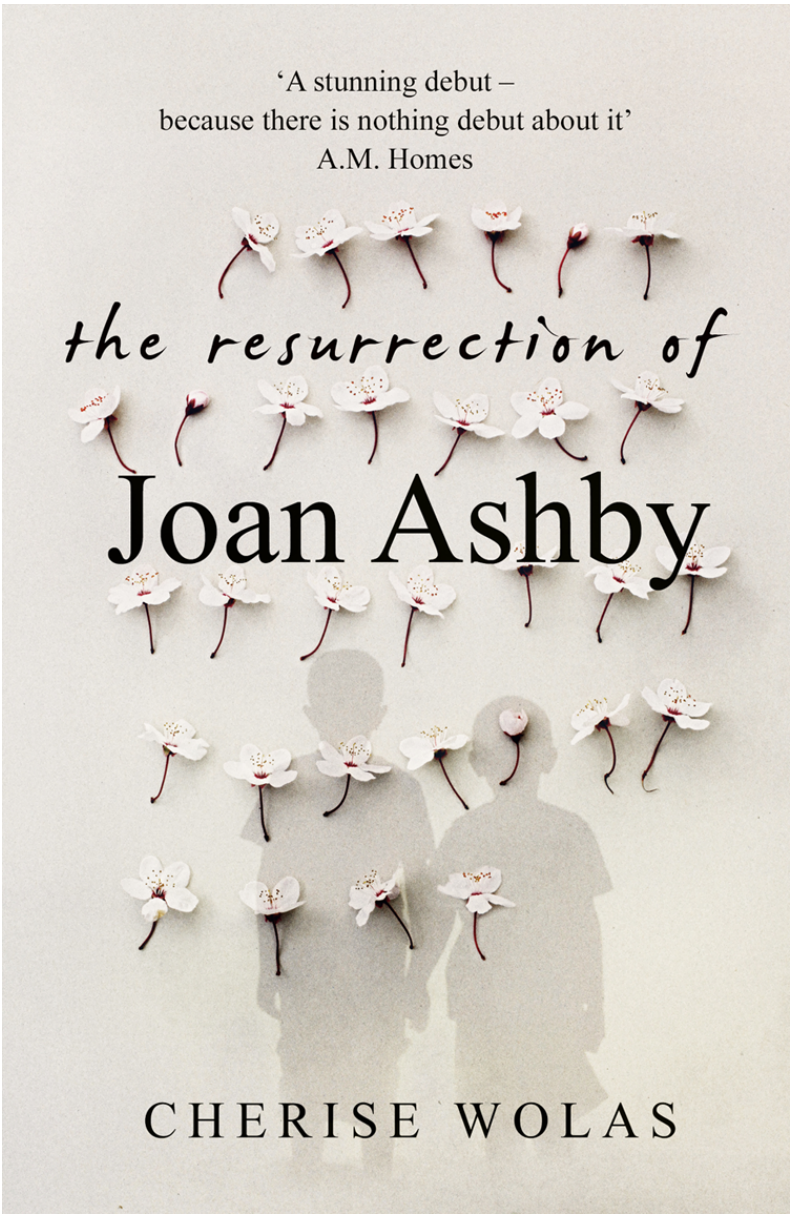
‘A stunning debut –
because there is nothing debut about it’
A.M. Homes



the resurrection of Joan Ashby

CHERISE WOLAS

Cherise Wolas

The Resurrection of Joan Ashby

«HarperCollins»

Wolas C.

The Resurrection of Joan Ashby / C. Wolas — «HarperCollins»,

‘A stunning debut – because there is nothing debut about it’A.M. HomesAged 13, Joan Ashby drew up a list of How to Become a Successful Writer:1. Do not waste time2. Ignore Eleanor Ashby* when she tells me I need friends 3. Read great literature every day4. Write every day5. Rewrite every day6. Avoid crushes and love7. Do not entertain any offer of marriage8. Never ever have children9. Never allow anyone to get in my wayA decade later her short stories take the literary world by storm. But her failure to fulfil numbers 6 and 7 gets in the way, closely followed by number 8 (twice); some years down the road, she finds herself living a life very different from the one she had envisioned.She finally gets back on track with numbers 4 and 5 and her much-anticipated first novel is finally written – and it's a masterpiece, she just knows it. But as she is poised to reclaim the spotlight, a betrayal of Shakespearean proportions is lurking around the corner…An audacious and dazzling novel, epic in scope but intimate in its portrayal of one woman’s triumphs and catastrophes.

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The Resurrection *of* Joan Ashby

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Praise for *The Resurrection of Joan Ashby*:

'Ambitious … intimate … a terrific twist midway through … That I got so worked up about a person who doesn't exist is a testament to Wolas's success in creating a complex and distinct fictional character. Joan Ashby is like no writer I have ever encountered; I'm sure, if she were real, she would be pleased to hear it'

New York Times Book Review

'A stunning debut – because there is nothing debut about it. It arrives so fully realised that it stuns as it entertains, as it twirls the reader on the sharp point of a #2 pencil. Wolas is a writer in full command of some impressive powers – one might even call them special powers. There is a joyous embrace to her work – to her exploration of the life and mind of her main character, the author Joan Ashby. Ashby is so well rendered that I found myself jealous of her (and Wolas) and also wishing she were my best friend and that we had a standing drinks date. Wolas is singular in her voice – and yet the delicacy, the specificity reminds me of my most favorite authors: J.D. Salinger, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, Joan Didion'

A.M. Homes

'Epic in scale … an extraordinary, assured and deeply involving novel about marriage, motherhood, sacrifice and the creative impulse. Highly recommended'

Daily Mail

'Astonishing … a gorgeous read, big and bold, intelligent and thought-provoking … an incredible book that reads nothing like a debut, so self-assured the writing, so expansive and wholly immersive the plot'

Independent, Ireland

'A stunning debut novel … a wealth of superb writing, mature insights, and breathtaking risks … A rare book such as this comes along only once in a long while'

New York Journal of Books

'Breathtaking … will do for motherhood what *Gone Girl* (2012) did for marriage. 'A story requires two things: a great story to tell and the bravery to tell it,' Joan observes. Wolas' debut expertly checks off both boxes'

Booklist, starred review

'Like John Irving's *The World According to Garp*, this is a look at the life of a writer that will entertain many nonwriters. Like Lauren Groff's *Fates and Furies*, it's a sharp-eyed portrait of the artist as spouse and householder. From the start, one wonders how Wolas is possibly going to pay off the idea that her heroine is such a genius. Verdict: few could do better'

Kirkus Reviews

'The scope of *The Resurrection of Joan Ashby*, the breadth of its engagement with the reader, the impressive realization of its ambitious literary character, all resonated so deeply that the pages of these other books offered naught but hollow echoes. Not only had Wolas succeeded in creating a character presented as a literary icon, complete with accompanying primary text, but she powerfully engaged the reader through an exploration of personal identity'

Publishers Weekly's Shelf Talker

' … a tour de force. And while I accept that it is a debut, I am shocked by it. It's, for me, like the literary equivalent of Athena springing fully formed from the head of Zeus'

Kirkus Reviews' Fully Booked podcast

'This is the kind of book that pulls you under and you go willingly. And when it's over, you come up for air and see anew. In giving us the story of one woman's struggle to write her own life, Wolas captures worlds in worlds here, and lives in lives. As many currents run in a single river, *The Resurrection of Joan Ashby* is rich and wide, and deep'

Sarah Blake, author of *The Postmistress*

'An audacious and dynamic first novel … a remarkable tapestry of literary skill, emotional insight, and sensational storytelling'

Ivy Pochoda, author of *Visitation Street*

'The rapturous advance praise for Cherise Wolas' assured meta debut, *The Resurrection of Joan Ashby*, doesn't do it justice. This ambitious first novel introduces us to an elusive artist with a stratospheric cult following—only to unravel her life, as the blessings of divine inspiration battle the curse of earthly love. Lawyer and film producer Wolas has forged an audacious balancing act whose betrayals come from the least expected corners, submerging readers in a dazzling universe we hate to leave'

Huffington Post, starred review

Dedication

For Bessie Rudolph, who would have been a writer had the world been different, who told me I was one, when I was just a child.

And for Michael, absolutely everything.

Epigraph

It does not matter what you choose—be a farmer, businessman, artist, what you will— but know your aim, and live for that one thing. We have only one life. The secret of success is concentration; wherever there has been a great life, or a great work, that has gone before. Taste everything a little, look at everything a little; but live for one thing. Anything is possible to a [woman] who knows [her] end and moves straight for it, and for it alone. I will show you what I mean.

If she has made blunders in the past, if she has weighted herself with a burden which she must bear to the end, she must but bear the burden bravely, and labor on … If she does all this, if she waits patiently, if she is never cast down, never despairs, never forgets her end, moves straight towards it, bending men and things most unlikely to her purpose, she must succeed at last.

— Olive Schreiner, *Story of an African Farm*

If I told you the whole story it would never end … What's happened to me has happened to a thousand women.

— Federico García Lorca,
Doña Rosita la Soltera: The Language of Flowers

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LITERATURE MAGAZINE
Fall Issue
(RE)INTRODUCING JOAN ASHBY

Joan Ashby is one of our most astonishing writers, a master of words whose profound characters slip free of the page and enter the world, breathing and enduring, finding pain or solace, even happiness, seeking a way forward, or a way out, their lives keenly and deeply observed. From the muscular to the sublime, her language renders precisely the shadowy contradictions she finds in human behavior, capturing, distilling, and purifying the complex, ambiguous, often porous lives her people navigate. Through the powerful lens of her work, readers discover the secret hearts of their own temperaments.

Enthralling, riveting, often shocking, her stories are as undeniable as her talent. She has said that reaching the marrow of her people, their quintessential facets, requires her own fortitude, an ability to simultaneously engage and detach, to be passionate yet impassive, and sometimes even remote.

We have been allowed to explore the notebooks she once religiously maintained and still possesses. Labeled *Favorite Words*, *Books I Am Reading*, *Quotes Never to Forget*, *Stories*, and *How to Do It,* they are fascinating reading, for in them the young writer announces, if only to herself, who she is, who she intends to be, what she intends to accomplish in her life.

In the notebook titled *How to Do It*, thirteen-year-old Joan Ashby articulates nine revealing precepts she was determined to follow in order to become a writer:

1. Do not waste time
2. Ignore Eleanor when she tells me I need friends[1]
3. Read great literature every day
4. Write every day
5. Rewrite every day
6. Avoid crushes and love
7. Do not entertain any offer of marriage
8. Never ever have children
9. Never allow anyone to get in my way

Eight years after penning these precepts, she burst onto the literary scene with her brilliant collection about incest, murder, insanity, suicide, abandonment, and the theft of lives. She was just twenty-one, the year was 1985, and *Other Small Spaces* was an extraordinary accomplishment. An instant sensation among reviewers, critics, and loyalists of literary fiction, it was a surprise entry on the *New York Times* hardcover best-seller list, where it held for two weeks. The subject matter was disturbing, but the book's unique heralding quality deeply touched readers whose adoration of the work turned rabid and created word-of-mouth interest beyond its initial fan base. Several months later, when this unsettling debut by such a young writer was crowned with the National Book Award, the anointment generated unprecedented attention and controversy. As a result, an enormous domestic audience searched it out, and when the collection was translated into thirty-five languages, its audience became universal. Amidst such excitement and furor, the book reappeared on the bestseller list and remained there for a year, the rare story collection to attain such status. Soon, Joan Ashby was a writer known throughout most of the world.

In 1989, four years after the publication of *Other Small Spaces*, Ashby continued her tremendous success with the compelling and complex *Fictional Family Life*, a collection of superbly interlocked stories with a sixteen-year-old boy at its center.

Fictional Family Life spectacularly demonstrated Ashby's vast range, and the world again responded. At twenty-five, she had a second acclaimed collection. When the book was shortlisted

for the Pulitzer Prize, it catapulted to bestselling status and remained on the *New York Times* list for its own remarkable year.

It has been nearly three decades since Joan Ashby published anything new, and in our desire to introduce, or reintroduce, Joan Ashby, we are reprinting excerpts from both of her collections.[2]

We start with "The Last Resort," and "Bettina's Children," the stories that bookend *Other Small Spaces.*

THE LAST RESORT

For a month, Owl Man has been saying he will let me out of here if I am honest. Again and again, he says to me, "Just once, I want you to do what I've asked. Wake up and write down the thoughts that first assail you."

"Owl Man, *assail* is a glorious word," I say to him five mornings a week when I am hauled in here at ten sharp by colossal black-as-night guards dressed all in white, my scrawny biceps in their paws, my paper-slippered feet dragging behind me. It's a lesson in geometry, the way they gently unhinge my angles and joints until I am seated in the brown leather chair that faces its mate, where Owl Man sits. The guards always wait until I swallow my pills, and when they leave us, Owl Man says, "Let's tackle these easy subjects again. What's your name?"

"Guess," is my regular opener.

"Can you tell me where are you?"

"The Last Resort."

Sometimes when I say that, Owl Man smiles.

Today it's the same routine: Released from my barred and locked room by Jim I and Jim II—my names for them, though the tags on their broad chests say Terrence and Golly V., one American, one clearly Indian-from-India—I'm dragged down a bunch of hallways to Owl Man's office. Then it's me in my seat, the cone of water in my hand, the pills down my gullet, the guard's usual question: "You okay here, Doc, we can stay outside, be available to you?" Terrence does all the talking for he and Golly V., and despite my sustained fury, I think it's sort of nice how Terrence has Golly V. under his wing, the same way the pills are winging their way into my bloodstream.

This morning, after Owl Man shuts the door, but before he begins the usual grilling, I jump in and say, "Got something for you, Dr. Samuel Swann," and it's fun watching his head rear back because I've used his real name.

In the beginning, my hands were shackled, bound together with those plastic handcuffs, but today I've been delivered with my hands belonging to me. I hold them up now, say, "No weapons, just something I've got for you, something that will make you sing and set me free."

Slowly, so slowly, I reach down into the crevice between breasts once lovingly admired and pull out a sheaf of pages. Already the handwriting looks foreign, shaky and disturbed, not at all the beautiful penmanship that used to win me gold stickers in childhood.

"You want to know the thoughts that assail me when I first wake? Well, here you go. Ten pages of my true beliefs," and I drop into Owl Man's flushed palm the whole of my life.

He asks me something real then, his voice nearly tender. "May I read these pages aloud? So we both can hear what you have to say?"

My head is doing the weird pill dance, swinging back and forth like a dying flower in a strong wind, the petals about to fall to earth, to be trampled and turned into crap that sticks, with other crap, to the bottoms of soles. Amidst all the head-bobbing, I say, "Here's my offer. You find the relevant parts and read them out loud, or I shut this down. I don't want to hear all of it again, not from start to finish. I've lived it once, would rather not return for another visit."

"Which would you prefer?"

"I don't know Swann, you're the doctor. I'm fairly certain that in my real life I own a lovely apartment and have two cats who adore me, and once, not even that long ago, I used to have friends, and a serious profession, and I went to movies, and thought about going to the ballet and the opera, and I took hot baths, and never worried about offing myself, and I had a man who loved me and knew how to make me yell out in delight. So, what will it take to get me out of here and back home? What's going to have the most ameliorative effect?"

"Ameliorative effect," Owl Man says. "I like that."

"Me too," I say, in a calm voice that surprises us both.

Owl Man begins to read and I am convinced, first, that I am a wizard with words, how I make them arch like green leaves over tiny beauteous flowers, and send them soaring like silvered planes that leave behind fairy dust in the blue firmament, that I am a remarkable talent. Second, that I am shocked by the person I have become. I do not recall writing, just this morning, about my desire to kill everyone I have ever known. All the throat-slitting, the fish-gutting, the stranglings I intend to inflict on the people I thought I still loved.

Swann's harmonious tone stays even, but I feel a million insects shivering up through my insides, taking up residence in the thin layer of skin that no longer protects me well from the world. When he comes to a stop and looks at me, I pretend I am lamb-calm, whistling through the wind.

"So the gist is, you would like a clean slate, live in a world where you can start fresh, become someone else, have no ties to the past, eliminate everyone currently entwined in your life."

I don't answer, just study his hanging diplomas in their fake wooden frames, think about the havoc I would wreak in a second on the supposedly innocent, how I would demonstrate to every one of them, in slow and painful ways, the taint lodged so deep in their hearts—

BETTINA'S CHILDREN

When Bettina was twelve years old and already half an orphan, her great-aunt—the aunt of her still-living father—gave her a series of books that told the story of Nurse Claire Peters. These books were not picture books; nonetheless Bettina could picture Claire, bright in her white uniform, beautiful despite the small white cap atop her lush blond hair, walking hushed hospital corridors, entering room after room, moving from bed to bed, her cool hands bringing relief, her changeling voice flowing from blue to violet to purple to the prettiest of greens, different colors for different maladies, the right ones always returning her sick and sometimes crotchety patients to vibrant life.

In Bettina's mind, Claire's lips were always shimmering in Claire's favorite pink lipstick, and Claire's eyes, observant and alert, the color of purified honey, were opened so wide that she always saw the truth of it all: what people were like when death was upon them. She held their hands then, to bring them forward to the light.

It took Bettina nearly that entire year to read the twenty-book series straight through, wishing with juvenile hope that her curly brown hair would turn as golden and straight as Claire's, that one day her own lips, thinner than she would have wished, but prettily bowed, would look nice in some similar shimmering pink shade, and when Bettina stacked all the books in her closet, she had decided she would become a nurse.

In nursing school, Bettina found peace with her own uninteresting looks, turning herself outward, focusing quietly, privately, on her natural healing talents; she was often several diagnostic steps ahead of the doctors to whom she was to defer. In the books, Claire never aged or thought about romance, despite being surrounded by handsome doctors, but in her own daily chores as a nurse, Bettina found true love.

At odd times in the staff's cafeteria, she would see one of the emergency room doctors, the tall ascetic one, but otherwise their paths did not cross: Bettina worked up on a general floor, and he down below, where the world washed ashore its human traumas.

One day, that emergency room doctor bought her a tea, a few days later a lunch. Standing in the cafeteria line next to Bettina, he looked down upon her from his great height and said, "I'm Jeffrey Caslon," and Bettina nodded and slid her tray up to the cashier, and he said, "Oh, no, I'm paying. After all, this is our first date." She had not realized it was any such thing.

Some weeks later, on a crisp and starry night, Dr. Caslon led Bettina outside, kissed her with a fervency she returned, and, at his request, Bettina transferred to the emergency room, aligning their shifts. She had not thought she would like her new assignment, but she relished its feral nature, the way the maimed, the shot, the stabbed, and those mysteriously sick arrived in the impure hours past midnight. Six months later, they had a small wedding in the chapel on the hospital grounds. A few months after that, their life then combined into Jeffrey's spartan bachelor flat, he inherited a substantial sum from an old great-aunt of his own.

When Jeffrey said to Bettina, "Would you consider moving to Africa? Do our part to make the world a bit better?" they were in the emergency room, facing each other across the body of a middle-aged man who, in death, exhibited the true dourness that had infected his soul.

Bettina needed no time to consider. She would be Claire Peters on a grander stage, with money in her pocket, love in her heart, her portable nursing skills freely available to those whose locus of birth created lives rife with disease, with too little to eat, with water that was unclean.

Soon, the Caslons were in a remote part of Nigeria. Jeffrey spread his inheritance around, hiring locals to build them a house, and the clinic they named the Caslon Clinic. They received the first shipments of medical equipment brought, on its last leg, in a rickety plane that landed on a dusty strip beyond the village, used as a playground by the native children for their made-up games.

The Caslons were a great draw; their pale skin, their small features, the certainty they exuded, the smiles they bestowed, all of it warmed the villagers.

When the clinic was upright, secured by a front and back door, a roof that could withstand heat and wind, the freshly married couple got to work. The equipment intrigued the villagers, but intermittent electricity made the plugged-in machines of little use to doctor and nurse. At least the village streets were designated by names, unpronounceable at first, but which gave Jeffrey and especially Bettina the feeling that life, despite how it seemed, was not completely freeform. Neither imagined returning home after the locals befriended them, passed their days hanging out on the clinic's stairs, on its porch that the Caslons furnished with abandoned chairs.

The Caslons received care packages of food from home which they shared; serious about abandoning all they had once known, their own prior creature comforts, to prove that people could band together and make something better and finer, although impossible to refine. A year into their life in the Nigerian village, Bettina got pregnant the first time, and then again the next year, and the year after that. She was heeding the Nigerian way.

In the right time, each time, Bettina gave birth to three bouncing babies, two boys and a girl. Children who laughed a lot and smiled early and seemed very intelligent and were healthy, so healthy, until they gained their footing and ran with their friends, mingling in the sweetness of childhood with the ebony-bright village children who laughed without knowing the desperate futures only they faced, or so the Caslons believed with a kind purity in their hearts.

Then once, twice, three times, Bettina and Jeffrey peered into dug-out holes, innards tossed up into mounds just beyond, laying each small wrapped body Bettina had birthed, deep down, to avert the scavenging animals capable of digging to China to get what they were after. Each time, Bettina fell to her knees, shocked by what she now shared with the village women; that there was nothing to keep her, any of them, safe. The Caslons were the same as the people they aided, adding their own blood to the heated red dirt.

Neither was religious, and they refused the crosses the Nigerians, thinking they were offering what was right, carved for them. Instead, they asked for wooden placards upon which Jeffrey and Bettina wrote the names of their dead children—Marcus Caslon, Julius Caslon, Cleopatra Caslon—their birthdays, their death days, marking their entombments in an earth that rarely felt the rain, that the wind blew away in devilish swirls of dust.

A month after their last and final child, called Cleo for short, was laid to rest at the age of three, the same tender age as the others, Bettina stood at the graves of her flesh and blood, and the hot, hard sun seemed ludicrous; death deserved darkness for more than a few hours. She wanted nothing to do with what Jeffrey was offering—a try for a fourth. What was the point of the inevitable prolonged suffering parents and child would endure? Marcus, Julius, and Cleo all set afire by temperatures that traveled up to one hundred and eight, that could not be reduced or assuaged. Three times, sitting by the bedsides of her loves, the fruits of her labor, Bettina had watched the skin peel free from their bones in strips as translucent as butterfly wings.

Jeffrey, brave and stoic, sure their sacrifices were part of his mandate, would not hear of leaving it all behind, this godforsaken country, as Bettina was then calling it, these people who demanded too much. When the rickety plane carrying Bettina was airborne, its small windows blinded by the light, Jeffrey wondered if, from up there, she was looking down, could see his hand raised, the tears on his cheeks.

She did not return to the American city of her birth, where her father had raised her, such as he could, where Jeffrey had plucked a young nurse filled with belief from obscurity, leading her into adventure, then into something else that Bettina knew should not be identified. She never sent a card or picked up the phone to call Jeffrey's parents, his sisters, to say there had been a rift in their marriage, that he remained in the world she had fled from. Instead, Bettina chose a big eastern city where winters were racked with high drifts of dirty snow. Her impressive nursing skills, her

experience with diseases most of the doctors had only read about in medical books, allowed her to orchestrate her future: a hospital where she was given free rein over the toughest pediatric unit, with skeletal children who would never enjoy a day at the beach, or play with their older siblings, or fall into or out of crushing love. She cared for their deflated sacks of skin and fat, untested muscles long gone, bound up in heavy blankets, tiny tubes inserted into their tiny veins, watched over by their parents, huddled and grieving, sitting close by, holding tender sets of fingers.

It was too late to save these parents from suffering as she had, though Bettina never kept them at arm's distance. She embraced the parents, she cried too when tears swamped their eyes, and she did what she could to make her sullen, saddened babies, her toddlers with a couple of front teeth peeking through swollen gums, comfortable.

Nigeria had taught Bettina to recognize the irrefutable line, how once it was crossed, it marked the end of time. In the large eastern hospital, when she saw the line crossed, when the parents had gone to the family room for a few hours of desperate sleep, Bettina sent her little foregone loves on to whatever world lay beyond. She emphatically did not view her actions as murder; she was no killer, but a loving nurse whose own maternal history had changed her initial reason for being: when there was nothing left to do, she heeded her training and made the suffering stop.

When they came for her—

Fictional Family Life, Ashby's immensely praised second collection, is a razor-sharp look at family life, focused around a teenaged boy who may, or may not, have tried to kill himself. That unclear violent act is dissected by two sets of narrators: Simon Tabor's family members, and the doctors and nurses who put him back together again. While the truths and lies of real life are debated, broken Simon Tabor remains in his hospital bed, in an inexplicable coma, and in that netherworld, he creates his own alter ego, a boy his own age, also named Simon Tabor, who is stuck in *his* room, creating *his* alter egos—boys who live the fantastical lives both Simon Tabors wished for themselves.

The following excerpt is from "I Speak," the only story in the collection in which the real Simon Tabor speaks for himself:

This is the only time you will hear my voice, the only time I will speak to you directly. Right now, I am on a table in an operating room and the doctor and nurses are racing around, working hard to repair the damage I have done to myself.

This isn't one of *those* stories—about a near-death experience that changes one's life, or a revelation about what happens when a person dies for some minutes and is revived. I haven't died and I won't. I am completely aware of everything going on around me, how, in their gowns and masks, the medical staff look like superheroes protecting their real identities.

Dr. Miner has just said, "Scalpel," and is now slicing into my skin, a zzzziiiippppp through the various levels of dermis, then a sucking sound, my blood spurting all over, and he says in this tight voice, "Clamps, now," and then he's clamping off various of my blood vessels that are dancing like beheaded snakes. Even with all the activity, my hearing is so stupendous I can tell Judith, RN, is sorting through the plates and screws, and Louise, RN, through the pins, trying to find all the right-sized pieces of hardware Dr. Miner will soon insert into my body.

