

I felt cold despite the mildness of the night and thought I'd better walk off my evening before going back to the hotel and calling the *gendarmes*, or whoever was going to get my suitcase for me.

I walked into the middle of the crowd leaving the church and fought the flow back to the doors. Inside, the stairwells were still open, and I slipped into one of them and climbed the long flights to the top, and stood at the stone wall there that lined the edge of the roof, under the carillons. It was about six o'clock at home; Carol was probably finishing her dinner—maybe one of her guilty-pleasure meals I won't eat, sardines on buttered toast, or boiled franks in macaroni—and getting ready to watch her programs.

Across the square on all sides, jumbles of terra-cotta roofs caught the moon at different angles and threw back a warm orange light. I had my hand on the wall, and on top of it and all across it, there were names scraped into the stone. Underneath my hand there was *Giuseppe, 1535*. All over, people had taken the time to leave signs of their pilgrimages—*Thomas Ames, Nov'r 1670; Maria, 1488*. I found a stone under one of the bells and scraped *Paul R, 1999*, but my name came out in a white powder. From the parapet, I could see small crowds surrounding the buskers, leaving them at the centres of little circles. A man's voice behind me said "*Nous sommes fermés*," and I turned to look at him, but I didn't move. "*Monsieur*," he said, coming toward me. I don't know why, but I backed away from him, and he stopped, and extended his hands cautiously. "*Monsieur? Écoute-moi, hein? Mon ami? I talk to you!*" I remained where I was, staring at the man who thought he was going to have to save my life. If I'd spoken his language, I might have been able to explain how I'd come to this moment in my life, but what people say about themselves is not nearly half of what you need to know about them. After another moment, I stepped back from the parapet and the man lowered his hands and smiled at me warmly. A misunderstanding is all it was.

AT FIRST, ON WALKING INTO HIS HOUSE, PETER BOWMAN THOUGHT his wife was laughing at a nature show. He saw the back of her head, and the screen in front of her flashed pink and black, and there were sounds of a pursuit. He came closer to where she was sitting, and heard that she was weeping.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"That's Vanessa," said Margot quietly. "It's Vanessa."

He saw that the image on the television was his daughter, a junior in high school. He grabbed the remote control and clicked the image away, and Margot collapsed into her lap. There was a bubble-wrap envelope beside her. It was addressed, in big Magic Marker letters, to Nessa Bowman. He picked it up; there was nothing in it.

He and Margot had been discussing Vanessa recently, an ongoing conversation about a child who was gradually becoming strange to them. There had been the changes in hair colour and the debatable fashions, but he and Margot were as enlightened about these things as they could be, and they didn't turn their concerns into *issues*. They placed their faith in providing a good house, with books and other wholesome diversions. There was nutritious food and opportunities for personal development—piano, swimming lessons. They knew rebellion would come, would rage through the house at some point, and they had faith that it would pass through without breaking anything that couldn't be fixed.

Peter had gone through an adolescent phase he remembered well, when he grew his hair long and made political pronouncements about things he didn't really understand. Feeling passionate about something seemed a defining rite. His parents hadn't taken it away from him, and he did not want to take it away from his own children. Whatever Vanessa was going through, he and Margot understood it was necessary, ordained by nature.

But *this*. Peter checked the envelope for a return address, knowing he'd find none, and then performed a moral calculation that would have resulted in Margot opening it. Opening the envelope was a transgression in itself, the sort of thing neither he nor his wife would normally do. He started with the name on the envelope, a version of "Vanessa" they knew no one to use for their daughter, then backtracked to the conversation the previous night about whether one of them should sit down with the girl and make sure everything was all right in her world.

He remained behind the couch. He knew he was supposed to sit on it with Margot and comfort her, or lead her out of the room and assert control in the way she might be expecting him to. But he did not do any of this. Rather, as if powerless, he tilted up the remote control feebly and clicked the TV back on. A ball of white light expanded and became Vanessa. There were two boys in the video with her. Peter and Margot watched silently, Margot with her hand over her mouth. The video showed their daughter involved in a variety of sexual acts, some of which Peter and Margot had both, at one time or another, enjoyed with each other. It was a display of knowledge as well as of sexuality, and it was hard for them to know what they were reacting to. Often, both of the boys were inside their daughter at the same time. When the tape ended, they both watched the white fuzz on the screen in silence.

"We have to show this to the police," Peter said, finally.

Margot shook her head.

"It's evidence," he said.

Margot took the remote from her husband's hand and silenced the hiss. "Rape victims don't smile, Peter."

VANESSA RETURNED FROM HER BALLET CLASS AT SIX THIRTY. Her younger brother, Eric, had been home since five, and had walked around the house in complete silence, being aware (as children are) that asking his parents why they seemed so upset was only likely to result in a reaction, rather than any information. There was no dinner cooking. He eventually grabbed a bag of chips and went downstairs to play a video game that involved a dexterous fox retrieving a nuclear warhead. When Vanessa came through the door, she had time enough to offer only a sing-songy hello before Eric heard, in quick succession, the sound of someone slapping Vanessa, Vanessa crying out in shock, and his mother calling his father's name. He could then hear the three of them going up the stairs.

