Missing You

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ABSTRACT

Missing You

Andrew Katz

Missing You is a collection of three short stories, the first two of which are fiction and the third a memoir. Though these stories stand independently, they are linked through their Montreal setting, their grounding in the medical profession, and their theme of connection and control in intimate human relationships. In "Break," "Ward," and "Play," the central relationships explored are, respectively, husband-wife, child-mother and child-father. In each story, the basic need and desire for connection with some important other is palpable. The characters typically respond to this need and desire with a fear of loss of control, based on an underlying threat of absence, chaos, unreality and/or the annihilation of the self. When the other ultimately eludes control, it can be both shattering and depressing, but at the same time can provide an unexpected opening for connection to take place.

Though each story originates within the conventions of realism, differing concerns for each necessitate differing perspectives and styles. The impressionistic interiority of the second-person in "Break" allows an appreciation of the depth of the protagonist's anxieties. The more distanced stance in the third-person "Ward" provides a level of objectivity in observing the protagonist, who both needs connection and is also herself an important other with whom connection is sought. Finally, the memoir-style approach of "Play" underscores the gradual, tectonic shifting, with episodic, sudden ruptures and transformations, that can characterize a person's relationship to the other over time. The conversational approach of this last story also suggests the importance of the reader as other.

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For all my family
especially my parents
my sisters and brother
my grandparents
and my new niece, Mikayla,
who has made a great start

Contents

BREAK

YOUR EYES OPEN to a blindingly bright sense that you are somewhere other than your bedroom. Your thoughts, everywhere.

Your heart jumps, starts beating against your chest to get out, and all at once a chill penetrates you: you have died. You have died and are waking up in limbo.

Whatever you are lying on, you grope at it, struggling to pull yourself up, despite the stiffness in your lower back, which is pinching even more sharply than usual. With a grunt, you manage to get your legs over and down, onto the hard floor.

You rub your eyes against the brightness. Facing you, a long wall of large, arching windows, all their blinds raised. Outside, everything buried in white, with thousands of lighted pin-points reflecting off it. And everywhere above the

neighbouring roofs, a vacant stare of blue. The blue dead cold. Not a cloud or a bird in it. It dominates the houses, the city, the planet. It is another ice age.

A struggle now to remember what clouds, birds are, if things like that have ever even existed.

Your chest suddenly tightens, your heart squeezed in a fist. You hold onto the edge of the cushion to catch your breath. It is a familiar pain, diagnosed years ago. A stable condition that subsides on its own. No need to panic.

Around the couch, braided wicker chairs with patterned cushions. Side tables shaped like hour-glasses with peach-colored lamps standing on them. This is the solarium. Your house.

By your feet, sunlight glares coldly on the hardwood floor. You have to get out of here.

A faint clicking. Over and over, click, click. It is somewhere behind you, buried under you. You reach behind the cushion, and wedged in the couch is a yellow, old-fashioned walkman, the kind that plays tapes. The tape has ended, still trying, with frustrated clicks, to advance.

You are suddenly aware of them: the plastic nubs in your ears. Bewildered by your own stupidity, you pull off the earphones.

What you can remember from last night: your thoughts swarming, even more than they had been the entire weekend. You going downstairs, to your woodshop, but seeing only scant bits of wood left on the shelves. You couldn't think what you could make anyway. Then coming back up. Looking for something else, anything, to settle

you down even slightly. Then going to the cabinet in here. Taking out Lily's walkman and some of her tapes.

A tape with *peace* in the title. Lying down on the couch. The hollow shoring of waves in your ears, and also, maybe, a woman's voice, speaking slowly, emphatically. All ridiculous, but what choice did you have? You were so on edge, you had to let yourself be lulled at least a bit. You would close your eyes for just a few minutes, you told yourself.

Struggling now to get to your feet, you grab the walkman. The brilliant solarium spins, and you almost fall over, just catching yourself on the couch armrest. The sharp pain seizes in your back again, and you have to straighten up carefully. You move toward the cabinet, open the door and shove the walkman back inside, knocking over the piles of other tapes and CDs she keeps in here, shutting the door before any of them can slide out.

What time is it? It was probably hours ago that you were supposed to leave. You look down. Same pants, socks and shirt that you were wearing last night. Also a loose pressure around your wrist. You glance at your watch, but its face is blurred. Over on the coffee table, no sign of your reading glasses. You have to peer at your watch closely, squinting. Almost 10, it seems.

Absurd. Like saying it is next year.

You move out of the solarium, through the kitchen, into the front hall. Climb the stairs, up toward the bedroom. Breaching the landing, you rest your hand on the banister, your chest still tight. You have some nitroglycerin spray in your briefcase

downstairs. But that makes you even more dizzy, and you have to drive. It is okay, you can get by without it.

In the mirror, a stubble of grayish-white covers your face and neck. You shave, quickly scraping down.

Water hitting you, you soap yourself, face, chest, arms. You notice, vaguely, as if for the first time, how much the wrinkled folds at your elbows have thickened. Washing your penis, you glance down at it, hanging flaccid, and at your testicles, sagging. You can imagine this being the body of one of your patients, not yours.

It doesn't matter. You throw on new socks, underwear, pants, a new shirt and tie. Your thoughts, hurrying downstairs ahead of you, rushing to get you into the car and on your way up to the hospital.

Wait.

That was what they all told you. The kids, first, when you phoned each of them to tell them what had happened.

Wait. Don't do anything yet. It's different this time, Dad. She's been doing so much better. She just needs some space. You have to trust her.

Then that psychiatrist Lily sees—what's his name.

Without going into details, Dr. Olsen, I don't think you need to do anything yet. I would at least wait the weekend. Given her history, your worry is completely

understandable, but honestly, I don't think it's overly serious. You could think of it as your wife playing hooky from her life for a few days.

How long has it been since you came home and found the house empty? Since it all started again? It was Friday night. And in all that time, what have you done? Nothing.

Why? Why did you listen to everyone? You *wanted* to do something. Instantly you thought to call the police, the way you have always done when this happens. The entire weekend you kept wanting to call them. It took every fiber of restraint in you to hold back, and even then you had to drive yourself to distraction, spending almost every minute on the ward—clearing your phone messages and e-mail list, sending off the final draft of your article to *The Canadian Journal of Geriatrics*, tending to patients.

In the past when she has disappeared, everyone else, particularly the kids, has always seen the necessity for calling the police, has always supported you. You would all wait together for them to find her. Her most recent episode—just a year ago, a few months after Philip, the last child still living at home, moved out—is still lodged in your memory. It was by far her most severe. The police eventually found her, at around 3 am, walking unsteadily along the sidewalk, shouting at the air. She was alone, without her hat and gloves. Her face and hands deeply frostbitten. At home over the next few days, she went the other way and withdrew into herself, barely eating, not getting out of bed. It became one of her worst depressions, so bad that she had to be hospitalized again, in one of the locked units of the psychiatry ward. They held her there for three weeks.

The outside temperature—one of the features on this new car—is - *22°C*. You can read the number, in phosphorescent digits, on the dashboard-spanning console, which makes you feel you are on a plane. Still unbelievable, that you bought this car. Double-checking the reading, you switch on the radio:

"It's a cold, *cold, COLD* minus 21 degrees Celsius this morning in downtown Montreal. Clear and sunny—just make sure to get out your long-johns..."

And that is this morning. The cold would have been far more brutal late last night. Only a month ago there was a front-page story in *The Gazette*, about a homeless man found frozen to death.

The kids' reluctance to see that their mother might have tumbled into another crisis, you can understand, sort of. She seemed—on the surface, to them—to be doing so well this past year.

She got her first full-time job ever. She's made new friends. She's been going out more. She has never smiled, laughed like this.

But none of the kids lives at home with her anymore. They don't see the self-doubts and worries that still plague her in private, despite the brave face she puts on. They don't see the pressures her boss at her work places on her, the extra hours he demands of her. They don't see how late some of her new "friends" keep her out, so that she gets migraines the next day. They don't see how unnecessarily anxious she is to gain their approval.

What you *can't* understand, though, what borders on negligence, is that psychiatrist's reluctance to see what could be happening to his own patient. Since he took over Lily's care a year and a half ago, after Dr. Krantz retired to California, he has

never struck you as particularly competent. He isn't open to other opinions, which you have to be in medicine, especially when a family member has an inside perspective on a patient's situation. Also, it took you until Saturday afternoon to track him down—he was out of town, at a wedding—and even when you did, he seemed almost nonchalant. Nonchalant about her having vanished again.

It was only reluctantly that he even agreed to meet with you today—at half past noon, in just a couple of hours, by the dashboard clock—and you have to drive out to his home office to see him.

Fortunately you don't have too much to take care of this morning on the floor, just rounds, which shouldn't take more than an hour or so. If there is anything else small, Ellen can maybe look after it, or you can do it later this afternoon.

You turn onto Cedar avenue, cutting up along the lower torso of Mount Royal. At the top of the hill, the hospital rises into view. The parking lot, normally almost deserted when you arrive, is packed.

Somehow, you have to believe that this psychiatrist will now, finally, see how serious, how out of hand this situation has become. It is Monday. You still haven't heard from Lily. (Just before rushing out of the house, you thought to call her work, and she wasn't there either.)

If he doesn't help you, though—at the end of this row of cars, you see a spot—you will take matters back in hand. No matter what he or anyone else thinks. You will call the police. It was a mistake not to call them right away.

The cold air anesthetizes your cheeks, your neck, your wrists between your gloves and your coat sleeves. It turns even your coat into paper, the cold passing right through it.

Your chest tightens up again. You try to breathe in more deeply, but the cold sticks in your throat.

You have to get inside. As fast as possible without getting even more out of breath, you hurry between a gauntlet of cars. Your briefcase knocking against your leg. Asphalt patched with black ice blurring by under your boots.

The sliding doors to the hospital, with the ice-white sun fractured against their glass, are a hundred feet ahead.

The air as you walk in turns hot and musty, and you shudder involuntarily. The lobby, a wide, open area where main corridors intersect, is heavily trafficked. Removing your Fedora, you make your way through to the elevators.

A monitor with a blue screen and a stagger of miniscule pink squares on it shows the elevators all held up on other floors. Shaking your wrist loose from your sleeve, you check your watch. But its face is still out of focus; you couldn't find your glasses.

You glance around, nervous suddenly, for some reason, about anyone looking at you. A small gaggle of medical students is standing nearby, all in their short white coats, pockets bulging with reference textbooks. You supervise medical students and residents on a regular basis on the floor, though none at the moment. These students

here are laughing, talking loudly, at their stage still not responsible for anyone. One of the students turns to peer over at you.

Ding. Another ding. Elevators. People shuffling out, a patient wheeled out in a wheelchair by an orderly. The students disappear into their elevator, you into yours. No one else enters with you, a relief.

The rising elevator drones. The walls a pale vein-blue. All at once the elevator swirls, the air turns thin and unreal, and you have to place your hand on the cool metal railing that runs along mid-way up the wall.

You have to hang on, can't lose your focus. If something has happened to her, you will never forgive yourself.

Normally in a silhouetted dimness when you arrive, your floor is now bright, up and started without you. Ellen is already there, standing with two other nurses in the work area behind the reception desk. As you walk over, she looks toward you. You want to keep going past the desk, but you make yourself stop and check in with them.

"Hi, Gerry," Ellen says, looking concerned as she peers at you over the top of her glasses. "Is everything all right?"

"Hi, sorry." On the wall beside them is the enormous board with all the patients' names grease-penciled on it. "Any problems?"

You can feel her still looking at you. "No, it was a quiet night," she says. "And nothing new so far this morning."

You can feel the other two nurses, the young woman and the young man, also staring at you.

"Listen, Ellen, I have a meeting at lunch, across town. I'm going to do rounds, but then I have to leave. I'll be back later this afternoon."

You walk off down the hallway. At your office, you start to fit your key into the knob.

"Morning, doc."

Startled, you turn. A man with white eyebrows and a thin, patterned sweater is wheeling himself out through the doorway of one of the patient rooms. You recognize him, and remember his case—osteoarthritis in his back. But you can't quite conjure his name. Caruso? Carlisle?

"Good morning," you say, feeling a bizarre, uncharacteristic urge to dismiss him, to tell him you will be out to see him later: you want to get inside, check any e-mails and messages that might have come in this morning.

But he is a patient. You can't go against what you yourself teach your medical students and residents about bedside manner You walk over to him. Against the wall beside him is a bench, one of your benches—over the years you have made several pieces of furniture for the ward, as well as for Lily and the kids. You sit down beside him, bringing you both eye-level.

"How are you doing today?"

He shrugs. "Oh, good, can't complain. Yourself?"

"Fine, fine. How are the aches and pains in your back?"

"Not bad, about the same."

"Do you need the nurse to increase your pain medication?"

"No, I'm doing okay. Those pills make it hard for me to—you know, do a number two."

"I can increase the dose of your other pills, the blue and the green ones, to make it easier for you to pass your bowel movements."

"No, that's okay, doc. It's just a few aches. Part of getting old." He smiles. "It's better than the alternative, right?"

"Okay, well let the nurse know. I'm just going to take your pulse."

Laying your fingertips on his wrist, you follow his beat—thin but regular. Your thoughts, for the briefest moment, steady.

A photograph of her—you made the wood frame around it—sits on the desk in your office. It is of her standing on Fort Lauderdale beach, where you are supposed to go together every winter. You should have booked your hotel and flight by now, weeks ago ideally. But her boss has been putting pressure on her, the new employee, not to take time off, and she hasn't been able to stand up to him and give you a time when she could go. You wanted to call her boss—Lily was already pushing herself too hard, you wanted to tell him, and she needed the time off, the time away.

With an insistence that was unusually forceful, though, she forbade you from calling; she did not want anyone to know about her history.

As you listen to your messages—one from the secretary of the dean of medicine at McGill, to set up a meeting; another from an organizer for an upcoming conference

on the elderly, at which you are the keynote speaker—you pick up the picture, holding tight to the frame. In the picture it is dusk, and she is standing in a long yellow summer dress, the ocean behind her. The horizon is purple and red and orange, having just lost the sun. The water, the sand, her dress and her hair all pick up the final bits of evening light.

Getting short of breath, you put the picture back down. You hang up the phone, glance at the clock on your desk, and go out to start rounds.

Your coat flapping around your knees, you rush down the hallway toward the elevators, past the desk. Suddenly, on the other side, something rolls in front of you out of nowhere, out of a patient room, and you almost crash into it: a push-cart loaded with disposable breathing masks and packages of sterile gauze and little boxes of stacked, softly clacking glass vials.

"Ellen! Sorry, sorry. I'm late."

"Okay, just about Mrs. Piella."

Mrs. Piella? "Yes?"

"You said you wanted an abdominal CT on her, right, as well as the ultrasound?"

Yes, yes. "Yes. I didn't write that on the order sheet?"

"Don't worry. I'll just add it. You can sign it afterwards."

"Okay, thanks, sorry. Yes, please add it. And also, Ellen, please make sure the nurse for Mr. Eli gives him his next dose of Lasix. He keeps getting it late according to the chart and his breathing is still very uncomfortable."

"I'll take care of it. Not to worry."

"Is there anything else? I'll be back this afternoon."

"I think we should be fine for now."

"Thank you, Ellen. I'll be back."

A ding at the end of the hall.

You call out, "Hold the doors please!"

The red body of your new car sits at the end of the parking lot. You make your way toward it, trying at once to hurry and stay calm.

- 21℃. You turn on the radio. An announcer is talking like rapid-fire. While trying to keep your eyes on the road, you fumble for the right button, still not familiar with where everything is.

A new station. A commercial. "Have you ever wondered why—"

Switch. Classical piano, a jumpy melody. The sort of thing Lily used to be able to play. Maybe she still could, though it's been years since you've heard her even touch your piano.

You turn the radio off. You can't get distracted.

The car carries you along silently, except when you have to accelerate, your feet not yet used to these pedals: the same pressure you used to apply sends these pedals to the floor, the engine revving.

Friday, driving home, you had been looking forward to showing this new car to her. You figured she would never expect this impulsiveness, this boldness from you. You had left the old mini-van sitting on the dealer's lot, having practically given it away. You didn't care. You had the feeling she might like something new, exciting. She herself had never gotten her license, but the two of you could drive in this car together. To the Eastern Townships maybe—you recalled an open invitation by a son of one of your patients, who runs a spa out there. If she couldn't get a week off for your trip to Florida, the two of you could at least go away for a weekend.

You can't forget the moment when you walked in the door, calling out her name. She usually kept some sort of classical music playing in the background when she was home, but now the house was silent. She should have been home: her work was supposed to let her out at four-thirty, and it was almost seven. You walked around into the front hall, calling upstairs for her. You checked every room in the house, from upstairs to the basement, where, finally, in the closet under the stairs, you found one of the suitcases missing.

You checked the answering machine. You called her at work, but the office was closed. You called your children, but none of them had heard from her.

Just remembering all this again, your blood is replaced with ice water.

You look up at the road, try to focus on this meeting ahead of you. This man is a professional, with a sworn duty, like yourself, to do no harm, to protect those in need. He has to do something.

Outside your window, a grey stone church passes. A bank with enormous, tinted windows. A teenage girl standing waiting for the bus, under-dressed for the weather, holding her shoulders.

You glance at the dashboard clock. You have about fifteen minutes. You will just make it on time.

The route to her psychiatrist's house has become familiar to you this past year, driving her there twice a week, every week, for her therapy sessions. Recently, though, for some reason, she has started to want to get there herself, and has insisted on taking the bus. She wouldn't even let you give her money for a taxi.

Now ahead you see the intersection where you need to turn. The light there is changing to yellow; you have to slow down, stop.

These lights are taking forever. Finally they change and you start to turn, but you accidentally gun the engine and turn harder and sharper than you meant to. Your wheels catch ice and you swerve through the turn.

Alarmed, you see a woman walking along beside the snowbank, pushing a toddler in a stroller.

You jam down on the brakes. A yellow symbol of a skidding car flashes on the console, warning beeps telling you that you are out of control. Miraculously, your

wheels find traction and the car halts. The woman has pulled the stroller right up against the snowbank.

Your heart fluttering, tightening, you lower the passenger window. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened. Are you okay?"

Her frightened expression has become replaced by an angry, accusing one. "For Christ's sake. I don't care if you're sorry, you shit. You're going to kill someone. I should get your plate number and call the police."