Hours from now, when Dr. Miner finishes stitching me physically back together, I plan to slip into an unexplained coma, and stay there for a good long time. I am looking forward to it. I think it will be fun, and restful, and give me time to think.

Plus, in the five hours I've already been in this operating room, I've discovered my own superhero power: I have the ability to know what's going on in the private lives of these people caring for me.

Like Dr. Miner, for example, he's setting my shattered left femur now, will do the right femur next, and while he's focused precisely on what he's doing, another part of his brain is back home, where just hours ago the woman he loves told him that she doesn't love him, that he is lousy in bed, and that she has been sleeping around. He doesn't want her to pack and leave him, but what else is

a real man supposed to demand? I agree—the traitor has to go, who needs to love someone frightful like that?—but I can tell Dr. Miner is weak and this betrayal will affect him for the rest of his life.

And the anesthesiologist monitoring my pulse, calibrating my state of unconsciousness, she's debating telling her husband she wants a boob job, to reduce, not to inflate, and she knows he'll put up a fight, the way he loves doing all manner of things to them, stuff she can't stand, and I can see in my mind the things her husband likes to do. I think the anesthesiologist might be kind of squeamish, because it all looks cool to me.

And Dr. Miner's right-hand nurse, Judith Sonnen, she's handing Dr. Miner a plate to screw into my femur, and she's got a prayer running through her head in a gobbledygook language, praying not for me but for her own strength. Born Esther Sonnenberg, her parents turned into evangelical Baptists when she was a kid and changed everyone's names, and Judith Sonnen thinks she may want to be the Jew she was born to be, reclaim her name at birth.

You can see, right, why I might not want to give up this power I've developed out of the blue.

Eventually, I'll be wheeled into a hospital room, already deep in my coma. Here's the warning. When I'm in my coma, you will hear theories about why I did what I did, posited by those who love me and will rarely leave my bedside: my parents, Renata and Harry, my sisters, Phoebe and Rachel, our occasional housekeeper, Consuela, and my dog, Scooter, as well as theories tossed about by Dr. Miner and the nurses, Judith and Louise, who feel a sort of love for me too, because they have seen inside my body, are invested in my slow progress back toward life.

But don't believe any of them because they will all be wrong.

I was not depressed, psychotic, delusional, did not think I was Christ, or some disciple, or a prophet whose name I can't pronounce. The blood tests will prove I wasn't on drugs. I will, however, be on great painkillers for close to a year.

I have already conjured up my alter ego to entertain me during the silent months to come. His name is also Simon Tabor, and he'll tell you about his life, and about the alter egos he—or rather I—create. Four boys, the same age as us, who live the kinds of lives we want to live. Both of us Simon Tabors stuck in rooms for very different reasons, yet sharing the same desire to experience other lives.

The bottom line is that my plan to fly did not go as expected. A lapse in judgment, I agree, and a question to be resolved another day. I'll have plenty of time to figure it out, but here is Dr. Miner leaning over me—

It is impossible to overestimate the titanic interest that attended Ashby's every move during those years when her collections dominated. In an era that pre-dates our current obsession with celebrity, her stunning success at such an early age, which also included receipt of a PEN/Malamud, and a Guggenheim, made her a phenomenon, one of the first literary celebrities on a modern-day scale. For a time, until she disappeared into small-town life, photographers often followed her—to the Korean grocery, the Laundromat, on her walks through the city.

Equally amazing is that *Other Small Spaces* and *Fictional Family Life* are now in their twenty-fifth and twenty-third printings respectively.

In William Linder's first *Wall Street Journal* interview with Ashby, when she returned from the *Other Small Spaces* book tour, her remarks display an innocence at odds with the splendidly dark nature of her writing.

"I took a temporary leave from Gravida Publishing, locked up my apartment, and was sent to Columbus, Fargo, Salt Lake City, Nashville, Austin, Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, and Newport, Rhode Island.[3] I was raised in a smallish suburb of Chicago, so before going on this tour, I had only seen that Midwestern city and, of course, New York, where I live. Seeing America as a new author was an incredible experience. I read to eager audiences, signed stacks of my books, was interviewed in hotel lobbies, in white-linen restaurants, in diner booths with gummy tabletops. I was photographed in local libraries and bookstores and, for some unclear reason, photographers posed me outside, on the shores of Lady Bird Lake, on a Newport dock in front of gleaming yachts,

with my toes in the sand and the Pacific Ocean behind me, the camera clicking away. *Young writer musing* is how I imagined those pictures, all pride and intention, eyes lowered against the sunshiny rays, the wind whipping my long hair around my throat until I was sure I would choke."

The New York Review of Books conducted an in-depth interview with Ashby that coincided with the publication of *Fictional Family Life*. Much was written about her following *Other Small Spaces*, but in the *NYRB* interview, for the first time she disclosed certain salient facts about her upbringing that helped explain her authorial precociousness, as well as the characters she wrote about, the fine line of their actions.

"I was an early reader, maybe because I was an only child, literally made by people not at all interested in me. It seemed to me that I had crashed through some kind of atmospheric orbit, landed on a planet where I definitely did not belong, and was not wanted, left huddling out in the cold, beyond the tight parental circle of two. Whether that circle was forged before I came along, or as a result of my presence, I've never known. What I did know was that they had no idea what to do with me, and I was left to my own devices.

"Most children in such underloving circumstances would act out, or demand their rightful attention, but I was made differently: I interpreted my familial outsider status as an invisible cloak granting me freedom, allowing me entry into a forbidden world where I could hear what was unspoken in the silent spaces and watch the misalignment between people's words and their deeds. I was seven when I crossed over, began stealing what I saw and heard, grafting my thefts onto people I imagined, whose stories I started writing down. My characters became *my people*, their worlds, *my worlds*, and it made me feel whole, happy, and safe. Books gave me succor and my parents' disinterest set me loose as a writer.

"If I had felt a natural kinship with my parents, who knows what I might have found myself writing about, or whether my work would have been of any interest to others. But my parents are who they are, and my upbringing was what it was, and I, through acclimation and natural constitution, was solitary and watchful.

"The concept of love completely mystified me—it still mystifies me—but I have always seen the darkest emotions with absolute clarity, the depths to which people can so easily descend. I gleaned all that in childhood, saw how the theory played out in my own family. It was a short step to believing we all possess the innate power to inflict great damage, even to kill, with the right convergence of events."

Ashby acknowledged that her parents did not intend to read her collections. "They have no interest in my work, are completely indifferent to me and my career. When I was ten, I handed my mother a story I horribly called 'The Meaning of Love.' With that title, no doubt she hoped to read something that might convince her I would end up a *normal* girl. But the story was about the opposite of love, and she quailed in the face of those I gleefully murdered, her only comment: 'I don't understand what goes on in your head, Joan.' She never again asked to read anything that came from my pen. My father never asked once.

"Their disinterest was my great luck as a writer. I have never felt compelled to harness myself because I have not been burdened by what they might think. My characters fall apart, immolate, decimate, grapple with the sinister impulses in their natures, injure themselves and others, kill too, and I am free from parental approbation. It is a way of writing that I highly recommend."

When Linder interviewed Ashby again, after the *Fictional Family Life* tour, she had this to say: "My publisher sent me around the United States for the second time, which I loved, and also to London, Paris, Rome, Zurich and Geneva, West Berlin, Cairo, and Istanbul. Switzerland struck me as odd, but apparently the precise Swiss secretly enjoy reading about lives that are not neat at all. West Berlin was distressing, knowing what was on the other side of the Wall. Cairo and Istanbul seemed like random choices until I was told that *FFL* was a runaway bestseller in Egypt and Turkey,

something I could not have imagined. Of course, I never imagined that either of my books would experience the great success that they have.

"But to answer your question, Mr. Linder, traveling for *Fictional Family Life* was something else entirely. This was my first time abroad, and being feted in those international cities was exciting. However, there were palpable differences between the two tours, because with *FFL*, suddenly I was no longer a debut writer, introduced instead, and uncomfortably, as the *young and revered Joan Ashby*, my name enunciated worshipfully, as if it were suddenly coated in a gorgeous veneer that should have taken centuries to develop. And everyone made clear to me—my agent, Patricia Volkmann, and my publisher, Storr & Storr, the foreign publishers of both my collections, writers I met, journalists who interviewed me, critics who have written about my books—that my first novel is eagerly expected. Of course I feel the pressure. But my own expectations for what I can accomplish likely are grander than theirs, and I feel confident about meeting them."

During the years when her star shone so brightly, some journalists were intent on positioning her as a feminist writer, though she refused such a limiting designation. "On that particular subject, I will say only this: I am a writer."

Indeed, when Ashby wrote about so-called feminine themes, such as love, family, and domesticity, she twisted such themes entirely, reversed them, turned them inside out until they were virtually unrecognizable. In *Other Small Spaces*, her male and female protagonists are children, teenagers, or adults, all ingrained in their lives, and, to various extents, flawed, hurt, suffering, vengeful, angry, kind, thoughtful, sometimes brutal with others and gentle with themselves, or vice versa. The scenes might be domesticated, but she was not writing merely, or solely, about domestic arrangements. With extraordinary beauty and burly power, she wrote about people of both sexes clawing their way out of stifling, smothering, or shrinking worlds, some believing wholeheartedly in living what Ashby called *an out-there life*, meaning a specifically determined life that did not conform to modern-day expectations. Other writers took Ashby up as a cudgel, as proof that being female did not lessen the impact of the work.

She also claimed male territory as her own, especially in *Fictional Family Life*, where she wrote deeply about Simon Tabor's multiple versions of himself, and the adolescent boy's self-imagined cast of make-believe fathers. In writing those daring and unpredictable fathers, juxtaposed also against Simon Tabor's real father, a self-destructing stockbroker who finds personal redemption as an insurance broker in the Bakersfield desert, she displayed her dazzling virtuosity, somehow both luminous and formidable.

Ashby writes for the sake of the work, although, when pressed, she did not apologize for seeking her own lasting place in the world of letters. In a 1988 interview with *Esquire*, she said, "It's not actually possible to write for an audience. Or at least I can't. I write for myself and hope others may find themselves in my work. It takes a lifetime to attain a writerly expansiveness, and finding an audience is the least of it. Of course, when I'm honing a story for the thousandth time, I admit my desire for that audience may have become conscious. I labor to be in charge of my own material, and if that hard work allows me to sit at the table with other serious, great writers of this and past generations, I don't shy away from that. Why would I? I write for myself, but I seek to be read, for the work to be deeply felt."

The Linder interviews and the *Esquire* interview are also interesting because Ashby limited the questions she was willing to answer to her childhood, her life as a young writer, her literary dreams. She never discussed her current personal life. As a result, many of her fans were shocked to learn she had married just before the international tour for *Fictional Family Life* commenced.

In early June 1989, under the bright lights of television cameras, Ashby read to a sold-out, standing-room-only crowd at Barnard College. Afterward, many female members of the audience inundated her with questions about her recent marriage, expressing their dismay. We note that the

following transcription of Ashby's remarks are set out here for the first time. The program that aired on PBS did not include these revelations.

"Sometimes I worry, too, that what I have done will end up disappointing myself. Beware of friends encouraging you to take a break from your writing, telling you to have a little fun and celebrate your success, if only for a long weekend. Beware, because your life may move in ways you didn't expect, or want, suddenly hallmarked by the seemingly traditional. In other words, beware of finding yourself living an unintended life.

"I don't normally divulge the personal, but it seems right to share how I ended up here. A road trip a couple of years ago with friends, fellow—or rather female—editors at the publishing house where I used to work. They chose Annapolis because the Naval Academy was there; all those strong and handsome men excited them. I wasn't interested, I had my focus. But there we were on the July Fourth weekend, in a bar on the waterfront promenade. My friends let themselves be swept away, but I held on to my place at that bar, thinking I'd stay and observe and slip back to the motel, make a few notes for the future. Then a man introduced himself to me and his extravagantly long hair was eccentric among all those shorn skulls of the naval cadets.

"If I had figured out immediately the kind of man he was, things might now be different. I believed then, as I still do, that my writing benefits from my perceptual abilities and my observational skills. So I absorbed this man's long hair, his long fingers, his long eyelashes, his romantic brown eyes, and I wondered what a painter or a sculptor, some kind of artist anyway, was doing in this naval bar. He struck me as likely leading a peripatetic life, attributing his unsteady schedule to a muse. But my snap denouncement of him was completely wrong. He was at Johns Hopkins, a doctor in the midst of a fellowship, specializing in rare eye surgeries, enraptured by his ability to help people see their worlds again. He was home for a visit with his vice admiral father, at the bar taking a breather from the old man who was still angry that his son had refused the navy.

"Groan now, because I know you will. He bought me a drink and said that when he completed his studies he was moving to a small town that had a world-class research hospital and lab where he would work on his theories for revolutionizing neuro-ocular surgery. What I heard in all that was *small town*, and I could not imagine anyone wanting to live in such a place. Two drinks in, I stupidly agreed to see him the next day. That turned into two more days spent together. I could see he was infatuated, but the notion did not fill me with unalloyed pleasure. I was not looking for love. Love was more than simply inconvenient; its consumptive nature always a threat to serious women. I had seen too often what happened to serious women in love, their sudden, unnatural lightheartedness, their new wardrobe of happiness their prior selves would never have worn, the loss of their forward momentum. I wanted no such conversion, no vulnerability to needless distraction. Since childhood, I had kept my literary ambitions at the fore of my mind.

"On the trip back to New York, I refuted my friends' belief that love had found me. 'He's a doctor who looks like a disheveled artist and neither he, nor any man, figures into my plans for my future,' I told them, in those or similar words, and I meant it.

"I held my ground against his romantic campaign of phone calls and handwritten love letters for a while, and then I agreed to see him again, on my own territory. [Much laughter here.]

"Come on, most of you probably would have done the same thing! I didn't anticipate our coordinated humor, or our perfect balance in those other meaningful ways. After that, every third weekend, he took the train to New York or I took the train to Baltimore. I had assumed I would live happily alone, passionately consumed by the lives of my imagined humans, but for the first time, I found my thoughts synced to those of another. I had never before experienced that with anyone. Being cherished took me longer to acknowledge and accept. He makes me kinder, more generous, when I step out into the world, and there is a gorgeousness in seeing oneself in the loving reflected glow of a worthy other.

"When I finally settled into the seriousness between us, the palpable love, it struck me as rather marvelous. Obviously, I put up serious barriers—my work comes first, no children, we'll consider a dog—but he wasn't put off, not even during this insane year with the publication of *Fictional Family Life* and my constant absences.

"What I also discovered is that I'm having no problems writing what will follow *Fictional Family Life*, thrilled that the work contains no words about either of us at all. [Much laughter here.]

"You laugh, but I'm incredibly relieved. The idea of mining material straight from my own life is abhorrent to me. I have no desire to write self-indulgently. I say this with appropriate trepidation, but I think love might make me a better writer, a writer able to delve even more deeply into what makes people human, because I am now experiencing the full range of emotions. If nothing else, discovering I have a speed, other than breakneck, has been revelatory.

"We've bought a small house in a place that calls itself a town but is no bigger than a village.[4] I've been living there for exactly two weeks, most of my time spent in a spare bedroom that is now my study, continuing to work on my first novel. And no, I won't tell you what it's called or what it's about."

The novel Joan Ashby was working on in her Rhome study in 1989 remains a mystery, for she has not published anything since *Fictional Family Life.* The Barnard event would be the last time Ashby read or spoke publicly, and thereafter she ceased granting interviews of any kind. On that evening, twenty-eight years ago, Ashby was wholly unaware that she, newly married, was pregnant.

(Continued after the break)

Part I

ANOTHER STORY IS WRITTEN

Ēka aura kahānī likh di

1

Joan Ashby was frank with Martin Manning right from the start: “There are two things you should know about me. Number one: My writing will always come first. Number two: Children are not on the table. I possess no need, primal or otherwise, for motherhood.”

Martin had grinned, looked beneath the checked tablecloth—“In case those imps you don’t want are hiding”—then checked what remained in her wineglass. “I’m flattered,” he said, “but isn’t this sort of discussion premature?”

She had vigorously shaken her head. “Truth is never premature. I don’t want to mislead you.”

When it was no longer too early for that sort of discussion, when they had acknowledged the seriousness of their love, when Joan had reiterated those two truths about herself twice more—in Battery Park, staring out at the Statue of Liberty, all green and distant, the waves churning in a spring wind, and on a bench in Central Park, reading the Sunday paper, both of them sweating in the humid hundred-degree heat—Martin never hesitated, always answered the same way.

Once, he raised her concerns himself. With both hands over his heart, Martin declared, “My own life plans don’t require a version of myself writ small. I don’t need anything more, except for whatever time you give me. We’re everything together, as special as any couple could be.” She laughed because he understood, because he was lovely, because she never intended to be the recipient of such romanticism, but she thought he had the equation wrong: the specialness each possessed had nothing to do with them as a couple.

On a wintery Sunday morning they made a definitive pact: if they moved forward together into the future, they would not sideline their lives with procreation. Joan asked Martin to swear to it as they lay in her bed in her East Village apartment, then made him sit up and raise his right hand and repeat it again. When he said, “I promise. No children,” snow began falling, hushing the city, and they stayed beneath the covers the whole of the day. By nightfall, when Martin was tossing his things into his weekend bag, the snow had ceased, but outside it was still silent, not a car or a taxi or a bus tracking through the white drifts that had accumulated. Joan’s block, crusty and exhausted, had turned into a winter wonderland.

From her living-room windows, four floors above the ground, Joan watched Martin inching across the coated street in his loafers, his footsteps the first to mar the pristine. He was heading uptown to Penn Station for the 6:05 back to Baltimore. He hurtled over a curbside snowbank, landed on the sidewalk, and stopped. He found her at the window, waved madly, then turned the corner and was out of sight. Fifteen minutes later, Joan was in her flannel pajamas at the nicked wooden dining table long used as a desk, reading the proofs of *Fictional Family Life*, its publication imminent. She looked at the vase Martin had brought her, filled not with hothouse winter flowers, but with the red licorice vines he had learned she liked, the treat she indulged in judiciously, when the work was going well. She proofread late into the night, aware she was smiling, and that she had never worked with such a look on her face. A month after that, Dr. Martin Manning asked Joan Ashby to marry him.

Their wedding was modest. The ceremony, eloquent and stirring, unfolded in a small Manhattan park, with rows of red and yellow tulips in the beds, their petals flaring and open. Joan’s dress, long and white, was unadorned, simple, her slender neck, her shoulders, all bare in the early spring sun, her black hair in a braid peppered with tiny white flowers. Martin wore a smart black suit and a serious tie.

There was no family in attendance. Martin’s father, whom Joan met only once after they were engaged, had been interred in the Columbarium of the US Naval Academy in Annapolis on a rainy day three months before. And when Joan reluctantly phoned her parents to invite them, upending their pattern of brief every-other-month calls, her mother said, “*Impossible, mais nous vous souhaitons bonne chance.*” Impossible, but we wish you good luck. Eleanor Ashby was not French, and had never been to France, but she fluently—though rarely—spoke the oft-proclaimed language of her

true soul, had insisted on Joan's fluency in it as well. For Joan, it was debatable whether Eleanor Ashby actually had a soul, but the French *bonne chance* indicated that her mother was attempting to be kind. Her use of the formal *vous*, rather than the intimate *tu*, an apparent denial of their mother-daughter relationship, did undercut that kindness, but it was better than Joan had expected. "*Merci, maman*," Joan said, relieved she would not have to see them.

The guests were not evenly divided; the groom's far outnumbered the bride's. All of Martin's college and medical-school pals made the trek from whichever states had become home, and ten of his new colleagues from Rhome carpooled together from the campus twenty miles outside of town that housed the hospital and the lab. But Annabelle Iger was there, Joan's former colleague at Gravida Publishing and the closest she had ever come to a best friend, along with the few other friends Joan had managed to make, and keep, during the years before her literary career exploded.

After she and Martin said their vows and slipped the wedding bands on each other's fingers and engaged in their first marital kiss, the small party whooped and clapped. Annabelle Iger said afterward to them both, "Your love makes me desire love in my bones, but only for the short term." Martin said, "Go find my friend Max. He's funny and smart and he thinks as you do," and Joan whispered to Iger, "He has good lips, too." At a nearby French bistro slightly down at the heel, the wedding party drank and feasted and danced until nearly four in the morning.

In the afternoon they woke and Martin said, "Wife," and Joan said, "Husband," such a strange word in her mouth, a word she never expected to apply to a man in her bed, or out of it. She wondered what else it meant, besides spouse, mate, to use sparingly or economically, to conserve. Then they tangled their limbs together again.

The following evening, Martin put Joan's suitcase into the trunk of an idling cab, before he too left the city, headed back to Rhome, to their newly purchased house, to his practice and research, while his bride flew away, for the foreign leg of the *Fictional Family Life* book tour. Her apartment had been emptied out, the landlord given notice of her permanent departure, and when she returned to the States, it would not be to JFK or LaGuardia, but to an airport near Washington, DC. Then Joan was flying across the ocean, sitting on trains, unpacking in glamorous foreign hotel rooms, reading to large and small gatherings, signing books, afterward spending the evenings with bookstore owners, critics, reviewers, emissaries of her overseas publishers, fellow writers, listening to trenchant debates about which new novels thrilled, which writers had been wrongfully blessed and did not deserve the worshipful, florid praise, whose work was unjustly overlooked, the glare eventually finding Joan again, a press of queries about what made her write, why she wrote what she wrote, when her first novel would be published.

Every day she composed a special postcard for Martin and sent it on its way, a pretty stamp in the corner from the country she was in. When they managed to talk on the phone, he said, "It's great getting mail in our new mailbox. I read your postcards and kiss your signature, then tack up each card on the kitchen wall." When she came home to Rhome, Martin had made a collage of all of her words.

It was two months since they married, three weeks since she had settled in Rhome, and Joan's tall, handsome husband was kneeling down, as he had not kneeled when he proposed, and the hands his colleagues called *miraculous* were pressed against her flat belly.

Joan placed her own hands on his head, in a kind of benediction, feeling the silk of his brown hair with fingers that were naked except for the slim platinum wedding band on the fourth. The ring was still an unfamiliar weight, a sight that surprised her several times a day when she looked up from the page rolled into her typewriter and caught its silvery flash.

Her new husband was on his knees on the painted wooden floor in her new study in their new house. The floor was maple, but the stain had taken on a curious orange tinge, and when Joan was finally there, her boxes unpacked, her last appearance in front of a huge crowd at Barnard a memory that still made her tingle, the laughter that rose up when she said Martin did not want children either,

only wanted to know if they might one day get a dog, the two of them had painted the floor white. Three separate coats on three successive Saturdays until the floor in her study gleamed.

Martin was kneeling and the heat from his hands passed through her thin sweater, branding her skin, and Joan found herself praying, not to God, or a god, for religion had not been part of her upbringing, but she was invoking her own personal kind of prayer, the soothing she had taught herself in childhood, reciting favorite words—*horological*, *malevolent*, *splattering*, *spackled*, *fossicking*, *bedlamite*, *shambles*, *oblate*, *coruscating*, *shambolic*, *furbelowed*, *aperçu*—this silent recitation, word after word, a beseeching, a cry for remembrance, for benevolence, for fairness. One by one, the words clicked through her mind, and then Martin looked up at her and he smiled and Joan saw his smile and felt a rip of fear, her eyes retreating from the beatific look on his face, landing on a corner of the room where she saw they had missed a place, a strip of wood not quite as brightly white as the rest.

"Joan," he said, gripping her belly, as if his long surgeon fingers might cradle the infinitesimal and unwanted that her body was harboring. There was a gauzy shimmer across his brown eyes. She had never seen him shed a tear, not even at his father's funeral, but the threat was there now, and another favorite word passed through her mind, *trembling*, because there were trembling teardrops poised behind Martin's long lashes, ready to fall, and this time she could not look away, could only stare back at him as her body tightened, turned rigid, her heart all at once shocked into pounding, white noise filling her ears, her mind still reciting words—*chaotic*, *barbate*, *insufflation*, *prodrome*, *otiose*, *misprision*—but still she heard him say, "I've never been so happy."

She watched him rise from the floor. He was speaking again. "We've got to celebrate. I'll go out and get some champagne and something sparkling and nonalcoholic for you."

And then he was out of her study, his tread heavy on the maple floors as he walked through the rest of their small house, the rattle of his keys as he plucked them from the bowl on the shelf next to the back door, the door slamming, his old Toyota revving up.

The shock did not relax its grip on her. She stood rooted to the white wooden floor, stunned that Martin did not remember their pact, the oath he took twice that snowy day not six months before, that his instinct was not hers, to do away with it completely, right from the start. A quick operation, she barely anaesthetized, her womb left clean and uninhabited, barer even than the bare rooms in this new house of theirs.

She thought of the story in *Other Small Spaces* that had become a revolutionary call among a small contingent of Joan's most fervent female fans, the opening paragraphs flowing right through her:

It felt right to Elizabeth that her hand should be freed of that finger with the rings that pronounced her his property. The stump had stopped bleeding, but there was so much more blood than she expected, a spreading pool across the new kitchen floor, just beginning to stagnate.

