

Goodnight Sweet

& other stories to read aloud before bed

John Wentworth



John Wentworth

for Gina

Foreword

by Bruce B. Suttle

Recently I celebrated my fortieth anniversary of being fifty. Nothing special, but it prompted me to reflect on the past fifty years, which started with my coming from the East to Champaign. Four events loom large: starting to teach philosophy at Parkland College; earning a Ph.D.; going to Texas to get married; and coming to know and cherish Johnnie in particular as my longest and best friend.

I offer this as a preface to the collection of Johnnie's short stories. It was in the mid-seventies when Parkland College was just starting up, classes being taught in various locations, such as churches, former public schools, and downtown vacancies. Johnnie's mother, Marlene, was taking her first college course—taught by me—in a conference room of a local church. She was, by far, my best student. Subsequently, our paths crossed and we got to know each other socially, which included her husband Dick and eventually Johnnie, his two brothers, Doug and Jim, and sister Liz. A few years later John-

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nie took a couple of courses from me, not quite achieving his mother's excellence.

After that our relationship became solely a matter of friendship. Drinking beer, playing chess, and talking. On one such occasion—it was tax time—I asked Johnnie what he would do if we won a million dollars; pay off the IRS and then what? “Nope” was his response. He would keep a little, continue small payments to the IRS and divide the rest among his six children. Those who knew Johnnie would not have been surprised.

In the forty some years I've known Johnnie there was a period of six or seven years during which we were both writing and trying to get our short stories published. Johnnie had been previously doing such and has continued after my long pause. We talked about writing and critiquing each other's stories. Neither of us got published. I resorted to returning to writing academic articles, which were published, while Johnnie continued his fiction (occasionally autobiographical) writing.

With the present privilege I've been able to read works of Johnnie's that I previously was not privy to. I was impressed! He writes with a command that conveys that he is not thoughtlessly fumbling, that his characters display what they think and feel without having the author explaining. His descriptions of the settings of the stories, the natural, social trappings are vivid, but not heavy-handed. He has a sense of knowing when and how to pause, to take a breath before continuing, and when and how to end a story.

Foreword

I read on average three to four short stories a week, usually from *The New Yorker* or *Harper's*. Granted, they have a wider reading audience than the central U.S. for what they offer. Still, very often I'm disappointed. Not so with Johnnie's stories. While once in a while a story will merely (?) produce a smile, but never a frown. This can't be said of what I read weekly. Often, they are just bummers.

Admittedly, I don't make it a point to suspend my knowing who I'm reading when I read Johnnie's stories. Yet, on the contrary, I think I expect more of him than of a stranger, and I'm seldom disappointed. Granted, some stories do things that I might not have done. But that certainly is not a fault in his writing. In fact, such occasions enrich my perspective of possibilities, not only of a story's content, but in how it is conveyed. They take a different direction than I expect, but more often than not, it works and is achieved by being neither labored nor awkward.

So, what awaits the reader of this collection of stories is an enhanced experience; a delightful experience that gives the reader a sense of the author's worldview.

Bruce B. Suttle
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My oldest and dearest friend has died; his absence leaves a vacuum in my life. While Kurt Brown and Johnnie go back to their late childhood together with many stories to be told, my friendship with Johnnie started in the late 70s. I have many cherished memories of times with Johnnie, but unlike his and Kurt's adventures, ours were conversations. A reoccurring topic was the nature of self, which we differed about. Johnnie believed that we have a core unchanging essential self, while I held our identity is constantly in flux like Heraclitus' river that changes with every step into it. But, upon reflection, I must admit that unlike what applies to others, Johnnie was the exception—he was always the Johnnie that I loved and will eternally miss.



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Goodnight Sweet

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Goodnight Sweet

"Yes, even in the winter. I just close the window between vehicles. And sometimes I won't open it if I see it's just one car. But when I see a string coming, I open it halfway and just like...soak it in...or try to. I find it so comforting. I think I told you—I know I told you—that when I was a kid we went to the drive-in movies all the time, like once or twice a month or more, because they charged by the car I think, so it was a cheap way to take four kids out at one time, a cheap way to get us to bed. And of course we lived in the south so we could go year-round. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. *Judge Roy Bean*. Jimmy Stewart in *The Cheyenne Social Club*. Dean Martin in *Bandolero*. And Raquel Welch, I think. [Siri, Raquel Welch in *Bandolero*? It doesn't look like you have an app called Bandolero. If you'd like, I can help you look for it on the app store. Um—no thanks.] Almost sure it was Raquel Welch, but it didn't matter 'cause I was only like six or seven, so I probably found Dean Martin cooler to watch. Anyway, what I was saying is that we went to the drive-ins a lot. My dad loved

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them. They always showed a double-feature, so like maybe four hours we got for less than ten bucks plus popcorn, which probably cost a quarter. All four kids would fall asleep during the second movie. Dozing, I could hear my mom and dad whispering about the movie, about us kids, about the next day. Then on the way home, it was always warm so my dad kept the windows open. Half-asleep, I'd lie there listening to the cars pass. I found it so soothing, then and now. I guess Airline Highway in Baton Rouge was a two-laner then, just like 47. I love the two-laners. Can't get the same sound on the interstate."

I pause and wait, look over, no nudge. She gone. I get up super-quiet to go brush my teeth. It has become our bedtime ritual: I'll go on and on about nothing, and she'll fall asleep. Way better than melatonin, she says. Even than Advil PM. Especially since that makes her fuzzy the next day. My voice doesn't make her fuzzy. And, funny, it makes *me* fuzzy, hearing my voice, but in a good way: fuzzy with warm memories, fuzzy, cozy-like. So it works for both of us. As long as I speak quietly. If I get worked up and turn up the speed, or the volume, even a little—no good for either of us.

The Girl in the Rain

He stood under a tree in the rain and was too shy to talk to the girl. She was also under a tree, maybe twenty feet away, waiting for the pouring rain to stop. She had her bicycle nearby. She was sixteen, and so was he. Months later she would date one of his friends, and months after that she would become his older brother's girlfriend for two years. Years after that, when she was twenty-nine, she would move to the quad cities and marry an accountant. But of course neither of them could have guessed any of this as they stood in the rain.

Either she was shy, too, or else she had nothing to say. She was a quiet girl in general, he knew. She was also very pretty, one of the prettiest girls in school. Some would say she was the prettiest of all. Standing in the rain under the tree, he felt any chances he would ever have with her slipping away forever. From this point on, he would always be the ridiculous boy who stood under the dripping leaves of the tree and could think of nothing to say.

The Girl in the Rain

They had been playing tennis on courts next to each other, she with her friends and he with his, and when the storm blew in suddenly, everyone else had scattered, running for their cars, or simply escaping into their houses in the neighborhood. For some reason she had not boarded her bike and pedaled off. Maybe she knew she would not beat the rain. And for some reason he had not left with his friends who had been on the court with him. They were a year or two older, and one of them had a car. They had not waited for him to pack up his gear, run across the street, and hop in, though they would have waited had he yelled for them to wait. They had honked as they drove away, arms waving out the windows.

Surely she wondered why he had not left with them, but of course she didn't ask. As pretty as she was, she might have suspected that he liked her and wanted time alone with her, even if it meant standing in the rain. But if she suspected this, she was not going to help him out by speaking first, beginning a conversation that would likely go something like this:

“We should have left a little earlier!”

“Yeah … looks like it.”

“Maybe it will stop soon.”

“Hope so!”

Surely she wondered why he did not speak. Being shy herself,

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did she understand that since minutes had passed with no words between them, that any words from him now were all the more difficult? Did she understand that he couldn't say now what he should have said minutes earlier, when the situation was fresh? As each second passed he felt it becoming impossible for him to say anything to her that would not sound forced, unnatural, or just plain stupid. This did not keep him from trying. He was wracking his brain for the right thing to say. Should he say,

"I can't believe I can't think of anything to say!"

or

"I think I still have one dry spot under my arm!"

or

"This must happen to you all the time!"

If he said anything, he would have to say it loudly, over the pouring rain. He would have to almost yell. If she didn't hear him right, which was likely since by now she was surely deep into her thoughts and not prepared for a sudden burst of words from him, he would have to repeat the yell.

"I said, I can't believe I can't think of anything to say!"

The Girl in the Rain

How could she respond to this? Maybe, "Oh! Me either!" Or, "That's okay!" Or maybe she would say nothing at all, just look at him blankly, in wonder at the ridiculous boy shouting in the rain. But he knew better; she wasn't like that. She was a nice girl, and everyone knew it. Not stuck up, just quiet. Chances were she was struggling as much as he was in this situation. He guessed probably not, but maybe. Meanwhile, although they were under large trees with many branches and leaves, they were both becoming drenched. The wind blew the rain in on them in cold bursts and, gusting, blew the smaller limbs above them apart so that the rain came pouring directly down on them. She had the head of her tennis racket up under her warm-up jacket to keep the strings dry, but her jacket was surely drenched, as his was. His racket was in a case and leaning on the tree next to him. The case was soaked and dripping, but he knew the racket itself was dry. He had thought at first that he should ask her for her racket, to see if it would fit in his case alongside his, but it was too late for that now.

They had played tennis together more than once, though always doubles. She played barefoot. When she had first started playing about two years earlier, just for fun, she always played barefoot, and as she improved her game, enough that she now played in the 3 spot on the varsity team, she still played barefoot except in competitive matches and team practice. The courts became extremely hot in the summer, so her feet must have blistered, calloused, toughened over time. He liked watching her play, the grace of her forehands, the turns

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and stretches of her gangly torso, the bob of her small breasts as she ran, the composure of her features as she rallied back and forth. Generally, she hit with topspin from the backcourt, rarely coming to the net. She was very fast as she covered the court, side-stepping, backtracking, her racket always back, ready for the next stroke. She far preferred to hit forehands, but her backhand was surprisingly strong considering how awkward it could look.

She was still coming into her beauty, though he would not have put it that way. She looked and moved like a girl who had grown six inches in six months. She wore her long, brown hair straight down her back. She was not one to play with her looks; she didn't need to. No makeup, no perms, no pushup bras. She could have almost been a tomboy, but she was so naturally pretty no one could see that. If you thought tomboy, it was like the fifth or sixth thought you had about her. A year or two later, he would see her hair curled and her face made up for her prom photos, next to his brother, but he never saw her that way before or after. Right now her hair was dripping wet. Her face looked serene, or maybe just a little sad. Her dark eyebrows looked even darker in the rain. She was neither facing him nor looking away. With a small turn of her head she would be looking directly at him. But she kept her eyes averted, maybe watching the raindrops bounce off the courts or the puddles accumulate around her toes. And all the while he stood twenty feet away from her remaining absolutely silent.

The Girl in the Rain

It could be she thought him a snob. But given the circumstances, this was not likely. Although he was her age, her year in school, he was developmentally many months behind her. Developmentally, he had not made much progress since puberty and might be called scrawny. Developmentally, he was at a time when girls made him more nervous than they ever would again, though he would always, even in middle age, be nervous around pretty women. Developmentally, he was shorter than she was, just slightly, but definitely. Plus, he was on the boys' tennis team number 7, to her girls' team number 3. This meant that she played in every varsity meet, and he in very few—only when one of the top six players was absent or ailing. Outside of tennis, he was in all other respects about a 5, and she in all other respects was surely a 9, no matter who you asked. So it was very unlikely that she thought him a snob. More likely she was reading him perfectly. He had had his chance to disarm her, to disarm the awkward situation, and he had not taken advantage. She would not say he had blown it—she was too nice for that—but she couldn't give him much credit, either.

If outward he was a coward, inward he was a jumbled mess. To the point that after several minutes of standing in the rain, just twenty feet from her, he began to question if she knew he was there. It was a crazy thought, but he did think it. She had not smiled at him; she had not looked his way and then shyly dropped her eyes. She had done nothing to acknowledge that he was there, so close by and basically sharing her experience. On the other hand, she had also done nothing to

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indicate he was *not* there. She had not, for instance, blown her nose, tossed her head vigorously to shake off the rain, or jumped up and down to stay warm. What else had she not done? She had not left. By now, her whole body soaked and undoubtedly cold, she could have hopped on her bike and pedaled away, knowing that she would get even wetter during the ride but that home was not far off. Was she staying because she wanted to give him a chance to say something? Finally?

The rain let up a little but then picked up even harder. Or maybe just the wind let up for a moment. The raindrops bounced off the tennis courts in acute angles; they looked like thousands of checkmarks bouncing at once. He moved his head in a way that allowed him to see her directly but as if he were looking beyond her. She stood there under the dripping leaves, barefoot, the head of her racket in her jacket. Nothing in her posture or attitude suggested that she had any intention of suddenly leaving, or even that she particularly minded standing in the rain. In her tennis skirt, with nothing to cover her legs, she was surely colder than he was in his warm-up pants. But she was not bouncing to stay warm; she was not hunched against the wind. Her face was placid, unreadable, but he thought her eyes darted his way, just once. He could not look away from her. They were now so thoroughly soaked through with the same rain that he had begun to love her.

Abruptly, he realized that he no longer felt ridiculous. He was no longer trying to think of words to say. The silence that

The Girl in the Rain

had first felt so awkward now felt like a pact between them. The situation was wholly upon them; they had participated in it long enough that it felt purposeful, if not meant to be. He was loving her willingness, her insistence, to stay with him. He knew he would not leave her, either, not even if his friends suddenly pulled up and called him over. He would wave them away and stay with her. He felt his feelings for her were tangible in the space between them. Surely she felt them there.

At sixteen, he had not made love to any girls, but maybe, in a way, that was happening now. How else could he describe the intimacy occurring between them? It didn't matter that she was too shy to meet his eyes. He loved her shyness. He loved everything about her. He felt elated. The next day in school they would walk the halls side by side and let everyone see they were together.

They were making love in the pouring rain. He was not sure if he had ever felt as close to anyone as he felt to her now. His throat was constricted, and he felt he might cry. He felt her hand on his face. He held her hand there. He looked into her eyes and saw them filled with tears and rain. He did not whisper these words into her ear: "To you I will never say an untrue word. I will always speak my heart to you, and I will listen to yours speak to me, and I will cherish the sound. No matter whatever happens between us, or whatever does not, I will always be standing as close to you as I am allowed and wanting to be closer. No matter how close I am—this close, close enough to feel your breath on my lips—I will want to

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be closer. There's so much I can't do. I can only do what I can do. I can love you from head to toe; I can love your heart and soul. I can listen, and I can learn, and I can come to understand you—all of you, the whole you that you are. Please understand me now. I am overcome by the powerlessness of words to express the way I feel for you. I might not be able to get it right, but I will never deceive you, and if I can help it I will never let a misunderstanding remain misunderstood. I will keep trying for an understanding between us that can fill silence, quiet noise, and bring a peace upon the earth like a heavy rain on a night that's absolutely still, and we wake to it together, and from then on everything we see, we see together."

He did not say these words to her. Years later, he said them, or something close to them, to another woman, a woman who was not standing in the rain. She was happy to hear them.

But she never fully understood what it was with him and the rain.

The Other Side

Please don't bring me down, she sang as softly as always. *Please don't let me go.* It was these lines that had brought us together and which had over many years sustained us because whenever I would become frustrated, impatient, tormented, even aloof, she would sing these words to seal us again, and sealed we remained for minutes, days, even many weeks, always willing to try things again because of who she was and who I wanted to be but never could be. I write these words at ninety-three. I never got there. I never got to where she was at fifteen, her age when I met her at Moon's Grocery on Steeple Street in Albany. I was sacking her mother's groceries. I asked the two of them if they needed help out. Mom said no, but Anna gently nodded, catching my eye. Her mother smiled on us then, but afterward only occasionally for the rest of her life.

I can't tell you who wrote the song. Please tell me who wrote the song. Years ago I would forget something for a short while, knowing it would return when I needed it. Now I have

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no such faith. I might never know who wrote our song, who first sang it. I am frustrated, as always, but also grateful that I can recall the lyrics, the words Anna sang softly to me maybe a thousand times. At one point she knew all the words to what was a very long song about a couple who belonged together despite many constant outward tensions, because their souls were aligned. *Please don't bring me down. Please don't let me go.* Her eyes on mine, her long straight hair falling on either side of her face like a liquid frame. I brought her down, us down, oh so many times—but I did not let her go, not ever, not even today as I hold her hand, what was her hand, and see the same face I saw for seventy years: always the face of a twenty-five-year old, no matter the memory I am having, be it from seventy or seven years ago. Let me tell you about her face. Perhaps you will be moved.

"She has a big blue splotch," is how my father described it. "Sort of like the ocean on a globe." This description does not sound complimentary, I know, and he did not mean it to be, his intention revealed by his tone. But he was right. In fact, I told him at his deathbed, "Dad, I'm sorry I never told you, but you were dead on. Anna's face is the ocean on a globe." Then I thought, *Now die and be done with it.* And he did. My father was my living likeness, and I was happy to see him go. "I should have gone with him," I said to her while I apologized about intentionally nudging her in the kitchen so that she cut herself with a paring knife, just on the finger, but the blood ran out over the cutting board, and it was this I needed to see before remorse kicked in. "My God," I said to her, tears

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welling. "I should have gone with him." You already know how she answered.

Look at a close-up of a woman's face in a modern magazine, how there are no pores anywhere, not a blemish to be seen. Think of a palette after you've been painting for hours, all the colors blending into the tip of your brush as you apply the final strokes. Think of the eyes of a dangerous animal as it licks the face of its offspring. Think of the ocean lapping the shore at dawn before any noise has broken but the ebb and flow of dark water ... such silliness was how we spent some mornings, my trying to describe to her how I saw her just after making love. Don't take me there now, OK? I'll come back here later. I would like to.

Anna. More properly Annabelle. But she was seldom proper. So, Anna. I stand at the window staring blankly at what's before me. The pane is light, then dark; the pain is light, then dark. Longing. You feel it for such a long time. I longed for her that night I met her at the grocery store. "It's inappropriate," the Dad in me said. "She's too young for you to be thinking this way." But, Dad, I'm only three years older. Even today, only three years older. And back then I looked younger than my age. Do I still? I stare into the mirror, holding my gaze without blinking, and after a minute or so I see the ghost of myself. My features jell and blur into what I might look like to others: a man with no definition still trying to find himself at ninety-three. Why did I never try harder to find myself when I was younger? Because there was no need. I

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felt no need. I held Anna, I looked at Anna, I touched Anna, I listened to Anna. Even her spoken words were like a song to me. I am so sentimental, I would say. My heart fills to such capacity and then empties to dry as soon as you leave me. Do not leave me. Why can't I hold you as if you are here after you are gone? Why is the mirror a window? Why can't I just sit down after dinner and watch TV like the rest of the world? Maybe a brownie after dinner. Ice cream on top. Maybe a slice of apple pie. Why can't I enjoy the taste of anything? Why can't a heartfelt TV show move my heart? Why do I bother getting out of bed only to get back in? *Please don't bring me down. Please don't let me go.* Such simple words that anyone could have written. It's not the written words but the tender way in which she sang them, her eyes glowing with not love but ecstasy, a joyous delight beyond words. Ineffable was one of our words. How do you feel? she would ask me in bed afterward. You know the adjectives. Blissful. Heavenly. Whatever. Love was not enough for Anna and me. We had it but wanted more. Or am I speaking for you now, Annie? Was it only me who needed more? Was everything always only me?

We lay on our backs during a picnic with our lunch basket purposefully between us. I would speak into the sky, the deepest-blue sky, with just enough clouds to make the blue look even bluer. She would speak into the sky. Our picnic basket was between us, a large basket that hid our faces from one another. If I looked left, I saw only the basket; if she looked right, she saw the same—well, not quite the same:

The Other Side

the other side of the basket. The weaving of the basket had loosened over the years, and its dark-orange color had turned browner in some spots and less orange in others. An old basket, sufficient to say—but a newer, particularly a brand-new, basket would have changed things. When we looked at each other and saw only the basket, we saw our picnics from years before, a fusion of picnics each of which changed the other, whether it had already happened or was yet to come. When I spoke into the sky without seeing Anna's face it felt as if I were speaking to the Lord. When she spoke into the sky without seeing my face, it felt to me as if she were speaking to me. I never felt I was her Lord, only that she understood everything best through me. I advised her. She always listened but only sometimes obeyed. Sometimes I might treat her as if she were a dog I would throw a Frisbee to. But sometimes she would watch the Frisbee land and run way past it, way past, to a place I would have told her not to go. In short, she did what she pleased, and often what she did, she did to please me.

Her face was as blue as the sky—no, a darker, deeper blue, more like the middle of the ocean. I stand at the mirror and stare into what I have become without her. I am a blur, a smear. She listened to me because she loved me. But my love could be heavy. Still, she was happy because she could look at a bird or a tree and see much more. I looked at the same bird, the same tree, and saw only what they meant to me.

I am ninety-three. I remember twenty years better than twenty minutes ago. Helpless in the morning, helpless in the night. I

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walk into the kitchen looking for my bed.

I will not, cannot, go without her—but she has already gone.
Or has she? Are you here, Anna? Is that you in the shadows,
you in the darker shades? Did we take a walk together earlier
today? I can hear you so clearly. *Please don't bring me down.*
Please just let me go.

The Summer of '77

He and Lucy would bicycle across town together to the large cemetery on the east side and have picnic lunches with her father, who had died when she was eleven. They would lay out their blanket next to his gravesite, one of several shaded by a sprawling burr oak, and take turns laying their heads in each other's lap, feeding each other cheese squares, cherry tomatoes, and celery sticks as they read one another poetry. Keats, Blake, Byron, Shelley—they loved the idea of loving the romantic poets. They were both seventeen years old, their lives stretching ahead of them as bright as the grassy dips and green waves of clover that covered the cemetery grounds.

On occasion, they would spend two or three hours there, leaving their bikes behind to walk among the headstones looking for familiar names, sometimes joking about the phrases people chose to have carved into stone to be remembered by, but more often opting for quiet, walking silently, hand in hand, almost always lingering in the children's section,

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which they both found solemnizing and of course never joked about. Other times, they would lounge on their picnic blanket and play crazy eights or casino. One day, examining the cards, Lucy remarked that she didn't get it, why the jack of diamonds could view the world with two eyes while the jack of hearts had but one. Shouldn't it be the other way around? And why did the jack of hearts look so glum? Was love that serious a matter? He never played cards again without seeing Lucy's broad smile turn to a frown when she lay down the jack of hearts.

They first met in Ms. Queller's English class when Lucy took the seat behind him on the first day of the semester, and remained there ever after. From the outset, he sensed her presence behind him and felt her looking at the back of his head. He took to ducking into the restroom each day before class to comb his hair. But he could not speak to her. Each day that he remained silent, it became more difficult to feign spontaneity and turn around to say hello. He believed she must be wondering about him, why he was so close but remained so distant. He wondered too why he couldn't show his natural friendliness to her, knowing it had something to do with her choosing to sit elsewhere if he spoke and got things wrong. He questioned: why did the risk feel out of proportion to the simple act of saying hello? And at some point wasn't remaining silent more risky than turning to speak? He watched her covertly each time she entered the classroom and took her seat, or if she arrived first he kept sights on her as he strolled to his desk, but he never caught her eye and nodded at her. As

The Summer of '77

weeks passed, he assumed she must have formed a judgment of him, which was only more reason to say nothing. Until one day, over two months into the semester, his classmate Reid Hinton informed him that Lucy was interested. He barely slept that night. Apparently learning that Reid had spoken to him, on the very next day Lucy tapped his shoulder and passed him a note. "Care to do lunch?" Then the next week she appeared at the grocery store where he was a bagboy. They spoke for several minutes before she left. Leaving, she turned and said, "I think you speak well."

After a cemetery picnic, they would set aside their poetry books, lay facing each other on the blanket, and make out until it was time to head back. These were the first, and also the longest, kissing sessions of his life. Even today, he could bring back the taste of Lucy's tongue, closing his eyes and willing himself back to their graveside blanket, the remains of Lucy's father just beneath them, reminding them to make the best use of their precious minutes.

They did. That summer they walked dozens of miles together, biked dozens more, paddled lakes and rivers, read hundreds of poems, kissed dozens of times for each poem they read, many of their kisses lasting over a minute, their mouths filling one another's until it just wasn't enough anymore, spurring them to further intimacies, and for six weeks or so—half the summer!—they even believed that they may become parents together. Lucy was a Catholic who never used contraception. She also refused to consider abortion,

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which was fine with him. Sex that led to kids—wasn’t that what love was all about? But Lucy skipped only one period, and by August they knew no child was coming. Lucy had prayed it all away. Disappointed, he had stepped back for a while. A friend invited him to drive several states over for a two-week summer festival, and when he returned, Lucy was biking with another boy. He stood at her bedroom window, stunned. What happened to Keats, Byron, Shelley? They had shared pints of each other’s saliva. Now she was biking with Steve Evans?

Today he is back at the gravesite. He has seen Lucy but once since she moved to Chicago for college in 1979. He has returned to her father’s gravesite many times since then. The burr oak became sick, rotted, and died at some point; another century would pass before the tree they replaced it with attained the same presence. Lucy’s dad’s grave is in the sun now, and his original headstone has been replaced with one that commemorates his military service in Korea. The surrounding area is now busy with headstones, and since the oak has gone, it sometimes takes him a minute to locate their old spot, the exact place they lay, where they kissed and whispered to each other, sharing planned futures that never came to be.

