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“Beyond the Balloon" and Other Stories

Mary F. Sharkey
CUNY City College

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"Beyond the Balloon"
and Other Stories

by

Mary F. Sharkey

Advisor: Linsey Abrams

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts of the City College of the City University of New York.
Preface

"Beyond the Balloon" and Other Stories is a collection of writing that explores family interaction around themes of disability and illness, race, and marital status. This body of work presents realistic characters who are navigating ordinary lives that present unexpected challenges.

“Beyond the Balloon” is the first seven chapters of a novel that explores the family and community of a boy with autism. It highlights the communication deficits that exist within autism as well as the wider world around it. A couple, already existing within a troubled marriage, must confront their son’s atypical behavior.

The remaining collection of stories include a coming-of-age story of two young adolescents who share most intimacies but cannot share a racist incident in the same way; a story of a father and son exploring what is left of their lives after a difficult divorce; an adolescent boy confronted with the death of his infant sister at the hands of his fanatically anti-medical establishment parents; a woman in her thirties who thinks she has decided she doesn’t want to have children but is now confronted with two close friends who are pregnant; and, a story of a family with two divergent sons, one who grows away to independence and another who continues to live as an adult child with his aging mother.

This manuscript is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of he City College of the City University of New York.

Mary Sharkey
Beyond the Balloon

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Chapter One – A Birthday

It was Sean’s third birthday party. He stood behind a chair with an attached red balloon and tugged on the string. He glanced around for his mother to release it for him. “Balloon,” he said and reached up on his tip toes. He glanced around again but she wasn’t nearby. He tipped the chair over, softly saying “balloon” as he did so. The balloon came within reach for a second but shot up again. “Balloon,” he said and looked around again for his mother. Carolyn came out of the back door with a tray of cut-up fruit, minus the strawberries in case there were allergies, and placed it on the table.

“What is it, Sean?” she asked as she righted the chair.

“Balloon,” he replied, reaching up again.

“No, we’re not doing the balloons yet. We’ll give out the balloons later.”

“Balloon,” he said and tugged harder at the string.

“C’mon, birthday boy. No balloons yet,” she lifted him up and blew a raspberry on his tummy and he was giggling so hard he forgot about the balloon. She popped some fruit into his mouth, distracting him again, and settled him on her hip. He wrapped his knees around her body, pressing them gently into her.

The other children swiped fruit and ran off, continuing their imagined battles of the day. She carried Sean inside to retrieve the platter of finger sandwiches. The parents began to gather around the food, calling for their children to come and eat. As they crowded in, Sean dropped his head to his
mother’s shoulder and fiddled with her ear lobe. She felt his little thighs tense up on her hip.

“It’s OK, Sean,” she whispered to him and kissed his cheek.

“Where’s John?” one of the fathers inquired about her husband. He wiped some but not all of the egg salad from his mouth.

“She’s at the bakery picking up the cake,” she replied and wondered how much longer he would be. It had been almost 30 minutes since he left.

She surveyd the organized chaos of the birthday party. The children ranged in age from about 2 to 6 years old. There were 15 but their energy level easily matched that of 30. They were ‘only playing’ but the adults envisioned the worst and saw damaged eye sockets or smashed teeth with every swing of a stick. They were mostly boys who easily replaced the sticks taken from their hands with another. It was war as they stalked and surprise attacked each other. They naturally separated by age, both sides led by the oldest boy in the group. Sean’s brother, Bill, was almost the leader of one side, probably second-in-command at the age of 5.

At Master Bakers on Main Street, the young woman tipped the box to show John the cake, “With the dump truck your wife requested,” she said. Her apron read “Master Bakers” in red script across her chest. John glanced, and then quickly didn’t, at her cleavage that pressed at the top of the apron.
“Looks great, thanks,” John said. “How much is that?”

She read through the order and her face became serious. “Ma, c’mere,” she called to the back. “It’s the Dougherty cake.”

John watched the two women talk and wondered what the fuss was. He patiently glanced around. Master Bakers had plastered their name on just about every surface in the store. Even the glass-front donut shelves were etched with Master Bakers. He laughed to himself remembering how he and his high school buddies called the place “Masturbators” every time they passed the only neon sign in their small town.

“We’ll just fix it now,” he heard the older woman say to the younger. “Mr. Dougherty, we made a mistake on the cake. Your wife specifically requested a red pickup truck. It’s on the order.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it,” he said. “Cake is cake. It will be gone so fast no one will notice.”

“But, your wife was very specific. She even called yesterday to confirm it,” she responded. “I’m very sorry about this. It’ll be about 20 minutes to redo it.”

“Let me call her,” he said. It didn’t make sense to him to miss most of Sean’s birthday party for a red pickup truck.

“Hey honey, how’s it going there?” he said when she picked up the phone. “It’s OK but where are you?” she asked.

“I’m still at Masturbators. There was a problem with the cake.”
“Master Bakers, John.” She had never thought that joke was funny.

“Right, anyway,” he continued. “They put a blue truck on instead of red. It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“It has to be red,” she firmly replied.

“It’s going to be 20 minutes,” he told her.

“I don’t care,” she said. “Sean loves red and it’s his birthday.” John heard the children shrieking in the background. “I have to go now, John. There’s a lot going on here.”

He clicked his phone shut. “It has to be red.” Before his call had ended, the women had undone the box and slid out the cake.

He pulled into the driveway on the bumper of his parents’ car. He knew it was them halfway up the street as his father was driving exactly the posted 25 mile-per-hour speed limit and had turned on his signal light precisely two houses before John’s. His father was always precise about such things. When he was teaching teenage John how to drive his directions were peppered with specific rules of the road which he quoted to the young driver without the aid of the handbook:

“Article 28, Section 1163. A signal of intention to turn right or left when required shall be given continuously during not less than the last one hundred feet
traveled by the vehicle before turning. Two 50 yard lots equal one hundred yards so signal right now.”

He was holding the large cake box as he waited for his parents to get out of the car.

“Sorry we’re a little late,” his mother said. “Your father was ‘doing his lottery.’” She couldn’t do the air quotes she usually did with her purse and birthday present in her hands. The gift was wrapped in truck paper with a big red bow on it.

“Dad, you should set something up on the computer for that. It would take you less time to enter in the numbers.” John pictured his father’s wall sized spreadsheets of numbers.

“No, no, This works for me,” he replied. “When you look at the rows, you can see the pattern…”

“C’mon let’s go see the boys.” His mother pushed the car door closed with her foot.

“Glad you could make it,” one of the fathers called to him when he saw John in the driveway.

“I got the cake!” he said as he walked towards the party with the large box, “With the red truck.” Sean glanced up for a flicker of a second.
The children dropped their sandwiches and begged to see it. Bill jumped up and down by his side. If he had a tail, he would be wagging it.

“Not yet, not yet,” Carolyn shooed them away, afraid that John would drop the cake. “Bring it to the kitchen, John.” She waved to her inlaws who were nodding and smiling at the guests, a polite way of getting through the small crowd so they could get to their grandsons.

As the parents turned away from the grandparent royalty, they became engaged in food negotiations with their kids. “No cake until you eat your sandwich” was the most common refrain. “I don’t like it” was the common whiny response. Sean sat contentedly eating, focused on his watermelon, sliced grapes, and raspberries. The other children took occasional nibbles from the table as they resumed their game of war. Two little girls sat at a small table with their napkins spread out like tablecloths, chatting as they ate as if they were at high tea.

Carolyn had not booked entertainment for the party. She knew a clown would make Sean cry. Seeing a cartoon character come to life as an adult in an oversized costume would probably make him cry. The party seemed to be going fine without it. The food was being eaten and the children were running around. Sean was happy, that was the most important thing. He looked up at her and held out his plate. He said nothing but she knew he wanted more. She gave him more watermelon which he intently and slowly ate. Since he was settled, she went inside to prepare the cake with candles.
“Here’s the cake,” John said as he clipped the red and white twine and carefully undid the Master Bakers box. “With a red truck!”

“Thanks for waiting for it,” she said, as she inspected the cake. “Why were your parents so late?”

“Lottery,” he said. They looked at each other and did a mock shrug, shoulders up, hands outstretched. It was one of their couple gestures that had no memorable beginning and no foreseeable end.

“What’s this?” she had resumed proofreading the cake. “They did a dump truck? I said a pickup truck.” She pouted with annoyance.

“Carolyn, enough already,” he said. “It’s red, right?”

“But I was so specific about this. It’s important to Sean.”

“Carolyn, let it go. It’s red. That will be enough for Sean.”

“The pickup truck is his favorite,” she was speaking almost to herself.

“Carolyn, come here for a second,” he reached out his arms to her. As he hugged her he whispered, “It will be OK, I promise.”

“I just want the day to be perfect,” she said.

“It already is, with or without the pickup truck,” he replied. He felt her body gently ease in his arms, a silent sigh.

“You’re right. Enough on this,” she said as she pulled away from him and inserted three candles. She brushed some stray hairs from the side of her face,
took a deep breath and said, “Let’s go sing Happy Birthday to our boy.”

John smiled and escorted her through the sliding glass doors to the patio.

She called the other children over to sing “Happy Birthday.” As they sang, Sean rocked slowly back and forth, gazing at the three candles.

“Make a wish!” she said and she wished for a second, herself, that this moment could somehow freeze—no candles blown out, no unfettered balloons floating into the sky, no spilled drinks, no child tripping over uneven ground and falling to a bleeding knee. Sean continued to gaze at the candles and Carolyn saw candle wax dripping onto the cake.

“Blow out the candles, Sean,” she encouraged him along. He didn’t respond so she and Bill quickly blew them out. Bill swiped some icing from the side of the cake and smeared a moustache across his upper lip. He raised his eyebrows up and down and began hopping from one foot to the other, letting out a loud “woo woo” with each bounce.

“Bill stop it,” Carolyn said reflexively. His grandmother stepped in to wipe his face with a napkin printed with birthday balloons.

Sean's eyes remained fixed on his mother, oblivious to the excitement of the children claiming the different parts of the truck or laughing at Bill. John was right; the kids didn’t care.

After the cake, the children were gathered up by their parents. John untied the balloons and Carolyn handed out the goody bags. Sean showed his only
enthusiastic moment of the day when John untied the red balloon. “Bah---looon!”
he shrieked. He was handing it to a little girl when Sean shrieked again “Bah---
loon!” He looked at his mother, tears streaming down his face. Of course he’s
upset, Carolyn thought, red is his favorite color. Since it was his birthday, she felt
no qualms about switching the balloon to make him happy.

“The birthday boy loves the red balloon, Oh-kay?” she crooned at the little
girl.

“OK, I’ll have pink then,” she said with conviction. Such an agreeable
child, Carolyn thought.

She then tied the red balloon to Sean’s wrist and he tugged and tugged,
bouncing the balloon up and down. His tears quickly dried. “Balloon,” he said as
a big smile filled his face. The remaining parents were grateful the birthday
meltdown had been averted and turned their focus to their children who were
encouraged in their polite good-byes “Say thank you to Sean’s mommy,” the
parents said. “I want candy,” the children replied as they rummaged through their
goody bags. Their negotiations resumed, “You can’t have candy now, you just
had cake.” The whiny response this time was “Just one piece.”

"Honey, Sean seemed a little off today, didn’t he?” John mentioned to her
that evening as she wiped down counters and he put away trays.
"I don’t think so. Maybe he was overwhelmed with all those people here," she responded. "Birthdays are a lot for a little boy. What do you expect?"