Surely her blood would stain the white tiles, the white grout, but perhaps that was as it should be, an indelible reminder of her suffering. She bent to stare into the bloody pool, surprised at its deep hue, a rich, heavy burgundy, like the wines Stuart preferred, not the happy red that pebbled her fingertips from a paper cut at the office or a paring knife nick when she chopped vegetables for dinner. She wondered how difficult it would be to clean and nearly opened the cabinet for the cleaning stuff, but what was the rush, she wondered. She would leave it for another day.

She stood up and felt her bones knitting back into place, as they never had to do before he took to pummeling her. On the new kitchen counter, called Centaur Granite, lay the offending digit. It was rosy when she first cut it off, but it was paler now, a fine sort of blue. Like a work of art, really, a sculpture on a pedestal in a cool downtown gallery, with a placard beneath it that would read Drained of Life.

But the finger glittered because of the engagement ring she had been so excited to own, to wear, a rare and perfect four-carat diamond that sparkled in the sun and had no inclusions, no spots, no clouds, no cavities, nothing to disfigure the view, the opposite of her own pocked eyesight when she had looked at Stuart's smooth exterior, that handsome face, and said, "Yes, Stuart, I say yes," having no

idea of the violence he could not contain. And nestled next to the diamond ring, curled up tight around it like a sleeping snake, was the golden wedding band that had always been too tight.

She could not imagine Stuart's face when he returned and saw the bloody floor, her dead finger on the counter in a position of accusation and blame. How strange all that sawing had not damaged its fine tapered shape, had not chipped the polish on the nail. Even now, the shade was still pretty, a pale pink color called Princess Fairy Tale—

Joan thought it might not be too late to slip off her own wedding band, tell Martin their young marriage was at an end, that the only conception she was interested in was what she birthed on the page.

Their house was in a new development, some of the roads still waiting to be paved, the market ten miles away, the wine and liquor store next door. Perhaps there was an hour before Martin returned, and imagining him back in the house, beaming, popping corks, making toasts, set Joan panting, her mouth open like the dog they should have gotten immediately. She felt faint, her vision blurring in the middle, as if her blue irises were turning black, a shade dropping over them. She made it into her chair before her legs gave way, dropped her head between her knees, and waited.

When her eyesight cleared, and her heart was only galloping, she sat up and looked at the shelves Martin had hung, stocked with copies of her two award-winning, best-selling books, all the different covers, the titles in myriad languages, proof that she had readers around the globe. She looked at the goose-necked lamp they'd found at a yard sale when she joined him in Rhome; at the old battered wooden dining-room table brought from New York, on which she had written her stories; at her solid typewriter atop, an Olivetti Praxis she loved; at the four hundred pages of her first novel she was calling *The Sympathetic Executioners*. She wished she could unravel time to the moment before she accepted Martin's offer of a drink in that Annapolis bar.

She looked down at the narrow wedding band on her finger, the inscription—*MM loves JA*—hidden underneath, and thought it would be easy enough to place it in Martin's hand, to separate their belongings, to let him buy the house, or perhaps she would simply give it to him, deed it over as a kind of consolation prize for the end of their marriage. She would return to New York. She had some money now, would not be stuck in the sooty East Village with its pungent streets, its buildings marked with aggressive graffiti. It would take less than a week to pack up and arrange for the movers. While she searched for a new place to live in the city, she could stay with Iger, a senior editor now at Gravida and the new owner of a two-bedroom apartment on the Upper East Side. Joan could accomplish everything, she thought, without losing too much time, without being away from the book for too long. Too much was happening in the lives of Silas and Abe, her young killers for hire, the sympathetic executioners, for her to break stride.

The blare of the ice-cream truck's tune shattered her hectic silence, the song growing louder as the truck journeyed through the unfinished neighborhood, a man yelling, "Wait, wait! You've got two little customers coming!" making Joan think of the lonely, stilted childhoods she and Martin had both endured. His mother dead when both he and she were too young, left with his stern father, ever the navy vice admiral who never wrapped his son in a hug, did not put a warm hand on his head or his shoulder; and Joan's life, unwanted in her parents' house, lost and alone unless she was reading or writing her stories up in her bedroom, or tucked away in the town library doing one or the other. How her parents had stared, as if her connection to them, her very existence, was an unsolvable puzzle. She instantly could see her father at the end of his working day, nearly motionless in his chair, the news on the television, a crossword in his lap, a glass of neat bourbon by his side, head turned away from his wife, from Joan's mother, who stood on the other side of the living room, phone against her well-tended wash-and-set, her lipsticked mouth wide in pretend surprise as she listened to friends' secrets, to gossip making the rounds. The furtiveness between the people Joan called Mother and Father, when her mother hung up the phone and sashayed over to sit on her father's lap, a soldered circle of two Joan observed from the fringes, seated at the top of the staircase when she, no matter

her age, was done with her reading and writing for the day. How they inclined their heads toward each other in those long minutes in the living room, and later at the kitchen table, telling each other about their days, neither ever asking Joan a question about anything. She remembered those awful dinners of her mother's calf's liver, and her father, so pale and bloodless, tearing into the flesh, his knife and fork scraping across the plate.

Martin was not pale and bloodless, she thought, sitting in her Rhome study. He was brilliant, as passionate about his work as she was about hers. He was strong and engaging, good and handsome, always looking as if he were fresh from a sunny day at the beach or from a whirlwind run down the slopes, burnished from the inside out. His days were spent on the campus, in the laboratory, or in the hospital's operating rooms, but when he emerged he liked music and conversation and an abundance of others, as she did not. Her ability to sometimes be charming made people mistake her for a social creature when she preferred the turning of her own thoughts. She had learned to enjoy the parties they went to by considering them experiential interludes, potential fodder for her work one day.

People sought out Dr. Martin Manning, wanted to be in his presence, thought of him as their best friend. And he *was* a good friend, caring, considerate, kind, taking under his wing the newly minted doctors doing their rotations. Children flocked to him too. In New York, on his weekends there with her, she had seen infants and toddlers smiling up at him, waving to him from their strollers, as the two of them walked past, she evading the fat wheels of the buggies, he leaning down with a quick hello, saying, "Nice hat, buddy, you going fishing?" or "You're wearing such a pretty dress, I wish I had a camera right this minute." He had told Joan more than once that when he was a boy he wished for the impossible—for siblings and cousins to play with at the holidays, for holidays at all, celebrated with laughter and noise. His parents, like Joan's, had been only children.

How did she miss so completely that Martin might want people who belonged to him through bonds more durable than friendship, that being a surrogate big brother to scared medical residents might not suffice, that waving to the children of others would not heal the hole in his heart? He had vowed to her they would not reproduce. Perhaps he had been honest when he swore to it, perhaps not. Regardless, Joan had proof that he wanted a child, he wanted this child.

She looked at the clock on her desk. An old-fashioned thing that had belonged to Martin's father, one of the few items Martin kept when he sold everything in the Annapolis house, sold the house itself. It was bulky like Martin's father. The hands sluggish, as Martin's father had not been, its tick-tock loud when Joan's writing was difficult, otherwise she didn't hear the noise at all. She was surprised Martin had held on to it once she heard how fearfully he watched that clock when he was growing up, counting down the hours, then half hours, then minutes, then seconds, until his father was home from the academy. Before dinner, he pushed Martin out of the house, into the backyard, yelling out the navy calisthenics Martin was to do: "Get down, boy, give me forty push-ups." And after they had eaten their dinners in silence, Martin watched the clock again. It was always ten minutes after Martin cleaned up the kitchen that his father demanded to see his finished homework, a red pen clutched between the vice admiral's thick fingers.

Looking at the second hand's slow sweep, Joan couldn't figure out how many minutes had passed since Martin's departure in pursuit of libations for an illusory celebration.

The day before, her knowledge of the clock's history did not alter the tick-tocking of their glorious future ahead. But now she felt as Martin must have felt waiting for the hands to reach the dreaded hour. Out of time. The expanse of their expected life together seemed suddenly reduced to nothing.

If she had this baby, it meant a second baby, Joan understood that now; the only discussion would be one of timing. Martin would want to create a foundation of family, Manning children who would be their responsibility to nurture through the years, though Martin would view them as a gift. Manning children who would grow up and have their own children, and their children would have children, and on and on, until no one would be left on their own. The opposite of how Joan lived her

life, the opposite of what she required for her work. She knew that other women managed both, had for centuries. But most of those women desired motherhood and they came to it, Joan imagined, with a set of beliefs about what it would be like, a faith even, in their maternal abilities, their qualifications. Their faith and belief in the worthiness of motherhood providing them with answers, with succor and calm, about navigating it all. She was not like those women; she did not want motherhood, had no underlying faith in her ability to negotiate the enormity of the obligation, had no interest in the supposed majesty of the experience. She had always felt differently, had never yearned for marriage or for a child, had never played make-believe house, had never played with the doll she received on her fifth birthday, so lifelike with its soft skin, its gurgles and giggles and cries when its middle was squeezed hard. She had no answers because those domesticated questions had never interested her, and her only belief was knowing, as her mother used to say regardless of the situation at hand, she was not cut from the right cloth. And she hadn't wanted to be.

If Joan extinguished the thing inside, she would have to leave Martin, or he would have to leave her. The joy that lit up his features, that timbred his voice when she told him the horrendous news, belied their vow, was clear evidence that such a break would be required. Dilation and curettage, grinding away at the cells rapidly multiplying inside of her, that soon enough would form into a face, a heart, two tiny feet, would puncture their happiness if she made such a drastic choice.

She could be fine without Martin. She would holster her love for him and rely, as she always had, on the exceptional traits mined during her unloving childhood. Those traits—detachment and heightened abilities to perceive and observe—had guided her through those awful years, had turned her into the writer she was. Without Martin's love, her current engagement with the world would fade, but living at a remove had served her work well, and she was fierce enough to adapt. Returning to her original life, the one she had planned on, would not be a problem, but when she looked down, her own palms were curved protectively around her belly. Instantly, she clasped them together.

She sighed. It was true that she was infinitely happier with Martin than she had been before, without him. But was holding on to this love worth suffering the mammoth changes that would upend her life if she nurtured this microscopic speck through all the following months, ate right, did not drink, thought good thoughts—which could not include hoping she miscarried—and brought forth into the world a baby that would be theirs forever? Was she actually considering freeing Martin from his vow? Having this thing?

What would it look like if she did, hypothetically? What did people typically worry about in such a situation? The sanity of the mother, the fitness of the father, the health of the fetus, the amount of money in the bank, the grandparents and what they would want to be called—stupid names like Marmie and Pappy—postpartum depression, C-sections versus natural births, genetic defects, ancestry, history, time.

What would she worry about? The regularity of her routine, her writing hours, her reading hours, how seldom she allowed herself to be pulled off course. Her ability to be as present in this world as she was in those she invented, among characters more real to her than most of the people she knew, than the people she used to know or observe in New York, strangers she now analyzed in the bookstores, in the library, at the market, on the streets, and in the restaurants of Rhome.

If she went through with this, hypothetically, she would have to be present for the baby, could not do what her own mother and father had done to her, what Martin's father had done to him. There could be no coldness, no isolation, no distance, no disaffection, no paltry pretend-love. The baby would have a right to a joyous childhood, which meant she—they—would have to give it that joyous childhood. She would have to find within herself additional love and patience, admirable traits she doubted she possessed in sufficient quantity, flawed as she was, consumed with her imagined human beings, the often grievous or heartrending situations she wrote them into and out of. She would have to willingly give all of herself, or at least most of herself. And the sacrifice new parents so loudly and proudly proclaimed themselves willing to make, willing, they said, to lay down their lives for the

good of their offspring … could Joan do that, sacrifice herself, if such was required? These days, for years really, in service to her work, she sacrificed others, but never herself.

Only the day before, her future had been so clear, but it was suddenly impossible to see into the distance, all because an accidental breach had left her undefended.

She swiveled in the chair and stared out the large window that faced her desk. The undulations of their vast acreage, humps of dirt that rose and fell over the four solid acres, rolled out into the distance; she could not see to the end of their property. She and Martin weren't gardeners, and who knew if they had green thumbs, but she could imagine the dirt gone, the land vibrantly green, an emerald carpet of soft grass, a swing set, a sandbox, a jungle gym. The kid could have a playground all its own, they had that much land. But wouldn't playing in a public park be better for it? Wasn't engagement with others a socializing force?—what Joan had avoided as a child by never leaving her desk or walking out of the public library she had visited most days after school. Being unloved had turned her into a writer, and her writerly way of living, alone most of the time, had not harmed her at all, or not much. Until this stealthy attack by Martin's swimmers, look at all she had accomplished so far.

Her sudden laugh was hollow and high, collapsing quickly, then trying to rise back up through her throat, tearing at her vocal cords, some inhuman wail wanting to be released, that she forced back down. How ridiculous, planning a termination and the resumption of her solitary life one minute, and in the next, designing a personal, private playground for an undesired child.

She closed her eyes and thought it was a perfect time to cry. She had not cried past the age of seven, when she found a pen and a notebook and began conjuring up her own people, people she could control and direct, living the complicated lives she chose for them, the good and the bad they were forced to endure.

When she opened her eyes, the late-afternoon sun had shifted, throwing her typewriter into a cone of warm light. The platinum band on her finger sparkled. If she were writing this as a story, if Joan were one of her own characters, would she see the movement of the sun, the gleam of the ring, as an omen or a blessing, something to be heeded or ignored? Her characters often suffered the sudden fall through a floor they had mistakenly believed was solid, a demarcation point between *then* and *now*, a point from which they could not retreat, when the *before* of their lives changed in an instant. She had written their devastations, then watched their brave resolutions to see it through, to welcome the *after*, regardless of what actions they ultimately took. She had never imagined it happening to her, or that it would feel this way, as if there were no ground at all to stand on, nothing within sight, the sky so far away.

This could be one of her own stories—a woman facing what was, for her, the unthinkable, and her love over the moon because of the news. What would she have the character do? After the anguish of discovering, too soon, her good husband's fallibility, would that woman pull herself out of the abyss, open her heart more, not abandon love, or eliminate the fledgling life within; would she welcome the quickening, become a wondrous pregnant woman, a loving mother, bask in the adoration of that flawed husband, their home a place where the good outweighed the bad, where eventual childhood hurts were magic-wanded away? That character might, Joan thought—and in the process discover her untapped abilities to live a full life, in real life, outside the pages of the stories she wrote, the novel-in-progress she was working on. That character would never abandon her own work, her reason for living, would remain a serious writer no matter what life threw at her, would finish her first novel, and the novel after that one, and the one after that, and all the novels that would follow, as she wrote and loved her unexpected child, and the second one too, through the run of delightful years. Of course, the woman's story would need some tragedy, some arc of calamity and catastrophe and misfortune and heartbreak, but this was not the time to ponder that. She knew she could write such a story, but could she write herself into it, become *that* eponymous Joan?

She heard Martin's car rumble into the driveway, the engine's long whistle of relief when it found itself at rest, and Joan thought, *I guess I'm going to try.*

"Joan Ashby Manning, where are you?" Martin called out, and immediately she wondered why she agreed to take his last name, even if its use was limited to their personal life, the name on their joint checking and savings accounts.

She heard him rattling paper bags in the kitchen; noise traveled fast in a house so small and contained, three bedrooms and two baths. Just right, really, for an incipient family. They had not yet figured out what to do with that third room, which echoed in its emptiness.

From her desk, she heard the pop of a cork, the whoosh of liquid poured into a glass, then the crinkle of foil pulled free from the bottle of sparkling apple cider, what all newly pregnant women seemed to drink, the faux elixir of celebration.

Joan looked at the hard-written pages of *The Sympathetic Executioners* and wondered whether it would be possible to finish the book in time.

"I'm still in here, Martin, but I'm coming," she called out.

She joined him in the kitchen. The sparkling apple cider in the fluted glass he handed her looked like a test tube of urine, but it was frothy, its bubbles fizzy, with a surprising, delicate sweetness she held for long seconds on her tongue. They walked out the back door and stood together on their land. When he reached for her hand, she allowed it, felt the way his swallowed hers whole.

"Thank you," Martin said. "I know what this means."

She was still down in the abyss, unable to see the treacherous path she would need to climb, to find traction again beneath her feet, and so Joan said nothing, remained silent, practiced what she thought *Joan* would do—stay quiet, keep her own counsel, figure things out.

Every so often, Martin thanked her again, and again, and again, always in a whisper of words, until the light bled out of the sky, the blue turning a sad, desolate gray. At the back door, before Joan followed Martin inside, she looked up once more, tried thinking of the sky as something more, as the heavens, the place where wishes were sent, where they were granted, but it looked only like an old rag wrung completely dry.

2

Even to herself, Joan Ashby could not deny the truth: she w*as* a pregnant goddess. Hormonal forces had turned her naturally good health into something patent and extraordinary. Her skin glistened, the whites of her eyes radiated, and her long hair, always a waterfall of black curls, was growing at a breathtaking rate, had already reached the small of her back, a perpetual tickle against her naked skin when she slept. Her eyelashes had become palm fronds over her bright-blue eyes, which had also altered, the color exotically deepening, eyes that startled her when she looked up while brushing her teeth. She had always been objective about her beauty, but even she was surprised when she glimpsed herself in a mirror; she *was* a goddess, and in the bath, a new nightly routine, she felt like a mermaid.

She often silently thanked the baby for being more thoughtful than she had expected it to be. She had feared it would punish her, for not wanting it, but she suffered no morning sickness or exhaustion, and as it grew, it kept itself nicely contained, swelling her gracefully, not wrenching Joan's natural physical delicacy into something cumbersome and ungainly.

The friendly people of Rhome frequently stopped her on the street, telling her she was a gorgeous mother-to-be, sometimes asking, sometimes not, before reaching out and rubbing her belly, every one of them saying, "For good luck," though whether she was to bring them good luck, or they her, she didn't know. At night, after her bath, when Martin wanted to do the same thing, she often said, "Please don't. I've been rubbed so many times today, I feel like a Buddha."

She was not the only pregnant woman in tiny Rhome. There were six others, but she was the town's first star. The celebrated writer from New York, with the dashing husband who was a neuro-ocular surgeon, who'd purchased a house out in the new development that was not formally named but some had taken to calling Peachtree, which made no sense to Joan. There were no peach trees in their neighborhood, no trees at all, not yet, no grass or gardens, just neighbors set far apart who waved to one another as they backed out of freshly graded driveways.

Small-town life had its benefits; she was not pursued like a fox by hounds, as she had been back in New York, her banal errands there somehow worthy of recording, a constant irritation because everyone shopped at the market, read the paper at the Laundromat, bought fresh fruit from the greengrocer. In Rhome, however, she wasn't completely anonymous. The Tell-Tale and the Inveterate Reader, the town's two bookstores, one on either end of the pretty main street, imaginatively named Strada di Felicità, had been artistically displaying her books in their windows for months, and the books had been flying off the shelves, so people recognized her from her photographs on the back flaps, from newspaper articles about her in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* that featured a picture, but they approached her diffidently, politely, with charitable words, asking that she inscribe the title pages of her books, wanting to know, after rubbing her belly, when the baby was due, if she had any favorite names in mind, if she and the doctor were having an easy time settling in. Joan smiled graciously at the gentle intrusions, introduced herself properly, learned names and professions, engaged in a different version of life's chitchat than perhaps the locals were used to; she tended to dig quickly past the superficial, asking pointed, gritty questions. But she could see they liked her, and she felt welcomed, even if it was the baby that served as the icebreaker, the pregnancy making her seem less formidable, easier to approach.

Only once did a man tail her, when she was five months pregnant and taking a break late in the day from the novel, the new paragraphs still in her mind:

The magazine was glossy and expensively produced, printed in Englewood, New Jersey, and each month, there were twenty pages of classifieds under a single heading: Kind Killers Wanted. Each ad a heartfelt request seeking the services of executioners. The one that caught Silas and Abe's attention read:

WANTED—CARING FATHER KILLER: My father once was a delightful man, a high school principal, who was fair and firm. He would be appalled if he knew how he groaned every hour of every day, if he knew the thick auburn hair that was his secret pride had thinned down to strands, exposing a skull tender as an egg. I can tell that he knows he has veered far from his course, that he has lost the thread of his life. He used to sling words with aplomb, but his eyes now reflect an awareness that he is regressing to an infantile state. He should not suffer this way. Please respond if interested. Will pay going rate.

The man tailing Joan froze in his spot on the sidewalk when Joan wandered into a store, then followed in her wake when she resumed her stroll. She turned to look back at him and white stars exploded in the air, the flash of the man's camera, a photographer stalking her, and Odile, who owned the Tell-Tale, flew out the front door of her shop and gave him hell. When the man yielded instantly, throwing his hands protectively around his camera and running fast down the street, Joan knew he wasn't a regular among the mob that used to trail her in New York—none of them would have given up so easily. But Odile didn't stop yelling until he disappeared around the corner.

There were requests that she give readings at the bookstores, at the library, that she jump into the town-run book group held monthly at the Rhome Community Center and lead all of Rhome's serious readers. She made a list of recommended books for the group's leader, an elderly chatterbox named Renee, who said, "I'd be happy to step aside, absolutely happy, happy to do that, thrilled to be one of your followers. I'll make sure we have fresh-baked cookies and real lemonade at the center for book group. What's your favorite? Oatmeal? Chocolate chip? Butter? Just tell me, and I'll make sure all is in order. We'll get you a comfortable chair too, not one of the metal ones the rest of us use."

But Joan declined everything that would have swallowed her time, kept her from working on *The Sympathetic Executioners*, the status of which her agent, Volkmann, was checking on regularly: "You've disappeared from the civilized world, so we have to make sure your voice rings out from that hinterland you've gone to, and is especially loud and clear. So write fast, Joan, write very, very fast."

Martin, too, frequently asked how the book was coming along, usually when she was in her nightly bath, when she needed absolute quiet to let her brain think on its own, to let the baby roll around without being slapped down. Each time, when he said, "Can I read something?" his smile and eagerness left their imprints behind, papering over her peace. *Other Small Spaces* was already hugely out in the world and she had been finishing the last of the connected stories that became *Fictional Family Life* when their courtship began. During their weekend visits with each other, she had seriously assessed the impact of burgeoning love on her work, whether love altered the time she spent at her desk in her East Village apartment, or at the Friedheim Music Library at Johns Hopkins when she was with Martin in Baltimore. But her output had not slacked off. She had written most of *The Sympathetic Executioners* with him in her life, experiencing his magnanimous nature, his respect for her creative intensity, when she returned to him spacy and otherworldly at night. Not once had he ever presumed to ask to read her pages, and if he had, she would have debated whether the relationship could survive. Now, when she was pregnant with his child, he was turning into a man claiming such a right. She knew he did not mean it that way, but more than once, after such a request, she had the desire to take her belly and what it contained, and walk out the door. "Maybe soon," she would say, not meaning it at all.

Several times a week, Joan was at the community center, in her maternity bathing suit, swimming slow laps. The other pregnant Rhome women swam too, breast-stroking up and down the lanes, keeping their heads dry, talking about their sex lives now that they were ballooning, about their food cravings. The only thing Joan craved was the buoyancy of water. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, at noon, she pinned up her abundantly long hair, pulled down the swim cap, and swam the crawl with her head underwater.

Augusta, Carla, Dawn, Emily, Meg, and Teresa were the "Pregnant Six," as they had taken to calling themselves, childhood friends who had gone away separately to university or college, then

traveled, before returning home for good. In the locker room afterward, when they talked, Joan was surprised that seeing the world had not altered their desires, their plans, did not convince them to settle down somewhere more interesting—any large city really—to participate in the bigger life she so recently left.

The women huddled around her, wanting to know whether New York was as dangerous as they heard on the news. When they told her of the countries they visited after receiving their degrees, they called that time "our youth," and it was the usual trio: France, England, Italy.

Where had Joan been, they wanted to know. She did not mention all the countries she visited while touring for *Fictional Family Life*, and said instead, "So no one's been to India? That's the country I want to see. Ever since I was a kid." She and Martin had not taken a honeymoon, would not do so now that she was pregnant, but it was to India that Joan wanted them to go. It didn't matter much that Martin waffled about it, said he had no interest, did not want to be immersed in the dirt and the poverty, who knew when they would take a trip anywhere with life already altered.

The Pregnant Six felt as Martin did about India, and Joan did not explain her fascination with the country. She wasn't sure if they were readers or not—none of them spoke to her in the star terms the other Rhome locals did, did not mention that they knew she was a writer—and so she did not say India beckoned loudly because of the books she had read in her childhood, by E. M. Forster, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and others, all describing ways of being, of seeing, landscapes alien and wild, completely different from what she had seen from the windows of her parents' house—other similar houses with backyards and front yards, identical trees and flowers planted in the same neat arrangements. Even in spring and fall, when the flowers were blooming, the world around her had been soaked in sepia, but in the Indian stories she read, flora and fauna teemed and seethed, and hard lives were fully, vibrantly lived out in the streets; everyone had a story to tell, their own or somebody else's. Those small and poor Indian towns in the books had been immensely more interesting to Joan than where she was growing up. The books had been a touchstone, as both reader and writer.