"I'm so sorry. I'm not used to this car yet. It accelerates suddenly. I'll be even more careful. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Just watch it," she says, and pushes the stroller away.

Pressing down carefully on the gas, you continue past her, then turn down another street, so that you are out of her sight. Irate with yourself for what you could have just done, unthinkably relieved that you didn't, and glad to be away from that woman's sudden wrath, you turn down yet another street, until you come up in front of the house, with its driveway bordered by scraggly cedar hedges.

You have never actually gotten out of the car here; this is your first time stepping onto the driveway. On the neighbouring lawn, two children in snowsuits are building a fort, re-enforcing the walls by patting more snow against them. Following the icy, salted path, you walk around behind the house.

Well-taped to the glass outer door is a note, presumably for the patients he sees here:

Please ring once and someone will be
with you shortly.

You press the doorbell. The cold has wrapped itself like a scarf around your bare neck. You try to shrug your coat collar up close to your ears.

The door behind the glass is in want of a fresh coat of paint, with bits of dark green chipped off it. The glass door itself shows a dimmed reflection of everything, including yourself standing huddled here.

Finally steps are heard. The inner door opens. A woman appears behind the glass, with a man, slightly older than yourself, standing behind her, holding the door for her. Benjamin, Dr. Benjamin—that's his name.

The woman's expression looks haggard, weary, as she tries to fit together the front zipper of her snow jacket. This impulse—to open the glass door, snatch the zipper from her and do up her coat yourself—what is it? You take a step back. The woman pushes open the door. Avoiding eye contact with you, she hurries away down the path.

Suddenly it is as if you have come to the house of some miserly old neighbour, asking to borrow some small but essential tool, but now, on the doorstep, have changed your mind and would rather do without it.

Dr. Benjamin, tall, with droopy cheeks and wispy white hair, is holding the door open for you.

"Hi, Dr. Olsen. Please, come on in."

Hesitantly, you step in. "Thank you," you say.

He opens a door to a small closet. "Can I take your coat?"

"That's alright," you say, reaching into the closet yourself and slipping your coat over a hanger. "And call me Gerald, please."

"Eugene." He reaches out his hand. You shake it. "Is it still cold out there?"

"Nippy. Not terrible. "

"We're just down this way," he says. He heads down a short set of steps that seems to lead to a separate area of the house. Since you are here now, you have to follow.

*

Lily would be uncomfortable in this place. Why did you ever agree for her to come here? You can sense her discomfort, what she must have felt here, as he takes you through the waiting room, where a corner table holds a small spill of what look like old magazines. He opens his office door, which drags noisily against the rug, and, stepping aside, ushers you in.

His office has a number of odd, high, port-hole-like windows, a large desk, and against one of the walls, a light beige couch. Lily has lain on that couch. Did she want to?

"Have a seat, please," he says, indicating the chair in front of his desk and going around to his chair on the other side.

You have been in a psychiatrist's office before. You know how things work here. When Philip started with all his recklessness a few years ago—poor grades, fights, stealing—you and Lily, at the recommendation of the school counselor, went with him to see a psychiatrist, and you remember how a therapist always waits, at least for a minute or two, to see if you begin, on your own, to explain why you're here.

To preempt this awkward beginning, you start immediately:

"Thank you for meeting. I realize this is unusual. As a fellow physician, you understand, I'm sure, that I wouldn't want to do anything here to violate doctor-patient confidentiality."

He looks at you, without nodding, his hand covering his chin, his eyes seeming to be listening.

Your chair is uncomfortable. You shift in it.

"My only concern," you say, "is for her to be safe."

He raises an eyebrow. "You're worried she's in danger?"

The question seems in a foreign language. You try to restrain any judgment in your voice.

"Yes, Eugene, as her husband, and as a doctor, I am worried. Extremely worried. I still haven't heard a word from her."

You pause, trying not to let yourself get too visibly upset.

"Everyone seems to think she's been doing so well this past year," you say, "I can tell you, though, it has all been a huge strain on her."

"So tell me what you're worried is happening?" he asks.

Doesn't he know? Doesn't he remember her during her hospitalization last year? "Well, the same thing that happened last time!" you blurt out, and then shake your head, giving a slightly incredulous laugh. You can feel your face involuntarily breaking into a smile. "I mean, Eugene, you remember what she was like last time."

You still remember exactly how she looked when you visited her in that locked ward, inside her drab, grey room. How she sat hunched in her chair, turned away from you, her face slack, expressionless, her whole body catatonic. She didn't even

acknowledge your presence, or glance at any of the things you brought, including the wooden jewelry box you'd made for her. Occasionally, according to the nurses, when they could get her to speak, she would murmur about feeling "useless," and "worthless".

Eugene's expression turns serious. "I remember," he says. "She went down pretty far. She came out the other side of it, though, too. She's got some grit in her."

He is trying to turn something around on you.

"She seems to have responded very well to her medication. And socially she's been less withdrawn. She's started to work, she's going out more—"

"With all respect," you say, "a lot of that is a front she puts up. She doesn't want to worry people. She wants them to think she's fine. Inside, though, I can see, she is still suffering, still wanting to escape."

Eugene sighs and nods, with what seems, hopefully, like understanding of the situation.

"And anyway," you say, "where is she? Even if she "played hooky" for the weekend, as you suggested—going off with some friends, not bothering to call, whatever the case—where is she now? The weekend is over. She has work today. What has happened to her?"

You sit forward in your chair, opening your palms to gesture toward the center of the desk, where the problem lies as transparent as the glass paperweight there.

He is looking at you now with an expression you can't quite read. You hope you are reaching him, making him consider that something could actually be wrong here.

"I can see you're worried," he says. "And as I said on the phone, I can understand that completely. But from my discussions with her, I definitely think she is okay this time. I can't go into details—as you say, for reasons of confidentiality. But I think she should be back or at least calling you soon."

"Why, what's happening? Did she call you? Do you know where she is?" If the man knows something, for God's sake—

"No, I don't," he says, speaking deliberately, with maddening slowness. "And, as I say, I can't really go into it. Do you have a sense yourself of what could be happening?"

"Of course! I just told you!"

"Okay, then. Well, maybe give it another day or so, and if you haven't heard from her by then, we can—"

"Another day or two!" The air in the room turns thin and uneasy. The black surface of the desk wavers. You urgently want to check your watch, but remembering you don't have your glasses you stop yourself.

Mustering every last ounce of patience you have left in you, you try to infuse understanding into your voice. "Eugene. With all due respect, we can't let another single day go by like this. If anything were to happen to her, I wouldn't, I can't—"

Looking at you directly, Eugene sighs softly.

"I'm sorry, Gerald. Please know, though, that I am confident she's safe. Perhaps if you—"

That is as much nonsense as you can hear. As you glance away, a double of the room breaks off from the room itself, one floating image sliding sideways over the

other. "I'm sorry, Eugene. I— I probably shouldn't have bothered you. I should have just called the police right away. At least to let them know. Just in case. Then we wouldn't be here."

You don't hear a response. You stand up. You glance at your watch without really looking at it.

A distant voice: "Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes, of course. I appreciate you taking the time for this. I just have to get back to the hospital and take care of some things—"

The floor is rotating, shifting under you, but you manage to follow it toward the door. That distant voice is speaking to you, saying something, but fading. You open the door, and then it is the waiting room, the stairs, coat, and outside.

The brightness off the snow is stupefying. A silence has fallen over everything. Overhead, the blue void has an air of irreversibility, the way a person's body appears after they have died.

You walk back along the path. You reach your car, sitting cold red in the driveway.

Everything has lost what makes it alive, has become part of this dead, frozen planet. Nothing can come from anything anymore.

Somehow, it is your fault. You have done this. You have made it this way.

There is nothing you can do now, no way to fix it, nowhere you can go. But you can't just let yourself collapse here. You get in the car, drive.

Houses tick past. Now office buildings. All their windows staring emptily.

The wheel in your hands is bone-cold. Where are you coming from? Five minutes ago is as imaginary and unreal as a previous lifetime. Behind each moment the previous one drops away, a plank in a collapsing bridge.

Where are you going?

The road seems to be leading you back up toward the hospital, but you can't go there. You can't show up on the floor in this state.

The wheel almost turns itself, back toward the house.

The garage opens, takes you in. On the steps to the side door, you sort through your jumble of keys.

Piano. Coming from inside the house. You grab your jingling keys in a choke hold to silence them.

Immediately you recognize the tune. Eons ago, Lily used to play it. Could it be the stereo? No. You hear her stumbling over notes.

You fit in the key, turn the handle. The door swings open too fast, banging against the wall.

The playing is cut off.

"Lily?"

You want to run around to the living room, but an invisible hand is held up in front of you, warning you to stop: any wrong move and you could lose her.

"Lily?"

You hear someone stepping out of the living room, then movement in the front hall. Without taking off your boots or coat, you move through the kitchen, hurrying, in case she is about to get out through the front door.

You turn the corner and see her. She has gotten out of the living room and is standing by the door, on the polished black stone of the front hall. She is wearing her coat. Behind her, she is pulling a suitcase, the same one you noticed was missing.

The slat blinds on the door direct bars of frozen light onto the black stone floor at her feet. With her body still turned toward the door, she glances at you.

"Gerry! You're supposed to be at work."

You almost can't talk. Instead, you want to do twenty things at once. Grab her, pull her away from the door, handcuff her to the house if you have to. But also hold her, make her something to eat, lay her down under blankets.

"Lily," you stammer, restraining yourself from running over to her. "What is going on? What is wrong? Where were you? I've been dying of worry."

"Nowhere."

"Lily, where were you?"

"Just at a friend's cottage" she says. You can see her keeping her grip on the handle of her suitcase. "I'm fine. I've just called a taxi. It should be here in a few minutes."

"Lily, please. Tell me what's wrong, what's going on. Who's cottage was this? Who were you with? What kind of a weekend was this? What went on there?"

"Nothing is wrong. Our boss at work, just invited a group of people up. People from the office. It was nothing. Look, Gerry, I'm sorry for not calling this weekend, or leaving you a message. I just, I don't know what. I couldn't. I just had to go."

"But where were you last night? Where are you going now?"

"I just—an opportunity has come up. For work." She breaks eye contact. "There's a conference. This whole week. Out of town. I've—someone has asked me to go. And I want to go."

"Lily, you're not making sense." You walk over to her. You place one hand on her shoulder, the other on the handle of her suitcase, to ease it away from her. "Why don't you take off your coat, sit down, let me take your suitcase, and we can discuss—"

She pulls the handle back from you, taking a step closer to the door. But then she looks down.

"Gerry, please. I'm sorry. I can't stay. The taxi's going to be here in a minute. I'll call you when I get there, okay?"

"Lily, listen to yourself. Please. You're not talking sense. You need to rest. You're pushing yourself too hard. You don't have to prove anything to these people. You don't need anything from them. Just come in, sit down."

You step toward her, again placing your hand on the suitcase handle, but this time she pulls it away even harder. She looks up at you, her hazel eyes both desperate and determined, in a way you don't recognize.

"Gerry, don't, please. I want to go."

"What sort of a conference is this? Who is trying to get you to go? Why does the office assistant need to go?"

"Our boss at work is going, and he needs an assistant there."

"Your boss?" The front hall tilts sideways. "Who is this person?"

"No one. Gerry, look, I think I just need some time."

She doesn't know what she is saying anymore. "Lily, if you could see yourself. You're exhausted. You don't know when to stop. You're going to put yourself back in the hospital."

Quickly slipping around between her and the door, you take hold of the suitcase handle, this time with a definite grip. "I can't let you keep doing this to yourself."

She tries to yank the suitcase back. You hold it firm.

"Gerry, give it back. Move. Please."

"No, Lily. Your boss can bring someone else to the conference. In fact, he can find another assistant. You need to rest now, I don't care what you say. You're going to push yourself over the edge again."

"Gerry." A pained look comes over her face. She lets go and paces around, back and forth in front of you, like a trapped animal. You don't want to do this to her, but it is for her own good. She's going to kill herself if she keeps pushing herself like this, or letting other people push her. Someone has to take a stand for her.

"Gerry," she says, stopping, staring right at you. "I'm not joking. I have to go. Give me back my suitcase."

There is a grinding sound outside, tires on snow.

"Gerry!" She pushes against your chest. "Gerry, stop it!"

"Lily, that's enough. That's enough now. You don't know what you're doing. You're not seeing clearly."

"No, Gerry! You, that's enough! Give me my suitcase!"

"We can stand here all day if you like, Lily, but I'm not letting you out."

"Gerry!" She is screaming now, not in her right mind anymore. You almost feel reassured. She casts around, bereft, bewildered. She glances into the adjoining dining room, and then suddenly stops. She looks at you for a moment. Then she walks into the dining room, and off the huge table picks up the centerpiece.

What is she doing?

She carries it out: the crystal bowl. Your bowl—yours and hers. You picked it out on the last day of your honeymoon. It has barely moved from the center of the table in twenty-two years. It is large enough to hold an infant, and she cradles it awkwardly in her arms, the cold light through the window glinting in the bevels of crystal.

"Gerry, give me back my suitcase. I have to go."

"Lily, what are you doing?"

"Just let me out." She holds the bowl out above the floor and raises her arms, as if to let it drop.

Your heart stops—she really is crazy—but you try to reason with her. "Lily, wait, wait. Just wait a moment."

Releasing the handle, you back away from both the suitcase and the door. You make it seem as if you are clearing a place for her to get by, backing up just far enough to still lunge and reach her before she leaves.

Still holding the bowl in the air, she inches over to the door. She has to shift the bowl precariously under her arm to turn the latch and pull open the inside door. The snow-covered front yard appears behind her.

With her free hand, she takes the suitcase handle and opens the glass door. Cold air sweeps in.

She turns to look at you, her eyes sad, or maybe apologetic. "I'm sorry I have to do this," she says. "I just need some time."

She lets you step toward her, to take the bowl out of her arms. As soon as you have it, she starts to pull her suitcase and step out. But holding the bowl against your side with one arm you grab her by the wrist.

"Gerry!" she shrieks.

"Lily, please. This is insane."

"Gerry! Stop it!"

In a single, surprising motion, she lets go of the handle, twists her wrist free of your grip, turns, and with both hands pushes into your chest. The hard shove unbalances you just enough for her to wrest the bowl from you. You try to grab it back, but she is a second ahead of you. With a grunt, she heaves it behind you, into the air.

The bowl is plummeting toward black stone. She is pushing open the door to walk out. In an incomprehensible, eternal instant, you are caught between her stepping away, hurrying toward the taxi, and a shattering of crystal and light.

WARD

With thanks to Gabrielle, Zoë and Heidi

IT WAS CLEAR almost before Elizabeth had closed the examination room door and sat down what would need to happen with this next patient, who sat slumped in a chair. Head drooped, matted brown hair hanging in front of her face, her baggy purple sweatshirt and sweatpants looking ratty. The white walls around her, and the stainless steel sink beside her, bright and clean under the fluorescent light. Through the door, a muted echo of people talking and walking around, of ringing phones and beeping monitors.

There was an odor, too, which this woman had brought in with her. That dried-sweat smell patients give off when they haven't washed in days, weeks.

She would have to go up to the closed ward. Elizabeth had called upstairs for another patient a few minutes ago, before picking up this woman's chart and giving it a read and coming in here, and they had said there were still a few beds open, which had been reassuring. Some days it was completely full up there, and then you didn't quite

know what to do with patients like this. If they couldn't go home, you had to hold them down here, until a space became available.

She used to put more energy into this kind of patient, back when she started as a psychiatric attending here in the ER, now over two years ago. Not into their management, which she always took care of diligently and fully, but into trying to reach them. Sitting leaning toward them, she would ask them questions about themselves, their symptoms, what was going on in their lives, trying a new angle if the first or second one didn't draw them out, believing that somewhere in there must be a person who wanted to come out of their shell, who wanted to talk to someone and begin to figure out how to get their life back on track. She did not believe they could possibly *want* to be sitting here like this, depressed and disheveled.

She still felt this way about patients like this. But she was beginning to accept the idea that here, in the Emergency Room, was not where most of them were going to start climbing out of whatever hole they had fallen into. Evidently it was too early. The important thing at this stage was to arrange some kind of monitoring and care for them at home, through a family member, a friend or a visiting nurse or social worker; or, if none of that were available, or if the patient were too ill, to fill out their medication and other orders and transfer them upstairs.

Through medical school and her residency, Elizabeth had completed several month or two-month long rotations on the closed ward. There were two locked units upstairs, actually: a High Care Area with eight beds, and a Transitional Team Unit with another eight beds. Most students and residents, the first time they worked there, didn't quite know what to make of the ward. The patients there, all in blue hospital gowns,

talked to themselves, and occasionally shouted and even became aggressive; or they were like this woman here, unresponsive, staring blankly. They had ideas and images in their heads that would shock you, the first time you heard them. Yet Elizabeth, to her own surprise, had not necessarily felt uncomfortable on the ward, not even back in medical school, when the majority of her classmates had been counting the days to the end of their psychiatry rotations. She had felt motivated by the fact you could *do* something about these patients' conditions, as you could about medical diseases.

She still remembers one of the first times she witnessed a full-blown psychotic patient come back down to sanity, after a period on the ward with anti-psychotic drug treatment. The patient had been a late middle-aged woman, a history professor at McGill, and had called Elizabeth a liar, a bitch, a whore, one hysterically-shouted insult after another. By the end of her stay, this woman had utterly changed, and apologized to Elizabeth and thanked her several times. She even sent Elizabeth a book she had written—about women in modern-day Japan—with a kind note inside the front cover.

One slight problem for Elizabeth had been the physical look of the ward, which was not quite a pleasure to work in each day, a small part of why she had ultimately chosen the attending position down here in the ER. The walls up there had almost no color, were mostly grey, and the windows were smaller, letting in less light, and had bars on them. The rationale, which she understood, was that the lack of stimulation helped the patients calm down. And it did seem to have that effect on them. In fact, even with its relative absence of color and light, there was something about the ward that she herself found quieting. Things felt secure there: it didn't matter how psychotic, delusional or even violent anyone became, on the ward they were prevented from

hurting themselves or anyone else. Then, over time, with the help of medication and psychological treatment, as well as of social therapies, such as art therapy done in groups, they would learn, hopefully, how to better control their out-of-control sides, how to manage them themselves.

