my clothes, my golf clubs and my records. Can you understand that?”

I nod, ashamed of myself for not realizing how little Zach had left of his old life. He'd given up a lot, trying to be a gentleman through this divorce. I haven't given him enough credit for that.

Zach says, “I'm sorry this is so hard. I know you think I don't know, but I do.”

Tears slip past the ridge of my nose. “He hates me, Zach.”

“He's just a kid. He'll get over it.”

I sniff and wipe my nose on the back of my hand. “It's not just that.”

“What, then?”

“He's so—” I close my eyes. I don't want to say the next word, admit that we are culpable, “—*lost*.”

“I know.” Zach sighs. I open my eyes and look over at him. There’s a notch at the corner of his mouth; the one that means he’s searching for the right—the polite and politically correct—words. “I don’t like to talk about this, it just sounds like whining. But believe me, things weren’t any better before. He’ll get used to things. Give him time.”

“Hey,” He reaches over and squeezes my knee. “You’re still the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“I find that a little hard to believe.”

“Well, believe it.”

Despite everything, I know the reverse is true: he’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. His small kindnesses, his enormous optimism—I don’t even want to think about life without him.

“It’s not like I thought it would be,” I say.

“I know.”

“It’s not like you thought it would be, either.”

“No.”

“You thought we’d be screwing like rabbits.”

“Well, I hoped—“

Hearing the smile in his voice, I smile myself. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault.”

I hesitate before I ask the next question, not sure if I want to hear the answer. “Are we going to make it, Zach?”

This is the question we've been trying to avoid all summer. Now that it's out, I'm filled with the same combination of dread and relief that comes with being the first to say I love you. Dread, because if you were going to hear what you wanted to hear, you wouldn't have had to be the first to say it. And relief, because at least now you'll *know*.

Zach takes a deep breath, as if he's about to explain something, then stops. He seems mesmerized by the trees again; the wind has picked up and their limbs are waving wildly. In our next-door neighbor's yard a crow squawks, then swoops down, changing branches. Fiddler sits up, watches for a moment, then settles back down. Zach shakes his head, as if he's trying to rid himself of some thought. "I don't know," he says finally.

I'm grateful for the reprieve, but my eyes still fill with tears. "So what do we do now?"

"Go to bed."

"No. Really."

He stands up and pulls me to my feet. Gathering me into his arms, he kisses my forehead, both eyes, my mouth. We sway a little and I grip him tighter, locking my hands behind his back. "Well, maybe you'll come to bed," he says. "But probably you'll start alphabetizing the canned goods."

"Funny." I push away, hands flat against his chest. He's holding my arms, keeping me from falling. "Zach, I don't want to sort things anymore. Tell me what to do."

He pulls me back, tucks my head under his chin. “Let’s just wait for August to end.” The words rumble in his throat as he says them. “The heat will break. R.J. will go back to school. Things will get better.”

I consider this: not a solution, but a strategy. “Okay,” I say, tired. I kiss the hollow of his throat, tasting his sweat. Then he leads me to the edge of the roof and I watch as he climbs down. When he reaches the bottom, he holds the ladder for me. Fiddler peers over the edge of the roof, curious. When I’m halfway, Zach knocks on the side of the ladder with his knuckles and calls up, “I suppose now’s not the time to tell you that you have terrible taste in music, is it?”

“Hey,” I yell, gripping the ladder.

When I reach the bottom, Zach drapes his arm across my shoulders. “It’s okay, you can’t help it,” he tells me. “Your parents liked *The Music Man*.” I laugh, and together we walk around to the front door. When we pass the Douglas fir, the top of it is shaking.

Inside, everything has been returned to order. I linger in the doorway and take it all in: our books, the quilt Zach’s mother gave us for a wedding gift, the watercolor my parents sent from Florida. Even R.J.’s running shoes—tucked halfway beneath the couch where I always trip on them—seem benign. It’ll be okay, I tell myself. August will end. They’ll finish widening the road. R.J and I will keep trying. Things will get better. I give Zach’s hand a squeeze and he tugs me toward the bedroom. When we reach the bed, I stop. “Wait,” I say, dropping his hand.

In the living room, I open the front door, and step out onto the porch. "Come on in, Fiddler," I call.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Stephanie Harrison attended Miami University, where she received a B.S. in systems analysis.

More African elephants are now being poached than being born. No one wants to grow up in a world without elephants and the clock is ticking to save them. Cath Lawson , World Wildlife Fund. Levels of elephant poaching in Asia are much lower than in Africa, and when poaching does happen, it's mainly as a result of conflict between humans and elephants. To enjoy the CBBC Newsround website at its best you will need to have JavaScript turned on. WATCH: Here are 11 things you never knew about elephants. That's because humans often take the land where elephants live in order to farm and develop it, which results in a loss of habitat. "Elephants need to eat 250 kilos per day and cost owners approximately \$1,000 per month to house and feed. Without tourism, these elephants would have nowhere to go and no one to pay for their fodder." source. "Mass tourism remains the only income source available to keep the majority of Thailand's captive elephants fed and so cannot be abandoned or boycotted but it is important to work with business and mahout communities to modify welfare and sustainability aspects." source. 3. Elephant riding remains in high demand. Many tourists want to ride elephants no matter what. In sheer numbers,