The questions Joan asked of the Pregnant Six in their post-swim conversations, when everyone's skin reeked with heavy-duty chlorine, allowed her to glimpse beneath their placid surfaces, their constant giggles, the way they brushed stray hairs off one another's faces, complimented a pedicure color. They were not unsubstantial women. Carla owned Craftables on Laurel Place, just off Strada di Felicità. Joan had wandered in and immediately out, the place a warren of cubbyholes filled with colorful skeins of knitting yarn and embroidery thread. Needlepoint samplers hung from fishing lines. There were trays of beads and amulets, and silk cords on which those beads and amulets were to be strung, in every shade of the rainbow, each color bunched together, thick as horses' tails, hanging on hooks. Carla also ran a knitting group at the store, and an embroidery group, and three times a year she brought in artists who created original drawings on needlepoint canvases for her customers. "It's commissioned self-art, really, if that's a real thing. Because the customer only has a picture on mesh until she needlepoints it herself." Joan had seen the prices on those original samples; Carla charged upward of five hundred dollars. An excellent business apparently for Rhome, shilling out the goods for pursuits unfathomable to Joan, but she had dashed down a few notes later, about a town buried beneath an avalanche of yarn, the people unaware of the disaster because they never walked out their front doors, too busy knitting and needling their lives away.

Dawn owned Boulangerie de Rhome, next to the Inveterate Reader. After college, she had taken a thirty-two-week intensive pastry-arts program in France, and opened the store immediately upon her return, with funding from her father. "I paid him back years ago with interest," she told Joan, holding her hand up for slaps from all the others. She was up at four each morning, working in the kitchen behind the shop, turning out all kinds of French breads—Pain a l'Ail, Pain au Froment, Pain aux Noix, Pain au Beurre, Pain Beignet—as well as the recognizable baguettes, and Joan's favorite that she bought each week, Pain Bâtard, bread that came out of the oven lopsided, in odd shapes, were mistakes. There were cast-iron French bistro tables in the shop and cooling cases filled with neat

rows of delectable petit fours, tarts and tortes and éclairs, custards and curds and ganaches. Martin had already deemed Boulangerie de Rhome off-limits for himself. He had not, he said, known he had such a sweet tooth.

Meg and Teresa's vocations were more ordinary; both were teachers, Meg of sixth graders at Rhome Elementary, Teresa of physics at Rhome High.

Augusta and Emily were lawyers in practice together. "We focus," Emily said, "on family and matrimonial law, including adoptions and divorces, as well as real estate, trusts, wills, and the execution of estates." It sounded to Joan as if they were the town's grim reapers, covering everything from cradle to grave. She wondered how a town Rhome's size generated sufficient legal matters to keep them both employed; its population was somewhere around seven thousand. Did that many houses change hands? she wondered. Were there so many people needing to bequeath vast estates? And although the six were proof that the town had no issue with fertility, she wondered about the number of adoptions they facilitated. She had not seen, as she did in New York, the Russian and Chinese children pushed around in strollers by parents who clearly did not share ethnicity with their bundles of joy. But apparently the town brought most of its legal work to Augusta and Emily, because sometimes one or the other was too busy to make it to the pool at noon.

If Joan had not inquired, she would have learned only that the Pregnant Six had all married boys they knew, but had not dated, back in junior high—two Bills, one Jim, one Dave, one Kevin, and one Steve—and were proud of their expanding bellies, their bounteous breasts, Augusta especially, who said, "This is the first time in my life I've worn a bra." When they spoke about their stores, their teaching responsibilities, their practices, their accomplishments, they were individual, stand-alone women. But when they massed together, as they always did in the locker room, they colonized, insect-like, the group emitting a high drone. Perhaps it was the similarity of their haircuts, blunt and bobbed, in various versions of butterscotch, that gave them the appearance of a hive. When Joan joined them there, the last usually to leave the pool, they were buzzing about, like a collective on a mission to haul back crumbs to those left behind. And yet, when her entry split them apart, they resumed talking in normal voices, laughing about how many times a night they rose to pee, bemoaning, with pride, the loss of their figures, the weight they had gained, quick to share tips and advice, including Joan in those sessions.

"Joan's the lucky one," they said. "At your age, you won't lose your figure at all, and whatever changes will spring back fast. We'll have to work harder." Before this accident of life, Joan never imagined worrying about her figure having to spring back. And she wondered why the Pregnant Six seemed intent on stressing their ages. Perhaps by small-town standards they were old for first-time motherhood, all of them thirty, treating her as if she were a member of a different generation, though she was not that much younger than any of them. If the baby came late, she would be twenty-six when she gave birth.

The Pregnant Six liked talking about how their priorities would change. It was husband, then work, then themselves, but soon it would be baby, then husband, then work. They set themselves up as the wise ones, with inside knowledge, though all of them were novices at pregnancy, at eventually being mothers. During those locker-room cabals, Joan silently bucked at their certainty about how they would conduct their new lives, pronouncements solid as stone. Joan thought there was something between her own mother's disinterest and this hovering the Pregnant Six were already embracing. It should not be impossible, she thought, to keep her different aims and goals separated, to move back and forth between simultaneous worlds, to live her various lives as they unfolded in parallel universes.

With so many expecting in Rhome, the community center decided a prenatal yoga class was a good idea, to be held twice a week at one in the afternoon, a lunchtime retreat for the women in the midst of their busy days. Teresa had been consulted about the chosen hour; she sat on the community center board and thought yoga after swimming would make a nice combination. Joan did not hear about the new yoga class until they were all in the locker room after swimming one day, and the

Pregnant Six stripped off their wet suits and pulled on loose track pants or shorts, bra tops and T-shirts, then clamored around Joan, who was still in her own dripping suit, and said she had to attend, smiling and encouraging, reaching out to touch a sodden curl, telling her they would have fun.

"It won't be the same without you," they cried out. "You've got to come, at least once." She had never been invited into a group, a clique really, and it was entirely because of the baby.

Her instinct was to decline, but one Friday, in her sixth month, after her swim spent pondering the family of tombstone carvers who had appeared in the novel—a mother and father and three daughters given free rein to choose the gravestones, to decide on the embellishments and the epitaphs of those eliminated by the sympathetic executioners—Joan found herself in a small mirrored room, standing on a mat, listening to a broad-shouldered woman telling them about prenatal yoga. The woman's hair was a brazen red, a fakery that failed to impart the youth she must have been after.

"Hi, everyone. I'm Lannie. By your wet heads, I'm guessing you've been swimming, which is good cardiovascular exercise, but yoga will help you stay limber, improve your balance and circulation, keep your muscles toned, and teach you to breathe right and relax, which will come in handy for the physical demands of labor, birth, and motherhood. I'm going to show you several poses, but we're going to start with *ujjayi*, a special breathing technique which will prime you for childbirth. *Ujjayi* will let you fight the urge to tighten up when you're in pain or afraid during labor. You'll take in air slowly through your nose until your lungs are completely filled, then exhale completely, until your stomach compresses."

There were laughs and the Pregnant Six grabbed at their bellies.

"Yes, of course," Lannie said, "but you'll still be able to feel it from the inside. Now watch me."

She inhaled until her large nose narrowed and her chest rose up like a bulwark, then there was a whoosh of an exhale that went on forever, which Joan found loud and annoying.

"Got it, everyone?" and the Pregnant Six yelled, "Got it."

They were their own cheerleading squad, and despite their inclusion of her, Joan felt distaste, remembering the horde of girls at her high school, she younger than everyone in her grade by several years, fourteen when she was a senior, and those girls, in short swingy cheer-skirts and crop-tops, roamed the hallways, making what they believed were pithy, hurtful remarks in superior voices that made some kids cry. About Joan they once said, "There's the girl who sure loves her pens. Wonder what she does with them alone in her bed." An unclever comment that had failed to land, proving to Joan, again, how easily people cracked away at others' humanity, the pain they inflicted comforting something inside of themselves. She couldn't help wondering what the Pregnant Six said about her when she was not among them, when they were massed and crooning together.

They practiced *ujjayi* breathing, their exhalations out of sync, until Lannie said, "Okay. Good enough for the first time. We're ready now for our first *asana*. *Virabhadrasana I*, a standing posture, the first of the three warrior poses.

"Yogis are known for their nonviolent ways, but the *Bhagavad Gita*, the most respected of all the yoga texts, is actually a dialogue between two famous and feared warriors that takes place on a battlefield between two great armies spoiling for a fight. What is commemorated in this pose is the *spiritual warrior* who bravely battles against the universal enemy, *avidya*, which is self-ignorance, the ultimate source of all our suffering. What you all want to work at battling in yourselves."

It was obvious to Joan that Lannie had memorized her yoga patter, but into *Virabhadrasana I* Joan went. Then *Virabhadrasana II* and *III*, *Tree*, *Downward Dog*, *Cat-Cow*, and good old-fashioned squats, out of place when Lannie was talking on about the meditative benefits of yoga, silencing their inner dialogues, and learning just to be.

Joan found she was curiously limber and graceful doing the poses, that she enjoyed heeding the instructions, ceding control for the hour, focused not on her novel's unfolding story, as she did when she swam, but on the mystical way she was contorting her body, watching herself in the mirror transitioning easily from one pose to the next, despite her belly, and the sloshing, along with a kick or

two, from inside. When she looked at the others, she was surprised by their precious way of holding themselves, mincing through the poses, hands rarely straying from their cargo, as if they were vessels for the world's next great philosophers.

"Time for *Baddha konasana*, sometimes known as cobbler's or tailor's pose," Lannie said. "Drag your mats to the wall. Backs up tight and straight against it, put your soles together and let your knees fall apart—

"*Meg, you're not grounded. Get grounded.* Yes, spread those ass cheeks apart so you're stable."

At last, they were told to lie on their sides on the mats. "Time for a pregnancy-modified *Shavasna*, corpse pose. Get comfortable. Eyes closed. Arms and legs relaxed. Palms facing upward. Now, *inhale.* Pull that breath into your lungs. Now, *exhale.* Force all that air out of you. Now, everyone, tense your entire body gently. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Now, let go. I'm going to shut off the lights and you can stay as long as you want."

When Joan opened her eyes in the darkened room, she was alone, her mat the only one left on the floor. The clock above the door read 3:05; the class had been over for more than an hour. She felt happy, hazily happy, a feeling that lasted as she drove home, and through two more hours of writing, and through dinner with Martin, laughing when he told her about the day's mishaps made by the residents assigned to him, listening carefully to him describe the initial steps for a radical surgery he was conceiving that might be able to restore sight in a permanent way for certain ocular diseases. Through it all, she honestly felt the glow of pregnancy; she had not felt it, not truly, before.

In bed that night, lying on her side with her back to Martin, straddling the body pillow as if it were a horse, she said, "I liked the yoga a lot. I'm going to do the classes with Lannie, but after the baby comes, I'm going to find a real yoga teacher and real yoga classes, even if I have to drive to another town."

Martin yawned and said, "Sounds good. Whatever you want to do sounds good to me," and then he was lightly snoring.

Joan thought about her old neighborhood in New York, the yoga studio she had often passed. Not once had she thought of opening its door, going in, checking it out. She felt her heart softening toward the baby a bit more; the way it was offering her something new in exchange for room and board.

3

Silas and Abe were left in a wicker basket at a firehouse, to the right of the red bay doors, found by the captain, who looked beneath the tattered blanket and discovered twins, nametags pinned to their onesies. A cooler bag was next to the basket, diapers on top, nursing bottles below. When the captain pulled out a bottle, it was full. All the bottles were full, each one labeled *Fresh Breast Milk* in fluorescent pink ink, and dated; the one in his hand dated that day.

The captain carried the basket and bag into the house, and his husky men, who threw themselves into fires, cooed over the babies, made goo-goo faces and trilling sounds, changed them and fed them while he called Children's Services.

The woman from the authority arrived and said, "At least they're infants. That's the key. They'll be placed in a heartbeat."

The captain said, "Please make sure they're kept together. Hard enough start to life, without them having to go it alone. They'll always be looking for each other, if you don't do the right thing."

It wasn't what the woman wanted; separating them would make her job easier, but the captain made her swear, and she, a failed mother herself, agreed.

During the following years, as infants, toddlers, young boys, then teens, Silas and Abe moved across the Midwest, from Kansas to Iowa to Indiana, coming to rest in Illinois. Their various foster parents, four sets in total, all of good cheer, made sure the boys had plenty to eat, warm comforters on their beds, books to read and television to watch, basketball hoops for H-O-R-S-E, and the benefits of fine public-school educations. And they were good boys—both blond, sunny, and light—handsome boys popular at the schools they attended, and with the girls who sidled up. Sweet and shy girls liked them too, not just the fast ones whose hips molded early into sensuous curves, whose breasts jiggled inside red or black bras.

For the past five years, Silas and Abe had lived in a three-story house in Chicago. Of all the houses they'd lived in, this one felt most like home. Their foster parents were an accountant and his piano-teacher wife. Short people from hardy stock, although the hardy stock was unclear because both wore thick glasses, were blind without them. The boys called them Frederick and Shirley, but when talking about their days at school, about their nightly and future dreams, sometimes their minds slipped, and to themselves, they replaced Frederick with *Dad*, Shirley with *Mom*. That was how close the twins felt to them.

On their eighteenth birthday, they crashed down the stairs for Shirley's annual birthday-king breakfast—pancakes, waffles, omelets, thirty strips of bacon, and fresh-squeezed orange juice. Bottles of boysenberry syrup and maple and a jar of Marshmallow Fluff on the dining-room table, along with an enormous sheet cake sprouting twin sets of eighteen candles. Streamers decorated the room, and from the ceiling, a homemade sign read: HAPPY BIRTHDAY! YOUR FUTURE AWAITS!

When the platters were emptied, the orange juice finished, the cake plates smeared in frosting, Shirley shooed them into the living room. Silas and Abe resisted. They had been raised well by all their fosters, to bring their manners with them wherever they were, to help out. "We'll clean up," the boys said, and Shirley shook her head. "Not necessary. We have a gift for each of you, the kind of gift that gives and gives."

Under the arch that led into the living room, they slipped off their shoes, Shirley's rule: No shoes on the carpeting. But she surprised them. "Not necessary this time. Tie those tennis shoes back up right now. Keep 'em on, you're going to need them. Now go and sit on the couch."

The boys retied their laces and tiptoed over the carpet, looking at each other sideways, acknowledging silently the freakishness of being allowed to do the forbidden. They sat on the couch,

just inches apart, and in came Frederick and Shirley, both barefooted, each wrestling a large present in their arms. They placed the wrapped packages just beyond Silas and Abe's tennis-shoed feet.

Shirley sat down at the baby grand and played the birthday song. Frederick clapped his hands and sang along. Then Shirley twirled around on the bench and said, "Ready? All right, go! Rip those bows right off, tear through the paper. We're not saving any of it this time."

The boys looked at each other again. What was meant by all these new instructions, the breaking of her inviolable rules? Shirley had a trunk in the basement filled with used wrapping paper, ironed precisely, and bows, second-, third-, and fourth-hand, that she kept in plastic bags.

They shrugged and did as instructed.

When the wrapping paper was off, standing before them were brand-new rolling suitcases, the fabric in army green. The suitcases were nice, but not what the twins had been hoping for, which was one of two things: to be adopted by the Jacksons or given a used car they could share.

"Thank you very much," they each said.

"That's just the first gift," Frederick said.

"Yes, like we said, this is a gift that will keep on giving," Shirley said. "Go on, boys, unzip the suitcases."

Inside the bags, each found new T-shirts, socks, underpants, jeans, and pajamas, and at the bottom, underneath the everyday attire, the boys pulled out black suits, crisp white shirts flat in their store packaging, marked 13 ½-inch neck, one tie each, in the same design, Silas's in red, Abe's in blue. The boys were confused. Shirley had recently taken them shopping for the summer clothes folded away upstairs in their shared room. They had not worn suits to their high school graduation and wondered why they would be given them now, when summer was just starting, when they would be lifeguarding at the public pool, in swim trunks and flip-flops all day long. They were looking forward to marking themselves with zinc oxide. Their faces in tribal patterns.

"Thank you, Frederick," said Silas.

"Thank you, Shirley," said Abe.

"You've been so generous to us," Silas said.

"Why suits?" asked Abe.

The Jacksons did not answer, but Frederick said, "Now put everything back in and zip up the suitcases." Which the boys did.

"Now roll them over here, to the front door," Shirley instructed, and the boys obeyed.

When the twins were at the front door, with their suitcases beside them, and Frederick and Shirley facing them, like short tackling blocks, Frederick said, "Put out your hands for the last birthday gift."

Two white envelopes. They peeked inside; a wad of crisp bills, marked by Shirley's iron.

"That, boys, is a thousand dollars each," Frederick said, and Shirley reached between them and opened the front door. The boys turned their heads and looked outside. The four of them stood there in silence, staring through the open door, down the walk lined in daisies, to the street, where cars were neatly parked. A little girl on a yellow bike rode past and beeped her horn.

"It's the way it works," Frederick said at last. "We really are sorry."

"Wait, what?" Silas said.

"What works what way?" Abe asked, his eyes wide, never moving off Frederick's face.

Then Shirley said, "You've been selected, so there's no reason to delay the inevitable. Anyway, we need your room for the next set of needy kids."

Over the years, the Jacksons had said the twins would never have to go, would not be fostered out at eighteen, would stay with them for as long as was right, through college and graduate school. Silas was interested in architecture, Abe in medicine. There had been talk, when they were younger, that the Jacksons would make sure that by the time the twins walked out the open front door, they would

be set up for life. What Shirley said made no sense to them, but clearly something had happened, or gone wrong, to change the minds of their surrogate parents.

Silas and Abe protested, then yelled, then grabbed on to the frame of the front door, but Frederick and Shirley, short as they were, were much stronger than they looked, stronger than the boys expected, all that hardy stock, and they found themselves outside the Jacksons' home, outside of *their* home, they thought, the handles of their rolling luggage gripped tight in their fists.

Silas did not look back, but Abe did, and he saw the front door slam, heard the lock turn.

It was a shock they could not process, standing halfway down the flowery path. Everything they owned, collected, cared for, was on shelves and in drawers, in the closet, up in their room. Silas had a prized baseball he caught at a Chicago Cubs game, and a mitt he was still oiling, yearbooks signed by all the girls, and Abe thought of his microscope, a present from the Jacksons last Christmas, and the books he had acquired so far in the Netter Collection: tomes on anatomy, biochemistry, cardiology, and epidemiology. He had planned to use his lifeguard earnings to purchase, at the end of summer, the volumes on anesthesiology, infectious diseases, and pathology. There were also the two dirty magazines his friend Tad had given him, tucked under Abe's mattress, naked pictures of gorgeous girls with their beavers fully exposed. Silas had lost his cherry, but Abe had not.

"What are they talking about? Selected for what?" Silas said. He was the tough twin, but tears were spilling out of his eyes, down his cheeks. He was cross-legged on the sidewalk, his face hidden behind his hands.

All their life, until this moment, Silas had been their leader, the more dominant twin, the one who made the plans, who led the way, but it was Abe who said, "Pull yourself together, Silas, we've got to do something. We've got to find a place where we can think. A place that has a phone. There's the minimart three blocks down, let's go there. We'll get Yoo-hoos and sit on the curb and figure out what to do. We'll call Frederick and Shirley. Maybe this is all just a joke. An initiation of sorts."

When Silas did not move, Abe laid his hand on his brother's shoulder and softly patted until Silas nodded, and rose, and followed Abe.

Thirty minutes after their kingly breakfast celebrating their eighteenth birthdays, they were rolling their luggage down the street, the wheels loud in the noon quiet of the summer Sunday.

On the corner of Unsworth Avenue and Third was the Exxon station and the minimart behind it. A man in a mechanic's jumpsuit was pumping gas for a pretty woman in a white Mercedes. "You Silas and Abe Canwell?" Abe nodded for them both. "You're expected. Go on into the market. Ask for Milt. He'll give you what you need."

Joan finished reading the opening pages of *The Sympathetic Executioners* and dropped them to the floor. She was stretched out on the living-room couch because she no longer fit at her desk. The couch, a hand-me-down from a colleague of Martin's who had moved on to another hospital five hundred miles away, was ugly, tight checks in blue and green, but it was deep and comfortable and supported Joan firmly. Physically, she was as comfortable as she could be these days, but her heart felt squeezed tight, and it wasn't the baby agitating her.

She had finished writing the novel by her own deadline, two weeks in advance of her estimated due date, the necessary time to catch her breath, before making final edits, bundling it up, and sending it off to Volkmann. She had imagined a third book tour, wondered what she and Martin would do when it was time for her to leave Rhome, leave the baby behind, and travel again. She had wondered how old the baby would be when that happened, and if she would feel torn away and unmoored, or find herself stepping lightly and fast.

For the last seven days, she had not peeked at all at the manuscript; instead she kept herself out of the house. Mornings she spent at Dawn's Boulangerie, though Dawn was not there, eating warm Pain Bâtard with butter and raspberry jam, drinking mugs of decaffeinated Earl Grey, and making lists of unusable baby names, like Plutarch, Reimann, and Winchester; Esmeralda, Clothilde, and Aine—names that would encourage targeted bullying, a few impossible to pronounce. She read them

to Martin at night, to hear him laugh. After, she swam in the overheated community pool, catching glimpses of the cold weather through the large windows and the clear retractable roof. Gloomy skies every day, rain, sleet, one brief snowstorm that left no evidence behind. The yoga class had ended, but she slid into the warm water with pleasure, with relief at being weightless, thinking the baby must feel as she did, floating in its pool of amniotic fluid.

She swam alone, sometimes floating on her back, until the baby rolled over, rolling her over. The Pregnant Six no longer swam, were no longer pregnant. They were *nesting*, they all said to Joan, when she had driven from one house to the next, delivering identical baby gifts to them all. Each had gone into labor on a separate day, six days in a row, and now their babies, every one had given birth to a girl, consumed them. Watching breasts pulled out at feeding time, listening to the baby talk that came from the new mothers' mouths, Joan promised herself she would feed her child in private, talk to it in her regular voice, in full sentences that did not rise up at the end, as if everything in an infant's nascent life was already an existential question.

Head underwater, swimming back and forth, she spent the seven days considering the theme of her book: *The traumatic experience of a child also symbolizes the eternal verities of the human condition.*

As a teenager, she had read all of the short stories by the Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand, but only after *Fictional Family Life* was published had she come upon an old interview with Anand in which he discussed some of what Joan's own writing was after. With this first novel, she had sought to wrangle with the concept obliquely, had researched Stockholm syndrome, and the statistics about how many vulnerable people could be persuaded to resist their own morality, how likely people were to be hypnotized. She had been interested in exploring what happened to children abandoned at birth, who were later dropped into a strange alternative world. What happened especially when those children had been well tended by caring foster parents—would the tragedy of their unwanted births and abandonment wipe out the interim temporary love, make them amenable to killing? If they were led in that direction, given the tools and a code to live by, a rationalization tucked into their skin that allowed them to consider the work noble, would they become euthanasiasts for hire? She had liked the underground group of foster parents analyzing the children they sheltered, searching out those with the requisite aptitudes. She had wanted to see what happened with Silas and Abe, if they naturally took to the work because they unconsciously tapped into the early realities of their existence.

Now, on the couch, the rain sheeting down, their four acres a muddy field, Joan was debating her authorial choices. She'd deliberately begun the book on their eighteenth birthdays, with just a quick summation of their fostered years. She had wanted to get to the crux, to the meat, was most interested in writing about what happened next, the path they were led to discover, whether they had the strength and rectitude to resist, or whether they would give in, welcome the lives chosen for them, the work they were told they were suited to do.

Had she made a mistake? Should she have begun further back in time, written in depth about Silas and Abe's entry into the world, the parents who had made them, the nature of that relationship, whether it was abusive or simply bad luck, two kids finding themselves parents too early in their lives.

The questions she had not had to answer by starting the book where she did raced through her brain: Who had abandoned the infants at the firehouse—the mother, the father, the two of them skulking before dawn to leave the basket at the door? Was the mother all on her own, living in a falling-down shack, pumping her milk to fill those bottles she inked with a pink marker? Or were the parents still a team, with regular jobs and tax returns, but the prospect of raising two at once, and identical, was overwhelming, far beyond what had been anticipated?

Had she made a grave error by not exploring the twins' early years, the balance of power between Silas and Abe, how it might have teetered, before settling?

Perhaps it was the hormones, her brain no longer wholly her own, her intelligence usurped by the baby, but the dismay did not lift away.

She read on:

Then Silas and Abe were through the double glass doors. A fat man with stringy black hair and a silver ring through his nose was manning the minimart's cash register.

"Come closer, young gentlemen. I'm Milt. No last name needed and absolutely no reason at all to be frightened. I get that it's a scary time for you, but all will be explained, all will be okay."

It was Abe who bravely approached the counter when Milt held out a rolled-up magazine. Abe took it and stepped back and Silas leaned over his shoulder. The magazine fanned out and revealed no name on the cover, no sharply photographed picture. The back and front were completely blank, shiny though, and solidly black, the paper of good quality, heavyweight.

"You can read the articles later, a fascinating bunch this time around," Milt said. "Lots to learn in there. But for now, I want you to read the classifieds, really read them carefully, then come back in and talk to me, tell me which one grabs your guts first. Only then will I explain what's going on, the presents you were given, the reason for the suits, the shirts, the ties. In those classifieds, young gentlemen, is your future. Anyone need something to drink before taking the first step?"

Abe stepped forward again and nodded. "I'd like a chocolate Yoo-hoo, Milt," then turned to his brother and said, "Silas, what do you want?"

In later chapters, they learned to pick locks, to move stealthily, to disguise themselves utterly, to kill gently with their bare hands and not leave a mark. The code the twins would live by was drilled into them: *Only by knowing the truth of a person can I guarantee that those I free from pain are dispatched with pure beating hearts, belonging to both killer and victim.* Their preparation included boning up on their subjects. They were handed large blue three-ring notebooks that contained the voluminous histories of their targets, everything about their lives, their loves, the people they had cared for or hurt.

