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A WEDDING! THE FIRST OF a generation; the bride and groom are just twenty-two, young to be married these days. Most of their friends flew in yesterday, and though they are in Pittsburgh, a city of half a million, they affect a good-natured snobbish disorientation, because they come from New York and Chicago but also because it suits their sense of the whole event, the magical disquieting novelty of it, to imagine that they are now in the middle of nowhere. They have all, of course, as children or teenagers, sat through the wedding of some uncle or cousin or in quite a few cases their own mother or father, so they know in that sense what to expect. But this is their first time as actual friends and contemporaries of the betrothed; and the strange, anarchic

exuberance they feel is tied to a fear that they are being pulled by surrogates into the world of responsible adulthood, a world whose exit will disappear behind them and for which they feel proudly unready. They are adults pretending to be children pretending to be adults. Last night's rehearsal dinner ended with the overmatched restaurant manager threatening to call the police. The day to come shapes up as an unstable compound of camp and import. Nine hours before they're due at the church, many of them are still sleeping, but already the thick old walls of the Pittsburgh Athletic Club seem to hum with a lordly overenthusiasm.

Mid-September. Since Labor Day, the western half of Pennsylvania has been caught in a late and dispiriting heat-wave. Cynthia wakes up in her mother's house, in a bed she's awakened in only five or six times in her life, and her first thought is for the temperature. She pulls on a T-shirt in case anyone else is awake, passes her burdensome stepsister Deborah (never Debbie) sleeping in flannel pajamas half on and half off the living-room couch, and slides open the door to the deck, from which she can see in the distance a few limp flags on the golf course at Fox Chapel. Cool, tolerably cool anyway, though it's still too early to tell anything for sure. It can't even be seven yet, she thinks. Not that she's worried. The specter of her bridesmaids holding beer bottles to their foreheads to cool off, or of Adam wiping the sweat out of his eyes as he promises himself to her, only makes her smile. She's not the type to fold if things don't go perfectly; what matters most to her is that the day be one that nobody who knows her will ever forget, a day her friends will tell

stories about. She turns and heads back indoors, past her own fading footprints in the heavy dew on the cedar planks of the deck.

She never imagined a wedding in Pittsburgh, because she never had any reason to imagine it until her mother remarried and moved out here two years ago. To the extent she'd pictured it at all, Cynthia had always assumed she'd be married back in Joliet Park, but in the middle of her last semester at Colgate she learned that her father had sold their old house there, in which he had not lived for a long time; and when she announced her engagement two months later her mother Ruth went off on one of her unpacifiable jags about Cynthia's stepfather Warren being "a part of this family" and would not stand for any implication that this was less than entirely true. To force-march these outsize personalities back to the scene of the family's dissolution in Joliet Park, to listen to them bitch over the seating chart and over old friends whose post-divorce allegiances were sometimes painfully ambiguous, was out of the question. It would have been a gruesome sort of nostalgia, and pointless at that. A wedding is rightfully about the future if it is about anything at all.

They could have married in New York – where Cynthia and Adam already shared an apartment – and in fact that was the arrangement Adam gently pushed for, on the grounds, typically male, of maximum simplicity. But the truth was that that wouldn't have seemed unusual enough to Cynthia, too little distinct from a typical Saturday night out drinking and dancing with their friends, just with fancier clothes and a

worse band. She wasn't completely sure why the idea should appeal to her at all – the big schmaltzy wedding, the sort of wedding for which everyone would have to make travel plans – but she didn't make a habit of questioning her wants. So Pittsburgh it was. Adam shrugged and said he only cared about making her happy; her father sent her a lovely note from wherever he was living now, implying that the whole idea had been his to begin with; and Warren expressed himself by opening up his checkbook, a consequence, to tell the truth, of which Cynthia had not been unmindful.

She tiptoes past the couch to avoid waking Deborah, because waking her might cause her to speak, and on one's wedding day there are some trials one ought to be spared. They don't know each other that well, but little things about Deborah excite Cynthia's derision as though they have lived together for years. The flannel pajamas, for instance: she is two years older than Cynthia but so congenitally chilly that she and Ruth might as well be roommates at the old folks' home. The house was bought with a second life in mind, a life in which the children were grown and gone, which explains why there is only one spare bedroom. Though the couch looks gratifyingly uncomfortable, Cynthia considered a campaign to pack Deborah off to the Athletic Club with all the other guests, so that her maid of honor and best friend, Marietta, could stay at the house instead. But family obligations are perverse. It makes no sense at all that this palpably hostile sexless geek should be one of her bridesmaids, and one of Cynthia's many close friends' feelings hurt as a result; yet here she is.

In the kitchen Ruth, Cynthia's mother, whose last name is now Harris, is drinking a cup of tea standing up, in a green ankle-length bathrobe she holds closed at the neck. Cynthia passes her and opens the refrigerator without a word. "Warren's out," Ruth says, in answer to a question it would not occur to Cynthia to ask. "He went to get you some coffee. We only keep decaf in the house, so he went out specially for you."

Cynthia scowls at the effrontery of decaf coffee, a fetish of the old and joyless. Tossing a loaf of bread on the counter, she stands on tiptoe to search the cupboard where she remembers the ancient jams are kept; then, feeling her mother's gaze, she turns her head to look back over her shoulder and says, "What?"

It's the underwear: the fact that she is parading around in it, but also the underwear itself, the unhomeliness of it, the fact that her daughter has grown into a woman whom it pleases to spend a lot of money on underwear. Shameless is the word for it. All Ruth wants is a little gravitas for today of all days, a proper sense of nervousness or even fear, which she might then think of some way to allay. One last moment of reliance. But no: it became clear weeks ago that all this was no rite of passage into womanhood for her daughter – it's a party, a big party for her and all her friends, and she and Warren are just there to pick up the tab. For the last six or eight years, nearly every sight of her daughter has caused a certain look to cross Ruth's face, a look of just-you-wait, though the question "wait for what?" is not one she could answer and thus she keeps her mouth shut. The flatness of

Cynthia's stomach, the strength and narrowness of her hips, more than anything the way she carries herself with such immodesty in a body whose nearness to the modern ideal is bound to provoke an unpredictable range of response; self-satisfied women are often brought low in this world, and for years now, mostly by frowning, Ruth has tried to sneak her insights onto the record.

But she reprimands herself; today, no matter who cares to deny it, is not just any day. She feels the faint echo of her own terror in the hours before her first wedding, a terror that was partly sexual, which counts as a bond between them even though her daughter's sexuality is a subject she has long since lost the fortitude to go near. "So," she says, trying for a conciliatory tone. "This is your special day." And Cynthia turns around, mouth open, and laughs – a laugh Ruth has heard before, the only solace for which is a retreat into memories of when her only child was a baby.

Behind them, the digital clock on the microwave blinks silently to seven-thirty. In the living room, Deborah, having woken herself with her own snoring, makes a little groaning sound that no one hears and pushes her face deeper into the gap between the cushions and the sofa back. At the Athletic Club, the weekend desk clerk consults the computer printout in her hand and dials the extension for Adam's room. She's seen the Daily Events schedule and recognizes his name as that of the groom; to the scripted wake-up greeting at the top of the printout she adds best wishes of her own, because she saw him last night and he's cute.

"Thanks," Adam says, and hangs up. He too goes straight

to the window to check the weather. His window faces the alley, though; he'll probably get a better sense of the day's prospects from the TV. He turns it on with the sound down but then lies back on the bed, fingers laced behind his head, and forgets to watch.

He hates sleeping alone and maybe for that reason he spent the minutes before the phone rang in an extravagant dream, a dream about driving a car with no steering wheel in it, a car that responded to his slightest weight shifts, like a skateboard or a sled.

One hour until breakfast in the hotel restaurant with his parents and his younger brother and best man, Conrad. Having thought of this, he tries to forget it again so that he can be genuinely blameless if he shows up late. He's a little hungover from the rehearsal dinner, though others, he reflects, will have cause to be a whole lot more hungover than he. Too early to call Cynthia, who's probably still asleep. What would really calm him down is sex with her – as it is he starts most mornings that way; it scatters the vague anxieties with which he wakes – but today that's not going to happen. With sudden inspiration he arches his back and pounds on the wall above his headboard, the wall his room shares with the room where Conrad is staying.

Conrad doesn't hear; up for an hour already, he is standing in the shower practicing his toast. It was the only duty that gave him any pause at all when he accepted the best-man role. He blushes and shakes whenever he has to speak in public; and how relatively easy it would be to pull this off in front of a ballroom full of strangers, as opposed to

friends and family with their license for pitiless long-term teasing, people before whom there is no question of pretending even for a few minutes that he is anyone other than who he is.

"They are a charmed couple," he says, because this is a phrase over which he's stumbled in earlier rehearsals; and it's too late now for a rewrite. "They are a charmed chouple. Fuck." And he starts from the beginning.

Waking in the other rooms on the second and third floor of the Athletic Club are friends of the bride and groom – couple friends, friends who have brought especially serious or promising dates – almost all of whom find themselves acting, at that hour, on a sexual impulse that's unsettlingly strong even for the bloom of youth. Some are laughing, and some stare into their partners' eyes with an urgency the memory of which will have them avoiding each other's gaze an hour later. They are not used to the licentiousness of hotel rooms; and the knowledge that on this particular weekend they have not just infiltrated this stuffy club but taken it over gives a subterraneous group sense to each intimate encounter, a sense of orgy that makes them want to offend strangers, to exert themselves until the walls of that place come down.

Indeed there is one couple that knocks the headboard against the wall behind Adam's parents' bed so loudly that his mother just prays she doesn't know them. She even tells her husband to call the front desk and complain, but he's in the bathroom and hears, as a rule, what he chooses to hear.

At eight-thirty Marietta's car rolls into the Harrises' driveway. Inside the kitchen she and the still undressed Cynthia kiss like sisters; "Jesus, it's fucking hot out there," Marietta says. "Oh hi, Mrs. Sikes. I mean Mrs. Harris!" It's more than Ruth can bear; she smiles premonitorily and withdraws from the kitchen.

"So shall we go do the hair thing?" Marietta says, but then all of a sudden Deborah is in the doorway, hair matted, face pebbled from the rough upholstery of the couch, looking at them both with tribal hatred.

"Your phone's ringing," she says to her stepsister, and turns and leaves.

The phone is on the bedroom floor, underneath the jacket Cynthia wore to the rehearsal dinner. Marietta follows her through the living room.

"Thanks for bringing it to me, there, Debski," says Cynthia, though Deborah has disappeared into the bathroom. "So, you didn't bring your dress? Where is it?"

"In the freezer," Marietta says.

"Oh, don't be such a baby. Haven't you heard? It's my Special Day."

"Well, that's my point. You're the bride. Still well within your power to change the whole dress code to, like, beach casual."

"Wear a tank top to your own wedding, slut," Cynthia says. "That's not how we roll here in Pittsburgh."

"I've got that not-so-fresh feeling," Marietta says. "That's all I'm saying."

In his chair watching CNN as they pass behind him,

Warren hears all this and, though he would still like to be a kind of father to this young woman, knows that for the moment the only dignified course is to pretend that he is not even in the room at all.

Cynthia smiles at Marietta and takes the phone out on the deck. "Isn't this bad luck?" she says, sliding the door shut behind her.

"I saw your dad in the lobby last night," Adam says. "I recognized him from his picture. He seemed in pretty good form. Have you called him yet?"

"No," she says, and her heart races a little bit. "I will in a while. Hey, what time is it?"

"Quarter to four."

"Very funny. I mean aren't you supposed to be at breakfast with your parents?"

"Maybe."

"Well don't leave Conrad alone with them, for God's sake. You know how they get. Plus he's got the rings so let's not antagonize him."

Adam smiles, waiting for the elevator in the empty hotel corridor. "Can you believe we're doing this?" he says.

The boards on the deck are already burning her feet. "Not too late to back out," she said, "if that's why you're calling."

"Well, I still have seven hours to think about it, right?"

"Me too. Tell you what, if I'm not there by, let's say, ten of four, you just go ahead and assume I'm not coming, okay?"

"Fair enough. Seeing how everything's paid for and all, if

you don't show I'll just wave one of the bridesmaids up and marry her."

"Which one you have your eye on?"

There is a pause. "I missed you when I woke up this morning," he says.

Her view of the golf course from earlier that morning has now been erased by haze. She closes her eyes. "Me too," she says. "You won't forget pictures, right?"

"Two-fifteen in the Trophy Room. Conrad's carrying around a little schedule."

"Okay," she says. "See you then. Enjoy your last few hours of freedom."

"Gotta go," he says. "The hookers are here."

She hangs up on him, smiling. In the living room, Marietta stands uncomfortably, while Deborah, back on the couch, watches her like a guard dog, like some emissary from the underworld of the socially damned. Marietta can read her hatred only as jealousy, which softens her own attitude a bit.

"So," she says, and remembers that Deborah is a graduate student somewhere, in something. "School is good?"

Adam strolls into the hotel dining room and sees that his parents, sitting with a stricken-looking Conrad, have ordered their breakfast but not touched it. They missed their connection in New York yesterday and arrived too late to make it to the rehearsal dinner, which may have been just as well. He kisses his mother on the top of her head. "How's your room?" he asks. "Everything to your liking?"

Adam's father makes a sarcastic noise, which his mother

recognizes and preemptively talks over. "Very nice," she says. "Very comfortable. You have to point out Cynthia's parents to me so we can say thank you."

The two sets of parents have never met. There didn't seem much point to it. "Marietta made it home okay last night?" Adam asks Conrad. Conrad nods but does not stop eating, because he would very much like to get this breakfast over with. Adam signals the waitress for coffee. He hasn't really looked at either of his parents since he sat down. No one is looking at Mr. Morey, though he seems to be mysteriously gathering himself nonetheless, like a clock about to strike. Two heart attacks have hunched his shoulders in the way of a man much older than he actually is. Up in the room are four portable oxygen tanks, in case he needs them, and in the purse at his wife's feet are various pills and phone numbers. But his short temper and unregulated resentments suggest that his physical failings are a kind of natural outgrowth of his personality, and everyone who knows him, mindful of his angry pride, is unsolicitous toward him. He is tormented by the efflorescence of foolishness and waste of all kinds, everywhere around him. He was a pipe fitter who became a full-time union executive until his disabilities forced him to retire. The Pittsburgh Athletic Club is exactly the kind of place that sets him off. His wife has made him put on a coat and tie for breakfast even though she will now have to hear about it for the next month.

But Adam is not embarrassed by them in this setting, as his brother is, because he doesn't really associate them all

that closely with himself anymore. He is amused by their helpless compulsion to be themselves, and will wind them up like a music box at any opportunity. "Hey, you know what I found in my room?" he says. "In the dresser drawer? A list of room rates. Did you guys see that? Do you have any idea what this place *costs*?"

"Oh, Adam, *please,*" his mother whispers, "today of all—"

"As it happens, I did," his father says, reddening. "I'm just glad I'm not the sap paying for all this."

"More reason to be glad we never had girls," his mother says, and laughs as if she were being filmed laughing.

"That wouldn't have made a damn bit of difference to me," Mr. Morey says. "I don't have to put on a show for anybody. I don't pretend to be anything I'm not."

Adam abruptly stands up. "Oh look, there's Mr. Sikes," he says. "Excuse me. I'm gonna go practice calling him Dad." And he crosses the room to where the bride's dapper father sits at a table by himself, reading the paper. Conrad watches him leave in disbelief. His parents stare accusingly at each other. A moment later the waitress comes by and fills Adam's coffee cup.

The doors to the hotel ballroom are shut, and behind them, in moments of silence, one can hear the vacuum cleaners run. Teenage girls in stiff black skirts walk from table to table, checking the place settings, counting on their fingers. They work slowly; the air conditioning is turned up all the way, and with the room not yet full of bodies it is exotically cold, the coldest place in the hotel. Only those

most desperate for a cigarette pass through the double doors to the infernal kitchen and the steaming alley beyond.

At the hotel bar sits the wedding planner, habitually early, having sent her son and his friend to the florist's in her van, praying they haven't stopped to get high along the way. It's why she doesn't pay them in advance. The bar isn't officially open yet but Masha knows everyone at the Athletic Club; this will be her fourth reception there this year. Though it's before noon, she feels like (as her father used to say) a *drink* drink, and Omar the bartender would certainly comp her one, but while she's on the job alcohol is out of the question. Something like that gets out and your reputation is shot. True, the bride – whose superior attitude Masha doesn't especially care for – isn't even from Pittsburgh and acts as if she might never set foot here again after today; but the stepfather, whose name is on the checks, is some rainmaker at Reed Smith, and the mother, whose superior attitude she doesn't much care for either, is one of those chronically unsatisfied types who love nothing better than to nurse along some scandal, substantiated or otherwise.

But that's the secret to Masha's success: you get invested not in the people, who can let you down, but in the ceremony, which never does. She doesn't say it out loud very often but she thinks of herself as a guardian of something, a finger in the dike holding back total indifference toward the few things that have always mattered, ritual and devotion and commitment. When you thought of it that way, the less you happened to care for the families themselves, the more noble your work became. Her own

marriage ended after nine years, but that detracted in no way from the beautiful memory of her wedding day itself; in fact, that's what you were left with, she thinks, that and a beloved if somewhat less than reliable son. Besides, if it were up to her they would all still be together, husband and wife and child, through happy and contentious times alike. But not everything is her decision.

A couple around the bride and groom's age walks into the bar and Omar tells them that he's closed. The boy looks ready to argue the evidence, but the girl says, "Forget it. I need to go upstairs and take another shower anyway." That's what today's going to be, Masha thinks: a pageant of sweat. Eighty-eight already, according to the silent TV screen above Omar's shaved head. That was part of the risk they all assumed when they booked the most beautiful old unmodernized Catholic church in Pittsburgh. That's why she is waiting until the last moment with the flowers. She couldn't book them the weather. Not that that would stop the mother from blaming her for it anyway.

Across town Cynthia and Marietta sit bemused and intimidated, shirtless, their heads poking through holes cut in old bedsheets, as a tight-lipped Polish woman (recommended by Masha) and her young assistant do their hair. They tease each other with stories from their college days; all the stories involve embarrassment or regret but none of them can't be laughed at. Only a few of them are about men because Cynthia and Adam started dating sophomore year. The Polish women, in a kind of secondary theme, speak in unsmiling Polish about God knows what, at least until

Cynthia says something about how badly this whole ordeal makes her want a cigarette.

"Please no," the older one says, her scissors in the air. "Big kiss on altar, your husband think hey, my wife's head smell like fucking ashtray."

Their eyes meet in the mirror, already retelling it.

The doors to the church stand open, for circulation's sake, but the dust hangs motionless on the ramps of light that slope down from the tall windows. Masha watches her red-eyed son and his Mexican friend, whom she secretly calls Señor Detention, try to get the white runner straight atop the sun-bleached carpeting between the pews. She pulls a creased checklist out of her jacket pocket and walks past the kneeling boys to the pulpit; turning to face the rows of empty seats, she solemnly taps her finger on the live microphone.

"Stay out of heat," the Polish woman says hopelessly as Cynthia and Marietta button their shirts back on. "Whole thing fall down."

With the car's air conditioner at full blast, Marietta pulls into the Harrises' driveway again. Standing outside the kitchen door on the tiny landing, flat against the wall in the scant shade of the eaves, Deborah is standing among the rain boots and gardening equipment, smoking a cigarette. She is already wearing her bridesmaid's dress. Eyes barely open, she glowers hatefully at the tinted windshield of the car.

"What is she doing?" Marietta says. She sounds almost scared.

"I don't know," Cynthia says wearily. "There's always some grievance."

"But why is she smoking outside in this heat? Is smoking not allowed in your mom's house or something?"

"Warren smokes. He smokes in the house all the time."

"Then why is she—"

"You know what?" Cynthia says. "Pull out. I can't even deal with going back in there right now. Go on, back out. I know someplace we can go."

Deborah watches them leave and smiles at the prospect of her stepmother's panic. Mother and daughter are so alike. No capacity for seeing themselves through others' eyes, no interest in it. No one ever opens a book in that whole god damned stunted hell-bound house, including her father, whose idea of self-betterment is watching *Unsolved Mysteries*. The aspect of him she's always cared least about is his money, but now that he's letting these two spend it like it's theirs, she resents them as climbers, her nominal stepsister especially. She knows this pains him. Make an effort, he keeps telling her, but no effort is necessary to understand the likes of Cynthia and her friends. One day it will hit them that high school is over.