She looked now at this woman sitting slouched, almost catatonic across from her. According to her chart—already partially filled in by the psychiatric nurse, who always did a preliminary assessment before the psychiatrist went in—she was younger than she looked, only twenty-eight, a couple of years younger than Elizabeth herself. She had no documented psychiatric history: no previous episodes of depression or of being on anti-depressants. According to her landlady, who was the one who had called 9-1-1 and had her brought in, this woman had not left her apartment or answered her phone or even answered her door for the past two weeks. Her landlady had thought she might be dead or something. Elizabeth wondered if there might be some kind of agoraphobia involved, though the exact diagnosis was not the most important thing now, more what needed to be done next.

She already knew, almost certainly, what would have to be done; no contact information had been found yet for this woman, of a friend or a family member, and she was clearly unable to take care of herself at the moment. But there was something about her that tugged on Elizabeth, that made her want to see if she could reach this woman, even if just briefly. This woman was young, physically healthy, and not unattractive, despite how much she had let herself go. She was at the start of her life.

Elizabeth leaned forward in her chair. "Ms. Hall?"

The woman didn't look up.

"Ms. Hall? Do you want me to call anyone, to tell them you're here?"

The woman's eyes gave a flick, but she kept staring at the floor.

Elizabeth glanced at the name at the top of the woman's chart, which she held on her lap. "Francine?" she said, her tone of voice changing slightly, as if she were talking more to a friend now. "Francine, is there someone you want me to call? Or do you want to try telling me about what's going on?"

The woman's eyes flicked again, almost a glance up. Elizabeth thought she saw a glimmer of something in her eyes, of some reaction, but she couldn't quite read what it was.

The woman was still staring at the ground, and now Elizabeth could feel the pull of other things she still had to take care of this afternoon, including two other patients waiting in other examination rooms. It didn't seem as if this interview was going anywhere right now, anyway. She would come back later to check on this woman, and in the meantime would fill out the transfer orders for her, in case nothing had changed in half-an-hour.

"Okay, well thank you, and I'll be back in a while, to see how you're doing. If you need anything or have any questions, just call for the nurse. Okay?"

Elizabeth stood up and went back out into the noisy bustle of the ER.

It was Sunday, her turn among the staff to take a weekend shift. But she had tomorrow off, which she was looking forward to. Her mother, who had been visiting the past few days, had gone back to Toronto this morning, and tomorrow Trudy, who normally took

Jonah on Mondays, was coming over to the house, to look after him there and help out while Elizabeth worked in the garden.

It had been at least a few weeks now that she had been trying to get to her garden, which still needed to be put to bed in preparation for winter: her perennials still had to be pruned back, her bulbs planted before the ground hardened. And after a hectic few weeks, she was ready for a more quiet day, spent outdoors getting her hands dirty. She had checked the weather forecast: relatively warm and sunny.

On top of her shifts here and Jonah and Daniel at home, as well as the visit from her mother, she had been working since last month on finishing some research for her boss, Dr. Beatrice Lasner, the head of ER psychiatry and a respected figure in the field. Bea was the person who had snapped Elizabeth up fresh out of her residency, having supervised and been impressed with her work over the years, and since Elizabeth had started here, Bea had enlisted her help with a number of projects. A few weeks ago she had approached Elizabeth again, this time about a re-structuring project Bea wanted to propose to the ER board.

"You know the situation," Bea had said. "And I know it. We both know why it has to change. But if we want the medical side to go along with it, it would be helpful if we had some data. Do you think we could put something together? It doesn't have to be too fancy or formal, just clear and convincing. I have a meeting with the board in three weeks."

Elizabeth had said yes, and had pulled out the charts of about thirty psychiatric ER cases, and had started reviewing, compiling, organizing and writing up all the information. It was a much larger undertaking than Bea had realized, though, and with

the board meeting coming up this Wednesday, Elizabeth had been staying up late the last few nights to get it done. It had been difficult to work steadily, though, because lately Jonah had started waking up and crying at night, for some reason not wanting to settle down.

Now, having gotten through all the day's patients, she was sitting in the back, shared office that the ER set aside for whichever psychiatrist was on duty. She had finished filling in all the patient charts, finished all the discharges or transfers upstairs, including Ms. Hall's transfer up. She had the research for the proposal pulled up on-screen and a stack of patient files on the desk beside her, the top one open. A bottle of water stood open on the desk, and every now and then she remembered to take a sip of it. On the corner of the desk was also a potted African violet, with its fleshy, thinly-furred leaves and purple flowers. Elizabeth had donated it to the office, to give it a bit more freshness and color, figuring nobody could be against having a plant in here.

"Just what we needed in here," Bea had said in fact. "It's beautiful. What a breath of fresh air. Lovely."

There was only about a half-hour left in Elizabeth's shift, but she wanted to take advantage of the time. She was typing ages, sexes, reasons for visits, lengths of waits, diagnoses and treatments into the computer when the phone rang.

"Hi, Bea. How are you?"

"Not good. Not good at all."

A pause. Elizabeth hesitated, then asked, "Why, what's wrong?"

Bea gave an exasperated sigh. "I've just been so exhausted this week, and I just had to take some time to myself the last few days. I had to take some time away from

my messages, or I wouldn't have been of any use. And I just checked my e-mail and found out that the head of the board can't make it on Wednesday. You know, for the project meeting. The only time the board can meet is tomorrow, at 11:00."

"Oh," Elizabeth said.

"I feel very badly for asking, but could you take my shift tomorrow?"

Elizabeth wasn't sure what to answer. "Well, Bea, the only thing is I—well, there were some things I wanted to get done at home." She paused, hoping that Bea might decide to call someone else. But when the pause got uncomfortably long, she suggested, "Is there any way the meeting could be started after lunch?" Half a day working in the garden would be better than nothing.

"Hm, you see we really will need several hours, and I just don't feel comfortable risking pushing the meeting into the late afternoon. I also can't foresee being able to reach the head of the board tonight, on a Sunday. It's too last minute. I really am so sorry for asking you this."

"No, no, Bea," she jumped in. "Don't worry about it. I can do it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I can get those other things done another time."

"Thank you so much, Liz. You are a gift, just a gift. I'll make sure to find someone to replace you later this week or next week."

"Okay, Bea. Thanks."

"Now also, Liz, did we get that research report done?"

The office, for a second, seemed to get smaller. "I'm working on it now. I haven't quite finished, since you didn't need it until Wednesday."

"I know it's soon, but would it be at all possible to have something ready by tomorrow morning? Say by 8, so I can look it over before I meet with the board?"

She looked at the report on the screen. It was close to done, but to really make it right would take five or six more hours, at least.

"Sure," she said. "I could do that. I'll e-mail it to you in the morning."

"Okay then. Great. Thanks so much again, Liz. Bye-bye."

She hung up. Thinking of her garden, she let out a long, slow, steadying breath. But she decided there was nothing she could do about the situation right now, and she started to think about how she would get everything done tonight. Her mom had left, so it was just Daniel at home now with Jonah. She could call him and ask him to start getting something ready for supper. He would probably want to make that Thai dish, which she didn't really like, but it would be fine for tonight. Then, as soon as Jonah was in bed, she could start working.

* * *

She often got migraines when she hadn't had enough sleep, and on Monday afternoon after finishing Bea's shift, as she drove to pick up Jonah at Trudy's, she could still feel a knot-like tightness in her forehead, especially on the right side. It had started sometime before lunch. She had taken her pills for it, and they had loosened the squeezing somewhat, so that now it only about half as bad as it had been.

As she put on her signal to pass a car in front of her, her mother's visit for some reason came to mind. She had come to help out, and had left several large containers

filled with chicken-rice soup in the freezer. She had also scrubbed from top to bottom both bathrooms, washed the kitchen floor, dusted and polished the furniture, and vacuumed the entire house, saving Elizabeth from chores for a couple of weeks. But she had also spent most of the time bickering with Daniel, sometimes mildly and at other times outright angrily, despite Elizabeth's efforts to keep them off controversial topics.

For as long as Elizabeth could remember, her mother had worked for a large company, selling life insurance, and had also been a staunch conservative—putting two Tory signs out on her lawn in 1993, when the party was so unpopular it won only two seats across the country. Daniel, on the other hand, was a lawyer for environmental groups that wanted to sue large corporations for over-polluting, and, as well, he had run, twice, for election with the New Democratic Party, even though they had no hope of winning in this district. At supper, Daniel would provoke her mother, making some comment about the current Conservative leader, or about big business in the country, and an hour later, when Elizabeth was drying the dishes, the two of them would still be at each other's throats.

Just thinking about all that made her headache worse. She turned on the radio and switched to a classical music station. Mozart, she recognized.

*

The edges of leaves turned in color, the air pleasantly cool, she walked up the steps outside Trudy's front door and rang the bell. She took a deep sniff of the crisp,

sweetened air. She was tired, but she also felt proud. It was the end of the day, and she had gotten everything—the report last night, Bea's shift, all of it—done.

She smiled to greet Trudy and Jonah, who appeared now behind the glass outer door. Trudy, in her mid-to-late fifties, with short graying brown hair and glasses, was wearing a white turtle neck with a knitted, button-up sweater overtop, and Jonah, sporting some overalls that Trudy had bought for him, was sitting on her hip.

Elizabeth opened the glass door. "Look who it is, Jonah," Trudy said.

"Hi, sweetie," Elizabeth cooed, stepping in, bending toward him, Trudy passing him into his mother's arms.

"How was your day?" Trudy asked.

Elizabeth re-adjusted Jonah on her hip: at a year old, he was big for his age, heavy as a small sac of potatoes. "Not bad," she said. "It's been a busy few weeks, and last night I had to stay up late to finish some research, for a proposal at work. But there was a meeting today about it and actually it looks like the changes we proposed are going ahead, so it was worth it. I'll just get to bed early tonight!"

"Congratulations," Trudy said. "I'd love to hear about it." She paused. "Now, I don't want to keep you if you need to get going, but would you like some tea?"

It was quarter-to-five, and Elizabeth was thinking she had to get home soon to prepare supper. Trudy's offer, though, and the chance to sit down for a chat, suddenly seemed like a welcome and needed break. Anyway, it probably wouldn't take more than half an hour.

"Sure," she said. "Can I help you with something?"

"Oh, no. Give me your coat, and you go into the living room and sit down. I'll just put on the kettle."

Jonah was pulling at the strap of her purse on her shoulder, and she turned to look at him. "Hi, pumpkin," she said. "Did you have a good day?"

Without smiling, Jonah glanced up at her. She bounced him up and down a bit and asked him again, putting her face close to his. This worked, and he gave her a grin.

He was just at the age where he was starting to walk—a few steps, then his legs gave out, or he lost confidence and either sat down again or looked for something or someone to hold himself up on. She liked him to practice walking—she didn't think he should be carried when he was able to walk himself—and she lowered him to the ground, so that he was standing facing forward. Holding both his arms raised, his hands in hers, she tried to inch him forward. He went a few steps, half-stumbled.

"Very good, sweetie! Try again."

He took a few more steps, then stopped.

"That's good. Don't give up."

Now he just stood there, his legs wobbling.

"Okay, then," she said. Giving a light grunt, she lifted him back up and carried him into the living room, where a few of his toys lay scattered on the carpet next to the low coffee table.

She liked Trudy's home, even if the décor wasn't her style. It had a warm feel, with an abundance of framed pictures on the walls and on the tables, all of Trudy's family: her husband, Jim, at work at the moment; their grown children; and other people, who Elizabeth didn't know. She felt lucky to have found this woman; she knew

Jonah was well looked after here. Trudy had been taking care of Jonah since he was about three months old, when Elizabeth had gone back to work part-time, and since then Trudy had re-decorated an entire room in her house for him, and Jim had even built him a crib.

It was unfortunate, Elizabeth thought, that Trudy could only take Jonah three days a week; when Jonah was six months and she had gone back to work full-time, she had had to look for additional sitters. Now on Thursdays, Jonah stayed in a home daycare, with five other toddlers; on Fridays, with a neighbour across the street, who had a two-and-a-half year old son. It was not ideal, but Daniel had shown no interest in staying at home, and if she didn't take care of her own needs, too, she would only become resentful, and would have very little to give anyone, including Jonah. This way, at least, she looked forward to seeing her son at the end of the day.

Trudy walked in carrying a tray arranged with a pot of tea, cups and saucers, milk, sugar and a plate of homemade apple squares sprinkled with cinnamon—a staple in the house. Elizabeth took a bite of square and a sip of tea. Almost as soon as she had started, Jonah reached for the square she was eating, or maybe the cup she was holding.

"No, Jonah," she said, worried about him grabbing the tea cup, which he could break. Without really thinking about it, she also didn't want him eating her square. It hadn't been given to him, and she didn't want him getting into the habit of thinking he could just grab for things. Looking around, she placed her snack on the windowsill behind the couch, just out of view.

"So how was he today," she asked Trudy. "Did you two have a good day?"

"Oh, he was a peach," Trudy said. "He played with a little girl in the park, and then he had his lunch. After that he had his nap. Then we played with his trucks."

Jonah squirmed and made a fussing noise, and, managing to turn himself around, tried to climb up over his mom's shoulder, to get at what she had hidden somewhere behind her.

She pulled him back down into her lap, more firmly this time. "No, Jonah," she repeated. "No."

"You can give him a little cake if you like," Trudy said. "He tried some earlier and seemed to like it."

Elizabeth cut a sliver off one of the extra squares, which Trudy had set aside on the coffee table, and handed it to Jonah. He took it between his fingers, crumbling it, a few bits falling onto the couch, and then put his mouth over the cake, his fingers and all. He looked up and laughed.

Trudy smiled. She leaned over and laid her hand on the side of his head, on his red curls. "You like that, don't you?"

Elizabeth gave a smile at her son's persistence, sighed, and then picked the fallen crumbs off the couch and rubbed them off her fingers onto the tray. Then she reached behind her, took a sip of tea, and replaced her cup back on the windowsill.

"So you said something is going ahead at your work?" Trudy asked.

"Yes," she said. "We're trying to re-structure what happens when a patient comes into the Emergency Room. There are two teams—the medical team and psychiatry—and we're trying to co-ordinate the two better, so that we work together better. Co-operate more. Instead of each team just doing their own job separately."

Jonah had turned himself around on her lap again, and was trying once more to climb up over her shoulder. She pulled him down, this time holding him under his arms so that he was facing her.

"Jonah. No." She said each word slowly, as unharshly but directly as she could, so that he could understand her meaning. "No. That's mommy's. Okay?"

"Where's your cup, Jonah?" Trudy said. "I forgot he has one somewhere." She sifted among his toys on the carpet and fished out a plastic cup and saucer.

"Thanks, Trudy," Elizabeth said, and passed the plastic dishes to her son. Then, as he became focused on the dishes, she eased him down to the carpet, placing him in front of the coffee table by her feet. Sitting half-facing her, Jonah knocked the dishes together so that they made a light clacking noise.

"Sorry," she said.

Trudy waved her hand. "Doesn't matter. So you were telling me about the two teams working together?"

"Right," Elizabeth said. "At the moment, for instance, when a patient comes in, they get seen by the medical team first. Medicine sees them first even if the patient seems to have psychiatric symptoms. Even if they are a known psychiatric case, they have to go through medicine first, just to rule out any medical causes. We might not get to see the patient for an hour or two, or more, which can be a very long time for them to wait around."

Elizabeth began to notice something: an unexpected eagerness in herself to explain to Trudy everything about the project. She felt a slight lift as she kept talking, a subtle lightness in chest.

Discreetly, she reached behind her and took another sip of tea, and also another bite of apple square. A few crumbs fell from her lips, and she picked them up off her pants and put them in her mouth. She went on by explaining that it was better for the patients if they were assessed by both teams, medicine and psychiatry, right from the first moment the patients walked in. Not if a patient is coming in with a heart attack, of course, but if there seemed to be anything psychiatric going on.

Trudy sat with a thoughtful, listening look on her face. "Golly," she said. "That's pretty neat."

A tapping sound came from below, and Elizabeth looked down to see Jonah knocking the plastic dishes against the surface of Trudy's table.

"Oh, Jonah, no, no," Elizabeth said, bending down to stop him, taking hold of his arms.

"That's okay, I don't think it will scratch," Trudy said. "It's an old table, anway."

"Sorry," Elizabeth said, still bent down and holding her son's arms, while he fussed and tried to pull away from her. "I just don't want him to get into the habit of knocking things on your table."

With Jonah still gripping the plastic dishes in his hands, Elizabeth guided his arms back down toward the carpet. "Play with them down here, okay sweetie?"

Elizabeth was reaching back to take another sip of tea, but caught her son, now with his back turned to her, again hitting the dishes against table.

"No, Jonah," she repeated, louder, quickly reaching down again and grabbing his arms. She moved them back down onto the carpet. "Play. Down. Here."

He fiddled with his dishes on the carpet, with less enthusiasm. Slowly, Elizabeth sat back up. Looking over at Trudy, she raised her eyebrows, bemused.

A whack. Elizabeth just caught sight of it: Jonah reaching up and slapping the plastic saucer flat against the table.

A frustration took hold of her, and for a moment she didn't know how to react. What did she want to do? Something like put him in another room, maybe. He was only a year old, she understood, but he wasn't completely a baby anymore. He had to learn sooner or later than he couldn't just do whatever he wanted when he wanted.

Suddenly, though, as if waking out of a daze, she recognized that it wasn't all him. It was also her. She was worn out. It was probably time to go home, have supper, get Jonah in bed, and then relax for a while in the living room with Daniel. They had earned a quiet evening together.

Walking in holding Jonah in the crook of her arm, Elizabeth flicked on the kitchen light overhead, then lowered him into his Jolly Jumper, sliding his feet through the leg holes and fastening the clip around his waist. She found him his baby-blue bear and, after turning the wind-up key in back among the fur so that the bear began to tinkle *Frère Jacques*, handed it down to him.

As he took it, he looked at it, as if it wasn't quite what he wanted. He turned his face up toward her, with an expression she couldn't quite read, some kind of hesitant question in it.

"Mom just has to make supper now, sweetie. Be a good boy, okay?"