"When Bill turned three years old, his birthday party was filled with cousins, neighbors, everyone. Don't you remember him high-fiving everyone, insisting on high-fiving everyone, before they left?"

"You shouldn't compare them, John," she scolded. "I'm sure you wouldn't want me comparing you to your siblings." She scrubbed at a spot on the counter.

"I'm just saying that the two parties were so different." An aluminum tray crashed into another loudly.

"That's not what you’re saying," she was getting upset. "You're saying there is something wrong with Sean." He was less than a year old, the doctor had asked her a question, she responded, and the doctor said wait and see, let's just wait and see.

"I didn't say that," he replied, his voice now a bit gruff. The trays crashed more as he attempted to stack them in size order. The loud bangs fed his frustration.

Carolyn felt exhausted.

"Look, I threw a three-year-old's birthday party today. I made platters of food. I put together goody bags. I made sure no one got hurt. I am not up to rehashing the day." She hoped that would end it. But just in case it didn’t, she added, “And would you stop crashing the trays? You’ll wake the boys.”
John left the kitchen muttering “whatever” under his breath.

As she replayed the conversation the next morning, it gnawed at her that she had actually said there was something wrong with Sean. She felt like John had backed her up against a wall and forced her to say it. But there was nothing wrong with Sean, she thought. If only more children were as kind and sweet as he was, the world might be a better place. He wasn't like Bill. He wasn't aggressive. If he got into a disagreement with another child, he ran to her and threw his head in her lap. She knew this meant that he was tired and it was time to go. Yes, Bill would often resist leaving but he was easily coerced with a bit of candy or a lollipop. If Sean was content, she knew they would all be content. There was nothing wrong with that.

Why had she said there was something wrong with him? What is wrong with a pleasant, well-adjusted child? Sean was a success to her. So many things in life pleased him. He was happy to line-up his trucks, one by one, and if another boy took one, he simply closed the gap (unless it was a red truck). He often didn't even bother if someone took something from him. When the ice cream truck came tinkling down the street, he didn't beg and plead like Bill. He looked at her and smiled and said "Ice cream truck." He knew every different kind of truck there was. Dump truck. Garbage truck. Pickup truck. He even knew the make of every truck that crossed their path. Chevy. Dodge. Ford. He was a bright boy but no one
else appreciated this.

John seemed to appreciate the boy he had in Bill. The cousins also went in for the rough and tumble world of Bill. Bill just didn’t seem to need her as much as Sean. Perhaps it was because he was a few years older. If she didn't pay attention to Sean she feared no one would. Day and evening, morning and noon, her attention was on Sean. But if she was to be honest with herself, she was subtly aware that her heart leaned more towards Sean. It was not intentional, it just was. She was watching and waiting like the doctor said.

Chapter Two – On Becoming a Mother

Bill was her firstborn. He transformed her into a mother. She had never experienced the feelings she had when he was born. She felt such joy mixed with overwhelming ignorance on what to do with a baby. She and John muddled through those hazy first few weeks. John seemed to radiate endlessly when he held baby Bill in his arms. She probably would have radiated more herself if she wasn't so worn out by the experience.

Within a few months, as the baby settled, she felt more like herself. The first 'date' she had with John was an anniversary dinner when her mother kept the baby overnight. She knew when she put on her thong that morning that they would have sex that night. The anticipation built within her throughout the day
and ended with an intense session between them in the bedroom. How long had it been since they had sex like that? Months? There had been a few rushed times here and there but nothing to compare with her abandon after the few beers they had that night. The end result was her pregnancy with Sean.

The early months of the pregnancy drained her, especially with the added demands of a toddler to care for. John went off to work every day while Carolyn napped when Bill napped, and ate with Bill, shoveling his uneaten food into her mouth as she cleared his plastic ABC plates. When evening came, she collapsed shortly after tucking him in. John read magazines, watched some television, ate snacks. She wondered how her life had changed so drastically when his seemed so much the same. Yes, he played with Bill every night while she washed up the dishes. Yes, he tossed him in the air on sunny days in the yard, as picture perfect as the ads he worked on all day. But she did endless loads of laundry, picked up trails of toys, changed countless diapers, prepared dinner. She decidedly pushed such thoughts from her mind and reminded herself that he worked all day and surely was exhausted, too. But he didn't seem to be.

She was soon holding both hands of a triumphant toddler as he walked along the sidewalk. The weight of her growing pregnancy pressed into her back and pushed around her organs. "Hooray for Billy," she mustered without too much enthusiasm. Hooray for mommy, she thought, as they entered the playground where she could plop him in the sandbox and plop herself on the
bench like a humpty-dumpty come to life. She managed a weak smile at the woman sitting with a dolled-up little girl on her lap. Bill waved, tossing sand around in the air. "Dada! Dada!" he shrieked. From her baby books, Carolyn knew this was easier for him to say than “mama” but still, it didn't seem fair.

“Stop throwing sand,” she called to him, more for the other mothers’ sake than to actually get him to stop.

She made arrangements to have her mother stay with them around the time the baby was due. She was so happy to have her there to take care of Bill and even make a few meals for the freezer. John made pleasant chit-chat with his mother-in-law but behind their bedroom door he would joke about her bland sauce over her overcooked pasta.

“How about opening a can of Chef Boyardee and calling it a meal?” he joked, after a couple of days of her mother’s dinners.

Carolyn barely smiled, too tired and uncomfortable to even respond. He never liked her mother's cooking. When they were dating, he insisted on keeping a bottle of Tabasco in the refrigerator to sprinkle liberally on the food she served. Since her own mother wasn't insulted by it, Carolyn wasn't either. Now, however, his complaints seemed ungrateful and immature. She was so thankful for her mother's help yet he could only find fault. She lay awake, upset, in the middle of the quiet night, staring at the clock with one hand on her stomach. Her contractions, barely noticeable a little while ago, were now stronger and closer
together. She woke John and they whispered their way out of the house after leaving a note for her mother.

John drove through the dark and silent streets, cautious at every stop and turn. The neon of the Master Bakers sign sizzled his sleepy eyes as he drove past. Two more lights and then a left turn to the hospital.

“Are you OK, honey?” he glanced at the back seat. She could only manage to softly say “shhh” in response. She wanted to lay down but Bill’s car seat was in the way. He sped up to the giant red cross of the beckoning hospital.

The bright lights and random beepings in the hospital contrasted with the dark quiet they had left at home. Her pulse and blood pressure were checked, an obtrusive monitor was placed around her belly. “I love you,” John said as he held her hand. He had tears in his eyes. This moment was more important than the sum of the others.

The labor was long and difficult. Carolyn pushed when she thought she couldn't push anymore. The nurses encouraged her, almost cheering as the baby's head crowned, only to be sucked back inside of her. John held her hand until the nurse moved him to where he could push back on one of Carolyn’s thighs.

“We’re almost there, Carolyn,” the nurse said.

"C'mon, one more and we'll have a baby," the doctor said as he pressed his fingers down and pushed her wide open. “C’mon Carolyn.”

She pushed as hard as she could, squeezing her eyes so hard she thought
they would never open again, her eyeballs pressed to the back of her skull. Tears and sweat dripped salt to her dry lips.

"That's it! Stop pushing. You did it!" the doctor said. "It's a boy!" The nurse handed the scissors to John so he could snip the umbilical cord. They hadn’t done this with Bill, he thought. The toughness of the cord against the scissor surprised him. Then the nurse took the baby to the basinet. Carolyn cried when she glanced over and saw him under the heat lights, all limbs and a giant red apple scrotum. Her legs in the stirrups quivered uncontrollably. Her body was clammy with sweat. She felt raw and relieved, ripped wide open but fully whole.

They cleaned up the baby and handed him to her. "Congratulations, mom and dad."

John beamed at her and the baby.

"My God, he's beautiful," he said. His words were clear but muffled by Carolyn’s intrigue with her new baby.

It was only a few months before Carolyn noticed the differences between the two babies. Bill had been content to sleep after a busy morning of stacking and crashing. Sean's needs were simple yet endless. She fed him, changed him, and rocked him to sleep, but if she attempted to place him in his crib he wailed as if he were in pain. As soon as she picked him up he was fine. Carolyn learned to
rush to him before his early cries escalated into inconsolable sobs accompanied by a red face and balled up fists. She didn't recall Bill's babyhood like this but perhaps she had forgotten. She and Bill had the luxury of a long morning nap, which suited her pregnant self. Now, Sean woke both of them at 5:30 every morning. By dinner time, they were all tired but she tried to have a decent meal on the table and the boys somewhat settled when John came home. She glanced at the clock noting that it was 6:30 and thought, “Only one more hour until bed time. I can make it.”

“How was your day?” she would ask when John arrived, not particularly interested in the answer but it was a guaranteed conversation starter. She tried to be attentive and it usually worked.

“Usual nightmares,” he responded. “We might be losing one of our biggest accounts. I might get them to change their minds if I fire a few people and get some new energy on the project. But then I have to decide who goes…”

Carolyn had this conversation down to a science. She knew where to insert her “uh-huh’s” and when to turn to face him. She had a few hot pots going and Sean was sitting in his high chair, waiting to be fed. Bill ran in and charged at John’s stomach.

“Hey, big guy!” John said. The office talk was over. “What was the letter of the day, today?”

“It was S. Sailboat, salamander, and the shark,” Bill chanted, remembering
the song from circle time at nursery school.

Sean sat quietly, waiting to be fed. He stretched his fingers in and out on the tray of the high chair and watched them intently as if they were the hands of another baby.

“And don’t forget Sean, his name begins with S,” Carolyn added. “John, can you feed him before his food is too cold.”

“Let me get changed first,” he said and left the room. Bill followed him, chanting more ‘s’ words.

Ten minutes passed and she heard the playful roaring of John wrestling with Bill on the bed. She could picture John’s large hands tossing Bill’s body around causing incessant giggles broken only by a gasping “Again!” from Bill. Sean and Carolyn were alone. She lowered the pan to simmer and sat to feed him. No spooning in as if it were an airplane for Sean, he looked into her eyes and methodically opened his mouth for each spoonful.

“Who’s my best boy?” she cooed. “You’re my best boy!” Sean smiled. When he was content, a kindness filled his face and the tedium of his daily care faded. This routine played out many times over the next few months and soon she became the only one who could feed him. John often gave up in frustration if he tried to feed Sean. Sean would turn his head to follow his mother as she puttered about the kitchen, oblivious to John’s efforts to feed him. Bill was old enough to clumsily throw or chase a ball and John had little patience for Sean’s clear
preference for Carolyn. In return, Carolyn developed a singular focus and it was Sean. He thrived under her attention. As he stepped his early steps away from her, he looked back time and again to see if she was still there. He focused all his energies on her. She was the only one to get the big belly laughs from him and he rarely smiled with anyone else, even his father.

“Why don’t you ask the doctor if he’s on track,” John said, during a calmer moment a few days later. No banging trays, no scrubbing at spots. “What do you mean ‘on track’?” Carolyn said. The boys were asleep and Carolyn was folding a warm load of laundry. “Please don’t get defensive about this. I just want to know that he’s OK,” John said.

“I’m not getting defensive. You just need to look at him, John,” she said. “He is absolutely OK.” She stacked Bill’s small underwear and reminded herself to ask the doctor about Sean’s potty training.

“No,” John replied. “He’s OK with you. He barely looks at me and I’m his father.”