Adam sits on the bed in his underwear. He's watching the Pirates game on TV. He considers masturbating, out of boredom, but there is too great a likelihood that Conrad or someone else will knock on his door. There is a great sense of bustle in the walls around him but nothing seems to require him right now. It's far too awful outside to go for a run. Why did they schedule the wedding for four in the

afternoon, anyway? Solitude and inactivity make him restless. At his bachelor party last weekend – a rafting trip on the Delaware with his six groomsmen – there was never a moment of idleness; gloriously exhausted, they slept in tents, some expensive Scotch but no real drunkenness, the whole thing put together by Conrad, one of the two or three best nights of his life. They'd cheerfully teased him by recounting old hookups, old binges, old mortifications. There was some ritual sarcastic mourning of all the sexual freedom he was waiving, but he could tell – it makes him smile now to remember it – that their hearts weren't in it, because none of them really thinks he is making a mistake. He's slept with other women, before he and Cyn met and, truth be told, for a short time after. What's left to mourn there? Just an adolescent obsession with variety, and he is past that point. They are meant for each other: he feels it so deeply that he's not quite able to say it, not even to her. She's like one of those horse whisperers, he thinks, only it's just him, he's the only one it works on, she's the only one he will let speak to him that way. It would seem juvenile to go back to wanting anything other than what he has. He also has a home, and a job, and he is impatient, in possession of these things, to leave his childish self behind and get the future under way in earnest.

He finds his phone on the dresser and calls her again. "I talked to your dad at breakfast," he says. "You should give him a call."

"I'm going to."

"Where are you?" he says.

"At the airport. Don't try to have me followed."

"No, seriously." He strains to make out the background noise, then realizes it's the same as the background noise in his own room. "Are you at the Pirates game?"

She laughs. "I'm in a bar with Marietta. We've had our hair done, but we're not ready to go back to the House of Pain just yet."

"What bar?"

"In your dreams," she says.

"Well, okay, but just don't show up drunk at the altar, because my last wife did that and, let me tell you, it really lowered the tone."

She smiles. The TV plays on a shelf above the scarred oaken bar, in the wonderful, midday, reptile-house gloom. With her fingers she ruins the circle of condensation that her vodka-and-soda glass keeps leaving on the wood. She knows why he's calling. "So," she says, "you're doing okay?"

When she says it she swears she can hear his breathing slow down. "Sure," he says. "I'm fine. I just don't like all the waiting."

They go over the schedule again and hang up, and Cynthia notices her maid of honor staring at her. "He's nervous, huh," Marietta says. She drinks. "So, are you nervous?"

Cynthia's first reaction, she has to admit, is to deny it without thinking about it, because she knows this is how she and Adam figure in the lives of their friends: as the fearless ones, dismissive of warnings and permissions, the

ones who go first. But when she does think about it she realizes that the answer is still no. They are perfect together.

"He makes me laugh, and he makes me come," she says. "And he needs me much too badly to ever fuck things up."

"Well, I'll drink to that," Marietta says, but then she doesn't drink. Her own date is spending the morning in the hotel gym; nothing about this whole weekend will please him as much as the discovery that his daily workout routine doesn't have to be altered. She stares into the cloudy mirror behind the bar, where their elaborately coiffed heads float as if in an aquarium. In this splendid dump they look like extras who have wandered off a movie set. "Hey," she says. "Your head smell like fucking ashtray."

As the heat peaks the city takes on a dirty sheen. Behind the haze the sun can only be approximately located, like the source of a headache; on the sidewalks each citizen moves forward in a kind of cocoon of dampness. The wedding guests have abandoned any half hearted plans to see some more of the city – the church is just a three-minute walk across the park from the Athletic Club and they will wait until the last minute even for that. Unhurriedly they take the tuxedo shirts out of their boxes, recount the studs and the cufflinks, hang the dresses on the bathroom door and turn on the shower to steam the travel wrinkles out of them. With nothing else to do they prop open their doors and turn the place into a dormitory. Someone puts on some music and the first complaint from the front desk arrives. They have begun drinking. Special occasions are marked by feats of excess.

One-forty and no one knows where the bride is. Deborah hasn't said a word; she lies on the couch in her bridesmaid's dress, reading Walter Benjamin and drinking a Diet Coke. Ruth feels as if her brain is going to blow out of her head like a champagne cork. At the same time she feels justified in some way by the threatened emergence into reality of her vision that this whole day would end in disaster. Her daughter left the hairdresser's more than an hour ago. Fine. It upheld Ruth's view of life, her own life at least, to think that the things that mattered to her were, in everyone else's estimation, a joke. Thirty-eight thousand dollars her husband has sunk into this day – more than the old days gave them any right to dream of – and Cynthia has barely acknowledged him; as for Warren, he has been putting on his tuxedo in the bedroom for an hour now, which, since he is a man who knows how to wear a tuxedo, suggests to Ruth that he is avoiding her. What's worst, though, is her full awareness, even at a moment like this, of her daughter's supreme, blithe competence. In another few minutes, with no word from her, they will have no choice but to proceed to the Athletic Club for the photo session as planned, and Ruth knows, in her heart of hearts, that Cynthia will be there. Of course there will be no real disaster: instead there will be the vindication of that refusal to take any of it seriously, to treat respectfully the day that marked the end of motherhood. Till death do us part. Big joke.

The only one who has already braved the walk from hotel to church, several times today in fact, is Masha. Wearing a maroon blazer – a little heavy for a day like this, but the item

in her closet that came closest to matching the burgundy of the bridesmaid's dresses – she is losing the battle to maintain a fresh, unruffled appearance throughout the day's events, that projection of capability that's normally a key element of her job; but today, she keeps telling herself, is a special case. She's sent her son to Wal-Mart, even though she knows he's high, to buy every standing fan they have. She's glad the groom is a little late for their meeting before the photo session. She doesn't particularly care anymore how it might look that she's waiting for him in the hotel bar. She drinks club soda after club soda and watches the guys in the band carry their own drums and keyboards and amplifiers into the ballroom, gasping and swearing, while she tries discreetly to check the size of the sweat stains under her arms.

Then the groom enters, black-tied, a very handsome boy with a highly developed sense of charm. "The wedding planner? Oh, she's in the bar," he says as he holds out his hand. It comes back to Masha that he is from New York City and has a way of speaking that's sometimes difficult to follow.

In the Trophy Room they find Ruth and Warren and Warren's mother, who at eighty-seven has lost track of time's more incremental movements and thus is as pleased to wait there indefinitely as her daughter-in-law is perplexed and insulted. They are more or less flattened against the wall by the door in order to avoid inconveniencing the photographer as he testily moves the lights and rearranges the furniture. No one else is there. The photographer, a short man with a neat mustache and a drinking problem

whom Masha has worked with many times, is pleased to see her because here at last is someone with whom he may safely lose his temper.

"She has something better to do?" he says, smiling tightly, speaking of the bride. "There's maybe something good on TV?"

With her back to Adam, Masha lifts her eyebrows at the photographer as if to say what can we do, this is what we're working with; and she says, "Allow me to introduce the groom, Adam Morey."

The photographer's mood is softened by Adam's charisma only because he sees that here is a young man obviously not averse to having his picture taken. The groomsmen file in; he can tell, mostly from their adolescent nudging, that a few of them are drunk. Who gives a shit, he reminds himself, and grabs one of them and points to his mark on the floor. He makes a note of the groom's parents (the father has the same strong chin and small mouth, the same convex hairline) standing with their backs to the wall, gazing at their son as if from a great distance, as if crowds were cheering, as if they were standing on an ice floe.

Then the bride walks in, ahead of her own entourage like a prizefighter, in the dress, the makeup, the veil and gloves, the full regalia. Masha and Ruth together make a gasping sound that's as unrehearsed as anything they'll say or feel all day. "No rush," says the photographer, but already his sarcasm is losing its edge – his work bores and harries him but he is not inured to beauty – and he goes to look at her through the camera. Behind Cynthia come the six

bridesmaids, Deborah several steps in front of the rest in her eagerness to get out of that awful suite where the beautiful ninnies chattered. The bridesmaids fan out by the door, sharing one of those gigantic bottles of water, picking at the sleeveless wine-colored dresses that are already darkening in spots.

This is why they are late: on her way to the suite set aside for the bridal party's preparations, Cynthia had finally stopped and knocked at the door to her father's room; he had opened the door in his tuxedo, looking like a movie star, though also older and thinner than she remembered him; and then, as she'd known all along she would without quite knowing why, she collapsed in tears. He took her in his arms and shut the door and whispered the little things that only he could get away with and then a few minutes later she reemerged and went to the elevator bank to go get her makeup applied.

He's last to enter the Trophy Room. Life does not seem versatile enough to account for the fact that this man and Cynthia's mother once fell in love and got married. Ruth herself has trouble accepting it as true, not because she has forgotten but because she remembers the strong impression he gave, every day for ten years, that he was late for some amusing engagement somewhere else. Now she watches in horror as Warren crosses the room to shake her ex-husband's hand. It's her fate, she thinks, to end up loyal to men who don't understand loyalty themselves.

There is only one person in the room Conrad's age whom he hasn't known for years, and that's Deborah. It's

her he winds up standing next to after the family photograph; and she doesn't actively ignore him because there's something in his face that she doesn't see in the Barbie faces of everyone else in the room.

"I'm actually a little nervous," he finds himself saying. "I have to give the toast."

That's what it is about him, she thinks, a recognizable human emotion. Unconsciously she pulls at the neckline of her bridesmaid's dress to try to keep her tattoo covered. He looks about eighteen, though she knows he must be older than that; at some point all these people were in the same college at the same time, or maybe it just seems that way. "You'll get through it," she says, not unkindly. "Just be yourself."

The room grows noisy, and at the center of it, Adam and Cynthia stand staring at each other, at the odd three-quarter angle into which the photographer manhandled them when it became too difficult to explain what he wanted. His arm around her waist. Something has been missing all day and this was it. When they are close together no one else can touch them. Their homes, their families, everything that made them is behind them now and will remain so from here on in. Masha pops up with a handful of tissues to wipe the sweat off Adam's forehead.

"I lost weight while getting married!" Adam says. "Ask me how!"

"Stop talking!" barks the photographer. "Memory time!"

This is where it starts to become a blur. And now, finally, as they take orders to turn their heads or change the position

of their fingers – as they stand rooted at the apex of a continually reconfigured V – comes the feeling they didn't quite credit before now, the feeling that the ceremony itself has taken over and begun to bear them along. Everything is dictated from here. They've exchanged themselves for their roles and it is not at all an unpleasant or a violated feeling. In the end not even their memories will have to be relied on; images of the day and night that have been taken out of their hands will arrive in the mail, weeks from now, formally and expensively bound.

The church is a furnace. With the heatwave in its second week, Masha's son was able to find for sale only five standing fans; the breeze they generate falters at about the third row. One young mother with a baby, a cousin of the groom's, stands up from her pew and heads back to the hotel before the ceremony has even begun. But Masha is at home at the intersection of pageantry and crisis; she calls the ushers together to instruct them to seat the eldest guests nearest the doors, regardless of their affiliation to bride or groom, and delivers a quick first-aid course in case of fainting. In the event, though, it's one of the ushers, a blond-haired boy named Sam, who finally passes out, just at the end of the aisle. Too exhausted to be discreet, his friends lay him awkwardly across the rearmost pew. Masha cradles his head in her lap and pulls out the smelling salts she had the foresight to transfer from the home first-aid kit into her purse just that morning.

The rest of them proceed to the altar a man down. What

seemed like such a lightweight job has proved so brutal that it's starting to seem a little funny, all the more so when they stare across the altar at the bridesmaids, who look as if they have just come from a five-mile hike in their red dresses. But then the familiar martial introduction rolls down from the organist's loft, a hundred and twenty people struggle gamely to their feet, and their attention gathers at the point where the light is strongest, at the church door. In the heat and glare the bride and her father shimmer slightly.

Marietta, who unlike most of them has had a few hours to grow used to the sight of her best friend in a wedding dress, keeps thinking about the ceremony itself, how many of its accepted elements seem wrong on symbolic grounds and should be changed. Why would you walk toward the man with whom you wanted to share your life in that halting, infantile gait, slower than you'd walked across any room in your life, as if you were being brought in by the tide? Wouldn't it be more auspicious to slip off your torture shoes and run up there? Then she realizes that what she's having, in effect, is a conversation with Cynthia, who would normally share her subversive interest in the day's many weirdnesses, but who's on the other side of the glass now. They have promised each other over and over that none of what exists between them will be lost, but neither of them has ever had a married friend and so neither of them really knows. She watches Cynthia's father, that charming piece of shit, squeeze his daughter's arm emotively without taking his eyes off their destination; he looks like Washington standing in the boat. Knowing how to behave on grand

occasions has never been his problem; it's the ordinary that could never sustain his interest.

When they finally arrive and the last note of the processional fades, he kisses her on the cheek, says something private to her, and withdraws. All eyes turn to the priest, who, in his mountainous bell-shaped surplice, resembles one of those eternally trickling monuments.

"Before we begin," he rumbles into the microphone, "may I suggest that under the circumstances it is permissible for gentlemen to remove their jackets."

For about a year after her husband left her, Ruth took Cynthia to Saint George's in Joliet Park every Sunday, trying to make the best of his absence by mounting a campaign of moral improvement. Then one Sunday Cynthia announced she would never go again, and that was that. So Ruth was surprised when her daughter said she wanted a church wedding. Surprised and a little offended, because a house of worship is not a stage set; but Warren convinced her to let that particular grievance go. Now, as the guests sit in unison and the sound of their sitting throws an echo over the faint buzz of the fans, she's glad to be where she is, if no less mystified.

They have agreed to two short readings. Cynthia's friend Natalie, whose hands she held when Natalie cried after their art history TA called her a cock tease, reads from Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. Bill Stearns, Adam's sophomore-year roommate, who once helped him pop his shoulder back in at a touch football game and then broke a date to wait with him at the emergency room for three hours afterward,

soldiers through his unprecedented recital of a poem by Juvenal. The words carry no specific meaning in this context; the hymns and Bible verses, too, are only appurtenances of meaning, but no less heartfelt for that. The trappings of belief are themselves a kind of belief, just as the priest's cassock is his office.

For this reason they are all suddenly united in the expectation that the priest, who does not know them, who won't see them again after today, who has even less experience with intimacy than they do, who has probably said the same thing to thirty other anonymous couples this year, has something crucial to impart to them. With majestic unself-consciousness, he blots the very top of his bald head with what is presumably a handkerchief.

"It is good," he says, "that your life together has begun in conditions that suggest a test." He pauses to appreciate the small laugh that ripples through the pews; the faces right in front of him, those of the bride and groom, are locked in sobriety. "There will be great joys in your life together, of course, but there will also be tests, maybe even severe ones, and the joys and the tests will not always appear in such a way as to seem to offset one another. We may lose sight, at such difficult moments, of the path, the promise, the blessedness of our lives, because we grow too close to ourselves; our purpose here is something that surely we too could begin to make out, if it were given to us to see as God sees. But we do not possess the farsightedness of God. Trust that He sees what you cannot, and that will enable you to go on trusting in each other. And if ever you should doubt

yourselves, if ever there comes a time when you doubt your ability to endure hardship, remember that God, on this day and for all time, has given you to each other. He hath made all of us. And He will never ask us to shoulder more of a burden than He knows we have the strength to bear."

The vows they have chosen are the traditional ones. The kiss is more of a relief than anything else; shyly they proceed out the door and down the church steps into the odiferous haze and climb directly into the back of a limo for the one-minute drive around the park to the reception. The guests can see the limo pulling up at the hotel entrance as they trudge back across the park themselves. The bells are ringing, evening is approaching, and though it's still ninety-two degrees, the solemn air has lifted; there's a party at the other end of this walk, and an air-conditioned one at that.

When they reach the end of the receiving line they are at the doorway to the ballroom, where the empty tables glitter and it's as cold as a skating rink. Three idle bartenders smile helpfully. Within minutes they are working like coal stokers, as the younger guests try to recover the buzz they had going in their hotel rooms before the ceremony sweated it out of them. At the head table, a long dais perpendicular to the bandstand, the groom's mother finds that she and her husband have been seated in between their new daughter-in-law's natural parents, perhaps to keep them from killing each other. She tries gamely not to be offended by the idea that the role she has been given to play, on this momentous day in the life of her firstborn son, is that of a human shield. She has an idea who's behind it, even if now is not the time,

even if it will never be the time; besides, Sandy feels, the fault is ultimately hers anyway. She went through a rough patch when the boys were little and had to leave home for a while. Literally doctor's orders. Maybe not surprising, then, that her son winds up with a girl who makes every decision, who calls all the shots. Who treats him like a child. But this isn't an appropriate moment for Sandy to start losing herself in the past; for one thing, she needs to remember to count her husband's drinks. Historically, in terms of his capacity for saying the unsayable, five is the magic number.

Scarcely a minute goes by without a knife clinking against a glass somewhere in the ballroom, first one and then a chorus of them: You made us come all the way here to witness your love? Okay, then – let's witness some love. The waitstaff bursts through the double doors like a football team and serves a hundred dinners. Conrad eats his salmon without tasting it and then waits, smiling robotically whenever others at his table laugh at something, until the meal is over and the champagne is poured and the moment is finally upon him.

"I have always looked up to my brother," Conrad says, eyes down, watching with dismay his own spit hitting the microphone. He memorized his toast but now he wishes he hadn't, because holding a piece of paper would at least occupy his right hand, the one not holding the champagne glass, the one floating spastically from his pants pocket to his chin to the back of his head. "When we were kids, everything he set out to achieve he achieved, everything he wanted he worked for until he earned it, everything he did

set an example not just for me but for everyone around him. An older brother's distinction, in his little brother's eyes, is pretty much automatic for a long time. But even when I got old enough to get over that feeling and decide for myself, he has never lost any of my esteem. Until today."

The whole ballroom laughs, to intoxicating effect, and when Conrad dares to look up his eye is drawn straight to the bride's stepsister, Deborah, maybe because her red dress is separated from the cluster of other red dresses by the width of the ballroom; she's sitting off in the corner, with her grandmother, or somebody's grandmother anyway. *Just be yourself:* what kind of stupid fucking advice was that? He makes himself look away from her before he loses his train of thought entirely.

"Until today, because here is where his streak as a self-made success ends, and sheer blind dumb luck takes over. Anyone can see that Cynthia is a woman of extraordinary charms" – a whistle from somewhere in the room – "anyone who's ever closed a bar with her or hiked the White Mountains with her or smoked a cigar on the deck of the Staten Island Ferry with her knows that she has a sense of humor and compassion and adventure that's not just rare but matchless. Any man in full possession of his faculties would choose her out of a thousand. But how on earth do we account for *her* choice? What are the odds that such a spectacular girl would be willing to spend her life with a guy who wears those stupid madras shorts he wears; who thinks he's a comedian but lacks the attention span to tell so much as a knock-knock joke from beginning to end; who believes

with all his heart that *near* the garbage, ashtray, or hamper is the same thing as *in* the garbage, ashtray . . . That's just a million to one shot, my friends, and frankly my brother deserves about as much credit for marrying this woman as he would for waking up with a winning lottery ticket stuck to his forehead, the lucky bastard."

It is very hard to hold off drinking from the glass of champagne in his hand. He is amazed at how hard everyone is laughing but he still wishes only for the whole thing to be over. Without meaning to he looks up at Deborah again. She's not laughing, but she is leaning forward intently with her elbows on her knees.

"Seriously," he says. "They are a charmed couple. No one who knows them can doubt that they are destined to spend a long, happy, extraordinary life together. And no one who sees that these two wonderful people found their perfect match, and were smart enough to realize it, can help feeling a little more optimistic about our own prospects as we head out into the world. To Cynthia and Adam."

Roars of approval, tapping of crystal. In the parking lot the drummer hears the applause and takes two more quick hits off his pre-gig joint before crushing it under the heel of his shoe.

The moment before the dancing begins, and the principals become hard to find, is the moment when Masha customarily takes her leave. She moves in a kind of crab walk behind the head table, accepting thanks, offering best wishes, smiling at the hundredth joke about the weather as if it were the first one. The money is already in the bank.