The microwave read 5:26. She decided there was still enough time to cook the lemon chicken, free-range, which she had prepared and put in the fridge this morning. Moving around the kitchen, she preheated the oven, took out two pots, filled them with water and put them on the stove, not turning on the elements yet. She went back and put the chicken in the oven. Then she took fresh carrots out of the fridge and began chopping. She noticed some apples in the fruit bowl that needed to get used, and thought about making a quick crisp for dessert, if there was time.

A belt-like strap, with a line of gold bells fastened to it, hung down against the side door that led in from the garage, and Elizabeth, slicing apples now, heard them jingle.

"Hey ho!" she heard Daniel call out.

"Hi," she answered.

Daniel, a bit shorter than the men she had been used to dating before she met him but still well-built and quite fit, walked into the kitchen wearing, as he often did to work, a casual sweater and jeans.

"What a day!" he said, dropping his briefcase onto the stool by the counter.

With her hand she pushed the apple cores off the board, making more room to keep cutting. "Was it?" she said.

"Yeah, there's these real assholes we're dealing with, at the pulp and paper company." As he talked, he walked over to the small desk in the corner and picked up the phone. "We're taking them to court in a few weeks, for having shit up the St-Lawrence for the past twenty years, and now they're trying to pull this intimidation

crap. What they don't know is that I tape-recorded some of their threats. It's going to bite them in the ass in front of the judge."

"That's good," she said. "Will you be ready for supper in about fifteen minutes?"

"Yeah, sure," he said. "Sorry, I'm just a bit worked up. Fifteen minutes sounds good." He was holding the receiver to his ear, listening to his messages. "How was your day?"

She pushed the slices off the chopping board and into a small microwavable casserole dish. "Also pretty busy," she said. "I have a bit of a headache. But good news, it looks like the research I did convinced the board to make some changes."

"Awesome," he said. "That's terrific, hon. Great job."

She went over to the stove and turned the dials to boil the water for the carrots. Then, able to pause for a minute, she looked around and breathed out a small, relieved sigh: everything was moving along, rolling.

"Fuck," Daniel said. He let the receiver fall back into its cradle. "I have to drive some papers over to Gary. I was supposed to mail them to him last week but I didn't have time, and he says he needs them ASAP. He has to work on them tonight. I'll make it fast, I promise."

"Oh, Daniel, come on. Can't it wait until tomorrow? I just want to relax tonight."

"He needs them, babe. I was supposed to have already gotten them to him."

"Can't it at least wait until after supper, then, after Jonah is in bed? Everything is almost ready."

"It's better if I just get this out the way, Liz. Then we can take it easy after that. Just put the oven on low. Everything will keep warm. I won't be long."

She was about to protest, to insist even harder, but something in her gave up, as if not wanting or not able to argue right now. "Fine. Just don't get into a conversation with him, please. Try to just drop off the papers and come home."

"I will, I will. Thanks, babe." He came around the counter and kissed her on the cheek. Then he turned to glance down at Jonah, who, suspended from the doorway, bouncing himself just a little, blinked up at him, with what might have been nervousness, or uncertainty, or something else. Daniel crouched down, gave Jonah a kiss on the cheek, too, and tousled his soft hair. "You having a good day, kid?" Then Daniel trotted out the door, with another jingle of bells.

For a minute she stared toward the door, as if her unhappiness and irritation over this situation might bring him back through it. But she did not want to be upset or angry. He felt this errand was urgent, and maybe it was. She loved and admired her husband for his passion for his work. What he did was important and he was devoted to it.

But there was no point denying that sometimes it got to be too much. Plans, things they had scheduled, could suddenly, at any moment, get postponed or changed. She turned down the oven. She wrapped foil over the pan of chicken. She turned the boiling water off. She plastic-wrapped the uncooked apple crisp. She could feel the lack of sleep, her headache, the research report, Bea's shift today, Daniel taking off now, all starting to wear into her.

She went to the fridge and poured herself a glass of vegetable juice. She could feel something else starting, too, something that came up now and then in her: an edge of frustration. This frustrated her—she was frustrated that she was frustrated; she didn't like it that her frustration could get a hold of her when she was under stress, could overtake her and block out any sense of rationality or reasonableness in her. A few months ago, in an argument with Daniel about helping with Jonah and with chores around the house, she had completely lost her cool, shouting at him for what seemed like an hour. Afterward, she had had a severe headache, and, worse, had felt as if she had temporarily turned into some kind of monster.

She took a slow sip of the juice. She went around to the living room to turn on some classical music, something relaxing.

Jonah was beginning to fuss now in his jumper. His bear was on the floor. The microwave read 6:21—it was past his suppertime. She unclipped Jonah, transferred him to his high chair, and re-strapped him in. On the white plastic tray in front of him, she placed a handful of Cheerios, to tide him over—she still wanted to try to wait, so that they could eat all together as a family.

Having finished his Cheerios, and also thrown several on the floor, Jonah started making louder noises, as if on the verge of crying. She bent down beside him and sniffed his diaper, then reached under the elastic ruffle to feel if he was wet. No. He was hungry. She was hungry, too. The schedule for the evening had been thrown off, and he still needed his bath. There was no point in postponing supper any longer. As she heated up a container of mini-raviolis in the microwave for him, she turned back on the stove to boil the carrots and cook the rice.

She was half-way through feeding him, and had taken several bites from her own plate, when the door jingled again. She turned around to glance at the microwave. It was quarter to seven.

Daniel was carrying a plastic bag as he walked in. She didn't look up but gave Jonah a spoonful as Daniel went around and dropped the bag on the counter.

"I went by the bakery on the way home," she heard him say. "I picked up some scones for you for tomorrow morning. Also this special organic coffee they were selling."

"Thank you," she said, without turning around. She paused to take a sip from her glass.

Daniel put down his plate across from her and sat down. "I just had to explain a couple of things to Gary about the files, so that he could work on them tonight. He invited me to stay for a drink but I told him I had to get home."

"Thanks," she said, glancing up at him. Maybe she was being sensitive and was over-reacting. She did want to reconcile, to salvage their evening together. But it was as if a glass wall had come between them, or something even thicker and more opaque. She could feel Daniel starting to disappear behind it, though she struggled to stay in the conversation.

Daniel took a drink of milk, put a piece of chicken in his mouth, and, while chewing, explained: "I was mentioning to Gary, it really is amazing what those big corporations think they can get away with. But they're going to pay to clean up the river. And hopefully we'll also set a precedent for other cases like this in the future."

"That would be good," she said.

"How about you, hon? Are you doing okay?"

She nodded. "I'm a bit tired. I think the last couple of days are starting to hit me. But I'll just get to bed early tonight."

"Sounds like a smart idea. It would be good for you. Maybe I'll work downstairs on the court case for a while."

"Sure," she said.

Jonah was wrestling with the straps in his seat, and starting to fuss again. He pushed away the spoon each time she put it forward. It was almost his bedtime.

"Hey ho, Jonah," Daniel said. Leaning toward him, he made noises like Donald Duck. Jonah half-smiled for a second, but then kept fidgeting around. Now he started crying.

"Daniel, don't get him worked up. It's late and he's overtired. I think I'm going to bring him upstairs for a bath and put him to bed."

"Okay, okay," Daniel said, in a Donald Duck voice. He smiled at her. She tried to give a smile back, to share the joke with him.

She carried Jonah, still crying now, upstairs. He seemed to be edging across some line, toward meltdown. She could feel herself edging across some line, too, a different one, not toward meltdown, but shutdown. At the top of the stairs, she decided it would be better for Jonah, and for her, if she didn't give him a bath tonight, if they just waited until tomorrow.

She laid him down on the change table to get him into his pajamas. She lifted his shirt over his head, but his head was big for the collar and the shirt got stuck, stretching tight around his head as she tried to pull it up and off. She could hear him

begin to protest under the shirt, but it was already pulled up fairly high—it made no sense to try to work it back down—and like removing a band-air she gave it a jerk. The shirt still didn't quite come off, stubbornly caught under his ears. Finally she gave another quick jerk, yanking the shirt loose.

Jonah let out a scream. He reached up, trying to grab his ears, a bewildered look on his face. Immediately, she felt bad; she picked him up, placed her hand on his bare back, and jiggled him lightly up and down.

"I'm sorry, pumpkin. Mommy's sorry. That hurt, didn't it."

Alternately shrieking and sobbing, he shifted around in her arms, still trying to reach for his ear.

"Okay, pumpkin, okay. I'm sorry."

She walked over with him to the small stereo system beside his crib and, picking up a tape marked "Jonah's sleep tape," inserted it into the slot and pressed play. Running water—which she had recorded in the bathroom one time, after accidentally discovering that the sound quieted him—began to gush lightly in the background. Then she finished undressing him. His skin felt sweaty, clammy, and she almost decided to give him a quick bath. But she told herself that it was okay, that, reasonably, he would be fine with a bath tomorrow. She checked his diaper, to make sure it was still dry and empty, and then pulled on his pajamas, being careful to ease the top down over his head.

Slowly he seemed to be getting distracted by the water sound, by the dimness—she had closed the blinds—and by his own tiredness: he was sniffling to himself now, starting to settle down. She lay him down on his back in his crib, lay his blanket over

him, and cranked his Winnie-the-Pooh mobile. Then she stroked his forehead a few times, smoothing back his curls. She leaned down and kissed his forehead. He seemed to be calmer now.

Before heading downstairs, she passed by the bathroom in their bedroom. It was decorated, toweled and carpeted all in shades of purple, the color she had chosen. The trickling sound of her pee, isolated in the quiet of the bathroom, was almost meditative.

When she went back down to the kitchen, she found Daniel still at the table with this morning's newspaper open in front of him. She told him that she was sorry, that she was really tired and really had a headache, and that she was going to lie in bed and read for a while, and then go to sleep.

"There's an apple crisp on the counter," she said. "It just needs to be heated for six minutes on high in the microwave."

"Okay, hon," Daniel said. "I think there's a bean sac in the freezer, if you want to lie it on your forehead. Do you want me to wrap up the rest of your dinner for you, too?"

"Yes, thanks," she said. "That's a good idea. And I'll grab the bean sac. Thanks. Goodnight."

"Thanks for dinner, hon. It was great. And I'll clean up in here, too, okay?"

Undressing upstairs, she felt heavy, defeated somehow, though at the same time almost too worn down to care. She pulled off her sweater, a cream-colored cashmere. She had folded it and was putting it back up on the shelf in her walk-in closet when she noticed that in taking it off, she had stained beige foundation on the collar.

"Shit."

All at once she wanted to yell, hit, break something.

"Shit, shit, shit."

She tossed the sweater into the dry cleaning basket behind the door. She paced over to the bed, threw back the sheets and sat down on the edge.

She stared down at the carpet, tears forming in her eyes. She tried to calm this frustration that had erupted in her.

She sniffed and wiped her eyes. It was end of the day, she told herself. There was no point in losing it now. She had made it to bed. She just had to lie down, let herself rest. Tomorrow would be a new day.

She stirred. It was dark. Somebody was beside her in the bed, snoring. Daniel.

Jonah was crying.

Her instinct was to get up, to go and see him, but oddly, something weighed her down, as if her bones had turned to lead. She knew she could get up if she really forced herself, but for some reason right now she did not want to fight this heaviness. She almost enjoyed it, the ease of it.

She also didn't believe in responding immediately to a baby's every cry. It wasn't good for the baby. If it hadn't soothed itself or fallen back asleep after five minutes, then, of course, you got up. But she had seen parents who jumped at their children's every whim, and it only seemed to spoil the child, to make it more dependent on you.

She would wait for a while like this, fastened to the bed, eyes closed, listening if the crying continued or stopped.

A sound wedged itself between her and sleep. Jonah again.

Some time had passed, she knew. Whether it was ten minutes or an hour, though, she couldn't be sure. She turned her head on the pillow to glance over at Daniel, a silhouette in the dark. There was no movement from him.

She was sure Jonah hadn't been crying all this time. He had probably fallen back to sleep before, and now woken up again. She felt a tug toward him, and thought that either Daniel or she should get up. If he didn't quiet down on his own soon, she would wake up Daniel.

Her eyes opened. Had she fallen asleep again? How much time had passed?

Her limbs feeling less weighed down than before, she made an effort to untangle herself from the cobwebs of sleep. She lifted her head. Her right forehead was no longer as tight, only throbbing slightly. She propped herself up on her elbow and listened.

Daniel had stopped snoring. And she couldn't hear anything else.

She laid her head back down on the pillow. She must have had at least a few hours of good sleep, because she felt calmer than before, her head relatively clear of thoughts. She sighed, relieved.

Soon she would try to get back to sleep, but she was awake now, and was content for a while to let herself simply lie in the dark, in the silence, with her eyes open, not thinking about anything in particular.

After a few minutes, a memory unexpectedly surfaced. It was something she hadn't thought about in a long time, from way back when she was a girl. It was not one specific memory, but a general one—of her mother talking to her, telling her things. It could have been in the kitchen as they made supper, in the car as her mother drove her to school in the morning on her way to work, or at other times when they happened to be alone together. Her mother had done the same thing again this weekend: the two of them had been taking Jonah for a walk, and her mother had talked almost the entire way about a business trip she had taken to the States a few weeks earlier, adding in some commentary on American versus Canadian politics.

Now, in the clarity of the dark, she remembered back when she was a girl how her mother would confide in her about matters related to Elizabeth's younger sister, who at that age had been strongly rebellious; about matters related to work, especially to colleagues her mother had been having difficulty with; even about matters related to Elizabeth's father and to the struggles in their marriage.

These conversations, during which Elizabeth could not recall having spoken very much, had never really struck Elizabeth as odd, maybe just as showing that she and her mother had a closer relationship than most mothers and daughters. She had appreciated, in a way, these times with her mom, their exclusive intimacy. She had felt good, and important, being able to support her mom, patiently listening to her and letting her talk.

There was something else, though, something even more, that she had felt in those moments. It was difficult to describe... She had felt a physical closeness to her mother. While her mother had been distracted talking, Elizabeth had been able to walk or sit near her, for a much longer amount of time than usual. It was this being physically close to her, she almost hadn't realized until now, that had meant the most to her in those conversations.

This past weekend, though, as she had walked with her mother and listened to her, Elizabeth had been aware of a distance between them, a gap so wide that she wasn't sure now, staring into the dark, if her mother, despite everything she had been telling Elizabeth, had even really been aware of her there.

There was something painful about this distance, she could feel now, a vague ache, hard to locate in herself, as if one of her deep organs had a tear or a bruise. But there was not much point dwelling on it, on any of this: her mother was the way she was, with her wonderful qualities and her difficult ones; she was not about to change. There was no way for Elizabeth to fix this distance: it was like so much air between them, insubstantial yet indisputable. It was something she had to just accept.

She sighed. She rolled over to put her arm around Daniel, lying there for a while. Eventually, to fall asleep again, she turned back over and, hugging one of the extra pillows, closed her eyes.

* * *

Next morning at Trudy's house, Jonah would not let go of Elizabeth. Since waking up, he had been inconsolable, hardly taking any of his breakfast, not interested in his bear or his trucks. Now, with Elizabeth standing in Trudy's foyer, trying to pass him into Trudy's arms, Jonah grabbed at and clung to whatever part of his mother he could: one of the large buttons on her open coat; then, when she loosened his hand from that, the strap of her purse. The whole time sobbing, gasping, as if she were about to disappear off the face of the earth.

Trudy, whom he was normally very happy to see, could not seem to convince him to let go of his mother, either.

"Mommy will be back, don't worry," Trudy said, moving closer, rubbing the back of his head.

Jonah had reached now through the front of her open coat, and was clutching at her blouse, still crying. Suddenly, he cried so hard he choked and coughed. Then vomited.

It wasn't much—he didn't have much in him to bring up—a wet burp, beige-colored spit. But it fell onto the front of her blouse, where it began to dribble down.

"Oh, dear," Trudy said.

"Merde," Elizabeth said, separating the flaps of her coat to look at her white blouse, where there was now a discolored splotch.

Trudy went off and came back with a damp cloth. She bent forward and, gently, wiped at the blouse. After a few rubs, though, the material still looked stained.

"I have some cleaner that will take that right out," Trudy said.

"Okay, thanks," Elizabeth said. "Here, can you take him a moment?"

He screamed—it was odd; he was usually so well behaved—as she tried, and finally managed, to pass him to Trudy. Elizabeth took off her coat, hanging it over a chair in the corner. She unbuttoned and slipped out of her blouse.

Elizabeth took Jonah back into her arms and Trudy brought the blouse to the laundry room. "I won't be more than a few minutes," Trudy said.

Elizabeth laid him on her bare shoulder, placed her hand on his back and very, very lightly bounced up and down with him. She thought about going into Trudy's living room to sit down on the couch with him, but if he threw up again she did not want any to get on the carpet. There was a flight of wooden steps leading upstairs, and she sat down with him on one of the bottoms steps.

"Okay, now. Okay, sweetie. Okay."

Jonah kept crying. He sounded more than just upset: he sounded almost terrified. His eyes were wide, bewildered. A feeling began to creep up on her, as if something were rotten in the pit of her stomach. It felt as if nothing she was doing was making things better, or even could make them better. As if no matter what she did, even if she sat here all day, this would just go on and on.

What did he want from her? She loved her son. What else did he want her to do?

She thought of Trudy, in the next room, hearing all this. She thought of the ER, and how she was probably going to hit traffic and be late.

Trudy walked back in now, holding out Elizabeth's blouse. "It's still a little wet, but it's clean. It should dry by the time you get to the hospital."

"Thanks, Trudy." She had the impulse to stand up and pass Jonah over to her, so that she could put on her blouse and get ready to leave, but she held back, sensing that that would make him even more upset, and the situation here deteriorate even further. Staying with him on the steps, trying to figure out what might calm him down a bit, she held him closer to her chest, and put her hand on the back of his head, and rocked lightly from side to side.

She looked up at Trudy. "I'll just sit here with him a few more minutes. Until he settles down."

"Oh ho! She's late! What's happening here? Watch out! The sky is falling!"

Bea was just stepping out of the back office, carrying a big binder under her arm, as she hurried down the corridor.

Often when Elizabeth least expected it, Bea could come out and switch her usual flattery for her prodigy with a teasing shot.

"Oh ho! The sky is falling!"

She stopped in front of Bea, and, as best she could manage, smiled.

"Jonah was fussing quite a bit this morning, and I hit traffic. Have there been any referrals yet?"