He sits down where they used to lay and waits for feelings to wash him over. After two or three weeks with Steve Evans, Lucy had come back to him. She invited him to her house while Steve was there sitting on the couch next to her.

The Summer of '77

When he arrived, she stood up, escorted him to a chair near the couch, and sat in his lap. She was using him to get back at Steve. She told him later that Steve had stepped out to see another girl. He happily took Lucy back, and for a short while they returned nearly to where they had been. But then summer ended, school started, and it was time for her to study hard enough to be accepted into Northwestern University. She took a weekend job at a restaurant down the street from her house. He often visited her there, and one night she brought him a chocolate shake with whipped cream and a cherry on top. She removed the cherry and bit into it, and then put the rest of it back on his shake. She opened her mouth just enough to show him the half-cherry on her tongue. He didn't know it, but this was her way of saying goodbye.

Lucy's dad had died of a heart attack at the age of forty-six, leaving a wife and seven children behind. At eleven years old, Lucy was the middle child. She had more than once mentioned that her father had been attracted to the occult. She had witnessed seances, watching ghosts shake dishes and sending sheets of a newspaper flying across a room. This is why he had died early, she said. The spirits took him away.

He had never told Lucy that he doubted the truth of her story, that to believe that sort of thing one would need to personally view the newspaper flying, and even then might suspect someone had turned on a fan. But it stuck with him that her father had been drawn to the occult, possibly even to Satanic forces, and one night he brought a friend to Lucy's

Stories to read aloud before bed

dad's grave at midnight. This was during one of the weeks that Lucy was biking with Steve Evans. He and his friend sat on Lucy's dad's grave with some candles and a deck of cards and tried to speak to him. They basically dared him to come out and get them. To impress his friend, he lay down directly over where they assumed Lucy's dad's bones would be and read short passages from the Bible in reverse.

Two weeks later, he and Lucy were kissing again, even future-planning again ... and then the end of summer, the start of school, the chocolate shake, and she was gone. Now, sitting near her dad's grave, he pulls a jack of hearts from his shirt pocket. He kisses the card and lays it face up on the grass over the grave. He understands that nothing will happen instantly, but *please, something*, he is saying inside. He pictures the half-cherry on Lucy's tongue. He pictures her smiling face beneath him, strands of her honey-yellow hair falling on either side. He tastes her spit. In the grass, the jack of hearts stares stoically into the distance.

Lucy lives in Pennsylvania with her family. She has not thought of him in forty years and has not visited her father's grave since 1991 when the new headstone was dedicated. He heard she was in town. He drove over to her old place, where her brother's family lived at the time, and spotted her sitting on the same porch step on which they had kissed on many nights in the summer of 1977. One night they had drank too much of something sweet and she ran inside to throw up. She was back in minutes, and they picked up where they had left

The Summer of '77

off. She had brushed her teeth.

He sat in his car and watched her. She was working on something in her lap, moving much as she had moved when he knew her. He watched her until she stood up and brushed something off the front of her jeans. She paused and looked out into the yard. She saw him sitting in his car across the street and left her eyes on him long enough for him to know. Was she giving him a chance to say something? He felt that she was. He was nearly ready to roll down the window when she turned, brushed her pants with her palms once more, and stepped inside.

At her father's grave, he stands, leaves the jack of hearts behind, and walks through the trees to the children's section of the cemetery. The graves are ten times as many as they used to be, but he locates Avie, her gray, speckled stone now many thousands of days older than Avie ever was. The words on Avie's stone, "Angels Go Early," had become their motto, their parting words, whenever Lucy or he had to leave the other before they were ready, which was nearly every time. "Angels go early," she would whisper in his ear. Then he would watch her walk or drive away, their goodbyes accumulating like the photos he kept stacked on his dresser to shuffle through in her absence. Photos of the two of them together in the summer of '77. You snap a photo to make a moment last a lifetime, but when you look through a stack of photos they tend to wash together and blur. Surely that's what had happened to him with Lucy. He had not been

Stories to read aloud before bed

her first kiss, though she had been his. He had blurred in with the rest of her boys, her men, leaving him nothing but a hazy, cloudy presence in a part of her mind she never dwelled.

You can find him there still, on any given day, as he strolls the grounds of the cemetery. He died a few years ago, in 2033. Years earlier, a storm passed through one night and blew the jack of hearts onto the muddy gravel road running through the cemetery, where it was passed over by slow-moving cars until it became part of the gravel.

No one comes to see Lucy's father anymore. No one but him. No one but him has visited Avie in over fifty years. Her parents moved out of the state, had three other children, and never returned. When he asked Avie how this makes her feel, she said only, "They had their lives to live."

Get It Right the First Time

We strive for absolute accuracy. Getting things precisely right is difficult, tougher than most people realize, but for us that's the ultimate goal. Wait, strike ultimate. Let's go with utmost. In the way we live, what we say, what we do, we strive for utmost accuracy. This is not a lazy way to live.

Because, as you may intuit more than understand, the living of a life is all about getting it wrong. Especially at first. When you're young you try something, get it wrong, try again, and get it less wrong the next time. Or you get it more wrong. Often what you feel might be a correction is in fact only an adjustment that itself must now be corrected before you can fix the original thing you did wrong. Trouble can begin here in that when you spend what might be an inordinate length of time (btw, it's inaccurate to say "amount of time") trying to correct what was intended to be the correction, you can easily lose sight of the original mistake, or wrongdoing—if those are in fact synonymous—even to the point of never returning to

Stories to read aloud before bed

it. Say, you tell a woman you love her when you don't. We've all done it. (Whoa! Please strike *that*.) Many of us have done it. When she questions you on what you have said, in trying to correct yourself—explain yourself—you tell her you have never loved any woman more than you love her. She then bristles a little, maybe scoots over slightly on the couch (or bench or maybe swing if you're outside) and asks you which other women you have loved. You tell her that's not important, what is important is that you love her most of all. But now she's much more interested in the women to whom she is being compared, and perhaps rightly so. Because if you have indeed loved women previous to her—even if you loved them less than you love her, as you're claiming now—that suggests, or even indicates, that you have been in love before (or believed that you were) and then at some point fell out of that love, or somehow moved past it, or else you wouldn't be sitting with her now. She presses you: what happened to the other woman, or women, you loved? Because if you don't love them anymore, how much is your love worth? If it's not forever like love is supposed to be. You can't think of an answer that will satisfy her, and you want to return to where you were with her just minutes ago, when you felt moved to tell her that you loved her, so you lie. You tell her that the woman you loved previously has died. This lie might seem to fix the moment, but you will now need to *live* the lie that you have told her. When you run into the woman you once loved, say, at your high school reunion, you will have to tell her to please play dumb (or dead) when she meets your wife or else there'll be hell to pay.

Get It Right the First Time

But to return: in trying to sustain for years a lie you told your now wife, a lie she of course picked up on somewhere along the way, you have lost credibility with your supposed beloved (i.e., your wife) because you never got back to the original mistake you made: telling her that you loved her when you didn't. Let's be clear here, and as accurate as we possibly can be: when you told her you loved her, this was not a lie, it was only a mistake. When you told her you loved her years ago on that couch or swing, you truly believed that you did love her. Like most people, you had no idea what love is, but you wanted her to love you—maybe even become your wife one day, which is what happened—so you told her what you felt was in your heart because you believed that is what she wanted to hear, and because that would be conducive to achieving your goal with her: to make her believe you truly loved her so things could then move forward to wherever you wanted them to move, be that the altar or the bedroom. But when you inaccurately told her that you loved her, trying to express to her what you believed was love but was really only a feeling of affection borne from the recurrent warmth of her body in proximity to the warmth of yours (on the couch or swing or whatever), this led to an avalanche of inaccuracies. After hearing enough times that you loved her, she made the mistake of believing she loved you too. She married you. You planned a future together. You had children together, bought a house together, both worked for promotions to pay for everything. You got in the habit of telling each other "I love you." But at some point the inaccuracy of it all became clear to both of you, maybe one before the other. When you

Stories to read aloud before bed

tell your spouse “I love you” every day, sometimes twice or more and even on the phone, the words cease to mean anything, like saying “prune” a hundred times in succession. When you realize that the words “I love you” don’t mean anything anymore, if they ever did, you step back further and question not just the words but the concept. This is when you realize a mistake occurred oh so long ago. You never loved each other, and every time you sort of recognized that what you thought was love was something else, you tried to prove the love even further, digging yourself in deeper—dog, child, house, another child, nicer car, bigger house—until you had dug a hole much too deep to crawl out of without looking to your friends and family and especially your children like a monster—a monster incapable of loving but prone to making terrible mistakes. So you step back and remind yourself, sometimes via your therapist, that all you did initially was make one (what felt like an honest) mistake. How in hell did that one small mistake snowball into such misery for all?

So you vow to not make the same mistake again. In fact, you won’t make any mistakes. You will strive for utmost accuracy, which is where we are now. Get it right the first time. Btw, to get it right, when you search “get it right the first time” on Google (or Bing or Yahoo or DuckDuckGo), the first hit (out of 9,840,000,000 on Google) is a song by William Martin Joel—aka Billy Joel. But you know, or suspect very strongly, that this phrase did not originate with Joel (who, incidentally, in 1977 wrote to his wife Elizabeth Weber that when he said he loved her it was forever and this was a promise from his

Get It Right the First Time

heart but then proceeded to marry three other wives after her, though Weber remained very much alive. So did BJ lie? Make a mistake? How do we find the truth?) but with someone way before him. Striving for accuracy, can we discover who?

Probably not, and if we could, who would care? Facts are not the kind of accuracy we're striving for. (If you need a fact, Google it—or Bing it or Duck it—and what you get should at least put you on a trail, though likely not the right trail.) What we're after is accuracy in living day to day. What we do, how we say, why we live—we want these choices to be in the pursuit of accuracy. We don't want to get one thing wrong because if we do it will take us time to try to correct it, and such time might be better spent in accurate pursuits. Figure out precisely what you mean by love, and chase after it with all that you have. Do what Socrates suggested: get to know yourself. Don't chase your dog all over the neighborhood only to find you're a cat person.

Don't make the mistake I did.

I married Laura.

Now I'm with Philip.

But I love Laura.

Most truly.

Agape

And how did she explain herself?

She would not, not for years to come, and even when she did, it was more of an exploration.

“Really? Can you explain *anything*, really?”

She was curled up sleeping on a couch in the theater lobby. The theater was inside a community college, where she was a student. He found her there on the couch every morning before classes started, usually studying college algebra because that was her first class of the day, at 9 a.m. He taught biology at the college, and she had been his student a year earlier. After their semester together ended, they stood outside the college, at least 15 feet from any entrance, and smoked cigarettes. Sometimes they took walks on the college grounds. Once he wrote her a poem, and read it to her, and afterward touched her face. Not long after that they slept together one night, and

Agape

one night only, and on that night he entered her body in what he perceived as a much more nonphysical than physical way, and she had entered his in a purely nonephemeral and what turned out to be permanent way that he felt he would never get over.

Right now she was sleeping. She was wearing a winter stocking cap, wool, thickly woven, purple. He had never seen the cap before this day, but this day was the first cold day of October, so maybe she'd had it for years but had just dug it out that morning. It was the kind of cap she would wear, totally congruous with her idea of herself, and with his idea of her, and with his idea of how she viewed herself, and maybe also with her idea of how he viewed her. This last possibility he couldn't be sure about because he didn't have enough to go on. She was fairly limited in what she gave him to go on—fairly in the sense of both justly and to a lesser degree than the antonym of *fairly* would indicate. She intentionally gave him little to go on, he believed. He sensed. Because to intentionally give someone something to go on might suggest a relationship between giver and taker that she did not want to consciously recognize or acknowledge—because to acknowledge or recognize the possibility of a relationship that involved the dynamic of subtle but undeniable communications between them might indicate that a relationship between them *did* in fact exist. When in her mind it didn't. Not in her conscious mind. Not in his perception of her conscious mind. Not in his conscious perception of her conscious mind.

Stories to read aloud before bed

He wanted to get things right. He believed he could. He knew that some couples who loved each other—and also some couples who *could* love each other given a certain set of circumstances—might never be together because of bad luck or bad timing or because a set of necessary circumstances might never come to be. He believed that he loved her, and he wanted her to love him, too. But she didn't. She couldn't. She couldn't because she didn't, and she didn't because she couldn't. Or so it now appeared. He believed he had loved her for 14 months and some odd days, since August of the previous year. It was now the first cold day of October, a week before Halloween. They both had young kids. A year earlier, 2.5 months after he first met her on the first day of his fall-semester biology class in which she was enrolled and in which she sat in the front row with the most open of all student countenances and with the most shining of eyes and eagerness of ears he had encountered as a teacher of biology and natural sciences for nearly 17 years, he had mentioned to her the possibility of him and his kids running into her and her kids while trick-or-treating. It was possible, he said at the time, because she and her children lived within a few blocks of the area in which his kids had trick-or-treated for many consecutive years. It was also possible, he knew at the time but did not say, because he would be *looking for her* and her children. He would be patrolling her block, his eyes peeled in the darkness, tearing up in the cold wind, while his kids initially pointed out that he was directing them to run up and knock on doors on which they had knocked just 10 minutes prior, before they then stopped outright on the

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sidewalk to question him pointedly: *Dad, why are we walking the same block over and over?* They looked up at him through eyes directly under and over which were caked with green face paint. Hulk green. Shrek green. (“Cool,” he had said at the Big Lots: “You’ll both be green. Save me money.” *Cool*, he had thought. But he’d had to return for another tube of green before they were done, standing in line after dark on a Halloween night threatening rain behind people who had waited ‘til the last minute to buy their three-pound bags of tootsie rolls, even then watching the clock on the Big Lots wall and thinking *her kids are young—they’re going to be done before we even get out there*. He pictured her watching the sky, assessing the storm clouds, her mind thinking in the way his mind would be thinking on such a night, especially if he had small children who resisted brushing their teeth, no dental plan, and no umbrella.

He never saw her that night, and he knew now, nearly a year later, he would not see her this Halloween night, either. This year he would not look for her and would even go out of his way to ensure he would not see her or her children as they trick-or-treated because he knew that if she saw him on the streets in or near her neighborhood she would not give him a break. That’s where they were now. At a place where for even a purely incidental coincidence he would be blamed and held accountable. Like the time in July at the pool on kids’ dollar day. Half the kids in town were at the pool that day, but when he saw her there, when he came up for air and there she was in her two-piece and her swimming cap and blowing

Stories to read aloud before bed

chlorinated spray through her nose, she looked at him with no trace of surprise and said, "So, how'd you know we'd be here?" She had swum abruptly to the other side of the pool and secured herself within a circle of children. She didn't want him near. For one, she suspected he had followed her there, which he had not done. Also, she was revealing more skin than she wanted him to see, and he wanted to see it, and she knew it. He felt mistreated on the stalking count but understood why she wanted privacy from him and his eyes. He had seen her naked six weeks earlier, on their one night together, and now every time she caught him catching even a peek of just the strip of her skin between shirt and jeans, she was reminded of that night and of how she should not have been there because she had a boyfriend whom she loved or believed she loved. From across the pool that day, and, six weeks earlier, from on top of her and beneath her and beside her, from in fact (and he was as proud of this as he was of his doctorate) virtually all positions that any preposition could designate or even propose, he respected her as much as he loved her, and he wanted her to think the best of him. Above all, he didn't want her to think he was a creep (because once a creep, *always* a creep). Still, on that summer day in what must have been late June, he couldn't 100 percent stop himself from looking at her from various spots at the other side of the pool, and occasionally from closer when he swam underwater for 20 to 30 feet and came up again as if not knowing where he was so that he could catch a glimpse of her before she realized what he was up to and ducked back behind child number two or three. But there was no need for her to duck or to shield

Agape

herself. Yes, he wanted the few nonproximate and innocent sightings he felt he had coming to him (the same sightings that anyone in the pool could have, if they chose), but much more than that he wanted her to see that he respected her wishes and her privacy. He needed her to see him not as a creep but as the man he truly was or believed himself to be because he had long-term post-boyfriend hopes that stretched far into the future. These hopes were what sustained him.

On the couch in the theater lobby she slept with her hands clenched into fists and tucked beneath her chin. In her sleep, did she seem disturbed by him? To him, it seemed that she tolerated rather than approved his watching over her. An ear flap of the wool cap fell beyond her ear lobe onto her jaw line. Her face was small and pale with slightly rosy cheeks. She was breathing through her mouth, her lips open about a millimeter, no saliva stretched between. Mouth muscles occasionally trembling, eyelids twitching and sometimes nearly opening, tongue flicking out to lick the pinkish white bellies of her lips and the tips of her teeth. She had the face of a beautiful child, or no: the beautifully peaceful face of a sleeping child.

He was afraid to touch her. The fear made him deeply sad. He sat beside her, not on the couch but on a desk chair beside the couch, and felt deeply sad and wondered what he could do that would feel right to him without being wrong for her, and he realized there was nothing. Well, he could *look*. In her exhaustion, and because no one else was around who might

Stories to read aloud before bed

get the wrong impression, he was permitted, apparently, to look at her in all of the vulnerability that exhausted sleep assigned. But there was no part of her he could touch, not her ankle, not her knee, not her hip, not her arm or shoulder, and above all not her face. To him this felt deeply wrong; that he, a man who had tried to make himself thoroughly, entirely, and unmistakably understood—understood *ad nauseum*, he now understood—and gone to great lengths to be wholly understandable for her—could not lay his hand on her cheek as she slept because his touch was not wanted.

As he lay watching her sleep, afraid to touch her, repelled by the thought of creeping her out, fighting the urge of his fingers to reach out to caress her hair and lay to rest on her cheek, he also felt that his being next to her, present with her during this intimacy of her sleep, was justified and natural and not in the least bit creepy.

She suddenly opened her eyes and looked at him for a moment, maybe taking him into focus, or maybe remembering way back into childhood at how it felt to be looked at in the way he was looking at her now. She reached down, took his hand, and held it to her cheek.

He remained silent but felt the questions in his eyes.

And how did she explain herself?

Agape

She would not, not for years to come, and even when she did,
it was more of an exploration.

Anna, or When Hope Flies

after Poe

He had recognized her from the get-go as the woman who had deceived him, as well as his brother, for years. She had pretended to be in love with his brother, and played the part so well that everyone believed her to be so. Many of his brother's friends were jealous of how much she loved him, feeling their own wives loved them much less. For several years, she had pretended to love his brother dearly, and after marrying him, she kicked the façade up a notch: always sitting near him, her hand on his leg or shoulder, or sometimes her fingers gently riffling through his hair; always agreeing with him, defending everything he said as if the lord himself had uttered it; always serving him first, always deferring to his judgment, always laughing at his jokes and glaring at those who didn't laugh, always lifting his confidence and self-esteem with exaggerated compliments and comments. She would both give and request sly kisses from him, pretending to believe no one was watching. She was quite convincing in all of this, and

Anna, or When Hope Flies

everyone believed my brother had married his perfect match.

On top of it all, she was stunning to gaze upon, in a drop-dead sort of way.

A year or two after she suddenly left him, my brother confided in me that her act was mainly to fool others. He went along with it because he also wanted others to be fooled—for them to believe she loved him as much as she appeared to love him. Everything she did had been a front to fool others, and they were both in on it, but for different reasons. She wanted people to think she was an angel (or maybe that was her motivation—who could say?), and he wanted people to think he was lucky enough, or perhaps superior enough, to have married an angel.

This was all when she was Chloe, which sounds now like a made-up name (though I suppose all names are made up at some point). Now, more than five years later, she is going by Anna, with an “A” pronounced like the “a” in “lawn.” Anna. And since my brother has moved across the country to LA, she is free to love me—or to pretend she does.

At first she wouldn’t confess who she was. Her hair was far different, and her nose slightly changed, but she had the same face she had when she was Chloe, a face so striking most people would recognize her in an instant. As I did. But initially I didn’t let on.

Stories to read aloud before bed

“Hey!”

“Hello!”

“I saw you here the other day and wanted to be sure to say hello this time. So, hello.”

“Well, hello. You’re right. I was here the other day.”

We were in a restaurant/bar on the east side called Le Tigre. I had recognized her at once and felt accordingly shocked but somehow still knew not to let on.

“I was hoping we could get a drink.”

“I was hoping the same thing.”

Her hand was on my shoulder now, lightly, her wrist delicately bent, and everyone in the bar was looking at us. At least in my head they were. At this point, I knew the game was up—she knew that I knew that she knew—and yet I continued to pretend, so that only later, when we were finally alone, would she tell me that she knew I had recognized her at the outset by “the way my eyes so clearly revealed my heart” but had not let on “because...”

Anyway, there we we were at Le Tigre, and now I wish we’d been wearing the tiger masks they hand out at the bar because we were playing our parts in a quadruple subterfuge: (1) she

Anna, or When Hope Flies

was not who she was pretending to be; (2) I was pretending not to recognize her; (3) she was pretending not to recognize that I had recognized her; and (4) I was pretending not to have recognized that she had recognized that I had recognized her.

Basically a typical human interaction, I suppose. But no—there was more to it. The game was not up but only just beginning. I was in the hands of an established pro.

Is anyone really who they pretend to be? Is anyone really who they perceive themselves to be? I had read Poe's "Dream within a Dream" in college ... and was inviting that poem into my life. I was hopping into bed with the writer of a detective novel, tales of duplicity, short stories of the macabre. And I couldn't wait.

Edgar Allan Poe: *Oh, yes, I know. Oh, yes, I know.*

Turns out, I had no way of knowing—but even if someone had warned me, I would have jumped in anyway. That was the kind of face she had. Measured time in the presence of that nature of beauty was worth risking eternal embarrassment. Being with her was like driving a vintage Lamborghini with an original Van Gogh in the backseat. When my friends went on and on about her exterior beauty, I would say, "Just wait until you look inside."

She was the same woman with me as she had been with my brother. She said to me:

Stories to read aloud before bed

"I was always more interested in you than your brother, but I wasn't sure how you felt. I married him to be closer to you, so I could count on seeing you often."

I did not believe her. I had witnessed how much she clearly loved my brother. But since my heart wasn't invested, I let her lie to me without question. Things progressed. We went on a few dates. A month passed. When we first slept together, I finally understood why my brother had been so torn apart when she left him. I'll say only this: she was not shy. As we lay in her bed afterward, both of us reflecting, I mentioned how weird it was that I was willing to sleep with my brother's ex-wife. It was undeniably disloyal. She disagreed, tossing her dark hair. Then she dropped a bombshell.

"I never made love to your brother."

I stared at her. Her head was back on the pillow, and I could not see her eyes. I couldn't say a word; I was dumbfounded. How could she expect me to believe such a lie? Did she really think I was that gullible? Then she clarified.

"We did sexual things, yes, but I was never with your brother the way I just was with you."

OK. I got out of bed and began to get dressed. I had not spoken a word still.

"Will you come back?" she lifted her head from the pillow to

Anna, or When Hope Flies

look at me. She was still naked but mostly under the sheet. Her mouth did that thing that made her irresistible, at least to me. Her lips were slightly pursed open, and her tongue pressed against her front teeth. I'm not sure she knew what she was doing to me, but I suspect she did. She tilted her head slightly and waited for me to say something. I considered saying *Take this kiss upon the brow...*

But I said nothing. I just left.

That night I sat alone in my apartment and ran everything over in my head. Over and over. What was I feeling? Had I done something terrible? When we were just dating, it felt fine, as if we could be perceived as just seeing each other as friends. I could have told my brother about it. Even when we locked eyes, it could be explained away as a misunderstanding. But this I could never tell him about. The question was: did I want to do it again? If the answer was no, then time would pass, and after a few weeks everything would blur over like a dream. I would be able to live with myself. I would see my brother in LA and mention nothing, as if nothing had happened, and eventually I would convince myself that I was OK, not the person I thought I was, maybe, but OK. But if the answer was yes, then what? I sat there in a sort of nonthinking state, feeling numb, waiting for something to enter. I knew the answer.

When we are primarily happy, we tend not to think much about what is making us happy. But when we are in pain, as

Stories to read aloud before bed

I was now, we dwell on it. I sat alone, knowing that what I wanted was going to invite pain, and that the pain would not be mine alone. So why would I want what I wanted?

She texted me, and then called, and then texted again. I didn't turn my phone off but put it in a place I could not see it or hear it. I put it in the refrigerator. I then sat back down and did my best to pretend that I lived in a time before phones. If I did not call or text her, and if I did not respond to her calls or texts, how long would it take before I could forget her? If I stayed in my apartment and did not go out?

On the wall, the clock ticked. It did not tock. Nor did I. I waited for days, weeks, until time for me was no longer measured in seconds or years but in breaths. I was no longer the same person. I felt finally like a sane person. When I left my apartment, I needed nothing but a carton of eggs and a jug of milk.

When love is all about holes—holes in the truth, holes in the heart, holes in the bedroom—it is not for the holy.

And that is who I am.

Edgar Allan Poe: *Oh, yes, I know. Oh, yes, I know.*

The Rest of Us

“...is that control over the person that you are is mostly out of your hands; turns out the free will we all thought we had is not free, after all. Of course my perspective is more educated than that of anyone else here, given my experience, so I’m here to tell you that the science is right: the ‘decisions’ you think you make have been made for you. You are, however, the vehicle through which a ‘decision’ plays out in the world, which effects other ‘decisions’ that keep the big ball rolling.”