“You hardly have time for him,” she said. “You’re so busy with Bill,”

“I have nothing but time for him but he only wants you.”

She thought she had successfully shared herself with the two boys. She
thought she had kept John satisfied as well. She was doing everything she could to keep things on an even keel but her stomach was churning. John was pushing her again, trying to get her to say something was wrong with Sean. She wasn’t going to let him do this. *Don’t all children want to be with their mothers?* she wondered.

“There’s nothing wrong with him, John. He’s a child.”

“I never said there was anything wrong. Those are your words.”

“No, you’re just wondering if everything is OK,” she said. “Isn’t that the same thing?” She folded Sean’s shirts and balled up his little socks.

“Can’t I be concerned about my son or are you the only one who is allowed?” John said. “Why don’t I take him to the doctor? I’ll ask the question.”

“You have to work tomorrow.”

“I can take an hour off.”

“What exactly do you want me to ask?” She stopped folding the clothes and focused her attention on John.

“Just ask her if he’s OK.”

“I don’t know what you’re searching for,” she said. “Why can’t you accept him as he is?”

“I do,” John said, “But he’s not like other kids, Carolyn.” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“He’s better than other kids, that’s what I see. He’s sweet and kind. He’s
smart.”

“Carolyn, he’s in his own world half the time. Can’t you see that?” As he said it, he realized that she couldn’t see that because Sean’s world was her world. She couldn’t see the same thing John saw. He didn’t know if anything was wrong but he knew something was different.

“OK, I’ll ask the doctor if there is something wrong with a little boy who is sweet and kind and smart. I’ll ask the doctor if there is something wrong with a boy who likes trucks. How ridiculous is this, John?” she responded, feeling more convinced that she was winning the argument.

“Let’s just let it go, OK, Carolyn?” he conceded. He was getting nowhere with her. He could call the doctor after the visit and see what she thought.

Carolyn unfolded her arms and resumed her folding, now emphatically snapping the lint off the small clothes before she folded them. Each pair of Bill’s underwear reminded her that the thing she really wanted to ask the doctor about was potty training.

Chapter Three – Red Arms

She rushed to get the two boys ready for the early morning doctor’s appointment. It was Sean’s three-year-old checkup. His nails needed to be clipped, teeth brushed, ears cleaned inside and outside, and his diaper changed.
She had a conversation started in her head that she hoped to have with the doctor about Sean. She wanted her confirmation that everything was fine with him mostly so she could reassure John. “Doctor, my husband wanted me to ask…” she didn’t even know what she was going to ask. No, she would just ask about potty training.

“Is Dr. Strum going to be there, Mom?” Bill asked. He was following her around as she put together the diaper bag.

“No, Bill,” she replied. “Remember I told you that Dr. Strum retired. You and Sean have a new doctor now. Her name is Dr. Muench. She’s a very nice lady.”

“Will she give Sean shots?”

“Only if she has to.”

“Why is her name Dr. Munch? Does she eat people?” Bill asked.

“That’s her name,” she replied. She packed an extra outfit just in case Sean messed up his shirt on the way.

“Who would name somebody ‘Munch’?” he asked.

Carolyn knew his brain was working overtime on this one but she was working overtime herself trying to find the insurance card. She had ordered a new one when Dr. Strum retired but now she couldn’t recall if it had arrived.

“I can’t talk right now, Bill,” she responded. “Go tell Sean it’s time to go.” She heard some stomping around because Bill always stomped wherever
he went. He also jumped from the third step to the bottom whenever he had the opportunity. Doors slammed and cabinets banged when Bill handled them. She always knew where he was in the house.

“Here he is, Mom,” Bill was holding Sean by his shirt sleeve, trying to stifle a laugh.

Sean’s arms were streaked with red marker. “Red!” Sean called out and held up his arms. Bill was now rolling around, cackling and laughing. In just five minutes, they would be officially late.

“Sean, what have you done?” she took hold of his hands and inspected his arms trying to determine if it was permanent marker. It didn’t matter, she had no time to clean him up.

“Red!” he said triumphantly.

“Yes, it is red.”

Bill would stop laughing long enough to look up from the floor. Now he started pointing and saying “Red!” only encouraging his own laughter.

“Bill, do you need to go to the bathroom?” Carolyn called to him. Bill was now sputtering. He couldn’t even say the word ‘red.’ And then she saw the tell-tale sign of wet pants; he had laughed too hard.

“Bill! Stop!” she yelled. “You wet your pants. Now we’re going to be late. Hurry up, go change.”

He sat up and then bolted to his room. “I’ll hurry!” he called before the
door slammed.

“Red!” Sean said again.

“OK, Red, maybe I have a few minutes to clean you up.” She brought Sean to the kitchen sink and poured some dishwashing soap on his arm. She gently scrubbed with the sponge and the red slowly started dripping off.

“No, red!” Sean whimpered.

“We have to wash this off, Sean,” she said soothingly. “Dr. Muench will wonder what happened.”

Giant tears streamed down his face. “Red, red, red.”

Definitely not permanent but it would need a lot of water.

“Red,” Sean said matter-of-factly.

“No more red,” Carolyn replied.

He chanted softly “red, red, red” as she dried his arm with a paper towel. He seemed just as pleased to see the red marker absorbed into the white paper towel.

“You can keep this, OK?” Carolyn offered him the damp paper towel.

He would meet Dr. Muench with what appeared to be a rash all over his arms.

“I’m ready!” Bill skidded within inches of them at the sink.

“Shoes,” Carolyn commanded.

“Flip flops,” Bill replied.
“Shoes,” Carolyn said again.

Perhaps his energy was spent from the laughter, the wet pants, the changing, and the red excitement but Bill did not argue with her on this one. Or maybe it was Sean who distracted them from arguing as he added one more time, “Red.”

Both boys were silent during the short drive to Dr. Muench’s office. She played their CD of “Favorite Train Songs for Kids” and they were at the office by track 4, “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” She pulled the car into a spot close to the doctor’s office and took note of the grand opening of a nail salon next door. Actually, the first thing she noticed were the red, white, and blue balloons snapping up and down on either side of the Grand Opening sign. She knew it would be a struggle to get Sean past the balloons. He had been fixated on them since his birthday party. She decided to distract him as much as possible. She walked with Bill on one side and Sean on the other, encouraging them to sing “Dinah won’t you blow! Dinah won’t you blow! Dinah won’t you blow your horn!” and skipping them right past the balloons. Her plan worked and she entered the doctor’s office feeling like the playful, fun mom shown on the cover of “Family Life” magazine. She certainly was more upbeat than the other two women sitting there.
“Mrs. Dougherty?” the receptionist called her a few minutes after she signed in. “Do you have your new insurance card.”

“No,” she said, “I’m sorry, I couldn’t find it. Most of the information is the same except for the doctor’s name. Can you just call them?”

“You’ll have to pay for the visit and then get reimbursed,” she said as if she had said it thousands of times.

“Would you mind just calling them? I’m sure it will be fine.”

“We don’t do that,” she said.

She joined the other two sullen women in the waiting chairs. She began calculating which credit card she could use. She definitely couldn’t use the debit card, there wasn’t enough there to cover it. Maybe the Disney Mastercard. She was close to having enough points to get a free one-night stay if they ever went.

Bill was in the play tent with the other two children who were waiting. They were both younger than he was and he was relishing being the leader. They thought no one could hear them outside the tent but the three women heard all of his bossing, “No, you go over there and stay there!” and “You can only speak when I say.” The little ones didn’t fight back; someday they would have a chance to be king of the waiting room. Sean lined up the trucks he found in the toy bin, the red one was first.

The nurse finally called them to Room 6. It was the blue room with the poster of childhood rashes. Bill loved this poster. He would ask endlessly,
“What’s this one called? How do you get it?” By the time Carolyn reached the fifth rash in the list her skin itched and she was sure they would all have a rash before they left the office.

“Bill, enough now, I have to get Sean ready for Dr. Muench,” she finally shushed him.

Fortunately, Sean’s red arms didn’t match any of the rashes on the poster so it was obvious that it was marker. He sat in his diaper, circling his finger around and around and around on Carolyn’s arm, cradling his head in the crook of her elbow. Bill hopped on and off the scale, sliding the weight up and down. Carolyn didn’t think she could contain Bill much longer in the small blue room. Just as she thought this, Dr. Muench opened the door.

The children both stopped whatever motion they were doing as if someone called “Freeze!” in a freeze-tag game. The three of them looked at Dr. Muench and said nothing.

“Hello,” she said and extended her large hand toward Carolyn. This was the first detail Carolyn noticed, her large hands. Dr. Muench wasn’t large in size, but her body parts seemed large. Her nose was large. Her ears hung low with the weight of her earrings. Her eyes bulged slightly. Her hair was a wild long tangle of curls. “I’m Dr. Muench,” she said as she shook Carolyn’s hand, squeezing a bit too hard. Her voice was solemn as if she were offering condolences at a funeral.

“And you must be Sean,” she said to Bill, her voice lightened up a bit
when she spoke to him.

“No I’m not, that’s Sean. He has a rash on his arms. Which one is it?”

Carolyn opened her mouth to speak but only heard herself say, “Here’s Sean.” Had she said more? Had she told Bill to shush? She was so uncomfortable around Dr. Muench she didn’t trust herself to say or do the right thing.

“OK, Sean,” Dr. Muench said. “Let’s have a look.” She glanced at his marked up arms and Carolyn felt even smaller in the doctor’s eyes. “Nice artwork,” she commented. Sensing this was an attempt at a joke, Carolyn let a small smile, maybe it was just a half-grin, come across her mouth. Bill, her gregarious five-year-old, was standing very close to Carolyn, watching Dr. Muench as if she were a creature to be observed rather than engaged.

As she felt around Sean’s small tummy with her large hands she asked questions, “How is his appetite? Does he eat a variety of foods?” Her eyes remained focused on Sean’s trunk and it seemed like she was talking to his belly button.

“Yes, just about everything but he really loves fruit.”

“How is his sleeping? Does he fall asleep on his own?” Now she was looking in his ears, talking to the little man she saw in there, no doubt. That’s what Dr. Strum used to say to the boys, “Let me see the little man in there, let me have a look.” And they did whatever she wanted. Now Sean pulled away from the hard object she shoved in his ear.
“Yes, mostly,” Carolyn fudged. She lay down every night with Sean for at least an hour, if not more, to get him to sleep and he often woke her at least once in the middle of the night. Then she would spend another half-hour or so to get him settled again. He never seemed tired during the daytime so she figured he got the sleep he needed.

“Does he like to climb? Slide? Is he active?” She was now undoing his diaper, checking for hernias. Sean remained perfectly still though he kept one hand on Carolyn’s arm. Bill started giggling.

“Yes,” Carolyn said. Perhaps she was thinking of Bill as Sean was not so active but he trailed his brother sometimes.

“How about language? Does he have a good vocabulary? Does he speak in sentences?” She velcroed his diaper back on and was now inspecting his legs, moving them up and down. Bill now focused his attention back on the scale.

“Mostly,” Carolyn replied. Did Chevy truck, Dodge truck, red truck count? Was that stringing together? “Not sentences all the time but we understand him.”

“OK,” Dr. Muench said. “So he is able to communicate and be understood. Great. He seems very healthy to me. No shots today.”

“Yay!” Bill shouted.

Dr. Muench patted his head and said “I’ll see you in a few months, right?”