Joan liked the shocking intimacy of the twins befriending those marked for death, the murders paid for in advance by thoughtful family members who wanted their loved ones no longer to suffer from brain tumors and cancers and cirrhosis and Alzheimer's and Parkinson's and systemic organ failure and any other disease that broke down the flesh or the mind.

Their first target, an elderly lady named Ginny Sauvage, pink-fleshed and white-haired in her retirement community bed, looked innocent in old age, held out her hands when the twins introduced themselves, after slipping past the guards, evading the nurses roaming the floor. But with those hands, now crippled and clawed, Ginny Sauvage had once beaten every one of her children.

Now that Ginny Sauvage had been found, her location determined, her mobility assessed, the twins made their way out of the retirement community and waited at the leafy entrance for their ride.

Abe said, "She was a brute, Silas, you've got to remember that, when we return to do the job. I've found what I need, something black in my pulse, and I'll teach you how to find it in yourself, how to feel it moving through you, the way you can harness it, and let it do the work for you."

Hours later, when Joan finished reading, the manuscript pages were out of order, no longer neatly sequential, but it didn't matter. It seemed to her there was something all wrong about the book. Was it too dark and deadly? Did it suffer from the lack of that unwritten familial history and backstory? Whatever it was, she had not found her way in.

She huffed into a seated position, then up off the couch, and made her slow way down the hall, into her study. She dropped the manuscript on her desk, turned away, then turned back. One by one, Joan dropped the four shelved dictionaries onto the five-hundred-page manuscript, listening to the booms of those tomes, feeling the reverberations in her body, until her work was completely hidden from view.

She thought about calling Volkmann, asking her to read it, as a reader, not as an agent ready to deliver the anticipated book to an eager publisher, having Martin read it as well.

In the novels of others, Joan always flipped first to the acknowledgments page, read the names of those who had provided the author with *immeasurable help*, *essential help*, *critical help*, *guidance*,

love, *good meals*, *a place to write looking at the ocean, a lake, a pond, a sand dune.* There were no acknowledgments listed in Joan's collections; she had not sought input from others, had relied on her own instincts to determine when the work was complete, exactly as she wanted it to be, had fought against the editors assigned her and won. She had not felt anyone deserved to be thanked.

She would not alter her methods now, she decided, she would stay true to herself. She would not give *The Sympathetic Executioners* to Volkmann or to Martin, their thoughts and impressions were irrelevant. She knew how she felt about the book. Intended to further the tremendous trajectory of her literary career, it would not have that effect; she would not be turning it in.

There was a niggling thought that Joan erased in an instant. The baby inside of her had done nothing wrong, had not leached away something vital in her, had not thinned her out as a writer. For a brief moment, the tumult lifted; that she did not apportion blame to the baby, that she considered the faults of the book all her own, seemed as good a start to motherhood as any.

In the nursery, she turned on the light, a small chandelier she and Martin found at another weekend yard sale. At night, when it was lit, the teardrop crystals threw magical floating shadows at the walls, dappled the ceiling. The room was now painted a pale yellow, the color of buttercups, a neutral color because Martin did not want to learn ahead of time whether it was a boy or a girl. It had been furnished for weeks. Crib against the far wall, with colorful mobiles hanging above, changing table across the way. A large bookcase against the long wall, already filled with thick books, none meant for children.

She sat down heavily in the recliner, put her feet up on the ottoman, and opened to where she'd left off the previous afternoon in Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* She had been reading aloud to the baby for months, had already read it *Anna Karenina*, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, the stories in the Portable Faulkner. She had thrown out all of Hemingway. The words he used to depict his narrow range of characters, his adoration of machismo, felt wrong on her tongue, too salty and hard-bitten, and if the baby was a boy she did not want him to turn out that way, that view of women congealed in his brain. She had replaced Hemingway with Jane Austen.

Joan hoped the baby would sense from the womb that she was treating it like a whole person, that by initiating it early into a life of books, she might create an embryonic connection between them, smoothing away any jagged edges in advance of their introduction to each other, or at least make the initial introduction smoother than it might otherwise be.

She still could not imagine holding a baby, her baby, in her arms. When the no-longer Pregnant Six had offered, lifting their babies into the air, ready to hand them over, Joan had demurred, rubbed her nose, and said, "I think I've got a touch of a cold." The bonding she knew she would have to do, it could only occur with her own.

"Okay, we're picking up near the top of page 376, in the Penguin Classics edition—

She gave him her hand, and muttered some word which was inaudible even to him; she gave him her hand, and immediately endeavoured to resume it, but he held it clenched within his own, and she felt that she was his prisoner. He was standing close to her now, and she could not escape from him. She was trembling with fear lest worse might betide her even than this. She had promised to marry him, and now she was covered with dismay as she felt rather than thought how very far she was from loving the man to whom she had given this promise.

'Alice,' he said, 'I am a man once again. It is only now that I can tell you what I have suffered during these last few years.' He still held her hand, but he had not as yet attempted any closer embrace. She knew that she was standing away from him awkwardly, almost showing her repugnance to him; but it was altogether beyond her power to assume an attitude of ordinary ease. 'Alice,' he continued, 'I feel that I am a strong man again, armed to meet the world at all points. Will you not let me thank you for what you have done for me?'

She must speak to him! Though the doing so should be ever so painful to her, she must say some word to him which should have in it a sound of kindness. After all, it was his undoubted right to come

to her, and the footing on which he assumed to stand was simply that which she herself had given to him. It was not his fault if at this moment he inspired her with disgust rather than with love.

Joan read to the baby until she had finished the chapter called *Passion Versus Prudence.*

The day before her water broke, before she knew that day would be remembered that way, Joan trashed *The Sympathetic Executioners.* She ripped up the pages until her hands were worn out, crumpled up the rest into loose, crinkly balls, stuffed it all into a trash bag, stuffed the trash bag into the garbage can at the side of the house. She would never revisit the work, had no need or desire to keep the book, not even for posterity, not even as proof that she had gone beyond the short-story form for which she was so praised. She would have to start all over again, a new novel from scratch.

Martin had not noticed when the typing stopped a few weeks before, had not been aware that she'd finished the book, had not noticed when the manuscript was no longer visible on her desk. He was out early in the mornings and home late. Major eye surgeries to perform every day, research that filled up the breaks. She knew he wasn't aware that he had stopped asking to read the pages in progress, unwittingly giving her space and peace. Of course, it was no longer relevant.

She could not sleep that night, thinking of the loss of all that excruciating effort that had been so pleasurable. At midnight, when she still hadn't found a spot in the bed that suited both she and the baby, she gave up. Martin was sleeping deeply, his arms and legs starfished, the way the newborn daughters of the no-longer Pregnant Six sprawled in their cribs. She could not recall ever seeing Martin in such a position. He looked boyish and she felt far away from anything girlish.

She did not flip on the light switch in the nursery. She walked across the cool wood floor and stood at a window. The sky was black, no moon or stars. She could see nothing outside, and it was as if nothing existed beyond the house in which a despondent, frightened woman was wide-awake and a contented man asleep. She had failed Silas and Abe. She had failed herself. She was not in the place she wanted to be, with a finished first novel that would pre-date the child.

When she lifted her nose off the cold glass and stepped back from the window, the low hallway light reflected her faint outline, and she locked on her eyes. She tried to catch herself blinking, but couldn't. She wondered how she would handle it all, how she would be as a mother, when she would again have blocks of time for herself. The baby would keep her from immediately starting something new.

She looked out into the void, into the invisible distance. She would have to develop the narrative of real life, but already she missed her submergence in those other worlds, within the only narratives that had ever mattered to her, with her very own people, the fallow time worth nothing at all.

4

Joan was propped up in the hospital bed, feeding their newborn son. Martin was on the bed with the two of them, his thumb and index a circle around both tiny ankles, above the tiny blue booties. The baby slipped off her breast and Martin took the infant into his arms.

Childbirth, and seeing the baby for the first time, and feeling his heart beating against hers, the suction between his slimy, steaming skin and her own, which had been mottled and wet, did not miraculously change Joan's worldview, as the no-longer Pregnant Six said it would. She did not suddenly feel it was her responsibility to solve war, genocide, disease, famine, hunger, low literacy rates, drug overdoses, the overcrowding of prisons. But she felt love, more than she thought she would, even though she was still not prepared, as other new parents seemed to be, to lay down her life for him, or for anyone.

She did not glow immediately after, but the baby did, not wizened at all, not old-man wrinkled. He did not emerge splotchy and crying. Instead, a light shone from his eyes, which he instantly opened, and when she looked down upon him, his eyes caught hers and did not let go, the two of them staring directly at each other, a kindling of sorts, until he fluttered to sleep.

And he was beautiful, a beautiful baby with blue eyes that matched her own, and a full head of downy dark-brown hair like Martin's, curls at the ends, for which she was responsible. He was good, too, rarely crying in these first few days, and when he did, it was as soft as a kitten's, and lasted for barely a minute. And he ate well. She had heard stories from two of the no-longer Pregnant Six about their own infants who hadn't figured it out, who didn't take to the breast, no matter how often an engorged nipple was stuffed into their mouths, who had lost a few precious ounces of birth weight before the mothers had resorted to formula.

The lactation specialist who came into Joan's room with pamphlets said it had been a long time since she had seen an infant latch on so easily, as Joan's did with her, that really, for now, there was no instruction she needed to give. And Joan felt a sense of pride, that at the start, she managed to do something right. She had not cursed it while it was baking inside of her, and he had emerged unscathed, with all his fingers and toes, with lungs that rose and fell, with a rosy mouth, with perfect lashes and brows, and the tiniest little bud between his legs that made both she and Martin laugh.

Martin cradled the baby against his chest and said, "We really should figure out what we're going to call him." On the table next to her hospital bed was the baby name book Martin had packed into her bag at the last minute, after she left a puddle in the kitchen, before he helped her out the back door, into the Toyota, racing out of Peachtree, down, through, and out of Rhome proper, to the campus where Martin spent most of his hours, Rhome General ablaze at four in the morning.

Joan picked up the book and let the pages fly. Then she closed her eyes, opened randomly, put her finger on the print, and looked down.

"Daniel," she said. "A Hebrew name. The biblical prophet and writer of the Book of Daniel was a teenager when taken to Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem in 607 BC."

"We're not Jewish," Martin said.

"We're not anything, so does it really matter? What do you think of the name?"

"Daniel Manning," Martin said. "I like it, it's strong, the two names work well together."

They looked at each other and Martin said, "So is that this little guy's name? Daniel?"

"Yes," Joan said. "I think it is."

If Martin wanted to look up the name's other meaning, the book was right there beside her. She did not know why, not exactly, not in thoughts she could have articulated, but it seemed right to her that Daniel meant "God is my judge."

5

Joan saw their reflections in the glass doors, mother in the hospital-required wheelchair, blanket-wrapped baby in her arms, father standing behind, the bizarre manifestation of an instantaneous miracle, all at once a family. Then they were through the doors, and the baby was in the infant seat hooked into the back of Martin's Toyota, and Joan felt the frigid clouds on her skin, and they were on their way home.

Within hours, the snow began falling. They moved Daniel's crib into their room, and during the nights, while Martin slept, Joan lifted the baby out and breast-fed him, marveling at his perfect weight in her arms, his sated burps smelling richly of her own milk. In the mornings, at the living-room windows, she gazed out at the frozen range of white with peaks, summits, and ridges, and each time Joan bent down to kiss Daniel's soft forehead, he was already looking up at her, his eyes studying her face, never once looking away.

It took no time for her to fall deeply in love with her unexpected child, with the rigors and rituals of unwanted motherhood, with having Martin home, so naturally fathering, doing all that he could, cleaning the kitchen, changing the diapers, singing to their infant son in his crib. They were dreamily nesting, just like the no-longer Pregnant Six had engaged in, and Joan found it utterly satisfying, thought then she might be capable of having more than one dream, might possibly thrive in the pursuit of both.

She was not writing at all, did not expect to sit at her desk in these early days, but *happiness*, *pleasure*, *elation*, *sweetness*, *treat*, *treasure*, and *gratefulness* were added to her list of favorite words. Daniel was so good, easy to satisfy, to fill up, to put to sleep, and she knew it was only luck that had created this angelic child.

And then Martin returned to the hospital and the lab, a husband around only at dawn and at night when the stars were their brightest, and caring for a baby with only two hands, no matter his goodness, was like boxing up the Sahara with a spoon. Showers, if at all, happened in the late afternoon; she subsisted on crackers and cheese, relied on Martin to market, the hamburger meat, the steaks, the fish he bought sliding into the freezer and never considered again. She kept up with the laundry, but otherwise the house was a mess, and still she resisted Martin's suggestion of a nanny to help out.

"I'm wary of having another body around the house all day long," she said. Martin insisted, striking where she was weakest. "A nanny could let you get back to work."

Eight weeks in, Joan stepped into her study for the first time since giving birth. Illuminated by the cold winter light, the room was a frozen preserve. The typewriter on her desk, lifeless and cold, the dictionaries she hadn't reshelved still sat there, hulking books she barely remembered paging through with delight, finding words she once lovingly, ecstatically, used in her writing. When Martin returned home that night, she agreed.

A week later, Joan opened the front door to a tall young woman wearing a high-collared, long-sleeved dress in bright tropical colors, magenta and teal and cobalt blue and orange. Flower earrings budded from her earlobes, and her hair, the color of wet sand, was pulled back tight in a ponytail. It was barely thirty degrees outside, high drifts of snow in front of all the houses, small paths from front doors to road, but the young woman wore no coat, no hat, no gloves, and did not seem at all cold.

"I'm Fancy," and she shook Joan's hand with a hidden might. "Sorry," she said when she saw Joan's face. "I think I've gotten rather too vigorous. I joined the gym at the community center, been working out with weights every day since landing here in Rhome."

At the kitchen table, she tightened her tight ponytail, and said, "So I'm Canadian, grew up on Lake Ontario, the eldest of seven brothers and sisters. There comes a time when all chicks must leave the nest, and when my time came, I grabbed my best girlfriend, Trudy, her family lives down the block from mine back home, and we jumped on a bus and kept traveling until we stopped in Rhome.

Strada di Felicità is just so pretty, and it seemed to me like this would be an interesting place to live, the way the town is a bunch of circles, getting larger and larger and larger, all the lovely stores, the lovely houses, so I turned to Trudy and said, 'This is the place, you game?' and she said she was, so we got off the bus and got down to business. We've got an apartment over Rudolph's Delicatessen on Tennessee Place. Such good food there, I must say. And I loved learning that the Italian man who founded Rhome thought every town should have a Street of Happiness running through it. I figured I could be happy in a place with a Strada di Felicità. And it's true, we are, the two of us, and we just love the busyness of the town, how there's always people out and about."

Joan thought Fancy's Canadian hometown must be minute indeed, because Rhome was charming, but sleepy, even with the hopefully named street.

"When I saw your advertisement for a nanny at the community center, I thought, 'Fancy, that's the job for you.' And now looking at you, such a pretty mother, I know I made the right decision to call. I'm nearly twenty, the oldest in my family by five years, so I've got tons of experience taking care of little ones. I practically raised my siblings myself. And this might be important to you, to gauge my seriousness, so I'll tell you now that I have no interest myself in men or romance. I leave all that to Trudy. Do you mind if I make us some tea? That's a nice kettle you've got on the stove. Just point me to the cabinet with the cups."

Joan did not laugh although she wanted to, listening to this Fancy, this odd young woman with her whirlwind of words, and instead said, "The cups are in that cabinet," pointing to the cabinet next to the sink, "and there are all kinds of teas in the drawer next to the fridge. Choose whatever you'd like."

Fancy was up and out of the kitchen chair, smoothing down her tropical dress, opening the cabinet, taking down two cups and saucers. "Nice, bone china," she said. "My family's never had much, but we always drink our tea from bone china, keeps it hot and makes one feel regal." Then she was opening the drawer and inspecting the boxes of teas. "Orange Pekoe okay with you?" and when the kettle whistled, Fancy brewed them tea strong as coffee, telling Joan, "This is what our queen, the queen of England, drinks, tea just this black."

Steam swirled up from their cups and Joan said, "Isn't Canada an independent country now? I didn't think the Queen still ruled there."

"Well, it's a little hard to pin our independence down to just one date. Some say it happened in 1867, but the truth is, it wasn't official until 1931, and it's only eight years ago that it was finalized, with the Canada Act of 1982. But the queen is still the official head of state, and she is our monarch. All Canadian children learn to speak the queen's English, and we are taught our table manners by imagining we are dining with her, that she is sitting just across the table from us. For instance, did you know that the proper way, the queen's way, of consuming soup is by sending the spoon through the liquid, away from yourself?"

"I don't think I did," said Joan, unable to picture the way her spoon moved through soup when she ate it.

Joan sipped her tea and Fancy drank hers down in two large gulps. "Nice, isn't it, when tea is sharp and powerful?" and Joan said that it was and then led Fancy out of the kitchen, down the short hallway, and into the baby's room, where Daniel was asleep in his crib.

Fancy took long strides across the room, leaned over the crib, her head falling forward, as if loose from her neck, and said, "He's a beautiful cherub and sleeping so well. What time did he go down for his nap?"

"Thirty minutes ago," Joan said. "He should wake in an hour."

Fancy straightened, and Joan thought she must be close to six feet, a good six inches taller than Joan, just a couple of inches shorter than Martin. A basketball player in flowers.

"I'm so glad you've got him on a schedule," Fancy said. "Too many mothers today think naptime is catch as catch can, which is nonsense in my book. A child on a sleep schedule is a happy child indeed."

Fancy stepped back nearly to the doorway and Joan watched her take in all of the room, her eyes moving from painted blank walls to bookcase to closet to changing table and back to the walls. Joan was waiting for the day when Daniel crayoned pictures and she framed them and hung them up.

"This is a lovely nursery," Fancy said. "I'm so pleased you chose yellow for the walls. Did you know that the yellow wavelength is relatively long and its stimulus is emotional, so it's the strongest color, psychologically? A yellow like this lifts spirits and self-esteem. It is the color of confidence and optimism. Living within it will help the cherub's emotional strength, his friendliness, his creativity. If you had chosen a brighter yellow, it could have caused his self-esteem to plummet, given rise in him to fear and anxiety, irrationality, emotional fragility, depression, anxiety, and a propensity for suicide. Or maybe in you, considering how much time you probably spend in here with him."

"Yellow can do all of that?" Joan asked. She had not considered the psychological ramifications when she and Martin chose the paint at Olinsky's Paint & Hardware in town, she had simply liked the shade.

"Definitely. Just think of that phrase, 'He's got a yellow streak,'" Fancy said. Joan thought that had to do with cowardice, rather than suicide, but who knew, perhaps cowardice could lead to suicide.

"Do you mind?" Fancy said, opening the closet door. Then she was murmuring to herself, "Nice sheets all lined up, nice clothes all hung up. Nice spare comforter for the crib. I'll show you how fast I am," and instantly Fancy was lifting the sleeping Daniel from the crib, cradling him in one long floral arm, stripping the mattress, remaking it, yanking the sheet tight as the navy vice admiral used to make Martin do, fluffing the small comforter, and in two minutes flat, Daniel, still asleep, was laid back down.

She was, Joan thought, a wacky kind of Mary Poppins. She hated that movie as a child, all that officiousness, as if children could not know their own minds, when Joan herself certainly did, but watching Fancy, Joan's perspective altered.

Fancy ran her fingers over the colorful mobiles hanging above the crib, checking for dust, Joan thought.

"I hope you won't be offended, but you could use my help. I can nanny and clean, and neither will take away from the other. And I was thinking, if you hired me, I could cook sometimes, if you'd let me. You have a very nice kitchen, and Trudy and I, our kitchen is just a pass-through sort of thing, not enough counter space to make anything real, and I miss cooking, which is a conundrum, I will say, since I swore I would never cook anything ever again once I hightailed it from home. All those mouths to feed morning, noon, and night."

She *was* a Mary Poppins, an original kind of fairy godmother in action, now at the bookcase, checking out the novels on the shelves that Joan read to Daniel while she nursed, as he nodded off for a nap. She was reading him the second of Trollope's Palliser novels, *Phineas Finn.* Since he had manifested as a real baby, sometimes Joan bent to convention and read him silly children's books, about dogs and spots and hills and pails, which were stacked in the case as well.

"That's quite a variety of books you've got there," Fancy said, then continued on without taking a breath. "This is what I would suggest. I'll be here by seven every morning. And if you trust me, you can give me a key. And if you want, or need me, I'm happy to sleep in here, with the little darling, stay over, take the night feedings to give you some solid sleep. I'll just need a camp bed I can fold up and put away, or a mattress I can blow up, and a light blanket, nothing more. Otherwise, I'll be out of your hair when the little one is down for the night."

Fancy was offering to nanny and cook and clean and was willing to take the hateful night feedings, and Joan hired her on the spot.

"How wonderful. I can start tomorrow, if that's good for you. And apologies, I forgot to ask you, what do you call the cherub?"

"Daniel," Joan said. "Yes, please start tomorrow. Is there a list of things you'll need?"

"I'll get the lay of the land in the morning, and if it's easier for you, we'll make the list together, and I'll shop for whatever we need. I don't have a car, but I'm licensed to drive, so if you've got a car, I can use that."

"I do. It's in the garage. Should we talk about what you'll be paid?" Joan asked.

"Whatever you think is right," Fancy replied, and just like that Joan had an extra set of fast-moving hands helping her again.

Fancy was a miracle of competencies, a helpmate in motion, the way she danced around the kitchen, bathing slippery Daniel in the sink, bundling him up in a snowsuit, covering him with blankets, pushing him in the carriage over the Mannings' land, up and down the snowy hillocks all the way to the property lines.

"Come spring, I'll help you plant grass, if you want, and flowers, too, you've got so much space out there, you can't even see your neighbors. Once the snow melts, it would be a shame to leave it unloved." Fancy made the offer each time she came in with the baby hocked over her shoulder, Daniel blowing spit bubbles, his eyes dancing around.

Fancy sang to Daniel when she put him down for his naps, baked cakes and chickens while Joan napped too, or closed herself up in her study and sat at her desk, her hands folded in her lap, the Olivetti's plug pulled from the socket, coiled on the white painted floor.

Martin liked Fancy too, calling out, "Hello, all my good people," on the rare evenings he was home early. "It's so great walking into the house," he told Joan, and it was true, Fancy kept everything under control. The kitchen was always fragrant, something delicious cooking in the oven, a cake frosted on the kitchen counter, and the baby on the table, cooing in his portable bassinet.

On those early evenings of Martin's, he stayed in the kitchen, making himself a drink, talking to Fancy, playing with Daniel. When Joan grew tired of trying to remember how writing was once as natural to her as breathing, the typewriter still unplugged, no paper rolled in, she listened to the laughter, to the baby's happy gurgles, to Fancy's funny voice going on, and Martin jumping in, talking about this and that and nothing at all, until she gave into the delight, rose from her chair, and joined them all in the kitchen.

6

It was Fancy's fourth month with them when Joan plugged in her typewriter, rolled a piece of paper onto the platen, put her hands on the keys, and wrote a first sentence, then a second, then the typewriter keys were quietly rat-a-tat-tatting, sounding to her like a symphony, her heart beating to the rhythm, her breath falling in line with the tune.

Each word she put down shined, imbued with love for her son and for her husband, and with appreciation for this nanny they hired who already felt like a member of the family Joan never wanted. But the words belonged to her alone, and for the first time since becoming a mother, Joan found herself on the firm ground she inherently recognized. She was, she realized, out of the abyss.

During every one of Daniel's naps, she secreted herself in her study, calming Fancy when she worried that Joan was wearing herself out, was planning on weaning the baby too quickly.

At first, she was writing about a quirky young woman like Fancy, but within days Fancy disappeared, and Joan was writing about babies. Unusual babies, rare and wondrous, odd and strange, philosophical babies who could opine about almost anything. Her creations had turquoise hair, or ears meant for elephants, or toes and fingers fused together that did not alarm but instead allowed for happy paddling in baths and ponds, or hearts that beat outside of their chests marking their levels of happiness, or an ability to speak multiple languages immediately after letting out their first cry. Their traits, their characteristics, were elegant and weird, and varied from story to story.

The babies in "The First Play Date" compared their experiences while they had been inside, discussing whether the wombs they had chosen to inhabit had been cramped or roomy, whether the water had been too cold or just right, about the one-eyed sharks some saw coming at them nightly, while others said they never saw such a thing, just used the time to practice their acrobatics.

In "Our Needs, Our Dreams," babies in a hospital nursery fervently discussed the difficulties they were having managing their miasmic ids, their enormous desires to come first, to always be heard, to be fed at the first pang of hunger, wishing someone, their parents or the nurses, understood their incomprehensible babble, for they had so many nightly dreams that needed immediate telling.

In "Twins," a solitary baby in his crib stared up at the fluffy white clouds he could see from his window and soliloquized about how it felt watching his twin die in their mother's womb, when just moments before they had been playing a chatty patty-cake together, how awful it had been barreling down through the tunnel alone, leaving her behind, a pale specter beginning to disintegrate.

In "Role Reversal," the babies effected a cataclysmic shift that turned mothers into fathers and fathers into mothers, and in "The Miniature Caretakers," the babies wound up nursing and feeding and rocking and singing to the adults meant to care for them.

In every one of the stories, Joan's creatures unspooled odd familial tales. She called them her Rare Baby stories, but they weren't written for children.

She was surprised by the new lightheartedness in her writing. So much of her earlier work was about the damaging events that bowled her people over, and she had thought Daniel's birth would intensify her dark view of the world, that she would envision tragedies that would take Daniel away, but she found she did not fear for his safety at all, had faith in her newfound abilities, and in Fancy's and Martin's, to protect him.