You have to give them credit, Masha thinks, taking one last look at the whole spectacle, postponing the opening of the ballroom doors and the blast of heat just beyond. They weren't the most gracious people in the world, but in the end they were willing to spend what needed to be spent.

The first dance: the bride and groom obviously could have practiced more, but their sheepish expressions only make the moment more affecting. They have never danced this way in public before – no one does anymore – and for them to forgo their usual grace, just for the sake of doing it the way it's always been done, is an expression of surprising humility. The song is "The Nearness of You," and before it's half over the parents cut in. Sandy is overwhelmed by her son's mischievous physical power. Mothers generally aren't held in their sons' arms after a certain age and it comes as a genuine shock. The bride's father feels his daughter's cheek on his shoulder, as guilelessly heavy as when she was a child and he carried her sleeping from the car, as he leads her around the floor. There's a man who can dance. Even Ruth doesn't bother trying not to remember. He hands their child off graciously to Warren, and feels the eyes on him as he walks off the floor. This has always been the rhythm of his fatherhood: dazzlement and aftermath. All day long he has endured the look of deep surprise in the eyes of nearly everyone to whom he has been introduced. He knows he has things to be forgiven for, but he considers his daughter's love full vindication, and for those who can't let go of the past he has never had any use.

Then the less ritualized dancing starts. It is the province

of young people fully at home in their bodies, drunk and obscurely tense and in need of release. Only in exorcising them do they feel the demands of this day. The band is bad but honorable, at peace with the fact that, though their ambitions may have sifted down to this, they are still making music for a living in front of an audience. They rarely get a chance anymore to perform for a crowd this young and unrestrained; they don't see anything fearful or destructive in all that energy, but they do understand the role of drunkenness in it and are okay with that. They're even more okay with the attractiveness of the women who join them onstage to arouse the crowd with unskilled go-go routines.

Twenty-two is a zone of privilege, and as the night deepens invisibly behind the heavy drapes, the others are centrifugally driven away, first from the dance floor and then from the ballroom itself. Older couples, couples with children, see where the night is going and finish their cake and politely excuse themselves for the long drive home or just for their beds upstairs. All over the hotel, the urge to transgress is finally breaching its borders. The night bellman goes into the men's room and sees that three tuxedoed wedding guests have pried the mirror off the wall and are hunched over it; he's so afraid of what's expected of him that he decides the prudent course is to go down to the basement and piss in the janitorial sink instead. People flirt with strangers, or even with old friends, in plain sight of their official dates. The desire to do something they know they'll regret is overwhelming. The doors to the ballroom stand open and the smoking and drinking and intense

conversational intimacies spill into the lobby – against the rules, but the night staff is intimidated and unsure of protocol and badly outnumbered anyway.

In the midst of all this, still powering it in fact, is utter faith in convention: at eleven-thirty the bride and groom disappear upstairs, and at midnight they return in their "traveling outfits", in which to travel the eight blocks to the gingerbread-style bed and breakfast where they will spend the night. Everyone applauds and then lines up raggedly to say goodbye.

Adam's mother and father are incapable of sharing their sadness with each other. The honeymoon in Mexico is their gift. "You have a safe trip," Mr. Morey says. And then they're in the car and waving. Ruth starts to cry. The band starts playing again, and with the guests of honor gone, decorum gives way once and for all.

Sam, the fair-haired usher who passed out inside the church, is now standing by the door to the kitchen tirelessly hitting on one of the waitresses, who is twenty years old and needs the wages from this evening and therefore tries not to dwell on how very handsome this guy would be if he would just shut up, which she could certainly make him do.

Marietta, drunk and stoic, is downstairs in the hotel gym, allowing her boyfriend to act out a particular fantasy. Who's to say what's creepy? she thinks. In her head is a line from *The Godfather:* someday, she says silently to him as he labors, and that day may never come, I might ask you to do me a service. . .

One of the bartenders leaves his station for a quick trip to

the men's room, and when he returns he discovers that the guests have gone behind the bar and taken the bottles back to their tables; he looks around and sees them all smiling at him, not mockingly but with great camaraderie. In the lobby, Bill, the groomsman who recited Juvenal, is trying to talk a married woman ten years his senior into having one drink in his room upstairs. He's actually almost there. He wants to do something he can never tell anyone about. A scared-looking bellhop comes into the ballroom and after one or two inquiries finds Conrad. He tells him there is an urgent message for him, upstairs in his room. The only explanations Conrad can think of are bad ones; he gets off the elevator, opens his door with the key, flips on the light, and standing there two feet in front of him is the antisocial, truth-advocating, tattooed bridesmaid, Deborah.

"Jesus!" Conrad says.

"Close the door," she says.

"How did you get in here?"

"You're not like the rest of them," Deborah says. She's still in her bridesmaid's dress but she's not wearing any shoes. She's very drunk. "I can see you, you know," she says. "You should give up trying to be one of them because you're not."

He's starting to get an inkling of what this is all about. She's not what he usually considers attractive, but on the other hand sometimes life puts something in your path that may never show up there again.

"You deserve something special," she says. Something in him chafes at this self-satisfied Mrs. Robinson routine. But

he's in no position to call her bluff; she does know at least that much about me, he thinks. She lifts up her bridesmaid's dress; if she was wearing something underneath it earlier, she's not anymore. She has a piercing that actually makes him wince. He is still young enough to immediately amend a mental checklist of sexual phenomena he has or has not seen.

"Close the door," she says. "Come on. Quickly."

"Aren't we related now?" he asks.

"Get on your knees," she says.

"Jesus Christ!" he says, and he gets on his knees.

In the ballroom an actual fight breaks out. One of the dishwashers has come out of the kitchen and told Sam to leave the young waitress alone; she's reached the end of her shift but is now so afraid to leave the hotel, because she knows he'll follow her outside, that she's in tears. Sam throws the first ridiculous punch, but the real damage is done when he's backing away in self-defense and falls right across the bar, smashing glasses and bottles alike. The women have long since removed their shoes, and so as a safety measure they climb up on the tables and continue dancing there. The band hasn't had this kind of contact high in years. They play until the moment they stop getting paid, and then they play three more songs, and then the night manager comes in and threatens to pull the plug. It would be really punk to tell him to go fuck himself, but they have another job here next month.

So the music stops, and the bar is closed, and the lights are all turned on because the night manager has had all the

complaints from upstairs he can take; but there are still twenty or thirty people in and around the ballroom, drunk, tired, euphoric, young, beautiful, sweaty, dressed up and on someone else's nickel, and determined – as who wouldn't be? – to remain all those things forever. When the ballroom is locked they take over the lobby, and when they're chased out of the lobby they take it upstairs to their rooms. Dawn seeps around the drapes. They pass out on one another's floors, across one another's beds, refusing to part, sealing their legend.

At the bed and breakfast eight blocks away Cynthia, in a T-shirt and shorts, is propped up by pillows on the huge four-poster bed, some librarian's idea of a honeymoon bower; she strokes her husband's hair as he sleeps with his head in her lap. He didn't even make it out of his clothes. She's not disappointed. Sex is no novelty; being exhausted together, being each other's safe place – that's what tells you you've found what everybody's always whining about searching for. The air conditioner hums. Tomorrow they will fly to Mexico, and when they fly back to New York Cynthia will be pregnant. When she figures that out, she will wonder again what she is wondering right now: whether it's true what the priest said – that God gives each of us only what He knows we can handle – because, all her life, things have come at her very fast.

2

TIME ADVANCED IN TWO WAYS at once: while the passage of years was profligate and mysterious, flattening their own youth from behind as insensibly as some great flaming wheel, still somehow those years were composed of days that could seem endless in themselves, that dripped capriciously like some torment of the damned. There were two full weeks, for instance, between the end of the children's summer camp and the beginning of school. Cynthia started out full of ideas, but after the zoo, the aquarium, the Children's Museum, the Circle Line, and the other zoo, there was still a week to go. And then came the rain.

Two days since they'd set foot outside the building and April and Jonas, who were six and five, could not find

anything to do, separately or together, that didn't devolve into a death match within ten minutes. Cynthia sat at the kitchen table with a magazine and listened to them yelling in their bedroom. An only child herself, she had no experience with this kind of fighting; she took it too much to heart, which was why she was trying her best to stay clear of it now. She had a tendency to lose her own patience and end things by punishing them both indiscriminately in the name of fairness. In spite of which they were now raising their voices on purpose to try to get her to intervene. Then there was some kind of a snapping sound, and Jonas started howling, and Cynthia was out of her chair like a shot and by the time she'd come out of their bedroom again she had told them there'd be no more TV that day, a stupid, spontaneous decision she knew would hurt them but that would really wind up hurting her because it was not even two in the afternoon and they were not going outside and the day would now pass about three times as slowly for all of them.

The kitchen faced back into the building's air shaft, a column of rain. Through the blur she could see the other kitchens in the building, most with their lights off. Cynthia and Adam had hired three nannies in the two years after Jonas was born but they had no luck there at all; one took eighteen sick days in the first two months, and one was so out of it the doors of a city bus once closed with her on the outside and the children on board, though the other passengers had started yelling before the driver could pull away. And when the third one, whom they all loved, quit without notice to return to the Philippines, April was so upset that she'd come

into their bed every night for two weeks. So Cynthia, who was down to part-time at work anyway, decided to try it herself for a while, because she just couldn't put them through that anymore. Childhood was not supposed to be about loss. That was three years ago now.

April came out of the kids' bedroom after a while and leaned against her mother's upper arm.

"Still raining?" she said in a weary, grown-up voice. Cynthia nodded and laid her cheek on top of April's head.

"No playground today, sweet potato," she said. "What shall we do instead?"

April sighed thoughtfully. Her face was thinning, where her brother's was still round as a ball, and she had her father's small mouth and sharp eyes. She could read pretty well for her age and so Cynthia closed the *Vogue* she was looking at and laid it face down on the table.

"Want to play Go Fish?" April said.

Jonas got wind of it; April tried to discourage him from joining them by making up complex new rules, which wasn't fair, and Cynthia said "of course he can play" just to forestall that awful whining note in their voices, the note that got in under her defenses and made her own voice turn scary. She could see it in their faces whenever this happened – they were like a mirror at her weakest moments – and then she would end up miserable after they had gone to bed, Adam rubbing her back with a pointlessness that only made things seem worse.

Jonas's hands were small and at one point he dropped his cards on the table. "That's a nine!" April said.

"No it's not," Jonas said as he gathered them up again.

"I asked you if you had any nines and you said go fish!" she said hotly. "Mom!"

"You did not," Jonas said, "and anyway that's a six. And it's cheating to peek at other people's cards, that's what Mom said. Cheater."

"You dropped them right in front of me! And that *is* a nine, you're looking at it upside down, here give it to me—"

"No!"

"Jesus, you're an idiot!"

That was two words she would get punished for, and Jonas looked eagerly at his mother, but a strange thing had happened: his mother was crying. The children withdrew into themselves, frightened, and Cynthia tried hard to stop frightening them, but it was not so easy.

"Sorry," she said to them.

"It's okay," April said reflexively.

"Yeah," Jonas said – and then, fishing up from his kindergarten experience a sentence he'd been taught for the purpose of conflict resolution, but had never actually used, he said, "What game would *you* like to play?"

When they were sweet like that you had to go with it right away, you had to do or say something, or else they'd really see you cry. So Cynthia said, "I want to play poker."

"Poker?" April said, wrinkling her nose for comic effect. She'd seen some mischief in her mother's face, something that promised a return to form, and she tried to draw it out. "How do you play?"

"Well, there's a bunch of different ways, but I'll teach you an easy one. Go get that big bowl of change off Daddy's dresser." She began shuffling and bridging, which the kids loved. Counting out equal stacks of pennies, dimes, nickels, and quarters killed a good amount of time, long enough for Cynthia to feel herself out of danger.

She taught them to play five-card draw, and when they had the hang of it – one pair, two pair, three of a kind – she introduced the betting. She dealt out a hand, and Jonas, fanning out his cards, put his fist in the air and yelled "Yes!"

"Fold," Cynthia said automatically, and then, more gently, "now we're going to learn what's called the poker face. You want to have the exact same face all the time, like a statue. That way you're keeping the secret of what cards you have, until the end when it's time to show."

But it ran against their nature. They scowled and groaned when the draw didn't give them what they were hoping for, and they wiggled and widened their eyes when they found themselves with something good. Cynthia had so taken to heart the children's generosity in suggesting that today they should all play what Mommy wanted to play that she couldn't bring herself to just throw them the game. She wanted to even things out between them, not lose on purpose to keep them happy, or allow herself to win a few just to teach them another lame lesson about being a good sport. It wasn't as though she was really taking their money. They were excited, and as long as the spell was unbroken the hours would keep marching smartly by and maybe

tonight for once she wouldn't already be staring at the front door when it opened and her husband came home.

So she sent April back to Adam's dresser, to the top drawer this time, and April came back holding two red bandannas. Cynthia knew they were there because she'd used them to tie Adam's wrists to the headboard, though that seemed like an awfully long time ago now. She called the kids in front of her chair and tied the bandannas around their faces so that everything below their eyes was draped like a bank robber. Then she sent them back to her bedroom to look at themselves in the full-length mirror, whence she soon heard screams of delight. Jonas ran back into the kitchen, pretending to shoot her.

"Stick 'em up!" he said.

"Back in your seat, there, pardner," Cynthia told him. "If you want my money you'll have to win it off me fair and square. Now, the name of the game," she said, dealing, "is Jacks or Better."

She ordered out for an early dinner – turkey sandwiches, chips, a bag of Milanos, even one small glass each of regular Coke, which they weren't normally allowed to have. Anything to keep them at the table. The bandannas weren't enough, because the kids' expressive eyes still gave their hands away, so she went into the bedroom herself and came back with two pairs of sunglasses, her own and Adam's, and balanced them on the children's ears. They looked like little Unabombers, but at least now the playing field was somewhat level. They would never, ever fold, even after the principle had been explained to them more than once;

but even so, at one point in the afternoon Cynthia was thrilled to discover that she was down three bucks to her children.

Then their attention began to waver. Jonas said he was bored, the word itself billowing out his red bandanna. April's desire to keep her mother happy was much stronger, but she had started putting her head down on the table between hands.

"Can we go to the playground?" Jonas asked.

Cynthia glanced quickly at the air-shaft windows to confirm that it was still raining; then something made her look again, and she saw one of their neighbors – some old woman, she didn't know who – standing at her own kitchen window, staring brazenly in at Cynthia and her incognito children, and scowling. What was worse, Cynthia saw, was that she was on the phone.

"Hey!" Cynthia said. She stood right up from the table and pulled open the kitchen window as far as it would go, which wasn't very far owing to the child-safety guards. She bent from the waist and shouted sideways out the window. "Hey! What are you looking at?"

Emboldened by his mother's high spirits, eager to jump to her defense whether he knew the source of the attack or not, Jonas ran up beside her, lifted the corner of his bandanna, and yelled out the window, "Yeah! What are you looking at?"

Cynthia turned; they stared at each other, and for a few seconds, in the wake of what would normally be considered a serious transgression, it was not apparent which way things

would go. Finally she offered him a high five. "Darn right!" she said. "Nobody stares at our family!"

The woman in the window's eyebrows seemed to jump, and she moved quickly out of their sight line. There were two windows in the kitchen: Cynthia opened the other one and both kids took up a position there.

"Go stare at somebody else, you old bat!" Cynthia shouted across the air shaft.

"Go stare at somebody else, you old bat!" the kids echoed, beside themselves.

"Mind your own beeswax!"

"Mind your own beeswax!"

Then Cynthia stood up on the windowsill and braced her hands against the frame. It wasn't dangerous, she felt, though there wasn't much between her and the air shaft now. April, too caught up in her mother's euphoria to be scared herself, pulled Jonas up on the other sill and they stood there with their arms around each other's waists.

"Our family rules!" Cynthia yelled, her breath fogging the glass.

"Our family rules!"

Then something flickered in the reflected light on the pane her nose was nearly touching; she turned her head and there, in the kitchen doorway, was Adam. He still had his dripping raincoat on. There was no telling how much he'd heard but his head was cocked warily, like a dog's. Cynthia hopped down to the floor, a little out of breath. The kids did the same and came and leaned against her on either side, still wearing their bandannas and sunglasses. Her nostrils flared

with the effort not to laugh. She put her hands on their shoulders.

"Hello, dear," she said in a bright voice. "The children and I have been gambling."

After four years at Morgan Stanley, an operation so vast that Adam's true bosses existed mostly on the level of gossip and rumor, a feeling of toxic stasis had begun to provoke him in the mornings when he arrived at work. It wasn't all in his head; lately a number of his colleagues had been promoted over and around him, and when he asked about it at his review, the thing that kept coming up was that they may have been dullards and yes-men but they all had their MBAs. Why this should have impressed anybody was beyond him. In theory he could have taken a leave of absence and gone back to business school himself – lots of the firm's junior employees did it at his age – but those people didn't have children to support, and anyway Adam lacked the tolerance for the one step back that might or might not set up the proverbial two steps forward. He'd worked hard to get where he was and he couldn't see giving up that ground voluntarily. The momentum of the business world was one-way only, a principle that should not be rationalized. He and Cynthia had a vivid faith in their own future, not as a variable but as a destination; all the glimpses New York afforded of the lives led by the truly successful, the arcane range of their experiences, aroused in the two of them less envy than impatience.

So he called a guy named Parker he'd met a few times

playing pickup basketball at Chelsea Piers, and took him out to lunch, and two weeks later Parker had brought him on at a private equity firm called Perini Capital, an outfit with a shitload of money behind it but so few people working there that Adam knew everyone's name by the end of his first day. The money, pre-bonus at least, was actually a little less than he'd been making at Morgan, but it wasn't about that. It was about potential upside, and also about his vision of what a man's work should be: a tight group of friends pushing themselves to make one another rich. No hierarchies or job descriptions; there was the boss and then there was everyone else, and the boss, Barry Sanford, loved Adam from day one. Sanford was a white-haired libertine who was on his fourth wife and had named the company after his boat. It was obvious to everyone that he saw something of his young self in Adam, and though Adam didn't personally see the resemblance, he was unoffended by it. The job's only drawback was that it required some travel – the occasional overnight to Iowa City or the equivalent, to sound out some handful of guys who thought their business deserved to be bigger than it was. And strippers: for some reason these aspirants always had the idea that strippers were the lingua franca of serious money men. In truth Adam considered few things in life a grimmer bore than an evening at Podunk's finest strip club, but he went along with it, because his job was to make these people admire him, a job at which he excelled.

His Perini colleagues, Parker included, were all still single; he'd go out for a few drinks with them after work but then

the evening would start to turn into another kind of evening and he'd excuse himself and go home. Still, the new environment – the informality and irreverence, the clubby decor, the foosball table, the sense that they were bound not by any sort of dull corporate ethos but only by the limits of their own creativity – fit him perfectly; he felt he belonged there. Its best amenity, though he wouldn't have said so to anyone but Cynthia, was that in the basement of the building, which was on Ninth Avenue, there was a swimming pool. Whenever he didn't have a lunch, Adam would take the elevator all the way down, hang his suit in the changing room, and swim laps until he wore himself out. Sometimes there was a group of kids wearing floaties in the shallow end – one of the other, bigger companies in the building had its own day care – but most days he had the water completely to himself, his every stroke echoing off the walls, his heartbeat loud in his ears. It felt like stealing. Then he'd shower, put his suit on, and go back upstairs to his desk. Sometimes he'd have Liz the receptionist order him something to eat, or sometimes he'd just skip it and let the adrenaline carry him through until dinner. He was in the best shape of his life, and it was a boon to his job performance too, because he always thought more clearly when he was a little exhausted.

At school April's first task was to esteem herself. They began with self-portraits, huge-headed, in which the bodies were an afterthought, apportioned roughly the same space on the page as a nose or an ear. The portraits smiled widely with

crooked teeth, not because the children's teeth were crooked but because teeth were hard to draw. They made lists of the reasons they liked themselves, lists of the things they were good at and the things at which they were determined to improve. They named the comforts of their homes – pets, siblings, favorite toys, or favorite places. One girl said her favorite place was Paris, but April took this to mean the imaginary Paris of the Madeline books. Her own favorite place was her parents' bed, with her parents not in it, just her and a few stuffed animals and a juice box and a Disney movie on TV. She dreamed of this situation often, though in practice she usually had to be sick to attain it. Something told her, though, that it would be seen as babyish, and so she said the Central Park Carousel instead.