“No, we’re going back to Dr. Strum,” Bill replied.
Carolyn turned red from embarrassment. “He doesn’t understand what retirement is, I guess,” she fumbled.

Dr. Muench stared at the computer screen and typed a few notations.

“Do you have any questions for me?” the doctor asked as she stared at the computer screen, hunting and pecking her way around the keyboard. She then got up from the chair in front of the computer and looked Carolyn directly in the eye. It was intentional and forced, as if there was a computer prompt on her screen that said, “Look at the caregiver and ask...”

“Just, you know, the usual stuff,” Carolyn stumbled over her words as she jumbled her questions with John’s. “Like is he OK, I mean is it OK to start potty training. He doesn’t show much interest but should I start?”

“Sure, just keep it all relaxed, no pressure,” she replied. “He’ll learn quickly with an older brother around.” She smiled at Bill but he was busy crumpling the paper on the examining table. Sean continued drawing circles on her arm with his finger.

“Anything else?” the doctor asked. Her hand was on the door knob.

“No, thanks,” Carolyn was already getting Sean dressed. The doctor left and Carolyn was relieved. The doctor had said everything was fine and that is what she needed to know. That is what she needed to let John know, too.

Everything was fine. Sean was fine.
“Look! Balloons!” Bill yelled as they left the office. “I want a balloon!”

“Bah looon, bah loooon,” Sean was shrieking, Bill was jumping up and down.

“C’mon boys, we have to go,” she said, knowing it wouldn’t make one bit of difference.

“We want balloons!” Bill demanded.

“Bah looooon, bah loooon,” Sean wailed. Sean’s face was melting in his sobs. Bill had a furrowed brow and crossed arms.

“We want balloons!” he said again. He planted his feet solidly into the pavement.

“Bill, you’re getting Sean worked up. Drop it,” she was firm, trying to match his stance.

“We want balloons!” he said, louder this time. He crossed his arms.

“Fine,” she said. “Get in the car and I’ll get you balloons.” She was tired and not up to the fight. She figured she could talk the grand openers into giving her some if she bought a gift certificate.

“That one!” Bill pointed at the only red balloon in the bunch.

“No, Sean gets red,” she said.

“I … Want…. That …. One…!” he pointed at the red balloon.

“Get in the car and you get a balloon, as simple as that,” she said. Sean was leaning against the car. He was crying in a silent, pained way with tears
streaming from his eyes. An occasional squeal came from him. She picked up Sean to put him in his car seat. “It’s OK, baby, mama is going to get you a balloon.”

“I get red,” Bill said.

“You get what you get and you don’t get upset,” she chanted.

“He always gets what he wants,” Bill whined.

“He’s little, Bill. You’re not,” she said.

“He’s not a baby anymore. He’s a pain in the butt!” he yelled. “I hate him!”

Carolyn felt her hands shaking as she tried to strap Sean into his car seat.

“Just get in the car, now,” she said in a calm and controlled voice. “Or you’ll get nothing. Just stay in the car, I’ll be right back,” she told them.

She walked to the doorway of the nail salon, where she could still see the boys in the car. She did a quick transaction for a gift certificate of $25 and the lady let her take two balloons. The boys were both smiling, in the back seat as she handed them the balloons. Bill grabbed the red one from her hand.

Sean’s eyes welled up with tears and he started to whimper.

“Bill, be the nice big brother, please. Just give him the red one.”

“No,” he replied.

She wiped Sean’s eyes and face with a gentle hand. “It’s ok, Sean, It will be ok.”
Sean whimpered all the way home as Bill held onto his victory balloon. Carolyn turned up the train cd, hoping it would distract all of them.

John took a few minutes after his lunch meeting to call Dr. Strum. “Dr. Strum retired,” the receptionist told him. “My wife was there today. Dougherty?” he asked. “She saw Dr. Muench, not Dr. Strum,” she responded. “Fine,” he replied. “Dr. Muench then.” “She’s not available for calls. She takes calls between 2:30 and 3:00.” “It’s 2:20.” he said. “I really need to speak with her now.” “I can put you on hold for 10 minutes or you can speak with the nurse now. But, I’m sorry, I can’t put you through until 2:30” “Are you kidding me?” “I can transfer you to the nurse,” she said. “No, no, I’ll just call back,” he said. “OK, thank you for calling.” Click.

His phone rang and it was Carolyn. “John Dougherty speaking,” he answered. It was automatic for him when he was in the office, no matter who called.
“It’s me, honey,” Carolyn said. “We just got home from the doctor’s office. Everything is fine.”

“Did you ask her anything?”

“The visit went so quickly. She’s a bit of an odd duck. She said we can start potty training. No shots, either. But, yes, everything is fine.” She sounded relieved. “I’m just glad we’re home. Bill had a total meltdown after the doctor’s visit.”

“What happened?” He was used to Sean’s meltdowns but not Bill’s.

“It’s not important, really,” she said. “Just wanted you to know that Sean is fine.”

He watched the clock as it clicked to 2:30.

“OK, we’ll talk later,” he said. “I have to go now.”

He hit redial. “Doctor’s office,” the receptionist said.

“Dr Strum, I mean Dr Muench, please?” he said.

“Hold on,” she said. Did she know it was him again?

“Dr. Muench,” the voice sounded distant, as if she was on speaker phone.

“Hello Dr Muench,” he said. Was anyone else in the room? “This is John Dougherty, Sean Dougherty’s father.”

“I saw Sean today. Nice boy.” Her responses were quick.

“I just wanted your professional opinion on…” he started. “It’s about
“What is it?”

“In your professional opinion, he seemed fine?” he asked.

“Physically, 100%.”

“He just seems so different from other kids,” he continued. “I wonder if he is OK.” John wasn’t so much talking to Dr. Muench as he was talking to get the words out.

“What are you getting at, Mr Dougherty?” she asked.

“Did my wife tell you about the trucks? How he lines up trucks? Sometimes for an hour or two?” he asked. Now that he started, now that he had an audience, he couldn’t contain himself. “Did she tell you about his obsession with red? Balloons? How he doesn’t communicate with anyone but her? Did she tell you she sleeps in his room several nights a week?” He hadn’t ever said it all out loud. He heard the phone line switch from the tunnel of speakerphone to the close-up of the phone line, reminding him that someone was on the other end. He imagined her jotting notes on a yellow pad.

“She just doesn’t see it,” he said. “She thinks he’s fine and just sweet and nice and smart and he is all those things. But he…” John could barely say it. His voice lowered, his hand cupped the phone and sweat began filling his underarms.

“He doesn’t even notice me and I’m his father.”

He heard some muffled conversation happening on Dr. Muench’s end of
the phone. Had she been listening?

“Mr. Dougherty,” she said. “I just need you to hold for a minute.”

The phone clicked and he was thrust into the abyss of hold music. It was faint and it was classical and he was left with his last statement floating in and out of the notes. He felt lighter and his head was clearer.

“Who are you holding for?” It was the receptionist again. “Hello?”

He hung up. By asking the questions the answers were becoming clear to him. He didn’t need her to get back on the phone.

On the half-hour commute home, he didn’t listen to the evening news on the radio. He didn’t even flip to the classic rock station. He thought of nothing else but Sean and what it was that didn’t sit right with him. He didn’t act like a son to John, certainly not in the same way he acted with Carolyn. Then again, John didn’t seem to be the same father with Sean that he was with Bill. Maybe it was John’s fault. Maybe he wasn’t a good enough father to him. Maybe he needed to make more effort. Then he would get through to him. Then things would change, not overnight, but eventually. He got nowhere with Carolyn but surely he could make a difference with a three-year-old.

He was a bit late that evening and both boys were already bathed and in their pajamas. They were watching a video. The house was quiet and calm.
Carolyn was flipping through a mail-order catalog. Why had he been so concerned? Everything here was fine. He felt like he had entered a different home than the one he had left that morning.

“Hi, honey,” Carolyn said. “Your dinner is on the counter.”

He ate alone in the kitchen, standing at the counter. He wanted to read Bill and Sean a story before bed. Usually he just read to Bill.

He sat next to them in front of the television. Their eyes were glazed over, their faces were blank and absent.

“Hey guys?” he said softly. “You wanna read a book with me?”

No response.

“Guys?”

“No,” Bill said, not turning his head from the television.

“John,” Carolyn called him over to the couch. “It’s been a really long day for us. You have no idea. Just let them be, OK?”

“What are those?” he said, pointing to the white and red balloons that were now half-deflated but still being held by the boys as if they would float away.

“Those are today’s spoils of war,” Carolyn replied. “Bill wanted the red one.”

John actually felt a little charge knowing that Bill had challenged the status quo, something he hadn’t been able to do himself.

“What happened?” he asked.
“I don’t even know where to start,” she said. “Both of them were screaming right near the doctor’s office. I was so embarrassed. But Bill was really pushing it.”

“Do you want me to talk to them?” he asked.

“No, just leave it,” she said. “I handled it.”

“How about I get them to sleep?” he said. “We’ll have some time to ourselves.”

He turned to the boys, “C’mon guys, tv off.”

“Aww, Dad,” Bill whined. Sean sat, staring intently at the television.

“You heard me. Let’s go.”

Bill switched off the television and stomped out of the room.

“Sean?” John said softly. “Sean, c’mon.”

Sean didn’t move. He just looked down at his crossed legs.

“Let’s go read a book, Sean.” He squatted next to him and gently rubbed his small back. The soft fleece of the pajama felt soft and warm.

“I’ll get him, John,” Carolyn said.

“No, tonight I’ll get him, Carolyn. You can go to Bill.”

Carolyn didn’t leave. Sean didn’t look up.

“Sean, honey,” Carolyn said, “C’mon, Sean.” She tried to coax him. As soon as he heard her voice, he looked up and smiled. “That’s my boy, c’mon.”

John’s hand fell from Sean’s back. “Carolyn, I’ll get him,” John said.
“Why are you making a big deal out of this? Just go to Bill,” she said.

“No, you go. I want to get Sean.”

Sean now stood and climbed up next to Carolyn on the couch. He put his head on her shoulder and started to fiddle with her ear lobe.

“It’s OK, Sean,” she said. “Daddy’s going to tuck you in.”

John held out his hands but Sean didn’t budge.

“Why are you doing this, John? It’s so late and he’s tired.”

John waited but Sean would not come to him. Finally, Carolyn stood up and picked him up to carry him upstairs. Sean stared over her shoulder, looking just past John, as if he weren’t there.

Bill’s room was decorated in a sports’ motif, Sean’s was trucks. Where Bill had baseballs and basketballs, Sean had dump trucks and cement mixers. The wallpaper borders, lamps, sheets, rugs, even the hooks for their jackets, all coincided with their designated themes. When John and Carolyn were engaged, they spent hours in furniture stores, picking out the expensive furniture they would use to start their lives together. They mostly shared taste but had disagreed on what now seemed like minor details such as whether to get a rolled arm sofa or if they wanted stainless or natural steel for the legs of their dining table. Carolyn ultimately went with John’s choices but when the boys came along, she indulged
her decorating desires, filling the rooms with knick-knacks to complement the
themes. John hated the wallpaper borders. “It’s like extending the clutter all the
way to the ceiling,” he had commented once. He hated the knick-knacks but had
to admit that it made it easy for him to bring back trinkets from his occasional
business trips since there was usually a bounty of baseballs and toy trucks in the
airport shops. Tonight in Bill’s room, he noted how these trinkets had become
collections which had ultimately become a room full of sports. There were
baseballs, pennants, programs, and bobbleheads. The floor was littered with balls
of various sizes and shapes, some leather, some foam.