Despite the disturbing qualities of her fictional babies, they were additional proof that motherhood was continuing to soften her. She had feared the opposite would occur, that she would become rigid and unyielding, as her mother had been. Instead, because of her own child, her writing was veering in a new direction; it was an unanticipated surprise.

Joan wrote five, then eight, then ten, then fourteen of the Rare Baby stories, and there were so many more bouncing around inside of her brain, in her heart.

"Tell me about them," Martin said. But the work was too new, and strangely personal, and Joan gave him no details; she did, however, tell him the truth: "Their sole purpose is just to get me working again, amidst the glorious mess of my reconfigured life," and he laughed the way she had hoped he would.

When Daniel was fussy at naptime, he settled when Joan leaned into his crib, stroked his face, and said, "It's time for a Rare Baby story." She took the recliner, and Fancy, hunched down on the short stool, reached through the wooden bars to hold Daniel's hand, her small hazel eyes already focused at some distant point, her mouth, with the gap between her front teeth, already opened, breathing excitedly about what was to come. One afternoon, Joan said to them, "This is the beginning of a story called 'Speaking in Tongues.'"

Since nearly the beginning of time, there were four inalienable truths about the Eves.

The first truth was that every single member of the family was female. There were no grandfathers, fathers, uncles, brothers, or nephews; there never had been. Each woman, on her own, without the need for any man, gave birth to a single child, and it was always a girl. It was Eve lore that their pure matriarchal line was a result of DNA, or caused by an undiscovered aquatic element, or was passed down in dreams from Eve to Eve, generation after generation.

The second truth was that the Eves had a specific, hallowed mission, every single one a musical thanatologist, playing harps or violins or cellos or flutes or lutes or using their lush a cappella voices as prescriptions rather than performance. Musically ushering the dying into the next world, or providing a quiet space for those facing eternity to reflect, ponder, rest, and muse on the meaning of life and death. Some of the dying were recipients of a single musical vigil, their time so near and at hand; others were treated to several, over weeks or months, calibrated to diagnoses, blood pressures, the insistence of diseases, the contraction of organs, the shifting of breaths, before they were claimed. Patients called the Eves angels of mercy, protectors of souls, but they were merely women curiously suited to the work, able to provide profound human connection with their invulnerable flesh, the way suffering flowed right through them without creasing their hearts.

The third truth was that every single Eve came out of the womb with identical features: long brown hair that fell to the waist, brown eyes that watched everything, and seashell ears that heard the slightest of sounds.

The fourth truth was that all Eves spoke early, by their eighth month. Training to become a musical thanatologist took a very long time, involved classes in music theory, in appreciation, in instrument and voice preparation, in rehearsal time, classes too in the workings of the body, in anthropology, in the history of death, potential sources of an afterlife. Over the eons, evolution unique to the Eves had shaved away the extra sixteen months normal children required to find their tongues, their voices, their words, their speech. Any Eve who did not begin speaking in that special eighth month faced an uncertain future, potential banishment from the clan, relegated to an unhappy life among boys and men whose harsh voices could force birds from the sky, turn soft rain into a killing machine, cause floods, famine, disease.

The Eves began with Ruth and wound through thousands of years down to Esther, who birthed Bessie, who birthed Annette, who birthed Willa. Of course, Willa looked exactly like her mother, like all her forebears, but she had sailed past her eighth month of life and had not said a word. Now that her first birthday had come and gone, fear was often in Annette's heart.

Willa was a good baby otherwise, a calm and still child, but she made no sound, not even a peep, and even when she cried, which was rare, she made no noise, her tears falling silently until they dried up and disappeared, leaving her long eyelashes beaded together, and the faintest silvery trail down her pink cheeks, grains of salt that sometimes her mother licked off.

It was lunchtime on a Tuesday, and Annette was expected at two at one of the hospices on her regular route, a request for a violin vigil, made by the man himself. When he called, he said, "I'm 110, so there's no time like the present. To be bathed in the sweetness of the violin in the hands

of a master like yourself must be one of the loveliest ways to go. I have come to terms with it all and I am ready to close my eyes for the last time, to be taken away by the melody of a *nigun,* the *Baal Shem* specifically." A *nigun* was the most taxing of soulful and religious Jewish songs, calling upon Annette's deep improvisational abilities, but the man's choice of the *Baal Shem* meant she had centuries of that *nigun* to follow, its overarching form structured by so many other violinists who had come before her, reflecting the mystical joy of intense prayer.

As she fed Willa the mashed peas she adored, one spoonful at a time, the *Baal Shem* was soaring through Annette and droplets collected in the corner of her eyes. Any crying by a thanatologist had to occur in advance, but certainly outside the walls of the hospice.

Another spoonful of the green mash and when the food slid in, Willa closed her perfect little cherry-red mouth and swayed with happiness. The kitchen clock never made any noise, but suddenly Annette heard the ticking, turned to look, watched as the second hand stopped sweeping, then moved forward again, one noisy click at a time. She felt her heart flutter, watched the spoon flip over in her hand, a dollop of green landing on the black and white tiled floor. Her head whipped back to her lovely little daughter, and she screamed.

Willa's unspoiled face had altered entirely, was suddenly abstract. There was her original mouth, the cherry-red one, so pert and lovely, but right next to it, as well-shaped as the first, was a second mouth, the deep purple of an overripe plum.

And then Willa spoke for the first time. From the cherry-red mouth came the words, "I love you, Mommy," and simultaneously, from the plum mouth, came the words, "You are a witch with a black heart, Mommy, I know what you really think about when you play your music, send those people to death"—

and Fancy inhaled so sharply that Daniel turned his head at the sound and let out a funny little laugh.

There was a timelessness for Joan in the act of creating these stories, a harkening back to when she was a young girl and beginning to write. After the failure of *The Sympathetic Executioners*, it was a relief to write without thoughts of publication, awards, and best-seller lists. The writing was pure again, the way it had been with both collections. And by reading aloud parts of the Rare Baby stories to Daniel and Fancy, she experienced the youthful pleasure denied her as a child, all that intense longing for a different mother who would have sat on Joan's bed and read Joan's stories aloud, exclaiming over what her child had produced. In the nursery, Joan's good voice floated, and the words of her strange stories rode the quiet air, and something way deep down inside of her was soothed, a release of the anger and hatred she had long carried about her mother, Eleanor Ashby, the force that colored Joan's earliest memories.

Each time she sat down to work on these stories, she knew they had something specific to tell her, perhaps about how she would be as a mother to Daniel as he grew up, encouraging his creativity, making true the positive effects of the buttercup-yellow paint. She sensed they were not meant to be heard by any others, not to be read by anyone else either.

At least once a weekend, Martin said, "How's the work coming? When can I read them? When are you going to send them to Volkmann?" He asked these questions, one or all of them, again and again, opening the door to her study while she was working, throwing her a kiss when he finished his querying, until shivers ran through Joan when she heard the knob turning, making her breath catch in her throat.

Each time, she said, "Soon, maybe," the way she had when he wanted to read pages from *The Sympathetic Executioners,* then said, "Martin, I need a little more time, then I'll be out."

Her husband, brash and brave in the operating room, in his focused research for groundbreaking ocular surgeries, seemed truculent in those freighted moments, before she responded, petulant even, and she felt incapable of explaining—had no desire to explain—the intrusiveness of his endless questions.

One day when they were alone in the living room, Fancy with Daniel in his room, Joan said, "Does it work for you that when you want to talk about your successes or failures in surgery, whether the research is going well or not, I listen, but otherwise I don't try to burrow into your world, just give you space to move and roam and be on your own, with your thoughts, hopes, and beliefs?"

"You're wonderful that way," he said, failing to make the leap he should have been able to make, to see that he was trying to burrow into her world, a place where he did not belong, and the single unspoken sentence jammed in her mind: *You've got to leave me alone*.

For a man so attentive to his patients, aware of their fears and their foibles, how had he forgotten this about her, her need to keep her work to herself? At the very least, when he was home, why didn't he notice that Fancy never, ever, knocked at the study when Joan was inside? If she thought a sign on the door would do the trick, she would have hoisted that sign right up, written in big black words: MARTIN—DO NOT DISTURB ME, but even that, she knew, would not keep him out. Sometimes she thought the only way to silence his voice, extinguish his interest, would be to stone him to death.

Breast-feeding ended, and bottles began, then rolling over and baby food, then gummed toes, solid food, first steps, and when Joan was not with Daniel or working on her Rare Baby stories while he napped, she and Fancy planted infant red maples, elms, and Cleveland pears around the property's entire perimeter, a weeping willow tree not far from the house. They hoed and raked the ground, eliminated the weeds, prepared the soil, tilled and fertilized it, then planted Kentucky bluegrass, tall fescue, fine fescue, Bermuda grass, Zoysia grass, and perennial rye, and took turns watering every morning and afternoon from spring to late fall. On weekends, Martin pitched in, allowing Daniel to think he was helping, his small hands gripping the hose just behind his father's big ones.

In their second year of planting, when the grass was finally fully established, Joan and Fancy figured out how to lay down sprinklers, and turned them on. "The water's going to be cold," Joan warned Daniel, but he ran laughing through the arcing sprays. "Look, Daniel," she said, and he stopped and looked at all the rainbows dancing around their backyard.

Joan and Fancy devised the shapes and boundaries of all the various gardens, marked them with sticks and flags, then got down to work, troweling, fertilizing, and planting lilac bushes, bougainvillea, hyacinth, phlox and poppies, tulips, wild violets, and gerbera daisies, everything in various hues of lavenders and pinks and purples and scarlets and burgundies and white, a field of lavender too. Their first vegetable garden was seeded with carrots, cucumbers, radishes, domestic tomatoes, beans, and lettuce, the vegetable world that thrived regardless of the gardener's abilities. Near the house, they built the playground Joan had imagined while weighing Daniel's early extermination. He now had a large sandbox to play in, and a swing set, and a bright-red jungle gym that took Martin three days of hard labor to put together.

In their third year of planting and gardening, all the flowers came up, a riot of blooms. Joan and Fancy took Daniel with them to the lumberyard, bought planks of wood and panes of wavy old glass and the building specifications for a gardening shed. They sawed and hammered, figured out how to make window frames, how to install the glass, and the shed rose up behind the weeping willow tree that was still so small, Daniel shimmying up its baby trunk yelling, "Look at me," all of twelve inches above the ground. When Fancy went home to Canada for a family visit, Joan painted the shed green by herself and stored all the gardening equipment within. By then, they had a potting table, ceramic planting pots stacked up like mismatched wedding-cake tiers, a large assortment of dinged and muddy trowels, rakes and hand mowers, bags of rich dirt for settling cuttings of delicate flowers into the pots until the new baby plants were sturdy enough for life outdoors. Sometimes, Joan escaped to the shed for an hour of quiet with a glass of wine, lowering a window for an illicit cigarette, briefly longing for the time when she had not created a different story for herself, longing too, for other ideas to flow through her mind, something beyond her rare babies.

Daniel was nearing four when Martin began flying to England, Germany, Croatia, and Russia, requested by private hospitals to operate on their citizens. Against the odds, he was having great

success with his newly devised surgery, returning sight to people who lived in an underworld of barely recognized shapes, or no shapes at all.

Joan was on the bed watching Martin pack for his tenth trip abroad—lucky scrub caps, the funny clogs he wore during his long surgical days, his toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, a T-shirt and pajama bottoms, two suits, shirts, ties, his shiny leather loafers, a winter sweater, jeans, and snow boots all went into his travel bag.

He turned to her suddenly. "Come on, Joan. You've let me read a page here and there, but why can't I read the Rare Baby stories from start to finish? I've got all these hours on planes and it would be great to read something other than medical journals and the newspaper."

Three and a half years writing those stories and they still felt like a secret to Joan. She had all the audience she needed in Daniel and Fancy. She touched her belly and wondered if she would read them aloud to the new baby. There was always going to be a second child, and soon there would be.

She watched Martin's mouth moving. He was still talking, inveigling her to let him read the work, but Joan was thinking of something else entirely, of how the news she was pregnant again had spurred a sort of silent trade-off: Martin no longer opened her study door without knocking, did not enter unless invited.

She tuned back in when his mouth clamped shut, his face clouded with hurt, and she thought she ought to give him the benefit of the doubt. She climbed off their bed, went into her study, gathered up five of the stories, and handed them over. She watched as he placed them neatly inside his briefcase.

A week later, back home, unpacking his bag, he pulled out her stories, all marked up, and her heart was once again beating too fast. She felt churlish, though, and remonstrated, when he pulled out a wrapped package and gave it to her. He had brought her a present, but when she opened it, there was a frightening device in her hand, antique and rusted, and Martin said, "That's a scleral depressor from the early twentieth century. I found it in a store in Cologne. Isn't it great?"

He turned it over in her hand. "You insert the tip between the globe and the orbit, the space occupied by the probe displaces the retina inward and creates an elevation. It helps locate and diagnose lesions that may otherwise go undetected, like retinal holes, tears, or vitreoretinal adhesions. It's used to assess patients who present with complaints of flashers and floaters, or who are at risk for peripheral retinal anomalies, such as high myopes or those with a history of blunt trauma."

He returned the depressor to its velvet-lined box. "I saw it and thought since I'm traveling to so many places, I should keep a lookout for these kinds of things, start a collection of old tools of the trade."

She felt the ghosts of eyes touched by that tool, the coldness of the metal still singed her palm.

Then he said, "Come on. Let's take Daniel for a walk."

It was Sunday and they were Fancy-free. Daniel was in his room, on his bed, the novel she was reading to him—*The Happy Island* by Dawn Powell—on his lap, and he was pretending to read.

"Mommy, listen to me," and he read, "*Everyone who knew James knew of his Evalyn, and that a visit from the Inspector General could not cast a town into greater confusion*," and Joan was shocked. She recognized the sentence from the book, and he read on, "*No one found her agreeable. Desperately James told stories about her to make her appear interesting, but she only emerged a more intolerable figure than before*."

She called out for Martin, and when he stood at Daniel's door, she said, "He's reading already! Whole sentences without sounding out the words. Just like I did, but I was older, five, when it happened."

Martin kneeled before Daniel. "Are you reading now, my man?" and Daniel nodded and began telling his father about the bachelors of New York City, and Martin looked up at Joan.

When everyone was zipped into their winter coats and out the front door, Martin whispered, "Maybe we should make sure he reads age-appropriate books." That wasn't going to happen on Joan's watch, but the battle could wait for another day.

They walked the wide streets of their development, the paving all complete, young trees bare-limbed in the cold, and were quiet for a while.

"So about your stories. I loved them all, but especially 'Otis Bleu Sings.' The way that baby could belt out an opera without any teeth in his mouth."

Daniel twisted around in his stroller and called out, "Mommy already read me that story."

They made rights and lefts through the neighborhood and all the while Martin was telling her his thoughts about the stories, the emotions he experienced while reading her work, then asking her questions. "How do you develop these characters? How does your brain hit upon these creations? What makes you think as you do? Are the stories based at all on Daniel, on the things he does? Are you imagining the new baby inside of you when you write?"

It was perhaps the hundredth time Martin quizzed her this way, wanting to dive into the depths of her mind, to know exactly how she put things into place, now asking specifically how she came up with the traits of her rare babies, their names, their family configurations, the outrageous things they did and said. This obsession he had to expose her processes, to aerate the pure elements of her work, he seemed to want her fully oxidized. She did not bask in his interest, as genuine and real as it was. Instead, she felt as if she were standing back at the abyss, and if he did not stop, if she could not stop him, she would fall into the darkness for good.

In the kitchen, after their walk, Joan told Martin he was in charge of dinner and closed herself up in her study. She sat at her desk and wished she were configured like other women who welcomed such keen attention, or at least like other writer-mothers who seemed to connect everything together, who handled with relish the confusion of it all, combining writing with motherhood, everything out in the open. There was a heroic disorder to their lives, but she could not abide it. This coalescing amalgamation of the disparate parts of her life—writer, wife, mother, pregnant woman again—was not what she had ever wanted. She had a baby, was going to have another, was writing about babies, had a husband who wanted to know everything about what their baby did in his absences, about how the baby inside was treating her, what her rare babies were up to, and how they had come to be. She was consumed by domesticity: the normality of her flesh-and-blood family juxtaposed against her manifested world, which was mystical, numinous, sometimes supernaturally odd, filled with erudite babies illuminating what others could not see.

She put her shaking hands on her typewriter, watched them settle, all the while feeling the impulse to walk out, to disappear, as she had considered doing when she told Martin she was pregnant the first time, their incongruent stances about the life she was carrying rocking her entirely, an earthquake upending the life she had anticipated for herself.

Her soul, she realized, was in disarray, and this second pregnancy was not helping. It was not at all like the first. She had morning sickness day and night. She was not miraculously glowing. A second baby would intensify the disorder she needed, somehow, to compartmentalize.

Over the next several days, she read through all fifty of her Rare Baby stories. They were beautiful, the writing strong and densely molded, but she did not want to publish such a collection, did not want to be yoked forever to these creatures who had been intended only to help her maneuver through that first vital metamorphosis.

She would not read them aloud to the new baby, when it finally arrived. She could not indulge in this exercise any longer. If she did, she would slip entirely away, become irreal, an outline when she was made more solidly than that. It was the first Joan Ashby, the realest Joan Ashby, the one who was neither wife nor mother, that she was in immediate danger of losing. She had to eliminate the concentric circles that dominated her life, otherwise she would not be able to carry on building the family they were building, would want only to cut the bonds that tied her down.

With Daniel, she had imagined herself as a character who would hang on to the love she had been given and love her unwanted baby, and she had done that exceedingly well. She would do it again when the new baby arrived. But before that happened, she needed to reframe her existence, fracture

her life, bifurcate Joan Manning, wife and mother, from Joan Ashby, the writer, erect boundaries to prevent any accidental bleeding between the two.

Volkmann called only twice a year now to confirm Joan had received her royalty statements and checks. She no longer asked about Joan's plans for her first novel, assumed Joan had ceased writing entirely, consumed with something like the joys of motherhood, and Joan allowed her that belief. The same was true with Annabelle Iger, who called every couple of months, saying, "Haven't you had enough of this pastoral existence, all this mothering and wifedom? Aren't you sick of love and diapers? Start writing again before it's too late." She and Iger talked of so many things, their editing days together, the men Iger was toying with, the plays Iger saw, the dance clubs Iger still frequented, but Joan never mentioned *The Sympathetic Executioners* or the Rare Baby stories to her either.

She was again at a critical juncture, and this time, she needed to maintain the divide, husband and children out in the real world, but on her own, the writing she did would be truly private, consecrated, known only to her. No more reading her work to Daniel and Fancy. The new baby's arrival would eliminate her study, soon to be transformed into another nursery.

She watched the reddened sun pale and set, and she pictured a castle with a tower that soared into the sky, a moat that rendered it inviolable, an imaginary place where she would write for the next years, without Martin knowing. She would throw him off her scent, lie and tell him she was taking a break, void entirely his inquisitions. She did not want to hear him talking about her work, suggesting, pontificating, analyzing. On the walk, the names of her characters had been far too familiar in his mouth. He had her and Daniel and the child to come; that would have to be sufficient.

In that high tower, that place of pure self, she might find her way to that first novel, at last write a book worthy of the reputation she had developed. She only wanted what belonged to her—what she created, her characters, her people, those with whom she spent the clearest hours of her days. It was, she thought, the way to make that truest part of herself whole once again. And if she protected her most essential qualities, the core of Joan Ashby, she could continue to give the rest of her heart to Martin, to Daniel, to the baby inside.

She thought about Fancy. She could trust Fancy to keep her secret when Joan returned to her work, after the early months with the new one.

She looked at Martin's father's clock on her desk. It had taken only thirty minutes to arrive at her plans for the future. Joan opened the study door and headed toward the living room, where her family was gathered. She could hear the roll of dice, the movement of plastic pieces, Martin and Daniel laughing, accusing each other of cheating, and she was aware how those voices both attracted and repelled her.

7

The delivery-room music was raucous in her thirty-second laboring hour. The baby was ten days late, and at the twenty-fifth hour, she had still been ticking off appropriate words: *troublesome, exasperating, perverse, contrary, recalcitrant, obstreperous, disobliging,* and then the few *u* words she could recall: *unaccommodating, unhelpful, uncooperative, unwanted.* Wait, she'd thought, when *unwanted* spiked, an articulated word she hoped only she heard. And then: *entirely true, entirely not true, this time, last time, true and not true.* She was sidetracked, the dictionary in her brain slipping away when a nurse increased the sweet epidural drip, and the music changed nature entirely. There had been Beethoven, Bach, and Mozart sailing through the delivery room, she was not an expert in classical music, but they were easily recognizable; now electric guitars were wailing, drumbeats pounding away, licks and harsh syncopations, and Joan's voice croaked when she yelled, "Please! Change the station." Nothing changed and she couldn't tell if the music and her yelling were only inside her own head. *Please*, she prayed then, though the years had not changed her position about God, or gods, and she had already run through the panoply of words she used to invoke, could remember.

Daniel's birth had been rapid, like a rocket, he set a record, leaving Joan with most of her self-respect intact, but not this time, this one already determining the time line of life. Her sweat, rivers of it, started out sweet, had gone sour, then yeasty, and now there was a meaty scent she was inhaling. She felt like a sick and cowering dog.

The bright lights all at once dimmed—why hadn't they been lowered from the start, hadn't they asked for a calm, quiet, melodic delivery?—and then Martin was soothing her forehead, whispering into her ear, "It will be okay."

A contraption rose over her belly, gloved hands draping reams of thick plastic over it, cutting off everything below from her view. She was in parts, leaving those on the other side to contend with what was beneath her curved flesh. Scrub caps darted around, white, pink, and yellow disks rising and falling, rapid voices chasing each other's tight tails, words like *maternal tachycardia, fetal distress, spinal block, catheter, IV lines*, and Joan felt something sting her hand. Out of the cyclone came her doctor's quiet voice, "Scalpel. Starting Pfannenstiel incision."

How wonderful now that everything was silent, the pain and fear gone, just the slow, slow beating of her own heart, her mind in a white haze that transformed into bleedingly bright primary colors. She remembered the pictures of a C-section that she had seen in one of Martin's medical books, the scalpel so sharp against the thin skin that the underlying yellow fat layer burst, revealing the shiny, tough, fibrous fascia, over the abdominal muscles. A scalpel nicking an opening in that tough lower layer, then pulled apart, revealing the filmy, flimsy layer, the peritoneum, the actual lining of the abdominal cavity; it, too, was opened, with sharp, thin scissors. Then a small cut through her retroperitoneal. She heard "Retractor," and pictured her bladder pulled down toward her feet, away from the rest of the surgery, sparing it injury. A final incision across the lower portion of her womb, her uterus easily tilted up and laid on her belly, revealing the baby only to the doctor and nurses busy working. There were pictures of it all in Martin's book and a sentence that read: *Pulling gently on the head will allow the rest of the delivery*. She heard "Clamping umbilical cord," and then she heard no more.

She woke in a hospital room and wondered why she was there, wondered when someone would come to explain why she felt nothing below her waist, nothing at all. She knew she should be afraid, but something in her bloodstream was lifting her up, up, up, out of the bed, and she was floating just below the ceiling. Looking down, she was at the old dining-room table she used as a desk, the wood floor of her East Village apartment sloped under her feet, pages crawling with words flying through the air, stacking up next to the typewriter, there was a title on the tip of her tongue, that slid right off, and she, too, slid away.

She woke again, and knew she was in her hospital room, that there was, or had been, a baby. Martin was on the bed, carefully balanced, tenderly looking at her. She heard him say, "That was all unexpected," then ask how she was feeling, but she couldn't respond, couldn't keep her eyes open, they were like windows slamming shut, and her last thought, It's *all* unexpected, reverberated then faded away.

She woke again and Martin was in the armchair next to the bed, the baby hidden in a blue blanket. So the operation had been successful, the baby alive. "He emerged with bravado and his eyes clenched tight. He has all of his parts," Martin said, and Joan wanted to say, "Turn down the painkillers, I can't stay awake," but she was gone before the words left her mouth.

She was awake and alone in her hospital room. She felt wrecked and sore and the clock hands were elongated snails inching around the black markings of the day, but perhaps it was night, and late, because she couldn't hear the nurses laughing at their station, couldn't hear the shush of their foam-soled shoes.

She woke and knew it was morning from the slant of the sun lighting up her hands, the veins standing out, needles inserted and taped down, and then the heavy door pushed open, and there was Martin, smiling and cradling the new baby, sitting down on the bed, transferring the infant into her arms. "Your first glimpse of your mommy," Martin said, and Joan saw a cap of jet-black hair, skin white as alabaster, the combination giving him the look of a baby ghoul or a vampire, something medieval, potentially poisonous. But everything was where it belonged. "He's beautiful, isn't he," Martin said, and Joan thought the pain meds were affecting her sight, for the baby looked so white, as if he were bloodless, when Daniel had been golden and rosy.

You've been in and out," Martin said as he untied her hospital gown, pushed it down past her breasts. She hadn't said a word yet, her throat still clenched tight, but he understood she wanted the baby's flesh on hers. She had been right, with Daniel, about the essentialness of that first connection, not wasting it on anyone else's baby. She was overheating, but the infant was cool and dry, not damp and sticky as Daniel had been, and even though they were skin-to-skin, the way this one looked up at her, she thought she had to be wrong, that it wasn't an arrogant stare, a smirk on his pale lips. He blinked, then turned his head away, already his own person.