Less auspicious was the name project. A name, the students were told, had a secret history; it might connect you to the country from which your family had first emigrated, or to the language or the religion of that country, or even just to the family itself and the loved ones who had gone before. It let you know that you were not just some one-time phenomenon but an outcome, a culmination, the top branch of a majestic tree. Told to go home and conduct some research on why she was named April Morey, she saw her parents exchange a quick look before her mother answered.

"Well," Cynthia said, muting the TV, "Dad and I talked about a lot of different names. We would sit on the couch in our old apartment and try them out on each other back when I was pregnant with you, say them out loud to see

how they sounded. And there were a few we liked, but we kept coming back to April. April Morey. It just sounded the most beautiful to us."

Her dad smiled, and patted her mom's leg.

"That's it?" April said.

They looked as confused as she was. "Also," her father said, sitting forward on the couch, "it's a pretty unusual name. Not a lot of other Aprils in the world. We wanted a name as special as you are."

They'd given her her name not because somebody else had had it, but because nobody had? "Was there ever another April in our family?" she asked. They looked at each other again, and shook their heads. "Why didn't you name me after a loved one?"

"A loved one?" Adam said.

April nodded. "A dead loved one. That's what a lot of people do. Or somebody from the old country." Her mother punched her father in the thigh, and that, it shocked April to realize, was because he had been about to laugh.

"Where do we come from?" she demanded of them. "What country?"

Stunningly, they seemed less than sure. Adam knew his father's family had come from England, but he didn't know where in England specifically, nor how many generations ago that had been; his mother's family was part German and part Dutch. Cynthia knew her father's ancestors were Russian, unless he'd been lying about that too, and as for her maternal grandparents, her mother had always refused to discuss them.

"Was there something special about the *month* of April?" April asked. There wasn't. No historic event had taken place then, no anniversary or birthday, though they did offer that if April's birthday had actually fallen in April, they would have named her something else.

"What would you have named me instead?" she persisted. The revelation that she, April, might just as plausibly have been Samantha or Josephine or Emma, that only chance was behind the whole solemn question of her identity, made her feel worse than ever. She could see that her parents were now upset, but she was angry at them and didn't care. They kept coming back to beauty, but it was a beauty she couldn't comprehend and that she wasn't at all sure her teacher would consider a satisfactory completion of the assignment.

Ms Diaz was nice about it, of course, but there was nothing to be done about the jealousy engendered by the other, longer name-essays that went up on the walls above their lockers, stories of honored relatives and cool languages and religious rituals tended through the generations. April felt as if her family came from nowhere, and, more puzzlingly, that this suited her parents just fine.

The next unit was family traditions. The teacher took pains to define this idea as broadly as possible; still, what traditions did April's family have? They hardly ever did the same thing even twice. They had no ancestral home they returned to, no church they attended (her mom had gone to church as a child but April had heard her say that she hated it and was glad she never had to go again), no special place they liked to travel to – indeed, having been someplace on

vacation once, like Nantucket or Vail or Disney World, even if they'd had a good time there, was usually cited as a reason not to go there again. Even their Christmas tree wasn't in the same spot every year. April knew her own grandparents so little that she sometimes mixed them up in her head and was shy about talking to them on the phone. She had one uncle and no aunts, just something her mother called a step-aunt, whom she'd only ever seen in a photo in her parents' wedding album.

Soon the whole temper of the assignment had changed, in April's mind, from an exercise in self-discovery to an indiscriminate hunt for what Ms. Diaz, for whom she would have died in any case, wanted to admire in her. It seemed perfectly defensible to start making things up. She wrote down that her family went to Saint Patrick's Cathedral every Sunday, and that they were considering a trip to Jerusalem for Christmas. Her grandmother on her mother's side, who was named May, had lost her parents as a girl but had gamely made her way from Holland to America by boat. Every summer April and her cousins gathered for a reunion at the family estate on a mountain in New Hampshire. It was so big that some of her distant pioneer relatives were buried in a small graveyard right there on the place.

Adam and Cynthia read these notions on the wall beneath their daughter's self-portrait on Parents' Night, mute with amazement. April's teacher couldn't really believe this stuff, could she? Yet she had posted it right there with all the other handwritten, dubiously spelled histories of perseverance and hardship. They already felt conspicuous, as they always did

at these school functions, as the youngest couple in the classroom; at twenty-nine they were still strikingly young, by Manhattan standards at least, to be parents at all. Jonas's best friend in kindergarten had once slept over for a whole weekend while his father took his mother to London for her fiftieth birthday. Every Parents' Night Adam and Cynthia were a kind of generation unto themselves, and it didn't take much, in that context, to awaken a vestigial unease about being in some sort of trouble they didn't even understand. When Ms Diaz, deep in conversation with some kid's father who was surely old enough to be their father too, smiled at them from across the room as if to say that she would be with them in just a moment, they smiled back warmly until she turned away and then Cynthia squeezed his arm and they got the hell out of there.

When she'd first stopped working outside the home, as the expression went, the kids were toddlers with unsynchronized nap schedules and so Cynthia's brain was pretty much indentured to them; even apart from the physical exhaustion, it was a struggle just to find a little interior space for herself, a little space in which to *be* herself, when they were so present and so vulnerable and so demanding every minute of the day. The only time that truly felt like her own was late at night when everyone else was asleep, when she would stay up and watch movies and savor the day's one cigarette, blowing the smoke out the window; but even that came at a price, since the sleep she lost made the next day's selflessness harder to maintain.

But now they were older, the school day was longer, and she determined that she could pick up where she left off and start working again. She took this idea more literally than she would have if she'd thought about it more. Her first and only job in New York, from the summer after college until after Jonas was born, had been as an editorial assistant at a glossy, ad-heavy magazine called *Beauty,* and in the absence of any other sort of work she particularly burned to do, she thought she might go back there. It was a painful miscalculation. Her best memories of *Beauty* were mostly memories of the kind of euphoric bitching that took place over drinks after work with her fellow assistants; most of those smart young women and gay men were now, like Cynthia, long gone, but a couple had stuck it out and managed to rise up the masthead. That was the only way to get anything decent out of a career in magazines – become a lifer. The current features editor was someone she used to eat cheap lunches with back when they were happy to get through the day without getting screamed at by someone important. Her name was Danielle. Cynthia left a message with Danielle's assistant, got a call back from a different assistant asking her to come in the following Monday at eleven-thirty, and arrived to find Danielle standing up behind her desk with a look of awkward condescension on her narrow face that said everything there was to say.

Still, they had to go through with it. Cynthia, angry and humiliated and eager to leave before Danielle had even sat down again, produced pictures of April and Jonas. Danielle told the story of her own broken engagement. They recalled

some of the people they had worked with back in the day. Cynthia had no idea what had happened to any of them; Danielle knew what had happened to all of them. It was possible to connect the overbearing power chick she was now to the emotionally manipulable peon she had been back then, but just barely. Finally they came with mutual reluctance to the subject at hand.

"Come on," Cynthia found herself saying. "I'm smart and I work hard and I can tell a good idea from a shitty one. If that was true three years ago it can't be untrue now. Children don't actually make you stupid – you do know that, right? Or maybe that would make a good investigative piece for you."

What kept her there past the point of good sense was her imagination of the dismayed, relieved, pitying expression into which Danielle's face would resolve the moment her office door closed between them. She postponed that moment as long as she could, even when doing so came off as begging. "You don't want what I can offer you," Danielle kept saying, and she was right, Cynthia didn't want it, but even less did she want to be spoken to like a child by someone who used to be her peer and now presumed to tell her what she did or did not want. In the end, in a thoroughly bridge-burning mood, she wrote "eat me" across the top of the résumé she'd brought, slid it across Danielle's desk, and walked out.

On the street she had a sudden memory, useless now, of a night out after work six or seven years ago when Danielle had gotten so drunk – Cynthia, pregnant by then, was stone

sober – that she'd started hitting on the troll of a bartender and Cynthia was deputed to take her home in a cab. The bed in her York Avenue studio, which Cynthia had never visited before, was covered with stuffed dogs. But it wasn't surprising that Danielle should have changed. There was a fast-moving mainstream in life, and once you'd dropped out of it, as Cynthia had, you weren't going to be hailed by everybody when you tried to step into it again.

That was what had happened to her: she had fallen into the underworld of women with nothing special to do. Like those moms she despised, the ones you made small talk with while you waited for your kid to find his shoes after a playdate at their Versailles-like apartments, who had live-in help and no real responsibilities and yet all they did was complain about how they never had a moment to themselves. But what filled Cynthia's days? She was at the gym five mornings a week now; Adam kept telling her she looked hotter than she ever had in her life, which was probably true, but maybe the whole routine there wasn't even about that, maybe it was about something else entirely. She had volunteered, again, to head the silent-auction committee for April's grade and for Jonas's too, even though she took no pleasure in it because of the proximity it forced her into with women whom she imagined were nothing like her. She had a rule about not drinking before five. She never broke it, but why was it there at all?

She and Adam joked all the time about the social purgatory to which they'd condemned themselves by having kids so young: some of their old friends were still hooking

up in bars and setting up Hamptons shares, while the people who actually lived the same sort of domesticated life the Moreys lived tended to be a dozen years older, boring as hell, and too covetous of their youth to befriend them in any case. They'd go to some school function and after a couple of drinks all the middle-aged Wall Street husbands would be macking on her; she thought it was hilarious, and Adam did too, and then the next day their fat-ass wives would make a point of not talking to her, as if that was supposed to be some sort of punishment. Still, her own charisma had become latent in her; who were her friends now?

Her erstwhile maid of honor, Marietta, was one of those with whom Cynthia had lost touch, all the more disgracefully since she lived right there in Tribeca – more than a hundred blocks away, but still. She was married now, to some Viacom executive she had met through some online personal ad – you had to hand it to her, she embraced all that stuff, the newer it was the more unintimidated she felt – but married or not it was hard to stay in contact with her because she worked ten or twelve hours a day as vice president of a media-relations company, one of those places that orchestrated the public rehabilitation of the disgraced: drunk starlets, politicians who turned up in sex videos, clients like that. "It's a lot like being a lawyer," was how Marietta had explained it to her. "Or a lot like advertising. It's a lot like most things, actually." As if to prove their bond, just when Cynthia was missing her most Marietta called one night out of nowhere and begged Cynthia to

meet her for a drink the next afternoon: there was something she needed to ask her. Cynthia said that, since she had to pick up the kids from school at three-thirty, maybe coffee was better. "Fuck that," Marietta said. "We'll have drinks at two, then. It's not like it's unprecedented. Remember that time at Head of the Charles when we made martinis at nine in the morning?"

"Less than distinctly," Cynthia said, smiling.

She actually wondered whether Marietta was going to offer her a job, weird as that would be, but instead it turned out that she was trying to get pregnant. She and Mr. Viacom had only been at it for six months but Marietta, who at thirty was a less patient person than she used to be, was getting ready to start on clomiphene. "How did it happen with you?" she asked Cynthia. "When it happened, I mean like the moment it happened, did you just know?"

"Don't you remember?" Cynthia said. "It was a total fucking shock. I was on my honeymoon. I'm still not sure how it happened."

"What about with Jonas?" she said, biting a cuticle. "Were you trying there?"

"Nope."

She scowled. "Fertile bitch. Well, you're still the only friend I can talk to about any of this who wouldn't try to talk me out of it. If they got wind of it at work, forget about it."

They sat at an outdoor table at a café across from the entrance to the Met, drinking lemon-drop martinis. There was no one else in the place at that hour but their waiter, and even he was barely in evidence.

"Here's the big discovery," Marietta said. "Here's the one aspect of this subject about which I know more than you. Sex where you're *trying* to get pregnant is the absolute worst sex known to man. Another six weeks of this and I swear to God if I'm not knocked up we're going to get divorced."

"Come off it," said Cynthia. Her new martini was too full to lift without spilling, so she was hunched over in her chair trying to sip from it.

"They always tell you that this is the true calling of sex, right? The higher purpose. It should be beautiful. Two people in love trying to create a new life. And let me tell you, it is easily the most joyless humping I've ever been a part of in my entire life. Remember Tom Billings?"

Cynthia thought for a moment. "From freshman orientation?" she said.

Marietta nodded ominously. "*That* was better than this," she said. "I just want him to come already and get out of the room so I can lie there like an idiot holding my knees up in the air like I'm supposed to. You'd think it's a guy's dream, right? Just blow your load and get out. But no: he wants to act like he's in some kind of weird Christian porno, going really slowly, stroking my hair, telling me that he loves me. Jesus!" She looked at Cynthia for a frozen moment, her mouth open in amazement, and then she started to laugh. "And he knows what I'm thinking, and I do feel sorry for him, but at the same time if this is all too hard on his fucking *ego,* well boo hoo. The last time we did it we didn't even say a word to each other until the next day. Speaking of which," she said, pulling her phone out of her purse, "I should give

him a call. Today is supposed to be one of our prime fertility days. He has to come straight home from work and inseminate me, and if he's forgotten, I'll kill him. Excuse me a minute. Two more?" she said to the waiter.

They were both laughing so hard by now that they had to steal napkins from the empty tables around them to wipe away tears, drawing stares from the pedestrians who passed in the sunlight just beyond the awning. Half an hour later they had hugged goodbye three times and vowed to see each other more often and Cynthia, drunk and paranoid, was on her way to Dalton to pick up the kids. She'd have to avoid conversation with the other mothers, but since they didn't like her anyway, there wasn't much trick to that. As for the kids, they weren't old enough, she reassured herself, to be able to tell; besides, this being Tuesday, April had dance and Jonas had tee ball so it was just a matter of rushing them into a cab and racing around the East Side anyway. No worries about making conversation. The kids hated it when they were late for things.

She remembered walking up this same stretch of Fifth Avenue years ago, when Jonas was still an infant, and as she waited for the light to change, one of those overly sunny old ladies who felt free to accost you whenever you were pushing a stroller had started pointing and cooing at him. When she was done she gazed up at Cynthia and said, "Enjoy this time. It goes by so fast," and Cynthia said, "Well then either my watch has stopped or one of us is nuts." Or maybe she hadn't actually said that out loud. She couldn't remember anymore.

That had been a tough time, with both kids still in diapers. Still, even now, probably her dirtiest secret was that impatience for these years to be over: for them to be teenagers, at least, where they started to fend for themselves a little bit and where she wouldn't have to spend so much time wondering whether she would prove equal to whatever bad thing might befall them. Most days were fine, but then once in a while she would feel herself caught in an afternoon that just seemed to refuse to pass. On the bright side, they were way ahead of most children their age, and part of that had to be that she made more than just a cameo appearance in their daytime lives, that unlike so many of their friends they weren't being raised by nannies who ferried them dispassionately from place to place like they were especially valuable packages. She didn't care whether or not they appreciated that now but some part of her was counting on their appreciating it later. And she hated it when people handed you that Norman Rockwell shit about kids growing up too fast; on the contrary, she looked forward to being able to talk to them almost as peers, maybe ask their advice once in a while instead of feeling like she had to have all the answers all the time. Anyway, when you considered the whole bazaar of damage that childhood exposed you to, was there even any such thing as growing up too fast?

She checked her watch again; she'd checked it just a few seconds ago, but somehow five minutes had gone by, and she quickened her pace. She didn't want to get there after the bell. Walking in the bright sunlight gave her a piercing headache, sort of like being drunk and hungover at the same

time. As she searched her bag again for the sunglasses she already knew she'd left on the hall table at home, she heard a voice through the uncomfortable buzz inside her head, a voice that whispered *too late. Too late.*

Which was ridiculous. She was barely thirty. At Adam's old job there was a broker who used to be a professional dog walker, who graduated from business school at age thirty-five. Too late for what, exactly? It might have made a difference if there were some type of work she felt passionate about, or some particular skill she might cultivate into excellence, something a little more marketable than just above-average intelligence and fear of idleness. Marietta loved to make fun of her dissolute clients, but if you got her drunk enough she would start talking in dead earnest about her job in terms of second chances and the desire to repent. Well, if you got Cynthia drunk enough, Cynthia thought, she would cop to wanting to do some good in the world, or at least to feel like her presence in it was value-added. How, though? Without some framework, some resources, even your secret aspirations just curdled into sentimental bullshit.

A lot of time seemed to have gone by very suddenly. The injustice of it, the knowledge that one could never go back to where one had started, to the old advantages, didn't subside that day or the next. She knew that, every day, some woman somewhere did exactly what now seemed so impossible to her. Nevertheless she persisted in feeling that some sort of privilege had been stolen from her, not by the children, of course, but by someone.

Private equity was considered old-school in some ways, because it still had one foot in the real: IPOs, profits on actual goods sold, even the occasional start-up, compared to which the ethereal instruments hedge funds dealt in were like some branch of astrophysics that generated money. It even called upon some old-fashioned people skills, which Adam turned out to possess in precocious abundance. You had to sit down with a guy, to listen to his pitch or to listen to whatever it was he talked about when he thought the pitch was over, in order to gauge whether he himself was the key to his own company's prospects or whether, at some point down the line, extracting a worthwhile profit was going to require taking the whole thing out of his hands.

Still, the ethereal was where the real money was, and everybody knew it. Parker in particular loved to bitch about how working at Perini was like driving some financial horse and buggy and how he couldn't wait for the old man to loosen his grip a little bit so they could start making themselves into real players. He was eaten up by envy of guys he'd gone to Wharton with who were worth fifty million in these high-flying VCs they'd started maybe three years ago. At least once a week he tried to draw Adam into some conversation about how the two of them should walk out and start their own fund. It might even have been worth listening to, Adam thought, if it wasn't for the fact that Parker sucked so bad at his job. He'd played football at Cornell and it was easy to see what Sanford had once liked about him, but lately the old man seemed to have soured on him completely. The more Parker worried about his

own job security, the more contempt he showed privately for the whole operation, and the stupider high-risk shit he proposed in the hopes of proving his indispensability to the place once and for all.

He came over to Adam's desk one morning holding a manila folder and said, "Dude, can I run something by you?" He'd gone to Los Angeles for the weekend, to some decadent birthday party one of his B-school classmates had thrown for himself, and he'd returned to New York with the notion that Perini should get into the movie business. Commercial credit was tight enough now, apparently, that rather than scuttle existing projects, the smaller studios would take financing from anywhere. "Here's the thing," Parker whispered. "It's kind of an outside-the-box idea, and if I go in there alone with it, he'll hand my balls to me before he's even heard what I have to say. But if you go in there with me, he'll give it a chance. He fucking loves you. So will you just go in there with me? You don't even have to say anything."

Adam was pretty sure that even five minutes' thought would reveal the idea as a terrible one. But he felt both pity and fascination when it came to Parker, who seemed more and more capable of some kind of epic crash and burn; and he knew Sanford would recognize that he was there only as a favor. Plus it was such a lunatic idea that he hated the thought of not being in the room when Sanford heard it. "When?" he said.

Parker beamed. "No time like the present," he said.

The rear wall of Sanford's office was floor-to-ceiling glass

that looked out over the Hudson. It was all dark wood and leather and had so much nautical crap in it that he might have stood by the window and imagined he was in some sort of high-tech crow's nest. It was pouring rain out there and much darker than it should have been. Parker nervously laid it out for him, and with a glance at Adam the old man gestured for the manila folder to be handed to him. He pored over Parker's analysis, not impatiently. At one point he looked up and said, "But who is Joe Levy?"

"Production head," Parker said.

"Yes, I see that, but who is he? What's he done? What sort of track record does he have in terms of, you know, actually making money?"

Parker shifted in his seat. "Well, he's produced numerous films as an independent," he said. "*Boathook* was one that did pretty well, in a box-office sense. But really what's intriguing about him is mostly a matter of pedigree. He's the son of Charles Levy, who was the head of UA back in the glory days. A legendary guy. Something like five or six Oscars. Joe grew up surrounded by all the great minds in the business."

Sanford made a snorting noise. "That's it?" he said, and leaned back in his chair. "His father? What is it, some sort of feudal system out there?"

"Kind of, actually," Parker said.