The rest of us listened, perhaps interested, but hardly transfixed, since we had heard it all before. Ken had his usual leeway from the rest of us because he had been drinking and had been dead for three years. So the Ken who each of us was entertaining differed significantly, such as for Annie, who had been in love with Ken for over twenty years, and, say, Rickard, who had never met Ken—he had only heard about him from the rest of us, which rendered dubious anything Rickard had to offer since, it must be said, Rickard could not be trusted in

Stories to read aloud before bed

his perceptions, as he often believed he heard, even said, one thing when the rest of us agreed he'd heard, or said, another. Not that he could be blamed for this, esp. if what Ken had just said (again) held any currency, given that poor Rickard amounted to nothing more than the sum of his experiences and had no more control over who he was than the rest of us had. Like the rest of us, he was only the baggage he carried, or in his case the baggage he checked into an unreliable storage bin.

"ha! and isn't that pretty much what it all comes down to?" Ken continued, "whether you check your baggage or carry it on?"

Ken's metaphysical metaphors were lost on the rest of us because we had basically stopped listening to him after he died. Now anything he had to say we channeled through our own mis-memories and misunderstandings of how underneath it all he really had little to offer to people who had real 9-5 work to do. Ken had lucked out of work when the land his grandmother owned was picked as the site for the new airport. The money had trickled down, and he had nothing better to do than drink and read and watch TV. This was before the internet. If he'd had the internet, he might still be alive, finding a reason to live rather than drink himself to death. He was all about knowledge accumulation, and probably would have been a key writer for Wikipedia if there had been one. Since there wasn't, he packed as much into his fried brain as he could and shared it all indiscriminately with the rest of

The Rest of Us

us. We weren't really listening then, either. We had so much to do. Jenn taught grade school. Michael owned his own insurance company, which was always just about to take off. Tony O. worked overtime every day because he had six kids at home. The rest of us didn't know what he did, just that he was always doing it. Jerrance was in grad school working on his second PhD, this time in biological engineering, which made him more quickly than the rest of us discount anything Ken had to say. In fact it was a question of debate among us whether Jerrance perceived Ken in any sense at all. The rest of us had been there, at Ken's tribute to life, whereas Jerrance had been up in the reservoir basins of the UP trying to breed shrimp in the mud of genetically fortified lake water. Turns out he could do it. Once he did, none of the rest of us wanted to go to his house for dinner. Not just because of the muddy shrimp (btw, the shrimp is in the same family as the cockroach, it turns out, which Ken told us but which of course Jerrance already knew, though he refused to acknowledge it for marketing reasons) but because in a way, he had turned into Ken, which made Ken superfluous to his experience. Anything Ken could know, Jerrance could know better, at least in the perhaps brilliant mind of Jerrance. Who could say if Jerrance was brilliant or not? The rest of us were not smart enough to know, or maybe smart enough not to care, given that temporal existence is so minuscule on the grand scale.

Not knowing suited us fine. We lived our lives as if they had meaning. A slice of New York-style pizza tastes better than a box of raisins, we could all agree, so why behave as if

Stories to read aloud before bed

they were the same? Sitting on a sunny beach, what are you gonna watch? Working in a cubicle, what are you going to do for the 30 percent of minutes you're not really working? Your daydreams tell you way more about yourself than does how you make your money. Don't even get us going. The rest of us feel that we don't really want to know if everything is fantasy, if we are wasting our lives in delusions. If we delude ourselves into the illusion that it's the delusion that is the illusion, won't we sleep better at night? So we pretend. We get by. We laugh and love, and live each day as if we have many more to come. We save. We plan. We meet at Katsinas's for happy hour every Friday at 5:30, talking about more than just who's missing and why the hell and how the hell and WTF and OMG—we talk about what fills the space between, what would still matter if nothing mattered, good, juicy philosophical shit that Ken would love if he were still here. What a great guy Ken is now that he's gone. What a great guy Jerrance will be once he's finally dead. What matters is that we understand one another. Jenn's genuine feelings. The secret passions of Tony O. Why I masturbate instead of getting off my ass and finding/startng/maintaining/enduring a relationship. Do I really need this much closet space?

Turns out I do. The rest of you do too. Turns out it's our closet space that we treasure most of all. The who we are that no one else will ever know. I mean, even if we tried to explain, how close could we come? If you told me that young boys on bikes inexplicably make you sob, as if that were something that defined you, what in the world could I make of that? In

The Rest of Us

a previous life you had a son who was struck by a car while riding his bicycle? It's something you don't even know about yourself, so what can I do with it? Ken tells us that death is the same as life, only longer, but how can we apply that to what we do each day? Ken tells us that once you die you no longer need to sleep. Is that something to look forward to? Life is tiring. The rest that comes with death is our reward for living. Now we hear that we don't get to sleep? No wonder the rest of us quit listening to Ken. The rest of us need our rest.

And I Step In

...so he just opens his entire suitcase in front of me, flipping it over and spilling its contents all over the bed, the bed we presumably will share later if all goes well, and just part of what's laying there amidst all the clothing, including numerous pairs of brightly colored and decorated pairs of underwear—pineapples, zebras—and a ridiculous number of socks that no way one man can wear in one weekend, all the handbag items that might have been better stored in their own separate compartments—hairbrush, more than one comb, prescription meds, lip balm, contact solution & lens cleaner, mouthwash, moisturizing hand lotion, bath salts, a zillion condoms, toothbrush and -paste & flossing string & teeth whitener—or maybe simply left behind if one is to make a good impression on one's first weekend away with a love interest (wart remover! foot deodorant!)—two or three paperbacks, a neon-orange rubber dildo, graphic comic books, ball caps, and probably as he planned it right on top of everything an enormous wallet stuffed with cash. Some

And I Step In

might call it confidence to be able to spill out so liberally, candidly, and maybe that's what he was going for: "There I am. Take me or leave me." Of course he'd already paid for the flight and the room and the rental car and knew I couldn't leave w/o inconvenience and expense—were these the cards he was playing?—and of course right next to the enormous wallet was a gift-wrapped square box that looked like jewelry.

I feel OK about it. He gives me a nice, nearly Platonic hug. He rubs my shoulders. He draws my bath, sprinkling in the bath salts. He knows what he's doing: he sprinkles in half, waits for the water to rise above the jets, and then adds the other half. He turns away as I undress. The mirrors are getting steamy. The jets of the hot tub whir and spit ... and ejaculate forcefully. He kisses my neck from behind and leaves the room. I close the door gently. I check the corners of the mirror that aren't steamed up yet, and like what I see. No visible thighs. With the mirror now totally steamed, I reflect inwardly for a moment or two, probably visually shrug, perhaps resigning myself to the adventure. And I step in.

I have been in love twice, and fallen out of it twice, once after and once during. Jaded, snakebitten, I still consider myself a romantic. At this point the man on the other side of the bathroom door remains a fantasy, an unturned page, an image taking form in the dark. He approached me at the library, to my mind one of the best places to meet a person, asking me if I'd read any Broch.

Stories to read aloud before bed

“Who?”

“Broch … Hermann Broch,” he whispered. We were in a library.

I’d never heard of him. I’m twenty-eight, by the way, and I love to read. When I was a child I stayed up all night reading beside the same plant. As the plant grew, my books became heavier, longer. I bought books online, rented them from the library, read all the ones I was supposed to read for school. I was the only one I knew who did that. One thing led to another, and I started writing papers about them.

“Oh, I don’t think … he writes long books, doesn’t he?”

“Not compared to Tolstoy.” Again with the whisper. I love it when men whisper about great authors. So conspiratorial. As if he and Leo had been together the night before.

Library man (*not* gentleman—I’d been in his presence, and he and mine, for maybe thirty seconds: how would I know if he was gentle? How would I know if I even wanted him to be? What does “gentle” even look like? Would he have to touch me for me to know he was gentle? Did I want to be touched, gently or otherwise, by a man I’d never met? The answer turned out to be yes). Library man lay his hand on my shoulder. Brave. Confident. *Gentle*.

“I can steer, point, lead, or verbally direct you to one of

And I Step In

the best books you've never read."

Does this guy think he's in a movie? was my first thought. Thought two didn't come right away. "Uh... well..."

"Tell you what."

He removed his hand from my shoulder—and immediately I missed it. What was happening? I had been trained to run from creepiness. I had more than once experienced creepiness firsthand, and I had run from it, and those experiences weren't as creepy as this one. So, why didn't I escape? I asked myself later.

Because I'd gone to the library to meet someone?

My body followed where he led. He never turned to check if I was still behind him. He led me to the Fiction Bs ... to Broch ... to *The Sleepwalkers*, which I could relate to just then.

"If you don't like this one, I know another one."

He said this very quietly. Then he was gone. Our little espionage had ended before it began.

In high school I had a class with Tim Lavender, whom I allowed to have sex with me. The next time I saw him, he said, "I knew I'd get you, Lena." And then he moved on.

Stories to read aloud before bed

Still in high school I met Marcus Mitchell who rode a motorcycle. I lived with him for two years, had a baby, gave away a baby, and broke up with Marcus soon after.

In college I fell for John Crutchfield, who was into Eckankar. He called it "Eck." We traveled on quite a few plains together before he was killed at twenty-two. "Crutch" was my first love. How do I know I loved him? I can't answer that. He called me "ballerina." When he was unhappy with me, he called me "ballerina bitch." I baked him pies. I chose not to attend his funeral. Please don't try to tell me I didn't love him. Because if I didn't...

After "Crutch" came Ben, then purely by coincidence Bening, then William who went by Bill instead of Will—why would that be?—and then Martin, who went by Martin. Martin lived in two houses in two cities and had two families. Why did I like that about him? He would visit my apartment in one of the cities he lived in. He stuck around for three months. Then came Kurt, Jake, Teller (you tell me), Jerome, Bridget, and Tony. One of them was my second love, but there's no need to go on about that. This isn't a love story.

I sit in the tub wondering how I got here. When did day-to-day living make me daring? I have no idea what to expect outside this bathtub.

The jets whirr. The skin of my hands is pruny. The bulb shining over me is too bright but I can't reach the switch from

And I Step In

the tub. I close my eyes, lower my ears below the water, and I am an aquatic creature. I wait to see how this feels. But the loud gurgling of the jets is everywhere, the primary presence in my tub. If I knew how, I would turn them off, all would fall quiet, and I would be a sleeping sea creature at the bottom of the sea.

Or would I be just a procrastinating me?

My life experiences have yet to show me who I am. I feel somewhat a mystery to myself, not knowing what I'm capable of. I want to live my life fully, this one life I believe I have. I don't want to waste even one day. I know things will get more difficult as I age.

I lift my head out of the water.

I bathe in the knowledge that he is out there waiting for me, the whisperer. He had written his cell number on the tenth page of *The Sleepwalkers*. I had called, and of course he had answered. Now he is sitting or lying on the bed. He has tossed all his stuff into two drawers, and has left one for me. He is flicking through channels or checking his phone or leafing through comics or pouring a drink or greasing his dildo or counting his money or counting his condoms or applying his wart remover.

Stories to read aloud before bed

I know he is waiting, and that he likes showing me how patient he is. He is a patient, gentle whisperer. What have I to fear?

Does he even like books? Has he even read Broch? I have, voraciously, and have ordered the rest of his stuff. At the library I found a copy of *The Spell*, which is in my overnight bag.

I try always to have a plan B.

After Many a Dull Day for the Barkeep

"I get you."

The customer reflected a moment, lifted the customer's glass, and took another drink. The customer held the liquid in the customer's mouth, swishing it about before swallowing it slowly. "But what's the main thing? Wha'dya hate most?"

Kt considered, or feigned to—the two later agreed that it's difficult for even the one doing the alleged considering to know for sure what is truly happening when being observed by another—as Kt touched a thumb- and fingertip to Kt's chin.

"Pouring shots in plastic mini-cups. That sucks."

"I got you," the customer said, and then impressively quickly: "What sucks worse, the plastic or the mini?"

The customer had put down three hazy IPAs, and the fourth one, Kt assessed, was beginning to touch the customer. Not bad for a small person of the customer's gender. The customer, despite being attractive to the majority of those who

Stories to read aloud before bed

perceived the customer, had been rather ordinary but now was showing small signs of being the unique customer that every customer was. Nothing too impressive yet but at least the customer was asking instead of telling. If the customer drained pint 4 and remained able to keep the customer's opinions to the customer alone, Kt might begin to like the customer, which the customer most likely would never know. Not unless the customer became a Ted or a Molly, which had not occurred even once since Kt switched establishments in May. Kt's last bar was downtown and nearly nothing but Teds and Mollys, and everyone knew who Kt liked and didn't like. Here at the airport hardly anyone showed up twice, which is what had lured Kt over in the first place, back in May. Kt'd switched over despite the extra steps to work and knowing tips would be fewer. Fewer, not less, because of the fewer sitting asses. Unknown travelers tipped better than Teds, and numerous percentages better than Mollys, one of whom had on three separate occasions tipped Kt a nickel, with zero spite or irony. Back then a nickel was worth five cents.

Soon the customer would get up to pee and find the customer's legs mildly unsteady. The customer would return and continue to talk. Once the customer had to pee, that wasn't all that came out. But if it was questions about another bodily person on earth and not a diarrheic assertion one after another, points would be won with the barkeep. Points, not pints. Pints could be won, but this was rare, and getting rarer the more years Kt shoved shots. And despite Teds and Mollys being the fuckin' worst, they were also the only ones who scored pints. Not a free pint had been poured since Kt made the big switch

After Many a Dull Day for the Barkeep

back in May. In the past, yes; in the present, no. Even the pints Kt poured Kt lay dollars in the till. Anyone who ever ran a register would assume Kt cut a slice, but Kt-kickbacks had been nil since late April, just before Kt took off a week to prep mentally for Kt's new gig at the 'port. If things didn't change up at least a little from here to there, many a dull day for the bonny barkeep.

The customer returned 30 ounces lighter, strolling jauntily, armswing 20 degrees, regaining the customer's seat without a hitch. The typical adjustment period on the stool but nothing suggesting. Pint 4 remained 50 percent liquid. With nothing to do but watch daytime TV or stack cocktail napkins corner sunshine orange to corner teal, Kt uncharacteristically dipped a toe.

"You half empty or half full?"

The customer appeared momentarily startled. The customer began to say a word that most likely was on its way to being "what" but could have been "when" or "why" but which in any case came out as "wh" before the customer maneuvered seamlessly—this being the kind of detail noted by any barkeep who'd passed the bar—to "Oh." Followed by a pretend-intended brief pause during which the customer's brain churned and came up with, "Of shit?"

When you've shoved greater than a million shots you become a post or a pillow. Kt, to Kt's self-satisfaction, still had some give. Was this because Kt generally genuinely liked people, or because disingenuously Kt wanted people to like Kt? No matter. What happened next would not have happened if a second or third customer was at the bar, or even in the

Stories to read aloud before bed

room, but since Kt was sharing this special moment with none other but the customer in front of Kt, and since the customer suddenly appeared to be quite vulnerable, incomplete smile at the outset now changed to near total apprehension as the customer waited nervously to learn how the bartender would respond to what a second ago had seemed funny, Kt felt Kt's tact change apparently without Kt. What happened next certainly would not have happened if Kt truly were the thick-knuckled barkeep Kt now and then, out of boredom, for self-entertainment purposes only, pretended to be.

What happened was that Kt said, with sagelike patience, "Your glass. I meant." Kt gestured grandly toward the pint glass sitting on the bar in front of the customer.

The customer recovered. The customer's ability to unruffle and pat down smooth came with some satisfaction to the customer, and by extension to Kt, whose facility to assess was about the same as anyone's but whose ability to perceive ranked high even among bartenders. Kt currently perceived that the customer would now say something that the customer believed to be clever. "Beer cold? Half-full. Beer warm? Half-empty."

The pair of brown eyes of Kt and the pair of eyes slate-blue of the customer bounced once off each other and then held, and held. An undeniable moment occurred between the two discrete beings who perceived the world through these two pairs of eyes, but neither of them could say later, either together at Kt's living space or, later again, unaccompanied in their own separate living spaces, already wishing to be back in the presence of the other, if the moment had been caused

After Many a Dull Day for the Barkeep

by the meeting of the eyes, or if the eyes had met as a natural extension of the moment. They recognized, and would agree, that following the moment, or perhaps at the tail end of it, perhaps the emergency exit employed to bring the long moment to its climax, intimacy occurred when Kt removed the customer's glass from the bar and tossed its contents into the sink. "Warm."

Misunderstanding Kierkegaard

The body cries, pees, sweats, bleeds, oozes, bursts, swells. Who is responsible? God? Nature? Neither? Both? No one? I know only that it's not me. I have nothing to do with it. If I say something and you cry, I did not make you cry. If I hit tennis balls to either side of the court and you run from side to side to reach them, I did not make you sweat. If I stab you with a knife, I did not make you bleed. Who filled your body with blood? Not me. Who covered you in skin so thin a knife cuts through? Not me.

The mind mistakes, misperceives, miscommunicates, mis-treats, misinterprets, misintuits, misunderstands, miscalculates, misreasons. Who is responsible? God? Does God really know of every mistake you're ever going to make before you make it? If so, has God caused you to make these mistakes? In the absence of God, who has caused you, or allowed you,

Misunderstanding Kierkegaard

to mistake and then to miscorrect to mistake again? You must know I have nothing to do with it. Your mind works without me. I cannot change your mind. If you say let's go have dinner, and I say let's take a walk and point out that the sun is setting, and you realize that it makes more sense to walk in the dusk than in the dark and that you're really not that hungry after all, it is not me that changed your mind.

You change your own mind. The noise my mouth makes to convey communication your way is the same noise it makes when I miscommunicate. It's not my fault that you listen.

Yet you blame me. I admit I sometimes blame you for blaming me, though it's not your blaming me that causes me to blame you. Unless you blame yourself, every blame is a misblame. You are responsible for all blame. Just as when you misperceive a shadow and steer into a deer, you are not to blame for the deer's death. The misperception that caused the steer that killed the deer was no more your choice than your becoming an evil child killer because your thick-chested, hairy uncles struck you in the head with rocks when you were young. The beaten dog does not choose to bite.

So stop crying. Or keep crying—but don't blame me. Yes, I called you a worthless piece of shit. Yes, I slapped you across the face. Yes, I held your head in the toilet. But I did not create tears. I shut my ears to hear your sobs and cries. When you slap me across the face, I thank you. When you hold my head in your lap and stroke my hair, I fall asleep. Do I misperceive

Stories to read aloud before bed

your lap for a foul-smelling urine spout? Do I misperceive a urine spout for your soft and loving lap? How do we perceive a misperception? Just as we perceive a perception. The next time your head is in the toilet, close your eyes and take a drink.

I do not wish to absolve myself. I wish to point out that I need no absolution. I do not plead innocent. I plead delighted. I plead joyous to watch you embrace the moments that amount to your life. Turn your face to the sun until it warms, then turn to the wind. Turn your face to the wind until it cools, then turn to the sun. Dance in your soul as if no one is watching. Because no one is watching. Make the most of most moments, but not all. Learn to make the most of one moment by making the least of it. A tear drop is a rain drop is a tear drop. In one deep breath, breathe in every breath—or wait 'til the next breath. Tomorrow will always do, even if it doesn't come. A next breath will always come until it doesn't anymore. What's the difference? Breathe each breath. A last one comes, but you will never know it. Your life lasts only as long as your misperceptions.

Overnight

Overnight, the wild winter storm had broken tree limbs that were now scattered over the front yard. The winds were still shrieking; the day was a mass of gray; the ground and sidewalks were coated with a crust of icy snow. It was much too cold, too hazardous, to go out and pick up the limbs, to toss them in the heap where they belonged, near the fire pit, where they would be burned come spring. Patrick looked through the window into the front yard and shook his head. The sticks in the yard reminded him of the attic, which was strewn with junk, and of the basement, where months ago his son's family had left all the belongings they didn't want when they moved from one house to another. Out in the driveway was a Corolla that had not started in nearly a year. And in the garden, at the side of the house, tomato cages stood in the frozen mud like coatless children shepherded by a now armless scarecrow grinning like a fool in the bitter cold winds of January.

Patrick checked the thermostat on his way to the kitchen,

Stories to read aloud before bed

where he sat at the table with the newspaper while coffee brewed. In the news, a young child molester had hanged himself at the local jail, a city councilman had vowed not to quit his post despite an adultery scandal, the local basketball team had lost their eighth game in a row, the weather page promised extreme conditions through the week. On the front page was a photo of young boys being pulled down a side street on a sled through blowing snow, their faces hidden by ski masks. Prepubescent bank robbers, Patrick thought. *Our future.*

Through the kitchen window frame, in places where the wood didn't quite fit together, the cold winds slipped in. The light summer curtains, tied at either side of the window, quivered like ghosts. Patrick pulled his robe tighter and wriggled his toes in his slippers. On the other side of the window were empty bird feeders, overturned bird baths. This area, even in winter, had once been filled with birds and squirrels, fighting each other for birdseed. Buried somewhere in the frozen ground were the remains of Puff Daddy, Patrick's granddaughter Savannah's bearded dragon, which had died after being stepped on during a birthday party. The large lizard had limped around for weeks, threatening recovery, before dying alone in his box. Savannah had lighted candles and dug a hole on a Saturday night in midsummer, then come in the house, the corners of her eyes wet, and turned off the music playing in the kitchen.

The CD player, now unplugged on the shelf next to the waffle

Overnight

iron, had not played for months. Patrick reached for one of the plastic-cased CDs leaning against the player: The Gazebo Jazz Trio, Live in New Orleans. He fingered the case, opened it; the disk was missing. Upstairs, in what was called the middle room, on a shelf near the computer table, was a stack of bare CDs, all with cases misplaced, most of the disks scratched so that they skipped when played. Some of the disks were streaked with a light coat of watered-down toothpaste because someone had once told Patrick, years ago, that he could repair a scratched CD by rubbing toothpaste over the surface. It had not worked. Patrick had also tried running the CDs through the dishwasher, placing them in like plates; but when the cycle finished, and he opened the door of the washer, he found the disks soaking in a puddle at the bottom. They looked up at him with reproach. He had never seen inanimate objects look so ill used.

Along with the CD cases on the shelf leaning against the CD player, coated by dust, were a few paperbacks: *Walden*, *A Walk in the Woods*, *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*. They were not his books. He had not finished a book in over a decade. He enjoyed reading, but he never finished anything before wanting to start something else. He enjoyed starting the first pages, the feeling of promise, but then he would skip around, jump to the ending, before laying the book aside and forgetting about it. On a small shelf in the bathroom, near the toilet, were a half dozen books he had been reading in for years—none of them finished.

Stories to read aloud before bed

Patrick poured a cup of coffee, for a moment holding the cup up close so that steam rose and warmed his face. He took one of the paperbacks from the shelf and flipped the pages. He held the book close to his nose and smelled it. Tears welled in his eyes. All of his life he had cried easily. He imagined himself a container filled to the brim with sentiment, so that anytime an additional dose was added, the surplus had nowhere to go but to spill out through his eyes. No matter. Tears were adjustment, like everything else. *Adjustment.* There was always that word. But wasn't every life nothing but one adjustment after another? At his age, wouldn't he be a pro by now?

He felt vaguely hungry and glanced automatically at his wrist watch. The watch had stopped a few days earlier, and he had not rewound it. He did not rewind it now. He had worn the watch for years but now looked at it as if he had never seen it before. The hands had stopped at 11:17. It was a heavy watch, a bit showy by his standards, but it had been a gift. He had fastened it to his wrist on the day he received it, and over a dozen years later it was still there. He took it off every night before bed, and every morning before showering, but he always put it back on again. *Like clockwork.* He stared at the watch now, well over an inch in diameter, large numbers that read like exclamation marks: *Hurry! You're late! Step on it!* What an odd object, he thought, to wear on one's wrist. He wondered if he would ever wind it again.

The clock over the stove was flashing 12:00. He remembered

Overnight

the house had lost power during the worst of the storm. From his bedside table, the glowing red numbers of his alarm clock had blinked at him for half the night. *Alarm clock*: a disturbing choice of language if you thought about it. To wake up each morning in alarm. Well, not him; not anymore. He doubted anything would ever alarm him again. In any case, watches, clocks, calendars—they no longer held their sway. In the bathroom, over the sink where he washed his face each morning, his wife had kissed the mirror in red lipstick. The mark was still there, and always would be. This was all the time he needed.

He stood and opened the refrigerator. A milk carton, orange juice, a box of butter, a container of English muffins, some jelly jars. On the shelves of the door, eggs, olives, pickles, a huge jug of mustard. *Enough mustard to last a lifetime*. And perhaps beyond. Did mustard ever go bad? Outside on the deck, covered in ice, the grill stood abandoned. Why did he possess things if he would not take care of them? Why hadn't someone thought to cover the grill for him during his *period of adjustment*? How did a thing that seemed so precious when you bought it, a thing that brought people together for good times, for celebrations, over time become a burden, something to be cared for? One more thing to feel bad about when you didn't cover it in winter?

His son was now warm down in Georgia. He had seen him the month before, when he'd come up for a few days following Patrick's colon surgery. His daughter, at the bottom of

Stories to read aloud before bed

Missouri, had been spared the storm. Did they know he had been hit hard? Would they call to see how he was? Would he answer the phone? The phone might not be operating, it occurred to him; the lines might have blown down. He had let his cell phone expire. If someone wanted to check on him, would they be forced to drive up through the wind and over the ice? Would they arrive, step into the house, stamp snow off their feet, and look at him with resentment? The only way to clear their conscience might be to drive over, but once conscience was cleared, what would fill the mind next?