She tried feeding him. He latched on. She felt the suction between his pursed mouth and her nipple, but suckling did not interest him, he was content to lie there, just like that, before tucking back into himself. Four times she tried, before Martin paged their ob-gyn.

Dr. Hinton lifted the baby from Joan's arms and said that because of the C-section and the meds coursing through her, he hadn't been allowed to suck after being liberated from her womb. Dr. Hinton actually said, *When he was born*, and Joan revised his words because *liberated from her womb* expressed the gravitas she thought this birth deserved. "The suck reflex is strongest then, right after birth. Delayed gratification sometimes makes it more difficult later on. But it's only the third day." Joan hadn't realized she had been out for so long. The doctor stroked the baby's lips. "To evoke and test the rooting reflex," he said, and the baby pulled the doctor's pinky into his mouth. "He's gone into full reflex, pulling my finger in, wrapping the lateral sides of his tongue around it, creating a medial trough, starting the peristaltic motion from front to back toward the soft palate and pharynx. Nothing's wrong with the short frenulum, because his tongue's moving forward easily. His airway is all clear, no mucous. So everything looks fine. He's got a powerful suck, see how he's moving his whole head, his face wrinkling and dimpling?" Joan and Martin nodded. "I'll send in the lactation specialist. She'll be able to help."

But the baby had made his decision. He would not partake in such intimate nurturing, was disinterested in receiving nourishment direct from Joan's body. At her request, his bassinet was moved out of the nursery and into her hospital room. On a frequent schedule, the nurses had her pump, then returned with bottles of her milk wrapped in white cloths, as if mother and son were about to embark together on a fine dining experience. But he did not want Joan as the source of his sustenance, his

tongue touched the plastic nipple, held on, sucked once, then he turned away, closing his eyes as if to say, *I've made it clear, haven't I, that I don't want what comes from her?* He was fed bottles of formula instead. Her milk was donated to a baby down the hall whose mother could not nurse at all.

At least Joan could keep him tightly grooved to her body, and she held their new child for hours, letting him go only when he was solidly asleep. It had been so different with Daniel, the way love had bubbled up, until the stream was an ocean, too large to ever spring a leak. Every day in the hospital, Joan waited for this new one to grab hold of her heart, to adhere to her beat, but a cool river ran between them that neither seemed capable of fording.

She and Martin had learned its sex ahead of time, no need for mystery with the second. And they had chosen a name. But only sometimes did Joan remember that fact, to use it when she spoke to him quietly. His birth certificate read Eric, Norse for *ever or eternal ruler.* Neither she nor Martin had any connection to that Nordic world, but it sounded strong, as strong as *Daniel Manning.* Just days old, and it seemed to Joan that Eric was indeed already ruling over his world. The kisses she gave him often felt premeditated.

Years later, Joan would wonder if she had already known everything, about him, but not just about him, about all that was to come, seeing the future while still in her hospital bed, clutching the baby to her heart, hoping the separation between them would close and heal, looking into his unfathomable eyes.

Perhaps it was the epidural she had been given, with its local anesthetic and narcotics, or the general anesthesia during the C-section, or the painkillers she was swallowing every four hours, but future events tumbled through her mind during those days and nights in the hospital, whipping past her eyes so quickly they could not be called visions, a kaleidoscope of images, mere flashes immediately forgotten. Through the years, certain situations would feel familiar, the feelings too, that sense of recollection, a déjà vu she could not place, not remembering that her mind once overflowed with an abundance of vital information. There would be no sense of that déjà vu, however, when the family she had never wanted twisted down into unknown depths, into a different kind of abyss, from which a roaring animal would race, up through dank tunnels, to tear into tender flesh. None of *that* was captured in those frenzied images. Did a broken heart reveal itself in X-rays, or was an autopsy required to see the fracture lines running through the four chambers, where ventricles and atria had shattered?

But in those earliest days, when nurses flitted in and out, checking her incision, rubbing her down with lotion to abate the itching, forcing her to cough, and to take short walks, as she tried mothering Eric, what Joan saw clearly were the vast, indecipherable truths written across his eyes, keenly felt the way he demanded and rejected her attention.

Her heart had opened wide for Daniel, with an unexpected and boundless adoration for her firstborn, but she knew instantly that Eric would not hold the same sacrosanct place, that he would never want what she could offer. And although her immediate reflex was to deny the notion of unequal maternal love, she realized that motherhood might also include what falls away.

THE ALTERATION OF PLANS

Yōjanāʻōṁ me badlav

8

On a hot windy day that tore the clouds apart, Joan and Martin brought Eric home. The pink roses out front had died while she and the baby were in the hospital, and carrying him up the brick walk, through that dead arbor, seemed like a funeral procession.

Framed by the opened front door, Daniel clutched Fancy's hand, still dressed in his camp clothes, his face peeking out from behind her wide flowered skirt.

He had a sweet, confused look on his face, a tremulousness about what was happening. He looked at his mother's belly, no longer as enormous as it had been when he felt a leg, a hand, the kicks, squealing when the skin rippled, like waves on a lake, when the baby somersaulted around. Joan and Martin and Fancy had each explained the concept, that what was inside of Joan would eventually come out, that Daniel would have a brother, and now the baby was here, at the doorstep, about to enter their home, changing the nature of their threesome, their foursome, forever.

Fancy's face was all lit up, her big front teeth shining, that gap between them like a secret.

Joan settled on the couch, and Fancy said, "A cause for celebration. Mr. Martin bought a nice bottle for a toast, and there's ale in the fridge for your milk." Fancy did not know yet that Joan's milk was of no use.

Daniel clung to Fancy's hand until she said, "Master Daniel, climb up and take your first look." When Fancy was nervous, formal appellations preceded their names.

He let Fancy go, kicked off his small tennis shoes, and climbed up on the couch.

"So Daniel, this is Eric," Martin said, and Daniel stared up at his father, then back to the baby.

"Can I?" he said, and Joan said, "Of course," and when Daniel gently touched the baby's face, his confusion fell away.

"He's so soft." Joan laughed. "Just like you, my love, when you were his age. The way you still are."

Daniel looked out the window at his playground. "When can I show him the sandbox and the swings and the jungle gym? When can he hang from his knees, like me?" Martin lifted Daniel into his lap. "A few years, buddy. Then he'll want to do everything with you."

The next day, Daniel insisted on feeding his baby brother, this infant he was already imagining as his friend, eager, even, to boss around; not knowing that someday Eric would neither heed nor follow, would leave Daniel in a silent, stormy race for dominance that Eric would know nothing about.

It was difficult to pry Daniel away from the baby. His new life in kindergarten could not compare. He did not want to leave with Fancy each morning, came running in at noon, insisting on knowing everything that happened in his absence before he would agree to eat his lunch. "Tell me the whole story of this morning," he would say to Joan, "and don't leave anything out." And she described it all—the feedings, the diaper changes, the naps, the drools, the songs Fancy had sung, what part Joan was up to in the book she was reading to Eric. During her late, heavily pregnant months, Daniel's favorite bedtime tale was hearing how Joan read to him when he was a tadpole, making her recite the names of those books he heard from inside her belly.

When Eric had been home for several weeks, Daniel said, "Mom, I'm going to make a list and you have to read those books again to Eric. I'll listen too, if I have time."

His seriousness made her realize she had not read to Eric in utero, as she had with him, and that whatever Eric heard during those nine pregnant months when she read to Daniel tucked up in his bed, was unintentional, secondhand, an afterthought.

Daniel included the Palliser and Trollope series; Balzac's *Lost Illusions*; Maugham's *The Painted Veil*; all the Dawn Powells, and so many more, but her Rare Baby stories weren't on his meticulous list. Those stories were in the past and she wasn't going to read them to Eric, but Daniel had heard them until he was four and, childishly, Joan wanted to know why he had left them off.

One afternoon, when Joan was in the recliner, Eric in her arms sucking hard at a bottle, Daniel ran in. "Where are you?" he demanded. "We're starting the chapter called 'The Two Dukes' in Trollope's *Phineas Redux*." "I remember that chapter, it's a good one," he said, and Joan thought he had to be pretending, wanting to impress her, as he liked to do, by demonstrating his smarts. He often joined her in the nursery, sitting on the stool while she read to Eric, frequently telling her he remembered that scene or that character, when so-and-so did this or that, but it was always a recollection after the fact. Still, if Daniel was telling the truth, then he remembered everything, which had to include her Rare Baby stories, and Joan wondered why he never mentioned them.

The weekend after they celebrated Eric's first birthday, Joan was on her knees in one of the gardens, her hands thrust deep into the rich earth, packing in mail-order tulip bulbs, thinking about whether she owed her parents a note. They had sent an unexpected birthday card to Eric, with a wrinkled twenty-dollar bill inside. The card had been devoid of preprinted sweetness, just Eleanor Ashby's truncated "*Good Luck*" in English, rather than in the professed French of her soul. And Joan couldn't figure out whether her mother meant the sentiment sarcastically. And if she did, whether it was directed at Joan, or at one-year-old Eric, who was another grandson her parents had no interest in meeting. But all that internal debating ceased when Fancy ran toward her, calling out, "You've got to come quick. Nothing's wrong, but hurry."

Daniel was in the baby's blue-walled nursery, the color suggested by Fancy. "Blue is the color of the mind," she had told Joan and Martin. "Blue is soothing and will foster the new one's intelligence, communication skills, serenity, logic, coolness, reflection, and calm. Pick a strong blue to stimulate clear though. The flip side of blue, or choosing the wrong blue, is a child who is cold, aloof, lacks emotions, or is unfriendly." Martin had laughed, but Joan thought the buttercup yellow they had chosen for Daniel's room was, perhaps, responsible for his wonderfully balanced nature, his early ability to read, his voracious love of books, his easy laughter, his ease falling instantly to sleep at bedtime; and at Olinsky's Paint & Hardware, Joan and Martin had selected Imperial Blue, like the velvety background of a star-laden night.

Daniel had dragged the nursing recliner over to the crib, in which Eric sat holding the stuffed giraffe Fancy had given him as a birthday present. His brown eyes were so round as he stared at his big brother. Daniel was holding the blank notebook he'd asked Joan for a week earlier. From where she stood, she could see that at least two pages were covered in words he had written himself.

Joan put a finger to her lips and Fancy nodded, the two of them staring into the room through the jamb of the open door.

"*Henry is a very small squirrel with ocean-blue eyes. His fur is gray and so is his bushy tail. He lives in a park that has lots of trees. One of those trees is a weeping willow and that is his home, in a hole in that tree, where he lives all alone. Sometimes that makes him very, very sad. Sometimes he cries at night when he remembers he once had a mother and a father and a baby brother, all of them gone one day, leaving him behind. He gets mad, too, when he remembers they didn't even leave him a note, just left him to try and do his best by himself. On his sixth birthday, he woke up wondering how to make the day special, when he wouldn't have any presents or balloons. He scrambled out of his hole, his bushy tail waving, and he looked all around the park. In the pond in the middle, he saw a baby duck swimming around, and he ran straight there. The duck was so little with feathers that looked like snow. 'Hi, Duck,' Henry said. 'It's my birthday and I want to know if you want to play with me.' Duck said, 'Okay. Come swimming with me.' Henry said, 'I don't know how to swim. But wait. I've got a great tail, and my feet are sort of like flippers, and maybe they'll keep me from sinking. So here I go.' And then Henry was in the pond with the duck and they splashed and played together for hours.*

"The End," Daniel said, and it was silent in the nursery for two or three seconds, and then Eric began to laugh his baby laugh, a gurgle more than anything else, but the sound he was making, the emotion he was conveying, was obvious, and Daniel said, "I don't see what's so funny. It's a good story."

Joan and Fancy smiled at each other and tiptoed down the hall into the kitchen. It was a Saturday, Martin was at the hospital making rounds, and Fancy pulled out a bowl and cans of tuna fish, then opened the fridge for the mayonnaise. “Daniel’s five years and seven months old and *he’s* writing. How about you?” Fancy said.

“How about me, what?” said Joan.

“You know,” Fancy said, and Joan did know.

The month Eric was due, Joan had done what she intended, told Martin she was taking a break from writing. “You know me,” she had said to him, “I need a room with a door to work and my study is the baby’s nursery now.” Martin had nodded. “Whatever you want to do. Whatever makes you happy.” It was so easy to get the lie past him, that would permit her to write without his knowledge, to keep him and their family far away from the precious part of herself. Still, she had been surprised he did not question her ability to cut herself off from her work, for whatever period of time, and disappointed to know he wouldn’t think of scaling the stone walls of her imaginary castle. Where did he store all the knowledge he had gleaned about her during their eight years together, or had he cleared his mind entirely, simplified his life, patients and research coming first, good and loving fathering in the off hours. Regardless, the lie was not supposed to come true, and more than a year had passed since Joan had written a word, those rare babies still figuring into her dreams. She had no satisfactory answer to Fancy’s unstated question, and it caused the usual sharp pain in her heart. For the past year, she had kept small notebooks and pens in her nightstand, in the nursery dresser, in her bag, but the pages remained blank, all that hostile white space, and she wondered if it was her fault, that the small notebooks made her think of journals, of diaries, repositories of dated lies and half-truths.

“I’ve seen Daniel so intent at his desk, but I didn’t know he was writing a story,” Joan said to Fancy instead. To celebrate his coming advancement into first grade, Joan and Martin had bought him a small white desk. Daniel had known what he wanted. “Something,” he said, “that makes everything I do look good.”

“First one I’ve heard,” Fancy said. “But that cherub’s got a first-rate imagination, just like yours. See how well the yellow walls worked out.”

Joan wanted to tell Daniel she heard him reading his story to Eric, praise and encourage him, express her thrill that he was her miraculous son, a writer just like she was. She nearly said something, until she thought back to the Joan in the story she was actually living, and knew *that* Joan would not interfere prematurely in the creative life of her firstborn.

“Daniel wrote a story,” Joan told Martin in bed that night. She felt the mattress depressing as his long body rolled over, felt his breath on her cheek. She stared up at the white ceiling. Why hadn’t they painted their bedroom a color specially chosen to increase or decrease the particular characteristics of its inhabitants, as they had done with the rooms their children lived in? Fancy had never presumed to suggest they paint their room, but what did she make of their white box? What did white signify, aside from purity, cleanliness, simplicity? Hostility, Joan thought, considering the pages of those notebooks stashed and unmarked. But why not white, and why bother now, when no paint color in their bedroom could alter their own long-formed personalities.

“I know,” Martin said. “He’s been showing them to me.”

“*Them?*” Joan said, and sat up. “He’s written more than the one Fancy and I overheard today?”

“Maybe three or four,” Martin said. “He finds me and hands me a story and waits until I read it, then wants to talk about it with me, asks me what I think. I’ve told him he’s inherited your talent.”

Joan twisted her hair up in a bun, found a pin on the nightstand, and stabbed it in. “Why wouldn’t he bring *me* his stories instead of you?”

Martin pulled Joan back down. “Maybe it’s a father-son thing, who knows.” She let him stroke her face, her neck, but when he reached to kiss her, she said, “I’m wiped. I’ve got to sleep.”

But he was asleep before her, and in the dark, the moon through the open drapes highlighted the whiteness of their room. Joan thought of Daniel writing away and debated how long the duration could be, without writing, before a writer was no longer considered a writer.

It took Daniel several months before he told Joan he was writing stories. She didn't ask why he had chosen his father first, kept all that to herself, just said, "I think that's absolutely wonderful, I can't wait to read them," and Daniel dashed away into his room and came back with three one-pagers. Then the stories grew longer, to two pages, then three, then more, and Daniel brought Joan every new one first, and every single one featured Henry the Squirrel.

She marveled how Daniel made him a Cub Scout, an animal tracker, a hiker, a surfer, a sailor, a long-distance swimmer making his way from Miami to Cuba, finding the particulars of the ocean's currents from the set of encyclopedias kept on the bottom shelf of the living-room bookcase. Daniel put Henry into risky situations, ascribed to him a catalogue of fears, and then forced the squirrel to use his wily imagination to overcome the challenges he faced. What would Henry do now that he was stranded at the Everest base camp; how might he tame the shark following him in the ocean; how could he pull a teenager drowning in a pool to safety?

In the stories Joan wrote when she was Daniel's age, she had murdered her characters, while Daniel had his one character facing down dangers and searching for answers. The genesis of the stories was clear to her: because Daniel felt loved and safe within his family, he could imagine himself taking risks, venturing out onto figurative limbs. He was lucky, Joan thought. She had only felt loved and safe within the worlds she created.

Joan encouraged his writing, praised him honestly, offered him help when he said a passage wasn't coming out right. He would return to her again, saying, "I think I got it now," and Joan would find he had not changed a word, or he had changed words, but not as she suggested. At first she was taken aback, reacting, she realized, as a writer, as her own editor, as the editor she had been for other novelists at Gravida, and not as a mother of a little boy finding his own storytelling path. The way Daniel threw away her suggestions—her editorial advice actually—stung, but she had done the same thing with her own editors. When Malcolm West was assigned to *Other Small Spaces*, he was just a few years older than Joan, his youth and inexperience turning him dictatorial, forcing her to attend their meetings with a false piety, calling him a few days later to report that her attempts to execute his suggestions had all failed. My fault, not yours, she always said, and her first collection was published as she wanted, unspoiled by a heavy hand. With *Fictional Family Life*, a senior editor named Philip Krauss took Joan under his wing, her accolades making her worthy of his attention, but even against him Joan had won every battle.

When she stopped feeling hurt, she applauded Daniel for his resolve, his firmness, his inability to be swayed by the suggestions of another. To keep him excited about what he was doing, she bound every one of his stories, even those that were a single paragraph, between cardboard covers that she ornately decorated and titled, with *By Daniel Manning* in huge letters on the front cover.

Still, it was disquieting, disconcerting, to be reading her child's stories about achievement, when she was not writing a thing, other than lists of errands, of things either she or Fancy should buy at the market, of calls she was to make to set up playdates with the mothers of the boys in Daniel's first-grade class, with the daughters belonging to Augusta, Carla, Dawn, Emily, Meg, and Teresa, the former Pregnant Six, who each now had birthed three to Joan's two, dental appointments for her and Martin, pediatrician appointments for the boys, the phone company when the telephone line fizzed and died.

When she buried *The Sympathetic Executioners*, she did not blame Daniel, then kicking around inside of her. She had been right—it wasn't Daniel who had thinned her out, any fetus would have caused the same harm. She knew now how children were—how Daniel was—their smiles, their kisses, their tears, all the precocious methods they employed to ensure their futures mattered, came first. Would she be writing now if Daniel weren't beautiful, loving, inquisitive, creative, good at tangling

his arms around her neck, whispering, “I love you, Mommy”? At this age, as unconditional as a cat or a dog.

Glimpsing her typewriter on the shelf in Eric’s nursery, it seemed long ago that the room was her study. Somehow Eric, who could not move around furniture, alter the position of his mobiles, change the location of the books on the shelves, had made it his own. Would she end up writing about Eric one day, about a child in his infancy who already knew his own future?

No, no more rare babies.

She would do right by her real ones, but they weren’t entitled to populate whatever she might write in the future. The millions of ideas she used to have each day had disappeared. Where had they all gone?

On Fancy’s first day back with the Mannings after her father’s funeral in Canada, she joined Joan and Daniel in the kitchen for breakfast and said, “He was such a good man. He couldn’t do everything he wanted for us, but his heart was in the right place. It was a lovely ceremony. There’s nothing like the sound of dirt hitting the top of a coffin. Makes me ache, but it’s the ring of time, calling a tired soul back to the earth. The cemetery was so pretty, bushes and flowers everywhere, and I spent an hour walking around, reading what people had etched onto gravestones, so much love for those buried in the ground.”

Martin was home early, not at the hospital late, not in some distant country, and when he walked in the door, Fancy said, “We’re having steaks and baked potatoes.”

An hour later, Eric was in his high chair, already fed, with a plastic bowl of cereal to play with, and everyone took their seats as Martin came in bearing a bottle of red wine. “Fancy, let’s toast your father,” he said, and Fancy brushed a tear from her eye.

The bottle was opened, wineglasses filled, and Martin lifted his glass. “I never met your father, but you’re a treasure, and he must have been one too.” Fancy said, “He was. Thank you. This means so much to me.”

“Fancy,” Daniel said then, “what happened after they buried your father in the ground? After the dirt hit the coffin? Did flowers grow fast?”

Fancy ruffled his hair and said, “So here’s what happened. Down in the ground my father went, the coffin this big old pine thing, huge because my dad was seven feet tall, where I get my own height from. There were prayers and poems and people sniffled and cried, and when it was over, my mom said, ‘Fancy, are you coming home now, we’ve got lots of people coming to mourn.’ And I said, ‘Not yet, I’ve got to go to Dad’s favorite place,’ and my mom understood, and off I went to the bridge, where he used to cast his fishing line on Sunday mornings at dawn, and I stood there, and the hours passed, and the sun grew hotter, and I waited and waited, and then all of a sudden, one fish, then a second, then a third, came flying out of the river, arcing over me, their fins flat out, their gills flapping, until they landed back in the water and swam away.”

Daniel’s eyes were huge, and he said, “That’s a great story, Fancy.”

And Martin said, “It is. That kind of stellar experience, being a part of an experience cherished by another, is what I see when I operate on people’s eyes, their profound and genuine dreams, the wishes they have for their lives, if their sight is returned.”

Daniel stared at his father, then said to Joan, “Does everyone in the whole world tell stories?” There was a fillip of concern in his voice, a fear perhaps tied to Fancy’s father’s grave, the sound of dirt hitting the coffin.

“Lots of people do. A story requires two things: a great story to tell and the bravery to tell it,” Joan said.

Daniel cut into his meat, sawed a bit off, put it in his mouth, chewed, nodded, then said, “Oh.”

“*You* are brave enough,” Joan said, wanting to allay his concern, but she sensed that Daniel feared something that might be more awful than death or looking into the depths of someone’s eyes: that perhaps the world was overrun by storytellers better than he.

"Book, book, book," Eric yelled, and Joan heard Daniel yell back, "Get away, that's mine. Don't be a pest." Since turning eight, Daniel was not only writing, but also climbing what he called his *ladder to literature*, a plain metal ladder he dragged in from the garage, warned about using without the steadying hand of either Joan or Fancy.

That first time he climbed up, Joan found his perfect little toes gripped around the top rung like pale commas, his hands pulling down big, heavy books. "Mom, I want to read the good stuff on my own," he said, and she understood, she had been just like him at the same age.

Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Solzhenitsyn's *Cancer Ward*, Kozinski's *The Painted Bird*, he read each of those books and dozens more, drawn to the Russians, to a Romanian, to love and war and infidelity, to the Soviet police state and terminal illness, to tales of cruel acts and heroic escapes. The suggestion Martin had once made—that Daniel read books geared for children his own age—had been roundly rejected by Joan, a child-rearing debate she had won. "It just makes me sort of sad," Martin had said. "I don't want him losing his innocence so soon."

"That ship seems to have sailed," Joan replied, and Daniel read whatever he wanted.

Once, *The Happy Hooker* was among the books he pulled down. "Mom," he yelled out, and when Joan came into the living room, Daniel was staring at the cover, the salacious book a dead golden bird in her son's small, outstretched hands, and she was disturbed to find herself thinking of the way the hooker had screwed her brother-in-law, then allowed herself to be penetrated by the stubby red penis of the brother-in-law's German shepherd.

"Can I read this one too?" he asked, and Joan said, "Of course, but only when your baby teeth are so long gone you will have no memory of them, and you live on your own, far away from Daddy and me." Clutching the sex book against his chest, Daniel said, "But why would I ever live far away from you and Daddy?" She gathered him up into a tight hug and gently removed the book from his grip. That night she handed it back to Martin to hide well.

One afternoon, when she was feeding Eric in the kitchen, Daniel pulled up a chair and said, "I think we should talk about the books I'm reading," and in the late afternoons, when he was home from school, and Eric was napping, and Fancy was in the kitchen preparing dinner, Joan and Daniel sat in the living room, or ran across the grass, up and over the knoll, to their special glen where they stretched out on a blanket and talked about what he was reading, what he liked or disliked, if anything had scared him. Sometimes they brought their books and mother and son read silently side by side, lifting their heads occasionally to determine the shifting shapes of the clouds.

From the start, Daniel did a curious thing each time he finished a book. Before returning it to its place on the living-room shelves, he crossed out Joan's name on the flyleaf and wrote in his own. When she asked him why, he said, "I'm taking possession, Mom," and she laughed because even at such a young age he needed to leave a piece of himself behind, in the work of others, with his own work. Exactly like her, or rather, exactly like the way she had been.

9

From his birth, Eric was like that nursery rhyme: when he was good, he was very, very good, and when he was bad, he was horrid. All that was missing was the little curl right in the middle of his forehead. His hair was as black as Joan's, but the same texture as Martin's, straight as a pasture of reeds, not a curl to be found.

When the daughters of the former Pregnant Six came over for playdates with Daniel, it was Eric who absorbed their attention, whom they insisted on mothering, ordering Daniel around in supercilious tones—"Bring me his blanket," or "He needs a new bottle, make sure you warm it up right"—while Eric cooed in their arms, wrapped long blond or brunette or pale red hair around his chubby fingers. He was angelic with the girls, never screamed when he was their make-believe baby. But with his own mother he screamed, jags that lasted for hours when he wasn't hungry, or thirsty, or wet, or dirty, or ill, or hurting, or teething, and Joan couldn't figure out if it was because the world seemed to him a frightening place, or if it was simpler than that—mere frustration that he could not yet make himself understood. When he would finally lock his lips together, the silence itself rang, as if a bomb had decimated all the sounds in the world, leaving nothing behind.