He returned to his game, not paying much attention to what was happening on the glowing screen in front of him, trying to behave normally. His was a family of rare outbursts, and both his parents worked in quiet professions—his father was a radiologist, his mother a librarian at city hall. At one time or another they had both expressed their belief that raised voices and anger never accomplished anything. Listening, observing, and other forms of stealth were their touchstones. Eric had once stood in the protected booth where his father's technician took the X-ray pictures, and he'd looked at the images afterwards. Milky shadow and solid white got resolved into some benign thing or another; sometimes the pictures confirmed something bad. No matter what the outcome, his father would lightly touch the X-ray, naming the thing-made-visible, and write it down on a pad. On the few times Eric had visited, his father had found a couple of tumours and a number of broken bones. *Here* and *here*, his father had said, showing him where the breaks were, his fingertip slowly tracing a bone.

That his sister had been hit by one of his parents was unimaginable to Eric. He cast his mind back over the things he'd done recently that he knew were wrong, but he couldn't come up with anything worse than smoking a couple of cigarettes. It was the kind of thing his mother wouldn't have approved of, but she would never have hit him for it. His father might even have given him one of those looks that said he was surprised to discover his twelve-year-old was smoking, but that it improved him somewhat by its daring. Although, of course, he could be *compelled* to stop, and he would stop.

The only thing he could be certain of was that whatever Vanessa had done, it was worse than smoking.

IN HER ROOM, HIS SISTER SAT ALONE ON THE BED, HER HAND pressed against the hot spot on her cheek. She pushed back to create more space between herself and her parents, who stood just barely inside the room.

"What's the matter with you?" Peter said. "Do you have any idea how dangerous this is?" He waited a moment, already exhausted from the effort of his anger. "Your mother and I are completely stunned. And disgusted. Who ever taught you to behave like this?"

Vanessa watched her mother, whose thoughts she believed she could read, but her mother lowered her head. "Tomorrow," said her father, "we're going to Dr. Davies and he is going to run every test known to man on you. But before that, you're going to give me the names of these animals and any other information you have about them."

Vanessa stared sullenly at her father.

"Do you have anything to add to this conversation?"

"I don't know their names."

"Should we play this tape for your friends? Maybe they know."

"Maybe they do."

This sass provoked Peter, and he lunged toward her, but

Margot shouted his name and he stopped himself. "Get out of here now," she said.

"I want an answer!"

"What does it matter?"

"You can't bring the anonymous to justice." He turned to his daughter. "You try to remember the names of these boys who *raped* you."

When he left the room, Vanessa started to cry. Her mother did not come and sit beside her as Vanessa thought she would, but remained beside the door, watching her, waiting her out. After a few moments, seeing her tears were having no effect, Vanessa calmed down. "*Were* you raped?" said Margot.

"I don't know!"

"Whose camera was it? Who shot it?"

The girl drew the back of her hand over her mouth. The fear she'd been feeling from the first slap had grown into a general sense of danger. Her mother might even be more difficult than her father. "It was on automatic," she said.

"Whose camera?"

"I don't know."

(In the hallway, her father leaned against the wall opposite, his mind reeling with strange geometries, picturing the camera placement, the size and shape of the room, the various alignments needed to minimize shadows, then shook his head to loose the figures rampant in it.)

Margot went over to her daughter's television, now a sinister presence. They'd bought it for her as a gift for earning straight A's the previous fall. Margot held the tape up. "How could you let them do this to you? How could *you* have done this?"

"I don't know."

"That's the last time you're going to say that, Vanessa. You obviously knew very well what you were doing." She was not going to cry in front of the girl. "I feel I don't even know you. How could a child of mine—?"

"Mum—"

Margot turned sharply and kicked the television set off its stand. It struck the wall and then the floor, sending up a shower of blue sparks. Immediately, Peter opened the door and looked back and forth between the stand, and his daughter and wife. Margot was shaking her hands in front of her, as if trying to dislodge something from her fingertips. "They weren't even wearing condoms!" she said to her husband.

"Mum—"

She rounded on the girl, her eyes red and furious. "You could be pregnant, for Christ's sake!"

"They didn't come *in* me."

"My god—"

"You could have AIDS," said Peter. "Have you thought about that?"

"They aren't gay."

"I'm not even going to respond to that."

"So you *do* know them," said Margot.

"Does it look like we're strangers?"

Margot held her tongue and just stood there, trying to breathe. "Who's seen this tape?" she asked.

"We all have a copy."

"You think if you each have a copy that'll keep everyone honest?"

"I don't know," said Vanessa. "They both wanted one."

"Naturally."

WHEN THEY WERE GOING OUT, AS STUDENTS AT THE University of Toronto, Peter and Margot had developed a ten-year plan. There was travelling to be done and degrees to be finished. They were both twenty-one, and Peter was going to specialize. Margot could wait until she was thirty to have kids—it was getting to be safer to have children later—and that way, they could enjoy what their own parents called their "youths," and do the

things some friends of theirs regretted not having done before starting a family. They even wrote it all down, with dates along the top and rows playing down the side, with headings like *Destinations*, *To Buy* (a car in Year Two, a house in Year Five), and *Money Saved*. Then Margot got pregnant three years in. By that point, they'd bought a car and driven to Orlando in it. The rest of the plan went fallow. By the time Vanessa was born, what they'd thought they were going to do didn't seem to matter: reality had usurped fantasy. They adjusted to the possible, and they liked it. Year Eight would be Eric, this time planned.