But Sanford was getting on a roll. "Were more chilling words ever spoken," he said, putting the folder down, "from the investor's point of view, than 'he's the son of the founder'? He figures the old man made it look so easy, how

hard can it be? I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm sure he's a lovely guy. I'm sure the parties are amazing. But I'm always leery of guys who do that, who step into their fathers' shoes. You know why? Because usually they're Pete Rose Junior. I mean, my father was a tailor. Should I have gone into that business? Do you suppose I had some kind of genetic affinity for it? What about you? What does your father do?"

Parker was nodding now, trying to get out in front of the idea that the whole proposal had been a lark to begin with. "He's a tax attorney," he said.

"Well then maybe you missed your calling. Maybe you should be a tax attorney too. Adam, how about you? What's your father's trade?"

Adam smiled. "Pipe fitter," he said.

The eyes of the other two men met for a silent moment, and then they burst into laughter. "I can just see it!" Sanford said. "So maybe you're considering going into business with him?"

"Not likely," Adam said. "He's dead."

He'd meant it as what it was, a fact, but it came out all wrong. He could tell from their faces. One thing he did not like was for people to feel sorry for him. When the sympathy faded, they would remember the weakness, and then one day they would turn around and shank you.

The rain made for an odd effect forty floors up, because you didn't get to see it hit anything on the way down, it was just a kind of static in the gray air.

"Jesus Christ," Sanford said. His voice was very different. He had a sentimental streak in him – everybody knew about

it, and some weren't above playing on it, but Adam really hadn't been trying to do that. "I didn't know."

"Did he die like when you were a kid or something?" Parker said.

Adam thought for a moment. "A little less than a year ago," he said.

"What?" Sanford said. "You don't mean when you were working here."

"Just before."

"I had no idea. Was he sick?"

"No," Adam said. "Well, yes and no. He died of a coronary, but it was his third one."

"How old was he?"

"Sixty-two."

Sanford turned white. "I had no idea," he said.

"Well, that's okay," Adam said. He waited for the conversation to resume. Sanford was looking right into his face like he wasn't even there, like he was some portrait of himself. Finally he tapped the folder with his forefinger. "Why don't I look this over," he said. Adam and Parker nodded and got up to leave, and they didn't really speak for the rest of the day, though Parker must have been talking to others there; Adam could tell by the way they stared at him when they thought he wasn't looking. At the end of the day he felt hyper and irritable and wanted nothing more than to get out for a run, but the rain was so heavy now you almost couldn't see the river anymore. Then he had a brainstorm: he grabbed his gym bag and went down to the basement, but the pool was already locked, even though it was just a

few minutes after six. By the time he got back up to the fortieth floor the office had cleared out completely. He went and looked out Sanford's window for a while, and then he went back to his desk and picked up the phone.

"Nice weather we're having," Cynthia said. "I thought you might be on your way already."

"What are you doing right now?" Adam said.

"Doing? What am I doing?"

"Can you call that Barnard girl? Do you think we could get her to come over and babysit right now?"

"I'm sure we could not," Cynthia said. "Why?"

"Because here's what I want to do," he said, watching the lights flicker on the phones in the silent office. "I want to check into a hotel with you for a couple of hours. I want to go to the nicest place we can think of and have a good dinner and some wine and then I want to take you to bed. I want you to think of something you've never asked me to do before and then I'll do it. I want to amaze you. I want complaints from the front desk. I want to get kicked out of there. Seriously, I am as hard as a rock right now just thinking about you."

She laughed delightedly. "I believe I'm getting the vapors," she said. "You better hope this phone's not tapped, pervert. Maybe you need to call that number for when you experience an erection lasting more than four hours."

"I'm not kidding, though," Adam said. "I love you. Seriously, the kids are old enough to be by themselves for a couple of hours, right?"

"No," she said indulgently, "they are not. They do go to bed early, though. So here's my counterproposal." He could hear her walking with the phone into another room. "After they're asleep, you sit down on the couch, and I will bring you a Scotch, and then I will kneel in front of that couch, and whatever happened to you today, I'm betting that between me and the Scotch we will make it all better. Okay? I love you too, by the way. And I do like the way you think. But this way we won't have any visits from Child Protective Services. Okay?"

"Okay," he said.

"We will call that Plan B," Cynthia said. "Now come home."

He hung up. It was almost dark now, and the rain on the windows made for a beautiful effect on the opposite wall, like a bleeding shadow. He called the car service and fifteen minutes later he was in the back seat of a limo that sat motionless in the rain on 57th Street, in traffic that was so bad he felt like time had stopped.

Isn't your father dead, Barry? he had wanted to say. Doesn't everybody's father die? Isn't that what happens? But he'd figured the less he said, the sooner they'd move on. For a long time Adam had known his father mostly as a short-fused bastard, but then in his teenage years something had shifted, and he'd felt like both his parents were a little afraid of him. It wasn't such a bad feeling, actually.

Even when he wiped the windows with the back of his hand he couldn't see outside. It didn't feel like they were moving at all. He thought about laying into the driver for

taking 57th in the first place, but that wouldn't make him feel any better. He just needed for a new day to start.

Sanford owned several secondary homes, but the one his current wife was most enamored of was in Cornwall, Connecticut, two hours and then some outside the city. The following Thursday at lunch he decided aloud that Adam should visit them there that very weekend, and should bring his wife and kids; initially Adam wasn't sure how seriously to take him, especially since this was a lunch at Gramercy Tavern that featured lots of wine, but when Sanford's secretary faxed him driving directions the next day, he phoned Cynthia and gave her the news. She was a sport about it. She asked if the kids should pack their bathing suits, and he answered that he didn't have the slightest idea.

"I owe you one," he said. He was actually thinking about Sanford's wife, whom he had met but Cynthia had not. He didn't see that going particularly well.

He spent Friday laughing off the mostly good-natured stink eye from everyone else at Perini, none of whom had ever been graced with such an invitation before, though they'd all been employed there longer than he had. The drive upstate the next morning opened gradually into the kind of calendar-art New England hillscape Adam had grown up in – stone walls, church spires, village greens – but Sanford's house, down at the end of a dirt road they passed twice before finding, was a white Regency-style mansion so gigantic and out of place it looked like a theme park. It sprawled across an expensively produced clearing as

if it had been dropped there from the air. Adam turned off the car and the four of them got out and stared. In its inappropriateness the house was so self-absorbed that it could have sprung fully formed from the head of Sanford's awful wife; still, the sheer ballsiness of it, the arrogance required to raze whatever must have been there before in order to erect this monstrosity precisely where it didn't belong, was kind of impressive. He knew Sanford had a lot of money but sometimes even someone in Adam's job had to be reminded what the phrase "a lot of money" really meant.

"This," Jonas said, "is the coolest house I have ever seen."

No one came outside to greet them; he wasn't sure how to let their hosts know they had arrived. Honking felt wrong on multiple levels. "So what time is the next tour?" Cynthia said, but just then Mrs. Sanford #4 – she introduced herself to Cyn as Victoria, thank God, because Adam had blanked on her name – came gaily through some side door that they hadn't even noticed was there.

Sanford himself was waiting in the foyer to shake hands with Cynthia and the children, in whom he took no pains to seem interested, and then he and his wife did something that struck Adam as truly old-school: they segregated their guests immediately by gender, with Victoria taking Cynthia and the kids upstairs and Sanford leading Adam down some steps, through a media room, and onto what turned out to be a screened back porch that faced directly, with only a few feet of mowed grass intervening, into the dense woods. The porch was crowded with dozens of large potted and hanging

plants, creating for a moment the effect that the spanking-new house was actually a sort of ruin the birches and pines were intent on reclaiming; but in there among the fauna were two large and very softly upholstered rattan chairs, and in between them was a table that held a pitcher of Bloody Marys. The porch was cool and dark, despite which Sanford wore a pair of sunglasses on a cord around his neck. His own glass was already three-quarters empty – he must have been sitting out here before the Moreys arrived – and he filled Adam's with a stately flourish. "You have a beautiful family," he said as he sank back into his chair.

"Thank you," Adam said. "Where have they been taken?"

"Not much to do out here," was Sanford's answer. "You're at least a hundred miles from the ocean, is what I don't like about it. Still, it is quiet." He took the celery stalk out of his drink and stuck it in his mouth.

Victoria had launched without prelude into a house tour, recounting the difficulties she'd had getting the various painters and decorators and contractors to adhere to her clearly expressed vision, a separate haughty narrative for every room in the mansion. By the fourth or fifth room Cynthia had a powerful urge to burn the whole place to the ground with this Botoxed stick figure inside it. There was no way they could have been more than ten years apart in age – unless she was a mummy, Cynthia reflected while watching the jaw move in her eerily smooth face, or possibly a vampire, preserved for centuries by the blood of her social inferiors – and yet she spoke as if from some great

experiential height, as if, at the end of her remarks, there might be time for a few questions.

"Three times, we painted this room," she was saying, as if she would even know which end of a paintbrush to hold. "And I had a chip from Barry's house in Stowe for the painter to match. Hello? Is that so hard? But you know how it is up here in these small towns, you just have to make the best of what you're given, in terms of contractors and such I mean."

"Sounds rough," Cynthia said.

"Are you from New York originally?" Victoria said.

Cynthia, who had turned around to make sure the children hadn't fallen too far behind, or maybe been snatched by silent ninja domestics, said, "What? No. Near Chicago."

"And what line is your family in?"

Cynthia repeated the question in her head to be sure she had heard it right. "They're small-town contractors," she said.

That she had put her foot in her mouth seemed more plausible to Victoria than the idea of being openly mocked; embarrassed, she looked away, and in avoiding Cynthia's eyes she seemed to remind herself of the presence of the two children, who, though of course they could have cared less about paint shades and window treatments, were awestruck by the house itself, the scale and gadgetry of it. There were environmental-control panels in every room, touch screens that not only calibrated light and temperature and music but also gave you access to security-camera views of the garage, the grounds, the driveway, and even the other rooms inside

the house. It had taken Jonas about ten seconds to figure it out. "There's Dad!" he said. Cynthia kept throwing him doomsday looks over her shoulder, but having solved the puzzle of the touch screens he couldn't keep his hands off them, and anyway she was half rooting for him to figure out how to make it rain in there. Soon he had left a trail of images of his father and Sanford flickering in every empty room through which they passed.

Victoria hadn't noticed that, but she picked up on the kids' general enchantment and felt gratified again. April was walking a few steps ahead of her brother now, embarrassed by his youthful enthusiasm, trying to blend in with the women, mimicking their facial expressions like someone trying to sneak into the second act of a play. She loved it when new people thought she was older than she was. She was leaning toward Victoria like some kind of thirsty plant, but Victoria seemed disinclined to engage her too directly. "God, these are gorgeous children," she said to Cynthia. "How old did you say they were?"

"Seven and six," Cynthia said, ignoring a scowl from April, who felt ages should be rounded up.

"They could model. They look like a Ralph Lauren catalogue. They go to school?"

"Why, yes," Cynthia said. "We thought that would be wise."

"Where, though?"

"Dalton," April offered.

"Very nice," Victoria said. "And you were smart to have them so young. Easier to bounce back." And she reached

out and casually patted Cynthia just below her waistline, approvingly, a touch so condescendingly intimate that Cynthia was speechless. She tried to remind herself that this was the wife of her husband's boss and so she would just have to suck it up for the weekend, and when that didn't work she tried to drum up some sympathetic revulsion at the thought of what old Vicky here must have had to deliver sexually in exchange for this life of high-end vision realizing. But that didn't really work either, because Sanford, even in his late sixties or whatever he was, was a ridiculously handsome guy.

It was apparently his intent to sit there on the porch drinking Bloody Marys for the duration of his guests' stay. He was talking now about the upcoming Newport-to-Bermuda yacht race. The Bloody Marys were excellent; Adam was starting to recall the pleasures of getting drunk before lunchtime but this seemed like an odd setting for it, like a myth or a fairy tale in which he might drink the proscribed drink and never find his way back to the surface of the earth. Not that he was nervous around the boss – they'd been drunk together many times – or felt he needed to keep up appearances of any sort. On the contrary: the more he was himself, the more the old man seemed to like him.

He looked abruptly at Adam, struck by an idea. "You could crew," he said. "The crew I had last year was hopeless. Interested? We'd be out anywhere from four to six days."

"Sadly," Adam said, "I know fuck all about sailing." Sanford's disappointment lasted only an instant. "You could

pick it up," he said. "I know a sailor when I see one. I see great things in you, you know."

Adam pretended he hadn't heard, which was his nearest approach to modesty.

"Those others, they'll do fine," Sanford went on. "But they're lieutenants. You give them a job to do and they'll get it done – any business needs that. But I see bigger things for you. God knows I won't be around forever."

Rather than allow Sanford to stray any farther down this path, Adam said, "So I'm meeting your pal Guy in Milwaukee on Monday morning. I have to fly out there tomorrow night." "Your pal" was said with some levity; Sanford scowled at the mention of Guy's name.

"The man is an animal," he said. "I think there's money to be made there, but I'm not sure I can spend another hour in the same room with him. Last time we met he threw a pen at my head. I'm sorry to sacrifice you to this lunatic. Maybe you can get it done, though. People like you. You know that? That's a gift. You can't teach it. I'm hungry," he said suddenly.

"Can I ask you something? Is there a pool here?"

"Good Lord," Sanford said, "you and the swimming."

"No," Adam said, "I was thinking of the kids. They brought their suits. Throw them in the water and they're good all day. It might give them something to do while we're sitting here getting loaded."

Sanford folded his hands on his chest. He had sunk quite low in his chair. "Helicopter," he said. "That's the term, right? These days? Helicopter parents, helicopter parenting."

"Sorry?"

"You're close to them, aren't you? I think that's great."

"You have children yourself, sir?"

The old man loved to be called sir. "Oh God yes," he said. "Of course. Anyway, no, there's no swimming pool here, but we do belong to this little club in town where they can swim all they like. Maybe we can even get some goddamn lunch there, since no lunch appears to be forthcoming here."

They followed the Sanfords in their car, in a silence generated by the fear that anything they wanted to say might later be innocently repeated in front of their hosts by one of the kids. It also required all of Adam's concentration not to lose sight of Sanford's Boxster, which he drove through the narrow roads at aristocratic speed. Adam thought the word "club" betokened a simple swimming pool, and had told the kids so; the family made a collective gasping sound when they came instead upon a clean, still lake hidden improbably high up in the Berkshire foothills. A wooden sign at the gate told them the place was called Cream Hill Pond. The quiet was overwhelming: "No power boats," Sanford pointed out. "Sunfish city." White sails dotted the water. There were two tennis courts, but no one was on them. The kids were vibrating with impatience to get into the lake; Cynthia asked Sanford's wife where the changing rooms were, but Victoria, who looked unhappy and even somewhat baffled to be there at what seemed like the children's behest, didn't know and had to ask someone else.

The dark pines, the sun on the water, the shimmer of the

triangular sails, it was all so postcard-beautiful that you felt a little stupid giving in to it; but April's and Jonas's uncomplicated pleasure was infectious. Cynthia watched them organizing some game in the water with a group of kids they'd met five minutes ago. Rarely did you see the two of them get along so well for so long a stretch and you had to think that the relationship between that and the sheer sense of space out here wasn't coincidental. She lifted her head to admire the green bowl of the hills. Wide open yet secure. Maybe she'd been looking at this place, this life, through the wrong eyes. All you wanted was for your children to become their best selves, but how were you supposed to know if this was not happening? Victoria was right: they were beautiful, so beautiful you almost felt like you should apologize for it, like something fundamental had been rigged in their favor. Maybe you were denying them something they needed without even knowing it, just because you weren't thinking big enough, or far enough outside the box of what your own childhood was like.

But as she watched them play she admitted to herself that sometimes this anxiety over whether your kids' lives were perfectly realized could reach the point where it wasn't a lot different from Victoria's trying to match a paint chip: you had to justify the day, and your existence in it, somehow. It was impressive, in a way, that a woman Victoria's age not only didn't want children but didn't really even pretend to like them. Certainly such a life was possible. Certainly there were other things one might do. According to Adam, she sat on the boards of about ten different national charities, where

she no doubt made herself a pain in the ass, but what did that really matter when she had the assets and the social position to actually do some good in the world? What did it matter that the money wasn't hers, as long as it was hers to give away? Cynthia already lived better than anyone in her family ever had, at least until Ruth remarried; still, there was rich and there was rich. She glanced over at Victoria, who wore a huge straw hat that she clamped down on her head with one palm even though there was no wind onshore at all. Cynthia was sorely tempted to ask her how old she was. It wasn't impossible that they were actually the same age.

"You have a beautiful home," she said. Victoria was staring back in the direction of the parking lot and didn't seem to hear.

Sanford, though, nodded graciously. "Shame you all can't spend the night," he said. "Next time." Adam's shocked expression was luckily hidden behind his sunglasses; they had their overnight bags in the car. "That's very kind of you," Cynthia said; she didn't know how she would keep the kids from howling, though, so she went down to the dock to give them the news out of their hosts' earshot. Adam saw her put her finger to her lips and give them the universal five-more-minutes signal as they stomped their feet in the water and complained. She knew how to be gracious. Even after ten years together, his more complex desires for her wound up translating themselves into the simpler language of arousal; and as he watched her walk back up the lawn toward the umbrella table where the adults sat, he experienced an untimely urge to pull her back to the

parking lot and do her right there up against some old Brahmin's car. Victoria went off to use the bathroom, and Sanford went off to take a phone call, and Adam was able to give his wife at last the private eye-roll he had wanted to give her all day.

"I am so sorry to put you through this," he said.

But she just smiled. "Actually, I'm really glad we came," she said. "If you want to know the truth, it all makes me kind of jealous."

He was so surprised by that, he couldn't think of another word to say until their hosts returned. The kids had such a meltdown when the time came to get them out of the water that Adam and Cynthia wound up deciding to leave for New York straight from the club. Once again the men were cleaved from the women, the old man walking Adam in the direction of his own car, with his arm around him.

"So what do you think of all this?" Sanford said, and it sounded astonishingly heartfelt, even if he was drunk. His life, Adam supposed he meant. The thought of being asked to pass judgment on it, even just as a matter of etiquette, made him almost resentful.

"Green with envy," he said finally. "You have a beautiful home. I mean, I'm sure you have several. But this is a great part of the world. And frankly," he said, tapping the hood of the Boxster, "this gets me a little hard too."

Sanford laughed enchantedly. Then he laid his hand on Adam's cheek. "Patience, my son," he said. "One day, all this will be yours."

While they searched for Route 22 signs, Adam noticed

his fingers were white around the wheel. "Pretty quiet back there," he said. "Did you guys have fun today?"

"It was awesome," April said. "I thought they would have kids, though."

"Not everybody does, you know," Cynthia said.

"Dad?" Jonas said meekly. "Can we have a country house?"

Cynthia laughed. "Yeah, Dad," she said. "How about it?"

Adam said nothing, and after half a minute Cynthia turned around in her seat. "One day," she said to the kids. "One day soon. We'll have all that stuff. It just takes time. You have to remember that Mr. Sanford is almost two hundred years old."

Actually, Adam thought, there was no reason why they couldn't buy some sort of weekend home now, although having gotten a load of Sanford's place Jonas would no doubt feel let down by anything Adam could afford. But there was something in Adam that stiffened against that idea – more so after today than ever before. Some manor in the country to return to over and over again, in which to sit and drink among the plants and do nothing in particular: was that what he was supposed to want? All day long he had felt like the house, the car, the club, the view, that whole life was being conspicuously shown to him, held out in front of him. *Patience, my son.* Why didn't he want it, then? Maybe he just wanted to determine his own rewards, and the pace at which they would come. Or maybe it was the presumption that all this privilege, no matter how touching it was that Sanford wanted him to have it, was Sanford's to give

him in the first place. Patrimony, even the sentimental kind, had nothing to do with it. Something in Adam bristled at the thought of inheriting anything from anybody.

The next night they had an early dinner together so that Adam could make his flight to Milwaukee. Guy – whose last name was Farbar but whose abusive phone manner had earned him monomial status in the Perini office – ran a company that made cryogenic rubber; he wanted financing to take it global. Adam didn't have a perfect understanding of what cryogenic rubber was or what it was used for, but one of the beauties of his job was that he didn't really have to. Sanford was high on the numbers, and with good reason, even though as a man of business Guy himself was essentially everything Sanford was not – loud, confrontational, impetuous, undisguised. His staff turnover was incredible, a fact that his seeming compulsion to fuck every single one of his female employees did nothing to diminish. In fact, probably the biggest red flag about getting into business with Guy at all was that there were already two pending lawsuits against him, one of which involved a temp who had been nineteen at the time.

