

## THE SHAPE OF A TEARDROP

### POLICE DOGS AND FIRE HOSES

I'm not going anywhere. They can come in with police dogs and fire hoses and I'll cling to the woodwork till I'm stripped to the bone. They'd like that, wouldn't they, their one and only child, who never asked to be born in the first place, reduced to an artifact in his own room in the only home he's ever known? A memento mori. A musculoskeletal structure without the musculo. Shouting matches? If they want shouting matches, well, I'm more than equal to the task. They're old and weak and ridiculous and they know it, with their stained teeth and droopy necks and faces like masks cut out of sheets of sandpaper, with two holes poked for their glittery, hypercritical eyes to blaze through. But what a fool I am—I thought the final straw was when they dropped me from the family plan and I woke up one day with no cell service and, really, knock-knock, how do they expect me to get a job if I don't have a phone? Is that so hard to figure out? Does that take higher reasoning? Putting fucking one and one together? The next final straw was when they brought in Lucas Hubinski, who was in high school with me back in the time before time, and had him put a lock on the refrigerator and the pantry, too, as if they were display cases at Tiffany's. You think that was extreme? How about the final final straw, the one that could have filled a whole barn with ungulate fodder bound up in bales eight feet high? You ready for this? They went out and got an eviction notice and taped it to the door of my room, as if that was going to mean anything to me, as if I cared what the Danbury Superior Court had to say about anything. Or what they had to say. Them, too.

### EVERY ADVANTAGE

He had every advantage. We loved him, we still love him, our only child, who came to us as the sweetest and truest blessing from God when I was forty-one and so empty inside I was staring into the void in my every waking moment and in my dreams, too, which used to be full of wonder but had turned so rancid I could feel my brain rotting right there on the pillow while Doug snored the night away—because he'd given up, he really had, worn out from working overtime so we could afford the in-vitro treatments, which were just money down the drain, because nothing ever came of them except heartache. But I don't give up so easily. I'm hardheaded like my mother and her mother before her. When the calendar said I was ovulating, I went to Victoria's Secret for lingerie, got Doug drunk on champagne, posed for him, sat in his lap, and watched porn with him till we were both so hot we practically raped each other. Still, nothing happened. Months dripped by like slow poison. I told myself there were other ways to be fulfilled besides bearing children, though when you come down to it, God and Heaven aside, the whole point of life is to create more life. Then, in the way of these things—the mysterious way, I mean, the way the world turns whether you think you're in charge of it or not—I missed my period. One morning, I woke up feeling sick to my stomach. I knew right away. I was elated. And my baby was more beautiful than beauty itself.

## THE DOCUMENT IN QUESTION

The document in question is just a paragraph long, pithy, to the point, and was drawn up by some lower life-form with a J.D. degree they'd met at the bar at Emilio's, where they used to take me in happier days, before, in my father's words—no joke, my own father—I became an embarrassment to them. Ha! I'm an embarrassment to them? Have they looked in a mirror lately? Anyway, it was a day from hell, first week of February, a cold needling rain harassing me all the way back from the mall, which is a 2.3-mile walk, and, of course, to get there in the first place, I had to walk the 2.3 miles, and forget sticking your thumb out, because nobody around here's picked up a hitchhiker since the first "Star Wars" movie came out or maybe even before that. Who knows? That's a matter for the social historians. But why didn't I drive? Because my car, a Japanese piece of shit, needs a new front end, and it's been up on blocks in the driveway for the past eighteen months, because my parents refuse to loan me the money to get it repaired, and, again, their thinking is beyond stupefying, because, even if I did manage to find a job without a cell phone, how would they expect me to actually arrive at my place of employment?

But I needed to get out, if only for my own mental and physical well-being, because you can only reread the creased and moldering paperbacks you've had on your shelf since you were fourteen, play video-game retreads, and stare into the fish tank for so many hours a day before you start feeling like Dostoyevsky's Underground Man, so I decided to make the trek. In the rain. I'm not much of a drinker, and, since my unemployment ran out, I don't have a whole lot of cash to throw around, but there's a bar at the mall where I like to sit over a pitcher and watch the bartender go briskly about her business, which mainly involves polishing the bar top and flirting with the male customers, a subset to which I belong. Her name is Ti-Gress, or at least that's what her nametag says, and, given what I have to put up with at home, it's beyond refreshing to sit there and watch her while the sound system delivers electronica and the patrons jaw at one another and the TV redirects its pixels till everybody's in a trance. Plus, I wanted to stop at Pet Emporium to pick up a pair of convict cichlids for the big tank (fifty gallons, freshwater, strictly Central and South American species, because that's my method, not like these so-called hobbyists who mix Asian, African, and South American species in a way that's an outrage to nature, if you think about it). Anyway, I watched Ti-Gress and exchanged a comment or two with her as she slid like a big silk kite up and down the bar, finished my beer, picked out the convicts, and had the stringy-haired sixteen-year-old pet-shop nerd put them in a bigger-than-normal plastic bag, with an extra shot of O<sub>2</sub> (which I tucked inside my jacket to keep it warm for the 2.3-mile walk home).

It got colder. The rain turned to sleet. Nobody would even consider stopping to offer me a ride, and, no, I didn't have the money to waste on an Uber, if that's what you're thinking. Then I walk in the house—nobody home, they're still at work, thank the tutelary gods for small miracles, and Jesus, Muhammad, and Siddhartha, too, if they're listening—and there's this notice taped to my door. You are herewith informed. Et cetera.

## BIRTHDAY CARD

I didn't even have a chance to get out of the car before he was right there in my face, waving the notice I'd come all the way home on my lunch break to tape to his door so there would be no mistaking our intentions, no more second chances or third chances—or twentieth, actually, if you want to know the truth of it. He was ugly in that moment, which I hate to admit, stamping around in the slush of the driveway, throwing a tantrum like a two-year-old. And with the neighbors watching, too—Jocelyn Hammersmith across the street, whose stone face I could see peeking through her parted blinds, foremost

among them. Oh, he was so put-upon, so abused, and I was inhuman, the most unfeeling mother in history, who'd never understood him, never supported him, never given him a break. Doug had called him an embarrassment, which was cruel and wrongheaded, but in that moment—with his face contorted and that unkempt snarl of a beard he never trims or even washes, so flecked with dandruff that he looks like a fur trapper in a snowstorm, and with all the weight he's put on feeling sorry for himself in the room I haven't been allowed to enter since he moved back home after breaking up with his girlfriend, seven years ago—I couldn't help seeing the truth of it.

Will he think to open the car door for me? No, he just wants to rave. "You're killing me! Is that what you want? You want me to be homeless? You want me to sleep outside in this shitty weather and get, what, multiple-drug-resistant TB from all the bums? Huh, would that make you happy?"

Does he notice that my arms are full or wonder why I'm bringing home a bouquet of pink roses and white carnations (which my eighth-period honors class went out of their way to surprise me with)? Does he even know it's my birthday? And what about a card? What about a birthday card, even a generic one—or a handmade one, like the ones he used to give me when he was in elementary school? Am I being petty to want some kind of recognition that I'm alive and breathing, even if it's only one day a year? Who is this person? What have I made? What has he become?

The door of the car—a Jeep Grand Cherokee that Doug insisted I get for the four-wheel drive—is heavier than the door of a bank vault and even in the best of times I have to push hard to get it open, but now, juggling my purse and briefcase and trying to protect the flowers, it's a real trick. Somehow I manage, and then I've got a foot on the pavement, in the slush, and I'm so angry I'm afraid of what I might say, afraid I might lash out, reminding him of all the "loans" over the years and the fifteen hundred dollars we gave him for Christmas to get himself an apartment, which he says he spent on "expenses," so I just match my expression to his and say, "It's my birthday."

That stops him, if only for an instant, the hand that's been flailing the notice like a doomsday flag dropping to his side and his face softening before it snaps back to the look of umbrage he seems to wear all day every day, even when he's out in the yard by himself or power-walking down the street to wherever he goes when he leaves the house. "You want me to die?" he shouts, loud enough for Jocelyn Hammersmith to hear through her storm windows.

I should bite my tongue. I should remember the way he once was, the way life was before whatever happened to him—to us, him, Doug, and me—wiped it all away. "Yes," I say, making my way past him, so close that the flowers in their crinkly cellophane brush the black leather coat that he insists on wearing winter and summer, as if it were the skin he was born in. "If you're going to die, go ahead and do it—but do it someplace else, will you? Will you at least do that for us?"

I'm angry, I am, but he looks so pathetic in that moment that I want to take everything back. "I didn't mean that," I say. "Justin, listen to me, look at me—"

But he's already turned his back on me, stamping up the front steps and slamming the door practically in my face.

A card. A birthday card. Is that too much to ask?

## LORENA

What my parents don't seem to understand is that Lorena is a miserable excuse for a human being and a certified bitch to boot. I tried with her. Tried to "man up," as she put it, and, when she got pregnant in our senior year at state college, I even moved in with her in her apartment that was the size of the sweatbox in "The Bridge on the River Kwai" (movie version; I never read the book), and I put up with that till she got so big I started calling her Godzilla, Jr., and things became toxic to the point where it made me physically ill just to look at her. Yes, I had sex with her, guilty as charged, but I was her pawn. All the experience was on her side—I barely knew what a condom was. And please—I never asked to have a child. I wasn't ready to be a father, O.K.? So sue me. Which, of course, was what she did, and, when I dropped out of school twelve credits short of a B.A. in cultural studies, went to sleep on the couch at Steve Arms's place, and got a job at Home Depot, they garnished my wages for child support. Welcome to the legal system of the U.S. of A.!

I made it short and sweet the day I ran into her on the street with the kid. "Lorena, you're killing me," I said, and it was the literal truth.

Lorena might have been pretty if she had more style, but she didn't. And there was the baby, propped up beside her on the bench waiting for the bus, and I just happened to have the bad luck of walking by at that moment. Five minutes before or after and she wouldn't have been there at all. "No, you're killing me," she said, and gave one of her curdled little laughs, like it was the wittiest thing that had ever emerged from anybody's mouth.

I didn't know what to do. I was frozen there. I still had a car then, and a job, and I could have done anything I wanted. The baby didn't look like me, but the DNA test her lawyer made me submit to came up bingo, and there he was, the baby, gazing up at me out of a pair of eyes that were as black as the empty spaces between the planets. "What's his name?" I asked, and she gave me a look as if I'd just slapped her and her mother and her mother's mother, all the way back to the hominids loping across Olduvai Gorge.

"What are you saying?" She was looking down a double barrel of hate aimed right between my eyes. My legs felt weak. I felt weak. I was so far gone I almost sat down beside her. "You know his name as well as I do."

"I didn't give it to him."

"No," she said. "No, you didn't."

And that, right there, that encounter at a bus stop, of all places, was what started the rift between my parents and their only child, because if there was one thing they wanted, my mother most of all, it was to see this marvel, this grandchild ("grandbaby," as she put it).

## ALEJANDRO

That was his name, my grandson, Alejandro Diaz Narvaez, and, if my son had done the right thing by the child's mother, he could have been named Alexander Dugan and brought into the family legitimately and wouldn't have to swim against the current all his life with a single parent who can't begin to give him the advantages he deserves. But my son refused to let us see him or have any contact with the mother, with

Lorena, whom we laid eyes on for the first time a month after Justin moved back into his room, when she appeared on the front porch with the baby in her arms. “Mrs. Dugan?” she said, making it both a question and a surmise, and I said, “Yes?”

Neither Doug nor I have a prejudicial bone in our bodies, so I can’t imagine how Justin could have thought we wouldn’t accept this child as readily as any other, even if we’d missed the birth of the baby, the shower, the christening, getting to meet the other set of grandparents, shopping for baby outfits and toys and cribs and strollers, all of it. I was gracious with Lorena, of course I was—that was how I was raised. And, as we sat over a cup of tea and a platter of shortbread rounds I found in the back of the cabinet and was afraid had gone stale (but hadn’t, thankfully), I studied that baby like a genealogical sleuth. And whose nose did he have? Whose eyes? Ears? Hair? Even the bow of his legs and the dimples that creased his cheeks when his mother made him laugh, which he did readily, a little chirp of a laugh. I could see right away what a good mother she was. He kicked out his legs and waved his arms, and when Lorena put him down on the carpet he showed off his ability to crawl at speed and even stand for whole seconds at a time without assistance, and the more I watched him the more I knew in my heart just whose child this was and the thing I felt above all else was blessed.

### ON A LEGAL FOOTING

So things are on a legal footing, as the expression goes, my mother, on her birthday, of all days, having taped the eviction notice to my door where it would instantaneously register, like a verbal slap in the face, before I could even work the combinations on the three case-hardened padlocks I’d had to install to protect my privacy and get the fish into the tank because the water in the plastic bag wasn’t getting any warmer and the O<sub>2</sub> level was dropping by the minute. And guess what? My father, when he came home, though I refused to come out of my room and join in any birthday celebration—are you kidding me?—went right along with the agenda. Because he’s weak, a drudge, a drone who’s toiled away at I.B.M. his whole life, taking his lunch to work in the same scuffed aluminum lunchbox he claims I gave him for Father’s Day when I was five years old, which probably isn’t even true and if it is it’s beyond pathetic.

Anyway, no sooner do I get the convicts into my ten-gallon holding tank to acclimate them and scrutinize them for disease—ich, in particular, *Ichthyophthirius multifiliis*, that is, which can infest an entire tank and turn your fish into tiny bloated white corpses floating in little slicks of their own scum—than I hear my mother’s car pull into the driveway, and it just sets me off, her coming home like that, like today’s no different from any other day, and so I tear the notice off the door and run right out there in the driveway to confront her with it. Which, of course, is just another kind of disaster, because we’ve reached the point where she doesn’t care if I live or die, just as long as I vacate the premises. And she admits it, says it right to my face in a tense little choked voice like it’s tearing her up inside, when the fact is that she coldly contracted with her lawyer friend to draw up the notice and then went down to the courthouse and paid the fee to file it. It’s like in that Russian story where the wolves are chasing the sled through the snowdrifts and the parents toss the baby out to distract them and save themselves—and the horses, don’t forget the horses.

Later, after my father comes home, I hear him at my door, though I’ve got the music going and I’m so furious I can barely concentrate on what I’m seeing on the computer screen, as I scroll through site after site about tenants’ rights, most of which are telling me I have none because I’ve never paid rent or helped with maintenance or entered into any kind of legal agreement, because they’re my parents, for shit’s sake, and my father’s saying things like “Come on, Justin, it’s your mother’s birthday” and “You knew this was

coming and don't say we didn't warn you," and then adding a threat or two about cutting off the power (which he knows drives a knife blade right into my spinal cord, because, in this weather, it would kill my fish in less than an hour) before he gives up. I hear them thumping around up there for the next half hour or so, and then they're slamming out the front door and into my father's car to go someplace (Emilio's, no doubt) for a celebratory dinner without me, the embarrassment who's so embarrassing he's not even going to have a roof over his head anymore. But that doesn't work for me, so what I'm doing is putting things on a legal footing of my own, searching for the cheapest lawyer I can find.

## **TIT FOR TAT**

The notice gave him ten days to vacate the premises, and every minute of those ten days was soul-wrenching for us, because after everything that's happened over the years—his disrespect and hostility, his slovenliness, his refusal to look for a job or offer to help out in the least bit, and the way he categorically rejects his own son and won't listen to reason or even consider our feelings as grandparents and bolts straight out of the house on the rare occasions when Lorena and Alejandro do make the effort to pay us a visit—please understand that we love him, no matter what he might tell you. But he makes it hard, so very, very hard.

The night of my birthday, after that scene in the driveway, we came home to a mess in the kitchen like you wouldn't believe. He'd managed to pry the door off the pantry and take a pair of bolt cutters to the lock on the refrigerator and make himself a big pot of the slumgullion stew he'll eat for days on end, just grabbing everything he could find and throwing the whole mess into the biggest pot we have, which, of course, disappeared into the basement, where he had his hot plate and microwave and whatever else I don't know. His door was locked, as usual. And, when I went down the hallway to pound on it and yell my lungs out in frustration, the carpet gave like a sponge under my feet. Why? Because it was wet, soaked right through to the maple flooring, and I saw then that he'd taken one of his ten-gallon aquariums, the first one I gave him, when he was still in elementary school, and just flung it into the hallway, plants and gravel and broken glass and all (but no fish—his fish were too precious for that, no matter what kind of gesture he thought he was making). I pounded on the door. Doug pounded on the door. But all we got back for the effort was the dismal electronic music he listens to 24/7, which got progressively louder as we pounded.

Happy birthday, Mom.

Two days later, as I got out of my car in the school parking lot, a stranger walked up to me, handed me an envelope, and announced, "You've been served."

## **WHAT I REALLY WANTED TO SUE THEM FOR**

What I really wanted to sue them for was giving birth to me in the first place, which had happened without my knowledge or consent and resulted in my having to live a shit life on a shit planet and all because they wanted to have sex. (All right, all right, so I fell into the same trap, but if they hadn't irresponsibly brought me into the world Lorena wouldn't have been able to take hold of my tool and stick it inside her as if that was where it belonged.) But the lawyer I talked to on the first-five-minutes-free hotline said that would never fly, despite the guy in India who's suing his parents for the exact same thing, so I settled on breach of contract and drew up the complaint myself, alleging that, by virtue of their giving me my own room in the house since I was an infant and freely letting me move back in when I had no place else to go, they



had entered into an unwritten contract to provide me with shelter, and that, even if it was within their rights to evict me, they at least had to give me six months' notice, because you can't just throw somebody out in the street, unless you're in some country where they randomly kick down doors and put people in concentration camps.

They didn't take it well. My father, the drudge, got somebody with a tow truck to come and haul my car away, leaving me to contemplate the bleached-out car-shaped blotch on the blacktop driveway and the bill for a hundred and twenty-five dollars that arrived in the mail three days later, along with the address of a garage where I could pick the car up (after shelling out twenty-five per day in storage fees). Which meant, in essence, that I no longer had a car, because I wasn't about to pay anybody anything for having misappropriated my property, and why couldn't I sue the garage, along with my father? Or, better yet, just call the police and report it stolen? That would make them squirm.

As it turned out, I didn't get around to it because other problems arose. Specifically, Lorena and Alejandro. Time may have winged by, but Lorena was pretty much the same, shapeless and without a clue about style (unlike Ti-Gress, who absolutely rocked every outfit she wore and was the only person I knew who actually got my jokes). It was different for the kid. He'd grown, as I'd already observed through the window on the occasions when Lorena came to visit my mother, hoping, no doubt, for some kind of handout, because I wasn't paying child support and never would, which was why I wasn't about to go out and get a job—Mom, if you're interested—just to see my wages garnished for this skinny, hungry-eyed blur of motion, who was something like seven years old and still didn't look anything like me, no matter what the spit-in-a-kit DNA test said. Oh, my mother would stand outside the door of the room from which she was evicting me and tell me that my son was here and how much he wanted to see me, and I'd just crank the music till the walls shook and watch for my chance to slip out of the house. And I'm sorry, but I am not going to be forced into any kind of relationship with anybody ever—I've got enough to deal with as it is when my own flesh and blood want to throw me out in the street like trash.

Yeah. Right. Call me naïve, because I had no idea the kind of cabal I was faced with here or what they were scheming together to do, my parents and Lorena and the kid, too, but let me clue you in: they wanted me out. And, once I was out, what was going to become of my six-hundred-square-foot room with its own private entrance and full bath, and the knotty-pine panelling I measured and cut and nailed up myself when I was a junior in high school and busting my hump over the college-prep classes I was taking just to please my parents, including the true ballbusters, pre-calc and French? French, Lorena, not Spanish.

## **DAY IN COURT**

He had his day in court, which was what he wanted, what we all wanted, lacking an alternative. We served him notice three times before we finally got to stand before a judge in a public courtroom, where our family differences were aired as if we were the lowlifes and toothless rednecks you see on the reality shows I never really had the stomach for, and the whole experience was as humiliating as anything I've ever been through in my life. We retained a friend of Doug's boss at I.B.M. to represent us, and Justin, looking the way he could always look if he put any effort into it—dignified and handsome, dressed up in a sports coat, with his beard trimmed and his wavy hair pulled back in a ponytail—represented himself, because ultimately he was too cheap to hire a lawyer, which Doug had known all along would be the case.

But listen to me, I sound as if I'm my own son's adversary, as if I want to denigrate him, and I don't—far from it. I want to build him up, to love him and respect him, but here we are, in a courtroom, and all those

present, from the judge to the court reporter to the onlookers with nothing better to do, are just having the time of their lives with our public ignominy, as if we were back in Dutch times and sitting in the stocks in the town square. We're suing to evict our own son from our family home, where he's lived all his life, because he's become a burden to us, an impossible person, lazy, venal, and abusive—yes, an embarrassment—and he's countersuing us on the ground that we've failed in our parental duty, reneging on the parent-child bond we made in the hospital the day he emerged from my womb and Doug cut the umbilical cord and the doctor handed him to me to clasp to my breast. That hurts. Lord, how that hurts.

## SO THEY NAILED ME

I pleaded with the judge (this balding, meringue-faced automaton who could have been a clone of my father) and made my case with all the authority and ironclad logic I had inside me, and, believe me, I'd done my homework online, and I cited a precedent in which the evictee—somebody's daughter, who was in the same figurative boat as I was—got the court to side with her and grant her a six-month extension, which was really all I wanted at this point, because the level of animosity and tit-for-tat-ism at home was just beyond belief, and I did not want to live there anymore or really ever see my parents again, but the judge came back at me as if he were the prosecuting attorney in some tabloid murder case on cable TV, just grilling me and grilling me. Did I have a job? Was I paying child support? Had I ever contributed anything toward rent at my parents' house? (Which was bogus, because I happen to know they own the house outright and mortgage-free, so blood from a stone, right?) Was I aware that a parent's legal responsibility for his or her child ends when that child turns eighteen and—here he shuffled the papers on the bench and made a show of clamping a pair of reading glasses over his little upturned lump of a half-price nose—it says here that you're thirty-one years of age, is that right?

Well, I was. Simple fact. Do your homework, dude. But the relevant fact here was that, whether I was six or sixty, I was the one getting tossed out in the street, and I tried to make him see that, tried to make him understand what it was going to take for me, with no money, no prospects, and, let's face it, no hope, to get it together to move, and did he have even the slightest notion of how difficult it is to relocate six fish tanks, including the fifty-gallon? Did he know how big that was? How much it weighed? Did he know that water weighs 8.34 pounds per gallon and the tanks would burst unless they were drained first, and, if they were drained, where did he expect me to put the fish, which required, life or death, a pH factor of 7.1 and a steady temperature of seventy-eight to eighty degrees or they risked getting the ich and the ich could kill them? *Would* kill them?

But the judge was the judge, and I was a minute speck on his docket, a blot, a nuisance, nothing. He set down his glasses, looked first at my parents, then at me, and pronounced his verdict. The case I'd cited, so he claimed, had been superseded by a more recent case and the judgment thrown back on the parents' side, who had the absolute right to evict anybody from their own domicile, and, in respect to that and his own determination in the case before him, he was finding against me and giving me seventy-two hours to vacate or face forcible eviction at the hands of the county sheriff, who—and here he looked me right in the eye—really had better things to do. Understood?

And then there was the scene in the hallway, when I was so blind with fury I couldn't have told you my own name if you'd asked me three times in succession, and before my parents could get to me and gloat or jeer or threaten me or whatever they were going to do I was confronted with Lorena and the kid, who were standing there practically blocking the exit, Lorena in a burlap-colored dress that showed off her fat knees and the kid in a miniature Mets cap and jersey, as if that would mean anything to me, since I gave



up on baseball forever when I was thirteen, the year that the Mets crashed and burned. She looked from me to the kid and said, "Alejandro, say hello to your father."

## **PYRRHIC VICTORY**

The silence in the house that night was almost insupportable, as if the air had been sucked out of us and we were just waiting for permission to breathe again. For the first time in as long as I could remember, the floorboards were not reverberating with the pulse of our son's music, which, as dreary and insistent as it was, had nonetheless become the heartbeat of the house, a filial rhythm I absorbed through the soles of my sandals and the arms of the chairs in the living room and could detect in the faint rattle of the dishes in the sideboard, and, even if I wasn't always consciously aware of it, it was there, letting me know that my son was alive and well and present. But why wasn't he playing his music? He was down there, wasn't he? I'd sat at the window watching since we'd got back from court, feeling nervous and guilty, hating myself, and I hadn't seen him go out since Steve Arms had dropped him off hours ago.

I asked Doug that question over dinner, which was a homemade paella with clams, mussels, and shrimp, fresh from the seafood market, which Justin used to love when he was still Justin. "I don't know," Doug said. "Maybe he unplugged the stereo—maybe he's packing up." He bent forward to dig a wedge of the socarrat out of the bottom of the pan. "All I can say is it's a relief to be able to sit here and eat dinner like normal human beings without that constant goddam thumping. You know what I say? It's time. It's about fucking time."

Of course, Justin is Justin, which meant that he ignored the court order and Doug had to summon somebody from the sheriff's department to come by and enforce it, which was a trial all in itself, watching my son be put through that on top of everything else. I wanted to go out and interfere, but Doug wouldn't let me. Here was this young man, in his pressed blue uniform and gun belt, standing outside the basement door while Justin pleaded with him for just a little more time and Steve Arms backed his truck up to the door and the two of them started putting black trash bags full of books and games and clothes into the back of the truck. Eventually, the sheriff's officer pointed at his watch, got in his cruiser, and drove off. Mercifully. But the process had started, and whether the officer had given him an hour or three hours or five I didn't know—all I knew was that by the end of the day there'd be a new lock on the door and my son wouldn't be allowed back inside ever again, whether he'd got his things out or not.

I watched them work, watched them drive off with the first load, then the second, and then finally come back for the fish tanks, the two of them maneuvering gingerly around the big one that still had half an inch of water in it while the fish batted around in the bulging clear plastic bags they'd laid carefully in the tanks after securing them in the bed of the truck, and I knew they didn't have long before they had to get those fish to where they were going and back into the tanks with the heaters and the filters up and running—that much Justin had taught me over the years. But where were the fish going? That I wasn't privy to. I wasn't privy to anything, not anymore. I used to have a son and now I didn't.

## **THE SHAPE OF A TEARDROP**

Steve, Ti-Gress, a couple of deadheads I knew from the bar all said the same thing: You're better off! Don't you feel better off? And I had to seriously wonder if they were joking or being sarcastic or just radiating their own hostility and insecurity. Better off? In a Section 8 shithole infested with addicts and ex-cons and welfare mothers and their shrieking welfare brats hanging off their necks like tumors, with my tanks

crowding the room so I could barely turn around? The tanks I had to move twice, incidentally, first to Steve Arms's garage, literally under the gun of some fascist Storm Trooper, and then to this place, and, if I lost half the fish in the process, what's that to anybody, least of all the judge or my parents? Or Lorena. Who—you guessed it—moved in with my parents, temporarily, strictly temporarily, because her place was being renovated, or so she claimed, and that was six months ago, and every time I walk by at night I wind up peeping in the window, even though I don't want to, and I can see them in there, one big happy family, my mother smiling and laughing and the kid bouncing off the walls like a Ping-Pong ball and Lorena looking pleased with herself, as if she'd finally settled the score with me, once and for all. My father I don't talk to. But my mother, out of the bigness of her heart, put me back on the family plan, and I do get to hear her voice once in a while—all right, daily—and she has one theme only now: Alejandro. As in, when am I going to take him to the park or to a movie or show him my fish tanks, because he's crazy about fish tanks and he loves you, he really does? I'm saying, "How can he love me when he barely knows me?" And she counters with "It's in his blood, don't you get it?"

You can only live with resentment for so long, I know that. I'm free of that place, free of my parents, and yet every time the phone buzzes in my pocket it's my mother or sometimes Lorena or even, with their prodding, Alejandro. They had him do some art work at school, which my mother sent me via the U.S. Postal Service, pictures of fish in tanks, squirrels and dogs and cars, the usual sort of thing, except for one that said "Dad" on it in big red bleeding letters and showed a kid's face, his face, obscured by a swarm of floating misshapen blobs that I finally figured out were teardrops, as if he was sending me a message, which he was, no doubt at the prompting of Lorena and my mother, but the thing was, the kid was no artist and you couldn't really tell what they were supposed to be. ♦