"I think you have two waiting for you," Bea said. "The nurse is just seeing them now, though, so don't worry. Go in, take a breath, get settled. There's some fresh coffee in the pot, too. I'll be upstairs if you need me. And later we can talk about the project, how we want to move forward with it."

Elizabeth closed her office door behind her, put down her briefcase, and stood there for a minute without taking off her coat.

Everyone was abandoning her, left and right. Even Bea now.

A moistness under her eyes.

Stop, she told herself.

Stop. Stop.

What had just happened with Bea was not really anything. It had just been a small joke. Bea still trusted her, still had confidence in her.

She was tired. She had had a challenging few days, a challenging morning so far. But the rotten feeling in her stomach was gradually disappearing. She just had to move forward now, to focus on those things that she could affect and change.

She already had some ideas for the project, and as she hooked her coat on the door she began to go over these in her head. She took her folders and books out of her briefcase, neatly arranging them on the back corner of the desk, beside the pot with her African violet.

She sometimes had the thought—a silly but harmless, and fun thought, it seemed to her—that her flowers smiled at her. Especially her pansies in the summer, who almost seemed to have eyes and mouths, faces. She couldn't quite feel now, though, whether the violet here on the desk was smiling at her, or how it felt toward her. At the moment it just sat there, not seeming really to express anything.

She thought of her garden: this weekend, she promised herself, no matter what else was happening, she would finally cut back her perennials and plant her bulbs.

*

At the desk in the office, a mug of coffee steaming beside her, she looked over the first referral, whose chart the nurse had just brought in. The chart for this patient was fairly thick; the patient must have been through the ER many times.

She looked at the assessment sheet, clipped, as usual, to the front of the chart. The name on the sheet jumped out at her. *Sampson, Shawn.*

Shawn, as the staff here had started calling him, was definitely a regular visitor, who showed up or was brought in every couple of months or so, if not more often. By his chart he was 42, though looking at him his age was hard to discern. He was a big, burly, heavily bearded man, usually dirty, with a strong, unpleasant smell, and dressed in layers of tattered clothes. The kind of patient you would feel sorry for, if he weren't so totally uncooperative, manipulative, confrontational and aggressive.

This was not the best way to start the morning. But she had handled him before. She could manage it.

She took a drink of coffee, then quickly looked over the second referral, to make sure it was not an absolute emergency. It seemed as if it could wait half an hour, so she got up and went down the hall to see what, if anything, she could do with Shawn.

The hub of the ER was an intersection of undirected traffic, people crossing this way and that. A medical attending going in the other direction strode past her, his expression preoccupied. She continued walking around to an examination room in a corner of the ER—a room that deliberately had no sharp or breakable equipment in it.

She knocked on the door. She couldn't hear any sound coming from inside. She waited a moment. Knocked again.

She was not scared, or even nervous; she was just being careful not to do anything too sudden. She didn't want to set him off—once he got started, the assessment ended quickly. Turning the handle, she slowly pushed the door open, not yet stepping in.

He was standing on the other side of the room, a huge, bearded barrel of a man. His pants were off. He still wore his layers of shirts and jackets, but no pants. No shoes, no socks, either. He had taken them all off, leaving them trailing on the ground. Just baggy, dirty white briefs covered him. His legs were grotesquely hairy.

He looked up at her. It was always difficult to read his expression, because of all his facial hair, but something in his stare, in his small, almost hidden eyes, seemed directed right at her. He reached into the front of his underwear. Her heart skipped.

His expression twisted into a smirk. He kept reaching down, right into the bottom of his underwear. He dug out his hand. A handful of shit.

Still smirking at her—in a way that would be difficult to forget—he held out his hand and rubbed the shit with his thumb. Slowly, as if caressing it.

It all seemed to happen in an instant. For a second she didn't move. Then, coming back to herself, she turned, went out of the room and shut the door. She turned the outside lock. She got on the phone and called a Code White. Within a minute, five large men dressed in aqua-green scrubs hurried into the ER.

She had a patient who was going upstairs, she explained. But he probably would not be cooperative. He was large, and also he had soiled himself.

Standing outside as the men went in, she heard Shawn talking loudly, then suddenly yelling, then outright screaming: two of them must have grabbed hold of his

arms, as another one landed the needle in his thigh. She heard a huge crash, as if Shawn had knocked the gurney in there right over on its side. There were coordinated instructions shouted between the men, and then a scuffling and wrestling. Shawn hurling profanities the whole time.

She pressed her forehead as she closed the office door. She sat down at her desk.

She had seen that kind of behavior before. It was something that certain patients did. You ignored it mostly, as best you could, looked around or aside from it. It was just sick, crazy, a result of a circuit gone loose in the mind. That was it, nothing more. You didn't pay attention to it—only to what needed to be done about it. A surgeon doesn't focus on the sudden jet of blood—he focuses on the solution, on the cut artery that needs to be tied.

As she had stood there in the doorway, his eyes, small and penetrating, had reached right into her. An assumption in his eyes: that she belonged to him in some way. That he had a right to make her watch.

She had hardly been aware of him getting to her. Now, though, pulling the next patient's chart across the desk, she could feel what had just happened holding onto her thoughts, even as she tried to shift them forward onto something else. She tried to read the assessment sheet on the top of the next chart, but the memory of him—of his eyes, of the way he had fondled that shit in his hand—kept playing in her mind, refusing to let go.

She stood up and went over to pour herself another cup of coffee.

It made no sense to keep thinking about what had happened. She had seen patients do this kind of thing dozens and dozens of times. He was a mentally ill man who hadn't known what he was doing.

She took a drink of coffee. A root of irritation was beginning to work its way into her, at her not being able to let go of him, at him not letting go of her. A wetness came into her eyes again. She did not want to be irritated. Not now. It was already too much.

She wiped her hands under her eyes, not wanting any redness to form. She told herself to just keep going, and the image of him would fade eventually.

She opened the examination room door to find a man and a woman sitting together. They looked in their mid-fifties or so; according to her chart the woman was fifty-four. She was wearing a well-coordinated tweed skirt and tweed jacket, and her blond bangs were cut neatly across her forehead. But she seemed severely annoyed, biting the corner of her lip and holding her hands clenched in fists on her knees. Her husband sat turned toward her, resting a hand on hers. He breathed out with relief and, rubbing his hand over him trim grey hair, looked up thankfully as Elizabeth walked in.

"Hi," he said, half standing up and extending his free hand. "I'm Victoria's husband, Colin Sawyer."

Elizabeth shook his hand. "I'm Dr. Laidlaw, the psychiatrist on duty today."

"I'm fine," the woman said.

In her chart, there was a record of this woman having been admitted three times to the ward in the past seven years, once for depression and the last two times for manic episodes. Her episodes were usually related either to her stopping her medication, or to stress, or both. This time apparently, about six weeks ago, she had stopped taking her Lithium again, with paranoid symptoms reappearing a couple of weeks later.

Elizabeth sat down, laying the chart on her lap, assessment sheet on top, and took out her pen. "Hi, Mrs. Sawyer. I'm Dr. Laidlaw."

Face clenched, the woman glanced only very quickly at Elizabeth, as if she could barely contain her irritation as it was, without also having to talk to this doctor.

Elizabeth looked at the husband. "As well as stopping her medication, has she also been under stress lately?"

"For God's sake, are we really going to go into all this?" Mrs. Sawyer cut in, still nervously averting her eyes. "I know I shouldn't have stopped my medication, okay? I know that was silly. I'll get started on it again. I just need to go home. I'll be better if I'm in my own house."

"Can I—" the husband said to Elizabeth. "Can I have a word with you outside for a few minutes? Would that be okay, Vicky? It will just be for ten minutes. I can bring you back a tea if you like."

"Whatever, fine," the woman said. "But I'll take my medication again. I'll take it on my own. You don't have to keep me here."

*

The husband explained: with the help of his wife's regular psychiatrist, they had already been trying, for the past month, to encourage her to re-start her medication. In his office, she would vow to take it, but then back at home she would refuse. She didn't want to need it. She wanted to be able to be fine without it. He couldn't put any pressure on her to take it, either, or she would start thinking he was trying to poison her.

Elizabeth was standing with the husband down a short, blind corridor near the examination room. A gurney with a patient lying on it was wheeled past.

Her work had also been a strain recently, he said. She was a design consultant, for art galleries—last year she helped set up the Janet Cardiff exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art. This year she was doing the Frida Kahlo display at the Musée des Beaux Arts. There was one upper-level woman at the Musée, though, who really didn't get along with Vicky for some reason, and this woman had been stone-walling almost all her ideas and suggestions, so that Vicky had almost no influence. After a while, when this kept going on and on, it began to eat at her, and she started to get odd ideas.

Pausing, he looked off to the side, not seeming to want to say anything else, as if it were a betrayal of his wife. But he sighed and collected himself.

These ideas, he said, were hard to explain. Vicky thought that this woman at the Musée was... was trying to get something into her, some kind of micro computer-chip, which would be able to literally control her, make her do this woman's bidding. She thought this woman was trying to get it into her through her food, and was even worried that this woman might come into their house at night, and try to surgically implant it while she slept.

The husband rubbed his hand across his forehead,. Then he took a deep breath, in and out, and looked soberly at Elizabeth, waiting to hear what might be done.

It was pretty clear to Elizabeth what needed to be done. "The good news," she said, "is that your wife responds well to her medication. Right? That's a big positive. So the first thing is to get her back on it. Then the next thing is to find a way to keep her on it."

All that was probably more likely to happen on the ward, she said. Especially considering his wife seemed to be having paranoid psychotic symptoms.

The man blew out hard. He shook his head. "Vicky is going to hate that. She does not want to stay here."

"I know," she said. "Most patients don't. But it will help her, and I can't really see sending her home like this. You've both already tried at home and it hasn't worked."

"I know," he said. "She just hates it up there. She says everyone is crazy there. And she complains that it's all grey, no paintings or pictures or anything, that it's like being in jail. A tomb, she also calls it. She also doesn't want anyone to know that she had to be admitted to hospital." He shook his head again, almost disbelievingly. "This is going to kill her."

As he talked, a feeling welled, very slightly, inside Elizabeth: an appreciation for this man's concern for his wife. Then she felt something else, too, something foreign to her: a question, even a hesitation about sending this man's wife up to the ward, as if it were wrong in some way to force this woman to go there. This made no sense, though; she knew it was the best, the only place for her.

*

"I know I stopped taking my medication! I know! I said that already! If you want me to take it, just give it to me now. I'll prove it to you. I'll take it right now."

"Mrs. Sawyer, I understand that you don't want to be admitted. Unfortunately, it's not just a matter of taking your medications. It's a matter of staying on them."

"Okay. I hear that. I'm sorry. I'm just getting frustrated. You're a woman of the book. So am I. The book says you are supposed to hospitalize me. You don't think I'll take my medication on my own. But I've done this before. This doesn't work. I need to go home. I need to be in my own house."

"Mrs. Sawyer, I'm sorry this is upsetting you so much. We just want to help you."

"I don't need your help!" she said, grabbing her husband, who was sitting beside her again. She gripped his hand. "I have my husband. We're a team. We'll get through this together!"

"Mrs. Sawyer—"

"How do you expect me to get better up there? The walls are grey. There's nothing there. Everyone there is crazy. They talk to themselves. They shout. They shit themselves. It's like a kindergarten. A million kids running wild, no one watching them. I can never talk to a nurse or a doctor when I want to. They're always busy. I can't go anywhere."

"Mrs. Sawyer—"

"You can't send me up there. I need to go back to my house!"

Seeming to realize she was betraying herself, the woman clenched her jaw, inhaled sharply through her nose, and tried to hold herself together. For the first time, she turned to Elizabeth directly, looking at her with pale green eyes.

"I'm not crazy," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "Please don't send me up there. I'll be safest at home."

"What do you mean by safest?" Elizabeth asked.

The woman bit her lip again, even harder, and looked down, away. Something about her reminded Elizabeth of a trapped animal, bewildered and overwhelmed by its defeat, by knowing the cage door, the only way out, has shut behind it.

Starting to feel claustrophobic, and hearing the echo of beeping and talking outside, Elizabeth went to the door. "I'm going leave you and your husband some time here together now. I'll be back soon. In the meantime, I'll send in the nurse. If you want, I can ask her to give you something to help you feel calmer."

Sitting at the desk, Elizabeth filled out the form for Mrs. Sawyer's transfer. On her way back to the office, the nurse had caught her to tell her that there were two new referrals. The nurse would be bringing their charts in soon.

Yesterday's migraine was inching its way back now. Also, a weariness, a heaviness seemed to be taking hold of her again, in her legs and arms, even in her chest.

She glanced at the clock in the bottom corner of the computer screen. It was 11:19 am.

For some reason, she wanted to call Bea. Why? To talk about case? No. The case, and the decision to send this woman upstairs, was straightforward.

Something about this woman was dragging on Elizabeth, though. She kept picturing her, with her tweed-outfit and straight bangs and green eyes, stuck on the ward, locked in a place she hated, that she only wanted to get away from.

Had Elizabeth ever thought before what it would be like actually to stay there, to live there? She started to imagine it now. The sense of it rose up inside her, came over her: she was standing in the ward, not on the side where the doctors and nurses worked but on the side where the patients stayed. Around her, the other patients were walking around talking to themselves or to the walls or to the air, or sitting depressed, or shouting, or shitting and smearing it on the walls, or throwing things. She was wearing a blue hospital gown. She even had wild ideas of her own, flying around inside her own head.

The transfer form for Mrs. Sawyer was filled out now, except for Elizabeth's signature. Elizabeth put down the pen. She didn't want to sign her name on this. What did she want? To go home? To be working in her garden? Maybe just to stay sitting here. To stop for a while, do nothing.

She looked down at the transfer form. This was the only option for this woman. It was a good option for her. Elizabeth had seen many people get better up there. But for some reason this woman's protests clung to her, making her think there had to be some other way, some other place.

She looked at the phone. It would not be reasonable to pick it up. But with an urgency she couldn't comprehend, she wanted to call Bea.

*

On her way to see the next patient, she went by the room where Mrs. Sawyer was sitting with her husband. She did not go in, but stood in the doorway. Mrs. Sawyer was not agitated anymore, but sat in a slackened, defeated posture, absenting herself from what was happening around her and to her.

"Everything's ready to go," Elizabeth said quietly. "An orderly should be in soon to bring her upstairs."

"Okay," Mr. Sawyer said. In his expression he seemed overwhelmed, tired, dejected, but he also seemed to be forcing himself to be stoic. "Thanks for your help. We appreciate it."

"Do you have any questions?"

"No." Looking back at his wife seated in her chair, he breathed out heavily. "No. We've been through all this before."

PLAY

NIGHT, out here on the balcony of an apartment building. A high balcony, a tall building. The night air neither cool nor warm, as if all weather has been cancelled, or displaced somewhere else.

Just loosely holding onto the metal railing, a man stands gazing up toward the night sky. His smile boyishly hopeful, his eyes entranced.

At the edge of his smile, though, is a quiver of uncertainty. An anxiety that whatever he is fixed on, whatever is dancing high out there, could vanish on him.

This is a man I have known my entire life, this expression on his face almost as familiar as my own in the mirror. But here he is different from how I have always known him. We are decades earlier, and he is still a young man, not yet thirty. His trim

hair is black and his face is defined by strong, even handsome lines, sort of the way he looks in his medical school graduation picture.

I observe his expression closely. For the first time in a while, for the first time maybe in his life, his future looks promising to him; the circumstances he was subject to growing up can now, possibly, be reversed. In a few months he will be graduating from medical school, at McGill here in Montreal, to begin his residency as a pediatrician, and already he can imagine thousands upon thousands of children, saved by him, grateful to him, in love with him. All once sick but now set sparkling again by him, like the stars overhead.

I am not yet a thought in his mind. It will be still another year before he meets my mother.

He looks so completely mesmerized—all the trailing strings of his heart pulled taut—that it seems he will always be held like this, the rest of his life.

Of the city that lies far below, he seems unaware, as if it were a forgotten memory.

* * *

It was dark by the time I walked into my apartment, so dark you couldn't see the walls or the floor of my front entrance. I let my bags, for school and for swimming, collapse to the floor. It was mid-February, 1997. I was twenty-one.

I still had the write-up to do of the patient assessment this afternoon. It was not due tomorrow, though; it could wait. For the rest of tonight, I decided without thinking

about it, I was no longer a medical student. I no longer even had to be "myself," at least not as people knew me.

Taking off my hat and gloves, shedding my coat, I felt a smile creep across my face, and also a quiet sense of triumph, as if, in getting back here, back into this blind dark in my own apartment, I had outwitted and eluded a gang of thugs with knives. No one could get at me now. I was under the radar in here, perfectly hidden.

Along with this feeling of success, though, came a note of warning, faint but unmistakable as a distant ambulance siren, except it was coming from inside me: I had to face the fact that these escapes from my life out there were getting harder to pull off; that my life out there was feeling less and less like mine, and seemed to be only bulking up in its difficulties and demands. Medical school, which I still wasn't really feeling connected to, was becoming busier and more serious—I was in the middle of my second year, at McGill, and we had just started doing these practice assessments on actual patients. My parents were still in the middle of their divorce. I was feeling more and more uncertain, and even slightly worried, about where my life in general was going.

So far, I was still managing to make these little escapes from the world, as with this one tonight, which gave me a chance, for a while, to be myself again—whatever that was, I wasn't sure; even at the hospital, on short breaks, I would try to find some corner where I could to open up whatever novel I was reading at the time, which I kept with me throughout the day, stashed in the pocket of my white coat.

I toed off my boots, trying not to step in the slush I imagined must be accumulating somewhere around my feet. I was secure for tonight. I had to be careful, though.

Leaving the wall switch off, leaving everything, including myself, in this welcome anonymity, I walked around to the kitchen, through the living room; I found it amusing for some reason to be deliberately doing all this in the dark, as if I were going against some conventional wisdom that says you are supposed to turn on a light. But the dark in here, I noticed now, had a depth and stillness to it, as if you were at the bottom of the ocean. You blurred with the dark. You could be anyone in here. You were not defined yet, a totipotent stem cell—the earliest embryonic cell, which has not yet started to "differentiate," which is still as potent as the first grain of energy that preceded the Big Bang, still able to become any kind of cell in the body.

I noticed something else now, too: after a swim tonight with the Masters team at McGill, my head was washed clear, empty of ideas, thoughts and words. All together, it seemed a state of being I needed to treat delicately, since I seemed to be finding it less and less often; a state of being that, like the dark, I had to try to leave undisturbed.

Unable to see what I was doing but familiar enough with where everything was in my small, narrow kitchen, I microwaved a quick supper and carried an almost burning plate out to the table, which was in a small alcove beside the living room. In the ceiling above the alcove was a single bulb, which now seemed okay to flick on. The unpainted walls in the alcove went bone-white. The brightness spread as far as the edge of the table, then abruptly fell off, as where a beach shelf drops away into ocean dark.

Propping myself up on the table by my elbows, I ate slowly, attentive to the hotness of each mouthful, to the way the heat spread into my body as it went down, that tangible sensation an anchor, grounding me again. Everywhere around, the living room remained as dark as the night outside, the couch and other furniture continuing to lie there in unseen slumber, like hibernating bears.

I wasn't paying attention to it right then, but a book lay closed beside me, on the corner of the table. It had a dully shiny black cover, as worn as an old vinyl record. It was an old diary of my dad's, apparently from when he himself had been in medical school.

My youngest sister, Ella, had found it while clearing out a low dusty bookshelf in the basement. She had been helping my mom pack up the house, which was being sold in the ongoing divorce. That my dad had even kept a diary was news to me, though according to my mom it had been sitting down there on the shelf for the past twenty years

Since picking it up from Ella yesterday, I had been waiting for a chance to look through it. It seemed a way to get a more palpable sense of my dad, of the actual man, which was something I had always found difficult—there seemed to be all these insubstantial, cloud-like layers in front of him, making it hard to reach him: there was his image of himself to get through; the image he seemed to want you to have of him; my mom's less sympathetic image of him; and my image of him, which was muddled by my own biases as his son.

There was another layer to sort through—my dad's confusion regarding me, his own difficult in distinguishing who I was separate from him—which I can probably best explain with an example: when I applied to medical school, I had to write an autobiographical letter. I remember one afternoon him emerging from his office downstairs with a rough draft of my letter in his hand. Without my knowing, he had already started my letter, written three pages of it—all in "my" voice, in the first person. He seemed excited about what he had written, because, as he told me, he thought it would present me in the best light to the admissions committee.

Later, when I actually sat down to write the letter myself, I became bogged down for a while, unable to completely tease out what I wanted to say from what he had written. (In the draft I finally sent to McGill, the introduction to my letter remained his.)

But this diary predated my existence, so it *couldn't* have anything to do with me; I couldn't be mixed up in it in any way. It had to be about him. It was sort of like an archeological artifact that had been unearthed, unaltered, from under all those layers. A clue, evidence of another, personal side to my dad, independent of me or our family.

I don't know why, but I found it funny, in a rueful way, that my dad seemed so unaware of or uninterested in this side of himself, in his own diary. When Ella had called him at his apartment and told him she'd found it, he hadn't seemed to mind what we did with it, whether we read it or not. This was not surprising, though: in his past and in himself did not generally seem to be where he wanted to spend a lot of time trying to look. Especially not now, with my mom's decision to get a divorce: his sense

of himself, as a husband and a father and a man, had been shaken, and he seemed to be preoccupied with holding that sense together, not with excavating it.

As I nudged away my empty plate, I noticed that the white light in the alcove felt clear and empty, a blank page: nothing started yet, no direction to anything yet, things free to develop, or not, in whatever way they wanted to, space for things to happen but no obligation. And I could stay here as long as I wanted tonight; there was no rush or need to do anything else. This sense of freedom here in this corner alcove was both reassuring and emboldening.

I glanced now at my dad's diary on the corner of the table. This seemed as good an opportunity as any to flip through it. With an almost deliberate casualness, consciously enjoying moving at my own pace, I pulled it over, opened it.

One thing I noticed right away was the handwriting: it was legible. My younger siblings and I often made fun of my dad's handwriting, which looked like a stereotypical doctor's "chicken scratches". But the handwriting here seemed to show a care or attention to what was being done, and I felt, unexpectedly, both relieved and happy at this. It seemed a sign that a more composed, together man had existed at one point, and possibly still existed somewhere in him.

The dates, which he had written in at the tops of the pages, were all in late 1968 or early 1969; that meant, I calculated, that he had been twenty-seven, and in his last year of medical school, a couple of years ahead of where I was now in the process.

The entries themselves tended to be brief, at most a page, usually less. And, to my surprise, they contained a deep, sincere wistfulness. A real wish that he or his circumstances could be different, yet an uncertainty whether they actually ever could be.

> *...Shabbat is a wonderful thing. I wish I had the belief in God so that I would celebrate it properly...*
>
> *...There was something free and pure about the movie which appealed to me...*
>
> *...She is a loving mother, and does so much work for the community, but I sometimes get tired of her complaints about everyone...*

I already knew some of the general details of my dad's youth: his own parents had divorced when he was five. His mother had been so angry at his father that she had cut his face out of every family photograph, except one, which my dad only found after his mother died. His father, my Zeida, although a figure in our lives now, had been more of an absence than a presence when my dad was a boy. My dad had been poor, had watched other kids go to movies, to theme parks, on trips, and later drive around in their own cars, all things he couldn't afford, and that he would make sure his own children were never deprived of.

He had learned how to make a buck. He had drifted away from Judaism, although he still retained a sentimental attachment to it, like a boat attached to shore by a mile-long tether. In his own words, he had been "afraid of hurting women," and had not been as bold as he had wanted on the dating scene.

There were brighter details, too, particularly related to his friendships; overall, though, I had the impression that his youth hadn't been very happy. In fact maybe that

was the main reason why he wasn't interested in his diary: it wasn't really a time in his life that he wanted to remember.

April 21st, 1969. It was toward the back of the diary, just a month or so before he graduated and started his pediatrics residency. A slightly longer entry:

> *I just got home from a lecture this evening. It was at McGill, and was given by Dr. Rubenstein, a McGill graduate who has been working for the past twenty years in Africa to try to eradicate polio in children.*
>
> *Dr. Rubenstein is highly respected in the field, but I also found him a gentle, kind man. A real mensch. He has changed the lives of so many children who otherwise might have died, or suffered for their entire lives with this crippling disease.*
>
> *It was a funny thing to do, but when I was walking home I stopped on the grass of the field just below the hospital and looked up. The field was dark, so you could sort of see the stars overhead. I felt almost as if I were being lifted.*

Reading these last few lines was a jolt—I almost felt as if my chest had been shocked with defibrillation paddles, the way you see doctors do to patients on TV—and as I was jolted something else happened: I became my father. I didn't know how it happened or where it was coming from, but I could feel it: I was him, staring up longingly and hopefully at the sky, on that night almost thirty years earlier.

In the corner of my apartment, I suddenly saw what he saw, thousands of lights: fireworks that explode and then glitter against the dark; thousands of fireflies erupting out of nowhere; thousands of jealous fairies fighting, sparking for my attention; thousands of pieces of a shattered sun bouncing around on dark choppy waves. My ears were filled with silence, yet these lights almost seemed to be calling to me, saying something to me. I had saved them. Made them all healthy, happy. They loved me for it.

Everything my dad was seeing and feeling, I could see and feel, his sensations running up and down my nerves, palpable in my body. At the same time, I was still myself, completely conscious of where I was and what was happening.

Whatever was happening felt playful, maybe like what an actor feels when he or she is "in character," and I wanted to keep it going as long as I could, to inhabit my father or have him inhabit me, whichever it was, as fully as possible. To approximate our circumstances more closely, I carefully pushed back my chair, stood up, and walked out of the alcove, into the dark of the living room. Past the barely visible couch. Toward the sliding glass door on the far wall: I lived on the sixth floor, and had a balcony that looked out over the city. I had the idea to step out onto the balcony, to join my dad outside, in the actual night air, gazing up at the actual night sky.

The glass of the door was cold, though, and I remembered it was not spring here, as it was for my dad, but the middle of winter. I paused. This distraction, this barrier between him and me, between then and now, was annoying, but I didn't want to be thrown off by it; I knew I had to decide what to do, calmly but quickly—I could already feel the connection faltering.

I almost went outside; I thought maybe I could ignore the cold. But then I decided that it was too freezing out, that being cold could become too much of a distraction. I would have to be as close to my dad as I could from in here.

It was not ideal, but it was something, and, accepting as much as possible this limitation on the experience, I stood and stared, through his eyes, up out at these mesmerizing lights, letting this overlap between the two of us play itself out, until I had gotten the feeling of it.

* * *

I didn't think of this experience of overlap, or whatever it might be called, as bizarre, just as kids playing make-believe don't think they're being odd. In fact it felt like one of the few plugged-in, energized experiences in the past several months. When it was done, I felt calmed and refreshed.

It still seemed smarter, safer, though, not to try to tell anyone about it, to let the experience find its place in me, privately. I didn't want it to be interfered with or cheapened for being told. And I didn't doubt that it would stay safe and intact inside me.

Recently, though, almost nine years later, I started to feel as though the experience were becoming buried in me, lost. I became anxious that I could lose my sense of it completely, that it could become as if it had never happened.

Is there a compromise in telling anything? It's hard, I find, to tell it quite right, to know what to include and what to leave out, what a reader will understand and what needs to be explained. I can already see that the telling here is limited by, among other things, my novice carpentry skills with words, intrusions of ego, and a lack of complete faith and trust in the very act of telling, though with each revised and re-revised draft, I try to work out these kinks.

I know that this story only approximates what I really experienced. It feels in fact as if the story is not, and can't be, the experience or the memory itself, but is and strives to be something else: a structure of some kind that helps hold and protect the

experience or the memory—without holding or protecting it too tightly, though. A house, as Alice Munro describes it, instead of a fortress. Or maybe a boat, something that helps carry the experience or the memory, that helps keep it aloft, float. Or maybe a basket or a hand-bag, as Ursula K. Leguin describes it, something so you can carry the experience, the memory with you.

Around the same time my dad's diary was found, I broke up with a girlfriend of a few months—things had not been clicking—and a few weeks later I became focused on a girl on the Masters swim team. We were about the same age, and had been on the team together for a year and a half, swimming in the same lane. I had loved her, in one sense of the word, from the beginning. I couldn't help but glimpse her underwater as we swam up and down past each other, and I was often overcome, almost hijacked by fantasies of us sleeping together and of crossing all the thresholds that would lead up that ecstatic moment, as I believed the moment would be.

As with most of the girls in my life that I had loved this way—there had been at least a dozen or two, from elementary school onward—we didn't have many clear points of overlap, were not obviously similar or even complementary to each other. My focus didn't seem to be on friendship, though, but on something closer to blissful union.

In the past, with these women who seemed to have this gravitational pull on me, I had never known how to really act with them, how to get from A to B to C on down. I certainly didn't know how to "be myself"; I couldn't even conceive of what that might mean: around these women any kind of calmness or spontaneity began running around

inside me fast as a scared cat, trying to get away to some kind of safety, and I would unthinkingly start projecting another "self"—one that was sensitive, caring, selfless, moral, worldly, wise, etc., anything but overwhelmed with desire. I convinced myself, for the most part, that I was being sincere, and maybe in some ways I was. But fundamentally, somewhere in my unconscious, I sense I was also trying to devise a way of making myself appealing to these women, of somehow tying them to me.

For the male to get the female to look at him and think "sex" seems a basic skill of the Animal Kingdom, as basic, as instinctual as a male cardinal showing off his red. My knee-jerk, fall-back approach of acting? being? sensitive, though, didn't seem to be working; with these women; in fact, it seemed to work almost like an anti-pheromone, a bad cologne. Yet I didn't know what else to do.

With this woman on my swim team, though, what I didn't want to do, what I was determined not to do, was repeat my past mistakes. Especially since she had mentioned, when I had asked her about it, a tentative, hesitant, possible interest in us dating. Around her, I concentrated on acting differently. I tried to be relaxed, laid-back; I strained to not become discombobulated and incoherent, to say just reasonable, unportentous, unpretentious, everyday things.

We got as far as phone conversations and a few, sporadic, platonic dates spread over a few months. I tried not to push anything, but I didn't sense her coming toward me, either. I still thought I could still see a glimmer of possible interest coming from her, and in that glimmer I kept investing more and more of myself, like someone selling off their assets to buy into a promising stock.

Just before the summer—inside, I was getting close to a bankruptcy sale by that point—it ended, before we had so much as held hands or kissed. This kind of ending, before anything had started, had happened before, and in the past I would feel let down, heavy-hearted, but would also eventually start to build myself back up. This time, though, as it hit me that nothing was going to take place between us, there was a different reaction in me: the bottom dropped out, and I suddenly felt angry—at her, at myself, at all this air around me. This reaction felt odd and completely unexpected. It was as if I were Wile E. Coyote, and had been madly pursuing the Road Runner, but then had accidentally run off the edge of the cliff, and now found myself with miles of nothing below me.

Disoriented by this reaction, which seemed too extreme for the situation, I quickly told myself that this didn't make sense: one woman, no matter how strong my desire, should not be able to cause this kind of a reaction in me. I should be able to let it go, move on.

It was mid-June, and my second year of med school was practically done. All I had left was a one-month elective, and I had arranged it in rural family medicine in Northern Ontario, close to my grandparents' cottage—my mom's parents—where I had been going every summer since I was born. The usual rule for staying at the cottage was a maximum of one week, and only if my grandparents were also there, but this summer my grandparents had agreed to let me stay there the month, with the place to myself, a rare and one-time concession, because it was for my studies.

There was no other place I would have rather had to myself for a month. I felt as comfortable there and as attached to every aspect of the place as I had with my house growing up. There was a particular kind of solitude you could find there: not an entrenched, defended solitude, but an open one. Especially if you were alone there—you could follow your own rhythms, doing things, or not, as the mood persuaded you, without worrying about what anyone else might think or how they might react. You could bring out the tangled up parts of yourself and try to tease out all the different threads, figure out how they linked together. In the background as you did all this: the lake, with its border of forested hills, over which the sun rose and set, sending a bright, speckled track of light running along the water from one end in the morning and a softer, smoother track spilling along from the other in the evening. Also the enormous, gradual slope of Precambrian rock—a brontosaurus' back, randomly bedded and patched with moss—that slanted up from the lake and that the cottage itself was built on, up at the top, half-hidden among tall jack pines, white and red pines, aspen, birch and spruce.

The cottage was older than I was, having been built by my grandfather, as well as by my uncle, when my mom was still a teenager.

To my relief, my elective that month also turned out to be quite light: the doctor I had been paired with was an Iron Man Triathlete who took off lots of time to train, a entire day plus a couple of half-days each week; even on the rare full day of work I was done by 4 or 5 pm. In good conscience, he offered to have me make up the lost, or gained, time with one of his colleagues, but I politely said no thanks, and, luckily, he smiled and nodded with a tacit understanding about why I was really up here.

I could not have asked for better circumstances. And I had always taken it for granted that things would gradually settle back into their proper proportion and perspective when I was up here. So it was disorienting to find myself, after a few days here, still unable to really calm down. Since a week earlier, when things hadn't worked out with the woman on my team, I still hadn't been able to talk myself out of the disturbingly, almost terrifyingly tangible feeling that the ground had disappeared under me, and out of my anger that this had happened.

I knew this reaction made no sense, and I tried to do what I always did up here: I went for swims; I sat at the base of the rock, looking out onto the lake; I read, or tried to. Yet bizarrely, my connection to the cottage, taken for granted up until then, began to feel more and more tenuous. A growing panic and frustration in me was refusing to let me touch the equanimity of the place, as if relaxing, letting go for even a moment, would send me into a free-fall, an endless drop.

The frustration in me, like a wolf on a leash, kept pulling me back to the girl, who shortly after things didn't work out began dating another guy. It was ridiculous, I knew, irrational, juvenile, not to mention completely overblown, but some part of me felt, with dead seriousness, dramatic as it sounds, that, in losing her, I had really lost my last chance at happiness with a woman, which felt like the basis for any other happiness. When I wouldn't give in to this feeling, though, when I kept trying to forget about her and just be here up at the cottage, this wolf in me, which seemed almost to have a life of its own, grew frustrated with me. I could feel it trying to get loose inside me, to break free of my restraint of it. It had almost had it with me. So much in my life wasn't there and wasn't happening; hadn't been there and hadn't happened.

Unbelievably, I could even feel it starting to turn on me, to want to get me out of the way and take matters into its own paws, jaws.

I began to get a little nervous. I could feel, more and more palpably, that there was nothing metaphorical about this wolf-like frustration, or about the harm it could do to me, if I didn't somehow manage to calm it down.

I got out my diary, determined to talk myself through all this rationally.

First of all, I wrote, all this could not be caused by this one girl, who I mostly, I had to admit, just overwhelmingly wanted to fondle and sleep with. I didn't know what it was about this desire that could shake me loose at my roots, but if it could have this effect, then there had to be something unsturdy in my roots to begin with, something this one experience, or non-experience with her had only exposed. It went deeper than what was just happening now.

Secondly, the real problem, I told myself, was not that I hadn't "got" her, but that I had tried to "get" her at all. Besides the fact that I was completely objectifying her, which I openly admitted to myself, but didn't really know what to do about at the moment—it *was* her body that I wanted, that I felt I needed—I had also been selling myself off, piece by piece, in trying to be with her. I hadn't been natural, hadn't just let things happen or not, in whatever way they would. I had tried to be relaxed, to be fun with her, but somehow I had still been holding back inside, trying to control how she felt toward me. I couldn't try to control these women, though, in any way; I had to let

what I desired either come to me or drift away, freely, in whatever way it was inclined to. And most of all, I had to be myself.

I still didn't really know what being myself meant. But I pointed out to myself that I had a relatively open summer ahead of me, in some of my favorite places—after the cottage, I was going to Stratford, Ontario for ten days, for their theatre festival. So there was no rush. I could discover what "myself" was slowly. The important thing was to keeping listening, and to keep loving what I loved—swimming in the lake; orange juice in the morning; reading on the porch; I was almost finished *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, by John Irving—and following these small experiences, one at a time, one after another, wherever they lead.

In addition to this methodical laying out of the facts of the situation, I brought out other artillery: the previous summer, on a solo bike trip through Ireland, I had come across, of all things, a Buddhist monastery, and had begun reading about Buddhist philosophy, including theories of non-attachment. At the cottage now, I dug further into *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, by Sogyal Rinpoche, holding onto the ideas as if to ropes, madly trying to be Zen about everything that was happening. I threw myself into other books, too: *Struggle for Intimacy*, by Janet G. Woititz; *To Have or to Be*, by Erich Fromm—I had read Fromm's book before, several times, but thought I could use another go at it.

The best I could achieve, though, through my most determined rationality and clear-headedness, was an ongoing draw between this wolf inside me and myself, as if I were Jacob wrestling with his angel, or his demon, whichever it was—maybe both. I could just barely stop this wolf from overwhelming me or from breaking loose, though

every now and then, every few days or so, it would stand down, for an hour or two, as if I had temporarily worn it out. There was usually just enough time for me to go for a swim or a walk and to recollect myself, before the struggle would start in me all over again.

There was a storm one afternoon. The cottage was surrounded by sheets of rain quickly torn through by the wind. White electricity. Bone-cracking thunder. The unleashed energy outside came as a relief, offering a distraction from my own struggling, and I put on my hooded rain coat and rain pants, which I had bought for my bike trip last summer, and went outside into it.

With the rain rapidly tapping on my hood, I walked down the slope of rock, down until I got near the lake, which the rain was hitting everywhere. On the slope, I lay down, chest first. I lay my cheek against the rock. I had one arm by my side, the other stretched above me, my hand happening to lie against a thin patch of wet moss. My legs were spread out. If anyone had been there, I might have looked as if I were sleeping. I was slightly angled downhill, and a little gulley of water flowed past my cheek. I had dressed warmly underneath, so I was not cold. I closed my eyes.

I was two people, I began to imagine. One was lying here, as I was now, molded to the earth, like an infant to its parent's chest, except that I was not an infant; I was the wise part of myself, the part of me connected to the rock and the moss, to the lake and the rain and the sky. In spirit, I was practically indistinguishable from these elements, a part of them; in fact, I could not be seen by human eyes, nor could I talk or in any way

signal my presence. Yet I was there, calmly aware of everything moving, flowing, happening around me.

The other person—who I also was, though I was not embodying him at the moment—was wandering around on this slope of rock. Lying here, I was aware of him out there somewhere, lost, confused, forlorn, a ghost, unsure of who he was or where he belonged. I could sense, too, that at this point, after all his wandering, he was also exhausted, just wanting a place in all this rain and storm to rest. He didn't know why he was so lost—he didn't know that half of him, his twin, was lying here, invisible. He didn't know that he was separated from himself. He just knew that he felt empty, that something felt missing.

The image of the two of us unfolded in my mind as a kind of tale, and according to the tale, the twin lies with his cheek on the earth, water running past him, his mind calmly aware, while for days or weeks or years the wanderer staggers and winds his way, without direction or guidance, over hills and valleys. Most of the time, the wanderer passes right by his twin without seeing him, without knowing he is actually so near himself. Every once in a while, though, by pure chance, the wanderer will happen to lie down and rest in exactly the place where his twin is lying, so that for a brief time their two bodies overlap. For a brief time, they are one, and quietly, without the other even knowing what is happening, the twin is able to send the energy that flows through him into the wanderer, so that the water and the lake, the rain and the moss and the sky enter the wanderer's bloodstream as well.

Later, when the wanderer rises, he pauses, feeling more refreshed, settled, though still without understanding why. Then he continues on his way.

There was one more aspect to the tale: if one were to look carefully over the hills and valleys, one would see that they are running not just with one stream of rain, but with hundreds of thousands, with miles upon rolling miles of silver streams, all crossing each other, and one would see these hills and valleys populated not with just one twin and one wanderer, but with a multitude of these pairs. Everyone in the world, in fact, according to the tale, is separated from themselves in this way, with one side of themselves practically a part of the earth, the other rootless and wandering aimlessly. Once in a while, though, accidentally, briefly, by a luck that feels like grace, one manages to rest in the other.

Lying there in the rain, I could picture my parents, my mom and my dad, each of them also separated from him or herself in this way.

Eventually, what turned out to be hours later, the storm quieted down, and the rain lifted. Slowly, I sat up. I pushed back my hood. The air felt clean. The lake was more or less still. After a while a boat passed, sending long, low tubes of water rolling toward the shore, the smoothly rounded waves mirroring along their lengths the blue of the sky.

The calm lasted for a while, several minutes. Eventually, though, something in me seemed to become uncomfortable with this letting everything be. Some of the edge had been taken off the struggle from before, but now that frustrated grasping in me came up again, wanting to snatch at this haunting scene that had opened up in front of me. I felt a mix of dejection and resignation at the return of this struggle. I tried to just keep looking out over the lake, up at the sky, to focus on the breeze on my face, but

already I could feel this inner battle drawing me back in, separating me from the experience.

I tried not to be upset with myself; I couldn't expect everything to be taken care of so quickly, I supposed. And I felt glad that at least I had had a reprieve, long enough to experience the flavor of something—I don't know what to call it, but something to do with just feeling that you're alive, plugged-in, present, here.

I lifted my head off the pillow on the couch, my bed while I was here. I felt like a tire that all the air had gone out of. It was about a week after the storm. Up until now, I had been able to keep wrestling with the wolf, with the angry grasping and clutching and lashing out in me, neither winning nor losing ground against it. But suddenly now this morning, the struggle felt as if it had been lost. Not as if the wolf had finally gotten its teeth into me, but rather as if a giant fist had closed around me and the wolf and the entire struggle, clamping down on any further fighting.

Also, some small, grieving animal in me seemed to have given up, to have crawled into a hole inside me. What was it grieving over? I couldn't really feel the answer. I couldn't feel anything much. The couch was on the large, screened porch, which looked out onto the lake through the trees. The sun was shining low behind the pine trees, and diffusing into the porch. I knew, in my head, that it was a beautiful morning, but I could not manage to feel connected to it.

All of a sudden this morning, nothing seemed to make sense anymore. Almost everything most people, including me, did seemed superficial, or robotic. I didn't know anything about anything anymore.

I told myself not to try to chase away this feeling. I didn't think I could chase it away anyway, but it seemed truthful, real, and I had the sense that the only way out of it was to let it be, and wait. It seemed pointless to even try to distract an animal from its grief, when its heart was heavy as lead. And anyway, with this fist gripping me, I didn't have the will or the heart to try to distract myself.

I had the feeling that something in me didn't trust me anymore—to take care of it, to look after it. It seemed to have lost faith in me. I felt sympathetic to that part of myself; I sensed there was good reason for it to be upset, and sad, although I couldn't and still can't completely say what that reason was; I do have some tentative thoughts about it, but this is probably not the place to go into them.

Let it be, and wait, I told myself. I knew—somewhere in my memory, even if I couldn't feel it then, even if I couldn't sense how it could possibly happen—that there was something alive in me, and something alive out there in the world, and that the two, somehow, could join. I knew I had experienced that at some point, somewhere in my life, and that I had to wait for the experience to come back.

I still had another month off after this elective; there still seemed to be enough time left in the summer not to think about the end of it, not to worry about having to take care of and deal with the world's other pressures or demands, real or perceived, that lay ahead.

After writing some of these thoughts in my diary, I got up. I went for a slow, long swim in the lake.

* * *

The theatre festival in Stratford, a town in Ontario modeled on Stratford-upon-Avon, runs every year from mid-May to early November. I had been to Stratford once or twice with my family when I was younger, but had started coming regularly, each summer, after a class trip there in CEGEP: on that trip, I had made a sudden group of friends, with whom I came back the following year as well. The year after that I came back with a girlfriend, and then the past couple of years just on my own. Every year I had been staying longer, seeing a few more plays. This year I was here for ten days, armed with tickets to almost three-quarters of the playbill.

I felt as if I had discovered Stratford, as if no one else that I knew had any real association with it, as if it was just mine. Since roaming around it with that unexpectedly made group of friends, it had seemed to have a quality of both reassurance and strangeness: familiar, yet also slightly removed from the rest of the world, a step outside of time. I began to trust it as I place where I could bring whatever was on my mind, and the disparate elements would find a way to sort themselves out, slowly, unpredictably but dependably.

Stratford was and is, to be sure, a tourist town. It had a quietly stylized look: well-groomed lawns; regularly-spaced trees and benches along a central river; clean sidewalks and small, pastel-colored buildings along its long main street, which were

mostly different shops and a few trendy restaurants. Oddly, though, I didn't really pay attention to or even notice this tourism aspect, or even most of the other people there. In my mind, it had a similar feel to the cottage. I could walk around; sit in a lawn chair by the river; think, read, write in my diary; listen to music on my walkman; try to listen to what was going on inside me; look around at things. And there were the plays, which I used, without really thinking about it, as a way to provoke something in me that seemed to need to be provoked, to show me things from unusual angles, to help me make more fruitful and tangible sense of things.

This time, though, I found myself unable to fully open up. I still felt as if a fist were holding me, stopping me from reaching out and connecting to things, and as if some small animal in me were feeling too dejected, too hopeless, to try to fight this grip. I kept telling myself, in my head and in my diary, to allow this feeling, to not try to distract myself from it, to not try to somehow get rid of it. I kept reminding myself that I had to trust myself, trust that, somewhere inside me, this weighed-down part of me knew its own way out, and wanted to find that way out. I couldn't force it; I had to wait, let it happen on its own.

But it was getting harder to wait, the longer this went on. I was feeling heavier and heavier inside. I began to worry that this heaviness could, eventually, actually take over me, sink me like a stone—an almost unbelievable yet now seemingly real possibility. There was also the fact that the summer was almost over; after Stratford, I was driving back to Montreal to immediately start third year, which was when you started in the hospital full-time, from early morning to the evening, on-call overnight every four days. In third year, you had actual responsibility for patients. It was when

the reality that you were becoming a doctor really set in. I didn't feel in any condition yet to cope with all that, especially since I still wasn't sure that I wanted to be a doctor. I didn't want to quit yet, though, either; medicine still felt like the world I had chosen, and I still wanted to see if I could make something out of it.

Stratford at that time had three theatres: one on-the-round stage, like the Globe theatre in London; one narrow, elongated, "thrust" stage that jutted out into the middle of the audience; and one proscenium stage. The latter was at the Avon theatre, located among the town's central streets. This year, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* was playing there. On my last afternoon in Stratford, I walked into the Avon, to see this final play of my trip. It was a matinee performance and, because it was Sunday, also the last performance of the day.

I settled into my seat, student-priced, up at the back of the balcony, and tried to just take in and get absorbed in this last play.

A balding, heavy-set man in his late fifties or early sixties, wearing a plain brown suit, was standing by himself, front center stage. He was facing the audience but gazing out above them, at the upper seats of the balcony—where I was no longer sitting: at intermission, I had looked down over the railing, spotted an empty seat in the front row, near center, and had snuck my way down into it. I was close enough now to touch the stage, this man a few arm-lengths away.

The man, Willy Loman, stood on a mostly dark stage, with a thin aura lighting him. The light seemed to be drawing in toward him, as toward a star faltering, on the

verge of collapsing in on itself. His whole demeanor was one of weariness—he seemed to need to sit down, to put down the briefcase he was carrying. He was a salesman, and his most recent sales trip, like all his sales trips in the last few years, had been exhausting, yet also a bust. For some reason he couldn't seem to sell like the other guys.

He kept standing, though, clutching his briefcase, staring upward with a hypnotized, stupefied gaze, as if at a starry dream. He was smiling, but his smile seemed frail, unstable. His eyes, though uplifted, seemed impoverished. Everything around him in his real life was receding from him: he was close to losing his job; he was inadvertently alienating his eldest son, Biff; his sanity and sense of reality were slipping away from him. Yet he couldn't abandon this dream. He was still wholeheartedly devoted to it, an almost eager slave to it, offering it his will. He was still ready to sell off every part of himself to it, even to sacrifice his life to it.

The play never said what he was selling, but it seemed, ultimately, to be himself. He wanted to be admired, respected, wanted, well-liked—for doors to open for him wherever he went. He seemed to need these things with such an intensity, it was as if they were prerequisites for his existence.

"I'm nothing, Pop!"

It was near the end of the play. Biff Loman was in the kitchen, arguing back and forth with his father. Biff, in his early thirties, had been a high school football star, and had always seemed at the helm of things—his father's pride and joy. But a

disillusionment had come over him, a disgust with his father's inflated image of him, an image he could no longer live up to, and he had left home for a while, working on farms, drifting, unsure of himself or of life.

Just a few days ago he had come back home, but the visit had not been what he'd hoped for. Willy took Biff's uncertainty and lack of direction personally, the way he had taken his football success personally. He kept accusing Biff of spite, of failing in life out of spite against his father.

"I'm nothing, Pop!"

"You're Biff Loman!" Willy shouted. His son was a somebody. A great somebody. The greatest. Or he could be. He should have been.

Biff looked as if he were about to spit, unable to swallow this kind of talk anymore. He charged across the stage, right up to his father. With rage and pleading in his voice, he shouted:

"I'm nothing, Pop! Nothing! And neither are you!"

For the entire play, the backdrop was a ring of apartment buildings, symbols of money and power, all crowded close together, surrounding and towering over the characters. When Willy was alone on the stage, the buildings seemed like a ring of bullies closing around a boy in a schoolyard.

What would a boy like Willy do in those circumstances? At first, try to ignore what was closing in around him. Then, when that didn't work, try to shout or threaten back the bullies. Then, when they kept closing in on him, maybe spread his open palms

in front of himself, pleading to them. Then, as their circle kept tightening around him, their eyes menacing him, their knives suddenly appearing and glinting, he might glance around at them, terrified of what was about to be done to him.

But there would be another point after that, when even fear wouldn't make sense anymore—the fact that he was going to get brutalized was a certainty. Then the only thing left would be disbelief: what was happening couldn't be happening.

At that point, when even fear was gone, the will would drain out of the boy, so all he could do would be to smile dizzily with incomprehension, his sanity finally absenting itself.

This was the look on Willy's face in the last scene of the play, after he had lost his job, after his fight with Biff, after the dream that he had pursued all his life had left him empty.

As he stood there, with a stunned stare, it occurred to him that that he still had one sacrifice he could make, so that his wife and sons could collect on his life insurance policy. He got into his car, hit the gas. Off stage, there was sound of tires squealing and of glass shattering.

As the actors moved toward the front of the stage for curtain call, an odd, amazed feeling swept through me. I didn't know what it was, but for the past two hours, without realizing it, I had forgotten myself, even forgotten where I was. I remembered only now that I was sitting, with other people, watching a play.

It was as if fresh blood were circulating through me, as I had been freed from something. It felt as if something important had been achieved.

I stood up almost right away, as tall as I could, to dignify what they had just done. For some reason, I felt a solidarity with the actors, a strong wish to support them. I clapped hard, distinct claps, so that they would know that one specific person had seen and felt what they had just accomplished; what they and I had just accomplished together. It seemed almost miraculous that they had managed to pull it off, so honestly and passionately and directly, in public, with so many people watching. Now no one could take it away; no one could say this hadn't just happened. Everyone had seen it. It was real.

Looking directly into the faces of each actor, who were all standing there at the front of the stage, a few feet in front of me, I caught the ear, then the eye of one of the actors, the one who had played Biff's brother, Happy Loman. He glanced at me, giving a surprised but pleased smile and a nod.

Shuffling outside, I noticed the world around me again: the relatively clear blue afternoon, which had a surprising amount of day left in it. The street, empty of cars, with people beginning to cross in pairs or groups back out toward the shops and restaurants. Everything seemed to be itself. I seemed to be myself. I was nervous for a moment, a surface of water lightly trembling, to be back out in the open, surrounded by these other people. I felt light, almost off the ground, unsure what was holding me up. But the sidewalk was solid under my feet.

I started walking down the sidewalk, alongside the bright green lawn of the theatre. Whatever I had been wrestling to get at or get to all summer, whatever I had

been waiting for, seemed, almost unbelievably, to have found me. It felt fragile, this open, unburdened feeling I had now, something I had to carry carefully. I could sense, too, how long it had been, months and months, since I had felt this way—too long.

I wanted to share it with the actors, to let them know that they had reached me. I wanted to share with them what I had seen and noticed in the play, in their portrayals, and, in turn, I wanted to know what they themselves had experienced. I had gone to talk to the actors after shows before; it had become something I did regularly when I felt moved by a play. And almost all of them seemed, to my surprise, to appreciate my approaching them. I'm not sure exactly why I did this, but it seemed to ground the experience for me, make it more tangible, as if after shaking hands and talking with them, I could be sure the experience had really happened.

I wanted to talk to all the actors, but especially to the one who had played Willy Loman, Al Waxman.

Outside the stage door, which was down a less manicured side street, a few other people were also waiting: a couple, it looked like, and a young woman, all, I guessed, a few years older than me. The young woman, hippy-ish, with friendly, quick blue eyes, was holding a thin bouquet of flowers, and the couple, fashionably dressed, were talking about the actors, who seemed to be friends of theirs. They all seemed to have a relaxed confidence about being here, as if they were waiting at the back door of a friend's house.

Eventually, a white-haired woman in a navy blue usher's vest stepped out to ask if we were waiting for someone in particular. The others all said yes. Hesitating for a moment, I nodded, too.

She led us in, down a short set of stairs. Unlike the front lobby, the area back here was purely functional. It was where the actors and stage crew and others came through on their way in and out of the theatre, passing between one world and another. There were a number of open doorways that led to dressing rooms, or, I figured, to the stage.

I liked being in here: I felt I had a found a place most people didn't know about, or wouldn't think to go to. I felt proud, too; it seemed to have required some initiative and courage for me to have come here.

Al Waxman was the last actor to come out. The area was empty, everyone else gone, by the time he stepped through one of the doorways. He was a wide-faced, heavy-ish man, as Willy had been, of course. He wore a white button-up shirt, opened comfortably at the top, and held a light coat under his arm. He looked a bit sweaty, physically tired, the way people do when they walk out of a workout at a gym. Even with his extra weight, though, he carried himself well, and there was nothing about him that seemed to require my sympathy or pity.

The older woman in the blue vest, who had been standing off to the side, went over to him, putting her hand on his arm and pointing at me. "This young man over there has been waiting to see you."

He nodded, glanced at me, and came over to where I was standing, by the stairs. We shook hands, and I told him my name, and that I wanted to thank him, that I had gotten a lot out of the play. I said, could I ask him some questions?