He caught himself still staring into the refrigerator. He touched an egg to see if it felt like something he wanted to eat. There would be cheese in the cheese drawer. Did he want an omelet? He didn't think so. Would it be a good idea to try to say something aloud? Should he turn on the radio? How could you fill something with emptiness? What did that even mean? He closed the refrigerator door.

Through the window, the wind continued to blow. He stood close, peering out, his breath on the glass. The twigs nearest the window pane were encased in ice, brittle and breaking as they thrashed about. A salt truck was parked on the side of the road, idling, blowing out exhaust. From houses across the street, dense streams of smoke rose up through chimney spouts and dispersed quickly into the racing clouds. The sky was spitting tiny pinpricks of ice, aimed right at him before bouncing off the window. It was a good day to be inside. He stood at the window and felt the workings of his brain, sput-

Overnight

tering, cycling, recycling. He could picture the wheels turning, gears slowly grinding. He sensed something being lost in the processing of the input. Somewhere deep inside him a tiny voice protested: *Too much!* He sensed that hours of daylight must be passed before he could sort it all out, process it during sleep, so that when he woke again, it all would have been worked out for him overnight.

Chat GBT

If we are not free to do what we like, and are on track to complete what is expected of us—that is, what is expected to happen will happen unless we interfere—then when we behave sufficiently contrary to effect an unexpected effect, are we hindering or obstructing what was meant to happen, or are we paving its way? If all things being as usual, if we are to meet Ingrid tomorrow at the park as we do every day but we choose to meet Celeste instead, do we owe Ingrid an explanation, or do we simply give her one? “We met Celeste at the coffee shop. We had no say in it.”

If she replies, “What do you mean you had no say?,” is there any explanation from us that she will purchase, buy into? If, to reiterate, we say, “We had no choice in the matter,” and she answers, “Of course you did!,” should we just walk out the door? If we were to try to explain, how would it sound? Something like this?

Chat GBT

A ball is rolling down a smoothly paved street. Watching it from the head of the street, we witness the ball veer slightly left, then slightly right, then straight the rest of the way to the bottom, where it veers left until it stops at the curb. The next day, same ball, same street, and the same thing happens. Apparently we have no wind conditions, no bumps in the road to take the ball off course. Next day, same thing. And the next day and the next, for years. The ball rolls just as we expect it to roll every day because every day it has rolled that way. Ten more years pass. One day, seemingly out of the blue, with no recognizable cause, the ball follows its same path but veers right instead of left, coming to stop for the first time ever at the opposite curb. Are we surprised? What has happened?

Walking down the street to retrieve the ball, we inspect the road closely. No pebbles, no dips, no bumps. It looks like the same road as always. Except that the ball is on its opposite side. If we begin with that, that the street looks different because the ball is on the other side—the *wrong* side—then we assume a cause has put the ball there, but if we end with that, that the street looks the same except that the ball has crossed to the other side—the *right* side—then we wonder why the ball has not done this all along. That is, if Celeste is the right woman, why did we spend so much time with Ingrid?

The next day, though, the ball veers left again, as it had for years, and comes to rest at the left-side curb. But the next day—surprise!—it veers right and stops at the right-side curb. The next day, left. No surprise. The next day, right. Now no

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surprise. Then Left. Right. Left. Right. For years. We enjoy the company of Ingrid and Celeste equally and see them both for about the same amount of time each week. Until one day Celeste finds out about Ingrid and tells Ingrid about Celeste. Is this a problem?

We watch the ball roll. It rolls down the street veering left, veering right, slightly left, slightly right, and at the bottom of the street, the ball stops in the middle. Ingrid and Celeste we enjoy the same? Or not in the same ways but in equal amounts? We walk down the street and find two pebbles: one sent the ball left, and the other sent it right. So what sent the ball back toward the center? It appears that Ingrid enjoys us more than Celeste does.

So, one more time to say our goodbyes, and then a lifetime with Ingrid? Surprise! Ingrid and Celeste have moved in together and have locked their door. The ball rests at the end of the street awaiting another roll. But we are done. Enough with the ball. The time has come to pick up the bat.

Tribute

“...pretty clear to me anyway that the ‘somewhat mysterious’ man by the lake, described by Clark as ‘present yet uninvolved,’ is indeed Hem himself, quite at home near water and hovering at the ready to get involved in any discussion on who holds the title for obliquely rendered abortion story. (Speaking of that discussion, or at least my hope for it, the same month that ‘Good People’ appeared in print—January 2007—my students and I read back to back ‘Hills’ and ‘GP’ fixing on four questions: [1] which story works better and why; [2] which story is the better abortion story and why; [3] what are Wallace’s intentions in his story toward Hemingway and his story, and how are these to be recognized; and [4] how have the discussion and implications of abortion changed in the eighty years between the writings of the two stories? As one might expect, despite my efforts to steer it, class discussion quickly 180ed from the value of the stories as fiction and whatever authorial impetus might have brought them to us to the horribly difficult and damaging dilemmas and choices

Stories to read aloud before bed

three of my students had endured during the lead-ups to their own abortions. In addition, two of the three had experienced unbearably haunting regrets that required tearful acknowledgment & appreciation from classmates. I too was quick to deliver—w/o the tears but with plenty of fear of the repercussions I would face if I failed to do so.) Hem obviously never met Wallace in any way, but Wallace met Hem via his fiction, apparently chiefly through his stories, several copies of which were heavily marked up in their margins, often with comments remarking on what lay beneath Hem's stark-bare style. As Clark notes, in his copy of (probably the second part of) 'Big Two-Hearted River,' Wallace underlined the story's last sentence and scribbled 'tragedy lies ahead'—not only for Nick Adams but for Hemingway as well, and of course much later for Wallace himself. Just how keenly DFW saw personal tragedy looming upon his first or second reading of 'Big Two-Hearted' we'll never know, but considering his depths of sensitivity it's at least not far-fetched to suggest that Wallace saw some of himself in Nick, and likely felt empathy, his lifelong go-to sense of compassion, for him during the trials he had endured as suggested in 'BTH.'"

KB paused from reading aloud. "Uh, you can't turn... I mean you can't submit this."

"You're on the second page."

"Your presumptuousness reflects too well."

Tribute

"Maybe if you read the rest?"

By inserting fingers between the bottoms of the top few pages of the upper-left-corner-stapled essay in his right hand and throwing the wrist of his left hand, with which he held the essay at the top left just beneath the staple, in a violent turning motion away from himself, KB demonstrably and emphatically ignored the existence of several pages and skipped to the essay's closing lines.

"...all considered based on the evidence presented perhaps goes without saying that 'GP' is the stronger story and DFW the stronger writer despite the current lack of inclination by anthological editors to recognize His pre-eminence through their story choices..."

KB stopped reading and did something with his tongue that pushed his lips forward into the shape of a reluctant kiss. "Ugh. But OK ...go ahead with it. You know what? I like it. Your audacity. I mean how often is that smart anyway? Insolence? The impudence exhibited in this essay is best backed by the unadulterated impertinence of submitting it for consideration."

"So go with it?"

"By all means. The Mets won it all in 69."

Stories to read aloud before bed

“69...”

“It will take that caliber of miracle.”

“69...”

KB lived in a one-bedroom apartment above the city’s best-attended art theatre, one-time site of its most popular adult theater. When he first moved in in the early ‘80s KB had worked for the porn house and paid \$110 a month for rent. Many good times were had (related elsewhere), until VHS and VCRs abruptly closed down adult theaters across the globe. KB’s monthly rent rose tenfold when months later the theater reopened as an art venue. He lost his job but chose to retain the apartment. “Still a great deal. Best view of downtown.”

True enough. On and across the street steering and strolling toward the city’s prime restaurants, bars, and shops were young couples, groups of young women, students, and sorority girls, for several months of the year in alluring, revealing attire, who from the perspective off his third-story balcony made the apartment more attractive than it had been as a porn-nest for hookers and call girls (the difference between KB had learned firsthand from streetwalkers who in winter clustered for warmth against the wind near the entrance to the theater), at least for a scholar like KB at that time aging into his mid-thirties.

OK, one night I’ll mention here particularly because yes I

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was there. This was 1982, in the summer of The Safety Dance. My best friend KB, nearly thirty years before chairing the English Department and teaching my son comp lit, had just moved in above the porn theater. I worked down the street at a pancake house, and at this pancake house worked Emma, a purely innocent doe-eyed seraph—more an instant love-object than lust-object, somehow even in the eyes of boys her age—not even eighteen serving up in a short skirt fake-buttered stacks of steaming hotcakes on heavy, industry-brand off-white plates as well as incredibly overpriced flat but suggestively whip-creamed waffles each with a bright-red cherry on top. For the kind of waffle you can make at home for three or four dimes, people, mainly students and variously motivated older men, some of them surely there to confirm that the rumors were true, were willing to lay down seven bucks, plus a hefty tip if they were lucky enough to have Emma visit their table as their actual server. The unfortunate patrons wired for women but assigned to seats in sections other than Emma’s spent their meal either crane-necking to get a look or hang-dogging over their plates after being chastised by a meal partner for the crass inability to conceal their motives when caught desperately seeking unrestricted views. The servers other than Emma, many of them beautifully constructed themselves, quickly sensed, and soon after joked about in that way that we all recognize is not really a joke at all, that Emma was not only Princess Pancake at this particular breakfast establishment but also destined to be homecoming queen at whichever university she chose to bump with her presence as well as mother of two or three ridiculously stunning children who

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called a multi-millionaire Dad. Emma meanwhile, who despite being envied and subsequently ridiculed by those who didn't know her because of her stereotypical Scandinavian sunny disposition and unblemished skin, truly was as sweet and innocent as she appeared to be, and truly *was* Scandinavian, born in Oslo and raised for fourteen years in Bergen, a city nearly as scenic as herself. So for those clueless customers, often from out of town, visiting Aunt Sonja's Pancake House because they'd Yelped about our (undeservedly from a pancake-flipper's perspective) famous potato pancakes, or simply because Sonja's had appeared hazily on their horizon as they exited the football stadium after watching with satisfaction as their university's team thrashed our university's team on the gridiron, meanwhile working up a hunger for something other than frankfurters, which is about all our stadium offered back in the '80s, when Emma in the flesh materialized at their table and in her genuinely Norwegian accent enquired as to what they would like to appear on plates that she herself would set in front of them they experienced something like what was described in the '80s as an *E.T.* moment, that epiphanic instant when the alien first appears in which earthlings cannot believe their eyes and ears. Men and women, adolescents and children, would try not to stare at the being simply being at their table. As soon as she took their orders and departed, often with a near curtsey followed by a glance back over her shoulder that revealed for a split-second—you learned to watch for it—the delicate contour of throat segueing into chin, most of the table would excuse themselves and head to the restroom to check their face and

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teeth in the mirror, quickly, before Emma returned with the waters.

I was a rarity at Sonja's, one of the few young men who had applied to work there without knowing about Emma. Todd and Tim Battershell gathered this within a few seconds of saying hello. The brothers Todd and Tim were two among many line cooks and particularly assigned to mentor me because one or the other, if not both, was nearly always there. On my first day they were both working and met me in the prep kitchen in batter-stained aprons with spatulas in the pockets, both of them older and taller than me, and both of them sweaty and greasy in a way that seemed normal to them. Maybe they caught me noting this because they informed me they had been working in the front kitchen, a place they said I was not anywhere near ready to step foot in yet. Before we turned to the training grill, they drew me back to the time clock, where I had just punched in. One of them waved a hand toward the photos tacked neatly in rows into the corkboard above and on either side of the time clock. I had glanced at the photos when I clocked in, noticing primarily the great number of them, but was running a minute late so had not ventured to check if I knew anyone. Todd and Tim stood at my side waiting in silence as I now took the time to look over the photos with much greater care than I would normally, which felt expected of me considering the brothers' silent and expectant, if not smug, expressions and how their arms were crossed over their chests. I noticed myself taking note of the pressure I felt to somehow see what they wanted me to see. I wondered if what I was

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doing was preparing for a quiz, and surely hoped not because I had thus far failed to try to connect any of the photos with the names beneath them. It occurred to me that I should try to do this. I shifted slightly back toward square one and recast my eyes to slowly and carefully take in photos I had probably already looked with great care at once. Meanwhile the brothers seemed to be losing patience that I had not yet seen anything to remark upon. At this point, now studying photos with a degree of circumspection that I felt sure I had already studied with equally much so, and feeling the brothers beside me shifting their weight and uncrossing and recrossing their arms across their chests, I remarked that I was surprised that there was no one on the board that I recognized, given how many photos were there. This comment was met with what felt like an angry silence. "And since I've lived in this town most of my life," I added. It was true. Considering my number of years in the city, the size of the city, and the number of photos I was expected to look at with great care, most of them of people in the ballpark of my age, it was indeed strange that I had thus far recognized no one. Of course at this point I had looked deeply into only a dozen or so photos, and once or twice allowed myself to glance sideward to help gauge just how many photographs we were talking here, noting with some despair that there must be over a hundred. "Wow." I heard myself say. "You know, I never realized how much you can't tell about a person by studying their photo." A second or two of silence and a small grunt. "You don't need to study them, just look at them..." said with undisguised impatience, before the other brother filled in, I like to think mer-

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cifully, "...especially at *that* one." Pointing with his pointer finger directly at one unmistakable Polaroid image, his finger very nearly contacting the photo just before his brother knocked his arm away as if to say how dare you. Indeed in the nanosecond that passed just before I began to take an extremely long and close look at this image, I saw that the photo, just this one, was protected with a piece of cellophane. Lamination, it occurred to me later, would have been going a bit too far, especially since many of the other photos were not exactly what might be described as flattering. As it turned out, Emma's reproduced image despite being hands-down at the head of this particular photo-imaginistic totem pole wasn't flattering either, which I learned later that day when I saw her in person for the first time. This I will detail in chapter 83 but for now should mention why this story is even more compelling than you might have expected—yes, perhaps you guessed, right next to Emma's photo on the wall beside the timeclock was a terribly timed shot of none other than Dave Wallace, his long face surely caught in mid-sentence as he explained to whomever was taking the photo (Jill, I learned later) that he had zero experience in pancake flipping but would be supra grateful to have the opportunity to give it a shot because he had just purchased a brand-new second-hand Vega that he could not drive because his funds for gasoline? *Færdig, terminado.* Here Dave surely rubbed the empty pockets of his pants. Yes, I got to know him that well. Because David Foster Wallace—though he was not DFW *yet*—and I lived, it turned out to be true, in the same town.

Stories to read aloud before bed

[Back to KB & a piece this time about Celeste Quinn. Later about Karen Green? Sally and Jim? Amy and tennis? The difference between Pythagorean and Euclidean?]

[Twenty years later, the Aunt Sonja's time clock photo of Emma was taped to my mirror.]

Brushes

Mine started before my birth, if that's fair, since my great-great uncle was Long John Wentworth, the first paid mayor of Chicago (and also chief editor of the *Chicago Democrat*) and, before that, my namesake, Sir John Wentworth, was British colonial governor of New Hampshire, loved by loyalists and revolutionaries alike (he was warned kindly to move on before the trouble started; he moved on to Nova Scotia to be their lieutenant-governor). More peripheral relations include the 1st Earl of Strafford, Thomas Wentworth, who ran things in Ireland for a while before losing his head when King Charles the 1st signed his death warrant.

So, if I sound a bit uppity, you understand. But I'm just getting started. Once I was born, things really got rolling. To begin, in the early 1970s, I stood within a few feet of my brother Doug as he competed in and won our local Duncan Yo-Yo contest, Butterfly division. He could make his yo-yo hesitate for a full twenty seconds, unheard of in those days,

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at least in Baton Rouge. More on brother Doug later, as he racked up further achievements (think tennis racquets and golf clubs, Pac-Man and Space Invaders, and more than anything think bass guitar) that landed him rich in experience though just short of fame.

OK, you want people you've heard of? Let's start with Pistol Pete Maravich, who played his college basketball at LSU in Baton Rouge and, fifty years later, still holds the all-time NCAA college scoring record (3,667 points). Pete averaged forty-four points a game over three varsity seasons, and that number would have been fifty-four, or higher, if they'd had the three-point shot back then. As luck would have it, my dad worked in the press box back in 1971, when the team was looking for a pair of young fans to appear with Pete on the cover of a game program. Arrangements were made, and my brother Doug and I waited for an hour or so after the game for Pete to appear for the photo shoot. But LSU had lost the game that night (to Kentucky; even with Pete, LSU could never beat Kentucky), and when Pete finally came out of the locker room he was close to tears. The photo shoot was postponed, and later canceled. So close to something we could have framed and put on the wall, we settled for Pistol Pete's autograph, which fetched me over \$100 on eBay many years later. (It's worth more now.)

Years passed, my family moved from Louisiana to Illinois, and I hung with nobody of consequence. My father, now a book publisher, drank whisky into the wee hours with Tom

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T. Hall ("Richard, you can call me 'T'") and exchanged letters with E.B. White. At some point he befriended members of the Williams family, who went on to write and read an inaugural poem ("Of History and Hope") for Bill Clinton in 1997 (Miller), and score eight top-10 hits on *Billboard*, two of them peaking at #1 (Lucinda). I brushed both Miller and Lucinda, by the way—Miller at my father's retirement party in 2001 (Miller read a poem), and Lucinda, before she hit the big-time, in a tent at ACL, where she smiled at me and signed my paper cup (eBay \$12).

Stay with me. And if you haven't heard of Andre Dubus, and yet you're reading this magazine, well, that's your fault. Think "A Father's Story" and "Killings"—Hemingwayesque stories with Hemingwayesque titles that are as good or better than Papa's best. If you're not a reader, think of the film *In the Bedroom*, which stars Tom Wilkinson, Sissy Spacek, and Karen Allen and is engagingly heart-breaking and decidedly not soft porn. Well, I knew Andre in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in 1984. (To clarify, we're talking Dubus II, not III, whose writing is also amazing, but whom I've not met—yet). Andre II could drink with anyone, while out-storying all takers, and was in a word astonishing to listen to while sitting around a fire in some grad student's backyard as midnight turned to 1 and then 2 and 3. Lucky for my wife and me, our daughter Rebecca was the same age as Andre and Peggy's daughter Cadence, so we were chosen as afterschool sitters. Young Cadence would say to me "Let me hear you roar," and at the end of the day Andre picked her up at our apartment and handed her bullets to

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count to see if she'd learned anything in school. Andre died in 1999, but if you search for Cadence you can see what she's up to, living the dancing life in Brooklyn, which in my book makes her worth mentioning.

As for my daughter Rebecca, she just left Florida for Washington, even now setting up her first digs in Seattle's upper Queen Anne district. While she lived in Gainesville she was best friends with Katie, who worked as a teller at a bank frequented by Arlyn Phoenix, mother of River—a pretty big deal because Rebecca and her clique had borderline worshipped River after watching him in "Stand By Me" and "Private Idaho." Think fan club, posters, diary entries. Now, twelve years after his death (Viper Room, Halloween 1993), River's mother was depositing checks with his name on them into their joint account.

Along with Dubus, the other semi-big-name writers I've met—as well as one underread whopper and another whose name I will withhold 'til the end—include Frederick Morgan, Laurence Lieberman (my poetry teacher at the University of Illinois), Nick Delbanco (my fiction teacher at the University of Michigan, whose first girlfriend was Carly Simon), Margaret Atwood (*A Handmaid's Tale*), Russell Banks (whose eventual wife, poet Chase Twichell, hit on me at a dive bar in Tuscaloosa), and, the biggie, 2003 Nobel Prize Winner J.M. Coetzee, author of one of my favorite novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Coetzee wasn't nice to me, maybe because he thought I was going to ask him to sign the copy of *Barbarians*

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I had clutched in my hand (he had already said he would not be doing that). He stared at me with steely eyes and had nothing memorable to say. Maybe he guessed correctly that I was intoxicated, partly at the prospect of sitting across from him, greater-partly on red wine, which they were pouring for free.

All of this is true. If you're wondering if I am writing memoir or parodying it, well I'm wondering that too. But this is all true. If I chose to tell untruths, think of where I might go. Think Mick Jagger, Bjorn Borg, Brooke Shields. (OK, guess my age.) Think about them, as we all do, but don't ask me to tell you anything. I can't. I never met them.

But you remember my brother Doug? He found himself stepping into the loo from which Rod Stewart was stepping out. He met John Travolta and Bill Clinton, on separate occasions, briefly, both at the Chicago Westin. My dad, Doug's father, out west on business, happened upon both Walter Matthau ("nice guy") and James Garner ("tall"). My wife Lisa spoke with Phyllis Diller in front of a mirror in a women's room on St. Armonds Circle. She barely missed Tony Bennett, traveling by boat with k.d. lang., as they disembarked, singing, on Longboat Key.

Wait. How about this one? For you music fans. Think Grammy Awards. Think third most Grammys of all, behind only Sir Georg Solti (31 awards) and Quincy Jones (28). That brings you to 27-time award winner Alison Krauss, who my

Stories to read aloud before bed

brother played the bass for in 1984 when Alison was 13. Her first band. When Alison returned to Champaign, Illinois, in the mid-'90s, now famous and already toting a Grammy or two, she saw Doug in the lobby and told him he "sang like an angel."

I've seen the Ramones live at a small venue (the Red Lion in Champaign; there was a bomb threat; we all stood outside in the Steak n Shake parking lot, waiting for clearance, Joey, Johnny, Dee Dee, and Marky [or maybe Richie] hunkered together smoking, all glum and cool as hell). Also at the Red Lion, I met Kevin Cronin, lead singer of REO Speedwagon, band members of which grew up in tiny Bondville, Illinois, on the same street as my future wife. I saw Springsteen in 1978, at the highest of his many heights—a 3.5-hour piano-leaping, fist-pumping, throat-wrenching, Big-Man-on-the-sax-playing, soul-rending extravaganza of a show. To this day my best ever. I saw the Stones at Aragon Ballroom. Disappointing, but still. Dylan. Van Morrison. Elvis Costello for \$1.95 at a tiny theater in Indianapolis, playing with Mink Deville and Nick Lowe. Back row, but still. I saw these performers but did not speak to them. I can't claim to have met them. I did meet Hayes Carll, Willy Nile, Bonnie Prince Billy, James McMurtry, and the Indigo Girls, but so has everyone. At Mabel's in Champaign my friends and I were invited to dance on stage by Toots and the Maytals, and we did so. In September 1986, my wife, daughter, and I arrived in Kingston, Jamaica, on the day after Peter Tosh was killed, but we did not attend the funeral parade because we were afraid it might

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turn violent. We did, though, march to the music to the June 10, 2004, parade in New Orleans on the day Ray Charles died.

Now that I think about it, both Toots Hibbert and Peter Tosh were close friends of Bob Marley, so if I can play “six degrees” for a moment, it’s almost as if Bob lounged in my room back in the early 1980s when I maxed out my system’s decibels to “No Woman, No Cry.” If that happened, it would have been for me like meeting Jesus, or even Van Gogh or Van Morrison (in the 1990s my handle as an eBay seller was VincentVanMorrison; I sold Pete Maravich bootleg tapes illegally; I am still blacklisted).

As you might be hoping, I’ve saved my favorite for last. He was twelve or thirteen. I was fourteen or fifteen. He rode a tandem bike (yes, a bicycle built for two) from Urbana to Champaign (central Illinois sister cities) to play a set of tennis with me at what were then the Centennial courts (now the Kenwood courts). We were both beginners, but he more than I, and I beat him 10–6 in what they called back then a pro set. Afterward we strolled across the street to buy cokes at the pool concession stand, and then sat among the pines to watch the girls in their swim suits and cool off. Actually, he didn’t buy a coke, because one thing he told me was that he never drank soft drinks. He was drinking something, though, so maybe just water. He said he liked to drink milk straight out of the jug. Watching the girls, I mentioned the term “booty,” and he just stared at me blank-faced. He was twelve or thirteen. I sure wish I could remember some of his exact words

Stories to read aloud before bed

because, though we played more tennis together later, this was the only time I was alone with him, and he was Dave Wallace, later to become David Foster Wallace. Think *Infinite Jest*.

Taken collectively, our brushes with fame are as unique to each of us as our fingerprints, and ultimately about as significant to our real lives. No famous name I ever met changed my life. But as we get on in years, the total sum of our brushes, though each one of them trivial, may add up to a fairly impressive canvas, even if we're the only ones impressed. I hang my canvas on my wall and stare at it, knowing it's like no other that ever existed in the universe, and I feel something like pride, as if to think, this is my creation, *my small contribution to the world*. I'm no Pete Maravich or Dave Wallace, but I might be the only living connection between the two.

If you'll look back with me at what I've written, you might suggest that my brother Doug has enjoyed more and arguably better brushes than I can claim. I won't disagree. But since you're still here, let me add one last stroke, like some of my others more of a semi-brush, and yet also deeper, more layered. So not only did I play tennis with Dave Wallace, I also taught English at the same college as his mother, Sally. Parkland College in Champaign. In the copy-room I teased her once or twice about Dave's truth-bending in his recently published essays, and about his politics (rumor had it he had voted for Reagan in 1980 or '84). In 1996, Sally was voted one of four national professors of the year by the Carnegie

Brushes

Foundation, but this didn't go to her head, and neither did her being the mother of the author of *Infinite Jest*. I spoke to her at a bookstore in Champaign one night in 1997 when Dave was reading there as part of his *Infinite Jest* tour. After the reading I carried a stack of books up for Dave to sign, and when I asked him if he remembered me, he said "You beat me 10–6 in a pro set." He signed my copy of *Infinite Jest*, "With Fond Memories." I never saw him again after that, but I did exchange emails with his wife Karen Green in 2010. She wrote to me: "I haven't read much about myself or David, because, I guess, I was/am too WEAK and it drove/drives me insane. Nothing seems right about it."