Daniel was usually a good sport and played the game of happy family while Joan and some combination of Augusta, Carla, Dawn, Emily, Meg, and Teresa watched a version of the future unfold. But sometimes, when he grew tired of heeding commands, he disappeared, and Joan would find him in his room, at his white desk, a notebook in front of him, a pen in his hand. During one of those afternoons, he started a story about Henry refusing the kind offer of another squirrel family to join them. *"Come be with us," the mother squirrel said. She was fat and round and her fur was brown. "No, I'm not interested in having any brothers and sisters, not anymore. Being on my own is much better."* Joan silently agreed.

When the weather was nice, the women sat outside at Joan's old writing desk. Purchased in a secondhand store for twenty-five dollars when she was eighteen and new to New York, there was no longer room for it in the house, but she had not wanted to set it out on the curb, dumped into a garbage truck. It hurt her to use the table this way, on which she had written so much, now stained from sweating glasses of iced tea and wine and gin and tonics and soda cans, but at least she could sit at it, her bare toes kicking at the cool grass she and Fancy had planted. Listening to the women's delight with how their eldest daughters so naturally cared for Eric, Joan would wish just one little girl would refuse to hold him, would say she had different dreams for herself, did not want to waste her time learning how to mother, that it was a skill she would have no use for. But such was unlikely, for as smart as Augusta, Carla, Dawn, Emily, Meg, and Teresa were, they were vocal about their maternal fulfillment, their satisfaction in having children, "Even better than we imagined it would be," they frequently said, in earshot of their daughters. "Don't you think so, Joan?" they asked her, and although Joan smiled, never did she nod her assent.

Once, her life had been completely fulfilled by a different kind of striving, that did not involve watching children interact and hearing ecstatic mothers describe their crushes with motherhood.

It always came as a shock to her then, that she was no different from any of them: a formerly famous writer now a stay-at-home mother, taking a yoga class two towns over twice a week, reading to Daniel, listening to his stories, trying to find a way in with Eric, a four-day weekend twice a year with Annabelle Iger in New York, happily hearing her rail against marriage, against children. Joan's failure to produce the first novel demonstrated, Iger said, the norm's destructive, debilitating effects. The way Iger held Martin wholly responsible would give Joan a sense of malevolent glee.

One cold afternoon, when the daughters of Augusta, Teresa, and Dawn were playing their usual game with Eric and Daniel in the nursery, and the women were in Joan's kitchen, cups filled with hot coffee, plates filling up with slices of Reine de Saba, the chocolate almond cake Dawn was testing on

them before offering it at Boulangerie de Rhome, the news of the day was that, in Vermont, a social worker was shot to death with a rifle by a mother fearing she would lose custody of her children. Meg and Teresa pressed their hands to their mouths, as Dawn said, "I'd do the same thing, shoot anyone who tried to take my kids from me." Joan nearly said aloud what she was thinking: she loved Daniel, she did love Eric, but sequential hours at a desk of her own, in a room of her own, with the ideas, or at least one idea, flowing, having a brief respite from custody, from mothering, from Daniel's after-school questions about everything, from Eric's screams, would not be half-bad.

At two, Eric's first word was not *Mommy, Daddy, Daniel, Fancy, grass, bath,* or *candy*, or any variation thereof, but *no.* And it was not a general *no*. It took Joan and Fancy several days to understand what Eric was trying to refuse, and even Daniel, who could decipher Eric's grunts and waving hands easily, was confused.

No meant no more reading to Eric at bedtime, no more big books, no more children's books, no reading at all, refusing that which was essential to Joan. However, if promised a red lollipop, he would listen to a story of Daniel's. He seemed to like the little gray squirrel, but the lollipop had to be in sight at all times, otherwise he stuffed his little fingers into his little ears and turned his face to the starry blue wall.

If the color blue, among other things, encouraged efficiency and communication, then Eric excelled at combining those two traits, efficiently communicating his needs and his wants without linguistic prowess.

No more reading came first, then *No diaper.* "No diaper," Eric said to Joan when she was changing him one morning. "No diaper," he said to Fancy that same day, when she was doing the same thing. He tugged at the diaper, pushed it down, figured out how to get one leg free, then the other, then ran through the house naked from the waist down, his chunky little ass so low to the ground.

"He's done with diapers," Daniel said to Joan.

"I get that, love, but he's only two. Barely potty-trained. He's not ready to make that decision for himself," and Joan diapered Eric again.

"No diaper," Eric yelled in the middle of the night, abandoning sleeping straight through, a trick only recently mastered, until his demand was honored. It was three in the morning, and everyone was gathered around his crib. Martin said, "He knows his own mind. So let's try underpants. Maybe he's telling us he knows more than we do."

Apparently he did, and Joan thought his name was proving itself—he was ruling his own world, setting the guidelines by which he was willing to live. Superheroes ran across his bottom from then on. Somehow, he had trained himself.

The week Eric left diapers behind, Daniel said, "How old was I when I stopped wearing diapers?" Joan thought, then said, "Almost three. Right, Fancy?" And Fancy nodded. "So does that mean Eric is smarter than me?" The corners of his mouth turned down, his eyes, too, were drooping like some old hunting dog, like the oldest hunting dog in the world. "Of course not," Joan said. "Everyone lives their life on a different schedule. Eric is early in this area, you were right on time."

Eric was, however, very slow to talk. He gathered up one word at a time, then ran with that word as if it were a kite on the end of a long rope. At three, his favorite word was *sandbox.* Led to the sandbox, he would spend happy hours alone building battlements, bridges made of fallen branches and twigs, forts with his own shirt and pants, holes filled with water from the hose that he figured out how to uncoil and turn on. Usually, he did not destroy what he created.

If blue fostered intelligence, then Joan had her doubts, both about the efficacy of colors employed this way, and about Eric. At four, his mouth was a receptacle for items other than food—bobby pins, pennies, paperclips, buttons, crayons, the sundered hoof of Fancy's stuffed giraffe. At four and a half, he began eating sand, clumps of dirt, chewy leaves, flowers plucked from the gardens, his baby teeth masticating it all. At nearly five, he was also sucking on pebbles, mashing pen caps of cheap ballpoints down, like some steel-toothed machine, until he bit through the plastic. It was

as if his refusal to breastfeed had manifested into an unquenchable oral fixation. Martin issued his professional determination that it was a phase he would outgrow.

But when Fancy found a sliver of bark between his front teeth, his tongue green from leaves, teeth marks scratching the surface of a rock he had in his pocket, she brought her concerns to Joan, and Joan couldn't keep herself from yelling at Eric. "Why are you eating all this crazy stuff?" and Eric, calm with that irritating half-smile on his lips, said, "I just like how it feels in my mouth." She left Fancy with Eric outside on the swings and went inside, to a living-room shelf where she found Martin's *Diseases and Disorders* and searched its pages for a disorder that might explain why he was stuffing strange things down his gullet, if it indicated some kind of mental disturbance, and there it was:

Pica (/ˈpaɪkə/ py-kə) *the persistent eating of nonnutritive substances like paper, clay, metal, chalk, soil, glass, sand, ice, starch. Probably a behavior pattern driven by multiple factors. Some recent evidence supports including pica with the obsessive-compulsive spectrum of disorders. There are several theoretical approaches that attempt to explain the etiology:*

Nutritional theories attribute pica to specific deficiencies of minerals, such as iron and zinc.

The sensory and psychological theories center on the finding that many patients with pica say that they just enjoy the taste, texture, and smell of the item they are eating.

A neuropsychiatric theory is supported by evidence that certain brain lesions in laboratory animals have been associated with abnormal eating behaviors, and it is postulated that pica might be associated with certain patterns of brain disorder in humans.

Psychosocial theories surrounding pica have described an association with family stress.

Addiction or addictive behavior has also been suggested as one possible explanation for pica behavior in some patients.

Treatment: Education about nutrition. Psychological counseling. Behavioral interventions for children with developmental disabilities. Closer supervision of children during play. Child-proof homes and play environments.

Eric didn't seem to have developmental difficulties, or an obsessive-compulsive disorder, the sandbox was regularly raked, there was no lead paint in the house, none, as far as she knew, in the dirt. He was the youngest member of a loving family, and chewed a children's multivitamin every single day. What stress could he have?

That night, Joan showed Martin the pica entry and said, "I think our youngest son might be suffering from this."

They had a heart-to-heart with Eric in the living room. Martin on the couch, Eric on the ottoman, Joan in the comfortable armchair some distance away. Triangles were the only thing she remembered from junior high geometry, and if a line were drawn from Martin to Eric, Eric to Joan, Joan to Martin, they were the three points of an obtuse triangle, and she, way out there, was the longest side, the point at the end of ninety degrees.

"Eric, do you feel compelled—is something making you eat dirt, sand, pebbles, leaves, twigs, sticks, stones, grass, and anything else that people don't usually eat? Something inside that's telling you to eat those things? Voices, or just a hunger you can't explain to yourself?" Martin asked.

"No," Eric said.

"No what?" Martin asked.

"I don't hear voices and I eat real food when I'm hungry." It wasn't an explanation, but it was something.

"Will you stop eating dirt, sand, pebbles, leaves, twigs, sticks, stones, grass, and anything else you know doesn't belong in your mouth?" Joan was impressed Martin could reel everything off twice in the same order, although surely he did the same thing, with medical terms, in the operating room.

"Yes," Eric said. "It's just for fun anyway."

"Will you promise not to have that kind of fun anymore?" Martin asked.

"Yes. No more fun," he said. "Can I go?"

Martin nodded and Eric ran from the room, his bare feet stomping on the hardwood floor. He had Martin's loud walk.

"Pica crisis averted," Martin said. "Next."

And it was true, the crisis disappeared or never truly existed; still, it seemed strange to Joan that Eric would have eaten any of those things in the first place, and she wondered what went on his head.

10

A fair came to Rhome the first weekend of August, setting up in a huge field where the hay had been sickle-mowed, leaving behind a flat, golden carpet. The field was ten miles past the Mannings' neighborhood, now called Peachtree by almost everyone. It was hot and sunny, the cloudless sky a rich blue. All of Rhome seemed to have turned out, as well as a good part of the populations of the towns on either side of it, for the fair was bustling when Joan and Martin and the boys arrived. White and beige tents dotted the landscape and booths had been set up and were doing a brisk business selling local produce, home-made jams and preserves, cheeses made from cows and goats and sheep from the nearby farms, wine bottled from Rappahannock County and Shenandoah Valley grapes. For the kids, there were Italian ices and sno-cones to lick, cotton candy to pull apart, and rides—a Ferris wheel, a merry-go-round, a small roller coaster, a riding ring where old horses were taking the youngest for slow rides, round and round. The aroma of barbecue was in the air.

Joan assessed the crowd, lighting upon the most interesting: young men turning white T-shirts into art, pinching the material tight and rubber-banding each section until they looked like porcupines being dipped into huge steaming vats of colored dyes; the young woman with a bird's nest of purple hair sitting at a potter's wheel, slamming down hunks of clay, her hands moving nearly as fast as the wheel, cups, vases, plates, bowls, trays, appearing like magic; the elderly man in a worn blue linen suit, a jaunty straw boater on his head, a smeared palette tight in his hand, painting a mammoth canvas of people on a beach staring out at an ocean where a sailboat bobbed in the distance, though he himself was standing in a mowed field; the handsome young man at an old-fashioned school desk, a manual typewriter in front of him, a stack of paper to the side. He had long pony-tailed hair and round wire glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, and his sign read: $5 GET YOUR OWN PERSONAL SHORT STORY. Joan absorbed these people and something clicked inside of her.

Daniel brought her back, tugging at her hand, saying, "I want to go exploring. I'll take Eric with me, but I've got so much to see and you and Daddy are walking too slow." He was a serious, responsible boy.

"He'll pull you every which way," Joan warned Daniel, wanting him to take Eric, thinking a good mother would let her older son run free, not obligate him to watch over his younger brother.

Martin touched her shoulder. "Let them go," he said, and she wondered why he would think she wouldn't.

Martin handed Daniel ten single dollar bills. "For whatever you guys want," he said. "Meet us at five at the entrance, okay? There's a lot of people here and it would be tough to have to search for you."

Daniel held up his wrist, showed his father his watch, the birthday present he had chosen for himself last year. He was obsessed with time lately: how much time had elapsed between one event and another, how much time had gone by since the beginning of the world, since he had written his last Henry story, since he had given Joan a story to read, since he began reading the latest big book he was reading, how little time was left before he was late to a friend's house, before he started fifth grade, before his tenth birthday in late December, before he was all grown up.

On the way home, the boys bounced off the backseat, chattering about the rides they had ridden, everything they had eaten, the new tie-dye T-shirts they were wearing, the clay vase painted yellow and white that Joan was holding in her lap, bought from the girl with the bird's-nest hair. Bounding into the house, the boys said they were full, they did not want dinner, and did not argue when Joan said, "Baths! Alone or together, whatever you want, but you both need to wash your hair." Wonderfully worn out, they were asleep long before their usual, well-guarded bedtimes.

Joan fixed salads with tomatoes and cucumbers from their own garden. She held up a bottle of wine, and Martin shook his head, "Work," he said. She opened the bottle anyway, poured herself a

glass, and they ate at the kitchen table, the windows all thrown open. The sun was just setting, it was nearing eight, and Martin was on his way back to the hospital. “I may sleep there tonight,” he said, which he sometimes did when he was worried about a patient who was not doing well. He kept a clean suit, shirt, and tie in his office. He never told her the names of his patients, gave her only brief précis of who they were. This one that he was worried about was Japanese, a grandfather, father, husband, a lover of the tea ceremony, and Joan had named him Mr. Kobayashi.

Martin grabbed a couple of apples from the bowl on the counter, kissed the top of Joan’s head, and shut the back door quietly. She heard his new car rev up, a Mercedes, all black. Years of driving secondhand Toyotas, he adored his car like a mistress, teaching the boys how to wash and wax on a couple of weekends. He had gotten the top-of-the-line sound system installed. Once he was beyond Rhome, he had twenty miles of pure highway, always racing beyond the speed limit, blasting the music, the windows down, screaming the lyrics.

The kitchen was clean and Joan was back at the table, her typewriter, silently retrieved from Eric’s closet just minutes earlier, plugged in for the first time in five years. She had dusted it off, checked that the cartridge still had ink, which it did. She had found reams of paper in that closet too, had taken one. Ripping off the wrapping around five hundred sheets of virgin paper had felt like love to her, overwhelming, never-going-to-happen-again love. She was thrilled Martin had gone back to the hospital to watch over Mr. Kobayashi. The idea had come to her in one fell swoop during the afternoon, because of the fair, and she had to start to get it down.

There was a potential novel there, she knew. She felt its commanding logic, both internal and external, powerful enough to keep her tethered to home, to silence the fears that she would never write again, eliminate the horrid daydream in which she sometimes indulged, about simply walking away from this alternative life she was living, filled with its soft poetry and hard tediousness, its spectacular, love-ridden times measured against meaningless hours and days and weeks and months, a life where her past accomplishments were long forgotten, where she was called, most often, Joan Manning, leaving her tongue-tied and wishing she could say, “I’m not Joan Manning, I’m Joan Ashby, the writer.” That indulgent daydream about leaving all this behind. Leaving the children, Martin, the house that was too small, the great stretch of land that was, like the house, in her name alone, where she used to think she would set up a writers’ colony. Leaving it all behind and never returning, stepping back into her original skin, where she was only, foremost, supremely, the writer Joan Ashby, no longer tied to the person she still mostly loved, the children they had made together that she loved with unequal force.

She thought about the boys in their beds, before their existences entirely fell away, their breathing no longer her concern. There was only the hum of the overhead light and the refrigerator, and then only the words in her head rushing onto the page.

We were young, and some of us were beautiful, and others of us were brilliant, and a few of us were both. Citizenship demanded only an ability to create, to use our minds and hands and bodies in unforeseen ways. We believed we knew more than those who had tried before us. Their experiment had failed, but their hard lessons would serve as our guide. Passionate, arrogant, certain we would not falter, or deceive, or betray ourselves, that we would not blacken our lives with whitewashed expectations, our presence here, in this arcadia, proved we had slipped the ropes and chains of expected, normal life. We considered everything. Except everything. By its very nature, everything resists corralling; it is far too expansive. You think you’ve avoided every last trap, but what you hadn’t considered, what you never could plan for, it is that which trips you up.

11

Joan had never liked fairs, had only occasionally pushed through the crowded blocks of the Feast of San Gennaro in Little Italy when she lived in New York, down the avenues closed to traffic for the street fairs that sprung up in spring and summer there. But it was the fair here, in the place she referred to as home, regardless of how it actually felt to her, with its tie-dye artists, potter, painter, writer, that cast a spell, shifted the gears in her brain, charged up her heart, unleashed her soul. She felt the bonds loosening, her tortured body stretching, already picturing herself walking free and unfettered. There was a future out there, only a spot on the horizon, and years away, but she could see it there in the distance, with her naked eyes.

It was past midnight when she stepped outside. In one hand she held the piece of paper with the single paragraph it took her twenty-four attempts to get right, and a glass of wine in the other. Her old desk was still pitched in the grass, and she set down the paper and glass, sat down on the wooden bench they had found somewhere, a yard sale, or the thrift shop, and she looked up, searching for the man in the moon.

The last time she felt this flame she was writing the Rare Baby stories, and before that *The Sympathetic Executioners*, no matter its failure, and before that, her celebrated collections. Five long years of a depleted brain, worried, then certain, that the precious part of herself had been destroyed. Fiction was what she read in books written by others, borrowed from the Rhome Library, purchased from Odile at the Tell-Tale, from Sessa at the Inveterate Reader, sent to her by Iger in the form of Gravida's prepublication copies, where Annabelle was now the senior vice president and associate publisher. Joan had not written a single line in these last years, not even an entry in those small notebooks she once stashed in various places, all discovered and used for other purposes a long time ago.

But now there was most of August to endure, before Eric started kindergarten and Daniel fifth grade. A sprawling month before Eric was gone from nine until noon, and Daniel gone until three. She could not bear the thought of delaying, of shuffling through the rest of the summer while the story was fresh in her mind. She could make notes, write longhand, but it would not be the same, she had not written that way since she was a girl. She needed quiet, emptiness, the compression of her fingertips on the keys, her Olivetti pulsing to her internal beat.

Martin never came home in the middle of any day, but she needed the boys, and Fancy, out of the house on a predetermined schedule, for a dedicated number of hours Monday through Friday.

Fancy was wonderful with them, taking them to the park to play, for bike rides along the river path that fronted the Potomac, within riding distance of the house, special trips for miniature golf or bowling and pizza one town away, but the time frame was not at all firm, sometimes it lasted for a morning or an afternoon, other times barely half an hour. And if Fancy dropped Daniel and Eric off at the homes of their friends, between the delivering and the fetching, she always ended up back at the house for the duration, busying herself in the kitchen, preparing fabulous dishes, but it was the only room in the house with a table on which a person could spread out and work.

Joan might steal time during their out-of-house adventures, but there was no certainty to it, and to truly get under way she needed what she used to have: hours that piled up in a freewheeling way, not writing in some truncated fashion. She needed to feel secure in her ability to get lost in this new dazzling world she was conceiving, and that would not happen if she had an ear cocked for a car that sounded like hers, Fancy at the wheel, the garage door opening, then the back door, suddenly accosted, waylaid by children with questions. She did not want to race around the kitchen, yanking the cord from the wall, stashing the typewriter, pen, pad, the pages she planned to write beyond that initial paragraph, the notes she would soon make, the first edited pages that would accrue, into a box

in the hall closet, to be hidden beneath a pile of old jackets she had failed, since spring, to drop into the Goodwill bin in the supermarket parking lot.

It was too late to sign the boys up for day camp, and even if it wasn't, Daniel would not willingly go. He could be found most of the time this summer past the knoll, down in the grassy glen on their land, where the two of them still sometimes had their informal chats about the books he read. He was never without the book he was currently reading and his notebook filled with drafts of new squirrel stories. Weekends were not the issue; by now, Joan was well versed in how those formerly empty hours, during which she once always worked, filled up with the needs and wants of others.

A shooting star punctured the night sky and Joan ran through a list of what she would give to have all the days available to her again. Martin did his best to be home on the weekends, to schedule tricky surgeries on Thursdays, rather than Fridays, planning his travel so that when the children woke on Saturday mornings, he was there at the breakfast table as often as he was able. When he was home, the children ran to him, jumped on his back, wanted him to play catch, kick around a soccer ball. He was a genuinely fine and good father, invested too, just not around consistently, or all that much. At the start of the summer, there had been an article in the *New York Times* about one of the new surgeries he was perfecting, toric IOL implantation in patients with *mild* or *forme fruste keratoconus*, and since then he was busy presenting his findings at hospitals in New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and DC. When he was home, though, by noon on the weekends he set up the Slip 'N Slide she had bought at Walmart, rolling out the long plastic sheet down from the top of the knoll, then spraying it with water from the hose. Joan always joined them out there, on a towel at the crest of the small hill, yelling, "Go Daniel. Go Eric," as the boys threw themselves on the wet plastic, their faces lit up, their smiles so huge. She had the sense, those weekends, that she was storing up memories that one day, if she needed them, she could flip through like photographs: a hot sun, a cool ride across bright-green grass, the paintbrushed colors of the flower gardens in the distance, the boys not waiting for their own turns but chasing each other down the wet runway until they careened into each other on the plastic, sending up rainbows of water, she and Martin laughing and cheering. She loved watching their trunks sliding down their pale backsides from the friction of skin on water on plastic, the way they both hauled them back up, as if she and Martin had not seen them naked from birth. Several times, watching Joan and Martin in their bathing suits sliding down the plastic through the cold water, like the children they had never been, the boys screamed in delight. They still had fun when it was just Joan who readied the Slip 'N Slide, but they didn't scream the same way, as if letting free everything they carried inside. The proportions were off, they were growing older, and Martin was a necessary ballast, the one who was not tarred with the eternal tag of *Mother*.

The breeze blew through the red maples, the elms, and Cleveland pear trees she and Fancy had planted nine years before. The maples were nearly fourteen feet high, the elms fifteen, the pear trees thirteen, their spreads now impressive, no longer the stick figures they had been. In the spring, the dense profusion of white pear flowers and maple buds was beautiful. Now everything was green, the pear leaves glossily green, but a little worn out from the heat. A week straight in the nineties. But the night breeze was cooling things down, and Joan went inside.

It was past one, and she was too wound up to sleep. She poured herself more wine and remembered when Daniel was four and a half, and she and the Pregnant Six signed the children up for swim lessons at the community center. Back in the pool they had once swum in together, seven mothers standing in the water, holding six girls and one boy in brightly colored suits, colorful water wings wrapped around their tender, unformed biceps. Such trust in Daniel's heart as she pulled him through the water. He had cinched his head back like a turtle, his eyes squinting against the splash of the water.

"I used to swim here every day," she had whispered into his ear. "When you were inside of me. We swam together before you could breathe air, both of us in the pool. Actually, you swam in two pools, in this one, and in here," she said, pointing at her stomach.

"So do I already know how to swim and I just forgot?" he had wanted to know.

In the second lesson, he gathered his courage, as the little girls did not, striking out on his own across the length of the shallow end, his feet kicking hard, his clear water wings flapping, his brown curls flattened against his small wet skull. He had looked like a lacewing, those slender, delicate insects with large and clear membranous wings that had discovered the roses she and Fancy planted at the front of the house, feeding, they learned, on the aphids that had taken up residence, distorting the flowers, leaving behind pale green secretions like mini-honeydews in a patch. Daniel could destroy nothing, that grin on his face, looking as if he could lift himself out of the water and fly away, so pleased with himself when his fingers grasped the concrete ledge on the other side.

Joan finished her wine and went inside. She brushed her teeth and washed her face. She was tan from the summer, her cheeks pinkly glowing from the day. She found the jar in the medicine cabinet and moisturized as she did not always remember to do. Clean T-shirt and pajama bottoms, she climbed into the empty bed, and the memory of those swim classes with Daniel gave rise to a viable plan.

She was dreaming that she was in a field, grass, enormous sunflowers, hundreds of beautiful people stretched out, languorous and laughing, on blankets and sheets, dancing to the sound of chimes and tambourines and acoustic guitars, others were handing out tiaras and crowns, crystal glasses filled with blushing wine that sparkled in the sun. They were young and old, and those like her, neither young nor old, in ball gowns, dashikis, loincloths, bathing suits, fringed jackets, and naked bodies too, in all shades, a thousand languages being spoken all at once, a chorus of sounds lifting up into the atmosphere. Hanging down from the clouds in the sky were paintings of stars, the moon, the sun. Wild horses ran in the distance, sinews caught in the sun. Over the glorious cacophony, the stampede of those hooves was fading away, the horses disappearing, racing down into a canyon she could not see.

A noise woke her. She leaned over to Martin's empty side of the bed, her eyes were barely open, she was the tiniest bit bleary from the wine. She tried reading the hands on his dead father's clock. It was four, or maybe five, in the morning, the hour and minute hands were too similar to discern which. The creak of wood under bare feet, nearing their bedroom, then Martin was slipping into the bed behind her, naked, running his hands under her T-shirt, cool against her warm skin, pulling down her pajama pants. He was deep inside of her when he whispered, "Do you ever think of having another child?" She did not turn her head when she said, "I never thought of having the ones we did."

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