Vanessa slept in their bed for the first year, a bump of warmth between them. To make love, one of them would change places with the baby, and sandwich her snugly between pillows. It was quiet lovemaking, sensible lovemaking. They got over feeling guilty. Margot found an article that said the smell of the pheromones and the rocking of the bed produced an especially sound sleep for a baby. Plus, she said, how could an infant resent the very thing that had brought it into the world?

When they tried to move Vanessa into her own bed, she resisted. For months, they struggled with her bitter night-cries, and if the two of them sat together watching television, Vanessa would not settle down until she was between them.

The solution in the end was a smaller crib, one that would allow the baby to feel enveloped. Many years later, Peter read about a woman who had developed a special machine that you lay down in, and it hugged you, and he thought about their solution to Vanessa's loneliness.

THE NIGHT OF THE VIDEOTAPE, MARGOT AND PETER LAY together in the king-size bed, trying to follow the nightly ritual. Vanessa was in her room, forbidden to go anywhere but the toilet. They could hear her through the wall that separated her room from theirs. That such plans had been hatched only inches from

their sleeping heads. How was it that she had not shot up in bed, as if from a dream, Margot thought, the moment her daughter had decided on this course?

The news played in front of them, the volume down to its lowest setting. It was Peter's habit to turn the news up if there was anything he thought he wanted to know about. The rest of the time he grazed business and news magazines and looked up only once in a while. He could sense a fire burning silently on the screen, or an update from a faraway war. Margot took her news with breakfast, and usually only from the newspaper, preferring not to be distressed by what was happening halfway across the world right before she went to sleep. She was a novel-reader, and each publishing season she bought the crop of new hardbacks, which she kept stacked on a low shelf beside the bed. She'd read half of something, then start something new, returning to the first book only when she was ready, when she had processed whatever it was that had made her stop reading it. As a librarian, she could have access to any book before the public, but she was a believer in paying for her pleasures, and they could afford it.

The night before, she'd been in the middle of three books. One was about some men on a misbegotten fishing trip, another was a family saga rooted in the New England of the pilgrims, and the last was an arty romance about a painter. A struggle anchored each one; like every good book she'd ever read, something dreadful was the occasion of every story, something to overcome. That was the nature of all books, although the stories of people's lives, as they were lived, weren't really like this. People tended to move forward motivated not, in the main, by crisis, but by ambition and hope and need. Most people she knew who suffered through terrible crises did not turn out to be more interesting, as they did in novels, but rather withdrew from those around them and only turned up again somewhere down the road, changed in a fugitive way that it was best not to talk about. Death was immune to this pattern, unless it was a shameful death, like a murder or a

suicide, or someone who'd died from an avoidable health problem. Usually, death was made congenial by neighbours and friends. Later, grief could be difficult, but there was never any shame in it.

Margot made a pretense of reading the fishing novel. It took place in Spain. It really had more in common with the romance novel than anything, except that the part of the woman was played by the fish.

"What," said Peter.

She'd laughed bitterly to herself. But she shook her head. He turned the television off.

"I think we should keep her out of school for the time being," he said.

"I think so as well."

"You take her in to Richard tomorrow. I called him at home and asked him to run a pelvic series. He knows what to do."

She sat up. "Does he know why?"

"No. I just asked him to give her an appointment. He won't have any questions."

"How do you know?"

"It's the way I asked. He'll just do it and then you can bring her home."

He turned and switched off his lamp, muttering *Jesus Christ* under his breath. Her lamp threw a pool of light onto her hands and the sheets. She flashed on the image of a surgical procedure.

"Is that all?" she said.

"What else is there?"

"I don't think we should do anything that could take this out of our hands. I don't want you to talk to the police."

He said nothing, just dug himself deeper into the mattress. She put her hand on his shoulder and tried to pull him around to her so she could see his face. His stillness upset her. He'd always said he was good in emergencies, and it was true. He had a centred calm that was good for frightening moments. It was what made

him a good doctor. But she didn't need that right now. She believed their daughter had made a mistake, but Margot wanted it to remain under their roof, where their own laws reigned. "You're going to make things more difficult, Peter. What are they going to tell you at this point anyway?"

"They're going to tell me what my rights are."

"Your rights?"

Now he turned around. His face was red, as if he'd been hanging upside down. "Get her to Richard Davies and then bring her home," he said.

PETER STAYED IN THE BEDROOM THE NEXT MORNING UNTIL HE heard Vanessa and Margot leave. Eric was downstairs, putting dishes away. Peter got dressed slowly; it felt as if he was being watched while he did it. His arms and legs didn't move the way he was used to, and he caught his breath once or twice. He went downstairs and said nothing to Eric while he folded a piece of white bread around a slice of cheese. Then the two of them silently gathered their things—he his briefcase, and Eric his books and baseball things—and got into the car.

Peter usually drove his son to school in the mornings, picking up another boy on the way, the other parent bringing Eric home. They drove over to the boy's house, and Eric stared into his baseball glove most of the way, looking up now and again to stare out the window with purpose, as if indicating there were things on his mind, too. Peter pulled into the boy's driveway and put the car in park.