Five years later, I met Jason Segel in Champaign on the occasion of his (quite impressive) appearance in *End of the Tour*, a 2015 film playing at EbertFest that recounted some of Wallace's experiences during the *Infinite Jest* tour. Segel was well known for a sit-com I had never seen, so was a popular catch at the festival, but I was fortunate enough to find him sitting alone at an outside table on the morning after the film had played. I asked him what it was like to play the role of David Foster Wallace in a city where many people well remembered Dave Wallace. I didn't mention that Dave's family had refused to watch the film, but maybe he knew that. "It's not tough because I don't know anyone here," he said. "If someone thinks I didn't get it right, I can only say I did my best—all anyone can do. And if they want to say they knew the real David better than I ever could, I'm sure they're right. I never met the guy."

You Say Bird

He stood at the picture window in the living room looking onto the front yard of the house they rented together. She sat on the loveseat behind him with a cup of coffee; 500+ loose pieces of a jigsaw puzzle were spread out on the coffee table before her. She had just spilled the pieces onto the table from the box. The picture on the box was a lighthouse in Maine. She had been there. She wanted to go again. He would rather go West, to the mountains. They were both about 30. They were intelligent, sensitive people and lovers of many things, including each other.

It was October in the Midwest. The scene he viewed through the window was about 30 minutes poststorm. More than an inch of rain had fallen, and was still flowing, mud-colored, on the sides of the street toward the drain on the corner. It was the kind of day that, walking into it, took you by surprise. The wind had come up; the temperature had dropped 10 degrees in an hour. The rain had stopped, but

You Say Bird

dark clouds still raced overhead.

Through the window, he was watching a female robin succeeding to build a nest in the heavy gusts of wind. The robin had flown off several times out of sight and returned with dead leaves, twigs, twine, and a muddy but still bright yellow ribbon. Out of nothing, the nest was coming together quickly. He had asked her to come look, but she hadn't made it to the window yet.

"She does it all with her beak," he said, talking into the window pane.

"Hmm," she said from behind him. After a moment she added, "He doesn't use his talons?"

"It's not a he. It's a she. And robins don't have talons."

"Oh," she said. "They have?"

"Eagles have talons. Hawks have talons." He was still talking into the window.

"Condors have talons." She smiled at the back of him.
"Sparrows have..."

"It's a robin, not a sparrow. Robins have claws."

Stories to read aloud before bed

"Robins have *claws*." She smiled again. "And a beak to build her nest."

She held her smile, but he didn't look her way, and she dropped her head back to her puzzle.

He turned and saw her face dipped over the puzzle pieces, her hair falling to either side of her head, the way it did when she looked down from on top of him. The image of her in bed struck him now, how she looked from his perspective on bottom: her face above her breasts above her belly. He turned away and looked back through the window at the half-finished nest, the bird's tiny head bobbing, its beak pecking to get each twig fragment in just the right place. He thought, *Would she do that for me?*

Earlier he had told her that he loved her. The moment was not particularly tender. He had her face squeezed between his hands as she brushed her teeth. Her mouth was dripping foam. "I love you, baby," he had said.

She had pulled loose and wiped her mouth on a towel. He noted, as he always did, her lack of reciprocation. She had trouble saying *I love you*. Something had happened to her as a child, she had told him. She could love just fine, she assured him, but she struggled with the words.

At the window, he felt far away from her. It was their one morning together of the week. They had planned a long walk

You Say Bird

but had woken up to hard rain falling.

"How does a puzzle with coffee sound?" she had asked him in bed.

"Coffee sounds good," he had said.

He didn't care for jigsaw puzzles, and she knew it. Had she really hopped out of bed, clapped her hands, and said "Now to my puzzle!" Why, yes, she really had.

The robin had found a piece of string and was tying a knot in the nest with her beak. In gusts of wind, one end of the string would blow free, and she would have to start again. She waited for the wind to settle, her head cocked, her beady eyes watching him through the window. He watched back in fascination.

"Listen," he said, not turning to look around. "Listen," he whispered.

She sat hunched on the couch without a sound. Her coffee had gone cold. Moments of silence passed. The robin flew off. He turned from the window to look at her on the couch. She was working on her puzzle, her lips pressed tight.

He said, "Sweetheart. You say *bird*, and I understand. I understand wings. Feathers. Beak. Flight. Nest. Egg."

Stories to read aloud before bed

She felt his eyes on her. She looked up from the puzzle, her face perplexed. "Sweetheart?" she said.

He continued: "What I don't see is the small fluttering body of your love, the nest, the egg of your love. I see the hungry open mouth waiting to be filled—your need of me."

She stared at him. "When I say *bird*?"

"You say *bird*, and I see a sparrow, or a robin. I don't see a raven so black he looks purple. I don't see a bright parrot in Madagascar. A bird flew into our window pane and fell and died, you say, and I see a sparrow, a broken sparrow on the ground beneath the window. If you say a bird bigger than a sparrow, I see a robin, not a meadowlark or a bluebird or a female cardinal with no red. Nor does the robin I see have much red. You speak of the robin's red breast. I see faint pink."

He was talking quickly. She was watching him, listening intently. She lifted her mug and drank cold coffee. She put the mug back down and bit her lower lip, watching him. She didn't say anything.

"Don't you see?" he continued "When I say *love*, every bird that has ever been and ever will be is soaring, swooping all together in joy. And the single tiny bird, the bird that fills your coffee cup, the one bird I have carried in my palm for years to know every subtle change in its feathers, every gradual change in color, every imperceptible change in its

You Say Bird

confidence in itself to care for itself and to soar. I have known that bird and thrown it into flight.”

He finished and was silent.

“Okay,” she said. “Can we talk about my puzzle a minute? Can you sit down here beside me and help me find a piece, what piece goes where?”

“Why?”

She spoke quietly, her eyes on his. “Because when you find the right piece, it fits right in. And then you find another piece. And one day, some day, maybe even today, it all comes together.”

Their eyes were locked on the other’s. The corner of his eyes were glistening. He spoke more quietly now. “When you cannot say that you love me, a bird I cannot see is tweeting distantly, remotely on a limb I cannot see. All my life I have looked for that limb, that bird, cocking my ears to understand an ineffable message in that shrill tweet. A huge, overwhelming message to convey if only I can listen well enough. And if it’s vague, that doesn’t matter. And if it can’t be fully communicated in the tweet, so be it.”

Her head dropped for a moment, and then lifted again. “What do you want from me?”

Stories to read aloud before bed

"Is it merely a call I hear?" He stepped closer to her, away from the window. "Is it merely a call I hear? A generic greeting, a noise for the sake of noise? Yes? No? Whatever it is, whatever its reason, it inevitably dies in the trees at dusk."

She was crying now, tears welling in her eyes and streaming down her face. She did not touch her cheeks. She did not wipe her eyes. "I don't have to do it," she said.

"Do what?"

"The puzzle!" She stared at him, crying.

He lifted his hands before him and looked to the ceiling. "Is that all you have?" he cried out. "Is that all?" He was standing above her now. "Is that all?" he said, much more quietly.

She stood up to face him, still crying. She held his eyes. "Tweet, tweet, tweet" she said. "Chirp, chirp."

He stood and stared at her, breathing deep breaths, his eyes glistening. He reached for her and pulled her close, holding her against his chest, the top of her head at his chin. With one hand he patted down her hair. "Okay," he said very quietly into her ear. "Okay, then. We're going to be okay."

They looked through the window at the robin looking at them. The robin's nest was finished. Three speckled eggs lay

You Say Bird

in the nest. The robin dangled a worm down to her babies' gaping mouths. The babies swallowed, grew, and flew. The robin's nest was empty. The robin's breast was faint pink, then red. She tapped at the window with her beak. "Love you," the robin said.

OR

They looked through the window at the robin looking at them. The robin's nest was finished. Three speckled eggs lay in the nest. The robin dangled a worm down to her babies' gaping mouths. The babies swallowed, grew, and flew. The robin's nest was empty. The robin's breast was faint pink, then red.

Body Parts

At the inopportune age of 44 upon the inopportune stage of Happily Married With Children, David Sheridan found himself thinking more than ever of women and their anatomy. After fathering two planned children in his early thirties, both daughters, he had received a third surprise in his near mid-40s: a beautiful boy who slid into the world two months earlier than expected amid a half-dozen complications, some of which were life threatening. After three weeks in an incubator and a total of five weeks in NICU, the baby, Ethan, gradually gained weight, his vital organs finally taking full hold, and he came home to sleep for the first time in his new crib—where he stayed for almost an hour, tossing and turning in his baby blanket, his tiny fists jammed into his tiny face. He slept the rest of the night tightly snuggled next to his mother in the bed in which he had been conceived on a gusty winter night not even nine months before. Inches away, David lay awake in the company of many thoughts. At the top, he felt so heavily grateful and was still thanking his angels, his god, his lucky

Body Parts

stars, his doctors and nurses, and anyone else out there who had played a part in his boy coming home to him and Lara alive and well. Always one to plan for the worst while hoping for the best, he had clearly imagined the alternative and the consequences that would bring. Would the death of their first, last, and only baby boy wedge he and Lara apart? Would they, blind to reason, blame one another? Or would their baby's death draw them even closer to each other and their surviving daughters? He had lay awake many nights at the hospital imagining the details of the likely scenarios. Then, as days passed with Ethan still holding on, the faces of a dozen nurses changed from sympathetic to hopeful and finally to surprised. One of the lucky or chosen few of the over twenty preemies he shared a nursery with, Ethan had beaten the odds. He beat death, David lay awake thinking. Now to keep him alive. Now to make him the happiest boy ever who spent his first three weeks in an incubator.

Over the next several months as Ethan grew stronger, Lara's full focus was on her baby. Who knew if she too had imagined the worst? She had never spoken of it. In her hours of staring into the glass box that held her baby boy, had she willed him to live? She too had seen the faces of the nurses change, and had seized on the earliest indication of hope. Much earlier than David would allow himself to, Lara had laid her palm flat against the glass of the incubator and declared, "I know he's going to make it. I know he's going to make it." So, David wondered, when Ethan did make it, how much of it was because she knew that he would? In any case, the two were inseparable now as though their lives had al-

Stories to read aloud before bed

ways depended on one another. As months went by, the novelty of the new baby in the house passed for David and the daughters, but every day seemed like day one for Lara. David drove the girls to school, picked them up after soccer practice. He made their meals or brought home pizza after work. He helped with their homework. All the while, while loving his daughters, he missed his wife, more beautiful than ever in her new, sustained happiness but also more than ever out of reach.

One night, as the baby dozed between them, David said, "Maybe tomorrow night?"

"Maybe what?" Lara's face was open innocence, neither bold nor diffident.

"Maybe Ethan sleeps in his crib..."

She seemed to think about it. "But it's just so much easier if he's in bed with me. If I wasn't breastfeeding..."

"Yeah, I'm sure. But lots of mothers breastfeed and must have to get up in the night. Maybe we could try just one or two nights a week?"

She smiled at him, leaned in to kiss his forehead, and turned out the light. David lay awake, fearful of touching her. Until now he had appeared to accept the situation with understanding, explaining to Lara, "I don't need sex like I used to. I'm over 40." But truly he resented having to go without. He and Lara had rediscovered sex in their late 30s, after the girls had finally realized the beds in their own rooms were large, lavish surfaces quite handy for sleeping. Lost time had been made up since then, but with another long dry spell now looming, David felt cheated. Had he not done his time already?

Body Parts

He lay near Lara's opulent body and listened to the sucking sounds of the baby. He craved her but could not touch her. He would be rebuked. They had made love occasionally over the months, when David played at pretending to feel the desperation he truly felt and, laughing, she'd give in for fifteen or twenty minutes. Maybe she even enjoyed it, but twice or even once a month was enough for her (or even too much? David winced), and this made him wild with want for her. And if not her, if not his wife, then—God forbid, but he was spending many hours awake on his back, his penis tap, tap, tapping below his naval as succubae danced above his bed whispering *nevermore*—another woman, please: an open, lush, wanton woman, insatiable and magnanimous with her body. This is what he desired, what he could not move his mind from. He ached for the bodies of women to want him. Their bodies were everywhere he looked: at the office and grocery store, museums and libraries, on the streets and behind the wheels of cars zipping past him at either side and turning down side streets out of his life. He waited at the light and watched them on the sidewalk in their jeans and shorts and dresses and skirts and halter-tops and lacy bras and skin-tight panties. He loved them in short hair, his fingers running over their scalps, or in long hair, luxuriously protected behind a curtain of long golden strands. Short or long of leg, slim or wide of waist, generously ample of hips or slight-hipped—the waifs in their gym shorts panting at the intersections—plain-faced or painted, thick lips or thin, tiny budding breasts or blossomed mounds of flesh—he wanted them all in turn or any one of them again and again.

Stories to read aloud before bed

He tried to work through it, spending more time at the office, shopping with his daughters, paying the bills, ministering the yard, playing golf, reading the sports page. He tried to focus on noting and appreciating the transitions in his life: the drives with the girls from home to school and then alone to work before back to school, back home with the girls, and back to work; waiting in line for lunch; trips to stores, church, the girls' soccer games; the precious morning minutes between pressing the snooze as he lay half-awake on his back, the fan blowing on his ankles, before a too-abrupt turn in the bed awoke Ethan, and automatically, still sleeping, Lara filled his tiny mouth with a ripened and glistening nipple, that he, David, damn it all, could not recall the taste of.

On occasional weekend mornings when he slept late, David dreamt absurd dreams that were much too embarrassing to ever describe or own up to. Except for one morning, in a fatalistic mood, he related to Lara that he had just sodomized his high school tennis partner, Steven Evans. "It was beautiful in a way. We were on a blanket under a large ginkgo tree with chirping sparrows. The grass was dewy, and Steve said he wanted to do it before the sun rose. He had a thermos of hot coffee. After I butt-fucked him, we played two sets of tennis and kissed every time we changed sides."

Lara giggled and went on arranging baby clothes in the dresser. It seemed every week she received—from friends, from her mother, from eBay—another box of infant shirts and shorts. The dresser was jam-packed, the drawers spilling over. While she arranged, little Ethan would lie on his belly, lifting his head up, watching his mother. David might run his finger

Body Parts

down Ethan's back or bury his nose in the loose skin between his shoulders. "You smell like sweet baby soap. You smell like a cloud."

Lara might smile and lay a hand on David's head. "Such a sweet boy," she would say. David knew she was referring to the baby, and would feel a ridiculous, embarrassing burn of jealousy. He carried this with him all the time now, alongside his love for Ethan and for his wife and his daughters, and alongside his physical and emotional cravings. All of this made for a bulky package bumping on his back and in his heart, like three children, all knees and elbows, insisting on being carried at once.



One day during his work week, David bought a newspaper and headed for a bench in a courtyard that bordered the building he worked in. He had taken to spending a few minutes on this bench several times a week. He found himself looking forward to it. If for a time he could find peace in distracting himself with mundane minutia, pleasurable in a way because it wanted nothing of him, then over time might he not become the peacefulness he felt?

He had been up much of the night with Ethan, whose belly was upset. He had carried him around the house, peering into pictures on the walls as if seeing them for the first time. He looked through windows at the dark yards and streets, all very quiet. In his arms, Ethan was bundled in a blanket and a sleeper. Held tight, he quit whimpering; laid in his crib, he

Stories to read aloud before bed

cried out immediately. David walked Ethan from bedroom to bedroom, down the stairs and up again, and then down again into the living room, where he stopped near a dark window to look out at the street lamps and at branches moving in a breeze. Ethan breathed audibly. David blew gently onto his face. The wall clock chimed three.

Across from the bench where David sat was another bench, and between the benches a walkway ran from one grassy end of the courtyard to another. When David looked up the walkway into the green of the courtyard trees, he squinted into the sun shining through them. Down that shimmering walkway now came the Latina woman he had been waiting for. Nervously, he watched her approach. Would she sit on the bench across from him? Or would she walk on by? Would she glance at him and make of her pouty lips a pouty smile? Or would she walk on by?

He looked into his newspaper, testing a sight of her from the corner of his eye. At her pace she would be upon him in thirty seconds. She would then have to choose her next move. Was she a day over twenty? Were her nipples poking against the silkiness of her bra? Would she slide out of her jeans? The length of her calves and thighs would be pale, insignificantly freckled, taut and alive in their youth. Between her legs her panties would be slightly damp from the moist slit hidden within her crinkled hairs. She would leave her panties on but would lift off her shirt and reach back behind herself to unclasp her bra. Would she unclasp her bra? Or would she smile and walk on by? As David waited, the sounds of her shoes on the sidewalk approached...approached...ap-

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proached...and went on by, clacking with authority on the walkway as she passed. He watched her walk away from him. Would she ever be back?

Out of nowhere a large man sat down aggressively on the bench next to David, leaving maybe eight inches of space between their thighs. David was taken aback, not having seen the man coming. Once the man had shifted and become still, David said hello.

The man stared straight ahead. His shoulders were intimidating, filling space, nearly touching David's arm. David folded his newspaper into itself.

"Can you stay a minute?" the man said. He didn't look over.

David looked at his wristwatch. "About time to get back to work." It occurred to him that this man might be deaf or in some other way partially absent. He felt his solid presence beside him. Glancing over, he gathered the man was dressed for hard work: T-shirt, heavy boots, jeans; his face was oily from sweating. His lips were cracked from dryness. He had no detectable body odor.

The man heaved a sigh.

"Long day?" David said.

"Straight ten hours. No break."

Let's see, David thought. This meant he had been working since about five in the morning. David took a longer look at the big-boned, muscular build beside him, the rough hands, scaly red knuckles, darkly tanned facial features, thick and rugged over the cracked lips, a crew cut.

Stories to read aloud before bed

"That's tough in this heat... I have a hard time getting through nine hours with an AC, two breaks, and an hour lunch." David laughed a little.

"I've worked outside for fifteen years. Winters and summers. I prefer it."

"What do you do?"

The man ignored the question. "Do you have children?"

"Three," David answered. "One of them brand new."

"A baby boy?" The man stared straight ahead, his voice monotone.

"Yeah, a boy this time. My other two are girls."

The man nodded. "I had a boy, too."

David paused and held off inquiring. "I'm glad to get a boy this time around," he said lightly. "Nice to have a change."

The man exhaled nosily, almost a grunt. He was still staring straight ahead. "I said I *had* a boy," he whispered. "I don't have him anymore."

David was ready to go. He looked at the folded paper in his hands. "I'm sorry. Do you... I mean—"

"When's your son's birthday?"

"Um, March 17th... about five months ago now."

"His teeth will be coming in soon."

"Yeah, soon I think."

"What's his name?"

"Ethan. My wife's father's name. He died last year."

"My boy was Andrew... Andy... Does your son have a favorite toy?"

Body Parts

The moments felt surreal to David. Were they really talking baby toys? "Any sort of ball," he heard himself say. "He loves balls. But he's scared to death of balloons."

David continued. "He's not really that much into toys. He plays with empty boxes."

The man cleared his throat. "My boy was eight when he was taken away."

David waited in silence. He had missed his chance to leave.

The man went on. "He was playing in the back yard. I had built him a tree house. He loved to play up there. I was in the house, doing nothing, watching a ball game. I didn't even care who won. When I went out to check on Andy, he wasn't around."

"At a friend's house, right?" the man continued. "Well, that's what I thought. I had nothing to worry about. We lived in a fine neighborhood. But I wanted to see him and be sure he was okay. My wife died in a car wreck, so it was just me and Andy. I taught him the best I could. We made his tree house together. It made me feel good to work with my boy. But he was a different kid after his mother died. He got so mad when nails wouldn't go in straight."

The man finally turned and looked at David. His eyes were wet. "We had our rough times too, but I don't remember them... I can't even say what they may have been." He paused and continued. "I went looking all over the neighborhood. None of his friends had seen him. I drove around for hours. No sign of him anywhere.

"The police had nothing to go on. No leads. After about a week, I got a box in the mail. Inside was a finger. A pinky

Stories to read aloud before bed

finger.

"The next day his other pinky came. Then the boxes kept coming: his teeth, his toes, his ears... I used to rub his ears when he went to sleep..."

The man paused, staring ahead again. David kept quiet, holding one of his own hands in the other. "Was there anything else in the boxes?" he said softly. "A note?"

The man tossed his head. "Then the boxes stopped coming. For a long time. Months. Until I got one last one... I haven't opened it. I've had it more than ten years."

"Are you going to open it?"

"I don't know."

David excused himself, offered his hand to be shook, and walked back to his office to finish his work day. Did he believe the man's story? No. But of all the people in town he could have sat next to, he had sat next to David. Or was he telling his story all over town? And if no one believed it, did that make the story any less true? David held his little finger up. Should he have asked the man to pinky swear? Should he have asked to see the box?

Ethan had spent the day throwing up. His breath was sour. The little creases of his throat smelled of vomit. But he had thrown up nothing but mother's milk; the vomit smelled almost sweet.

"Does he need a bath?" Lara asked.

"No," David said. "Ready for bed?"

They lay together with Ethan between them. Ethan had no fever, but his head was sweaty. David decided not to tell Lara about the man and his story. He held his hands up in the

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dark and looked at them. Some light was coming in through the window. After Lara and Ethan fell asleep he got up from bed, walked around to Lara's side, and looked down on her in the near darkness. Sleeping, she looked like a little girl, but from inside her nightgown the ring of an areola and its nipple peeked up at him. The dark nipple looked sore from being sucked.

He left the room and the house and stepped into the yard, where the hum of cicadas was alternately shrilling and quieting, a soundtrack for the yard's dark images and the night sky. Slipping off his shoes and undressing, he let his clothes fall to the ground around him. Naked, he stood in the darkness—street lamps had been voted down on his street—and wondered if God was watching. Once he had been quite sure of it. One side of the yard lighted up briefly as a car turned the corner and into a neighbor's driveway. For a moment he felt exposed by the light, but he stood his ground and believed he was not seen. The car doors slammed shut; a woman's voice he recognized giggled her husband's name as the couple walked up the walk and entered their house.

The night was still, the sky black. He stood and tried to capture a moment he had not experienced before and would never have again, but his imagination failed him. He tried to see the man on the bench as he went about his nightly tasks—washing the dishes, watching TV, sitting on the edge of his bed—and to imagine himself about these same tasks after the loss of Ethan. But no. His imagination couldn't supply the depth of feeling he desired. Sometimes he felt that the deepest feelings that his childhood and teenage years had suggested

Stories to read aloud before bed

he was capable of had been sucked up by the mere passing of time.

A sudden breeze touched body parts that had not felt wind since he was a boy. Across the street, a soft lamp clicked on in his neighbor's bedroom, and a figure drew the shade.

Hoping for more, he gauged himself. Disappointment? Emptiness?

He put his clothes back on, stepped back into the house, and returned to their bedroom. He waited in the dark silence near the bed, his eyes on the figures of his wife and his son. Once his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, he stood quietly for several moments watching his son's belly rise and fall. When he moved his eyes to his son's face, Ethan's eyes suddenly opened to stare peacefully back at him.

"We're on page 117, Dad. All good."

"Yes, but I just don't know how to end this story."

"What are you feeling?"

David looked inside himself. "Grateful. I'm feeling very grateful."

Ethan smiled. "Let's end with that."



The Creek

Raymond Starns and Johnny Crutchfield were sweeping grass off the Carlton's driveway when they heard Nick Thompson yelling something about the creek. Still a ways down the street, Nick was running up from the creek but also turning and pointing back to it as he yelled. Ray and Johnny had been having a grass fight after mowing the lawn for Mrs. Carlton. Watching them from the window, she had come out with two brooms, one for each of them. Sweeping the grass wasn't nearly as much fun as throwing it at each other, but the boys knew they wouldn't be paid for mowing the lawn if they didn't do what Mrs. Carlton told them to do, which was to clear every blade of grass from the driveway and from the sidewalk in front of the house. The boys were sweeping with less than full enthusiasm as Nick Thompson came running closer yelling that someone had fallen into the creek. This didn't make immediate sense to the boys because the creek was only two feet deep, and boys fell into it all the time, many times on purpose to cool off after picking blackberries.

Stories to read aloud before bed

or catching crawdads. But there was one deep spot of the creek, which was the pit that had been dug out for drainage pipes to empty into. This pit was said to be 14 feet deep. The water in the pit was somehow stagnant and didn't seep over to the rest of the creek, which was shallow and muddy but clean enough to see the crawdads as long as you didn't slosh the water around too much. You could fill a bucket with crawdads in an hour and sell them to the Floyds, who threw a crawdad boil almost every Friday night.