He turned out to be even more of a character in person. He had bushy hair and a retro mustache and had taken this cryogenic rubber company from receivership to eleven million in profit in less than three years. His office had one of those topless gas-station calendars on the wall. "We were up thirty-one percent last year," he shouted at Adam. "In fucking Wisconsin! What is taking you people so long? Where's the money already? Fucking tight-ass Ivy League

Wall Streeters. None of you have ever run an actual business in your lives – I mean, a business that *makes* things. Calling me up and asking for this form and that prospectus. Get your heads out of your asses! I talk to that Sanford guy and it's like talking to one of those animatronic Disney things. The Hall of WASPs. You, on the other hand, seem almost like an actual person. Why can't I just deal with you? Just write me a fucking check already!"

"It's not my money," Adam said, amused.

Guy scowled. "Whatever," he said. "If it was your money we could shake hands and get rich. But you're still young and you still have a boss to jerk off, I get it. When do you fly back? Do I have your cell?"

"Tomorrow first thing. Here, let me write it down for you again."

"Then by Wednesday morning latest I need sixteen million for starters or I go elsewhere."

"Understood," Adam said, meaning that he understood that Guy delivered this same ultimatum every time. Secretly he had an intuition that there was no way this maniac would not succeed, no matter what he was selling. Still, it wasn't Adam's money.

"Whatever way it works," Guy said, and turned around to make a phone call.

And that was it: no lavish dinner to woo him, no junior executives, no strip club. Back at the hotel Adam tried to book a flight home that same night, but there was nothing – some kind of storm was coming in, and flights were being canceled in bunches. A hotel room these days was basically

like a mausoleum with a big TV in it: he couldn't just sit there. But the health club in the basement was closed for renovations; and there was a Journey tribute band playing in the bar. It was like a nightmare. He hadn't even brought any work with him. Rain battered the windows, and in the lobby the staff ran around putting wastebaskets under new leaks in the ceiling. He went back upstairs to his room and called Cynthia.

"So what have you been up to?" he asked, drumming his fingers on the bedspread.

"Math homework. April's class started talking about geometry this week. Not exactly my strong suit. She gets a little stressed if she doesn't pick up something immediately."

Her voice flattened out in the evenings, once the kids were in bed – he'd noticed that lately, but never as distinctly as he did now, when her voice was all he had of her.

"There's acute angles," he said, "and also some other kind."

"Okay," she said. "Home schooling probably not an option, then."

"Why so early, anyway? Didn't we start geometry in like ninth grade?"

"I can't remember," Cynthia said.

"Well, you have to talk to me about something," he said. "I'm in some kind of black Midwestern hole here. What have you got?"

She sighed. "Okay," she said. "Marietta has this shrink she used to see, and I called him up today and made an appointment."

He said nothing.

"Discuss," she said.

"An appointment for yourself?"

She laughed. "Yes of course for myself, genius. At least it's not like he's some stranger. I mean he's a stranger to me, but Marietta vetted him for like three years. It's just something I've been thinking about a little bit and I decided to see what it's all about."

He could feel that she needed him to say something, but something was preventing him, something that felt, at least a little, like panic.

"Adam, of course I won't do it if it's going to freak you out," she said. "I mean it. I know it's probably not something you approve of in general."

"Of course it's okay with me," he said. "Of course I approve of it. I mean it's not for me to approve or disapprove. It's just I guess I didn't know you were unhappy."

"Not unhappy," she said thoughtfully. "More like stuck. Anyway, Christ, it's like going to the gym, everyone does it. You know that, right?"

He tried to say the right things, and then he heard April come in with another homework question and he had to let her go. The truth was that he did disapprove, at least a little – not in general, not for other people; but the two of them were different. One of the things that made the two of them so great together, he'd always felt, was that shared talent for leaving all their baggage behind. Why would you want to go back and pick that up again? Everybody's got their own; just walk the fuck away from yours and don't

turn around. He saw it borne out every day in the world of finance: the most highly evolved people were the ones for whom even yesterday did not exist.

Still, she was unhappy; she was unhappy, and that had to be his responsibility. He opened up the minibar, sat on the edge of the vast bed with his feet on the windowsill, his back to the empty room behind him, and watched the lightning over black Lake Michigan. A few mini-bottles later he felt less agitated; but he hated doing nothing, and these were hours he was never going to get back.

The first thing Jonas ever collected was Duplo animals. He was too young at the time to remember it now, but his mother liked to tell him stories about himself. The different Duplo sets had different animal-shaped blocks, and he would take them out of their sets and line them up on the coffee table in the living room, or on the rim of the bathtub, or on the floor under his parents' bed, always in the same mysterious order determined somehow, as best she could tell, by their color. Cynthia would find them arrayed like that, in different places around the apartment, two or three times a week.

Next it was pennies: he would arrange them by year, once he'd learned his numbers, and then he'd arrange them by color, really by gradations of dirtiness, from the bright polish of the new ones to the murky greenish-bronze that made the man on the penny look like he was sitting and thinking about something on a bench inside a cave. Then his mother was talking to another mother in the playground

and after that she showed him how to bring the shine out of all the pennies by soaking them in lemon juice. That was a lot of fun – like leading the penny man outside where it was light – though it was also the sort of fun that could only be had once and then it was done. This was often the case when grownups got involved.

There was one morning when Jonas walked into the living room to ask his mother for Oreos before dinner even though he knew he wasn't going to get them; he saw her sitting on the window seat, holding onto her knees, looking out the window, like she was sad about something she couldn't find. Think, she often said to him. Where did you have it last?

He loved it when she played with him, but when it came to the collecting she had a way of getting too involved. Like when Grandma Ruth sent him one of those state-quarter sets. His mother would go through her own quarters before he'd even seen them; she knew the ones he was still missing and she'd just walk into his room and hand them to him. Or later when he started reading the Nate the Great books. She saw he liked the first three and so she went out and bought the entire rest of the series, numbers four through sixteen. When it was almost more fun not to have them yet – to know they existed out there somewhere and waited patiently to be found. He didn't know how to tell her this.

Of course she didn't only bring him things he'd asked for. Once in a while she'd buy a few CDs and they'd sit on the living room floor and listen, and if there were one or two he didn't show any interest in, they probably wouldn't play

those again. There was one called *Flight of the Bumblebee* – as soon as that one was over he asked if he could hear it again, and his mother's face softened, like that was what she'd been waiting for. Pretty soon she told him that he didn't need to ask permission every time. He knew how to operate the stereo himself though he wasn't supposed to fiddle with the volume knob.

April said one day that if she heard *Flight of the Bumblebee* one more time she'd go postal. He didn't know what that meant but it made him self-conscious so he didn't play it again for the rest of that day.

"He's got an unusual attention span," he heard his mother telling someone else in Zabar's one day. "For a kid his age, a boy especially, he can focus on one thing for a long time."

He finally found a way to pursue his interests without having to worry about others spoiling it with their own enthusiasm or else getting their feelings hurt: he started a secret collection, which, given his limited freedom of movement in the outside world, pretty much restricted him to collecting things from inside the apartment. Also, in order to maintain the collection's integrity as a secret, it had to consist of items people had forgotten about or would eventually be willing to forget about. He knew that this was pretty close to what people called stealing but he chose not to dwell on that. So far he had one of his mother's lipsticks, a combination lock from his father's gym bag, April's hairband with the sunflowers on it, four different wine corks, his father's empty money clip (this he had found serendipitously under a couch cushion), an electricity bill,

one photo from his parents' wedding album, April's preschool report card that said she had a "quick temper," two mismatched earrings from the bottom of his mother's purse, a tiny wooden carving of a cat from Dad's boss's house in Connecticut, and a book-light that clipped onto the top of the book you were reading in bed. That last one almost undid the whole project, because his mother had searched for it with unusual thoroughness before giving up.

No one ever looked in the old Lego box that was inside a drawstring bag that was at the bottom of the toy chest that he sat on to read or to draw. He didn't need to look inside the box to remind himself what was in there – he could tick off its contents in his head at any moment of the day, or while lying in bed at night – but once in a while he liked to open it up anyway. It made each item seem even more valuable to know that everyone else had given up on it, because he was the only one in the family who knew the secret, which was that things might disappear but, thanks to him, rarely was anything ever really lost. He held each object between his fingers for a while, recommitting it to memory; then he packed them all away and opened the door of his room and walked past his mother at the kitchen table and into the living room to hear *Flight of the Bumblebee* again.

For Christmas break they were going to a resort in Costa Rica; some guy from Morgan Stanley Adam still played basketball with had said the beaches there were the most beautiful beaches on earth. To the kids, one resort was the

same as another, which was to say a kind of paradise where all strangers were nice to you and your parents never said no to anything or asked how much it cost and all you had to do to get anything you wanted was to pick up the phone. April was also mindful, though she knew she shouldn't be, of the jealousy these trips engendered in some of her school friends, who maybe got to go skiing for a couple of days or spent the break in Florida in the hot, featureless homes of their grandparents.

Just a week or so before they were due to leave, the most recent hire at Perini – a guy named Bill Brennan, just barely out of college, whose junior status was unfortunately cemented by the fact that he was only about five feet six – strode around the office tossing postcard-style invitations on everyone's desk. "Some buddies of mine are opening a bar," he said. "Grand opening tonight. Actually, I have a piece of it too. You have to come. All of you are comped. They have to get some buzz going. Every hot woman I know will be there. Adam, dude, it's on 89th and Second, right in your backyard. You have to come. I know it's not your thing anymore."

"Fuck you it's not my thing anymore," Adam said, laughing. He called Cynthia and told her to get the sitter they used, or some other sitter, it didn't matter. They hadn't been to a real meat-market bar like that in a long time, long enough that everything about it seemed hysterical now. The men – if you could even use that word, since despite their suits and loosened ties they all looked about twenty years old – nodded meaningfully to the pounding music and

generally stood around hoping for disinhibited women to fall on them like some humanitarian airdrop. Parker and the rest of them were in heaven. Brennan comped all their drinks, but it was so crowded that it took Adam almost fifteen minutes to complete the round trip to the bar from the spot they'd staked out against the wall. By the time he made it back from his third go-round with a Scotch for himself and a vodka and soda for Cynthia, she was holding a different, brand-new drink someone else had bought for her; she was visibly smashed, and encircled by strange, hyena-like guys.

"This, losers, is my husband," she shouted when she saw him, because you had to shout in there to say anything at all. Even so, they smiled and nodded and were likely only pretending to have caught, or cared, what she was saying. A beautiful drunk woman standing alone, even for five minutes, drew these guys like touts at a racetrack; they were too young and callow even to check for a wedding ring. "He is more of a man than any of you will ever be. Especially you, fatso," she yelled, gesturing to one guy, who just smiled.

"Hey now," Adam said.

"You have lost a step, though," Cynthia said in his ear. "I mean, these bottom-feeders bought me three drinks while I was waiting for you to come back with this one." She took one glass out of his hand, took a sip from it, and then with drinks in both hands put her arms around his neck and started making out with him. He felt a little vodka splash on the back of his neck. He wasn't sure whether or not this was

hilarious. The circle of guys may not have been able to hear anything she'd been saying to them, but this kind of display they understood, and with no hard feelings they turned away to see what else was available.

Cyn stopped kissing him for a moment and screamed after them, "His dick is bigger than yours too!" That they heard. In fact, a number of people seemed to hear it. "Okay," Adam said, putting his hand gently on the small of her back, "I'm thinking it's time to call it a night."

When they were out on the sidewalk she turned around toward the bar's façade and made the sign of the cross. It was only about ten blocks home but under the circumstances he thought they'd be better off in a cab. He watched her as they rode, eyes closed, head against the window. He hadn't seen her this drunk in years; or maybe he had, but the difference was that he'd been that drunk too. She held her liquor like a champion, so if she was this far gone – and without him – it could only be because she wanted it that way. They got off the elevator and she went straight to the bathroom; Adam waited by the front door while the sitter, Gina, a round girl from Barnard about whom he knew absolutely nothing other than that she was from Minnesota, found her jacket and her shoes and wedged her textbooks back into her backpack. He counted out her money, including a twenty for cab fare. "Is it okay if I don't walk you out tonight?" he said.

"No problem," she said. "It's not like it's a rough neighborhood."

He waited until the elevator door closed. Walking back

through the foyer he saw that Gina had written on a pad underneath the phone, "Cynthia – Your mother called," and then underneath that, "2x." He went to the bathroom to make sure she was okay, but the door was open again and she wasn't in there. She wasn't in their bedroom either. He found her in the kids' room, sitting on the floor against the wall between their beds. Her eyes were wide open.

"We need a bigger apartment," she whispered. "They can't keep sharing a room forever."

He nodded and reached out his hands to help her to her feet. When she was on the bed in their room he took her shoes off and brought her a couple of Advil and a glass of water. The room was lit only from outside but she lay back on the pillow with her forearm over her eyes.

"You okay?" Adam asked her. She nodded. Then, because her unguardedness was contagious, as drunk people's often is, he said, "Hey, Cyn, can I ask you something?"

Without moving her arm from her eyes she gestured grandly with her hand, like, knock yourself out.

"When you go to that shrink," he said, "what do you talk about?"

She grinned. "Not supposed to ask that," she said.

He nodded, though she couldn't see him, and kept lightly stroking her hip with his fingertips. The radiator hissed softly.

"Now," she said, lifting her arm from her face. "Time to show me what you've got. Come on, stud. I knew you'd be good when I saw you in that bar."

She started struggling with her jeans. He stood up beside

the bed to help her, and by the time he had them off, she was asleep.

The next morning he took the kids to school and let her stay in bed; he put the note about her mother's phone calls next to the coffeemaker where she'd see it. She scowled; okay, two more Advil and something to eat before I start to deal with that, she thought, but no such luck, at about five minutes to eight the phone rang again. Ruth sounded tense and offended, though that was pretty much par for the course.

"I called three times last night," she said.

"We were out late. Which is why a stranger answered the phone. We got home way past your bedtime."

"Well, anyway, I'm calling because I have a favor to ask you, and as I thought you might have gathered, it's urgent. It's about your sister."

"I'm sorry?"

"Your stepsister, Deborah." Before Cynthia could even think of what to say, Ruth pressed on: "You know she's living in New York—"

"No, I did not know that. I thought she lived in Boston. How would I know where she lives?"

Ruth made a sound of exasperation with which Cynthia was very familiar. "Well, I don't know how you manage not to know these things. Yes, she's been living right there in the same city as you for two years. She's been getting her PhD in art history at NYU."

"That's super for her," Cynthia said, holding the phone with her shoulder as she poured water into the coffeemaker. "So why—"

"She has been," Ruth said, and here her voice slowed down a bit as if she'd hit an obstacle, "she has been having some difficulties. Apparently. I mean we just found out about it. Apparently it involves a man, or anyway that's where it started. A professor of hers."

"How original," Cynthia said. She sat on the windowsill, feeling the metal safety guards against the small of her back.

"But it goes beyond that. She has – there have been – well, she ended up in the hospital, more or less against her will, there were some sort of pills involved, she says it was an accident but apparently some doctor there refuses to see it that way."

"Some doctor where?"

"In Bellevue," Ruth said.

"In *Bellevue*?"

"It's not as bad as it sounds. The way it was explained to me, it's just a formality. Warren says it's a liability issue for them. They need to release her to someone, a family member, and so I need you to go down there and get her. The admitting doctor's name is—"

"Whoa," Cynthia said. "Whoa. I am not a part of this. Bellevue? Are you fucking kidding me?"

"She's your *sister*!" Ruth wailed.

"She is not my sister. Jesus. We are leaving for Costa Rica in less than a week. Why the hell don't you and Warren come get her?"

"Warren is in San Francisco. He'll come get her if he has to, but it would mean another night in that place for her. Who knows what goes on? Even the doctor said

she obviously didn't really belong in there. He seemed so nice." The thought of institutional niceness in such circumstances undid Ruth, and she started crying. "Please, Cynthia. Please. It's his only child. Maybe you don't care about her but surely you won't just let someone you know keep suffering if you can stop it. You're not that kind of person."

Her head was pounding. She really needed to eat something soon. An egg sandwich, maybe. "God damn it," she said. "God damn it. All right. Where the fuck is Bellevue exactly, anyway?"

Ruth gave her the address. "Just a night or two with you," she said, "and she'll be better, maybe well enough to go back to her own place, though they told us she shouldn't try—"

"No way is that happening. She's your problem. And don't hand me that family shit. This is not some sanitarium. I have children here." In the cab down to 27th Street she called Delta and booked Deborah on a flight to Pittsburgh that night. Some two hours later, after she'd filled out every form and then waited in the lobby, which was lit like an autopsy room, for somebody to find somebody else who would sign off on the discharge, the steel door to the ward clicked open and her stepsister walked through. They hadn't seen each other in eight years, but Cynthia, remembering the old hostility in Deborah's eyes, was surprised to see it gone, and nothing else in its place. Probably just the drugs, Cynthia thought. They've got to have some designer shit up in here.

She was thin and pale, and looked very much like someone who had just spent a lot of time throwing up. Like a much more intense version of the hangover Cynthia herself was still fighting down. Her hair was in knots. The great unlikeliness of this moment was actually kind of compelling, but Cynthia tried not to let it show. "So you're on a 7:32 flight to Pittsburgh," she said, but Deborah didn't even break stride, she was in such a hurry to get out of there. Cynthia fell into step alongside her. "They probably won't even let you on the plane looking like this, though. You can come back to our apartment and clean up and borrow something to wear. Do you have to go back to your place for any reason?"

Deborah licked her lips and said hoarsely, "No."

"Good. I don't think there's time, anyway."

She sat in the kitchen while Deborah took a shower that lasted a good thirty minutes. Cynthia was torn between irritation – the kids had to be picked up at school at three-fifteen – and nervousness about whatever might be going on in there. Finally Deborah exited in a huge cloud of steam, looking flushed and a little more like herself, though still woefully skinny. Cynthia's jeans barely stayed on her hips; she had a smaller pair but there was no way she was giving those up. "I can't believe you live like this," Deborah said. "That is the nicest shower I've ever been in. You should see my place."

Cynthia looked her over, not listening to what she said. She didn't trust her. In her state she might do anything, and if it happened here, it would become Cynthia's problem. "Come on," she said. "We have to go pick up my kids."

Dalton's lower-school building was a double-wide townhouse just a few blocks away; the early-arriving mothers went into the lobby, where there was a fireplace, to keep warm, but Cynthia and Deborah waited outside at the bottom of the steps for April and Jonas to emerge. Deborah seemed to have some awareness of herself as out of place; she stayed a step behind Cynthia's shoulder and cringed a bit as if trying not to be seen, not just by the kids (whom she wouldn't have recognized anyway) but by anyone. More than half the women out on the sidewalk were nannies, substantial and mostly dark-skinned and sober-looking, talking to one another with their eyes on the door and occasionally laughing without smiling. When April and Jonas appeared on the landing, wrapped tightly in their coats, and walked smiling down the steps toward their mother, Cynthia heard from behind her, softly but unmistakably, a gasp.

"Kids," Cynthia said; and then, just because it was the shortest available explanation, "this is your aunt Deborah."

Their mouths fell open, but they also remembered their manners and held out their hands for Deborah to shake. "I've seen pictures of you," April said, and for a moment Cynthia was surprised. "At Mom and Dad's wedding. You were one of the bridesmaids."

"That would be correct," Deborah said. Cynthia rolled her eyes. Some people had no talent for talking to children at all.

At home the kids watched TV and had a snack, as usual; and Deborah, after sitting silently under the kitchen clock with Cynthia for a few minutes, stood up from the table and

went into the living room to join them. Cynthia phoned her mother with Deborah's flight information. "Yes, Mom, she's fine," she said, watching warily through the kitchen doorway. "Perfectly normal. I mean, if a grown woman sitting on the floor eating Goldfish and watching the Disney Channel is normal. Just be there when her flight gets in so she doesn't go AWOL or whatever." When Adam walked through the door, Cynthia stood up, kissed him, and grabbed her keys. "They've eaten," she said to him. "Let me just get my coat and we're out of here." He went into the TV room, and the kids jumped all over him. "Daddy," they yelled, "have you met Aunt Deborah?"