"There's a problem in our house," Peter said.

"I know."

"It's a serious problem, but we're going to take care of it. You don't have to worry."

"I'm not worried," said Eric. Peter ran his hands down the side of the wheel, as if admiring it. "What's the problem?"

"I'm not going to talk about it. And if you hear anything at school, you're not going to respond. People are vicious. You stay out of it."

"Okay."

Peter looked at Eric steadily. It was not a look Eric had seen before. His father's face was still, but his eyes were as sharp as starlight. "This is *our* problem, do you understand? When families get into trouble, they have to work it out. It happens to everyone."

"I know," said Eric.

"You're a good boy, though. All right?"

Eric opened the door. "Does Vanessa have to leave school?"

"Go and get your friend," Peter said. "Everything is going to be fine." He watched his son go up the walk to the boy's house and trade a couple of words with the boy's mother, words he couldn't hear, that floated up into the air above them all and vanished. The friendly time of day, how distant that kind of thing seemed to him now. The boy emerged, another twelve-year-old, with a baseball bat that had a glove balanced on its tip. He watched the two of them come toward the car. He'd been a good father to this child, he thought, and images went through his mind of all the things he'd taught him. But they were the same things he'd tried to teach Vanessa. How to play fair. To have respect for the natural world. To develop a sense of wonder and joy (to use the terminology of the parenting books he and Margot had read). Maybe Vanessa had taken a different message from him? Did he somehow send her down a path different from the one he'd always thought she was on? He worked the seam of these thoughts for the fault, for whatever would show him where he'd even just slightly broken faith with the girl.

WHEN HE GOT TO WORK THAT AFTERNOON, X-RAYS FROM THE morning's patients were waiting for him on his desk. He took the first group and slipped them into the wall viewer. A man's torso,

the ribs arcing back into shadow, the organs behind dully arrayed. The body, reduced to the barest of structure, had no power to scandalize, he thought. You could show skeletons fucking, and it would never bother anyone. He leaned into the glowing pictures on his wall, his hand braced against the side of the light box, seeing the striations of cirrhoses on the man's liver. The story the body told. Anonymously, it was phenomenological, a statistic, a likelihood. With flesh on it, it was a man's death. In the rest of the envelopes on his desk, he would find a woman's death, a parent's relief, a child's ruin.

That morning he'd spent some time in the company of the police.

He'd gone to the station on Dundas and waited on a cold moulded-plastic chair in the waiting area. It was merely the strip of floor in front of the main desk, behind which men in uniform scuttled back and forth with papers in their hands. There were posters for missing children, some of them aged by computer. Another poster advised which types of freshwater fish you were allowed to catch in August, a month that was a whole season in the future.

His name was called and the little wooden gate held open for him and he was admitted to the back. He met Detective Stone, a large man in his fifties with grey stubble that curved down off his face and onto his plush neck. The detective ushered Peter into an interviewing room and slapped a fresh pad of legal paper onto the table between them. There was a wall-length window that looked out on the hallway, and officers walked past it, singly, or with someone who might have their hands behind their back, the officer leading them by the elbow. Peter sat cautiously, taking care not to let the videotape make a sound against the chair. He was carrying it in an inside coat pocket.

"Where's your daughter, Mr. Bowman," said the detective.

"She's at the doctor with my wife."

"Rape kit."

Peter nodded once.

"When can she come in, then."
"I'll find out."

Someone knocked at the door and stuck his head in. Stone looked up and nodded, then looked back at Peter. "Does she know her attackers?"

"They weren't really attackers," said Peter. "They're boys from her school." The detective wrote it all down. "They filmed it."

"The boys who attacked her."

"Yes."

"How do you know this?"

"I have the tape," Peter said, and instinctively he held it closer to his body. Detective Stone noticed this and tilted his head to one side, looking at Peter's coat. "I'm uncomfortable about this."

"Yes," said Stone. "We'll move to a better room."

He led Peter into the basement of the station. As soon as they'd come down the stairs and the sounds of the work day faded, it immediately seemed that this was a more serious business. For the first time, Peter became aware that there were fewer options for him now, fewer ways to think about all this. He was in a police station, therefore anything with the taint of crime on it would be brought forth as a crime.

The room in the basement was more remote, but there was a window in the wall. There were ten or so chairs in the room, and a television on top of a metal trolley. Peter sat in one of the chairs, but then stood again when the detective didn't take a seat himself. Stone put the tape in and pressed play. Peter turned toward the window. His hands started to ache, as if he were holding something very cold. He heard the sounds of the tape.

A couple of officers passed by the window and made eye contact with him and then quickly glanced at what was on the screen. How easy it was to put it all together. After a moment longer, Stone switched the machine off. Peter breathed in deeply.

"Your daughter's seventeen," the detective said.

"Yes."

"And who are these boys?"

"I don't know."

Peter stood uncomfortably, the window in his peripheral vision now filling more regularly with officers going past. It was change-of-shift, or lunchtime. Stone ejected the tape.