When two other boys came running by, Ray and Johnny stopped sweeping. These boys were older, and they were running toward the creek. Ray and Johnny threw down their brooms and followed. The creek was only 50 yards away, sloping down from Wimpole Street at the dead-end. As the boys ran they could see someone standing on the large drainage pipe that jutted out over the pit. This pipe was about 3 feet in diameter and maybe 8 feet above the water; it jutted over the pit a length of about 6 feet. You never saw anyone standing on this pipe because if you slipped you fell into what might be the nastiest water in all of Baton Rouge. Smaller pipes running directly into the water were said to contain raw sewage. It was well known among the neighborhood kids that when pets died they were thrown into the pit, as were unwanted kittens and puppies, still living as they were plunged in. Every kid on the block had witnessed at least one animal, alive or dead, being tossed into the pit. A layer of slime rested on top of the water, making it impossible to see below the surface. When boys peed into the pit, as they sometimes did—from

The Creek

the ground, not the pipe—their urine pooled on top of the slime before oozing in gradually to become part of the murk. The water in the pit was so revolting that not even the water moccasins went near it.

How Chris Tatum ended up in the pit no one ever knew, or if someone did know, he never told the true story. Nick Thompson said he saw Chris on the big pipe and heard a splash, but he did not see Chris fall in. That is what Nick said at the beginning, and he stuck to the story later, when he talked to the paramedics who arrived to try to save Chris; to the police, who questioned him later that day; and to Chris's parents, who visited Nick at home a few days after their boy drowned. Nick told the story so consistently and believably that no one doubted he was telling the truth, which left everyone to speculate what Chris was doing on the pipe in the first place. Had Nick Thompson dared Chris to walk the pipe? No, Nick said. He would not do that. Was Chris suicidal? Earlier that same week Chris had won a medal in a local track competition; he was set to run the following weekend in a regional race. He had been seen around the neighborhood showing the medal around to anyone who asked. No, everyone agreed, the boy showed no signs of being suicidal. Besides, no one in his right mind would choose to drown himself in the pit. So the mystery remained: Why was Chris Tatum, a nine-year-old boy, walking a pipe that even high-schoolers steered clear of?

Racing for the dead-end, Johnny Crutchfield and Raymond Starns were among the first to arrive at the pit. When they

Stories to read aloud before bed

got there, breathing hard from their sprint down Wimpole, only two teenage boys were there. Ray did not recognize them. The teenagers paid them no mind. They were shouting at each other. One of them was stretched out prone on the big pipe and peering into the sludge below. The other was standing on the edge, also looking hard into the water as if he could see below the surface.

"I don't know what to do!" one of the teenagers shouted. "I don't know what to do!"

"We need a rope!" the other one shouted. "We have to go in!"

"We can't go in there!"

"God, I know, I know! But what can we do? We have to! We have to!"

"We don't even know he's in there!"

"I know! I know!"

Ray stood transfixed next to Johnny Crutchfield, relieved that no one expected anything of him. He was only eight, Johnny was only nine—no one would ask them to do anything. One of the teenage boys had stripped off his shirt and shoes and seemed to be looking for the best place to jump in. Ray learned later that this boy was Chris Tatum's older brother.

The Creek

Surely to the teenagers' great relief, a truck suddenly appeared skidding across the gravel at the end of the street. Three men leaped out, one of them holding a large, thick rope. A few moments of confused chaos ensued as the men all asked questions of the teens at the same time: Who was in the pit? Who had seen him fall? How much time had passed? The teenagers had no answers; later it would turn out that they had been playing basketball in a neighborhood driveway when Nick Thompson ran up and told them a boy had fallen into the pit. He thought it was Chris Tatum. The teens had listened no further before sprinting for the creek.

One of the men was suddenly shouting in anguish—"Chris! Chris!"—as if crying for the boy to appear out of the thickets along the creek. Within seconds, this same man stripped down to his pants. The other men quickly tied the rope around his torso, and without hesitating the man dove into the dark water. Ray and Johnny stood frozen in place. They were on high ground above the pit, about eight feet above the remaining two men and two teenagers standing along the pit's rim. No one paid them any attention, and no one said a word; they were all waiting for the man to emerge from the murky water. Ray wasn't sure how much time had passed, but the men on the ground must have thought the man in the pit had been in the water too long because they began yanking on the rope. A moment later the man's head and shoulders appeared above water. The man was gasping for air and thrashing about as if trying to shake something loose from where it was caught in the water. Seconds later he drug up a large piece of metal

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fencing and handed one end of it to the men on the ground to drag out of the way. Then he went under again.

Everyone watched the surface of water in silence as the seconds passed. The length of rope the men held grew shorter as the rope slid through their hands. The men and their clothes were streaked with pit slime. At any other time, Ray would have been appalled at the thought of swimming deep to the bottom of the pit, but the foulness of the water was not an issue now. This made a deep impression on him—that sometimes the worst you can imagine must be done. Ray understood by now that the man in the water was Mr. Tatum, Chris's father. He was in the worst of all possible places, groping in the dark for his son. Ray knew Chris from school. The week before, Chris had humiliated Ray by stopping in the middle of a foot race to let Ray catch up to him, only to take off again and beat him to the finish line by 20 feet. Ray had been crushed. He could still see the heckling laughter in his friends' faces. Ray had never won anything in his life, while winning races seemed to come easily to Chris. For an hour or two he had hated Chris Tatum.

This was on Ray's mind as he watched Mr. Tatum's head appear again above the surface, his face and hair covered in mud. He opened his mouth, catching at the air, and his throat made a horrible barking sound. His face was contorted in anguish. "He's down there." Then he was gone again. Ray would lie awake later that night with those words repeating in his head. He had never seen anything like the contortion of

The Creek

Mr. Tatum's face. That image, and those words, would stick with Ray for the rest of his life.

Later, people would say that Gregory Tatum went down and came up at least five times before finally coming up with his son in his arms. Exhausted, he held Chris's arms up for the men on the ground to grab hold of. They drug Chris up and immediately lay him flat on his back and began pressing on his chest. At the same time, the teenagers pulled on the rope to help Chris's father climb out of the pit. It took both teens pulling with all their strength to get him out. He came out gasping and shaking, his body plastered with mud. He went immediately to Chris and began blowing into his mouth and pushing on his chest. He shook his son's shoulders and shouted into his face.

"Chris! You make it! Chris! You hear me? You make it!" His face was twisted in anguish, his voice a hoarse mix of crying and shouting. He was begging his son to live.

Sirens had been sounding in the distance, and soon an emergency vehicle pulled up, and several men piled out and ran down the slope to Chris and his father. Many people had now gathered in the area, some of them neighbors Ray recognized. Many adults were there, with more gathering every minute, and quickly Ray's view of the creek was blocked. He realized Johnny Crutchfield was no longer at his side. He looked numbly around him at all the people whispering to each other or standing in silence, many of them shaking their

Stories to read aloud before bed

heads, some of them openly crying. He found Johnny in the crowd.

"I'm gonna go. You wanna go?"

"No."

Ray turned away and walked up Wimpole Street. At the Carlton's house, the brooms he and Johnny had tossed aside were still on the ground. Tufts of grass were still strewn on the driveway and sidewalk. Ray picked up the broom he had used earlier and began to sweep the grass from the driveway. He kept looking down the street toward the crowd at the creek, wishing he would hear a sudden cheer and that all would be miraculously well. He had heard stories of people dying and then being somehow brought back to life. He sensed, though, that it was too late for Chris.

That evening, while the news was still fresh to those who had been at work all day, Ray told his parents what he had seen at the creek. They held him and told him they were sorry he had to see all that, that it was way too much for a boy his age to see. Ray allowed himself to be comforted, grateful for his mother's arms around him.

Before dusk, Ray and his brother Pat walked down the sidewalk toward the Tatum's house. No kids were playing in the yards. The houses on Wimpole Street looked quiet, and somehow different from before. They walked slowly, passing

The Creek

the Tatum's, watching the house for anything that signaled a boy who lived there had died that day. The house was quiet, the curtains closed.

"I'm sorry you had to see that," Pat said. "That's way too much for a boy your age to see." Pat was 12 and in the sixth grade. He had been at the school playground with friends and had missed seeing what happened at the creek. He had also been at the playground to watch Ray's foot race with Chris Tatum the week before.

"It's weird," Ray said. "That the one to die is Chris."

"He was a good kid. Really fast."

Ray nodded. He idolized his brother and wanted to tell him everything. They turned to walk back, again watching the Tatum's house carefully as they passed. They reached their own house and went up the walk toward the door.

"Thanks," Ray said.

Pat looked at him. "Sure."

"I'm going to stay out a while."

"Okay."

Stories to read aloud before bed

From the edge of his family's yard, Ray could see the bright yellow ribbon stretching from a phone post to a tree. A sign was posted on the other side of the ribbon. Ray could not read the sign from where he was, but he had seen men with the sign earlier and knew it read *Danger. Keep out.* A few weeks later the pit would be drained and filled in with concrete. A spike with a cross at the top would be placed in the ground nearby. Below the cross, a metal plate would read *Chris Tatum, 1970–1979.* Years later, when Ray returned to Baton Rouge, the cross would be gone. The pit filled with concrete would not be there, either. Somehow, even the creek would be gone, filled in with bright green grass. When Ray ran *Chris Tatum, Wimpole Street, Baton Rouge* through Google in the year 2013, the first hit of the search was a government site. When Ray clicked on the link, the site opened alongside an ad for dating women 50+. No sign of Chris Tatum anywhere. As if he never existed, Ray thought. But it was likely that Chris's parents and siblings existed somewhere still, so of course Chris was with them. And Chris would also stay with Ray, 45 years after the incident, his proud grin as he showed off his racing medals, his muddy, limp body in his father's arms.

Dusk was falling. Ray walked across the street to the Crutchfield's yard, which was filled with thick patches of clover. Sometimes Ray and his friends sat in the cool clover and discussed their big plans for the future. Most of them wanted to be baseball players. Other days they lay in the clover and watched clouds pass. Ray lay on his back now and scanned the sky. Birds were soaring in the mild winds just before dark.

The Creek

Ray picked out a group of birds. The birds were probably not black, but they looked black in the distance. Ray concentrated. He watched the birds intently, trying to hate them, trying to make them drop from the sky.

Too Close to See Clearly

We're in bed in the dark, on the verge of sleep. My wife Jenn breaks the stillness by whispering the lyrics to Steely Dan's "Ricky, Don't Lose that Number" in a voice that sounds—on her back, nearly naked, at once so close to me and yet so dispassionate—almost chilling in its bareness, its raw absence of emotion. I lay on my back and stare at the ceiling, giving her what feels like a generous amount of space. She finishes speaking the lyrics but then repeats the last line several times.

She was once the warmest, most lush of women. Just months ago we watched my penis grow in a glass of champagne and made love listening to Charlton Heston reading *The Song of Songs*. Now not only the sex has suffered but nothing between us is the same. Her presence has changed. She has encased herself in privacy, a single, inviolate unit. She has become so damn weird.

Speak to me in trumpet, she told me yesterday. Miles Davis. Chet Baker. She is so tired of words the meaning of which is nothing. She says. If I really have something to com-

Too Close to See Clearly

municate to her, I should say it in a way that speaks to her.

She begins every day with that old Seal song. Good song, but every day? I lay still, listening, wondering if this morning will differ from the previous morning, but it never does. I know where she is. I get out of bed, turn down the volume as I pass the stereo, walk into the bathroom, and find her in the shower, lathered, eyes closed, soapy water streaming her contours.

"Is that you, Jenn?" I say into the mist.

I linger in the bathroom, brushing my teeth, flossing, shaving, cleaning my razor, until she turns the knobs and slides the see-through curtain.

"Can you hand me?" she says, gesturing toward a towel. When I'm not fast enough, she tries to reach past me, but I catch her wrist and redirect her upper body into my arms. We stand awkwardly for a moment, front to front, her hair dripping onto my thighs, her nipples in my chest hair. We are too close to see each other clearly. She pulls away, wraps in a towel, faces the mirror.

"It's me," she says from far away.

I study the side of her face. I'm not usually a dense person. I've been told I'm a good listener and a good advisor often enough that I've become a good listener and perhaps a good advisor. It's the same with my sensibility and level-headedness. If I have these traits, I have acquired them because my friends and co-workers tell me that I'm sensible and level-headed—and they mean this as praise, of course. I take it as such and recycle it, perpetuating the small myth I have become. But I know that if people had never labeled me as

Stories to read aloud before bed

perceptive, sensible, level-headed, I would never have become any of these. This makes me feel somewhat of an impostor, but I'm okay with that. What I regret is that in coming to believe, myself, that I'm the perceptive man people say I am, I have dozed off and missed half the movie—including the scenes where my wife opened the door and began inching out a bit further each day.

"Where are you going?"

It's nearly 11 p.m. She has abruptly dressed again hours after undressing for the night. She pulls a sweatshirt on over a T-shirt. From under the bed she drags out her walking shoes. But she drives off in the car. I fall asleep with a magazine and sometime later wake up to find her in bed next to me. I put my nose in her hair. Her hair smells of cigarette smoke. I'm barely half awake and the next thing I know I'm trying to wedge her thighs apart with my knee. My nose remains buried deep in her smoky hair.

"Stop," she whispers.

I stop. A dreamy thought occurs. Did the smoky hair fool me? Did I think the woman next to me was not my wife?

A small marketplace, a path, and a tiny park connect our old downtown to our new downtown. I'm here on a Saturday morning standing under an awning after a sudden downpour. I have just spotted my wife and her boyfriend standing in the rain near crates of sweet potatoes and squash. I step behind a post to watch them. Her boyfriend is tall, slim, bearded, a grad student or perhaps a first-year professor. He's wearing plaid shorts and a dark T-shirt. Next to him, holding a butter-nut squash, Jenn looks light and happy. She has just laughed

Too Close to See Clearly

about something. They are a strikingly natural and attractive couple—so much so that I might be watching them even if one of them were not my wife.

I edge away from the market, back onto the path, and walk home in the rain. That night I make dinner alone, taking my time because I suspect Jenn will be home late or not at all. I have a few drinks and play music from my bachelor days. For a while I find myself recklessly happy. “What do you think she wants?” I say aloud, chopping walnuts. Then, matter-of-factly: “Find out what she wants, and let her have it. People should have what they want.” I shrug. The shrugging movement feels natural with the chopping and the music, so I shrug some more and try to rap: *I've seen the movie, I've heard the song, if she comes back, cool, if not, so long.*

But when I need to search on my knees in a dusty corner of the closet for old record albums I want to hear, I begin to come apart. Sitting cross-legged in the darkish closet, I catch my image in the mirror on the door and scoot over for a closer look. The skin around my eyes and nose is extra oily, my eyes red and puffy, and my jaw, relaxed by the alcohol, slack. Otherwise there's nothing new here. I look like a slightly beat-up version of the guy I will always be. I smile wistfully at myself and leave the albums in the closet.

Jenn gets home around 9 p.m. with two bags of produce. She takes me in curiously and surely notes the bottle of Dewar's on the counter. She puts down her bags and goes directly to the bedroom. A few minutes later she has changed her clothes and tied up her hair. She sits at the table in the dining room and waits for me.

Stories to read aloud before bed

For the next hour, over chewy walnut chicken and fresh green beans, we talk. I learn that her new friend Nathan is a psych professor who just really gets her. Jenn is sensitive of my feelings. I know if I were anyone else she would be gushing.

Weeks pass. Many nights she doesn't come home. I suspect she sleeps here only when Nathan has his son with him. At home she now sleeps on the couch in front of the TV, which she leaves on all night, or on the day bed in the guest room, listening to Seal. A light hits the gloom on the gray.

The first time I saw her she was coming my way across a grassy field with an emphatic smile, a small wave, and legs tanned dark beneath her cutoffs. "I'll play!" she said. She thought I was someone else. I was there for my first game as well. It turned out neither of us got into the game, but we hit it off and talked half the night at a coffee shop. She admired my hands. I stroked her hair. It stayed that way for years.

I don't recognize the divorce papers when they arrive. I sit on the stoop with the letter in my lap. Down the street, Dirk and Leon walk hand in hand, their shiatsu running along beside them. I sign the divorce papers and mail them back to her lawyer. A few weeks later, we see each other in court. Jenn's wearing a dress I have pulled off her many times. Now I'm not allowed to touch her.

"Thanks for doing this. Nathan wants to get married."

"What the hell happened?" I mutter.

She laughs lightly, touches my shoulder, kisses me quickly near one side of my mouth. Then she pulls away, ducks across the hall, and vanishes into the Women's room.

Too Close to See Clearly

I'm probably supposed to leave, but I wait in the hallway. I'm not sure what else I want to say to her. I'm alone in a dark theater after all the other patrons have left. I'm watching the end credits hoping for one more scene.

The door to the Women's room opens, and Jenn steps out—except that it's not her. I must have opened my mouth to say something or made a forward movement or gesture because the woman has read the confusion on my face. She steps toward me, because there's nowhere else to step, and smiles awkwardly.

"Sorry," she says. "I'm the only one here."

Absence

When I see the street sign that says Wimpole I brake my Audi and take the turn slowly. It's been a year since I've taken this right turn, and now, taking it again, I want the street to look as if it has missed me.

The Cummings' house has freshly painted shutters, but their grass needs cutting as it always did, and their mailbox is still at a slant after being hit by a teenager years ago. Once I was stopped on this corner waiting to pull off Wimpole and I put my car in park and ran over to the mailbox. I thought all it needed was a good shove into the ground and it would be like new, but I was wrong. The metal post was bent beyond repair.

The Eagens' house is exactly the same as it was: the best looking and best kept on the block. I was never friends with either of the Eagens, but I knew them well enough to know that the Cummings and their unkempt yard gave them fits, which was enough to make me dislike them because I like the Cummings, particularly Larry Cummings. He's a big man with

Absence

white hair and a round face that smiles a lot. His hair and clothes are as untidy as his yard, but he is genuinely unconcerned. I like Larry because on the day Keri and I moved in he called me over from the moving truck and handed me a vodka tonic.

"You're a newlywed," he told me. "I can tell. You have that air about you." He bumped my glass with his and filled me in about the neighborhood.

Across the street from the Cummings and the Eagens are the Wrights. Their house is small and brick and always has toys in the driveway. Keri and I used to hear the Wright kids from bed on weekend mornings. We'd wake Sharla, our daughter, and tell her that the Wrights were racing. Sharla has a slick, bright-red Racer Runabout. Or at least she had one—it might be broken by now. I'll have to ask her about it.

The birch tree in the Flints' yard has been cut down, which surprises me because I know Wally Flint well, and he'd never cut down any tree, much less his own birch. So maybe the Flints have moved, which would be a shame because Sharla's best friend was Anna Flint, and Keri liked Wally's wife Vivian, too. Wally and I were friends at one time, but I haven't spoken to him since I left. I tried calling him during the first month, when I was really down, but he didn't return my calls.

I reach our own house, and the first thing I see is a sign that says Spracklin and Spracklin stuck in the middle of our yard. A For Sale sign. I pull up the driveway and park behind Keri's Toyota. When I'm out of the car, I walk over and open the hood of the Toyota. Tucked under my arm is Blaze, the stick horse I have brought for Sharla. I peer at the engine a few

Stories to read aloud before bed

seconds and close the hood again. Then I have a look at the sign. It's shiny aluminum and looks brand new. The lettering is bold and black, with a photo of Rich and Ernie Spracklin underneath. I yank the sign out of the ground and carry it with me to the front door. On the door is a note: *Rob, you're late. We walked to the school to see Sharla's teacher. Back soon. Door's open.* When I try the door it is locked. This is just like Keri, so I'm not surprised. I go around the house and try the back door. It's locked too, but I remember that Keri kept a key in the rotting wood of the porch rail in case her mother came by. I find the key there, unlock the door, and let myself inside. Once in, I take off my shoes, toss Blaze on the sofa, look in the fridge, and then head for the bedroom. I throw the For Sale sign on the bed and immediately regret it because I've smeared the bedspread with mud. I carry the sign into the bathroom and hold it under the shower a while. I bring a wet rag into the bedroom and spread the mud around on the bedspread. Then I sit on the bed, on the right side where I used to sleep.

I lie down cautiously at first so as not to wrinkle the bedspread, and then realize how ridiculous this is considering the bedspread is now a muddy mess. So I think what the hell and get under the covers. My feet stick out over the edge of the bed like they used to. I put both pillows under my head and smell Pink, Keri's perfume.

When I first left I missed this bed more than I thought I would. The one at the apartment is comfortable enough, and my feet don't stick out either. But it's not my bed. My bed is this one, the one I am lying on. It's only three-fourths the size

Absence

of the other bed, but it held the two of us well enough and left room for Sharla to come bouncing in to sit beside us on mornings we slept late.

When Keri and I were first married the only pieces of furniture we had to move into our new house were this bed and a dining room set. The dining room set was a gift from my parents, but Keri and I bought the bed ourselves. We disagreed on which room to put it in; I wanted it in the room with the adjoining bathroom, and she wanted it across the hall where the sun came in. So we alternated. We moved the bed back and forth across the hall every week for three months. It finally stayed where I wanted it when Keri decided to use the other room for exercising.

The bed is still where it was when I left—exactly where, which pleases me. And it still smells as fresh and clean as Keri always kept it. She washed the sheets every other day. They smell now as if they have just been washed and I'm even more sorry to have muddied the bedspread.

I lift my waist and thighs and bounce on the bed. I don't hear anything. I do it again, bouncing harder, and this time I'm relieved to hear the squeak of the bed's headboard behind me. The headboard is about five feet tall, wooden, with thousands of tiny etchings carved in by hand. Keri and I found the headboard at an antique store before we were married and, later, made sure to buy a bed that would fit it. After I finished attaching the headboard, I sat on the bed and admired it. For the first time I felt truly married.

Keri and I found that when we had sex the headboard shook back and forth, squeaking horribly and banging against

Stories to read aloud before bed

the wall. We weren't particularly lively lovemakers—the headboard was just unusually tall and top heavy. We lived a week or two with the squeaking until one night we couldn't stand it anymore and I shoved an old slipper between the headboard and the wall. From then on I always knew when Keri wanted to have sex. She'd crawl in beside me and ask, "Did you put the slipper in?" I'm sure at some point she must have noticed that I *always* had the slipper in.

A year and a day ago Keri came home early from what was scheduled to be an all-day conference and found me sharing our bed with a woman she didn't know. I moved out that night thinking I'd be back within a few days. After a few days passed, and then a few weeks, I feared Keri would ask for a divorce. But she never did. I sent her money, of course, and had mutual friends relay presents to her and Sharla. But I vowed not to return until she asked me back. As time passed I became less stubborn and would have returned on nearly any terms, but it was too late. I couldn't go back without risking being turned away.

Yesterday, after a year had passed, I called Keri and told her I wanted to see Sharla. She was mysterious on the phone. I couldn't tell what she thought of me. She did not say, "It's about time" or "It's too late for that," as I had expected. She was all calm and control, all matter of fact. She told me I could come the next day if I would take Sharla to get her hair cut. I would have to pick her up at the house because the car wasn't running. She asked if I'd have a look at the car if I didn't mind because she had no money for a mechanic. I took this as a hint and dug out my credit cards because I knew I wouldn't be able

Absence

to fix the car. I know nothing about them.

I hear noise out in the yard and know they are back. I jump from the bed and look out the window. They are on the front step. I pull the blankets up on the bed and put the pillows back in place. As I enter the living room, Keri is coming in the front door.

"What did you lock the door for?" she says.

I look at her. Her hair is lighter, in a shoulder-length perm. Her skin is tan underneath a white sun dress. She is pretty.

"Well," I begin. "When I got here, old man Cummings was pounding on the door, yelling for you to let him in. I told him I'd fetch you and locked the door behind me so he wouldn't follow me."

"Mr. Cummings?"

"Yep. He said you told him to stop by anytime for a drinky-poo. He had a bottle with him."

She rolls her eyes at me. And then from behind her out comes Sharla. I smile and kneel down, hands ready to catch her, but she doesn't run to me. Keri gives me what I perceive to be a pained look.

"Your dad wants to see you, sweetie. Aren't you going to say hello?"

Sharla says hello.

"Come here, baby," I say. "I brought you a present."

She hesitates. She looks at Keri, then back at me.

"Don't you want it?"

Sharla says nothing. She is only one little girl, but I feel as if I'm facing a crowd of strangers, all waiting for the right move from me. I'm not sure what to do. I start to stand, then fall

Stories to read aloud before bed

back to my knees and hold my arms out. Sharla says nothing and comes no closer. I look at her standing there in her red dress with white flowers and understand that she isn't going to come, that she doesn't want to see me. I glance at Keri to see if she is telling me, *see, look what you've done*, but she isn't. She's telling me to keep trying. I go to the couch to get the stick horse and put it between my legs.

"Sharla, this is Blaze... Do you like him?"

Sharla looks at me. Keri pats her shoulder, and she comes over, cautiously. When she is near I put my hands around her waist and look into her eyes.

Sharla likes Blaze. I show her how his head moves, and she gallops off into the kitchen. Keri and I look at each other.

"How do you like the house?" she says. "You've looked around?"

"It looks good," I say. "The couch looks good in front of the window there. That was a good idea."

"You think so? Viv helped me move it. She had all these ideas for moving things around. I'm not sure about some of them. You know, none of them are major. We didn't knock out any walls. But I'm not sure if I like that plant stand there. I guess it takes me a while to adjust."

"Me, too," I say. "But I think the house looks fine now. I think you've done a good job." Then, after a pause, I say, "So the Flints haven't moved then?"

"No. You thought they did?"

"I saw their birch was gone. I didn't think Wally would cut it down."

"He didn't. Well, he did. After it was hit by lightning."

Absence

"Lightning?"

"Uh-huh. Just like that—crash, and it was gone."

"That's too bad. I bet Wally hated losing it."