Deborah stood up, brushing crumbs off her shirt. She and Adam nodded to each other awkwardly. Jonas, holding both his father's hands, walked up his thighs and flipped himself over.

"How's your brother doing?" Deborah said.

Adam's eyebrows went up. "Good," he said. "He's in Los Angeles. I guess I'd forgotten you knew each other. You want me to tell him you said hi?"

"No," she said, as Cynthia reappeared in the doorway behind him and beckoned with one finger.

They hit traffic getting on the FDR at that hour and again once they were over the Triborough. Cynthia started looking nervously at her watch. No way in hell they were missing this flight. Suddenly she felt a kind of shudder go through the seat beneath her, and when she turned she saw that Deborah was crying, and shaking with the effort not to make any noise while doing it.

"Oh please," Cynthia said – not to Deborah, exactly, but that was how she took it.

"Please what?" Deborah said angrily, wiping her eyes on her borrowed shirt. "I'm sorry that unhappiness doesn't fit in with your lifestyle. I know you don't give a shit about me but I'd think I'd merit the sympathy a total stranger would, at least. Of course maybe the total stranger would get nothing from you either. I'd forgotten how easy everything's always been for you. I just didn't expect I'd ever feel so jealous of it."

"As I understand it," Cynthia said, "you banged some married professor and what do you know, it turns out he's a liar. Wow, I'm sure you're the first person that's ever happened to. So you forget about it and you move forward. The rest of it is just drama, which should really be your middle name, by the way. You may not respect me but at least I'd respect myself enough not to wind up in the batshit ward."

"What do you know about it? What do you know about anything? You have never suffered a day in your life. You've never not gotten anything you wanted. And now those kids of yours are growing up the same way. Like a little ruling class. It's terrifying."

"What did you say to them?" Cynthia said.

"Everything given to them. No idea how fortunate they are. Sweet and content and well bred. Everything as it should be and they have no idea how the other ninety-nine percent lives."

"Hey, you're right," Cynthia said. "I really should try to ennoble them with some early suffering. I really should go back home and take some things away from them. Boy, it's a mystery to me how someone as smart as you has never had a kid of her own."

And when she said that, Deborah stiffened as if she'd been hit; she stopped talking and turned to look out the window; and just like that Cynthia had a pretty good idea what had really happened. They rode the rest of the way to LaGuardia in silence.

"Keep the meter running," Cynthia said to the driver. Deborah, her hand on the door, turned to face her. "I know you only did this because you had to," she said, "but thank you anyway."

"I didn't have to do it," Cynthia said. "Why would I have to do it?"

"Because we're quote-unquote family," Deborah said.

But that's what's so fucked up about it, Cynthia thought when she was back in the city-bound traffic on the L.I.E. Everyone thought they could keep playing this family card with her to get her to do what they wanted; the irony was that they had no idea how deeply she bought into the idea they were so cynical about. She believed in it more than any of them. But you didn't get to screw around with definitions, your own or anyone else's. Just because Ruth found some rich guy to get old with, it didn't follow that Cynthia was no longer an only child. And she hadn't heard from her father in the last three years, but that didn't mean he wasn't still her father, or that anybody else was. That was

how you kept the whole idea meaningful, and powerful. You kept it small.

But the whole blowup stayed with her, particularly the indictment of her children, or at least of the way she was raising them. That was beyond the pale. Even if you'd spent the previous night in Bellevue, she thought, you should know better than to go there. It wasn't the first time she'd reached the conclusion that, on the subject of children, most people were full of shit. What was supposed to be the point of denying them anything? Who decided that not having things that your parents hadn't had either was character-building somehow? Narcissistic bullshit. Your children's lives were supposed to be better than yours: that was the whole idea. And what was the point of getting hung up on how much things cost? You were expected to complain when things were, or seemed, more expensive than they should be: braces, for instance, which their dentist said both kids were eventually going to need. Fifteen grand, probably, before that was all over. But the fact was they could afford it. They spent sixty thousand dollars a year just to send their kids to school and they could afford that too. They knew or observed plenty of people – in their neighborhood, in their own building – richer than they were; still, they already had much more money than Cynthia had ever seen as a kid, even during the flush times. In fact the very notion of "flush times" was one that Cynthia did not care to revisit.

And as far as the kids' characters being shaped by money, it was clearly untrue because money itself was one area

where you saw the fundamental differences between them. The two of them fought less and less as time went on; there was little ground for competition or envy because they just didn't want the same things. April was a thoroughly social animal, obsessed with preteen perks and downright lawyerly when it came to the question of their early acquisition. She'd been given her own cell phone this year, because that was a safety issue; but just last week Cynthia had bought her a pair of Tory Burch shoes for Christmas – to be honest, it thrilled her somewhat, just on the level of pride in her daughter's precociousness, that April had even asked for them – and before that there'd been a kind of mini-scandal at school when some kids she knew in the grade ahead of hers were caught trying to pay for lunch at Serendipity with a parent's credit card. You could hold them off for a while, but any parent knew that it wasn't about possessing all these things so much as it was about asking to be trusted, to be let into the world a little more, and in that light Cynthia couldn't see the argument for saying no to very much. That the lines should stay open, that she should always be the first person April would come to about anything and everything – that was the important consideration, and she wasn't going to risk losing her daughter's confidence over something as stupid as other people's bitchy judgments of her privileges. She knew April already had a bit of a mean-girl rep at school, but as far as Cynthia was concerned, wailing over that kind of natural social stratification was more about the mothers' egos than the kids'. April could handle herself just fine. In truth

Cynthia couldn't help but be a little impressed by the fantastic amount of ingenuity April put into appearing two or three years older than she was. The great irony, of course, was that Jonas's complete lack of interest in whatever his own peers were doing or buying or watching made him seem like he was about forty years old.

But there was no getting out of certain forms of sibling togetherness; she had to take them to see that dentist again before they left for Costa Rica, for instance, and even though April was furious about having to miss ballet, Cynthia had made this appointment six months ago and if they missed it this huckster was booked until summer. She picked them up at school, and even though they were running late they had to take the subway instead of a cab, because for the past three weeks Jonas's homeroom teacher had been doing a unit about conservation and air pollution and if Cynthia had to hear another word about the fucking ozone layer she was going to scream. They crossed 87th and at the storefront gap that led to the subway entrance they found themselves converging with a guy pushing a baby in a stroller – actually not a baby at all, Cynthia saw, more like three years old, a kid who, by virtue of still being strollered around at that age, was clearly running the show. Beautiful boy, though. The father was a good-looking guy too, very expensively tousled. All four of them did that little no-you-go-first dance at the top step, and even though it only took a second, Cynthia was suddenly conscious of impatient people mustering behind them.

"Sorry," she said to the dad, "you go ahead," and she smiled before she realized that he was not even looking at her but instead, uncertainly, down the steps themselves. She had a vestigial memory of pissing off rude strangers while pushing April around in one of those strollers, and also a mother's instinctive assumption that men are overmatched by small children. "Guys, go on downstairs," she said to April and Jonas. "Not through the turnstile." She turned back to the father with her most prim smile as other commuters swirled into the open lane created by the kids' departure and said, "Can I give you a hand carrying the pasha here?" Suddenly his eyes seemed to focus on her, and he gave her a very winning smile, though without nodding or shrugging or otherwise acknowledging that she'd spoken. He did not even seem to notice the swarm of hostile strangers struggling to get past him, which was an admirable quality, Cynthia thought. Or maybe there was something wrong with him.

"Yes, thanks," he said at last. "That's really nice of you."

He didn't move and so she went around to the front of the stroller and picked up the strap between the front wheels, even though that meant she would be the one backing down the stairs. He lifted his end by the handles and they started down slowly.

"So you've obviously been in my position before," he said. "Beautiful kids."

She smiled, looking down at her feet for the next step. In front of her, the little boy's eyes opened slightly.

"Easy to see where they get it from," the father said.

"Thanks. Well, you too. He's a knockout."

"So, I guess this is like the meet-cute," he said, and she laughed, even if she didn't quite know what he meant. People flowed all around them. She tried to find April and Jonas but couldn't turn her head far enough to see them. "My name's Eric, by the way," he said.

"Cynthia."

"Hey Cynthia?" he said. He bent from the waist, and so she knew she was almost at the bottom step. She had to lean forward suddenly just to hear him. "This was so nice of you. Look, this is going to sound bizarre, but do you live in this neighborhood? I would hate to think that I'll never see you again. You are a really beautiful woman."

"I'm sorry?" Cynthia said.

"I can't believe I said that," Eric said, and it seemed exactly like he was telling the truth. He was probably an unemployed actor. His wife was probably some corporate lawyer who felt guilty for not spending more time with her son, while her husband spent his afternoons in the playground collecting phone numbers from au pairs.

They were now both standing on the cement floor inside the station, still holding the stroller between them, a couple of feet off the ground. People hustling down the stairs brushed past them as if they weren't even there. She knew that the longer she just stood there, the more emboldened he would become. She could feel herself turning red.

"Do you do this a lot, Eric?" she said.

He knew how to stare into a woman's eyes, that was for sure. "I know I'm being insanely forward," he said, "but

I'm not sorry, because two more seconds and I was never going to see you again. I know you're married. I'm married too. It doesn't have to be about that."

What? she kept saying to herself, as if she were deaf to whatever she was thinking. *What?* His son's eyes were half open and on her, as expressionless as if he had just sentenced her to death. It made Eric himself seem like some sort of superman to know that on some level he'd forgotten that the boy was even there.

She put her end of the stroller gently on the floor and turned and walked away as fast as she could. Jonas and April were standing by the nearest turnstile with that look of infinite sarcastic indulgence kids always wore when they had to wait for you. Cynthia panicked for a moment, thinking that they would surely ask her what all that was about and knowing she was still too rattled to make up an answer; but they didn't say a word, they couldn't have cared less. They turned and ran their MetroCards through the slot and walked ahead of her down the steps to the express track.

Cynthia was neither offended nor flattered, really – mostly she just thought it was hilarious. She couldn't wait to tell Adam about it. It did bother her a little bit to think that this kind of unsanctioned activity went on without her, that she was not a part of it, even though she had no desire to *be* part of it – married strangers hooking up in earshot of their kids. Who knew? Maybe this sort of decadence went on all the time. There was a time when she might have at least led the guy on a little bit just to shock herself, when anything

that new to her would have presented itself in the form of a hypothetical dare.

"Earth to Mom," Jonas said. A train was already there at the express platform, its doors just sliding open, and the kids had quickened their steps to catch it. She ushered them along in front of her, where she could see them; when the doors opened, they stepped inside, and then a voice from on board the train roared, "Hold the door!" She heard a ticking sound; it was the cane of a blind man, white-haired, wearing an old blue blazer, a baseball cap, and enormous wraparound sunglasses. He seemed angry about something, or at someone. "Hold the *door*!" he yelled again, though someone, not Cynthia, was already holding it. His cane swung incautiously at about ankle level, swatting the base of the seats, the pole at the center of the car, the door frame, and people's legs. She couldn't tell whether he was actually orienting himself this way or just panicking. She took another step back, to avoid the cane's arc – not because she feared it would hurt, but because she didn't want to send the man any kind of false information – and then it happened: the doors closed with their two-note chime, and she was on the platform and they were on the train, and as it pulled out she saw the look of terror on Jonas's face, though he might well have been terrified mostly of her, banging her hands on the glass and screaming *Wait*.

Even before she'd reached the end of the platform the train was moving too fast for her, and there she was, watching the train lights shrinking away from her down the tunnel. She couldn't turn away from it. She could feel that

the strangers behind her had stopped moving too: nothing was moving anymore but that train. "You got kids on that train?" a voice said behind her, a young voice, a man's voice. Misfortune made everyone familiar with you. "How old are they?"

Cynthia turned around and tried to answer but could not. She could actually see a black circle forming at the edges of her own vision.

"Go to the booth and ask for a transit cop," the young man said – he was wearing a huge Knicks jersey. "*You* go," someone else said to him contemptuously. "You're going to send this woman up the stairs? You can't see she's about to pass out as it is?" Over their heads she heard a gathering roar, and she thought at first she was fainting but it was a real roar, there was another express train pulling in beside them. Two people were holding her gently by the elbows. The children had disappeared into a tunnel: it didn't seem real. "What's your name?" an older woman's voice said.

Cynthia got on the first car of the train and groped her way to the locked front door that faced forward into the darkness. She understood it was a stupid idea but the logic of the situation was all dream logic now and she didn't feel there was anything to discuss. The children's fear filled every cell of her. She had to go find them. She had to put her face flat against the glass in order to see past her own reflection, even though there was nothing to see for a long time but the track and the steelwork that held open the tunnel and the ghostly local stations they sped through without stopping. Finally she felt the train slowing down beneath her feet and

the lights of the platform at 59th Street floated toward her. She burst out onto the platform and only then did it occur to her that there was no real reason to think that the kids had gotten off here at all, maybe they were still crying on the train as it continued on its long loop beneath the city, but then she saw a cop farther down the platform and the cop had his hands on two children's shoulders and the two children were April and Jonas.

"You're *here*?" the cop said, not very sympathetically. "I just radioed 86th Street to look for you there. That wasn't real smart, getting on another train." The kids were staring at her with the blank expression of kids overhearing their parents fight. Even an hour later Cynthia couldn't remember much about how she got them back up the stairs and into the bright street and into a cab and back home, but she didn't recall any of them saying a word the entire way.

She made Adam sleep in the kids' room that night, so they could both stay in the big bed with her. The next day she kept them both home from school. Adam was a little surprised but put it down to erring on the side of caution: they were quieter than usual, it was true, but it was hard to tell – even for April and Jonas themselves – how much of their anxiety was still their own and how much of it came from being treated so solicitously, as if something terrible had happened to them. He told them both how proud of them he was for being so brave and for being smart enough to ask for help from a police officer, just like they should have. He said that anytime they wanted to talk about

yesterday, he was there for them; but that was not Cynthia's approach. She sat the kids down together and asked them what questions they had, about what had happened yesterday, and about why Mommy hadn't gotten on the train with them, and when they came up with nothing, she took that as evidence of how traumatized they were, how quickly you had to act before what was in them buried itself so deeply you were never going to get it out again. She let them return to school the next day but was so worried for them that she sat them down to talk again as soon as they got home, just to compensate in case she'd made a mistake. That night April woke up sobbing from a nightmare. Ten minutes later both kids were sleeping beside their mother and Adam was curled up in Jonas's short bed watching the shadows, awake but too tired to get up and turn the nightlight off.

By the weekend, they seemed to have gotten past it; they were a little less clingy, and that uncharacteristic wide-eyed silence in which Adam or Cynthia would sometimes come upon them diminished and then was gone. They went to the Radio City Christmas show and packed for the trip to Costa Rica and ate at 3 Guys and it all seemed behind them.

But Cynthia was unconvinced. Every night she postponed Adam's sleep demanding to know what more he thought they should do about it. He tried his best to say all the properly sympathetic things; he was pretty sure that the suffering she ascribed to them was really her own, but the great thing about Cynthia was that no matter how

stressed she might get, she always returned to her own center, somehow, if you had the patience to just let it happen. But when she told him Wednesday night that she had called Dalton to ask if they could recommend a psychiatrist who specialized in treating children with PTSD – and that not only was there such a person but she had already made an appointment with him – Adam started to wonder whether the whole thing was getting out of hand.

"In a few days," he said soothingly, "we'll all be sitting on the beach, and we'll have a new perspective on everything. Them too."

They were whispering because though the kids had been put to bed down the hall hours ago, you never knew.

"Not so much," Cynthia said. "I called the resort tonight and canceled our reservation."

He struggled up onto his elbows and stared at her.

"The plane tickets weren't refundable. Sorry about that. But I told the kids and they're fine with it. We'll have Christmas at home for once. It won't kill us. I just don't feel like being in a strange place right now." She started crying. "But something has to change around here," she said. "Something has to start getting better. You can't just do nothing."

"It will. Things are going great." It was true, and yet even as he said it he could feel himself starting to panic. "Bonuses are this week, you know. It's only going to get better for us."

"I know it. But time doesn't mean the same thing to you

and me anymore, you know? You're all like, in ten years we'll have everything we want, and in the meantime I feel like I need binoculars just to be able to see to the end of the fucking day."

"Look," he said pleadingly, "I don't blame you for being upset about what happened, but isn't there another way of looking at it? I mean, April and Jonas knew what to do. They did exactly the right thing. In a way it should make you worry less. Plus, I don't want to make light of it or anything, but it's New York. You can't protect them from everything."

"Well, maybe we shouldn't live here, then," she said.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Maybe we should live somewhere else. Maybe we should be living a different kind of life. Who says it has to be this way? You think this is the best life we could be living? There's so little space here. There's so little room to move. It should feel safe but it just feels exposed. There's got to be somewhere else for us to go."

He was nervous about touching her all of a sudden. "I thought you said you wanted to stay here, though," he said tentatively.

She shook her head, wiping her eyes. "Don't you get it?" she said. "This is the only thing there is for me to be good at. And I suck at it. In fact I'm terrified I'm getting worse at it instead of better."

"Cyn, it was one bad hour out of their lives. You seriously think, as good as our lives are, that that's what they're going to remember?"

"Don't be an idiot," she said. "You think you're born knowing how to forget shit like that?"

Each December Sanford took them out to lunch one by one and gave them their bonus checks, along with a kind of performance review, known among the staff as the State of the Career Address, that helped explain the amount. The business itself was his whim, and while they all knew that it had been a profitable year, there was no expectation that the relative size of the bonuses reflected anything more precise than Sanford's own fondness for them.

They were good enough friends to joke about their fear. The whole operation was so mercurial that it wouldn't have been outside the realm of possibility for one of them to be fired at his or her bonus lunch, or for all of them to be handed a severance check and told that Sanford had decided to shut the place down. Adam, whose lunch was scheduled for the Friday before Christmas, was on a roll. He'd put together the first round of financing for a generic-drug start-up that was poised to get huge in a way few people other than Adam had foreseen; and he'd set up a friendly takeover of Wisconsin Cryogenics, friendly enough to keep the volatile Guy from Milwaukee in teenagers and blow for the rest of his life. The hardest part about putting that together was getting Guy to keep his mouth shut about it, so the stock wouldn't overreact and screw the deal.

Sanford took Adam to Bouley, where they split two bottles of wine before the boss produced a check in a

glassine envelope. "Open it," he said immodestly, as if there were a ring inside.

Adam opened it and saw it was for three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. It was much more than he was expecting, or had received in previous years, and he'd heard enough to know that none of his colleagues had gotten anything close to it.

"This is between you and me," Sanford said unnecessarily. In his old age he cried more easily. "This is not about the past year. This is about the future. I need to make sure you aren't going anywhere. I need to be sure you know how you're valued. I'm getting to the point where I need to think about the legacy that I leave in this world."

Like a lot of his peers, Sanford maintained his social profile through lavish entertainments tied to charities; it wasn't long after bonus season, when presumably they were all feeling flush, that his employees were dunned to buy tickets to that spring's annual benefit for an organization close to his heart, the Boys and Girls Clubs of New York, to be held on the deck of the *Intrepid,* the decommissioned aircraft carrier that served as a floating naval museum at one of the Hudson River piers. A thousand dollars a head. For those who worked at Perini it was not an invitation there was any question of refusing. Adam bought a ticket for Cynthia as well. Normally he wouldn't have forced her hand like that, but he needed to see a little of the old Cynthia, radiant at a party, for her sake but also for his own. She was so down these days, and though for the life of him he couldn't see what there was to be down about, he was so

used to being grounded by her that he had a real fear that, wherever she was drifting, he'd end up drifting right out there along with her. He couldn't figure out what to try other than maybe to re-enact an evening when she was happier.

It wasn't much of a plan, but for that night, at least, it seemed to work. Cynthia was beaming as she shivered in a black dress in the hangar-like space below the deck of the ship, drinking some kind of themed martini, the center of attention among Adam's colleagues from Perini, none of whom had sprung for the extra grand for a date. They took turns asking her to dance. He could see how smitten they were with her, with the idea of her, proof of life after marriage. Even when they got a little drunk and their gaze became a little more direct, it did not occur to him to feel jealous, because she deserved their attention. They ate rack of lamb. They saw Tiki Barber. Sanford and his wife came magnanimously by their table, everyone happily drunk.