Like most actors I had said this to, he didn't seem to expect this, but at the same time seemed open to it. "Sure," he said. "If you'll excuse me one moment, though, I

just need to see if someone is waiting outside for me." He climbed the stairs, peered out through the window, then came back down to the first or second stair, which, with my being taller than him, put us about eye-level.

We talked. I mentioned different scenes that I had found interesting, and explained why. I asked him what he thought Willy, or Biff, was feeling or struggling with in certain scenes, what the underlying tensions and concerns were. I don't know how I seemed to him, what impression he had of me, this young fellow wanting to engage him in this peculiar way, but I didn't think about it; I was happy to be talking with him.

Then I began to sense our time together running out. I knew his ride would be here soon, and our paths would diverge, he going on with his afternoon, I with mine. In the face of this imminent and, in all likelihood, permanent, separation, something I hadn't even known I had wanted to say suddenly came out.

"Willy Loman also reminded me of my own father."

I half glanced away as I said this, embarrassed, feeling like maybe this was too personal to bring in to the conversation. To my surprise, though, he seemed unsurprised, and unoffended by this change in tone. In fact, the way he raised his eyebrows, it was as if my comment touched on something that, in preparing for the role, he had already considered.

He gave me a smile. "He's everyone's father, isn't he."

As I heard this, an armor I hadn't even known I had been wearing seemed to unhinge and fall away. What he had just said was unexpected, inscrutable—I didn't know what it meant exactly—and yet it was overwhelmingly resonant. I didn't feel

naked, but exposed in an even more personal way. His words felt so impossibly exact and right, full of understanding, that I didn't know what to say.

Then something started to happen: it felt similar to an afternoon in my first apartment, a semi-basement, when water suddenly started flooding in under the door and through the windows (several city water mains in downtown Montreal had burst open, causing a massive tide to rise right outside).

I couldn't stay here; I didn't want to break down in front of him. I think I said something automatic, like "yeah, I guess he is," and then "thank you," and then shook his hand again and walked back up outside.

The side street was, to my relief, deserted. Everyone had gone for the day, back out in the main area of town. Still feeling as if I were about to be completely, overwhelmingly flooded and not knowing what to do, I started to walk along the sidewalk, to also head back out into town.

But something inside stopped me. Why was I trying to get away from this feeling? Hadn't I reminded and reassured myself over and over this summer, as I wrestled to hold myself together, that that weighed-down part of me would know the way out, would find its own way to the surface when it was ready? Was I going to turn my back on it now? I knew if I did that, I would never be able to trust anything I told myself again. I would have no reasoned arguments left to hold back my frustration from turning inward on me.

I was welling up. My whole body seemed to want me to break down, to let go. I was still reluctant. Why? This feeling trying to be let out, I could sense, *was me*. Wasn't that what I had been telling myself I was waiting for? And out there, what was waiting for me that I was in any hurry to get to? At the end of this street lay the end of my trip, of my summer, and the start of an entire year of dreariness, in the trenches of the hospitals, a year I could still couldn't imagine getting through, not like this.

Off to my left was the back loading area of the theatre, where trucks dropped off stage sets and other props or supplies. The area was deserted, too. In the back right corner, below a closed, ribbed, warehouse-like door, I noticed a short set of cement steps, leading up to a platform for stepping in and out. I walked over to the corner, to these steps, up onto the platform. I knelt down, and as my knees touched down on the concrete something in me broke open.

It had been years since I had cried. I couldn't have articulated what my crying was about, but it seemed to have to do with my dad, with our entire relationship. But also with the divorce. And with medical school. And with women, with hopeless longing. And with even more than all that. It also had to do with myself, with who I thought I was and who I wanted to be and who I thought I had to be and what I didn't know about myself and what I couldn't feel and what I couldn't let go of and what was missing in my life and inside me.

I didn't know why, but it began to seem urgent that every last drop of this feeling pour out, that I not get in my way here, that I let this flooding continue even if it meant I would be left dry. This seemed suddenly as if it were my one chance to get at something that the rest of the time seemed practically impossible to reach, and I felt I

had to let it keep surging out, even if each wave after wave of it were wracking my body, almost choking me.

He's everyone's father, isn't he.

I kept repeating Al Waxman's words to myself. Without my really understanding them, they seemed to express everything, and seemed to help keep things open inside me, to prevent them from closing off.

He's everyone's father. He's everyone's father.

I bent even further over my knees, pressing my forehead against them, shutting my eyes. From somewhere out in town there came the honk of a car—an unthinkable distraction, an assault on the senses; closing my eyes even tighter, I pressed my hands over my ears. It was awkward to hold my ears like this, but then I remembered reading about the way the Buddhist monks prayed, also folded forward over their knees like this but with their arms out in front of them, the idea being for the monks to humbly lower themselves, getting as close to the ground as possible. I extended my arms in front of me in the same way and, shrugging hard, blocked my ears by pressing my shoulders up into them.

A thought intruded: if anyone happened to pass by on the street, they might see me here, and wonder what that guy was doing over there, lying forward at the top of those steps in the corner. I started to imagine a late-middle-aged couple standing over on the sidewalk, peering uncomprehendingly. I could not pursue the image, though, or, even worse, the idea of trying to explain all this to them; I batted it away. Right now, this one time, I told myself, I couldn't think about other people's reactions. Let them

wonder, let them not understand; some things were unknown, and if anyone happened to see me they would just have to deal with it.

As everything kept flooding out, I could feel myself drying up inside, and even more than that, hollowing out, as if my heart had been removed from my chest, turning me into an empty cave. It felt as if I were losing everything: everything I knew or thought I knew about others or myself, everything I believed, everything I had ever based myself on. The emptiness inside me was acute, a wrenching ache.

Again a thought intruded and began to pull at me: shouldn't I be getting up now? Wasn't that enough of all this? Wouldn't it be better if I just went out to dinner now? Or back into town to look around? Wasn't I being selfish, going on and on with this?

I shut my eyes still tighter and pushed my shoulders even harder up against my ears, trying to press myself deeper into dark, into silence. I had to keep going, I told myself. The dark I was diving into seemed to be expanding, as if I were descending further and further into the ocean, past where the light could reach—except that the dark here had become dry, empty, so it was more as if I were rising further and further into the void of space, into a starless, planetless black.

When I wouldn't let myself be distracted off this course, though, that giant fist that had been closed around me seemed to re-assert itself, and to start to close off this feeling, whether I wanted it to or not. A fear, almost a panic rose up in me. I didn't know how to stop this closing off, and I knew that if I started to struggle with it, the feeling rushing through me would get blocked off completely. But I could not let all this stop now. I thought again of the long year ahead of me, which I would never

survive it if I didn't get through this now; I thought of all the things I had told myself this summer, promises to myself that I couldn't dare break or prove untrue now.

The fist was gripping me harder and harder inside, refusing to relinquish me. Afraid that I was about to stay blocked inside for another endless year, that the small animal in me might give up hope entirely, that my frustration, if I didn't keep going here, would get its claws into me—yet feeling helpless to know how to stay open—I began, in among my other tears, to whimper, to sob, pathetically, miserably. I couldn't think of what else to do, how else to free what was inside me.

Please, I started to plead. *Please.*

I wasn't pleading to anyone or anything in particular, but for some, any way out of this.

Please. Please.

I did not and do not believe in God in any literal sense. Yet at that time I often used the term when I needed someone to address.

Please, God. Please. Please. Please.

As I pleaded, a question appeared in my mind:

God, do you love my father?

I didn't know where this question came from, what it meant, or how it related to the giant fist trying to abort what was happening, but it seemed to address itself to whatever in me was holding me back. I repeated this question into the empty dark, as if blindly launching probes into space in search of other life.

God, do you love my father?

Do you love my father?

Do you love my father?

Then something happened. Something in me seemed, unbelievably, to *hear* this odd, inexplicable, yet somehow meaningful question. There was a release inside me, then a pause—a listening to hear if there would be any answer.

Suddenly an image appeared in my mind, an image from months back. It was of my dad, of him as a young man, on that almost night thirty years ago that I had read about in his diary. It was dark, and he was gazing up toward the night sky. But instead of being on a grassy field, he was standing out on the balcony of my apartment building.

And at the same time as I saw this image, something else happened: I was picked up, as if by the back of my shirt. It was as if a river had come from behind and picked me up into the air. Not a river made of water, but a river made of some kind of muscle, a river with intention, with direction. My heart leapt into my throat as my body kept being lifted further into the air, right off the ground.

I had no idea what was happening, and at the same time, I sensed that I was about to be taken somewhere. It was like dreaming, except that I was wide awake, and it felt more real, exciting and terrifying than dreaming. It was all happening.

I kept being lifted, higher and higher into the air. A new thought intruded now: about how great I was, how gifted I was, how unique I was, that this amazing thing was happening in me. Voices and faces began to encroach in on me, all praising me, admiring me and wanting me for my being so in touch and in tune with life's

mysterious movements, blah blah blah. Horrified—paradoxically, this praise could derail the very thing it seemed so enamored with—I promised myself, absolutely vowed, that I would never tell *anyone*, *ever*, about what was happening now. For six or seven years after that day, I didn't, refusing to even write in my diary about it. I knew—it was the only thing I knew right now—that I had to let whatever was happening unfold in whatever natural way it was going to. I could feel that if I even considered accepting, or trying to exchange, affection, praise for it, it would instantly halt. And right now, it felt as if everything, my very existence, depended on it continuing. I kept being lifted, rising past the roof of the theatre now, my heart still fluttering in my throat as I was taken right up into the late afternoon sky.

To something in me, the height between me and the earth was starting to bring on a near panic, and all of a sudden the wolf-like frustration in me that I had been struggling with all summer woke up, wanting to stop me from letting this go on. Was I mad, letting myself be carried up into the sky? Out of the sky around me, reaching toward me, were giant, dark, sharp hands or claws or knives—they were all shrouded and blurred, but I could feel that they were moments away from grabbing me, digging into me, even killing me if they had to. This had gone far enough, too far already. All that mattered to this frustration in me was that all was stopped, now, permanently.

At this threat, though, for the first time, an anger rose up in me. I did not *want* to be thrown off here, now, when I was as close as this to getting at something I needed. I knew I couldn't fight with this ferocity in me—everything that was happening would halt—so I began, without thinking about it, to plead again, to reach out inside me for some kind of help.

The color of my anger was white. And all at once it streaked down out of the sky, taking on the form of white angels, each blazing and wielding a fiery white trident. Each angel was no bigger than a few inches tall, but together they formed a swift, powerful host: not one host, but wave after wave of hosts—diving out of the sky to swoop in front of the grasping, the clawing, to intercept it before it could get a hold of me, driving their tridents into it, as if driving pitchforks into hay, and pushing it back. They carried it away from here, to the other side of the world from here, clearing a space for me to let this experience happen.

This one time, I told myself, I would let someone else—these angels—take the responsibility for dealing with this frustration in me. I would not feel guilty for not listening to whatever was behind this anger, this panic. This one time, I would let myself not struggle with it, not worry about it, not think about it, and instead allow myself to focus on what was happening in me.

By this point I had been lifted ever higher into the air over Stratford, and was being flown across the sky. As I flew, the grasping, several times, tried again to shoot out and take hold of me, and thoughts of praise or self-aggrandizement kept trying to distract me—anything and everything to knock me off this course—but each time I would let this army of fierce white angels take care of all that, let them swoop in to stop these threats, push them beyond the horizon, far away from what was trying to unfold here.

*

As I was rapidly ushered across the sky, the blue began to dim, then to darken, until it was twilight, then evening, then night.

I peered ahead of me, trying to see where I was going, and in the distance, against the night sky, I could see it: the high balcony, with my dad standing out on it, staring upward. For some reason, I didn't think once about the fact that he was on the balcony of my apartment building. To me it was still him on that night I had read about.

He didn't see me as I was flown closer and closer, not even as I began to be lowered down out of the sky toward him, his attention transfixed elsewhere, at something high out in the night sky. But something else was happening, too: like Alice in Wonderland, I was shrinking. By the time I had descended right down and was hovering in front of his chest, I was only a few inches tall, not half a thumb's length.

Suspended there, I looked up at his face, which appeared above the mountain of his chest; I was checking to see if he had detected me. But I was not even born yet; there was no reason for him to suspect that anyone was with him here, and he just kept staring up at the faintly-starred sky.

It occurred to me that there must be an entrance, a hidden door, somewhere in his chest. Eventually, a small door did open. I looked in. It was as if you were peering into a cave, nothing but dark.

A moment later a figure ambled out of the dark, up toward the doorway, and a tall but slightly stooped, friendly-looking butler appeared in front of me, his expression and demeanor reminding me of Alfred, the butler from Batman. He was bald except for the trim grey card of hair below each caved-in temple, and his manner was deliberate, measured, like a Buddhist monk who moves without tarrying or hurrying.

He stood there with an eternity of patience, seeming to be waiting for me to ask to come in. It seemed important to ask, as if it were part of some ritual, although it seemed to go without saying that I would be allowed entrance. I asked, not out loud—somehow we were able to communicate almost telepathically, through our expressions and gestures—and the butler gave a slow, slight nod. Stepping aside, he motioned that I could come in.

Without a sound, the door closed behind me. The room was completely dark—so dark you couldn't even tell if it *was* a room; there was no sense of walls or ceiling. The dark overhead had a rounded, airy quality.

I couldn't see the butler, but I could sense him nearby, and somehow he guided me through the dark. Very soon, I could see, or begin to see, something up ahead: a small white light.

As I approached this miniscule light, which seemed to be coming from the center of the room, I began to discern a white pillar—Roman-like, except thinner, and short, just waist-high. And as I came up next to the pillar, I could see, perched on top of it, an ordinary white stone.

The stone could have fit in the palm of your hand. Emanating from it but staying close around it was an aura of white-white light. There was nothing dazzling or eerie or haunting about the aura; it had the quality of reality rather than of magic, of substance rather than of illusion.

It would be impossible to try to describe the shape of the stone; it seemed at once young and ancient, like a small piece of rock left over from the Big Bang, from

the universe's tumultuous, explosive creation. An original stone that had never been cut, chiseled, shaped or altered in any way, that was still completely itself.

An inclination came over me, and I looked up to find the butler, who had placed himself on the other side, at the periphery of the stone's light, which almost didn't brush his features. Again with just a glance, I asked him if I could touch the stone. I sensed he would nod, and, with a reassuring smile, he did, not so much to give me permission as to confirm that I was doing what I needed to do.

I turned back towards the stone. I reached toward it. I didn't have to stretch far. My finger touched against it.

What happened then was instant: the white light that had been huddled around the stone leapt up along my finger, up my arm, right over my head, down my back and all around my body, cool water rippling over me, as if I had stepped into a waterfall. I couldn't believe what was happening, and at the same time this feeling seemed the most real thing that had happened to me in longer than I could remember: the light rushing from the stone to me and back again, back and forth in a seamless flow, refreshing and restoring me.

The stone was still the stone and I was still myself; yet the one touching and the one being touched were not two.

A few seconds, an eternity later, I lifted my finger. As quickly as a circuit is broken, the light around me vanished and went back to the way it had been, close around the stone. I was standing in the dark again, with the stone sitting there inconspicuously in front of me.

I wanted to touch the stone again. More urgently than before, I looked up to find the butler's face.

This time, the butler shook his head, though his smile was still understanding. He seemed to be telling me—and somewhere inside me, I realized, I already knew this—that this experience, this opportunity to connect with this white stone inside my dad, had been a gift, offered so that I could know, so that I could feel that it was there inside him, that it was real. Now that I had felt it, though, now that I knew it, it was time to go.

I didn't want to know this. I didn't want to leave. Looking away from the butler, back toward the stone, I reached out to touch it. This time, though, as I laid my finger against it, its aura, instead of coming alive, dimmed, almost completely fading.

And this time the point where I touched was jagged—a cut happened—and, pulling away my hand, I saw my finger had a few drops of blood trickling down it.

Within moments, the stone began to emanate its white aura again; I had not done any damage to it. I understood, though, now, with a grief filling my chest, that I really did have to leave. And I realized it was not a matter of imposed rules or prohibitions; it was a matter of natural law. I could not stay here inside my father.

From around the other side of the pillar, the butler appeared. He did not hurry me or indicate that I should come, but I understood that he was waiting to guide me back to the doorway. Still full of grief for what I knew now had to happen, I backed away from the stone and joined the butler. Again without words, I communicated how much I didn't want to leave, how almost impossibly sad this seemed, and, nodding, he smiled with understanding. But he did not turn around to take me back.

We walked through the dark, the stone on its pillar receding further and further. At last, we reached the door. The butler opened it. I stood in the doorway, looking back toward the stone, which I could no longer quite see. The butler stood patiently, not seeming to mind my reluctance to take this last step out. He nodded and smiled one last time, as if to thank me, simply, for having come here.

Then, because it had to be that way, I stepped out, and watched as the door closed.

I was being carried now again, quickly through the night sky, away from my dad, from the balcony, from that night almost thirty years earlier, which all around me was turning back to evening, then to twilight, then back to the dusky blue of late afternoon. Present-day Stratford came into view, then the Avon theatre, then the loading area behind the theatre, and gradually I was lowered back down into myself, back into my own body, back onto the cement platform, where I had been bent forward over my knees, crying, the entire time.

I was still crying, but differently than before: before the tears had seemed to arise out of a sense of hopelessness, emptiness and absence, from a sense of what had never been experienced; now they seemed to be tears of loss, of grief. This crying was connected to something, something I had been separated from, but now had touched, felt, and could sense was real.

Gradually, I relaxed my shoulders, letting in some of the sounds from over on the main streets of downtown Stratford. I lifted my head and squinted my eyes open, letting in a blur of daylight. I wiped my eyes.

I sat kneeling there a few minutes, my mind clear of any thought or word or idea. (Later, in a restaurant, I would ask the time and find out that an hour and a half had gone by.) The cement platform under my knees, the walls of the loading area, the light of late afternoon—all began to come into focus.

I stayed there for another few minutes, letting what had happened sink in. I did not want to leave yet, though I knew I would leave in another minute or two.

When it seemed to be time, I slowly stood up and went back down the stairs. I paused to look back at the stairs in the corner. I let out a long breath, as if I'd just barely managed to make it down a two-hour long stretch of river rapids. I had made it, though. I was here.

After one more look at the stairs, I turned and walked back out onto the street, and into town.