“Wow, Bill,” he said. “I never realized you had so much stuff.”

“Look at this, Dad” Bill said as he pushed socks, sneakers, and a
sweatshirt out of the way. “A boxing glove!” He held up the prized possession
and made fake audience sounds as he strutted around like a champion. John
laughed and clapped his hands a few times to add to the fake cheers.

“Bill,” Carolyn interjected. “It’s time for bed.” She was smiling at the
scene the two of them made as she subtly swayed with Sean on her hip. Sean’s
head was on her shoulder, his fingers fiddling with her earlobe.

“OK, let’s find a good story to read,” John said and Bill promptly dropped
his boxing glove and started pulling multiple books off his shelf.

“This one!” he said as he handed John a copy of Where the Wild Things

Are.
“How about Goodnight, Moon?” Carolyn said and lightly kicked it forward with her toe. Carolyn knew the roaring ‘wild things’ would have Bill jumping on the bed, possibly grunting and moaning as he became a monster himself.

Sean pointed to a blue cover on the floor and said “Book. Book.” Carolyn bent to pick it up from the floor and saw it was Love You Forever.

“How about this one?” she said and held up the book.

“This one Mom!” Bill whined, handing John the book.

“But Sean wants this one,” she said.

“But I-I-I-I want this one.” Bill replied.

“OK, let’s see if we can work this out,” John interjected. Sean was clutching Love You Forever to his chest. Bill held Where The Wild Things Are in front of his own face. “Bill wants Where the Wild Things Are. Mom wants Goodnight, Moon. And Sean wants Love You Forever.” John felt like he was at work bouncing ideas at a launch meeting. All he needed was a white board and some markers. He thought reading to the boys was going to be fun and now he was negotiating.

“I don’t need Goodnight, Moon,” Carolyn acquiesced. “I just don’t want anyone jumping up and down and that always happens with Where the Wild Things Are. So, why don’t we read Love You Forever?”

“Because it’s bor – ing!” Bill replied. He turned his attention to John,
“Please please please, Dad. I promise I won’t jump on the bed.”

“But Sean wants this book,” Carolyn said, also appealing to John.

“OK, now we’re down to two books, *Where the Wild Things Are* and *Love You Forever.*” With that choice, John actually wanted *Where the Wild Things Are.* He thought *Love You Forever* was creepy, especially when the mother climbs in her grown son’s window at night to hold him and rock him and sing to him. “And we’re split. Mom and Sean want *Love You Forever* and Bill and I want *Where the Wild Things Are.* Bill, if we read *Where the Wild Things Are,* you promise not to jump on the bed, right?”

“I promise,” he said with a big nod of his head.

“I can read this to Sean in his room,” Carolyn offered.

“No, I’m reading to the boys tonight,” John reminded her. Bill pushed his stuffed animals off the bed and climbed in. John reached for Sean but he clung tighter to Carolyn. “C’mon down here, Sean.” He patted the bed.

“It’s OK, honey,” Carolyn cooed to Sean. “Here you go.” She settled him next to Bill who licked him twice and said “I’ll eat you up” with a smile on his face. He still held onto *Love You Forever.* John read the familiar words, “they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth…” as Carolyn tidied Bill’s room, putting baseballs next to baseballs and dirty clothes in the hamper with the basketball hoop on it. If she left the room, she thought Sean would make a fuss so she continued to rearrange things until the story was over and she could
take Sean to his room.

“Goodnight, Bill,” the parents said and each kissed him. His legs were still restless under the blanket and he flipped around doing a few random monster noises. “OK, calm down now,” Carolyn said as she flicked off his lamp. Sean was again planted on her hip.

In the hallway, John said, “Let me put Sean to sleep.” He reached for his son.

Sean slightly tensed up in Carolyn’s arms. “I’ll tuck him in,” Carolyn said.

“I want to put him to sleep tonight,” he said.

“I got it, honey,” she said. “I’ll be down in a minute.” He knew she would fall asleep on Sean’s floor and he wouldn’t see her again until he gently woke her to come to bed. There would be no time to talk, no time to tell her that he had called Dr. Muench, no time to let her know that he wanted things to change. No time for the two of them.

“But, Carolyn,” he protested. Then he looked at Sean who was glancing at Carolyn’s chin as he clutched his Love You Forever book. “Another time, then,” he said, defeated. Things were not going to change overnight, he reminded himself as he went to their bedroom to change his clothes. As he headed downstairs he heard Carolyn softly reading:

“That mother picked up that grown up man and rocked him back and forth, back and forth, and as she rocked him she
Chapter Four – Master Bakers

The next morning, John stopped at Master Bakers on his way to work to pick up donuts for the office. They had landed a mid-sized account and a small acknowledgment always kept the staff motivated.

“Two dozen assorted donuts, please,” he said to the cashier.

“These are on the house, Mr. Dougherty,” the older woman said as she wrapped the box with red and white twine. “We’re sorry you had to wait the other day.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” he protested. “It was all fine in the end. Cake is cake.”

“Actually, your wife called and according to her it wasn’t so fine,” she replied. “So, please, take these and we’re even, OK?”

“She called here?” he asked.

“She said she wanted a refund on the cake, that you had missed most of the party, and what little boy wants a birthday party without his father there? Look, we felt bad, but it was an honest mistake,” she said.
It’s not like Sean even noticed he was gone, he thought.

“I’ll talk to her,” he said.

“I don’t want to cause trouble,” she continued. “Please just take these on the house.” She refused to press a button on the cash register.

“Thank you,” he said graciously. The bells on the door rattled loudly as he pushed his way out of the bakery.

John didn’t have a long commute to work but it was complicated. There were many lights on the long stretch of road to the Garden State Parkway. If the first light was green, he could sail up the road expecting them all to be green and be on the parkway within 7 minutes. If the first light was red, each light after that would be red and it would take him almost double that time. Once on the parkway, he went two exits and then there was another series of lights before his office building. Today, all the lights were red.

Why would she call the bakery and demand a refund? He coasted three blocks to the next red light.

Was she that angry? He waited at the red light, fourth in the row of cars.

He felt embarrassed at the bakery, like he didn’t know his own wife. Surely most couples talk about things like that, don’t they? Not a big deal, he thought, but yet it is. Had he made such a fuss about the party that she didn’t feel
like she could bring it up? What had that year of couple’s therapy done if not helped them communicate better?

Another red light, now he was third in the line of cars. The car in front of him had a bumper sticker that read “My child is an honor student at St. Agnes Elementary School.”

It’s just a fucking birthday cake! What is the big deal? He drove a few more blocks to the next red light. He had become so accustomed to not cursing since the boys were around, even when he thought a curse it startled him.

At the light, he saw the tuxedo store where he had rented his wedding tuxedo. Most mornings the tuxedo store was his landmark to gauge if he was late for work because the parkway entrance was just after this light. It had taken him 15 minutes to get to the tuxedo landmark, add in the bakery stop and he was late. No meetings, though, so not a big deal. He remembered back to the visits he and his buddies had made to the shop to get fitted for their tuxedos. They had clowned around with the top hat and the giant shoe horn. They called the sales clerk “Jeeves” every time they addressed him. They had abandoned the offer of rentable dress shoes and agreed that wearing black Converse sneakers would be much cooler. Carolyn had appealed the decision saying, “When you look at the wedding pictures in 20 years, don’t you think sneakers will look ridiculous? Don’t be childish. It’s your wedding.” He gave in, it wasn’t worth an argument.

He wasn’t the first to get married nor the last. Within three years, he and
his friends had made appearances in each other’s wedding parties, swapping almost identical toasts but always ending with, “Ladies and gentleman, please enjoy the wedding cake from Masturbators,” coughing out the last syllables so they could keep their inside joke. Carolyn’s face dropped when it happened at their wedding until she realized that no one else had caught it.

The first day they met, he was a rising star in a small advertising firm and she worked at a marketing firm that was promoting the mall. To promote their businesses, they had both competed in a local charity benefit, “Hey Rube, Get a Tube,” an inner tube race sponsored by the Lion’s Club. The racers pumped up their inner tubes on the beach, ran into the ocean, paddled a half mile stretch along the shore, and then departed to the finish line. The unusually hot day in mid-September began with a parade of the unrehearsed high school marching band in “Hey Rube, Get a Tube” t-shirts and jeans. There were floats and fancy convertible cars to transport the racers. The suited-up Lion’s Club members offered free birch beer with the $5.00 purchase of a mug.

John’s float was for dental floss, an account he was managing at the firm. The float had a giant set of teeth with black lacy thongs hanging between each tooth. The banner read, “Dentette Floss reaches the hidden spots.” Carolyn’s float was for the mall. Her float was a less racy affair with tissue-paper flowers decorating stores made of cardboard boxes. Balloons and crepe paper stood still in the humid air. They both waited about an hour in the train station parking lot for
the parade to get underway, the two floats idling next to each other. Carolyn was a bit anxious since she was not the intended tube race competitor. She had to fill in at the last minute when the marketing manager’s mother died. Carolyn worked behind the scenes in production but everyone agreed she would be the best person to manage the float since she had come up with the concept. It was the racing part that she was not so sure about.

The members of the marching band were weighted down by their instruments but enjoyed the freedom from their wool uniforms and hats. The twirlers tossed their silver batons in the air, each one higher than the next. The cheerleaders sat in a group surrounded by their pom-poms, inspecting their tan legs for signs of imperfection. They randomly stretched their muscles. Occasional shrieks could be heard among the random honks of the brass section and the tinkling scales of the xylophone. Carolyn had not gone to this high school but it felt familiar to her.

John had gone to the high school and recognized some younger siblings of his high school friends. He felt connected but distant, having several years between him and these kids. He felt like his younger self around them. He remembered when he and his friends had made up most of the saxophone section in the marching band. They would ham it up as they marched, moving their saxes up and down in unison. One of them would sometimes blow extra hard to alert the rest to a hot girl on the sidelines. Now, he was alone noticing the hot girl at the
float next to him.

Carolyn was busying herself with last minute tacking of flowers and crepe paper. She was worried the chocolate kisses they intended to toss were melting in the heat. She was checking the placement of each of her sponsors to be sure that JC Penney had the most prominence on the float since they had given the largest donation. And sometimes she reached up high so her oversized Hey Rube Get a Tube t-shirt lifted to offer a glimpse of her white cheek bulging out of her red bathing suit. Whenever John looked around, his eyes seemed to land on that image.

John bought two mugs of birch beer and brought one to her.

“Do you want a beer?” he said to her back, closer now to the ass he had admired.

“What?” she replied. “I’m in the race, probably not a good idea.” She turned to face him, wondering who would be drinking beer at 10:30 in the morning. Her face was sweaty from the heat.

“It will cool you off,” he said.

“Oh, birch beer, yes, I’d love some,” she said.

They clinked their mugs and John said, “May the best tuber win.” They looked into each other’s eyes then sipped the lukewarm birch beer. It hardly quenched their thirst.

“I’m John,” he said. They shook hands, like competitors and colleagues.
“Carolyn,” she replied. “Have you done this race before?”

“In high school,” he said. “A long time ago.”

“How long?” she asked.

“Almost ten years,” he said with a casual nod.

“Did you go to high school here?” she asked.

“You got it. And I was a proud member of the Blue Devils band. We sounded much better,” he said with a smile.