"I'm going to have a technician produce some photos from this. Just of faces. You can pick up the tape later this afternoon. Then we'll see." Peter watched the detective slide the tape into an interdepartmental envelope he picked up off a pile on a desk behind the television stand. The envelope was covered with signatures. You could see the tape through holes punched in the envelope. "Don't worry," said Stone. "Our guy has to look at this kind of thing all the time. He knows it's sensitive."

"Thank you," Peter said. He went out of the room and then up and out of the station. No one accompanied him.

AS THE AFTERNOON PASSED, AND THE STEADY FLOW OF patients came in and out of his office, Peter found his mind tuned in to what he imagined Detective Stone was discovering. Perhaps a computer program was comparing the images from the film with pictures taken by the Department of Motor Vehicles, or the Transit Commission, which had probably issued the boys student cards. Maybe it was going to be that easy, just connecting the dots. He could be walking into Vanessa's school with Stone in a matter of hours, the detective already armed with names and the principal cooperating. They'd collect the criminals and bring them back down to the station and they'd be photographed and fingerprinted. It wouldn't take long before they realized what kind of long-term trouble they were actually in. And he, Peter, would watch it all in silence, his face a warning to the rapists that the longer their incarceration, the safer they'd be.

It took most of the afternoon, through a broken tibia, a fatty liver, a spot on a lung (a biopsy ordered), and a green-stick fracture

for Peter to weave the entire story. After his last patient, he sat alone at his desk and savoured the possibility of punishment. The cars in the doctors' lot below had dwindled to fewer than ten. His nurse came in. "Do you need anything?" she asked.

"No," said Peter. "I'm just going to finish this." He put a hand down on his paperwork.

She stood in the doorway, looking at him. She was in her stockinged feet now. "You okay, Peter?"

"I'm great," he said, and he smiled at her brightly.

"I'll forward your calls to this line."

AT RICHARD DAVIES'S OFFICE, MARGOT HAD BEEN ASKED TO wait for Vanessa outside the examining room. The doctor took about half an hour with the girl and then sent her out smiling. Margot went into Davies's office and sat down in front of his desk as he washed his hands at his own sink. The washing of hands always struck Margot as a gesture of propriety. Her own father had washed his many times a day, before meals, after meals, when coming in from outside. It always seemed a quality of probity: a man who washed his hands could be trusted because he was thinking of other people when he did.

Richard Davies asked her about herself and Peter, and about the back extension on the house, which had been done some years ago, the last time he'd spoken to either of them. (Margot searched her memory for the difficulties—if any—they'd encountered on building the porch. All she could bring to mind were the picayune disagreements she'd had with her husband about paint colours and a sun-light; she hoped a time would come soon when such things would seem important again.) Davies opened Vanessa's file and looked down at it. Vanessa was a wonderful young girl, he said, but he thought she should be on the pill.

Margot nodded, feeling quite mute. She felt that, perhaps, he was letting them both off easy.

Davies led her out of his office with a comforting hand under her elbow, and kissed her on the cheek. He gave her a prescription.

"But what about the goddamned exam?" Peter asked when Margot told him all this.

"She's fine, he says."

"What does that mean?"

"He said physically she looked fine. There were no abrasions, no cuts. There was no evidence at all that anyone had forced her to do anything."

"So his answer is to put her on the fucking pill?"

"Peter."

"Did he suggest we advertise her services in the newspaper, too?"

There was silence on Margot's end. She was at a pay phone in the mall; she'd taken both kids out for dinner, to give a sense of carrying on—as much for her own benefit as for theirs. "We had a good day," she said quietly. "Vanessa and I."

"I'm glad."

"I'm not any happier about this than you are, Peter. But I've started to think—"

"What."

"We should be careful not to overreact."

"Over—. Where are you?"

"We're at the mall. We're having supper."

He had his thumb and forefinger on his brow and he massaged it hard. He stretched the skin so hard it felt as if it might split. "Well, why was your day so good, Margot?"

"We talked. I asked her if she was okay. Apart from this. I asked her, like we said we would."

"And."

"She didn't say a lot. But I had the impression that there's nothing really wrong. She's happy."

"She told you that."

"No. But she's not ashamed of herself. She's upset, I think, that we're upset. She told me she was glad we'd never been secretive about sex. That we'd always said it was healthy. Because she wasn't afraid."

He could hear her crying, almost silently, her breathing shallower now. "Well, I guess that makes us good parents," he said. "Doesn't it? She has such a healthy attitude."

Margot collected herself. "I have to go. When are you coming home?"

"I have more to do."

Behind her, in the mall, he could hear the spiralling calliope of mall music, the threads of fine-clothing music, the ice-cream music. The voices of children and the sounds of coin-operated animals. He saw Margot standing in a hallway that led to lockers and a bathroom and his two children eating off of plastic trays. Were they in her sightlines? Could she see what they were doing, who they were talking to, who was, perhaps, looking at *them*? In his mind's eye, he went up over all their heads, into the barn-like girders that flew into the atrium above the food court, and he pictured all the people there, moving from their seats back to their cars, or entering the building, their shopping lists hidden in their pockets. And he saw the shape of their movements as solid lines showing where they'd been, and dotted lines showing where they were going, and the place was a hive of possibility. *Anything* was about to happen. There would have to be lines for eye contact too, and even thoughts. Everything was connected to his children, to his wife, to him.

"Did you go to the police?"

"I'm going to finish this up and come home," he said.

"Peter."

"We'll talk about it when I get home." He closed a file on his desk. He'd just signed a letter that ended with the words, *Thank you for referring this genuinely pleasant young man to me.*

"I want you to think more about this. About what Richard said. She's seventeen. Lots of kids her age are sexually active."

He slapped the desk with his palm. "That's not the god-damned point, Margot! That's not the point!"

"Yes, it is!" she shouted back, and immediately lowered her voice. He imagined dotted lines converging on her in the hall where she was standing. "The point is that she's not a child anymore, Peter. The way we've learned that hurts us, but it doesn't change the fact of it."

"I have to go," he said, and he hung up.

IT WAS FULLY DARK WHEN PETER ARRIVED BACK AT THE POLICE station—a spring darkness, shot through with fragrances. The light from within the station was welcoming, making it seem like a place of succour or refuge. Detective Stone was on the desk and asked for someone to cover him when he saw Peter. He opened the little gate and gestured to the first room they'd sat in, earlier that day.

"Can I get you a coffee?" he asked.

Peter shook his head no and the detective turned and looked at the man who was now the duty clerk and gave him a half-wave. He waited for Peter to go through the door before entering and sitting across from him sideways, his hip to the tabletop. A few police officers passed by the window, and some of them looked in. It seemed to Peter that they knew him. He was no longer a citizen come to the police to learn something, or to report something. He was a case. They knew him.

Detective Stone opened a new file folder between them, and there were three or four blown-up print-outs of the two boys in the film, their faces degraded by enlargement. Peter imagined for a moment that these were pictures taken after an interrogation, the faces swollen with what it had taken to get the truth out of them. Stone spun the file around to Peter and Peter carefully drew the pictures toward himself. He looked back and forth between them. He lay his finger lightly on the picture of the bigger boy.

"Who's this one?" Peter said.

"I can't tell you his name."

He looked up at the detective. "Why."

"He's a minor."

"What about this one?"

"That one as well."

Peter lowered his eyes back down to the report that he'd revealed by sliding the pictures out of the file. He saw his daughter's name and his address, and then, below it, the words *Juvenile A* and *Juvenile B*. He stared hard at those denominations, and the masks of the degraded faces on the pages in front of him. Detective Stone slid the file away from Peter and turned it around. "You can charge a minor, but their names are protected."

"She knows their names."

"I know their names. But this one," he pointed to the second boy, "he's fifteen. This one's sixteen. So I can't tell you anything about them."

"What if they're tried in adult court?"

"Their identities would still be protected. And in any case, before you try them, you have to charge them."

"I'm charging them."

The detective swivelled his big frame around in the chair to face Peter. He closed the file and put one big hand over top of it. "Well, that's a problem. Since your daughter is of age, she becomes the complainant. You can't press charges on her behalf. She can, or we can, and—before you say anything—we have to feel a crime's actually been committed."

Peter stared at the closed file. He didn't want to annoy the detective. He thought if the detective said anything else that it could lead to a bad turning. So he stood up. "Well, I ought to talk to my wife and my daughter, then. I didn't know."

"Please sit down, Mr. Bowman. I don't think you understand everything yet."

"It's up to my daughter. I understand. My wife and I will sit down with her."

"Mr. Bowman, if your daughter presses charges, two things will happen. One is, these boys' parents will get lawyers, and the first thing the lawyers will do is lay countercharges. They'll say your daughter coerced *them*. But let's say, for whatever reason, they don't press their own charges. It'll go to court, and if the media covers it, and they will, the boys won't be named—but your daughter *will* be."

"Detective Stone—"

"I'm sorry, but that's the way it would work here."

"You can't tell me there's been no crime committed! You know boys, I'm sure you see kids like these . . ." he gestured hopelessly at the closed folder. "Look, Vanessa may be seventeen, but she's a child. And anyone who would let themselves be *used* like this would have to be—"

"Like I said, Mr. Bowman, the facts of the case—"

"There are two of them! They fuck her *up the ass*! You're telling me if they'd done this to her four months ago, when she was sixteen, that I could have laid charges?" The detective remained silent. Outside, in the hall, men swept silently past the window. No one had looked in when Peter raised his voice. He was alone with the facts of the case.

"There's only one thing that's actionable here," Stone said, "and unfortunately, it would be brought against your daughter. I'm not *going* to do that, but if someone walked in here and told me to make an example of someone, it'd have to be your daughter. And if either of these two boys' parents wished to, they could bring a charge of statutory rape against her." He waited a moment. Peter's mouth had closed to a thin white line. Finally, he sat down again. "Statutory rape is a charge that pertains to sex with any minor," the detective continued. "It's called statutory because it's deemed a minor cannot consent to sex, and therefore, the law calls it rape."

Peter's voice was thin. "I came in here to . . . how can you tell me there's nothing I can do? That it was *her* fault?"

"It's no one's fault, Mr. Bowman. That's what you have to understand. There was no crime committed."

Peter stood up and shoved the table back. Stone quickly flattened his hands against it to prevent it from striking him, but otherwise he remained still. Neither man spoke for a long moment. Then Peter said, "I'm her father."

"Yes," said Detective Stone with a single, emphatic nod.