"Wally?" I don't know. I know Anna cried when it happened. But you know how she is. She cried more than Sharla when you left."

I'm not sure this is a deliberate blow. Keri has ducked into the kitchen.

"Well, Anna's a sweet girl," I say. "I'm glad they didn't move."

Keri brings me a beer from the kitchen. I open it and cross the living room to sit on the couch. Keri leans on the doorway between the kitchen and the living room.

"Speaking of moving," she says. "I'm thinking about it."

"I know. Spracklin and Spracklin."

"Right. We're having an open house two weeks from tomorrow. I just want to see if I can get a good price."

Sharla comes into the room dragging Blaze by his reins. "Hey, dad, come here," she says.

She walks into my and Keri's bedroom and looks over her shoulder to see if I am following. I am. In the bedroom I see that she has put the For Sale sign on the bed. It is leaning against the headboard, a stake on each pillow.

"The bed's for sale," she says.

"Not that too!"

She giggles. "It might as well be for sale. Nobody sleeps there anymore." She smiles up at me, then stops smiling suddenly and just stares.

Stories to read aloud before bed



While Sharla is getting her hair cut I read a McCalls. Every couple of minutes I look at her sitting in her chair. Her back is to me, but I can see her face in the mirror. Once she catches me and wants to turn around, but the stylist holds her in place. The stylist is wearing tight green jeans and an airy shirt that shows skin as she moves this way and that. Her hair is cropped short but looks soft to the touch.

"You're looking prettier all the time," I say. "Sharla."

When the haircut is over, Sharla looks about the same as she did before. "She looks great," I say to the stylist. "Nice job." I pay her and tip her, and she thanks me with a smile. I back out the door looking at her, and she turns away.

"All set?" I say to Sharla. She takes my hand.

We walk toward the car. "What should we do now?" I say.
"I don't know."

"Anywhere you want to go?"

"I'm hot."

"Well, it's a hot day. You're wearing too many clothes. Did your mom dress you?"

"Yes."

"Want to go somewhere for a coke or something?"

She shakes her head. "Mom will be mad."

"No, she won't. She put me in charge today. Where do you want to go? Name it."

She lets go of my hand. "She didn't put you in charge."

"You weren't there. We were in the kitchen."

"I don't think she would do that."

Absence

"Don't worry, sweetie. I'm sure it's okay. I've known your mom a long time."

"Okay."

"Where should we go?"

We get into the car and slam our doors. We put down our windows. Sharla lays her head on the door, and her hair blows in the wind as I drive.

The line at Dairy Queen is long, but most customers are getting their orders to go. The seating area is empty except for a frumpy woman and her teenage daughter somberly licking their cones. Sharla has ice cream on her face already, and her tongue is red from a cherry slushy. I drink a chocolate shake through a straw. I make two trips to the counter for more napkins. Sharla and I make faces at the gloomy couple with the cones. When the daughter turns and catches us, we stop and giggle at each other. I ask Sharla what she meant when she said that nobody sleeps in our bed anymore.

"That's right," she says. "Mom lies on the bed sometimes, but she doesn't sleep there."

"She doesn't spend the night in there?"

"Nope." She is pushing ice cream deeper into the cone with her tongue.

"Where does she sleep?"

"In my room with me."

"In your bed? It's not big enough."

"Not in my bed. She got another one. A little one."

"Another bed? Why doesn't she use our bed?"

"I don't know."

"How often does she lie on it? Our bed, I mean."

Stories to read aloud before bed

"I don't know. Once a day."

"She takes naps there?"

"No. She just lies there on her back. Once I came in and asked her if she would do something and she said she was reading and you know what?"

"What?"

"She didn't have a book or anything."

"What time of day does she lie in the bed?"

"All times. Sometimes she brings the TV in there."

"What does she watch?"

"Dad, I don't know."

Sharla is sticky with ice cream again so I put all the crumpled napkins together in my hand and wipe her face. She brings her slushy with her and we go out to the car.

On the way home we are quiet. Sharla digs around in the glove box. I stop at a drugstore along the way.

"I'll be right back," I tell her. I head to the men's fragrance aisle.

When I find her again she is walking the toy section, her tiny black shoes clicking the tile. She picks up a stuffed puppy with an ear missing. "Aww." She lays it down gently and picks up a plastic phone, the kind I had when I was a kid.

"Does it dial Mickey Mouse?"

She giggles. "It dials Mr. Ping."

"Who the hell's Mr. Ping?"

"From Rhinoland."

"Right."

We take the phone to the checkout girl, who smiles at us. She's a high school girl, probably 16 or 17.

Absence

"We have an urgent call to make," I tell her.

She laughs, showing her perfect teeth. Her nametag says Dian.

"Say hi to Dian, Sharla," I say.

Sharla looks at me and says nothing.

"Is your daddy buying you a new toy?" Dian bends over the counter to get closer to Sharla. Sharla backs away. Dian laughs. "Kids never like me," she says. "I'm too forward."

"Talk about forward. Have you met Mr. Ping?"

Dian and I laugh together. Sharla rolls her eyes.

When we get home Keri calls Sharla over and looks at her hair.

"Rob. They hardly cut anything."

"I know. We'll go again tomorrow."

"And the next day," says Sharla.

Keri doesn't smile. She seems all business now.

"Well, isn't she pretty?"

Keri flashes me a look. "Rob, I've told you. Stop telling her how pretty she is. She knows she's pretty. She's going to think nothing else matters."

"But she is pretty. Almost as pretty as her mom."

"I don't care about that," Keri says loudly. She looks at me defiantly.

My reflex is to yell back at her, but I don't. I come forward, put my hand on her waist.

"Did you look at the car?"

"I did. But I couldn't see what was wrong." I pull credit cards from my wallet. "Take these to get it fixed."

Stories to read aloud before bed

"I hardly think I'll need all of them." Her eyes are on me. I look straight back at her. I want to say I'm sorry to hurt her, but I don't. She drops her eyes.

Before leaving I go into the bathroom and from there walk quietly into the bedroom. Keri has straightened the bedspread, and the stain from the sign looks worse now. Silently, I lift my pillow from beneath the covers. From my pocket I take the bottle of cologne I bought at the drugstore, open it, and spill a few drops on the pillow. I put the pillow back under the bedspread and smell it. The bed smells like me. I shake the rest of the bottle all over the bedspread.

When I close the door my presence lingers.

Swinging

"Mom, Josh is swinging again."

"With who?"

"Andy and Thomas."

"Tell him I want to see him."

Angie was on a step ladder, painting a wall in the dining room. She had told Josh no swinging that day—and if she had her way it would be forever. But she never got her way, or seldom did. In her town the men did as they pleased, while the women forged together and discussed their men. Truth is, they loved them. That didn't mean they approved of everything they did.

Josh came in ahead of Pris, his attitude somehow preceding him into the room.

Stories to read aloud before bed

“What?”

Angie sighed. “I told you no swinging, Josh.”

“I’m not! I’m just watching the other guys.”

“I should have said no watching your friends swing either.”

“You didn’t say that.”

“I’m saying it now. Please stay away from there.” She had paused painting, the brush held up high in her hand, her eyes turned downward to see her son. He was a beautiful son, inside and out, and she was fearful what the world would do to him.

“Why?”

“Because I asked you to. Because I said please.”

Josh turned to Pris. “Thanks for telling on me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You swing, too.”

“Not as much as you.”

Swinging

"So?"

"So nothing."

Josh was 11; Pris was 9. They had a typical sibling relationship. Pris adored Josh but was jealous; Josh protected Pris but was jealous. They took care of each other but could be the other's worst enemy for a few minutes at a time.

"What's for lunch?"

"Lunchables." Angie paused painting and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. It was mid-July, a hot time to be painting without the AC. She stubbornly refused to turn the air on, though, to prove to her husband she could go a day without it. As always, they wanted to reduce their bills.
"Sorry. I'm on a ladder."

"That's okay. I like lunchables."

"In the fridge."

The children left the room; Angie continued to paint the wall. It was just past noon on a Wednesday. She wanted the painting done by Friday. Then she and Clayton could finish the room on Saturday in time for guests that night. She pivoted on the ladder step to view the walls around her. She was on track, she thought. Clayton would be pleased. He might insist on taking them all out to dinner. If he did, she knew

Stories to read aloud before bed

what she would wear.

Clayton worked at Horizon Hobby, one of the largest employers in town. They made millions of gadgets and gadget pieces and specialized in model planes and cars. A high-end model car and all its accessories could run more than a thousand dollars. "It's a good company," Clayton had told Angie when he took the job. "Job security. Overtime if I want it."

"There's that much money in hobbies?"

"There's billions in hobbies. People spend money on what they want to do."

"What's our hobby, baby?"

He grinned at her. "Going to bed early."

She laughed. "Cheap enough!"

They had been married 4 years before having Josh. She knew that other wives in the neighborhood envied what they still had after 15 years. It sometimes amazed her, too, how much love she could feel for a man she knew so well. The love came on her in surges sometimes, out of the blue. They were regular reminders she could turn to during the down times. In his eyes, she saw that he loved her right back. Ditto. On the ladder, painting, her heart welled up. In 15 years she had seen the best and worst of him, and somehow he still managed to

Swinging

surprise her.

She took a break. The kids had left their lunchable boxes and wrappers on the table in the kitchen before running back outside. She was relieved to have them full and happy so easily. She tossed the boxes and the cellophane into the recycle bin and scraped a small puddle of tomato sauce into the trash. Fed two kids for four bucks, she thought. *Bargain.*

She looked through the front window for signs of Josh and Pris at play. No one was around. She opened the door and ducked her head out. The day was hot and sticky, the sun burning through a thin layer of clouds. She saw no sign of Josh or Pris or their neighborhood friends.

She and Clayton had been unsure at first when choosing the house, but the neighborhood had turned out to be great for kids. The Cunninghams next door had three; the Gavigans next to them had two. On the other side, the Hintons had four. Across the street, the Flints had three, and the Johnsons three more. Many days the sidewalks and street were filled with kids on bicycles, scooters, skateboards riding on ramps and homemade obstacle courses. Some families had pools in their backyards open to all kids in the neighborhood. On clothes lines, swimming suits dried quickly in the hot breeze. Kites flew. Balls bounced. Kids' mouths were stained from popsicles. Every image that Angie and Clayton had envisioned for their children had come to be in this small neighborhood in this small town.

Stories to read aloud before bed

Angie walked down the front walk toward the street. In the distance she could hear laughing and squealing. She looked down the street toward the Swinford house and saw a group of children gathered in a circle. The children were too far away for her to recognize faces, but she quickly spotted Pris by the way she moved. That meant Josh was there, too. Indignant, Angie walked quickly down the sidewalk toward the Swinford's. As she got closer, she saw the entire group of children swinging.

"Josh! Pris!"

All the kids looked her way. Josh and Pris came running.



"You ruined going out for dinner for all of us is what you did." Clayton paused. "We were going to go to Meatheads." He added this last part to turn the screw on his kids a little further. He knew how much they loved Meatheads.

"Meatheads! Aw!"

"Next time listen to your mom, okay?"

Josh and Pris sat silently, their heads hanging.

"Don't look like that. You know what you did."

Swinging

Angie lay a pizza at each end of the table, cheese for the kids, pepperoni for her and Clayton. "Anyone want a salad?"

"Sit down, sweetie. We don't need salads."

"Are you sure? I don't mind." Angie sat down at her place next to Clayton. Josh and Pris sat at the other side of the table. They all had a plate and fork in front of them. The pizzas steamed, too hot to eat.

"So, what do you think?" Clayton eyed Angie. "Do we punish them?"

Angie ran a glance over the kids, who were cheering up before eating. "No Meatheads is punishment enough. I just want them to do better next time."

"Josh?"

Josh met his father's eyes. "I'll do better."

"Me, too," said Pris.

"What's all the attraction of swinging, anyway? Doesn't it get old?"

Josh eyed Pris. "It's just what everyone was doing. There was nothing else to do."

Stories to read aloud before bed

Pris kept quiet.

"Well, I don't care much either way, but no matter what, you need to listen to your mom."

"What's wrong with swinging, anyway?"

Angie reached for a piece of pizza. "I wish you didn't even have to ask that question, Josh."

Clayton spoke up. "No offense, honey, but I could ask the same question. It seems like it would be dull to me, and I'm not agreeing with what Josh did today, but I don't see any harm in swinging, either."

Angie spoke quietly. "It's disrespectful. How would you like it? Or if it was Pris or Josh?"

"I wouldn't like that. But that's the point, isn't it? To remind us to value the lives we have here, to appreciate our privileges? To make us better people?"

Angie took a bite of pizza, her eyes on him. She finished chewing and swallowed. "Can we talk about something else?" she said cheerily.

"Sure we can, honey. What I don't get is why they call it swinging, anyway. I mean it's the swinger doing the swinging, right? Not the one swinging him. Or her." He reached

Swinging

for more pizza.



The next day as Angie drove down their street she looked over to see the boy hanging from the tree in the Swinford's yard. She couldn't recognize him as a boy anymore. He had been in the tree for over a week. He was hanging from the neck from a solid limb about halfway up the tree. He had been there all week. The boy was the only swinger on their street that Angie knew of, but they were appearing all over town, all over the entire state. She had read they had been showing up in larger cities for years but that in all the hub-bub no one had paid them any mind, until they started to smell. When they started to smell, it was someone's job to cut them down. When they cut one down, another would soon appear in the same spot, or nearby. Apparently in the city swingers were so common that no one noticed them anymore.

At the store she filled her cart with groceries. The image of the boy hanging in the tree had stuck with her. Maybe Clayton was right—that swingers were there as reminders for her to be a better person. Did the image of the boy sticking with her make her a better person? Nobody else seemed to notice. No one else talked about the boys and girls who were swinging all over town. All of these children had parents, or once had. Why couldn't people see that? Was she more sensitive than most people? Did that make her a better person?

Stories to read aloud before bed

Peanut butter was on sale in the large two-pack of Pris's favorite brand. Angie put two of the two-packs into her cart—*enough peanut butter for months!* No, she decided, she was no different from most people she knew: no better, no worse. If time allowed, she would be better, but there were not enough minutes in the day. Not now. Maybe when the kids grew up she could devote herself to being a better person. She knew someone who visited jails to read to prisoners. She had never done that. But at least she thought about it.

Ahead of her in the checkout line was Lana Cardwell, paging through a tabloid. Angie had worked with Lana when she volunteered at the school.

“Anything new on Brad Pitt?”

Lana glanced up, annoyed until she saw it was Angie. “Not a thing!” She placed the tabloid back on the rack. “How are you, Angie?”

“Good!”

“I was just reading about the swingers.” She gestured back toward the tabloid.

“Yeah? We have one on our street.”

“I think we do, too. I haven’t seen her myself.”

Swinging

“Ours is a boy. Just a young boy.”

“Most of them are kids from what I hear.”

“I wonder why that is.”

“I guess adults, if they live that long, are more hardy.”

“Yeah...”

“Your kids notice them?”

“Oh, yeah. Just today—”

“Mine, too. Kids seem to be fascinated.”

“I know kids who swing them around like dolls.”

“Yeah. Bash them like piñatas!”

“What’s up with that? Why do children want to do that?”

“Oh, I don’t think they mean any harm. For them it’s just a novelty, something different to do... Where are your kids now?”

“Swimming with friends.”

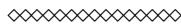
Stories to read aloud before bed



On the way back from the store, Angie pulled over in front of the Swinford's yard. She knew the Swinfords were not home at this time of day. To give herself a reason to be there, in case anyone was looking, she walked up the front walk with a bag of apples. On her way up she had a closer look at the boy hanging in the tree. Dozens of flies flew around him. Most of his skin had come loose and was decomposing quickly in the heat. His mouth was open, revealing crooked and broken teeth. His throat was torn open in flaps that resembled cardboard. The body was dark and dried up, like a Slim Jim. There was no blood anywhere. No pus. His eyes had either dried out or been pecked out by birds. Angie stared fascinated. It was hard to believe this creature was once human. She recalled seeing a mummy in a museum as a child. But this boy had been alive just weeks ago. What had killed him? Hunger? Disease? War? Where had he lived and died? Were his parents still alive? Did they know their boy was now swinging in a small town across the ocean? Or perhaps they were swingers, too, in another town in another state, placed there by God for His own mysterious purposes.

On the ground lay the stick the kids had been spinning the boy with the day before. They had spun the boy round and round, twisting the rope so that when they stood back the boy spun like a top. Recalling the image, Angie shook her head. What made children this way?

Swinging



Later, Angie and Clayton were in bed.

"I stopped to see the swinger today."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know. I just felt I should."

"Mothers."

"What? What does that mean?"

"Nothing. Just joking. But mothers can be so... syrupy."

"Overly sweet?"

Clayton laughed. "Yeah, that's it."

"I don't know that being a mom has anything to do with it. I just don't get why people have to be the way they are."

"Honey."

"I mean what did these swingers, these people, do that was so wrong that they get hung in a tree?"

Stories to read aloud before bed

"Babe, they haven't done anything wrong. It's nothing to get upset about. There are so many people in the world, and so many people dead and dying, no one notices one more. That's all swingers are, even if there are millions of them. Every one of them is just one more."

"But what did they do wrong?"

"Nothing. They just got born, that's all."

"And that's why they're hanging there? We got born, too—why aren't we hanging then?"

"I don't know, baby. Maybe we are."

Clayton clicked out the light. He waited a few seconds out of respect before pulling Angie tight.

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July 25, Friday: Lisa and I leave Mahomet around 3 pm in mom's red Dodge Caravan, which is partially held together with silver duct tape at the rear passenger's side. Smooth ride the entire way. Listening to Jimmy Buffett, mainly, and eating Lisa's snacks. Stops at Burger King for a Whopper, the Big Peach for tomatoes and peaches (where we were joined by D&D), and Loogootee CVS, which is tradition but where we bought nothing—in fact, Lisa did not leave the van. Then Shoals' smoky liquor store for two Miller High Lifes (No BoMacs—saving our appetite for dinner) that covered us for the windy last 15 miles into French Lick. We found GGDD waiting for us at Villa 57. Mom and dad had arrived first, around 4:00, and by the time we arrived mom had her crab cakes going and the rest of dinner (crab legs & corn) in the hopper. Nearby is the FL duck, who now makes the trip every year from 808, and a big bouquet of flowers that made the trip with us—large, white 808 lilies that lasted nearly the whole two weeks—much longer than the peaches. We were all tired

Stories to read aloud before bed

after dinner and went to bed before midnight. Earlier, Lisa had set up our little apartment in the loft, and that's where we slept every night but one. We enjoyed it up there and didn't relocate even when the bed in the second bedroom was empty.

So for this trip, on this first night, there are just the six of us so-called adults. It might be the first time in the 28 years we have been coming that there are zero kids on the first night! It did feel odd, but not for long, and we all rose to the occasion and had our usual festive first FL Friday—dinner, wine, whisky for dad, talking at the table, and an earlier than usual bedtime. Mom's crab legs were excellent, and cracking those open and eating them with lots of butter took the better part of an hour. What did we speak of? The kids, of course. Of Mallory, up in Canada on her most-of-the-summer-long band trip, which she is enjoying bravely and immensely without a trace of homesickness; of Will and Lark, who are spending the week in Baltimore and Philly with Kim, Mike, Noah, Ben, and Thomas, and who will be joining us here next week; of Coy, who is moving this week into a new apartment in Chicago, and his recent play "Orphans" at the Station, in which he starred alongside Max; of Kelsi, who just celebrated her 1-year anniversary with Caleb and how well they are doing down in St. Louis; of Allegra's busy travel summer and her mystical NY trip with Liz earlier this month; of Becca and Vannah, the only kids born back in 1986, the first year of FL and Villa 57, and how grown up they are and how well they are doing now; of Jake & Britt and the new babe, Lydia, and how she's walking now, and that they are all arriving in FL

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later in the week; of Amanda and Logan's very recent move to Illinois, joining Hime & Trace on Columbia Street, and how sweet Amanda has turned out to be, and what a good mom, and what a good situation for Hime and Trace to have Logan so near; of Elena's working two jobs all summer and missing out on Allegra's fun trips to CA & NY, and her maybe not making it to FL this year, either (though she might be coming with her friend Holly—fingers crossed); of Harrison getting married so early and now living in California and away from Julie, which must be a good thing; of Megan's current move into her new place on Arlington Street, her life post-Will Hagle, and her new boyfriend Ian; and of the blur of a Pawleys trip this year, how great the weather was, and how Pawleys will always be there for the Wentworths, as French Lick has been, even more so, for so many years, and so many years to come.

Saturday, July 26

This was the trip when I got up early each morning to work on a copyedit for TCP for 3-5 hours before starting the day. After working, on most mornings, I walked up the hill to exercise for 30 minutes on the equipment near the indoor pool. So, after work on Lisa's laptop upstairs in our little apartment, usually with coffee, and after exercise and maybe a shower, I joined Lisa and D&D down at the pool, where we spent much of this day in the sun. Later we went to the winery for dinner and ate pasta and drank Chambourcin, if that's how it's spelled. Then back to the villa for cards. I think we

Stories to read aloud before bed

played Euchre, just 4 of us: DDLJ. Doug and I showed the girls how to play the game. To bed after midnight. Lisa and I are sleeping with the sliding glass door open to hear the cicadas and feel the cool air. This was a much cooler FL stay than usual, overall, with temps usually in the 70s and low 80s during the day and in the 60s at night. (Today is Kim's 49th birthday. But she is not with us this year.)

Sunday, July 27

Up by 6 or so for work. Coffee. Mom gets up next, around 7:30, then dad, D&D, and last Lisa, though no one sleeps in late. From upstairs we can hear most that's said downstairs, but the downstairs people tend to forget that, so Lisa and I can hear many of Dad's colorful comments about who did what in a way that he might not have done regarding dishes, thermostat, trash, laundry, fridge, etc. This is a little perk to sleeping in the loft that I had noticed before but never appreciated as much as we did this trip. After breakfast, Lisa and I head to the pool, where D&D are already. Pool and sunshine for just a while; then we lose Debbie because she needs to start on dinner, which is pinenut-crusted chicken with poblano sauce, and excellent. I eat a lot. We watch the Dodger game during and after dinner. The Dodgers beat the Giants to complete a three-game sweep, which puts the Dodgers atop the division—maybe for good. After the game we play Canasta, which works OK for six players, at least on this night.

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Monday, July 28

Work (Lisa is now working at the table with me on these mornings during the week), breakfast, pool, sun, casino (Lisa wins at the roulette table), and then Lisa and I to Jaycees to buy the rest of what we need for dinner. The day before we bought a huge piece of meat (tenderloin) similar to what we have done before here. Last time the steaks were excellent; this time they are not. Not much flavor to them. But the cooking with music is fun, and this night feels like vintage French Lick, with happy Doug, easy dad, tipsy Lisa, pleasant, smiling Debbie, always agreeable mom, and me busy in the kitchen making a big mess during a slow dinner prep that leads to a disappointing dinner—about par for the course. But Lisa has set the table with a table cloth from home, candles, and flowers, and we have a nice meal anyway. The main things I am missing are my kiddos. But I know I will have my first four—or some of them—here in years to come, and W&L will arrive in just a few days. After dinner we played more Euchre, the 4 of us again: DDLJ, and this time the girls won.

Tuesday, July 29

This day feels different. Most of the week so far has felt like FL prelude to me—just the beginning of a stay that is stretching out before us. But now it's already the day that D&D will leave, so nobody is as happy as we were. Late lunch at the Country Club, all 6 of us. I'm not sure on what day, but Lisa and I have already been here one time this trip—sat outside

Stories to read aloud before bed

in the sun and watched the golfers while we ate salmon and drank beer. This time all the tables outside are taken, so we sit inside at a round table. Dad insists on buying dinner, very nice, and we have mostly sandwiches, and I'm the only one who drinks—my usual big glass of Stella Artois. Over the years, I have put down many of these big beers at the country club. A fun lunch, but then, shortly after, goodbyes to D&D and watching them drive down the hill and away. Sad for a while, and then we hear from Liz that she might show up that night. Meanwhile, it's just the 4 of us left. We eat good leftover dinners at the villa and go to bed before 11. Liz decides not to make the late drive and arrives on Wednesday instead.

Wednesday, July 30

Work. Coffee. Breakfast. Liz arrives. We find her at the pool. By the time I walk to the pool after exercise, down the path with my beer (hello to Pat on the bench), Mom, Dad, and Lisa are sitting poolside with drinks. I sit for an hour and read about building boats in my backyard (new project). Then back to the villa, where mom, Liz, and I compare southerners to New Englanders and talk about the sad state of schools while Lisa dresses for dinner. Soon Lisa and I head to West Baden for a date-night dinner (GGL go to Wacky Wings—first time there for any of us), but it is after 9:00, when the restaurant closes, so we order pizza at the more casual place (waitress exhausted and miserable), and this date night is partially a flop. But we like being there anyway—very quiet tonight with nearly no traffic in the lobby. We drink a bottle of Chilean red

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wine, enjoy the quiet immensity of the place, and then walk our wine glasses back to the van for future use.

Thursday, July 31

Work. Bike ride with Liz to the tennis courts, racing down the hill at breakneck speed. Tennis is great fun, and we both play well at first, but then I wear down (Liz “runs me all over the court, Richard,” after suggesting we play the doubles court), and Liz wins handily. While we play, Scott arrives, after a 5.5-hour drive on route 50. Bike ride back up the hill. Shower and then to the winery with LGGLS for early dinner (because the place closes at 5; waitress: Heather, who Scott mentioned resembled Debbie) and 4 bottles of wine, 2 white, 2 red, 2 of which we bring back to finish at the villa while playing cards on the deck—first Canasta, then Whist, which we all agreed was more fun and worked better for six than did Canasta. More wine open, fudge eaten, and we played cards ‘til after dark, a total of 3+ hours. Teams were Mom and me; Lisa and dad; Scott and Liz. Scott & Liz won, but not until the next night. After cards, Lisa watched the rest of *Gravity* on the couch, and I fell asleep on her lap. Woke up, talked to Will on the phone (he and Lark spent the day in Washington DC with Kim, Mike, Thomas), and then to our loft bed after a weird little fight with Lisa. “Turn the fuckin’ light off!” “Oh, yeah!?” *Clickety-click.* “How do you like that!?” I threw a dark chocolate bar at her.

Friday, August 1

Work, pool (for sun, talking with LSL, and reading my new proofing project for McGraw Hill), exercise on the hill, shower at the villa, Country Club w GGLSL (salmon again; VG again; Lisa and Scott disappointed with their steaks; dad very pleased with his ribs; mom very pleased with her salmon cooked rare and her martini). We sat outside on a pretty evening with dusk approaching, no bugs, and a grand view of the golf course. I drank just one big Stella but really enjoyed this meal, except the part that Lisa did not. Mom, at my left, was in a fun mood, as she has been all trip. Dad told the story of how he lost his sense of smell. Then back to the villa to finish our Whist game, watch the last-place Cubs crush the first-place Dodgers, and wait for Elena, Vannah, and Mike to arrive, which they did at about 11:30, just ahead of my bedtime. Liz and Scott have moved to the Lane & given the second bedroom here to Vannah and Mike. Elena, a little sick (sore throat), slept on the downstairs pullout couch—its first use this trip. Presumably, Jake, Britt, and Lydia arrived safely around midnight at the Lane, Liz and Scott greeting them there.

We have been here a week already. As usual, I'm marveling at how fast the week has passed. In another year, we would be done with FL now and back home. This year we have a whole 'nother week.

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Saturday, Aug 2

Up at 7 to work. Pretty morning through the sliding glass door at my left. I am enjoying the loft apartment Lisa has created for us—the first time I've spent so much time up here and on the upstairs balcony. We now have GGJLLSSMJBL here, with LSJBL sleeping at the Lane. Tomorrow W&L are scheduled to arrive. We spend a good part of today at the pool. Then back to the villa to watch a little Cubs–Dodgers (Dodgers win) and do some dinner prep. Dinner tonight is spaghetti and meatballs with, for me, LOTS of red wine. After dinner we play poker. Most of the game breaks up around midnight, but Mike and I stay up 'til almost 3, and I win all the chips for a change. Of course the next morning I have only sketchy memories of this night. I do know we drank three good bottles of Scottie red wine, and then some.

Sunday, Aug 3

Mainly a hungover work day for me. Made blueberry pancakes for breakfast. Then I worked slowly but productively at a table near the pool, while Lisa, Elena, Liz, Scott, Jake, Britt, Lydia, Mike, and Vannah lounged and swam nearby. Worked from 1 'til 8 or so, when Will and Lark arrived with G&G, who had picked them up in Indy from Kim. Liz and Lisa made hamburgers, rice, couscous, corn, and salad for dinner, and I went to bed soon after dinner, about 10:30. The kids all stayed up much later. I heard them talking around 2:30 and thought morning had already arrived. Felt very good to catch up on

Stories to read aloud before bed

sleep and get rid of the hangover.

This is the year that Lark is eating vegetarian. She sticks to it the whole week. Will, on the other hand, eats a whole rack of ribs at the Country Club, though this time I wasn't there to see it.

Monday, Aug 4

Up about 7 to finish and return my TCP project. Then breakfast (still eating Debbie's leftovers from last weekend), exercise on the hill, and back to the villa to await Lisa and our next move. First some Jimmy Buffett ("When the coast is clear") and a beer before likely heading down to the pool.

Now Jimmy Buffett, beer, pool, and proofing in the sunshine.

It's only the next day now, Tuesday, but I can't remember if we ever made it to the pool yesterday. I think I walked down alone—yes, that's right. We stayed just a little while, and then walked over to the golf club to pick up our foot golf balls (soccer balls) and carts. Six of us (LJBWLJ) played 9 holes and drove two carts around the old 9-hole course near where we used to play volleyball in the old days. We had as much fun driving the carts as we did kicking the balls, which was more difficult for those of us with only flip-flops or sandals. After foot golf, back to the pool briefly, then back to the villa before dinner at Wacky Wings, where we sat outside. Dad paid for a big dinner, which was surprisingly good. Day turned to dusk

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and dusk to dark. We sat a while eating wings, fries, fish, and more, and drinking beers. Then dad drove over to the Lane to get a room for Jake, Britt, and Lydia to stay one more night. Then all back to the villa, where the kids watched a movie, and the rest of us (GGJLL) went to bed. Wasn't early, though—I didn't get to sleep 'til after midnight. I think Jake and Will were the only ones who stayed awake for *The Lego Movie*.

Tuesday, Aug 5

Proofreading in the sun. Jake, Britt, & Lydia take off. Zip-lining at Lark Valley for Liz, Elena, W&L, and me. Fun, though it seemed a bit dangerous on some landings. We had a good group, ages ranging from 70 (former family doctor) to 13 (Lark). Our guides were Adam Lark and his brother Eric Lark, from Loogootee, and we dove into this adventure on rather a Lark, so Larks were in abundance around us. Mom paid \$180, which lasted nearly two hours and included seven separate zip lines, some short, some long, several of them over water (my favorites), and the expense felt worth it for the five of us. Later, quiet proofing on the villa balcony. Then Chicago pizza on the West Baden veranda (they kicked us out of the lobby for bringing in outside food). GGLLLEWJ. We all missed Scott and his cigar. Home kinda early to bed after Liz received bad news that a friend (Brad) had died in Carolina.

Stories to read aloud before bed

Wednesday, Aug 6

Up at 7. Coffee shop at the Homestead with L & Elle. Then drive Elena home to 601. Lisa to Judy's for 3-hour hair appt. I work a while at 808, visit Sophie at 1205, pick Lisa up at 4, and off we go to FL again. One stop at the Loogootee liquor store for a big beer. Arrive back at the villa at 9:15—the rest of the bunch at the country club. Lisa has arranged a free night's stay for her and me at the FL hotel—room 1515. Late dinner at Power Plant: fish and steak and pretty good wine. Slept well in a real bed, though we sort of missed our loft apt and cicadas.

Thursday, Aug 7

Up early but lounged in our room for much of the morning. Then coffee on the porch before heading to the villa to discover Liz has gone. Good morning to GGWL. Lark's not feeling too good. She naps and rests while Will and I take a walk around the hotel and downtown. Lisa works a while at the villa, then meets us at Fox Hollow, and we all go to 33 Brick for lunch and beer. Lisa and I discover the German restaurant down the street—what used to be Jody's 19th Hole. We talk to the owner and tell her we'll be back later with the rest of the bunch. Later we eat here for dinner with GGWL—very good! Before dinner we play Cosmic Golf, walking around under the black-light with colors and creatures all around, plus animal sounds piped in. We all enjoyed this, as you can see in this pic, which appears to be upside-down:

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Stories to read aloud before bed

Ah, here it is. Upside-up, do we look a little chubby here?



Anyway, our scores were 28 to 27 to 26 to 25, or something like that—a close competition. In the end, the last hole stole our balls, which ended the game and sent us to the German restaurant to meet G&G, who were already seated at the round table near the front. The place is beautifully decorated, just packed with stuff, most of it from Germany. We had a very good dinner and an excellent server (and a short talk with the owner, from Bavaria), and we all plan to return

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to this place—next trip, I guess, because this one is nearly over.

Friday, Aug 8

Up early to pick up and clear out of the villa. Similar to many past trips, it is Mom, Dad, and me (Lisa was in the loft, working on travel) cleaning out the fridge, carrying bags to the car and van, piling towels, wiping down the counters, etc., marking our last hours at the villa. Will and Lark help, lugging bags out to the van in the light rain. Dad walks slowly down the walk—this is before his hip surgery (if he ever had it). Goodbyes, and then G&G headed straight for 808. Lisa, Will, Lark, and I stopped at Denny's for breakfast—our first time there this trip. Breakfast was good, and then we hit an antique store and Huck's (I bought a \$9.99 jug of Sprite for the kids) before leaving town. We stopped at Bo-Macs in Shoals for burgers to go (I still have a Big Boy with cheese in the 1205 fridge 4 days later) and then, in cool temps and under clearing skies, we drove home, capping another wonderful FL trip although I missed having more of my kids here.

I have been to FL with family, kids, or both, in springs and summers, at least 40 times now. Lisa has been with me for 9 of the last 10, before that Gina for 8 or 9 years and Kim for 9 or 10. W&L have been with me every year since they were born, and often twice a year. Before 1999 we had CAE on nearly every trip, and many since then of course, though for the last few years rarely all three together. Many great memories of Coy here, including one year with Will Tyner, when driving home

Stories to read aloud before bed

on my birthday I took the wrong highway 41 exit and drove all the way to Kentucky before realizing my mistake, setting us back two hours and making me late for my 808 birthday dinner (Debbie's pecan-crusted catfish). Rebecca has not been to FL since 1996, when she came with Heather, Katie, Vannah, Coy, Allegra, Elena, et maybe al. Of course I was there, and maybe G&G for the first weekend, but no one else except maybe Vannah's friend Amy. I think Gina's last trip was 1995. Kim's final FL year with me was 2008, but she came again just last year, with Mike, and stayed one night in villa 22. Now that villa is gone for us, forever. Will and I visited 22 this trip to say goodbye and, as in the past, do our Wolverine-walk down the hill toward the hotel. Ah, French Lick. See you next year.

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*We can only be said to be alive in those moments when
our hearts are conscious of our treasures.*

Thornton Wilder.

Stories to read aloud before bed

27 January

At my desk. Late. Christopher in bed behind me. A bitter cold day today, sunny and clear but so windy I couldn't walk 10 paces before turning and walking backward against the wind. Everyone on the sidewalk was doing it, a new craze, as if all of Ann Arbor had decided to live in reverse for the day. All we strangers joined together against the elements, backstepping, our cheeks red from the cold, our noses running, our eyes squinty slits in the face of the sun. The air was jarringly cold. Alarmingly cold. No clothing, no skin, no meat, just liquid ice applied directly to the bones. *Brrrrr!* Every time I am this cold I am sure I have never been colder.

The wind is still howling now and the branch banging on the side of the house, the knock of Becca's "bomable snowy yard monster." She believes in our monster despite C's reassurances that no monsters exist, particularly abominable ones. "Then what *is* that noise?" I ask, because I love to see Becca's eyes widen, especially, I admit, in a fear that C can alleviate but only I can kiss away entirely.

Mom, you were everywhere today: in the steam of my tea, in the crackle of the logs in the fireplace, in the library, where your books gather dust. I'm shelving them slowly because so many fall open in my hands. In the musty smell rising from the pages I see you in the living room corner, your head bent over your book, your glasses glinting in the light of Auntie Dort's antique lamp. The lampshade is tilted for light to pour brighter on your pages. It is winter. You're wearing dad's heavy wool socks, your feet resting on the brick of the fire-

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place.

C is grumbling behind me. The bed, he says, is 10 degrees colder without me. But I'll stay where I am a while. By now he must be accustomed to the chill.

My darling Becca. Over the last weeks so many new expressions have crossed her face. Where do they come from? *Sesame Street?* *Dora the Explorer?* Possibly. Certainly they are not from C, who is as deadpan today as on the day I married him. I am the one most with her, so I wonder—is it me she is mirroring? Is it vain of me to say I hope so?

I recall a day from when I was a child. Uncle James crept up behind me and jolted me with a loud “boo!” I don’t remember my reaction, only that it impressed Uncle. He remarked to mother: “You wait, this girl will be on the stage, Marlene! The silver screen! What a lively face!” Something like that—his exclamations, not mine. And from that day on much was made of my ability to bend my features this way and that. *Make your camel face, Voni!* *Show us your monkey!* Dad exhibited me to dinner guests, who never failed to flatter me. I felt on center stage, taking my entire share of the spotlight. Over time all that ended. Somewhere in my teen years everyone realized I was nothing special, after all—a plain Jane. No one has called me *Voni* in years.

This morning I went through Rebecca’s dresser drawers, finally getting around to clearing out her summer clothes. So many of the dresses and jumpers are too small already, and I felt sad to think she’ll never wear them again. I consoled myself with the thought that someday these same dresses will swirl around the ankles of another little girl—and I know I will

Stories to read aloud before bed

see Becca then, just as she is today.

As I arranged her clothes, she sat on the floor beside me looking thoughtful. Of all the pieces I held out to her, only one tiny T-shirt sparked her interest. Dad bought the shirt at York Beach last summer, and Becca instantly spilled red Kool-Aid down the front. The shirt shows gulls flying over sharp white waves. Becca took it from me and tried to pull it on over her head. I watched her, giggling. She was trying to put her head through an armhole. Too funny! She was so determined, her little mouth set, her forehead furrowed. Finally I gave in and helped her. We took off her sweater and pulled the shirt on over her sweet round belly. A tight fit. Right off, she tottered over to the long mirror on the door. I sat staring, in one of my moments, catching her face reflecting. I'm sure I gaped. It was your face, mother. Your face. Your wonderful face, full of wonder. Time stopped, and in the suspended moment I saw you on your deathbed, your eyes not sad but calm, as I've imagined they were. Your arms reached out to me, and I thought you wanted to tell me something, but when I stepped forward time kicked in again, and you were gone. Only Becca walked into my open arms. I gathered her up and sang her a song.

C is suddenly very much awake.

He: Baby, I just had a crazy dream. I woke up throbbing. Come to bed.

Me: Hmm! So it's my responsibility to treat a condition I didn't inspire?

He: Not your responsibility: your pleasure.

Me: What about her?

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He: Who?

Me: The one you were dreaming of. She started you; let her finish you. Go back to sleep.

He is waiting for me, playing with his phone, talking to me, feigning nonchalance. We have our little jokes, but he's bitter underneath.

He: What? Jealous of your journal? Jealous of a *notebook*?

Me: You know you are. I don't blame you.

He: Don't worry about me. I know I can I have you when I want.

Me: But it must hurt to know I don't want you back.

He: You *have* changed.

Me: I know. Who knows better? But it's temporary...

He: It's been going for months. Ever since...

Yes—ever since mom died. This conversation has not taken place; the words have not been spoken. Yet they hang heavy in the house. When the lights go out, C heads for bed, and I head for my desk.

Mom, can I blame him if he has come to hate you? For months you have lived in this house, floating like smoke from room to room. You follow me. You never let me be.

He: Are you coming then?

Me: On my way to save the day!

I'll go to bed, but he won't be satisfied. Real passion speaks to all of our senses, its pretense to only one. But it's that one he's most concerned about right now, I suppose.

28 January

Something odd is happening. I woke up this morning like a schoolgirl in summer: my eyes opened, my head jumped off my pillow like a ricochet. All the symptoms of age I've grown used to—morning mouth, puffy cheeks, itchy eyes—were absent. None of the dull heaviness of blood and bone. I'm all light and airy. I'm being cautious, though, holding myself in check, excepting a trick. If this feeling is fleeting, let it leave me now. I've never been one for quick thrills or one-night flings. I want something lasting. I've been testing myself all morning, trying to come back to earth. As a teenager I tried to depress happiness by thinking the worst thoughts I could think of. I wanted no part of passing joys. Always I have wanted something strong, enduring. This morning I have limited myself to the most mundane activities, the tasks most bland. I had oatmeal for breakfast. I read the front page of the *Observer*. The bad news of the world slid right off me. After breakfast I washed windows, exercised, mended rips in C's shirts, paid the bills. Now noon has passed and I've stopped trying to bring myself down. Now I ask: what's wrong with me?

Christopher on the phone: What's up with you today?

Me: Meaning?

He: You don't sound yourself.

Me: Myself? That old mope?

He: Hey, you're feeling better.

Me: Oh, honey. I'm way better. My blood is dancing in my veins.

He: Wow. That must be nice.

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Me: Nice? Nice?

Carrie visited at noon. I tossed a sugar cube into her cup from across the kitchen. I wrapped my arms around her waist and laughed. Becca stood wide-eyed, watching me. Carrie kept a close eye on me, too. Cut down on the caffeine, she advised. I tried to calm down but could not restrain myself. Now I ask myself: have I been down so long that it feels wrong to be up?

Later. C at Hal's watching football. Becca sleeping on the floor in the next room. If I lean back in my chair, I can see her stretched out on the rug, her fists tucked under her chest. She's still wearing her York Beach shirt—she won't let me take it off.

After Becca fell asleep I went to the library and sat among mom's books. These books were her friends, many of them more dear to her than people. In the absolute silence of the room I could hear the books whispering secrets not meant for my ears. I used to feel like an intruder in this room. I felt ashamed that I have not read these books, none of them, not even the ones mom recommended only to me. Today, as I tried to hear what the books were saying, a voice broke the silence and said, clear as a bell: "In case I need good luck one day."

You remember sending me out for four-leaf clovers. One summer I spent hours kneeling in the cool patches in the backyard. For every four-leaf clover I found, you gave me a dollar, which I ran across and spent at Skelton's drugstore. But before I ran off, I made you say it. It was our little ritual. I made you say, "In case I need good luck one day." Then you flattened the clover between pages of your favorite books.

Stories to read aloud before bed

After you spoke to me, I felt seized by the urge to find those clovers. I searched in every book. At first I went slowly, leafing gently through the pages, expecting to see a glimpse of green. Then I lost patience and shook the books by their covers. Finally, something did fall from the pages—but it wasn't a clover. I never found a single clover. What I found was an old photograph. I have it in front of me now, leaning on a candlestick. Of course I feel I was meant to find it. Nothing comes from nowhere. In the photo you are sitting on the rail of the boat that took us to the Nubble lighthouse. I'm with you, my arm wrapped around you, my hand around a beer bottle. Your arm is around my waist, one finger caught in my belt loop. Behind us the ocean is dark blue and wild. Water splashes against the side of the boat and shoots up like a fountain over our heads. We are about to be drenched.

29 January

Slept in late. Woke up to laughter outside the window. I lay there a few minutes adjusting, more asleep than awake, eyes still closed. Outside, noise rose and fell: shrill shrieks, passing conversation, children laughing, tires on gravel. I sat up in bed and pulled the curtain. Right out the window a man stood in swimming trunks and a straw hat calling for his beach towel. Running down the walk came a child with an armload of bright-colored plastic. I realized it was beach toys.

The sun was already well up, shining over the Pelican into my window, warming the sheet that covered me. I kicked the sheet off and lay naked, the sun spilling onto my bare belly.

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Suddenly silence. A trace. A thimble. The bed empty beside me. The cot empty beside the bed. I got up, found a robe on the door, and discovered mom and dad's room empty too. Everywhere empty but me—and I felt so full of what? I was alone in the cottage. Fridge note. Coffee cup. Pastry. All for me. Loving husband, doting husband—all for me. But where was he?

I drank my coffee on the screened porch and watched people pass. Everyone was carrying beachbags, inflatable toys, umbrellas, towels, all the bright colors bonus bright against the blue of the sky. Everyone was flip-flopped, bare-footed, sun-hatted, copper-toned, coffee-cupped, eyes shaded, bare-topped, bikinied, one-pieced, sandy-toed, pale-footed, golden bellied, shoulder-freckled, playmate bodied, suck-it-in beer-bellied, twinkly eyed, beach-paced—all on their lazy and glorious walks to the sea. A human smorgasbord. Delicious! One young fellow of the frat-boy variety, beer bottle in hand already—not even 10 a.m. I think—spied me on the porch and tried to wave me over. Through the porch screen, the sun glare, the beer buzz, he couldn't see the 10 years between us. Or did those years not exist? I played the girl he thought I was, smiled shyly, demurred. He raised his bottle. "Water's great!" he shouted. He tripped on nothing, recovered, grinned sheepishly. I gave him a thumbs-up, which was enough. He padded on across the street and joined his buddies.

Eventually I joined the parade on the path to the beach. As I crossed the wooden plank stretching over the grounds of the Pelican, a gust of salt air blew into my face. I sucked it in, held it, and walked on, warm sand under my feet, my skin baking.

Stories to read aloud before bed

The beach was jammed. I walked a thin path between towels and bodies, looking for a set I recognized. The white sand—hot on top, cool underneath—filled the spaces between my toes.

I found mom and dad sitting in the shallow water in matching beach chairs, their feet dividing the foam as it slid back into the sea. Dad and his newspaper. Mom and her book. I sat in the surf with the sun in my face, leaning against daddy's shins, and felt time slip by. To my left, a little girl, maybe four, skin golden brown, yellow bikini bottom filled with sand, blonde ponytail on her back, in her tiny hands her tiny pail and her tiny shovel. To my right, an old woman holding the hand of a taller masculine presence I could not much see, her long pale legs spidery-veined under her beach robe, the tips of the untied robe cord dipping into the rising water, her expression serene, her rich white hair spilling out under a beach bonnet. I sat spellbound, drugged by the sun. Eventually the tide rose, and we had to save our beach chairs from the water. Someone mentioned breakfast. From far off toward the pier, Christopher and Becca were coming our way hand in hand, Becca half toddling, half straggling, Chris tugging her along behind.

Later in the day, on odd incident. I was rocking on the porch, getting Becca to sleep, when mom slipped out from the cottage, lifted Becca from my arms, and off she went. Without a word. I stared after them as they vanished down the path. An hours passed before they returned. So much for Becca's nap!

What a day we had! It's late now, the cottage quiet, neighbors quiet, stars twinkling, and always, behind everything,

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the low roar of the ocean spilling on the shore. We took a walk earlier, peering into dimmed cottages at couples playing cards, drinking after-dinner drinks, talking quietly in porch rockers. It felt like stepping back in time. The entire day felt this way, that warm hum, the glow of years having passed without me. Oh, what I would give to be a little girl again, to know, or somehow sense, the full life ahead of me, building like a wave, taking on size, coming for me across the dark sea.

Earlier, we drove into Perkins Cove for lunch (Barnacle Billy's—fun place; Becca does *not* like lobster!) and then hopped back in the car to find a beach. Later took Ridge Road into York for a ferry ride around the Nubble lighthouse. We were joined at the dock by 20 or so other passengers. We all lined onto the boat and sat on rows of benches on deck. Christopher ordered beers, and the four of us, plus Becca, stood by the rail drinking, talking, watching the water as the boat chugged along. Water splashed up on my arms and effervesced on my skin. Dad clicked photos, Chris hammed it up, mom held Becca so she could see over the railing. I looked out at the headlands and beaches, the luxurious houses along the shore. Now and then a voice crackled in a loudspeaker telling us who owned a particular house or how devastating a storm was to a hotel. I didn't listen. Behind me a man boasted of being a founding member of Project Puffin, a movement credited with bringing puffins back to Maine in the 1980s. I tuned in, tuned out, and stood between dad and mom, who were taking turns holding Becca. We settled into silence, dipped into a cove, and watched as the Nubble appeared on the peninsula. The lighthouse is much squatter than I expected—noth-

Stories to read aloud before bed

ing like Hatteras or Assateague. The tower is barely taller than the keeper's house beside it. The slanting lawn leads down to large rocks on the shore and to a tiny bright red shed standing out amidst all the green of the grass, the blue of the sky, the white of the houses and the picket fence.

When we were as close to the lighthouse as we were going to get, mom left her seat with Becca and walked around the cabin, out of sight. I soon followed and found her standing near the railing, Becca propped in one arm.

"I was just telling Becca that my mother's mother was born in 1879—the year the Nubble was first used. I'm told she brought me here when I was young, but I don't remember it. I don't remember my grandmother at all. I never got to know her."

Mom seemed far away from me. I told her I was glad that Becca knew her grandmother. We sat silent for a while, it occurred to me Becca must be getting heavy, so I tried to lift her from mom's arms. Mom pulled back. She assured me she was fine, and turned away from me. I kissed Becca and left the two of them together.

The ferry completed its semicircle around the Nubble and turned back toward York. My side of the boat now faced the open sea. The sun glowed like an orange planet over the water. Gulls had flown over from a headland to fly beside the boat. Everyone was quietly admiring the sun, pointing at the gulls, speaking in low tones, as if in church. The clup-clup of the motor was louder now and the slap of the waves more forceful.

Christopher and I rested our arms on the rail and watched the changing shades of the water as the sun dropped. The air

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turned colder. Dad joined us, and he and Chris talked a while. I left them and walked back to the other side of the cabin.

You stood where I left you, gazing into sea and sky, where they merged on the horizon. A lone gull near the boat was alternately soaring and then fighting the wind. The other gulls had vanished as dusk set in. You had set Becca down, and she was beside you now, her tiny hand in yours. You were speaking to her, I think, but I could not hear. Becca pointed to the gull over your heads, its gray belly looking darker every minute as the night came on. The cruise was almost over. Suddenly the gull turned toward the sea and soared off, gaining speed just as the ferry was slowing down as we approached the dock. The gull seemed headed for the now faded orange pool into which the sun had dropped. You stared after him into the pool, and the farther away he got the harder it was to tell if he was coming or going.