"One of these things is not like the other," Sanford said, smiling rakishly at Cynthia. "What are you doing at this table full of empty tuxedos?" He held out his hand to her, and when she held out hers, he kissed it. Victoria smiled into the middle distance.

"So nice to see you again, Barry," Cynthia said.

"Please. The pleasure is all mine. You are the absolute jewel of this sorry gathering. Let me ask you something. Do you dance?"

"Not really."

"Splendid. Son," he said to Adam, "you don't mind if I

make off with your wife for a while, do you? Adam may not have told you this but I am a dance instructor par excellence. Among my many talents." He held out his elbow; Cynthia, with a mock-frightened glance at her husband, put down her martini and glided off on Sanford's arm toward the dance floor. Victoria saw a friend a few tables away, or pretended to, and she waved and chirped and left the table without a word.

"Unbelievable," Parker said, not without a little envy in his voice. "Fucking old goat. And with his wife right there too. Amazing what that guy gets away with."

Parker's bonus, Adam knew, was so insultingly small that he had skipped right over resentment and moved straight to terror. He emptied another martini, and beckoned to the waitress with the empty glass. "There's no buzz," he said to Adam, "like that good-cause buzz."

"True dat," Adam said. In fact, though, the drunker he got, the more restless and vaguely surly he began to feel, which was unusual for him. He could feel himself smiling, so he stopped. There was a bar up on deck as well, and he headed outside to visit it, just to get away from the table for a few minutes. On the stairs he turned and was able to pick out his boss and his wife on the crowded dance floor. It was a field of tuxedos but his eyes were drawn right to them. He watched Sanford turn her around and around in that small space; he said something that made her laugh. It made Adam nostalgic. All the energy and heedlessness and faith in herself that he had always adored had lost its outlet and so that faith had backed up, as it were, into the lives of the

children. What was worst was that the life of maximized potential they had always believed in for themselves was still right there in front of them, closer than ever really, but she had stopped looking forward to it, she wouldn't even lift her head to see it. When he told her about the bonus, she had mustered a polite smile and whistled, like, How nice for you. It was both thrilling and a little sad to see her out there dancing like her old self, drunk and luminous, because it took a crazy setting like this, a fantasy almost, to bring it out of her again. Maybe life needed to better resemble the fantasy. Not that there was some thousand-dollar gala to go to every night. But whatever it was that had to be done, it was his turn to bail her out; she'd bailed him out in more ways than he could count. He couldn't picture what he might have become without her.

He knew his boss well enough to have no doubt that seducing Cynthia was the one and only thing on his mind right now. It didn't bother him. Not just because he knew it would never happen: it was right, somehow, that that was what Sanford should try to do, regardless of the fact that his wife was standing right there, or his love for Adam, or the presence of hundreds of onlookers. That was the point of a life like Sanford's. You pursued what you wanted.

Up on the deck there was some kind of disturbance in the line for drinks: a frat-boy type in front of Adam was complaining to his friends that the kid at the front of the line, who looked about nineteen years old, was chatting up the bartender. "Mack on your own time, Junior," he said. "Some of us are thirsty here."

The kid turned around. He had a huge nose, one of those noses that starts practically on the forehead, but on him it looked sort of Roman and oddly handsome. "Take it easy there, Bluto," he said, and Adam's eyes widened gleefully at the audacity of it. "She's my sister."

"What?" Bluto said.

"I'm not shitting you," the kid said. "I think we're twins." Though he had his drink in hand, he turned back and started murmuring to the bartender again.

Another Wall Street tyke, Adam thought, another kid blowing his bonus money on a party where he thinks he'll network with people who don't even know he's alive. The whole bonus thing got to him, actually, in a way it hadn't before. He'd been given a big bonus this year. What did that even mean? Maybe he should buy himself a sailboat, or find more expensive hotels to stay in during the few weeks a year he was allowed to travel where he wanted instead of Charlotte or Omaha, or see if he could find an even more overpriced school to send his kids to? He felt like a sap. Everybody acted like the amount mattered, when what mattered was the notion of getting a bonus at all, of being outside that small circle wherein it was decided how much a man's work was worth, how close you had come to some goal somebody else had set for you. Sanford could have given him two million and the principle would still be the same. Meanwhile time was going by, and the life around you started to calcify while the Barry Sanfords of the world paid you to wait to be told what would happen next.

His relationship to drinking had grown complicated. The more he felt he wanted one, the more he tried not to have it: it was a self-control exercise, of course, but also he was working out more and more lately, and drinking and especially hangovers were incommensurate with the plan to get into perfect shape. He weighed less and could lift more now than ten years ago. One day off from his routine, though, and he could feel the backslide beginning. Even now, standing in the bar line in a tuxedo, he had a restless urge to descend through the loud metal innards of this impotent ship and, once out on the thin path that ran between the Hudson and the West Side Highway, go for a run.

When Bluto got to the front of the line, he pushed the kid aside – just a nudge, really, but the kid was so much smaller that he stumbled and lost about half his drink on the floor. He put the glass down on the bar and for a moment Adam thought the kid was drunk enough to do something seriously stupid. Instead, though, he stuck out his hand. "No hard feelings, bro," he said to Bluto, and when Bluto scowled and shook his hand, the kid reached up with his other hand and clapped Bluto on the shoulder. Then he wandered off, not toward the tables but in the direction of the moribund planes, some of them spotlit, welded onto the deck as exhibits. Adam continued to stare after him, not so much intently as distractedly, and then suddenly the kid turned around and caught him at it. A few strange seconds passed, strange in that it seemed less awkward than it probably should have. The kid raised his eyebrows, and then – Adam was absolutely sure of it – as he started to walk away

again he held up his right hand, opened it up by raising his fingers as one might open up a book of matches, and there, facing out from his palm, looped around a couple of his fingers, was a wristwatch.

No way. Bluto turned away from the bar again to head back into the crowd, holding three beers by their necks in one hand. "Have a good night, G," he said to Adam.

"You too. Hey, do you have the time?"

Bluto shook his thick wrist out of his sleeve and held it up in front of his face. It was bare. "Holy fuck," he said.

Adam left him there pushing everyone backward while he searched the deck for his expensive watch. He got about halfway back to his own table before he stopped. It took a second in that sea of tuxes but he could pick out his colleagues sitting at the Perini table with their heads close together, probably in some timid bitchfest about something. They didn't see him. Cynthia must still have been dancing. Adam turned around and walked back into the darkness punctuated by the hulks of old Mustangs and helicopters and fighter jets. He found his man lighting a cigarette, way up by the bow, looking across the water to New Jersey, as if the boat were on its way there.

He looked a little nervous at Adam's approach. "Cheese it, the cops," he said.

"Why did you show me the watch?" Adam asked him. "How did you know I wasn't some friend of that guy's?"

He shrugged. "He was laughing," he said. "Whereas you looked pissed just to be here."

"Where did you learn to do that? What are you, like

some child of the streets or something? Did you even pay to get in here?"

Once he realized Adam wasn't there to bust him, the kid relaxed a bit. "Somebody gave me his ticket," he said. "His boss paid for it because he believes in Giving Back. I'd love to tell you some Oliver Twist bullshit but the truth is a whole lot geekier. I used to do magic. Right through high school. I can get wallets too. Want to see?"

"Where do you work?" Say I'm a broker, Adam thought.

"I'm a broker at Merrill Lynch. What about you?"

Adam didn't answer. You could never, ever go back to this moment in time, he was thinking, to this one permutation of the random. It wasn't about fate – fate was bullshit. It was about a moment's potential and what you did with it. Unrealized potential was a tragic thing.

"Do you know how perfect this is?" he said out loud. "There's no connection between us at all. We don't know each other, we don't work together, we didn't go to the same school. I don't even know your name. Your name isn't even on the guest list here."

"Wait," the kid said. "Don't tell me. *Strangers on a Train*."

"You're not going to give that asshole back his watch, are you?" Adam said.

A little smirk that Adam hadn't even realized was there suddenly faded from the kid's face. The inchoate patter of the bandleader beneath them and the tidal rush of the Hudson below them were like one sound. He looked at Adam and swallowed. "No," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because fuck him. That's why not."

The adrenaline was pounding through him now. He hadn't felt like this since he proposed. Without turning he gestured over his shoulder toward the party, which they could hear but not see.

"They're all like him," Adam said. "They wear a uniform to make it easier to tell. They give us gifts, like tickets to benefits, to make us forget that life is short. We can't just wait around. We don't have that kind of time."

"We who?" the kid said.

"We happy few," he said. "You and me. It's time to bum-rush the show. It's time to change the terms. It's going to require some bravery on your part."

What was scary was how immediately all this came to him, when he hadn't even really known it was there: an urge for vengeance, sure, but vengeance against what? He used to be a leader. He'd never done what others his age were doing, he was always in too much of a hurry, and yet somehow that hurry, instead of bringing him the life he wanted, had marginalized him. Now all of a sudden the margin seemed like the only place to be. As for the kid, Adam could tell from the look of terror on his face that he was not wrong about him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," the kid said, which was the right thing to say.

"Yes you do," Adam said. "I'm going to tell you something now. You don't need to do anything but hear it. Wisconsin Cryogenics. Can you remember that without writing it down?"

He nodded.

"Now, you can do with that what you will. If you like, it can just be my little gift to you. And that can be the end. But it doesn't have to be the end."

They froze and watched a man and a woman, both holding martini glasses, stoop to walk under the stilled blades of a helicopter. Drunkenly they climbed inside. Music started up again within the ship.

"Give me a number," Adam said. "Not a work number, or a home number. Maybe like a girlfriend's cell. I'm going to contact you in about three weeks, okay? Three weeks. Then we'll either talk about the future or you can just hang up on me. My name is Adam."

The kid was right with him. He whispered a number, and Adam recited it back. Once he had a number in his head he didn't forget it. "One more thing," Adam said. "Give me the watch."

The kid was confused but handed it over. Adam had a quick look at it: a gold Patek Philippe. He wasn't much into watches himself but he appreciated value. He pursed his lips respectfully, and then he threw it over the side.

Back at the table he found Cynthia sitting with Parker and Brennan and one or two of the others, all of whom were too drunk and needed to go home. Cynthia, still glowing from all the dancing, glared teasingly at him. "Leave a lady hanging, why don't you," she said. "Where've you been, anyway?"

He told her he'd run into some old friends from Morgan. It was the easiest lie he'd ever told. Parker staggered around

the table to say goodbye to her; he bent over with drunken gravitas and kissed her hand, and she laughed, and Adam thought how right she was: you couldn't just do nothing. It wasn't enough to trust in your future, you had to seize your future, pull it up out of the stream of time, and in doing so you separated yourself from the legions of pathetic, sullen yes-men who had faith in the world as a patrimony. That kind of meek belief in the ultimate justice of things was not in Adam's makeup. He'd give their children everything too, risk anything for them. He knew what he was risking. But it was all a test of your fitness anyway. The noblest risks were the secret ones. *Fortuna favet fortibus.*

Sanford talked a good game but he wasn't about to give up what was his except maybe in his will, just like all the other bloated old satyrs capering around on this big docked ship. As for Adam, when he was lying speechless in some hospital bed after his third coronary, everybody would think he was thinking about one thing, but he would be thinking about something else.

They finally found a new apartment, on East End, a long way from Dalton but bigger and better in so many other respects – not only would April and Jonas finally have their own rooms, there was a guest room also, and a patio and access to a pool – that even the kids gave in to the idea of uprooting pretty quickly. But the renovations Cynthia wanted took months longer than expected, and in the end they had to knock fifty thousand off the selling price of their own place in return for the buyer's agreement to delay the

closing. It was a strange period, with about half their stuff packed away, calling the contractors for updates every afternoon, living like subletters in their own home. The kids lost their enthusiasm and started to complain remorsefully about having to move at all. They'd act out, Cynthia would get frustrated with them, and after one particularly trying weekend in this short-tempered limbo, Adam proposed to his wife that they go away somewhere for a few days, just the two of them. Couples they knew did that all the time, but when they stopped to think about it, they hadn't really done it themselves since April was born. He even offered to take Cynthia to Paris; he knew he probably wouldn't enjoy it that much himself, two flights across the Atlantic in three days, but he made the offer just to show her he was serious. Sitting on a beach someplace in the Caribbean was more their style, but in the end it didn't matter because there was no one to leave the kids with for that long. Cynthia couldn't think of anyone she knew or trusted well enough for that. Who, that little Barnard girl they hired, from Minnesota? It was a wonder she could survive a weekend in the city herself. It was true that the two of them didn't have parents who lived nearby, or whom you'd necessarily trust your kids with even if they were nearby. When Adam was a kid, his parents thought nothing of stashing him and Conrad at some neighbor's place if they had plans, sometimes on the shortest of notice. But when Cyn asked him if he had any bright ideas for April and Jonas, he had to admit that he did not. As a family they were a little more of an island, for better or for worse, than he'd realized.

So they compromised: he got her to agree to spend one night in a hotel with him right there in Manhattan. Gina, the Barnard girl, who despite being in college never seemed to have weekend plans, consented to sleep over at their apartment. They told the kids they were going to Atlantic City, where it was very boring and there was gambling and children were not allowed. Then on Friday afternoon they checked into the Parker Meridien and called room service for oysters and a bottle of Absolut Citron and some ice. Adam had her out of her clothes almost before the waiter had left the room. She couldn't believe how much energy he brought to it. You might have thought he hadn't gotten laid in months, but God knew that wasn't true. For a couple with two young kids, they were at it pretty often. But she could see, if not quite understand, how badly he needed this particular encounter to be great. When he wasn't bending her legs back over her head, he was pulling her to the side of the bed so that her palms were on the floor. It was like some sexual epic, like it was important that they outfuck everyone else in the hotel. Two hours later she was very sure that they had. She didn't have to fake it with him, mercifully, but seeing the way he was acting – how much he wanted to please her – she would have faked it for him if she had to.

He took a break and pulled a ten-dollar bottle of water out of the minibar. He drank it in front of the dark window, his chest still heaving; my God, Cynthia thought, he is so fucking gorgeous. She rolled over on to her stomach on the oversize bed. It was a long way from their wedding night,

passed out from fatigue in that kitschy little B and B in Pittsburgh; she surprised herself by even remembering it. But when you did remember it you had a hard time not feeling optimistic. Things had been getting better the last few months. Adam was doing really well. He'd started trading on the side, he said, and suddenly there was money for everything. They were going to Vail in February, and to the Caribbean in the spring. The new apartment was going to be amazing. Sanford's wife had asked her to join the Coalition for Public Schools. That had to be Adam's doing too, of course. And what he kept telling her all these months was absolutely right: you just needed to get out into the world a little more. She felt his fingers on her calf and turned around to see him smiling sweetly at her. "Okay, shorty," he said. "Break time's over."

He kept telling her how much he loved her, and she would turn her face away when he said it for fear she would start crying. He came again and went directly to the bathroom: "Just checking for a defibrillator," he said. The door closed. Cynthia lay staring at the ceiling; after a minute she rolled to the edge of the bed and walked somewhat stiffly to the chair by the window where she'd dropped her bag. The room was huge, with a stunning view from the foot of Central Park. Cynthia thought she might even be able to see their apartment from there, but they weren't quite high up enough. No voicemail on her phone, but in her bag she found three tightly folded pieces of lined paper – notes to her that Jonas must have slipped in there just before they left the apartment. The first two

said "Love U" and "Miss U," and the third one said, "R U winning?"

She was still looking at them when Adam came up behind her. She was worried he'd be angry at her, but of course he wasn't. He was perfect. "Maybe," he said, and kissed her neck, "we should just head home."

They called Gina from the sidewalk outside the hotel so she wouldn't panic when she heard their key in the door. Adam took her downstairs to put her in a cab; Cynthia slipped off her shoes and went into the kids' bedroom. Jonas was sleeping on his stomach as he always did, the covers kicked off, one palm flat against the mattress as if it were a pane of glass. She sat on the floor, against the wall across from his bed. In the dark the room was a comforting weave of long shadows, from the dresser, from the window frame, from the rolling backpack full of April's schoolbooks that sat beside the door. She held her breath for a moment until she made out their own.

It made sense, she supposed, that the kids were a little nervous about moving into a new place, and a little nostalgic too. Everything that had ever happened to them had happened here. But she was flat faking it when she pretended to share their feelings about saying goodbye to this apartment. She never thought this was going to be their last home. To tell the truth she didn't think the next one would be their last either. It was a vaguely shameful thing to admit. But there was always that moment when you fell out of love with a place, when you looked it over and asked yourself if it was so unimprovable that you wouldn't mind

if you died there. Once that thought lodged itself in your head, forget it, it was over.

Not the kind of reasoning you could share with kids that age, obviously. Jonas had already gone through a brief obsession with death, when he was just three. Cynthia was never sure what triggered it – probably some story she'd read to him, though she couldn't think which one – but one day he was just aware of death, and he had trouble grasping some of its basic tenets. To him it amounted to being paralyzed, eyes open, inside a coffin, forever. The absence of consciousness was literally unimaginable. He believed the dead could still see, for instance – it was just too dark for them to see anything. Distinctions like that were not anything Cynthia wanted to get into with him.

She tried what she could think of. She had him pull out his toy cash register. "How many days until your birthday?" she said.

"Fifty-six," Jonas said, who knew this because he asked about it every day.

"And is that a little or a lot?"

"A *lot*!"

She thought a moment, then punched some figures into the beeping cash register. "This is how many days until you're Grandma Morey's age," she said. "And even Grandma isn't dying anytime soon." Her own mother was older than Adam's, but she didn't use Grandma Ruth as an example because Jonas hadn't seen her in so long Cynthia thought she might not seem sufficiently real. She turned the numbers toward him.

"Wow!" he said. But she should have known that wouldn't work: at that age, any number over one hundred was the same in his mind, and anyway to tell a child that he shouldn't be afraid of something *yet* was no kind of advice at all.

"It's all a part of nature," she said another time. "Every living thing is born, and grows, and dies. Every single animal and plant and bird and flower and tree. It's what's called," she said, hating herself, "the circle of life."

"So you'll die? And Daddy? And April? When?"

"No," she said, panicking. "Mommy and Daddy are not going to die. You don't even need to worry about that. Just put that thought right out of your head." She pantomimed plucking a bad thought out of her own head and sniffing it and throwing it away, which made him laugh, and then she let him watch TV.

"He'll move on," Adam had said. "He's three. Something else interesting will come along and bump it right out of his head. I remember going through a phase like that when I was around his age."

"You did? What did your mother tell you?"

He thought. "I have absolutely no memory of it."

"So you recall asking the question. It's just that your mother said nothing worth remembering."

He nodded.

"Well, there you have it," Cynthia said.

Then one day the preschool called; they had her come pick Jonas up early because after snack time he had just started crying. He wouldn't discuss what was bothering him.

Probably just tired, the teacher said with that slightly lunatic patience you wanted in a preschool teacher, but all the same maybe she ought to come and get him.

She took him home in a cab, stroking his hair and kissing the top of his head, not asking any questions. She was trying to soothe herself as much as him. Who is this boy? she said to herself. Why is there no one to help me? How am I supposed to know what to do?

When they walked in the front door, she said, "We have to go get April in about an hour. You want a snack and I'll read to you?"

"Mommy?" he said. "I don't want to die because when you're dead you can't talk or get up and I'll miss you."

And here she learned a lesson about desperation and the ways in which a parent could sometimes rely on it. "Come here," she said. He sat on her lap. She told him that he was a big boy and it was time for the truth. The truth was that no one knows what happens after we die, because we can't talk to dead people and dead people can't talk to us. But some people have some ideas about what might happen. Some people believe in an idea called reincarnation, where when one life ends there's a little rest time and then you get to come back and live again; not the same exact life, though, and maybe not even the same kind of life – maybe you came back as an eagle, or a dog. In fact, maybe this life, right now, wasn't even his first one: maybe he'd been a dinosaur, so long ago that he'd forgotten. (She could feel his little arms relaxing.) Another idea, which a whole lot of people believed in, was called heaven. Heaven was a place that

depended on your wishes: the place in life when you'd felt safest and happiest and most comfortable, heaven was that place for you all the time, forever.

"A nice warm house," Jonas said, "with you and Daddy."

He left his sister out of it, Cynthia noticed, but she had let that go. It was a little rite of passage for her, a confidence builder, a lesson in love's resources even when there was nothing in particular you yourself believed in.