"Do you have kids?"

"One of each."

"Me as well. I have a twelve-year-old son. What am I supposed to tell him?"

The detective stood up and swept the file to his side. "Don't tell him anything. It's none of his business." He waited a moment to see if Peter had anything else to say, and in his silence began to leave the room. "I'll tell you one more thing, in case it's something you're thinking of, Mr. Bowman. If you force your daughter to press charges, I won't be able to prevent anything that happens as a result. And there's a good chance that this will be the last time for a long time that anyone feels like talking to you." He went out the door. From the hallway, he said, "See the clerk. He'll have your tape."

WHEN HE FINALLY CAME HOME, IT WAS PAST MIDNIGHT, AND Peter went into the house silently and sat downstairs in the dark. He held the tape in his hands, this tape that now felt as if it could broadcast itself throughout the city.

Margot was in bed and so was Vanessa. Peter had gone downstairs, thinking he wanted to watch Eric sleeping. He went down into the basement, remembering the times when Vanessa was a baby and he'd get home after bedtime and go into her room to watch her sleep. The fragile lids under which her eyes would be flicking back and forth, the parted lips.

But what if once or twice he'd taken the precaution of stripping a bit of that simple safety away? By frightening her awake, or

pinching her hard enough to bring her out of the warmth of sleep? Then maybe she would have had the sense not to film herself having sex with two boys. What on earth could help him trace the contents of that tape back to the quietly sighing child under her covers?

When he got to Eric's room, he heard the sound of the boy's television from behind the door. The telltale sounds of cartoon lasers, the muffled cries of imaginary victims. He turned away and went silently up the stairs again.

In the living room, he put the videotape into the machine and turned the television on. He quickly muted the sound and waited for the old VCR to thread the images on the tape through to the TV. It was now at a spot near the middle of the tape. Someone had watched it that far. In the scene now playing, his daughter was performing fellatio on the two boys, alternating between them. From this scene they would remove their T-shirts, and she her underwear. Then would come the myriad sex acts. In silence, it was a sinister dumbshow.

He brought himself to look at his daughter, really look at her. He looked at the body that he sometimes, and with some shame, imagined under her clothes. Did she look like her mother, he sometimes wondered, and here he saw that she did, a little. But who she really looked like was him. She had his long, greyhound torso, his gangly limbs. The top of her pelvis poked out as his did, both of their flesh insufficient to contain their wild, oversized bones. In whatever way such an alchemy could be worked, it was his body on the television, except that it was his body as a young girl's. He felt the pained affection he'd felt for her when she was a child, aware of how delicate all of her was, and how tenderly he loved that frailty. What genius there was in nature, that it could tell him that even at this moment, when he was frightened and disgusted, this was still his child, the same one he had so instinctively wanted to protect. This was him, cut loose from the moorings of his being, and flung heedlessly into hers. But that did not make her separate from him.

He turned off the TV and went out to his car. In the station's interview room, he'd taken care to note the address of the boy called Juvenile B. The typed report had been exposed long enough for him to memorize it.

The fifteen-year-old's house was not far from Vanessa's school, although it was in the opposite direction from their house. It was now almost three in the morning, and when Peter got to the house it was dark. He parked the car across the street and killed the lights and engine. For five minutes he sat there in complete stillness, his hands palms-down over his knees. No cars went up or down the street, and nothing changed inside the houses that he could see. There was no one even watching television, no telltale dancing blue light. There was a jittery tension in his body; he gritted his teeth and could not relax his face.

The neighbourhood he'd come to was a mirror image of his own: he felt the people who lived in these houses would have been people he'd be comfortable with, if he met them at a school function, a barbecue, or a school play. He knew what kinds of cars would be in those garages, which magazines came to the houses, which newspapers. The fifteen-year-old's garage door was not open. (You did not fear your neighbours in such quarters, only that, if you did something such as leave a garage door open, you would stand out. Not just to thieves, but to those around you. You did not want to advertise that you were blasé about your possessions, or careless. These solidarities were the shibboleths of such neighbourhoods.)

Peter tried the front door of the house, gently. Just having the cold brass of the knob in his hand made him feel as if he had already done something wrong. The knob turned fractionally before meeting a resistance. He went around the side of the house, past the garage, to a door he assumed led to a mudroom. The outer portion of this door swung open freely. In fact, there was no mechanism there to keep it closed. An inner door was more firmly shut, but there was no deadbolt. He took a magnetic card from

his wallet, the one that admitted him to the hospital garage, and slid it into the door, just as he had seen it done in the movies. He entered the house.

Peter paused a moment in the hallway that led to the open part of the main floor to let his eyes adjust to the faint streetlight that suffused this part of the house. It was a vague light. It made all the objects around him seem composed of each other. There was no colour here. He could hear his heart in his neck, but otherwise, all was silent. After a few moments, the staircase to the second floor emerged out of the greyness, and he began to go up. The wooden banister under his hand was cool.

As he came toward the upper hallway, he began to hear the sounds of a sleeping household. To his right, and through a slightly open door, a man snored quietly. In the pauses between inhales, he could hear another's breathing, a sibilant but hollow sound that was almost exactly like Margot's breathing when she was asleep. Softer breathing came from the left. He continued down the hall. There were five more doors. One was open: a bathroom. Another was a narrow door, a closet of some kind. The other three were bedrooms.

He pushed the first door open. It slid against carpet. A crib, above which a mobile hung, stood out in silhouette against the back wall. A nightlight, plugged into the wall beneath the crib, projected the bars of the crib across the ceiling. The baby was sleeping on its stomach and had its head tucked, like a swan, into the warmth of its own body. He stepped away and closed the door. When his own children had been that small, such stillness and peacefulness seemed a signal to him that he and Margot were doing everything right. No child sleeps so soundly if it knows hunger or fear. This faceless infant was well loved, he thought. It did not yet know what kinds of people it lived with and that they could attract darkness.

The second door was the older boy's room. A pennant bearing the name of the baseball team Eric played on was on the door.

Pythons, it said. Maybe the boy even played with Eric, although he was likely to be on another squad, a boy Eric perhaps looked up to. Peter put the flat of his palm on the door and pushed it open, and the faint light from the hall seeped in, illuminating the bed and the body in it. He stepped into the verge, cutting the light out, and waited for his eyes to adjust. It smelled like Eric's room, a boyish smell cut with an edge of sourness. Peter could put his face in Eric's hair and smell the milky warmth of his scalp. Eric's lanky body was covered in a blond down, and he was shy of it. He was harmless. All he cared about was his video games and making his mother laugh. Peter thought, if he could, he would freeze him at this age, while he was still a delight.

But the smell in the room was also his smell. He recognized that he had brought his own funk along. He wondered why humans' instincts were so in abeyance that they could not smell a threat in their own burrow. He had not awakened to the threat in his household, in the body of his daughter. He'd been oblivious to it; it had moved through the rooms of his life like something familiar.

Peter stepped into the room. There was a bat on the floor—he touched it with the tip of a shoe and rolled it toward himself, and then pushed it silently under the bed. His eyes had adjusted and he could see the boy's face now, in profile against his pillow. He recognized the spiky blond hair over the forehead. He saw it in his mind's eye, bent down against the small of his daughter's back, her face buried in the boy's groin, the boy's eyes closed, as now, only more conscious, the lids clenching and unclenching. He knew, when he'd looked at the image, what the boy was feeling; there was no end to the likenesses he'd sensed when he looked at that video. He'd even remembered, for the first time in many years, his earliest kiss. It was on a dare, in a closet, and the closet was as dark as the boy's room. The girl's name was Casey. She was small and limber; he recalled that she was a gymnast. Her mouth had tasted metallic. Someone shouted "Time!" outside the

door, and they'd pulled away, and Peter had become immediately aware of the fact that his erection hurt. He was thirteen then. If they hadn't called time, if he'd been alone with her in there, would the urgency of the sensations in his body have compelled him to carry the encounter further? What if Casey had resisted him? What if she'd pushed him on?

His body felt cool in the comfortable dark of the boy's room, and except for the back of his neck, his skin was dry. He could see the outline of the boy's scapulae, the side of the multi-panelled cranium, the bone that was so fragile in babies that it was the one most frequently broken in newborns, the plates of the cranium sliding over the grey ocean below it.

The boy stirred in the bed, and Peter stilled himself. He heard him take a deep, waking breath, and the boy turned his head on the pillow, so that he was looking toward the foot of the bed. He called out quietly. He was seeing his father in the doorway, in the gloom. He got no answer and raised himself on one elbow and squinted out into the dark. Peter could see his face clearly now, there was no doubt in his mind, he would not be punishing the wrong person. The boy looked confused, and stayed silent, not certain of where he was, or even if he was dreaming.

"Go back to sleep," Peter said. He made no effort to disguise his voice. The stillness between himself and the boy drew out and neither of them moved. "Go back to sleep."

The boy let himself back down onto the pillow and pulled his covers about himself. In a matter of a few seconds, his breathing slowed down again, deep dreaming breaths, the boy's mind sliding to another place. Peter watched him.

THIS IS A LITTLE STORY THAT SOMETIMES ONE OF MY SONS ASKS me to tell. It's about a day in January when I was ten, when my little brother and I found a dead dog in the middle of the road. We'd just come out of Harrison Road and onto York Mills where it starts its long slow dip toward the intersection at Bayview Avenue. Adam—who's of course an uncle now, imagine—had his skates draped over his neck, the cold iron blades knocking up against each other, while I had mine in my bag. We each carried our own Stan Mikita stick. When the light changed, we crossed and headed down the hill toward the arena. It was very cold and getting dark, and the cars had their lights on. The ones heading in the direction of the traffic lights below were curving around a spot part-way down, and when we got there, we saw a big black newf lying there that had probably walked into traffic and been hit by a car coming over the hill. Other cars had nudged the dog lower, so it came to rest in the middle of the incline. The animal lay on its side, its nose pointing straight across the road, one yellow line disappearing under its back and another coming out under its belly. It looked like it had been struck by a cartoon arrow.

We knew dogs—we'd watched our father whelp pups in the basement of our house, in a little kennel made of plywood he'd knocked together for them. We'd seen them being born. They came out in shiny grey sacs, already struggling, and if the mother (our dog, Sam—we don't have dogs now, allergies) didn't free