The band began to get into formation. The drums pounded to sync the marchers. The drum major blew her whistle and soon the twirlers and cheerleaders put on their showy smiles. The color guard brought their flags into position.

“Good luck!” she said and raised her mug of birch beer.

“Same to you. See you at the end,” he replied. He watched her hoist herself onto the float. It wasn’t graceful but he still enjoyed it.

Neither John nor Carolyn were even close to winning that tube race. He let the real competitors pass him and showed mock exertion as he came closer to Carolyn’s inner tube. The ocean was mild and they had an easy time. She laughed at his swim cap which was covered with teeth. He pretended to be a shark and grabbed at her while chomping his teeth. When they landed on the beach they were more spent from laughing than physical exertion.

“Wanna get a beer?” he asked. “A real one this time, preferably cold.”
“Sure but I have to shower off first,” she said.

“I’ll meet you at the Pavilion in a half hour,” and he bumped her inner tube with his one more time.

“Great,” she said. Her hair was matted with salt water and her face was red from the sun. Her skin felt sandy and itchy and her insides were pulsing. She dragged her inner tube to the bathhouses on the boardwalk and lined up with the rest of the racers for a brisk cold shower.

There was no place for her to fix herself up. The mirror was coated with years of salt water. There were only hand dryers that some women were ducking under to dry their hair. She ran her fingers through her rinsed hair. She glanced enough of her face through the salted mirror to see how happy and excited she actually was. She took a deep breath, sucked in her stomach and smoothed it with her hands, then walked out.

The sun’s heat baked into her skin that was no longer cool from the brief shower. The beach and all its revelers seemed to be cheering her on. The surf gently crashed in the distance. She breathed in the salt air that was heavy with the smell of fresh popped popcorn and sweet sticky candy. Screams from the amusement park whipped with the rides as they spun people upside down. Through the cacophony of the boardwalk she spotted John walking into the Pavilion. He was wearing his Hey Rube Get a Tube shirt and orange shorts. She saw confidence. She saw handsome. She sped up a bit to meet him slowing only
when she knew she was within his eyesight.

“Hey,” she said, coming up next to him at the bar. He smelled like soap and coconuts.

“Hey,” he almost reached to touch her but restrained himself. “What do you want to drink?”

“Amstel.”

He held out two empty mugs towards the bartender. “Amstel and a Bud, man.”

“I bought two more mugs,” he told her.

“Nice,” she said. “It is a benefit, after all.” The other racers slowly filled the Pavilion and by their third round, it became difficult to get the bartender’s attention.

“You want to get out of here?” he asked her.

“Sure,” she said. She was almost tipsy.

“There’s a clam bake at the end of the boardwalk. All you can eat.”

“Sounds great.”

They walked down the boardwalk feeling like they had won something. Wheels of chance click click clicked around them. The splintered wood of the boardwalk felt soft under their flip flops. The boardwalk was crowded with people but the two of them felt the crowd separate as they walked. At one point they were jostled into each other and their hands clasped in silent opposition.
When they arrived at the clambake only corn and potatoes were left but they didn’t care. When they finished eating, John reached in his pocket.

“I have a surprise for you,” he said. “Close your eyes and hold out your hands.”

She did as she was instructed and felt something silky in her hands.

“OK, open your eyes,” he said.

She opened her eyes and her hands where John had placed a thong from his float. Her jaw fell open but she was speechless. She didn’t laugh. He thought he almost blew it at that moment.

“Um, OK, I guess,” she said, trying to stay composed.

“Aw, c’mon, it’s a joke,” he said. “I’ll take it back.”

“No,” she said. Her face was flushed from beer and embarrassment. “I’ll keep it.”

“Really, it was just a joke,” he was trying to save himself.

“Yes, I get it,” she said. “I just never…”

She shook her head. “My God, what am I saying?” She briefly closed her eyes and pursed her lips. “OK, here goes. I never wore one before.”

His mind wandered to the bit of swimsuit cheek and then the thong. He imagined it all in combination and it was nice.

“Maybe you should try it,” he said, shrugging and picking at some corn kernels on his Styrofoam plate. He had to look away because he, too, was feeling
embarrassed that he had given it to her. “I’m sorry.”

“No,” she reassured him. “Don’t be. It’s funny. I just can’t believe I told you that I never…”

“Let’s drop it, OK?” he said. “My mistake.” He knew he had pushed her enough to peak both of their curiosities. It would be many months before he saw her in that thong but it was worth the wait.

On their anniversary, they always had at least these four things—corn, potatoes, beer, and Carolyn in a thong.

When he arrived at the office, he grabbed the donuts from the passenger seat. The Master Bakers box, labeled with scripted red letters engraved on the box, reminded him of Carolyn’s phone call demanding a refund. The memories of the girl she was at the tube race snapped from his mind. He felt agitated.

“Good morning, John,” his assistant, Jenny, greeted him. She had only worked for him for about four months but he didn’t know how he had survived without her.

“I brought some donuts. Do you have some scissors to cut open the box?” He handed her the big box of donuts.

“That’s so sweet,” she said as she snipped the thread. She was always cute, always pleasant. He was lucky to have her because she could actually do her
job, too. “There you go. How about I put these out in the conference room?” As she walked away, he watched her tight black pants switch back and forth. Definitely a thong, he thought. Focus, John, focus focus focus, he briefly meditated.

The pink While You Were Out slip on his desk was completed with her purple ink and large round script. “Dr. Muench, 8:30 am”

John picked up the phone to call her back.

“Dr. Muench, please?” he said.

“Who’s calling?” the receptionist said.

“John Dougherty returning her call.”

“Hold on,” click.

“Dr. Muench speaking,” she said into the phone.

“This is John Dougherty, returning your call.”

“Hi,” she continued. “We got cut off yesterday. I wanted to get back to you. I have your son’s chart right here. Did you have some specific questions about Bill?”

“I was calling you about Sean,” he said.

“Right, Sean, I meant Sean. He’s three, right?”

“Three years old. Bill is five.”

“But you’re calling about Sean who’s three.”
“Yes, Sean,” he responded. “I’m concerned about Sean.” He dampened his thoughts of Carolyn, Master Bakers, the beach, his assistant’s ass. He only saw Sean refusing his attempts to read to him or tuck him in. “Sean seems disconnected.”

“Right,” she said. “How do you mean ‘disconnected?’”

“For instance, last night, I tried to put him to bed but he insisted on my wife doing it. He wouldn’t let me.”

“I see,” she responded. “Anything else?”

“You saw him yesterday. What did you think?” he threw the question back at her.

“Physically, he seemed normal. He is reaching his milestones. Unless you tell me you’re seeing something else, I can assure you that he seems fine.”

“OK, so him not letting me put him to bed, is that fine?”

“All children go through phases. This is most likely a phase,” she said. Her response sounded like a script.

“And if it isn’t? If my son continues to not look at me or interact with me?” His tone was short, his voice was crisp.

“If he’s not looking at you at all, then maybe we need to rule some things out” she said. “Remember he is just a child and he’s not doing this with intention. Provide him with a loving and playful home. All children respond to that,” she continued. John felt like he was getting a lecture. “But, I am available to you and
your family if you need me. Was there anything else?”

Anything else? What else had he been thinking about? Nothing but Sean.

And Carolyn.

“Rule out what?” he asked.

“This requires more than a brief phone conversation. I can transfer you back to my receptionist to set up a consult.”

“Let me try the loving and playful thing first,” he replied. He hung up wondering why she had bothered to call him back. Maybe it was just a phase. Maybe he was overreacting. Maybe he should just play with Sean more. Maybe something would change. Right now, John had a newly acquired mid-size account to work on.

Carolyn had a routine to her day. She woke up, showered, dressed, and did her hair and makeup. She swished and wiped around the toilet bowl and sink. Sometimes she windexed the mirror and faucets. She often put the boxes of cereal and bowls out the evening before so breakfast was a quick meal. She always included melon or bananas because she knew Sean would eat that. Bill shoveled the cereal in quickly, one foot under his bottom and the other on the floor, ready to bolt into action. He was active from morning until night and he wasn’t going to let any meal slow him down.

“Woo woo woo!” Bill barked, fist pumping his hand in the air. He had just
downed the last of the milk from the cereal bowl.

Sean had lined up about 50 Cheerios. He picked up one at a time and brought it to his mouth. He was focused on his food.

She had some errands to run while Bill was at school, then she could take Sean for a donut, maybe the park. She knew she would be heading to Master Bakers since she had gotten nowhere with them on the telephone. She hadn’t bothered to talk to John about it. He was so busy making a big deal about reading to the boys last night, when did she have a chance to talk to him? Why had he made such a fuss about putting the boys to bed? Getting them to sleep was something she alone had successfully accomplished, mostly, for five years. There was never disagreement about books. She picked one and that was that. She had a routine set for them. Bath, pajamas, a half-hour educational video, teeth-brushing (though Sean hated that), and a story, usually read at the top of the stairs so there wouldn’t be a disagreement about whose room she would read in. She usually wound up in Sean’s room but he was younger and had a hard time getting settled. As soon as Bill’s head hit the pillow, he fell asleep. He didn’t even know she was with Sean. It was a comfort to be with Sean at the end of the day. The stresses eased out of her body as she rocked him, his head nuzzled between her jaw and shoulder. When John traveled for business, she often brought a pillow and blanket into Sean’s room to sleep next to his crib. Sometimes she brought him into her bed where the two slept soundly, often stretching their sleep an extra hour or so
into the morning. She never could sleep with Bill. He turned like the hands of a
clock all night long, kicking her in the back or stomach as his body went from the
top of the bed to the bottom. The few times she had shared a bed with him, she
woke up feeling battered and sleepless.

“They shouldn’t be in our bed,” John had said, after one night of Sean,
then Bill, then Sean and Bill in their bed. “We’re locking the door.”

“Isn’t that extreme?” she said.

“You bring Sean in here,” John said.

“Not often. Why would you lock them out?” she said. “What if they need
something?”

“You make this sound cruel. If they need something, they can knock.”

“John, they’re children. They need their parents,” she replied.

“They have their parents, all day long,” he said. “But we need some time,
too. We barely have time for a conversation anymore, Carolyn.”

“Conversation, that’s what you’re after,” she said. “Doubt it.”

“Well, we could do with some of that once in a while, too,” he responded.

“Remember ‘close your eyes and put out your hands’?”

When he said things like that she remembered herself on the boardwalk
that day, blushing and not knowing where they were headed. She remembered
being surprised by herself talking with a near stranger about thongs. It was all a
bit of a whirlwind. They dated for a few months. She waited an appropriate
amount of time before sleeping with him. She had had two boyfriends before him but she felt different about John. Their time together was easy and often he surprised her. The thong was the first, but every date they had after that ended with him saying “close your eyes and put out your hands.” Through this little game he presented her with tickets to concerts, sliced kiwi, ice cubes, and ultimately a beautiful engagement ring. She thought he was clever and thoughtful and fun. She forgot he was in advertising and that he spent the better part of his day making the mundane seem exciting and fresh. Her position at the mall was not a career path and it simply felt like work. It was John’s attention that kept her going. She had some friends at work but he still had all of his high school friends. His friends became her friends. Soon the friends were marrying and going on exotic honeymoons to Thailand and Peru. It was natural that they would do the same. Their honeymoon was a package tour to the Bahamas. John thought they should go to a beach in tribute to how they met. She wore day-of-the-week thongs which she thought was clever.

Some of their friends were relocated to other parts of the country. Some of their friends stayed in town. Some of them had kids, some didn’t. She was never sure how the choices were made or what the discussions were. She questioned so many things in the early years of the marriage when it seemed that everyone around her was clear in their direction and settling into their married selves. There were new cars with bows on them at Christmas. There were recipe exchanges.
There were cocktail parties. Carolyn worked at the mall, came home to make dinner, did the laundry, pressed John’s shirts, and sometimes the pillowcases, so they smelled fresh.

She wanted to please him. This was married life, wasn’t it? But, there she was at a cocktail party, joining in with the other wives’ conversation.

“They have a 10 shirts get one free special every Friday,” one of the women shared.

“Oh, I’ll have to go there then. Carolyn, have you used the new cleaners at the end of Ocean Avenue?”

“No,” she answered. None of them ironed their husband’s shirts. She felt like an idiot.

“John, I don’t know what is wrong. I’m sure it’s me, but I feel like I’m missing something here,” she said one night when they were driving home from playing Pictionary with friends. She and John were not a good team. She could draw well but he wanted concepts. They both did better when they were on separate teams.

“What do you mean ‘missing something’?”

They stopped at stop signs where there was no traffic. They rolled slowly to stop at red lights, anticipating the green.
“Everyone around us seems so together. They’re all on the same page. But with us…”

“What?” he said. “You know this is all news to me.”

She looked away from him, her face flashing in and out of the light of the street lamps.

“Carolyn?”

“Between working all day, and coming home to laundry and mail, and making sure that there isn’t too much gravy on the mashed potatoes and all the little things that make up our lives, I just feel like it’s too much,” she said.

“We’ll work through this,” he reassured her.

“I don’t know if we can,” she said. “I don’t know if I can.”

“It’s about us, Carolyn,” he said. “Not just you. I thought you were happy. We have a beautiful house. My job is going well. We’re living our dreams.”

“I think we’re living your dreams,” she said.

The silence of the car was interrupted by John’s gear shifting for each stop. She couldn’t look at him. She didn’t know what she was thinking or feeling or what she had started. But she knew that she had opened up a conversation that she now didn’t want to have.

“My dreams? I thought our life was pretty good. Nice vacations when we can. Dinners out. Good friends. Distant but close enough family. It’s all good, Carolyn.”
“See, maybe that’s it. It’s all good in spurts. The vacations are good. The dinners out are good. But the days in between feel like drudgery to me.”

“I had no idea it was so bad for you,” he said. He tried to contain his sarcasm.

“I just feel like I need a change, a big change.”

“Is this going to be a baby conversation? We’ve been down that road, Carolyn.”

“No,” she replied. Her eyes were filling with tears. “It’s not about having a baby. It’s just me, OK? It’s about me.” She felt the thud of her statement, like she had a terminal illness. The car was overly hot so she switched the heat off and cracked her window a bit.

“I need the defroster on,” John said. She thrust the defrost up full blast, surprising herself with the force.

“Are you happy now?” she grumbled. She pulled off the sleeves of her jacket, pulling at them like she was removing a straightjacket.

The defroster blasted heat to the clear windshield but he didn’t turn it off. He knew no response was the best response to both Carolyn and the temperature of the car. He dropped the car into lower gear as he turned into their driveway. She would become rational again, maybe when they got inside. The house was dark. The hanging planters on the porch swayed, bouncing the impatients and dropping a few decayed leaves. The cable wire tapped lightly against the vinyl
siding of their house. A distant neighbor’s chime tinkled cheerfully.

It was perverse amusement for Carolyn to remember those pre-children days as drudgery. The details of her current life with the boys hardly painted a carefree life. After the boys ate their breakfast, she loaded the dishwasher, washed the coffee pot, wiped spilled milk and apple juice off the table, emptied the goopy sink strainer of soggy Cheerios, and wiped down the counters. She shouted to the boys to turn the TV off and think about getting dressed. She knew the getting dressed part was an unrealistic expectation but she felt programmed to say it. She placed the cold-pak in Bill’s lunch box and loaded it with string cheese, drinkable yogurt, a juice box, and a banana—all organic. Then, she would usually find them wrestling on the sofa, most likely Bill had Sean pinned. Both boys would be laughing. As she walked through the living room, she gathered up stray magazines and children’s books and stacked them in the basket, too. She said “C’mon boys” at least three times before they got off of each other. Bill charged up the steps, Sean did one step at a time, always starting with his right foot. She carried the basket up the steps behind him. As she walked by Bill’s bedroom she saw most of his shirts out of the drawer and heaped on the floor. He was looking for his favorite Batman t-shirt. She walked with Sean to his room and picked out his outfit for the day. She changed his diaper, carefully smearing Desitin on him.
She replaced the fishy scent of the Desitin with the baby smell of a wipe as she got the last bits of ointment off of her hands. She dressed Sean, brushed his soft hair with a baby comb, humming “Twinkle Twinkle Little Star” as she did so. He gazed at her or at the small mirror she often handed him to keep him amused. She carried Sean off to Bill’s room to find him twisted up in his shirt, trying to force his head through the sleeve. She reached with her free hand to help him but he slipped away.

“I can do it!” he said as he continued to twist blindly.

When he was done, the shirt was on backwards, so he started all over again. It would be another 10 minutes before Bill was ready to put on his shoes. Once downstairs, she handed the boys their sweatshirts, handed Bill his lunch, and said, “Let’s go.”

“It’s ‘I’ week, Mom. I need something that begins with ‘I’” Bill informed her.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” she said, as she racked her brain for something that began with “I”. Igloo, instrument, idiot, institution…nothing she could immediately place a hand on.

“Iowa!” he said, as he picked up a puzzle piece from the wooden United States of America map puzzle.

“Perfect,” she said, relived she didn’t have to think of something. “Let’s go.”
“I need to put it in a baggie with my name on it.”

She went to the kitchen, placed Iowa in a baggie and wrote “Bill” with a Sharpie.

“Here,” she said as she handed it to him. He bounced away, shaking Iowa up and down in its little bag.

She strapped, rather she strapped, both boys into their car seats in her not quite a mini-van, not quite an SUV, sporty but practical car. She grabbed some stray Chex from the floor and tossed them to the lawn for the birds. She started to back out of the driveway but remembered she had to mail some letters and bring the new insurance card to the pediatrician’s office. She put the parking brake on, turned off the car, and took the keys in with her. She grabbed the letters and card off the mantle. She still couldn’t believe they let her give them the $40 co-pay with the assurance that she would be back the next day with the card. The doctor’s office would be her first stop after dropping Bill at school. She settled back into the driver’s seat and put the “Favorite Train Songs for Kids” CD in the player. They drove the few blocks to Bill’s school and she undid all the seatbelts, car seats, CD playing that she had just done.

“Don’t forget Iowa, Bill,” she said as she reached past his seat and picked up the baggie.

“Thanks, Mom!” he said. She held both of their hands as they walked to the small house that had been converted to a preschool. The letter “I” was posted
on the front door.

“Hi, Bill,” the teacher called as they entered. It was small school of about 20 kids. It was run by a husband and wife with one rotating assistant teacher. The place was cheery and warm and fun. Bill loved it there. Carolyn loved it there because she always left with one less kid. Sean would start the following fall when Bill left for kindergarten.

“Hi, Jane,” Carolyn said to the teacher.

“Hi, Carolyn. Hi, Sean,” she replied. Bill barely said good-bye or hello and headed straight for the tee-pee where the other children whispered in conspiratorial tones. Carolyn usually hung around for five or ten minutes, chatting with Jane or Thomas, her husband. Jane often handed Sean a matchbox car or truck when he came in. Sean rolled the car around the classroom.

“Sean, we have to go,” she said after a few minutes. She knew he wasn’t leaving without the car. Jane was as understanding as she had been with all the other cars Sean took from the school. She made a mental note to return the other dozen or so cars that belonged to the school that had found their way to Sean’s room.

“Ask Jane if you can borrow the car.” He didn’t look up, he just rolled it along.

“It’s OK,” Jane said, finally looking away from Sean. “He can borrow it.” Carolyn mouthed ‘thanks’ as she picked up Sean and lead him out of the
school.

“Bye, Mom!” Bill poked his head out of the tee-pee and just as quickly ducked back in.

As she clicked Sean back into his car seat, he clutched the car with one hand and turned the wheels with the other. She reviewed her errands—doctor’s office, Master Bakers, pick up Bill. Carolyn turned on the train songs for Sean and checked her wallet one more time for the insurance card. She looked up from clicking in her own seatbelt to see Wanda Wallace tapping on her window.

“Hey Wanda,” she said as the window automatically whirred down.

“Carolyn, I wanted to thank you for Sean’s party. Isabelle had a wonderful time,” Wanda held tiny Isabelle on one hip. “Right, Isabelle?” She looked at her daughter who nodded but did not take her attention away from the toy cell phone she held in her hands.

“I’m glad could make it,” Carolyn responded

“Do you want to get the kids together for a play date?” Wanda asked. Isabelle now looked up.

“Sure, not right now, of course. I have some errands to run,” Carolyn said.

“Tomorrow? While the older ones are in school? How about my place?” Wanda had it all figured out.

“That would be fine. We’ll look forward to it.” Carolyn said.

“Great,” Wanda replied. “I know you have to get going. We’ll see you
tomorrow. Say good-bye, Isabelle.” The child was again transfixed by her cell phone. Wanda shrugged and waved on her behalf.

Carolyn drove the ten minutes to the doctor’s office, mindlessly humming along to “Down at the Station” as she pulled into the plaza. She and Sean gave a loud “Toot! Toot!” and finished it up with “off we go.” She glanced at him in the rear view mirror and saw the amused look on his face. Her internal chatter of getting the insurance card to the doctor, what’s for dinner, go to Master Bakers, put some gas in the car, oh good no more balloons at the nail salon—somehow Sean’s smile could quiet it all.

“C’mon, buddy, this will be quick,” she said as she turned off the car.

The gleeful moment with Sean was promptly erased as she entered Dr. Muench’s waiting room. Three sullen women sat overlooking their very tiny infants. The infants were not attractive. One was blotchy, the next was shaded yellow, and the third was wrapped up in an intricate contraption strapped to the mother so it appeared as one of multiple body rolls. The mothers loved them enough to shield them from Sean as he walked by, fearful that their immunocompromised infants might become infected with something while they waited in the doctor’s office. Carolyn recognized the weariness on their faces and the fatigue in their bodies. Sean dropped her hand and went into the tent to sit
alone.

“I brought the insurance card,” Carolyn whispered to the receptionist, not wanting to wake any of the sleeping infants who would soon be wailing from their shots.

The woman handed Carolyn a clipboard with several forms. She said nothing to Carolyn.

“Nothing has changed. It’s just a new card.”

“You need to fill it out again if you get a new card,” the woman replied.

“But nothing has changed.” Carolyn held out the card as if to show her it was really almost exactly the same.

The woman handed her a pen and then spun her desk chair around towards the computer. The phone rang at least five times before she picked it up.

Carolyn was beyond annoyed. She felt her face flush red as she turned towards the waiting room to face the three women. The only available seat was next to the woman with the strapped on infant as the others were taken by infant car seats and large diaper bags. The new mother smiled at her weakly, as if her life force had been sucked out of her with each nursing session. She made a show of moving a bit out of the way so Carolyn could fit on the chair but there was little room so Carolyn sat at the edge of the seat. She completed the forms more quickly than she expected, as several of them required only her signature. Sean poked his head out of the tent, checking to see if she was still there.
“I’m almost done, sweety,” she said but he had closed himself back into
the tent. The waiting room was too silent for all of the people it held.

“Please hold,” the receptionist said to the telephone receiver as Carolyn
handed her the clipboard and new insurance card. She took it from Carolyn
without looking at her and slid her chair across to the copy machine. She attached
the copy to the other forms, stapled them together and handed the card back to
Carolyn.

“Dr. Muench’s office,” she continued into the phone.

Carolyn tucked the insurance card into her wallet, peeked her head into the
tent and whispered “C’mon Sean. I’ll get you a donut.” He quickly crawled out of
the tent and Carolyn locked eyes one more time with the weary mother who now
offered her a disapproving glance before reaching for a parenting magazine.
Carolyn had been that mother once. She definitely would have disapproved of a
mother bribing her three-year-old with a donut. I’ll check back with you in three
years, she thought to herself.

Carolyn checked the time on her dashboard and wondered why it had
taken half of an hour to submit a new insurance card to Dr. Muench’s office. She
knew this would be a good story to share with John tonight. He had a daily litany
of tales of inefficiency, but she thought she would trump all of them. Thirty
minutes to copy an insurance card, she imagined herself saying. Can you believe
that? He would shake his head and mutter ‘unbelievable’ in agreement. She would
continue to say that at least she wasn’t sitting in there forever with an infant like the other women there. He would agree.

“Did you like the tent?” she called to Sean in the back seat.

“Donut,” he replied.

“Yes, we’re going to get you a donut now.”

The thought of Master Bakers, while a treat for Sean, did not provide relief for Carolyn. The birthday party was a success, as Wanda Wallace would testify, but she had called Master Bakers the day after the party. She was still annoyed with John for not taking her side. Now she had to handle this herself. She replayed bits of the conversation in her mind, preparing herself for the confrontation ahead of her.

“You ruined the party for my son,” she had said.

“We are very sorry, Mrs. Dougherty,” it was the mother, the older woman, on the line. “It was an honest mistake.”

“My husband waited there for 30 minutes. It was only a two hour party,” she had said. It was bit of an exaggeration as the party was three hours long.

“We fixed it as best we could,” she replied.

“But it was not what I ordered,” Carolyn continued. “I specifically requested a red pick-up truck and instead I got a blue dump truck that was then switched to red. It may not matter to you but it does matter to a little boy.”

“Mrs. Dougherty,” Carolyn sensed the old woman was changing course,
softening a bit. “We’ve happily supplied cakes for many occasions for you—the boys’ christenings, their birthday parties. We want to make this right.”

Carolyn didn’t know what they could do to make it right. She probably should have thought of something before she called them on the phone. John told her it wasn’t that big of a deal but Carolyn couldn’t let it go. It took so little to make Sean happy, a red pick-up truck or a red balloon, yet he had to settle for a red dump truck or a white balloon. Carolyn knew these weren’t life or death decisions but they were things in her control. Why shouldn’t they be exactly as she wanted?

“I need to think about this,” Carolyn continued. “I don’t know if there’s anything you can do to make it right.” Click. For the first time in her life, Carolyn had hung up on someone. She turned away from the phone. She felt triumphant yet shaky, like she had somehow climbed to the top of a mountain only to realize that the person with the water was still far behind her. She hadn’t told John about the phone call. Even as they had eaten the last remnants of the cake for dessert the evening after the party, the evening after the call to the bakery, she had said nothing.

Now, as she drove to Master Bakers, she wondered what they could do to make it right. She wondered how you face someone after you hang up on her. She was hoping the mother wasn’t there. Was Carolyn supposed to apologize? Or was the old woman the one to apologize? She still felt confident that she was on the
right side of this argument. The customer is always right. The mall had been plastered with such slogans in the back hallways and offices. That was how customer service worked.

She pulled into a parking space in front of Master Bakers.

“Donut,” Sean said from the back seat. He smiled at Carolyn.

The sleigh bells on the door rattled loudly as Carolyn and Sean entered the bakery. The daughter saw Carolyn and immediately went to the back to get her mother. The plump woman dusted her floured hands on her apron and a false smile fell across her face.

“Mrs. Dougherty, I’m glad you came in,” she said. “We saw Mr. Dougherty earlier.”

“Really?” Carolyn responded. She hoped they hadn’t said anything to John.

“We gave him a dozen donuts on the house,” she continued. “For all the trouble with the cake.”

Carolyn’s heart picked up speed.

“Donut,” Sean said, dotting the etched glass with his moist fingers.

“Yes, Sean,” she said. “I’ll get you a donut. One for Bill, too.”

“Please, Mrs. Dougherty,” the woman continued. “Let us give the boys some donuts and we’ll put this behind us. What do you say?” She smiled at Carolyn. *Our Customers are Number One*, the sign at the mall had said, with an
index finger pointing into the air. This is how Master Bakers had stayed in business for so many generations, she mused. A couple of free donuts.

“Sure,” Carolyn said. There were no apologies, just a donut and a big smile on Sean’s face.

“See, he’s a happy boy now,” she continued, smiling warmly at Sean as his face was slowly being covered in powdered sugar.

“Yes,” Carolyn said as she picked up the small box wrapped in red and white twine that held Bill’s éclair “OK, we’re all set now.”

John took a break around 11:30 and headed to the conference room for a donut but they were all gone. All that remained was a blob of jelly that had escaped a jelly donut, some crumbs, and powdered sugar.

“Here you go,” Jenny walked in behind him, holding a plate with a lone old-fashioned cruller. She smiled. “I knew you’d be looking for one.”

“Thanks,” he said. “You think of everything.”

“That’s my job, right?” she said.

Focus, focus, focus, John. It’s just a donut and there are presentations to be done.

“Right,” he replied. “I have some PowerPoints for you to work on. Make sure there aren’t any typos, ok?” Focus, that’s right, back to the work. Back to the
task at hand.

“Sure thing,” she said. “Can I pull them up from the Maize file?”

“Yes,” he said. Always eager to please, he thought.

While he finished the donut in his office he checked his voicemail.

“…free donuts from Master Bakers…” his wife’s voice filled the room as he listened on speakerphone. He deleted the message, dusted a few crumbs from his desk and returned to his presentation.

After lunch, he stopped by Jenny’s desk. She was still out to lunch but he was pleased to see the Maize Powerpoint presentation on her screen. No endless solitaire games for Jenny, he thought. On her desk he saw pictures of Jenny’s nieces in their dance costumes. There was Jenny and her boyfriend, in a canoe. Somebody’s puppy in a frame. There were a few fast food coupons thumbtacked to the wall, next to a bumper sticker for “The Q, WQXT Alt Radio 108.” John hadn’t really noticed anything around her desk before, probably because she was always sitting there. It was unremarkable in so many ways yet Jenny seemed present even in her absence. Her cream-colored cardigan hung off the back of her chair and underneath her desk were a pair of her shoes. A bottle of Purell was stationed next to her computer monitor. The screen suddenly switched over to an image slide show—there’s Jenny at a bar with her girlfriends, next, a picture of a deer on the side of the road, then a closeup of her boyfriend making a silly face, her parents, her car. A hairband with a few of her stray hairs rested next to her
computer mouse.

“Hello,” Jenny said as she approached. Jenny’s lunch friend dropped away to her own cubicle. John was pulled out of his personal inventory of Jenny’s cubicle. He felt like he knew more about her than he was supposed to.

“I’m just about finished,” she continued. She dropped her purse into a drawer and rubbed Purell into her palms. The movement prompted the Maize Powerpoint file to pop up on the screen again.

“Good, I was just checking,” he said.

“About another hour?” she asked.

“That will be fine, Jenny,” he said. He stood for an awkward moment then walked away. He looked around at his own office. There was the picture of Carolyn, before the kids were born. She was sitting on the beach, a loose white shirt draped over her bathing suit and a large sunhat shielded her eyes. Yet, the light hit her eyes just enough to make them shimmer. She had a knowing look on her face, confident yet coy. He also had a framed portrait of the boys but it was at least a year old. Sean still looked pudgy and babyish. He had baby curls because they couldn’t get his haircut without hysterics that year. Sean was looking just beyond the camera which was only obvious because Bill’s gaze was right on. His eyes matched Carolyn’s, shimmering in an artificial light. Surrounding these photos were various gizmos and gimmicks he had developed to promote clients. He was most proud of the tooth-shaped dental floss dispenser and the yellow and
black bumblebee made of a metal coil ("Spring into Action…Excel Exterminators"). These ideas had not won him any annual awards but they amused him. His office looked a bit like a defunct toy shop. His pictures were outdated in rickety frames. Carolyn’s photo was even fading a bit. He rarely noticed these things since he was mostly riveted to his computer screen. He was meticulous in its care and had a drawer filled with cloths and cleaners to preserve the screen. But he didn’t have scrolling pictures, just a field of stars coming at him at a moderate speed.

With Jenny’s finishing touches, the Maize project was finished up sooner than John expected. He was able to leave around 6:00 and was hoping for some time with the boys if he could beat the traffic on the Parkway. His radio was blasting classic rock when he turned on the car but it was the 10 minute block of commercials to make up for the 20 minute block of music that would follow. He hit the scan button and stopped at 108, the Q and listened all the way home. The music was not entirely his style but occasionally a guitar rift caught his attention.

Chapter Five – Baby Furniture

“Iowa, Illinois, Indiana,” Bill was piecing the United States puzzle map together starting with the “I” states when John came in.

“Daddy!” Bill called and jumped up to tackle him.

“Let me get changed and I’ll give you a hand with that,” John said. The
puzzle was abandoned as Bill hopped around him as he went upstairs. John heard the water in the bathroom and poked his head in to see Carolyn bathing Sean.

“Hi, honey,” he leaned to give her a kiss.

“Hey, you’re home early,” she said as she tilted a cheek up to meet his pursed lips.

“Maize project is done,” he said. “That assistant is great. She gets twice as much done in half the time.”

Carolyn was half-listening as she splashed cups of water onto Sean’s belly. Sean had stuck all of the red foam letters and numbers to the side of the tub.

“Hey, Sean,” John said to the slick boy who was being rigorously soaped up by Carolyn. Sean didn’t look up from his chore of dropping the remaining foam letters and numbers to the floor outside of the tub. John squatted down to his level at the tub.

“Hey, what are you doing there, mister?” he joked with him. He picked up a yellow S, a green E, a blue A, and a purple N and stuck them to the inside of the tub. “What does that say?” Sean continued his tidy of the tub and promptly removed the letters that spelled his name, depositing them back on the floor outside of the tub. John held up the wet S and asked “What’s this letter?”

“S!” Bill yelled from the doorway.

“Not you,” John said. “I’m asking Sean.”

“Say ‘S,’ Sean,” Bill commanded. Sean whispered “S” as he glanced at
“OK, let me try,” John said. “What’s this letter?” He held up the E.

“E!” Bill called out. “Say ‘E,’” Sean!

“Bill, let Sean tell me,” Bill said. Sean hadn’t looked up to see what John was holding. He fiddled with a washcloth in the water.

John reached across to a red “E” plastered to the side of the tub. He peeled it off and said, “Sean, look, what’s this letter?”

Sean saw the red letter peeled from the side of the tub.

“John, don’t take the red one,” Carolyn warned but it was already down.

“Red E, red E,” