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Force Majeure and Other Stories

by

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Abstract

Force Majeure and Other Stories explores the imperfect way people often make life-altering decisions. Many times, this results from circumstance — an unexpected situation requiring an immediate decision presents itself — but we also often bring the need for such decisions upon ourselves, when our dissatisfaction with the banality of everyday life leads to the desire to pursue an imagined, and many times idealized, alternate reality. This collection of short stories explores the factors that shape our decisions — from inertia to the strength of emotional ties. Each story in this collection follows a character who encounters such a decision and who must navigate not only the immediate repercussions of that decision but also mitigate the long-term consequences. Ultimately, *Force Majeure and Other Stories* celebrates the messy, chaotic way we move through life because it is precisely this that makes us human.

Table of Contents

Something Like Love.	1
Flip Side.	25
Breaking Point.	41
Force Majeure.	52

Something Like Love

It was something like love, this balance Eddie Ruth and Winston had managed to strike. After twenty three years of marriage, Eddie Ruth certainly wasn't *in* love with her husband. She hadn't been for quite some time. Though, really, she couldn't be sure that she'd ever loved him; that she even knew what love for a man felt like. And at forty three years old, Eddie Ruth thought this gave her reason to feel sorry for herself.

Still, she took care to make sure Winston never suspected this. She'd never found the ruse difficult to maintain, particularly with Winston so inclined to believe every word and gesture of love. Though she sometimes wondered if perhaps Winston wasn't as gullible as she believed; that instead she'd become so practiced in the lie that it had become its own warped version of truth. Eddie Ruth could accept responsibility for her part in the lie but, in his own way, Winston also perpetuated this skewed story of their lives. For instance, he never seemed happier than when he'd tease her about the day they'd met — when Eddie Ruth had quite literally been struck down by love.

They'd told the story over dinner at the French restaurant downtown or during drinks in the casino bar; each of their friends had heard it at least once. It didn't matter if it was the new neighbors across the street that they'd invited over to the house for cocktails or Winston's new stuffy boss who'd insisted they join him and his

young girlfriend for dinner; the story didn't vary. Each knew the part they must play — Eddie Ruth, the naïve love-struck college student who blushed at just the right moments; Winston, smiling indulgently at his wife, happily wearing the mantle of a man who had found himself unexpectedly befuddled by love.

The story, as they told it, went something like this: Eddie Ruth, a college sophomore, had met a thirty-year-old Winston only after he'd nearly run her over with his car.

Yes, they'd both nod emphatically, you heard that right. Nearly ran her over!

Luckily though, Eddie Ruth always said, she'd recently lost those fifty extra pounds she'd carried around for most of her young life.

Here she'd blush and look away, then Winston would take over.

“So she just sort of ricocheted off the front right bumper, then bounced along the sidewalk.” Winston would clap his hands together, shooting the top hand forward toward their listeners. “Finally, she stopped, arms and legs flung every which way.” Then Winston would bow his head, pinch the bridge of his nose, close his eyes for a moment as though the memory still pained him. “I was sure I'd killed her. Killed the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen.” He'd smile and touch her cheek — a brief caress with his thumb. And though the story was told for show, Eddie Ruth knew that, below the telling, there was love in this gesture. Or something like it.

“And I thought he was an angel.” She'd describe his long herringbone wool coat, dashing aviator sunglasses, and dark hair as she'd seen him from her vantage point on the sidewalk. And this line wasn't just for show; she had imagined him to be something celestial and magical — on that day at least.

Behind the scenes though, while she spoke her lines, Eddie Ruth couldn't help but hear her mother's voice, warning her even now against putting any man up on a pedestal. Her mother hadn't known the terminology to use, hadn't called it a savior complex, but all the same she had noticed Eddie Ruth's tendency toward idolizing men, so she spent a great deal of time trying to make Eddie Ruth self sufficient. Perhaps, Eddie Ruth always thought in later years, if her mother had been the more supportive sort, Eddie Ruth would have not felt the need to go running after the first man who paid her any attention. But that was an entirely different matter, one that didn't fit nicely into the story she and Winston told.

In fact, they largely glossed over all of the aspects of that day that might have made their listeners uncomfortable. When they told the story, Winston became the absent-minded driver. In truth, the accident happened only because Eddie Ruth had crossed against the light, stepping directly in front of Winston's car. And they certainly didn't mention that she had been hit while on her way to the hospital to visit her mother before surgery. Or that her mother died later that same day from complications.

Tidbits like those didn't make for a very thrilling love story; Eddie Ruth long ago decided she liked the story better the way she and Winston told it. Yet had her mother not died that day, Eddie Ruth felt fairly certain that Winston, who had followed her to the hospital to ensure she was, as she seemed to be, largely unharmed by the accident, would have apologized to her once again, held her small hand tightly inside his two larger hands for a moment, then said goodbye. Instead, Winston had been faced with ensuring the well-being of a woman who within the span of an hour

had been physically assaulted by a two-thousand-pound vehicle — his — and emotionally crushed when her mother had passed away on the operating table. That he hadn't immediately dashed away down the hospital's hall spoke volumes about his character, in Eddie Ruth's mind. Though what exactly it said, Eddie Ruth still, to this day, wasn't sure.

Their first meeting wasn't something Eddie Ruth thought their marriage had ever managed to escape. Winston, Eddie Ruth feared, could never quite shake the guilt of striking her down. Perhaps that guilt was the deciding factor in their lives together.

It wasn't just this one story that they'd re-casted, either. Over the years, they added to the stories they told, built a stable they could access as they needed. Yet the characters they played remained largely unchanged — Eddie Ruth, the love-struck college student, and Winston, the indulgent husband. And though perhaps these weren't quite the people they'd been at first, over the years, through the repeated telling of countless stories, they seemed to become more like the characters they'd invented than themselves.

Twenty-three years after the day they'd first met, they were working on building a new story that could later be shared over dinner with friends. It wasn't going well. In fact, they hadn't spoken to each other since they'd returned home earlier that afternoon from moving Robbie into his freshman dorm at Case Western. The dorms, reeking of perspiration and stale cigarette smoke, had been overcrowded

with anxious parents and their gangly, almost-men sons who wanted nothing more than for those same parents to be gone.

They'd both had headaches by the time they were ready to head home. Eddie Ruth blamed hers on Winston, for hurrying her along as she tried to say a proper goodbye. In truth, she'd imagined a scene like you might see on television, and though she was not naïve enough to believe it would be quite like that, she'd hoped for something close. Instead, there were no tears, and Robbie, who'd always been a nervous boy, seemed preoccupied with the awkwardness of hugging his mother in front of his new roommates. Winston simply gave Robbie a single, solid clap on the back, then put his arm around Eddie Ruth to steer her out of the small room.

In the car, Eddie Ruth fulfilled her longstanding role of navigator, giving Winston stilted directions back to the interstate; since then, there had been little conversation, except for when Eddie Ruth needed to use the rest area or asked Winston to stop so that she could get a soda. Instead, she spent the drive alternating between organizing her latest batch of collected obituary cut outs and reading a new novel about the zombie apocalypse.

Collecting obituaries had started with her mother's: first, struggling to gather accomplishments and other tidbits so that the boy at the paper could put something together, then, being distraught when she found a rather dismal portrait of her mother when the obituary did appear. Eddie Ruth took her mother's sparse obituary as a personal failing, so she began browsing through other write ups in the coming weeks, looking for clever ideas, should she ever be tasked with such a responsibility again. Clipping the best examples from the paper to save for reference seemed logical. And

though she could likely now write a better obituary than any writer charged with doing so, the habit had gotten worse.

To say that obituary collecting had grown into her zombie fetish wasn't entirely true, though Eddie Ruth could certainly draw a tenuous connection between the two. Years ago, Robbie, half mocking what he saw as his mother's peculiar habit of clipping obituaries, had bought Eddie Ruth her first zombie novel. On the inside cover he'd scrawled something smart-alecky about the people whose obituaries she'd clipped not being dead after all. Eddie Ruth was sure he never imagined that his gift might backfire as it had, giving birth to yet another quirk.

Winston did not want to hear about how Cecelia Poplins had passed away or how the South Korean villagers' preparations for the zombie apocalypse had been woefully inadequate, so he kept his eyes on the road and his attention focused on the AM talk shows they were able to pick up.

Several times during the drive, Eddie Ruth could tell that Winston wanted to talk, though he refused to start the conversation. She could certainly understand why, given recent events, he believed he should defer to her readiness to discuss what had happened between them, but Eddie Ruth firmly believed that if he felt the need for them to talk, he should simply *talk*. All of this beating around the bush made her head ache even more. And though later, while having dinner with their neighbors, she imagined they might lovingly discuss Winston's penchant for *not getting to the point of things*, at the time, there seemed nothing lovely about it.

For the last hour of the drive home, Winston took great pains to get his wife to pay him attention. For starters, he knew that she largely disagreed with the

conservative politics in the talk shows he chose to listen to. Usually, his listening to these programs elicited a reaction from Eddie Ruth. But, when that got him nowhere, she several times noticed him chuckling at the host's comments then looking toward her out of the corner of his eye to see if she'd noticed.

While she hadn't started off with the intention of ignoring him, Eddie Ruth was also not one to be outdone. The more Winston attempted to get her attention, the more she shut him out. In her mind, her husband deserved at least that. When he disagreed with a more liberal radio commentator, loudly guffawing then pounding the heel of his palm against the steering wheel, rather than ask what was troubling him, Eddie Ruth buried her nose further into her book.

This went on for awhile.

So, when Winston finally directly spoke to her, Eddie Ruth was, quite rightly she thought, even more filled with anger than she had been at the beginning of the car ride.

"Damn it, Ruthie, you can't just ignore me. No matter what I may or may not have done, you can't treat me like this." The vein on the side of his temple pulsed furiously, though his voice remained even.

Eddie Ruth hadn't intended for it to escalate to this point, not here, in the car, at least, but a small part of her was glad it had. "What? What do you God damn want, Winston?" She could feel the flush in her cheeks and noticed how the paperback book shook in her hands. Furious that Winston might notice this trembling, she chucked the book across the car so that it struck the driver's side window, just inches

in front of Winston's face. "Is it how I've cut my hair or how I should be reading something to make me smart?"

Winston, not used to hearing his wife speak to him, or to anyone for that matter, in quite this manner, seemed afraid. It seemed he certainly didn't know how to respond, so he said nothing.

Eddie Ruth though, had little intention of allowing him to get a word in to the conversation now that it had begun. She yelled, her voice filling the roomy sedan. She liked the way that it sounded, felt the adrenaline course through her body in a way that was unfamiliar to her. "Why can't you just ever come out and say what it is you want to say? Why do we have to dance about for two hours before we actually talk about anything?"

"Well, we're talking now." He smiled widely in her direction, but Eddie Ruth noticed the sides of his mouth quivering.

Earlier that day, she'd noticed how handsome Winston looked, taking in the campus, assessing this place where they would leave their only son. His wide stance, crossed arms, and surly countenance had made her glad to be by his side. Yet Eddie Ruth couldn't help but think how pitiful he now looked as he navigated the car: two bone-heavy, liver-spotted hands on the wheel. His belly had rounded out, his cheeks sagged down below his jaw-line. His eyes reminded her of the sad-eyed bloodhound her mother had brought home when Eddie Ruth was a little girl. How desperate he seemed for Eddie Ruth's attention. How *old*. This didn't even feel like a fair fight.

She sat back in her seat, crossed her arms against her chest. "What did you want to talk about?"

Winston brought his hand up, cupped it over his mouth, then slowly brought it down over his chin. "I can't say I remember, Ruthie."

Once home, Winston trudged upstairs to their bedroom, while Eddie Ruth slammed around the first floor of the house; more than anything, she wished that she'd never gotten so deep into the mess she was now in.

Eddie Ruth had found the envelope a little more than two weeks before Robbie was leaving for school. Winston, she knew, must have meant for her to find it. She'd never known him to be careless. Though she doubted he knew why he'd done it, it seemed to her his attempt at some level of truth between him.

The letter was in the lower right-hand drawer, the one that stuck, of her mother's wooden desk. She and Winston both hated the desk, and had long ago bought a new, smarter-looking replacement, but, over the years, it had served as a wasteland of papers, magazines, and the like that had not yet found their final destination. Eddie Ruth couldn't help but think it fitting that she found the envelope in her mother's desk, as though, somehow, despite being dead, her mother had reached out across the years with a final I told you so.

The envelope itself was white and letter-size, carelessly torn open along the flap so that jagged edges remained, framing a thick packet of folded handwritten pages and photos. She found no postage or handwriting on the front. Curious, Eddie Ruth pulled the packet from the jagged flap and unfolded the sheaf of papers. The writing on the pages was girlish, a careful, evenly measured blue scrawl, and it fully

filled each page. The photos distracted Eddie Ruth; at first, they seemed rather innocuous — a young girl sitting on a bed wearing cut-off jean shorts and a faded tight-fitting, red T-shirt. At first, Eddie Ruth thought it must be one of Robbie's girlfriends, and she felt unsure whether she should continue snooping through her son's things. Then, though, a shock of thick white hair — Winston's — peeked from the top of one of the last photos in the stack, barely visible behind the others.

Suddenly, she was flipping through the photos as quickly as she could: Winston, wearing the plaid Oxford she'd given him for his birthday two years ago, with his arm slung over the young girl's shoulders, Winston nuzzling this woman's neck, then each of them in the same bed from the first photo, in varying stages of undress, posing lewdly, laughing for the camera. The girl was attractive, certainly, barely looked older than Robbie, even when Eddie Ruth held her photo just in front of her nose.

Eddie Ruth thought she should feel disgusted, violated, furious. Instead, though she couldn't shake a vague sense that they had both been laughing at her, she didn't feel strongly about any of what she had found. In fact, what surprised her most about this discovery was her own blunted reaction: surprise, but not shock. She guessed she'd suspected this for years. Hurt, but not devastation. Eddie Ruth thought that this confirmed something that had been troubling her lately; that, what she'd called love all of these years, that muted trilling that happened whenever Winston came near, might not be love after all. Perhaps, for more than half of her life, she'd been mistaken about loving him.

That she hadn't heard Winston come in to the room wasn't entirely true, but she'd chosen to pretend that she did not hear the door open, or his footsteps clacking

across the wood floor, or the abrupt stop when he saw her sitting there with the papers and photos spread before her. From the corner of her eye she had seen him jam his hands into his trouser pockets, rock back on his heels and exhale, making a little sound like 'oh'.

He'd continued to stand there, breathing heavily, waiting. She'd been surprised by his silence.

When she finally spoke, she'd felt ashamed that her voice was shaky and too quiet. "Winston, there is nothing for us to talk about here. Now, I'm very busy trying to find this blasted paper. Please leave me to it."

She'd folded the papers with the pictures inside, as it had been, replaced it into the envelope and shoved it into the very back of the hidden drawer.

To divorce Winston after so many years seemed too drastic. Over the years the thought had crossed her mind frequently, but each time it had, she'd found one reason or another why she shouldn't: it wasn't fair to Robbie; it wasn't that her marriage was *bad*; and besides, where would she go? And, as her friend Ellen always said, being alone isn't any better than being lonely. Perhaps if she had ever loved someone else, the answer would have been different.

Now though, just hours after dropping Robbie at school, she stood in the kitchen, looking into the woods behind their yard; now, she could think of little reason to stay. Once again, it seemed she was waiting for Winston's lead. How many times had she stood in this very spot, waiting for Winston to descend, having worked

out a palatable resolution to whatever conflict they'd had. Now, the sound of Winston plodding around above her made her queasy; she knew he would soon want to talk.

Suddenly, it was as though she slipped out of character, and the idea didn't seem so ludicrous: leaving her husband. No longer being the other half of a couple. Not having to worry how Winston might clack his tongue and inhale deeply in reaction to every decision she made. Having no one to judge her actions but herself. She let the idea rest for a moment. Washed her hands at the sink, making sure the water ran hot enough so that it hurt, that she scrubbed her hands pink.

She decided to take the idea on a run — a good five miles or so should give her time to mull it over. She was a grown woman, after all. She'd been a good wife, perhaps too good. She'd raised her son in the way she'd intended to — he was a mostly well-adjusted boy about to start at a respectable school. He, she was sure, would not be tormented by his upbringing in the way she had been. Or, rather, if he was, she knew she had given her best, that she could have done no differently by him.

She didn't need to wait for Winston to come downstairs. Perhaps they would talk later, but just as likely they would not. In fact, they might never have to speak again. That the decision was Eddie Ruth's to make both thrilled and scared her. Almost giddy, she took the steps two at a time.

In the bedroom, Eddie Ruth found Winston sitting on their bed, staring into the closet, a Bible in his hands.

"Ruthie." His kept his voice quiet, even. "Ruthie, I've been reading and I think I understand what's wrong. Why you're so angry with me."

Eddie Ruth had long admired her husband's faith, had felt jealous that he could embrace something so completely, that he could find comfort and certainty when she could not. Now, though, it made him seem condescending and intolerant. Ruthie thought that the Bible in his hand only meant that his guess at what was *wrong* with her couldn't be further from the truth.

She walked into the closet, picked up her running shoes, and flipped the thick book up a bit with her fingertips on her way back past him. "So that you don't have to wonder anymore — I think I'm going to leave you. I'm going for a run to see if I change my mind."

Eddie Ruth expected her heart to race, to flutter, but it only continued to thump evenly in her chest. She smiled in the way she used to when she tried to seduce him.

Winston, perhaps too stunned to respond, sat there with his mouth pursed and the Bible clutched in his lap, following her progress across the room.

She pulled her running clothes from the dresser. As she pulled her jeans and polo off, she was not discreet, instead looking her husband full in the face as she pulled her sports bra over her head. He finally looked away, down toward the closed Bible in his hands.

"I didn't sleep with her, if that changes your mind at all. I couldn't."

Eddie Ruth saw the shame color his cheeks. Of course, Winston would be most ashamed not by his infidelity but instead that he hadn't been able to consummate the affair. It would have been better, she thought, if he hadn't told her that.

Outside, the air felt brisk and soon she was warm from running. At the bottom of their neighborhood, where normally she turned right she made a left, deciding to tackle the large hill that she largely avoided. The hill was a hazard in the winter, become a slalom course for cars any time the roads became slick. By the time she got to the top of it, the entire back of her legs burned with the effort and it was no longer a question of whether she should leave Winston.

She imagined how it felt to be single. Winston certainly hadn't been a bad husband, and she committed herself to not portraying him as such. He had provided well for her, for Robbie, had worked in a dreary office every day so that they would want for nothing. He had never been arrested, or cheated on her, even now, after he'd rented a motel room with precisely that intent.

She contemplated how she would tell her friends, the girls from her office, their pastor at church. She imagined herself sitting in coffee shops, cupcakes or some other pastry in front of her and Ellen, or whichever of her friends' turn it was that day. She wouldn't be dramatic about it, well, except perhaps with Ellen, who seemed to enjoy stories more when they were laced with drama or particularly morbid details.

Single Eddie Ruth would be a straight shooter. Everything would be on the table. There would be no glossing over things they didn't fit well into the story. She would not censor herself.

She expected that leaving Winston would be more difficult than it was. That she'd struggle to get out of bed in the morning or have little to fill her days. That was

how it always seemed to go in stories. Instead, to her surprise, Eddie Ruth slipped easily into her new life.

The 'Leaving Winston' story, or the telling of it, didn't quite go in the way she imagined it would. Her friends didn't seem surprised, and she never made it to church to tell the pastor. She figured Winston could handle that.

She found an apartment in a complex not far from the dentist's office where she worked. The apartment reminded Eddie Ruth of a Palm Springs crime scene she'd seen in a 1980s crime show. Inside the circle of apartment buildings it was though time had frozen sometime around mid-June.

It wasn't ideal, but it would do for now. The inside of the apartment wasn't much better, but it was certainly large enough for Eddie Ruth. Still, the gold-plated fixtures and lights that had been chosen because they fit well with complex's exterior theme left much to be desired. She set herself to the task of decorating, using the credit card that she shared with Winston, and whether Winston took the mounting charges as part of the penance Eddie Ruth was inflicting on him or simply didn't care, he did not challenge her. She bought a king-sized bed, bigger than the one she'd shared with Winston, a full living room set, a simple wooden kitchen table with four sturdy, unadorned chairs, and silk sheets that she thought felt a little too slick to sleep comfortably on.

The sheets made her think of sex, a topic that she wasn't used to allotting much time to lately. More particularly, they made her think of sex with someone other than Winston. That she'd never slept with anyone other than Winston hadn't

often troubled her. Though she had never intended to be one of those women who only had sex their husband, that was how it had worked out.

In theory, it seemed an easy enough goal to set: getting herself laid. First, she tried flirting with the men who delivered her living room set, but that effort went entirely unrewarded. Flirting with strangers, apparently, did not come naturally to her, and by the end of their visit the two men seemed decidedly concerned about her mental stability.

She thought she might have a better shot when her friend Ellen and her latest boyfriend, so new-and-unlikely-to-stick-around that Eddie Ruth never bothered to learn his name, suggested that she go out on what was certainly *not* a blind date with a friend of theirs; just a dinner with a new friend. “Ease yourself back into it,” Ellen said. Eddie Ruth wasn’t entirely sure what *it* might be or if she’d ever been immersed in *it* a first time. But this way, at least she wasn’t doing the chasing. And while she didn’t quite feel ready to cry lonely, it might be nice to get out of the house.

She’d taken care to arrive late, had forced herself to sit back down at her kitchen table and read a chapter in her book before leaving the apartment. She and Winston had spent far too many dinners imagining together why some woman continued to sit alone at the bar, far past the time it became apparent to that no amount of glancing at the door or her watch would summon her companion. Eddie Ruth did not want to ever be that woman.

Craig had called the night before and suggested they meet at a restaurant he wanted to try. When he asked if she’d been there, she’d lied, said she hadn’t, that it sounded terrific. In fact, she’d been there once before, years ago, with Winston —

one of those too-dark places where you can barely read the menu because the only light source seems to be a small candle on the table.

Eddie Ruth did not find Craig terribly attractive, even though she guessed he was a handsome man. Her mother would have called him a gentleman; his manners were flawless. He stood when she arrived, took her coat, pulled out her chair, told her it was nice to meet her and that she looked lovely.

Eddie Ruth thanked him, smiled shyly as she took her chair. Picked up her menu to avoid the awkward silence that she was sure would follow. She couldn't help wondering what the hell she'd been thinking.

“Ellen tells me you're into zombies?”

She looked up quickly, tried to discern if he was mocking her. He didn't seem to be. “Yes, a little bit.”

A healthy Zombie Squad debate as an ice breaker; surely, not something Eddie Ruth would have ever expected, but a pleasant surprise.

Perhaps he was a good-looking man after all. When Craig was younger, Eddie Ruth guessed he'd been awkward, but he'd aged well: tan, in good shape, and a touch of gray at his temples. He dressed sharply — a sport coat, pressed khaki slacks, and brown shoes with a high shine — making Eddie Ruth wonder if he had one of the ladies at the department store help him piece his clothing together; only a few men, Winston being one of them, could dress themselves that nicely.

Maybe not perfect, but certainly a pleasant evening. Yet it was as though Eddie Ruth couldn't view the evening through the correct lens. Everything remained somewhat out of focus, distorted, so that she couldn't trust that she was seeing what

was really in front of her, but rather what she'd conditioned herself to see. She couldn't process anything without wondering what Winston might have thought of it and how they might later relay the same story to their friends.

They'd tell it as though Eddie Ruth had a momentarily lapse from her *real* life, that she somehow ended up with her on a date with a kind-enough man, funny even, but *certainly no Winston!*

That she'd intended to but then hadn't slept with him would be omitted. Details like that nearly always made things awkward.

They wouldn't say that Eddie Ruth hadn't been surprised when she'd ended up at his house; she'd suggested it. Or that she'd doubted she'd find a nicer man, and he'd seemed to think she was lovely; he'd kept touching her hand and arm during dinner, laughing even when her joke fell flat, smiling kindly when she'd mistakenly mentioned Winston. Sooner or later, she'd need to move on. Yet, no sooner had she pushed him against his front door and begun kissing him, her arms twisting around his neck, snaking up his shirt, pulling at his belt, she knew, felt it deep in her gut, that she needed to leave. Like a warning bell trilling in her head, all she seemed able to think was *Too soon! Too soon!*

They also wouldn't mention that she'd cried nearly the entire drive back to her apartment.

The next week, Winston finally came to the apartment. She'd refused to answer his calls; she hadn't seen him in nearly two months.

Robbie, he told her, was coming home and did she want to be the one to tell him what had happened. He didn't want to say something that would make things worse. He stood there awkwardly, having placed one foot on the doorstep before realizing that she did not plan on inviting him in. The stance left him off balance and he'd had to put a hand on the door jamb to keep himself steady.

She nodded, said, "I'll call him, but I'll imagine he'll want to stay at the house." She'd put off telling Robbie, precisely because she knew he'd be angry with her; and because she knew he'd worry.

"I don't suppose you'd come home for dinner then?"

Eddie Ruth just shook her head, but felt angry. They'd never talked more about his affair; there'd been no apology, no explanation. It just sat there, a hard, heavy fact between them. So how dare he look hopeful? Why did he presume he had any reason to even hope?

When she took a step back and put her hand on the door to close it, Winston seemed to misunderstand the gesture, thought that she was finally taking a step back as a way to invite him in.

He shifted his weight forward onto his front foot, then, mid-shift realized his mistake and tried to adjust, but too late.

He tumbled forward onto the floor, missing Eddie Ruth only by inches.

She started to bend down, to touch his shoulder, make sure he was all right. But before she reached him he pushed himself up on his knees.

"Damn it, Ruthie. I'm fine." His face was red with the effort of getting to his feet or perhaps with embarrassment, though Winston didn't often become

embarrassed. She saw that his shirt had come un-tucked; his skin stretched over his belly.

To break the silence, she offered him a seat on the couch, which he quickly declined, making the excuse that he had somewhere to be.

After he left, Eddie Ruth couldn't stop worrying that perhaps she didn't know her husband at all. This Winston that had just left seemed nothing like the man she'd met that first day, that man who had stood by her side all of these years, who had played the dashing hero in the story of their lives together.

Had she, for all of these years, loved nothing more than a figment of her imagination? Yet, if this were the case, there were real-life moments she'd used to build this fictitious man: Winston who brought her tulips every birthday, who tossed toddler Robbie lovingly into the air, who had diligently saved receipts and spent hours poring over their tax returns so that Eddie Ruth never had to worry. Surely those things meant something, even if not quite what she'd wanted them to mean.

She went to Thanksgiving dinner because Robbie asked her to. At least, that was what she told herself. She didn't like to think that she was lonely. She imagined Winston and Robbie sitting by the fire, their feet kicked up on ottomans, catching up on stories of the past months apart. Eddie Ruth's chair, she feared, had been pushed back into the corner, where her own mother's desk had once stood.

Though she agreed to go, she drew a line at cooking the meal, offering through Robbie to bring dessert only.

Dinner had been better than she'd expected; and though she'd intended to stand by and watch Winston fumble through dinner preparation, she'd been surprised to find him a rather nimble cook, closing cabinets with his elbow while transporting casserole dishes, loosely measuring ingredients as though he did this daily.

But it was the well-designed menu that made Eddie Ruth wonder who'd given him instructions on what to buy. Turkey, good-sized; cranberries, fresh; stuffing from scratch, chicken broth, green beans, and fried onions. Perhaps he was seeing someone who'd assembled the shopping list for him. Eddie Ruth hoped, if there was another woman, Winston wouldn't mention her. She certainly didn't want to ask, felt afraid to know the answer, but also didn't trust herself with being surprised with the news.

She'd gone to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of wine, but she found herself quickly in the mix of things, mashing and whipping potatoes, adding flour to the grease to make a gravy. Winston didn't abandon his post as she'd expected, but instead stayed in the thick of it with her. He was nervous, she could tell, but seemed glad to have her there. They prepared the dinner in a coordinated dance that they'd never before been able to manage.

Winston had smiled at her, brushed his lips across her forehead as he reached above her for a baking dish. She'd been startled and so hadn't had time to object, though even if she would it seen it coming, she didn't think she would have shied away. He smelled lovely, like a woodsy curry that made her want to bury her nose against her chest. Tonight he looked quite like he had the morning they'd dropped Robbie off; how she remembered him looking for most of their marriage.

Robbie buffered the dinner conversation, which was nothing new, their relationship having hinged on Robbie for quite some time. He talked in the quick nervous stream he'd had since he was little, as though he'd stored up a novel's worth of tidbits to share with them and she wondered if he and Winston had talked at all in the days Robbie had been home.

With his son sitting next to him, it was easier to remember a younger Winston. Present-day Winston even seemed younger; his jowls smoothed, his belly not nearly so round. Maybe she'd been wrong earlier in the kitchen; maybe he hadn't been cooking or eating much at all since she'd left.

Robbie ate quickly then ran back to the game he'd been watching on television, leaving Eddie Ruth and Winston sitting across the table from each other. Before, Winston would soon have followed Robbie into the living room, gestured to Robbie to move his legs, give his old man a place to sit, and left Eddie Ruth to clean up after their meal. It wasn't that Winston wouldn't have helped, Eddie Ruth realized now, but he'd never been asked, didn't realize that perhaps that was expected of him. That his wife would have taken that as a sign of his love.

Now though, they both sat across from the other at the table, not sure how this dinner would end.

"Everything was very good." Eddie Ruth said finally. Complimenting the dinner still seemed proper protocol, even when the dinner had been cooked by your ex-husband. "You're an excellent cook, Winston."

He nodded, smiled a bit, like he was going to make a joke about his cooking, but instead turned serious. "Ruthie, do you ever think about coming back?"

“No.” She answered before she thought about it, but knew it was the truth.

“No, honey, I don’t.”

He didn’t seem to have heard her. He seemed have worked out a script of things he wanted to say, and despite her response, seemed determined to get through it. “Things could work out for us, you know.” He stood, walked around the table, pulled out the chair next to her. He sat down, put her hand in his, held them there. “I just want you to know that I’m ready to do whatever you need me to do.”

“I know, Winston. This isn’t your —”

“Oh, the girl was a mistake, a terrible mistake. I don’t want to make excuses, but I was in the middle of it before I knew it. And I couldn’t quite figure out how to get out without looking like the old fool I was.”

Eddie Ruth was tempted to cradle his face in her hand, to tell him it was all right. She saw then how easily she could slip back into this old pattern, yet felt quite sure that their marriage could never again be quite what it had been. It would be simple enough though — another revision to their story. Now, they would be two equal players sharing the stage. She saw how this whole mess could become just an episode in their lives together.

“How do you know you love me, Winston? How can you be sure this isn’t just some story we’ve told ourselves so often that we each believe it?” She made sure to keep her voice quiet, so that Robbie wouldn’t hear them over the television.

He sat back in his chair, dropped her hand, folded his arms. “I feel like there’s an answer you’re expecting to hear.”

She shook her head, assured him there wasn't. "I can't answer it. I wondered if you could."

When he said nothing, she rose from her chair, left her plate sitting on the table. As she passed behind him she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and knew she wouldn't be in this house again.

He followed her to get her coat, stood quietly while she said goodnight to Robbie, then to the door. "Good night, Winston."

He smiled, touched her cheek — a slight caress with his thumb. And under that, there was something, if not love. "Good night, Ruthie. Take care of yourself."

Yes, Eddie Ruth realized, what she'd felt for Winston *had* been something like love. She didn't look back when she heard the door close behind her.

Flip Side

Every Saturday, Greg showered, then quietly pulled on his workpants and boots while his wife, Charlotte, slept in their bed. Then coffee, brewed stronger than Charlotte liked, before heading to the garage to strip the insulation off whatever copper wire he'd managed to accumulate from work that week. The garage, like the rest of the house, like the rest of the neighborhood for that matter, was nothing special — a one-car garage with a rusty red Sears lawn mower bought on clearance; a mammoth, carefully crafted workbench built with plywood and two-by-fours left over from finishing the basement; a peg board that housed Greg's meticulously cared for collection of tools. Not much, but it was all Greg's.

Lately, he'd been leaving the door from the garage to the house open, keeping an eye turned toward the television as he sliced the plastic casings from the wire. Several weeks before, Ugandan wildlife officials had set free the largest family of captive gorillas ever released into the wild. To capitalize on the release, the Ugandan government set up cameras throughout the forest and tagged the animals with tracking sensors so that their every moment could be streamed across the internet and television.

The gorillas had been released on the night of his sixteen-year-old daughter Julie's first date. Greg would never forget the nervous energy rolling off his daughter that night as they watched the television together. How excited she'd been that she'd

no longer have to go hide in the library to eat her lunch! No more mocking or teasing, or random laughter as she walked by. This one date, Julie was convinced, would rocket her into a whole other stratosphere of popularity.

Greg had met the boy before, done work for his father. He knew the kind of boy too well: popular, polo-shirt-wearing, and ran with a crowd that Greg knew, God love her, his daughter did not. He'd worried it was a mean-spirited prank, had even pulled Charlotte aside the night they'd found out; having seen the same thing done to girls like Julie when he himself was in high school. But the boy had called several times, making Julie blush, turn her back, and talk quietly so that Greg could not hear. "Stop being such a cynic all the time," Charlotte had told him, kissing his cheek and running her hands up and down his arms.

Julie'd spent a good part of the day in the bathroom, curling her hair, carefully concealing her pimple crop. Once dressed, she'd sat carefully on the edge of the couch, not wanting to wrinkle her dress. Greg had told her she looked beautiful.

Then seven o'clock. No boy. On the television, the Ugandan officials had begun banging on the cage side with batons in a poor attempt to coax the gorillas from the safety of their pen. Greg had clenched his fists in his lap, looked sidelong at his daughter who stared straight ahead with her lower lip caught between her teeth.

Eight o'clock. No boy. The officials had begun to yell at the animals, who still had not emerged, banging the side of cage in what had almost become a thoughtless, rhythmic beat. A tear or two on Julie's cheek, but no words. He'd wondered whether she yet realized it was all a hoax; figured she had.

Nine. Still no boy, though Greg, at least, had stopped waiting. He and Julie had continued to sit wordlessly on the sofa. Then the first gorilla's large, leathery face — inquisitive or afraid, Greg wondered — had peeked out from the darkness. Watching, he'd thought only of his soft-bellied daughter, next to him on the couch, trying to pretend that she was not devastated and heartbroken. Whatever the reason, from that moment on, he'd kept tabs on the gorillas the way a father does with a child.

This morning, three weeks into it, news reports featured the gorillas' veterinary doctor who suspected one of the youngest gorillas, a female named Cora, was close to death. Her decline had been swift, veterinarians speculated on what might be causing her deterioration. For days, none of the 6.3 million people watching around the globe saw her eat or drink. Instead, she spent hours curled at the base of a huge, vine-covered tree, every now and then softly groaning when her mother came close. As if to confirm the latest doctor's grim prognosis, up flashed video of Cora separated from her family while the gorilla Greg knew to be Cora's mother paced between Cora and the rest of her brood.

Greg cursed the television; he knew from the moment he saw their release that the animals had never had a chance.

Better, Greg thought, to focus on the copper anyway. He had no business getting caught up in gorilla drama halfway around the world. Julie had been invited to some summer school in Georgia to study the mating habits of frogs, and Greg'd be

damned if she wasn't going because he couldn't afford it. Like every parent, he guessed, he wanted a better life for his daughter.

Not that he minded his lot. He didn't regret any of it, but he knew things had been harder than it might have been if twenty years ago he'd never seen beautiful red-headed Charlotte twirling barefoot around his friend's living room at a holiday party. Like so many people they knew, he and Charlotte had been young and in a hurry to get their life started: Marriage. An apartment. Two jobs each to pay for that apartment. Dropping out of college. Julie.

In Greg's mind, Charlotte had given up far more than he had. His future before Charlotte: maybe community college, a decent but go-nowhere job in some cubicle farm, a fair dose of drinking and lots of solitary television watching. Charlotte though had the quickest wit he'd ever encountered. If she wouldn't have married him, Greg imagined Charlotte would've lived in some scene he'd plucked from a magazine ad: skyscrapers, briefcases, brightly colored drink, all against a background of classical music.

By the time he finished with the copper, Charlotte was at the kitchen table, a bowl of cereal in front of her. Greg leaned down, kissed his wife's head.

"Done already?" Charlotte asked.

"Not as much there as I thought. I have that side job for that doctor today, so I've got to get going again in a minute. Still worried though."

The side job today might pull in a few hundred, and Greg's largest haul of copper ever had only brought in five hundred. The price of copper had dropped though, right after Scott died, so he couldn't expect nearly that much now.

“Won’t be the end of the world if she doesn’t go, you know. There’s no harm in missing some summer school. She’ll have another shot, a smart kid like her.”

“No.” Greg crossed his arms, shook his head, leaned against the counter and looked Charlotte in the eye. “We’ll figure it out.”

Greg couldn’t help but think of the girl gorilla, lying dejected on the forest floor. He told himself to stop being dramatic.

Charlotte had asked him to drop a box of Julie’s baby clothes over to Scott’s widow on his way to this side job. Greg hadn’t been to Scott’s house since the wake, when the small colonial, in need of a coat of paint, had been filled with dozens of mourners wondering just how they had ended up there — at a funeral for a man not yet turned thirty.

Greg sat in his truck for several minutes, inspecting the wraparound porch Scott had restored the summer before he died. It was a good porch, he knew that without looking, yet he stayed still, a grown man afraid to walk up and knock on a door. Was he worried she’d be angry at him? He knew she wasn’t. He knew she didn’t blame him; she’d told him that herself. Rather, Greg suspected, he was worried about himself, that seeing Scott’s widow would bring all of his guilt surging forward. Even if she didn’t know it, Greg knew — he was to blame that the woman in that house was raising her daughter alone.

Maybe that was why he couldn't get the images out of his mind: Scott, whistling one minute, then dead, sprawled and misshapen on a freshly waxed gymnasium floor.

When he finally worked up the courage to make his way to the house and knock, Scott's widow, Grace, answered quickly and Greg suspected she'd been watching him through the window. She wore sweatpants and a tattered T-shirt; looked like she'd had a rough night of drinking the night before, though Scott always said she didn't drink. Though not quite the Grace he remembered, she was still a nice-enough-looking woman.

Capable — that was the word that came to mind when Greg thought of Grace. Yet this couldn't be further from how Scott had described her. Skittish, restless, often difficult to please. Sometimes, Scott said, it felt like she'd roam the house at night, looking for reasons to fault Scott, to berate him. Right before they'd found out she was pregnant, Scott told Greg he couldn't take it anymore; he was going to leave her. Help her move to an apartment or, worst case, back to her parents' house. That he'd made a mistake getting married so young; that it would be better for both of them if he just set things right now.

Greg couldn't understand how they'd been married in the first place. The Scott he knew was a consummate prankster, screwing a guy's tool bag to the floor so that he nearly fell over when he went to life it, tipping a Johnny over with a guy in it, just because there was a score to be settled. All in good fun, but never a dull day at work with Scott.

But then the baby girl, and things had been better for the last few months before Scott died. Grace had settled well into being a mother. Her attention focused on her daughter, she'd found little reason to hound Scott.

With their daughter, now a toddler, held securely against her hip with one arm, she leaned forward and wrapped her free arm around Greg's shoulders, gave him a kiss on the cheek. "It's so good to see you, Greg. Always good to see you."

Though he'd meant to ease the cardboard box down just inside the door, a side of the worn box gave way, causing it to tumble out of his grasp, startling the baby so that she began to cry.

He felt a flush on his face and skittishness overtook him just like it had at work after the accident, when he'd have to wipe drops of sweat from his brow before snipping a wire, when his shoulders tensed and heart skipped at the sound of a drill crashing against the concrete floor behind him. Before the accident, he was as steady as they came: a staple gun fired two inches from his ear by some novice carpenter barely made him blink. Now, standing in front of Grace, it was like Scott had died just yesterday.

"You okay?"

Greg took a deep breath, ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Fine. Fine. Don't worry about me. How are you doing? You look well."

"We're making it." She made a good attempt at a smile, almost managed to pull it off. "I'm thinking of moving in with my mother."

"Oh, that's good." Greg knew then she must be hard off, to be moving back in with her folks. Scott had hated Grace's mom, a drunk who, though harmless, never

had a nice word to say about her daughter. “Let us know what we can do to help you out.”

Uncomfortable silence. Neither of them, it seemed, wanted to leave the other. Perhaps Grace, like Greg, enjoyed how when they were together it was as though Scott was just out of sight.

Finally, Greg leaned in again, gave Grace a hug, promised that Charlotte would call again soon.

Then, on to the doctor’s house: two-story with a three-car garage — an exceptional house in an exceptional neighborhood. A house that could swallow Greg’s house whole and you’d never know the difference.

The boy who opened the door looked about sixteen, Julie’s age, but that’s where the similarities ended for Greg. Shoe-polish black hair and pasty white skin paired with a black T-shirt he wore with the word Korn in jagged white letters across the front. Ear pierced with the hole stretched to the size of a quarter, held open by a black rubber ring. A spiked black leather collar wrapped tight around his neck, he was taller than Greg by about six inches.

Without a word, the boy turned away, leaving the front door gaping behind him.

Greg followed him through the entry way into a kitchen about halfway remodeled, eyed the marbled red ceramic tile covering the floor and could tell they’d brought someone in to do it; the lines too perfect to be a doctor’s work.

“Your parents here?”

The boy, who said his name was Travis, shook his head, leaned on the countertop, resting his elbows in front of an open laptop. “You want some coffee?”

“I’m good.” Greg heard a commentator’s voice from the computer mention an extraction effort. “You watching about those gorillas?”

“They’re going to pull them out. Tranquilize them or some shit.”

“Think they should just leave them alone, if you ask me.”

Travis shrugged and pointed to the basement. “Panel’s down there. My dad says if you need any help or something, I’m supposed to *be your guy*.” He shot finger guns in Greg’s direction. Greg could picture the doctor making the same motion this morning as he walked out the door.

The panel that needed to be changed out sat in the far corner of the basement, behind a mountain of odds and ends that Greg guessed was Travis’ old stuff. He set to work clearing a path, pushing aside dust-covered strollers and trash bags of clothes, little blue stuffed bears he could never imagine that kid upstairs playing with. A kid’s pair of trousers and a sweater vest fell out of one of the bags onto the floor. Greg picked them up, wondering what had happened to Travis to change him from the boy who’d worn these clothes into the kid he’d met upstairs.

Kids change though. Greg knew that well enough, had watched Julie morph from a friendly, outgoing kid who played kickball with the neighborhood kids to a sullen, unsure teenager with a tendency to cry for days and hide under her blankets. Greg thought she needed a change of pace, a summer with new kids doing something she loved. Surely, that would set her on the path to get out of his town. It had to.

Then, the shoe box. The damn shoebox might as well have had a heavenly light shining down on it. Greg reached to move it with one hand, had assumed that it was empty or held a pair of worn shoes. A layer of dust covered the box; it looked, like the rest of the pile Greg worked to move, as though it had not been touched in years. It took a moment for him to process what happened. One second, the box in his hand, swinging toward the new pile he was creating. Then, the box giving way under the weight it held, falling open, releasing four rubber-band-bound stacks of bills onto the floor. Not singles either, but rather dozens of crisp twenty and hundred dollar bills. Greg left the fallen money on the floor and pulled the lid entirely off the shoe box, finding what he quickly counted as eleven additional stacks of bills, each about an inch thick.

Thousands of dollars. At least. Maybe tens of thousands. A lifetime of biology summer camps and a semester of college and a bundle of cash left on the front porch of Scott's house.

Greg had never known someone with enough money to leave a stack of it forgotten in a cardboard shoes box thrown in with a pile of castaways. He quickly scooped up the fallen money, replaced it in the box, closed the lid. He knew he should place it far in the back of the pile, against the wall so that he'd have to scale the mound of bags and boxes to reach it again. He didn't though, instead laid it carefully at the foot of the pile, then threw a brown corduroy jacket on top of it.

He didn't have to make a decision right then, did he? Only then did he realize that he had been contemplating *stealing* from this man who'd let him into his house, left him alone with his son.

Anger. Sudden and at himself mostly — he wasn't a thief, yet here he sat, contemplating how easily he could place this money into his tool bag, how, if anyone even noticed it gone, they would likely blame the boy upstairs or one of the friends that he surely brought into this house.

Had he found his price then? Was easy access to a shoebox of cash all it took for words like honesty and integrity to lose all of their meaning?

When the door to the basement opened, Greg couldn't help from turning to make sure the shoebox was well covered. Travis loped down the stairs, stopped on the second stair from the bottom, pulled a magazine from his back pocket and sat down, his legs spread wide, blocking the entire width of the stairway. He rested his elbows on his knees as he opened the magazine. He didn't look at Greg.

Greg wondered if they boy hadn't been charged with keeping an eye on him, and though he normally would have bristled at the thought, now there was only guilt. Maybe he needed to be watched after all.

Greg jumped like a firecracker when Travis spoke.

"They're going after the gorillas. Helicopters just took off and they're sending a truck out too. Trying to save that girl." Travis looked up from his magazine, gestured toward the panel. "How's it going?"

"All right."

"You've been doing this a long time? This work, I mean."

"Long time." Greg didn't want the company, but having a watchman did keep him from transferring stacks of bills into his bag.

"I stuck a fork in a light socket once."

Greg turned away from the panel, shook his head. “Not the brightest kid, huh?”

Travis laughed, set the magazine down next to him on the step. “No, guess not. Keep telling my dad that — he wants me to be a doctor. I had my way, I’d rather be a circus clown, but maybe I’ll do this instead.”

Greg knew the kid was testing him, measuring his reaction against what his father might say. “Well, most days I feel like I’m one step up from the guys picking up the elephant shit.”

“You get to play with electricity.” He looked thoughtful for a second. “But my dad does get to play with tits all day.”

“What?” Surely Greg misheard the kid.

“Plastic surgeon.” He stood up from the stairs and held both his hands out, made an elaborate squeezing motion, then headed over toward the panel, pulling up his jeans from where they rested low on his hips. “Can I help?”

Greg eyed the shoebox on the floor, inches from Travis’ black boot. “Look kid, go for the tits, this isn’t the sort of thing for you.”

Travis crossed the basement, peered over Greg’s shoulder. “Have you ever gotten shocked? I bet it’s wicked.”

“Yeah,” Greg said. “It’s wicked all right.”

Wicked, in the sense of terrible and unjust, rather than wicked cool — maybe. Still, not even close to the words that ran through his head the day Scott died.

A lift would have made all of the difference. With a lift the job would have taken a few hours — tops — but without it, they’d had to push to be done by three.

They'd started the day slowly navigating the rafters as they changed out fixtures, but at some point (lunch?) carelessness had set in. Greg hadn't been paying attention to Scott — he hadn't watched his apprentice closely for quite some time — so it was only when he heard Scott cry out that he looked up. Only one reason Greg knew of that a man screams like that.

Was it the electricity or the fall that had killed him? Greg had never been sure. All he knew was that after that first scream, Scott had tumbled silently from the rafters to the gym floor below. The rest of it Greg remembered like a news report: his own yelling, wanting to believe Scott was still there to hear him, knowing he wasn't, scrambling as fast as an old man could down toward the floor, calling 911 from his radio.

“It's not wicked, kid. Don't fool yourself.”

Travis nodded, continued to watch over Greg's shoulder. This made Greg nervous.

He stayed there, silent, until Greg struggled to reach behind a bundle of wires. Then, Travis reached over Greg's shoulder, pulled a cluster of wires back out of Greg's way. “Here, I've got it.”

“What the hell you think you're doing?” Instinctively, he raised the back of his left hand to within inches of Travis' face, used the hulk of his own body to force the boy back. “Why don't you just go upstairs, kid?”

Greg wanted to believe his overreaction was an aftereffect of Scott's accident, that it wasn't his guilt from paying more attention to the past and to the box of money

on the floor than he was to the boy. No way had his subconscious drummed up an excuse to get the boy back upstairs.

For just a second, Greg saw surprise and hurt on the kid's face, before the punk kid exterior took its place again. "Sure, right. I'm out of here." Travis turned and headed back to the stairs. Not another word to Greg.

Greg stepped away from the electrical panel, headed over toward where the shoe box lay hidden. He moved the coat, opened the lid, picked a stack of bills from the box. Maybe he'd just take a stack or two, barely noticeable unless someone knew just how many had been in there to begin with. Running his hands through his hair, he debated what Charlotte would have him do. He tried to make the little Charlotte in his mind's eye sanction the crime, though he knew that she'd be embarrassed that he'd already spent as much time as he had already contemplating stealing money. But Charlotte came from better stock than he did, everybody knew that.

He decided to just put some of the money deep in his bag. Let it sit there for awhile while he worked, so he could see how this new thief mantle sat atop his shoulders. He distracted himself with thinking of the gorillas, wondered if the search party had gotten to them yet. If, at that very moment, the magnificent creatures were being hunted back into captivity. Perhaps their recapture was a good thing. They hadn't been bred for this after all, they weren't equipped to make their way in the wider world.

For argument's sake, let's say he stole the money. What would he be giving up? What would he never get back if he walked up those basement stairs with a single bill of that money in his bag? Sure, he'd pay for Julie's summer school, which may or

may not make a damn bit of difference in the path she chose. He could slip an envelope through the mail slot at Scott's house, help Grace put off the inevitable for another month or two. Then what? Maybe the next time he needed money, he could just slip a rubber mask over his face and walk into a bank, kindly ask the teller for whatever cash she had handy, then calmly make his way back out to the street. Was he being a little dramatic? Sure. His future crimes would likely be lifting a piece of jewelry here and there when he worked in a bedroom, a wallet left on a side table. Little things like that. Was he a saint? Certainly not; he'd done his share of things to be ashamed of, but he wasn't so sure he wanted to add theft to the list.

Plain and simple, he couldn't steal the money. Maybe he just hadn't yet found his price, or maybe he was, like Charlotte said, a good man after all. He took the stacks of bills he'd hidden in his bag and replaced them in the shoebox, closed the lid, and again set the box on the floor. He knew he couldn't stay down there much longer and be sure he wouldn't change his mind so he hurried through the rest of the work, climbed the steps to the kitchen, closed the basement door firmly behind him.

Before he left, he should try to make amends with the kid. It wasn't the kid's fault after all. Greg found Travis sitting on the couch with his laptop, leaning in to hear the announcer's voice giving a play by play.

"Hey, Travis, I —"

Travis spoke quickly, didn't look up from his computer. "If you're done, your money's on the table. My dad says take whatever he owes you." He gestured back toward the kitchen.

"Thanks, kid. I'm sorry about earlier."

Travis held his hand up in a half-hearted, go-screw-yourself wave, still didn't look up at Greg.

When he saw the stack of money on the table, a thinner stack than the ones downstairs, but crisp bills, held together by a rubber band, Greg stopped short. Had this all been some sort of cosmic test?

As he counted the money on the table, he imagined that on the drive home, he'd perhaps feel shame or regret that he'd even considered taking the money. Or, perhaps it would be just the opposite and he'd feel like a failure for refusing to commit one small, inconsequential crime to help his wife, his daughter, the widow who had no one to blame for her life but him. Either way, the doctor, he was sure, would have never noticed that the money was gone.

Still, Greg counted out what he was owed and left every bill of the remaining money on the table, the rubber band curled nearby.

Breaking Point

Claire heard a noise like the cracking lake ice made when her dog, Boozer, stepped onto it too early in the season. In the living room, she found the front picture window split up the center: a fissured crack that scattered dozens of frenzied points of light across the dark living room walls.

On the front porch, Claire kicked aside Boozer's collection of chewed-up sticks, searching for the window-breaking culprit — perhaps an abandoned baseball lying in the tulip-filled flower box that her husband, Roger, had bought her last summer, or a broken-necked bird fooled by the reflection on the glass — but she saw nothing.

She couldn't say she was surprised by this latest turn of events. Irritated maybe, but not surprised. The day itself had started off in the most peculiar of ways: that morning, upon waking, she'd been amazed to find herself a 33-year-old wife and mother. Oh, sure, she remembered yesterday and the day before that, but her place within the film of her life seemed to have shifted: where before she'd merely observed from a back-row balcony seat, now she'd been dropped center stage in her life's diorama. She could recall the factual events of her life: giving birth to her son, Wyatt; interviewing for her job at the county library; scouring the nursery where they'd picked up the rose bushes planted in the side yard. Remembering these events now, she felt joy or sadness or anger, but these feelings stemmed from her new self

recalling the past; back then, while in the moment, her affect had remained largely flat. And it wasn't as though her new, stronger emotions overshadowed what she'd felt in the past; it was as though she hadn't had a stake in the game until that very morning. Even when she thought of some of the events involving Roger over the years — now she felt a whole host of emotions, but at the time, nothing.

Like the time when Roger decided to build a fort — a bomb shelter, Roger had called it when the neighbors asked — in the middle of their cul-de-sac. She'd driven past the haphazard structure on her way home from the grocery store, a bit annoyed and confused that someone would build something so hideous right in the middle of their street. Only after her neighbor, Dorothy, had knocked on her door a few minutes later did Claire realize why Roger had run to the hardware store that morning for plywood and metal sheeting. No one, but particularly Claire, could ever forget how he'd cowered in the street, afraid to leave his refuge, even as she had quietly pleaded with him to please come inside the house and go to bed. When Claire disassembled the fort later that night and left it at the end of the driveway for trash, she'd kept her eyes to the ground. Yet she couldn't firmly put her finger on the overriding emotion she'd felt at the time: embarrassed, betrayed? The next morning, had she, like everyone else, felt surprise when Roger woke up as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened, climbed into his car, drove to the airport, caught a plane to Boston, and went to work?

Of course she remembered all of the details, but had she really been there? Had *she*, the person she was at that moment, been there?

Furious. That was the overriding emotion for Claire at the moment. She was furious that the window was broken with no apparent cause. She no sooner came back inside the house than the right part of the windowpane slid away from its other half, shattering as it crashed to the hardwood floor. Seconds later, the left half disintegrated, unable to sustain its weight. The glass scattered across the floor, like raw, sparkling jewels.

“What was that?” Wyatt yelled from his bedroom.

“Nothing, Wy. Don’t worry about it.” Claire pictured Wyatt in his room as she so often found him: crouched on the center of his twin bed, a myriad of books scattered in front of him. He’d spend hours at this: reading a single page from each book, then carefully turning each book to the next page before beginning the cycle again. Before today, she struggled to remember the emotions this scene elicited. Now: amazement, worry, love, fear.

One of the day’s most difficult adjustments had been acclimating herself to the rather acute emotions she now felt toward Wyatt. And though she was quite certain she hadn’t felt such extreme and wide-ranging emotions before today, she couldn’t help but *feel* that she had. Emotions as intense as what she felt toward the boy couldn’t be born overnight. To be honest, part of her balked at this intensity of feeling, made her want to draw her hand back when she went to ruffle the boy’s hair, withdraw the hand she’d laid on his shoulder while he worked on his spelling words.

“Was that the roof falling?” Wyatt wasn’t letting it drop.

“No, silly. The roof’s not going anywhere.”

Claire went into the kitchen, shoved the broom and dust pan under her arm, then headed to the living room where she shoed Boozer away from the scattered glass. Boozer, their nearly 70-pound beagle, whose size, Roger was convinced, was the result of the chemical spill that occurred just a few days after the dog's birth, retreated to the entryway and stood there, cocking his head at Claire. As she scooped up the piles of glass, Boozer started barking, then howled mournfully. Claire guessed the thin, billowing curtains spooked him.

Roger called later that evening, as he did most nights he was traveling. Claire spoke before he could say hello. "You're never going to believe this one."

"You've decided you're leaving me? When I come home it'll just be an abandoned house with Boozer waiting for me on the front porch?"

"The thought's crossed my mind. Knowing you, you'd end up eating Boozer after a few days on your own." Claire smiled as she reached into the kitchen cabinet for the phone book. "What are the glass guys called? We need one."

"I'd glow from the radiation if I ate Boozer. That dog's pure poison, just look at him."

When she told him about the window, Roger was quiet, and Claire guessed it was because he knew what was coming next; their bank account sat at just under \$200.

"Maybe you can barter with them? One small, slightly strange child for a pane of glass?"

"That's not funny." It made no sense to Claire that they barely squeaked by. Odd as he sometimes behaved, Roger's performance at work never seemed to be

affected. And they didn't live extravagantly, by any standard, nor were they destitute. Claire clipped coupons, kept the house cool in the winter and warm in the summer, didn't leave lights on, but it made little difference — they never got ahead.

Roger skirted the money issue by taking the next step in the dance they'd perfected over the years. "I love you, Claire."

Did she love him? Now, in this moment, did this new her love her husband? She guessed love was in the mix, but at the moment, it wasn't the overriding emotion.

Regardless, she told him she did, then said goodbye after finding Wyatt standing directly in front of the empty space that used to be a window, throwing his stuffed animals one by one onto the front lawn.

"What are you doing, Wy?" Claire could tell she'd startled him; his pajama-clad back tensed as she laid her palm on his shoulder. "Don't you think they'll get cold out there?"

"They've decided it's time to move on." He lobbed Bambi out the window.

"They don't like it here?" She pulled her son close and was surprised to find that he nearly reached her chest, and that his small hands had lost all of the chubbiness of toddlerhood.

"It's all right. They're just gone wild now, that's all." He turned and grinned shyly at Claire, then pressed a small grey fox, his favorite, into her palm. "Your turn."

Claire looked for a moment at the animal in her hand, small and defenseless, and considered that she should explain the wrongness of throwing animals, even the stuffed ones, to Wyatt. But she did not. Instead, Claire winced when she heard the

soft thud of the fox hitting the tree in the front lawn. For a moment, she wanted to fling herself out of the window after them.

Wyatt solemnly squeezed her hand, and then gathered up the rest of his animals. “It’s time for me to go to bed now.”

Claire nodded, deciding the animals could wait until morning to be hunted down. Before going to bed herself, Claire decided to cover the window. She tried trash bags taped together with duct tape but, once finished, she found the sight of so much black plastic strapped down by silver tape claustrophobic and quickly pulled it down. She ran through her options: thick paint-splattered plastic tarp; an old paisley sheet from the guest room; maybe aluminum foil. She concluded she needed plywood, which she didn’t have, or something equally sturdy, able to keep out anything wanting to get in. She never considered what might get out. Finally, she settled on spending a night communing with the great outdoors right in her own living room.

She flipped off the overhead light so as not to attract any more bugs than the ones already crawling on the ceiling, sat on the couch and stared out into the blackness, wondering if it might be best to at least pull the curtains closed. Who knows, Claire thought, Wyatt’s exiled animals might decide to attack en masse. She could at least have the curtains between her and them. She pictured the small, grey fox leading the charge and decided she’d want to see that coming. So the window remained just as it was.

Claire shivered the first few times the warm breeze rustled the magazine pages on the coffee table. When Boozer padded into the room, from where she couldn’t

guess, Claire felt calmer. She pulled a blanket from the back of the couch to cover herself, then flipped on the small television set to catch the late show. Within seconds, a dozen June bugs crawled across the television screen.

When Boozer sat straight up in front of the window and stared into the darkness, Claire felt her neck hairs stand up on end and turned to look out the window. She knew she was silly to be afraid. Besides, how often could she smell the gardenias from next door or watch the falling, slightly iridescent blooms from their four-year-old Bradford pear cascade into the living room?

Yet there *was* someone out there; her neighbor, Dorothy, from across the street, standing on the sidewalk outside the house, peering into the gaping window.

“Hello!” Dorothy gave an exaggerated wave when she noticed Claire looking back at her. “You’ve got some wildlife out here on your lawn, dear.”

“Yes, I know. Thank you.”

When Dorothy continued standing there, looking in through the window, Claire rose from the couch and made her way outside.

Generally, Claire avoided Dorothy, a teacher’s aide at Wyatt’s school whom Claire had known since high school, as much as she could.

Dorothy seemed unable to stop looking toward the window, even as she took a dramatic breath through her nose, then started talking. “It’s Wyatt, honey. You know how much I adore you, how much I love Wyatt, right?”

Claire said that she did.

“Janie from school, she’s that snotty-nosed kid, you know the one? asked Wyatt about his chalk pictures today, what they were and all and he said, well, he said that it was a whole bunch of little bunny rabbits going to kill a big, old lion.”

Dorothy paused, and Claire stayed quiet, wondering what her old ghost-around-the-edges self might have said to this.

“And, honey, like I said, you know how much this kills me, but I simply can’t let things like that pass under my nose without letting you know.”

“Did it look like rabbits killing lions?”

“Just one lion, dear. Lots of rabbits, just one lion.”

“I’m sure he didn’t mean any harm.”

“Yes, but…” Dorothy cleared her throat, then seemed to decide against continuing.

Jesus. Claire wondered how Dorothy, who still wore black leather corsets and fishnet stockings, by her own admission, while she went clubbing with their 25-year-old neighbors, and who couldn’t even keep a fucking ficus alive, felt qualified to tell Claire the best way raise *her* child.

Claire said none of this though, instead thanked Dorothy for letting her know. “He’s just a kid, you know.”

She watched Dorothy cross the street, go into her house, and close the door behind her. Claire stood on the sidewalk for a bit, looking toward her own house like others must see it. It looked normal enough and in good enough repair — mostly intact windows, neutral siding, shingled roof — though not exceptional. If Claire didn’t know better, she’d assume a perfectly happy family lived there. Claire looked

at the animals at her feet, considered picking them up and tossing them back through the window, but she did not. She couldn't help feeling jealous toward the animals, having escaped the house that still held her so close. Yet, Claire wondered as she glanced toward the car, couldn't she just leave, find a new way to make for herself, without Roger, and even perhaps, without Wyatt? The practicalities soon rushed in, overwhelming Claire. Surely she couldn't leave a sleeping child alone, and she had no money, no place to go. She returned to her watch on the sofa.

In the middle of the night, the phone rang, waking Claire from where she slept on the couch. Half asleep, she answered the phone.

"It's in the closet, second shoe rack, third sneaker box." Roger's voice sounded as though he'd just downed several pots of coffee and sucked the helium from a dozen balloons. "That's all I can tell you."

"Roger?" Claire sat up quickly. "Roger? Are you all right? Where are you?"

She heard the line disconnect and knew he'd hung up.

As she sat up, she looked toward the front window and nearly screamed. Wyatt, standing just outside the window, stared blankly in at her. His hair was covered with dandelion fluffs and he smiled sheepishly, as though he didn't know quite where he was.

"Jesus! Wyatt, get in here!" She switched on the table lamp and struggled to pull an unresponsive Wyatt back inside the window.

Once his feet hit the hardwood floor, she hugged him, rather roughly, then nudged him toward the hall. He walked away slowly, still smiling at nothing in

particular. “I don’t believe you, Wyatt. What the hell are you thinking walking outside in the middle of the night like that?”

Wyatt just giggled and stumbled toward his room. Claire went to the kitchen and took a beer from the refrigerator, her heart still thumping in her chest. She leaned against the counter and brought the bottle to her lips, then closed her eyes and ran her fingers through her hair.

Claire couldn’t believe just how exhausted she felt — how not herself. Was this day of amped-up emotions her finally snapping the last ties that bound her to sanity? Had she finally reached her limit, no longer capable of holding everything together? Maybe today was only the first step: perhaps if she didn’t get away, if she didn’t cut ties with Roger and just run, it might happen to her, that she might snap and start hanging wet laundry from the ceiling fans or lying down in the middle of the street. Claire finished her beer, shook her head, and told herself that if she ever won the lottery, she’d jump ship.

Claire headed to her room, looked in on Wyatt who slept soundly in his bed, his grey fox clutched in his right hand just under his chin, though Claire doubted he’d ever been fully awake.

In her closet, she settled on the floor, then reached for the third shoebox on the second metal rack. She hesitated briefly, unsure that she wanted to discover what Roger might be hiding there. After a moment, she couldn’t resist and yanked the lid from the shoebox, only to find a pair of Roger’s polished work shoes. Disappointed, she began yanking random shoe boxes from the rack, tossing lids and crumpled tissue paper onto the carpet.

Though she didn't want to admit it, with each new shoe box, she imagined she'd find what a part of her had always suspected was stashed away somewhere: stacks of hundred dollar bills, fitted neatly in a sneaker shoebox, left in the middle of their shoe rack. Why shouldn't it be just that simple? If she didn't know just how much Roger distrusted banks, she'd worry he had some offshore account ready for whenever he felt the urge to bail.

With this money though, she could climb into that car, back out of the driveway and drive clear across the country. How easy it would be, Claire thought, how easy to pack that luggage she hadn't used since her honeymoon and never come back. Not quite two hours after dropping Wyatt at school, luggage in the trunk, she could be nearly at the state border, heading west. There were libraries everywhere; she'd be fine with a little nest egg to get herself established. She'd miss them at first, she knew, much like she'd missed her parents when she'd left for college, but that longing would blunt over time, rounding out the jagged edges. She was of a hearty stock; she'd make it through.

Soon though, she understood that perhaps she'd moved forward with her planning a bit too hastily. With each shoebox, Claire felt her hopes falter. Nothing but shoes, dozens of shoes. She doubted she'd have left anyway.

How easy it is to plan an escape when the door in front of you is closed. When it's open though, when someone hands you the key and says "go," suddenly, you're forced to examine what it is you're really after, what you're willing to give up. Is that other life out there really better, or it is just that it's not yours that makes it so damn appealing?

Force Majeure

Gina told her husband she was leaving him over a breakfast of scrambled eggs and English muffins at their kitchen table.

Bert did not look up after she'd spoken. Instead, he concentrated on cutting his eggs into perfect squares before spearing each bite with his fork and bringing it slowly to his mouth.

Of course Bert would take time to process what he'd heard, to fully measure his reaction against his internal psychiatrist's barometer, before responding. To be fair, Gina knew this wasn't the sort of news you spring on someone during a weekday breakfast. She had been surprised when the words had crossed her lips in a jumbled, run-on string of words. Though the idea of leaving Bert was not new to Gina — it had been festering for weeks, months, years even. The words themselves had been lolling about on the back of her tongue ever since she'd woken that morning, but she'd believed herself too paralyzed with indecision to say anything. Until, suddenly, she'd spoken.

Gina knew she wouldn't be leaving if Mabel were still alive. Or if any of their desperate attempts to have another child after they lost Mabel had been successful. Perhaps, with a child, they would have even been happy together. But Gina knew it wasn't an easy cause-and-effect scenario; to pretend their marriage had been on solid footing before they'd had Mabel would be nothing but farce. In fact, in those first too-

quiet moments in the obstetrician's office when the only sound had been from the Doppler machine, with Mabel's heart galloping along at more than 200 beats per minute, Gina couldn't help but feel her own heart begin to falter; she and Bert didn't come from stock strong enough to survive something like this.

But they, like Mabel, had made it. Not only had they made it, but during Mabel's six years, eight heart surgeries, and 23 heart medications, their marriage had grown stronger, so that, when they did lose her, when Bert went to wake Mabel up to eat her pancakes and couldn't, it hit them with a magnitude for which they hadn't been prepared.

When Bert finally did look up at Gina, he continued to chew deliberately. "Is there something you need to talk about?"

Gina wasn't sure what sort of reaction she'd expected, but it was certainly something more visceral than this. She'd always known Bert was clinical by nature. And when they'd met, she'd loved him for it. Even when he'd proposed with a point-by-point presentation of his career goals and earning potential, followed by an earnest treatise on how his current attributes would translate into strong parenting skills, she'd been charmed.

Now though, she just shook her head, cleared her plate from the table, and resisted the urge to toss her orange juice onto his crisp, white shirt. "No, nothing to talk about. I'll be out of the house by the time you get home."

Bert reached for his coffee cup, held it carefully with both hands, kept his eyes on Gina while he drank. "You're serious then?"

She turned full round and looked at him, made sure his eyes were focused, alert and not dull and drifting outwards like they'd started to do the past few years. "Couldn't be more serious if I tried, Bert."

But she wasn't at all sure she *was* serious. In fact, Gina was nothing if not tired of being serious. She'd been mired in a pool of seriousness for the past two years. Their friends hadn't known how to take the news about Mabel — and to be fair, who does? They tried. In the beginning, it was easier: send flowers, make a donation, drop by with a casserole to add to the already-overflowing freezer. Then, two months later, nine months later, three years later even, people didn't know. So they left a wide berth, spoke in hushed tones when she was near, kept the conversation to safe topics like the weather and changes to local city ordinances. They didn't ask about Mabel, didn't ask about anything that *mattered*. What Gina wanted to tell them, wanted them to understand, was that nothing they said could make the fact that her daughter died any worse. That they shouldn't worry that she'd forgotten, that they'd remind her of something that would make her sad.

Bert himself had seemed unsure on how to cope. He'd spent the first few hellish weeks almost entirely in bed, not eating, not drinking more than it took to keep him alive. Leaving Gina alone to immerse herself in the details of burying their daughter. Then, weeks later when he emerged, it was as though he'd purged all of his grief. He had showered, shaved, and announced to Gina that he'd be seeing patients that morning.

Since then, he'd largely avoided anything that might remind him of Mabel, had generally left the room when Gina tried to talk about her. When his grief did hit

him, it was a full-on relapse, causing him to take to their bed and hide meekly under the covers for days. So, last night, Gina had been surprised to find Bert sitting in Mabel's still-intact bedroom, reading his patient files for the next day. She'd felt love for him then, a tenderness that she'd forgotten, and later they'd made love. But she'd held on a little too tightly, causing him to leave the bed and go to the couch, flipping through the television stations, looking for anything to distract him from the feeling that his wife needed something that he could not give her.

Not that Bert would understand why he'd left the bed. He'd recognized it only as too much sweat on his chest from her holding him near, a rush of blood to his neck because she'd bitten his flesh too tightly between her teeth. She wanted to follow him, to sit on the floor and wrap her arms around his sinewy runner's legs. But she had not followed him; rather, she'd rolled over into the center of the bed, pulled the comforter over her naked body and slept.

Bert finished his breakfast, rinsed his plates in the sink, kissed her cheek. "We'll talk tonight, okay? Give this all time to percolate a bit."

Gina shrugged, stayed in the kitchen until he'd left.

Then she left the house as well, walked the few blocks to the coffee shop.

She knew what she *should* be doing: researching apartments, buying moving boxes, calling an attorney. Instead, she bought her coffee, sat at one of the small tables outside the store, glanced at the man at the table next to hers. He sat hunched over a laptop, wore a crisp button-down Oxford shirt, blue, and kept running his hand over his creased forehead and through his hair, causing it to stand at odds with his head.

But he looked up and smiled broadly when he saw Gina glance his way, then turned his attention back to his computer. While not quite handsome, Gina thought he had a certain sturdiness about him, an appeal that made her think of clean cotton sheets blowing in a summer's breeze. Not handsome, but still, in his own way, rather beautiful. She couldn't help the flush that touched her cheeks.

Sitting there, Gina soon felt awkward. She hadn't brought a book or a magazine to keep her occupied, yet she certainly didn't want to begin any of the tasks that stood before her. And so, she decided, she'd just have to continue staring into her cup of black coffee. She'd just have to sit there. Until she died. From inertia.

Within minutes, the first errant thought of the man next to her flitted past.

Him: shaving at a foggy mirror, his chin raised as he slowly scraped his neck with a straight-edged razor. Then, pacing in front of a boardroom audience, speaking ardently as he struggled to keep from running his hands through his hair. A habit of his then. At home, his tie loosened and his hair once again in disarray.

Gina: not nearly as surprised as she ought to have been to see herself inserted into his life: standing next to him in the kitchen, carefree, a glass of wine in her hand, looking over his shoulder while he worked at the stove.

Of course she had no reason to believe she was at all accurate in her imaginings, and even less reason to believe she could insert herself so casually into this stranger's life, yet she felt oddly sure that the life she wove for him was fairly close to the one he lived.

At the table next to her, the man cursed, not quite under his breath, hit the tabletop with his palm, catching Gina off guard. Though it had startled her, she

couldn't say she was surprised by this outburst; it was exactly the sort of thing her imagined man would have done. Delighted, she laughed.

He smiled back, again ran his hand through his hair. "Sorry about that. This damn spreadsheet has a death wish."

In her imagined world, she would run her hand from his shoulder down over his chest, would bend and press her lips to his forehead to smooth the worry lines. In her imagined world, this uncooperative spreadsheet would be their greatest of worries.

In reality, Gina just nodded, worried that words she didn't intend to say might now cross her lips. That she might tell this man that while she hadn't even known she was looking, she couldn't help but feel like she'd *found* something when she'd sat next to him. That, if it wasn't too much trouble, she'd like for him to pack up his things and leave with her, make love to her, and keep her ensconced in his arms so that leaving Bert would be given a stamp of finality that it didn't yet feel to Gina like it had. So that she'd have no choice.

Gina knew if this was really what she wanted, what she needed, to happen, she should speak; that staring into her coffee wouldn't accomplish anything. Finally, she decided she'd ask him about his work. Not the most interesting of conversation starters, but it was something, and felt fairly safe.

She finally looked up, but the man was nearly finished packing up his things, though he was still half crouched above his chair while he shoved the laptop into his shoulder bag. When he noticed Gina watching him, he grinned at her and her heart swelled with longing. "Think it's time for a break. I'll try again tonight. After a drink

or two of something stronger than this.” He gestured toward her coffee cup, gave a half-wave, then began walking away.

Gina stared stupidly after him; briefly considered following him.

Instead, she walked to the cemetery. She knew she was again delaying the inevitable, but she couldn't help herself. Gina sat on the damp grass by Mabel's headstone, pulled stray brambles back from the edges of the stone. She came often to the cemetery, wished that she would feel some sign that Mabel was close by. It was a common theme in her bereaved parents group: fathers talking about how their children came to them in their dreams, mothers saying they often felt a hand on their shoulders. Other signs, real or imagined, that made the passing days seem bearable. In three years, only two times had Gina felt her daughter was near: once, a quick breeze through a window that Gina didn't remember opening; second, a lavender kite, Mabel's favorite color, entangled in the branches of their pear tree.

Bert had smiled when she'd showed him the kite, touched her cheek, said that he was glad it made her happy. Though he'd never say it, Gina knew he didn't believe it was Mabel, that she'd only invented a connection as her way of coping. She also knew that, in a therapy session, he would have encouraged his patient to hold on to whatever they needed to get by, but with Gina, with his own wife, he wasn't able to do the same. Perhaps, because it was *his* daughter, he couldn't walk that fine, detached line that he often did in his practice. Gina knew he *wanted* to be strong, wanted to shoulder this burden for her, but, they both knew, he couldn't. That, when it came to Mabel, his grieving was of an all-or-nothing sort that had vacillated wildly over the past few years. That somehow Gina had come out the strong one.

Most often at the cemetery, Gina sat and talked to Mabel about things she'd never have discussed with her daughter in life. But it was as though, since she'd died, Mabel was at once always a six-year-old girl and also a full-grown woman whom Gina could confide in. Today, Gina whispered nothing that she hadn't already said dozens of times before: she was confused, that losing Mabel had made everything turn all upside down, and of course it wasn't her fault — if blame were to go to anyone, it would be Gina — but she just wished she'd know, for once, what the right thing was to do.

She was surprised when an elderly man in a grocer's uniform parked his truck behind her car on the road, made his way toward where she sat.

He waved, stopped a few feet from where she sat, spoke. "Are you all having a caterpillar problem over here? The furry ones, you know. They're kind of orange and black?" He paused for a moment, bent over and plucked a sample from one of the headstones, held it out toward Gina. "Like this?"

Gina reached out, cradled the drop of fur in her palm, shook her head; she'd only noticed a few.

"My grandma, bless her heart," the man shook his head, "always said they're supposed to mean a hard winter; something about the stripes. I don't know if I believe that, but they've got to mean something, right? Good, bad, or otherwise."

"I don't know." Gina paused. "Maybe I have heard that before." It was a blurry, underwater memory: walking with Mabel's kindergarten class on a path in the woods. Discovering a cluster of little orange and black beings that looked like the cheap, furry prizes Mabel won at the church carnival. Thinking of snow.

Gina didn't want, nor did she try, to stop the tears.

The man continued to stand there, started to speak several times, each time reconsidering with a little jerk of his chin, so that Gina started to worry that he was having some sort of fit. Finally, he landed on his words and spoke.

"Your daughter?" He moved closer to where Gina sat so he could read Mabel's stone. His hair was salt and pepper, his skin the color of a ripe chestnut.

When she nodded yes, she was grateful he didn't say he was sorry, making Gina feel as though she should tell him it was okay when so clearly it was not.

Instead, he just nodded, pulled a navy blue handkerchief from his back pocket, handed it to her, pointed a wrinkled hand over to their right. "My son's over there. He's been gone fifty-one years and every day I pray the good Lord will take me so that I can see him." He bent, pulled a stray weed from the ground. "But my time's coming soon enough — I'm an old man."

Gina nodded. "The more I want things to go faster, the more they seem to slow down. Makes me wish life had an accelerator, or fast forward button. Something like that." Gina wanted to make this man smile, wanted to not to cry herself.

He did smile, a bit, but Gina saw pity there. "Well, if God's taking suggestions, I'd rather get another go at things."

Gina agreed. She played the what-if game so often that she'd amassed a plethora of things that would have saved Mabel, *if only*.

He shook his head when she offered his handkerchief back, ran his hand over his hair, then gestured toward his chest. "Most of my life has been spent trying to

close that hole — feels like it's been blown clear through you? But no matter what, he's still gone.”

She reached her hand up and rubbed the back of her neck. Gina didn't want to, but she felt angry at this meddling man doling out advice. Blown wide open, that was indeed how she felt. But she was quite sure that there'd always been a rift inside her. Sure, now it had widened into an impassable chasm, but Gina was certain all of her emptiness didn't stem from losing Mabel.

“Anyway, I just wish someone would have told me that, is all. Take a silly old man's words for what they're worth.”

She said nothing, nodded, but when she still didn't look up he said goodbye and walked back to his truck. Once behind the wheel, he sat there for a few moments before driving away.

By the time she got home, it was early afternoon. Bert would be home in a few hours. She took a shower, letting the water scald her back, liking the distraction of the pain.

Did it all hinge on this? Would she look back twenty years from now and wonder why she'd made the decision that she had? Did this all stem from losing Mabel?

Out of the shower, Gina let her towel fall to the floor and stood in front of the bathroom's full-length mirror with her eyes closed. Finally, she opened them, took in her face, the slight wrinkles by her eyes. She picked up the towel, wiped away the moisture on the mirror.

She brought the towel to her stomach, a part of her wishing that she could scrub away the pinkish, slightly puckered scars that ran from just underneath her sagging breasts to the scar where they'd pulled Mabel from her. This, her belly, a roadmap for a life already ended, was something she would never escape. And yet, did she want to? Given the chance, would she really rub away this evidence of her daughter's life?

She pulled her stomach skin taut, pushing her breasts up and turned to the side, looking at the mirror over her shoulder, trying to hide the too-vivid proof of her life from herself.

Gina wondered what others would see if they would look at her, if she let them see her: a near middle-aged body having served its purpose, most likely. She sank down on the cold bathroom floor, pulled the towel over herself and rested her head on her knees.

Gina pulled the largest piece of luggage she could find from the top shelf of the closet and dragged it into her bedroom, banging it against the doorframe as she went.

Once in her closet, the suitcase open at her feet, she did not think. Too much of that would convince her to stay. Instead, she grabbed handfuls of clothes still on their hangers, all of the clothes that had been so carefully pressed and hung in the closet, and tossed them into the bag. And after a trip into the bathroom to grab an armful of soaps, lotions, powders, and brushes that she stuffed into the side pockets, it

was done. She kneeled on top of the suitcase, her weight making the zipper come together so she could close it.

She made it as far as Mabel's doorway.

That night, Gina stood in the kitchen, pouring two glasses of wine from the bottle they'd opened the night before, when Bert came home from work.

"Hey there," he murmured, barely skimmed her elbow with his fingertips, then made his way to the table. Out of the corner of her eye, Gina saw the slowness of his moments, how his eyes never left her profile.

He was afraid then; didn't want to startle her.

She remembered the crisp November day he and Mabel had found a bird, broken, in the side yard. Gina had stood in nearly the same spot in the kitchen, her hands deep in dishwater, watching them through the window. They'd been nearly running, but then, so quickly, how calculated his every movement had seemed as he'd bent and coaxed Mabel to stand behind him. At first, Gina thought Bert didn't realize the bird was dead, that he didn't want to startle the poor thing. But then, she'd seen Mabel peeking past Bert, tears dripping from her wind-burnt cheeks; her hands shoved into her overcoat pockets.

Gina handed Bert his glass, put her hand on his shoulder and kissed his head. He waited until she sat across for him before he began. "I've been thinking, Gina. If you need to go, I understand that. I can respect that. I'll be okay."

Gina smiled, drank most of her wine, reached her hand across the table to him. Squeezed tightly, hoping to make him understand that she couldn't leave him. That somehow, in this mess that was their life, they'd become rooted in this house, entwined and anchored in an empty room behind a door just down the hall.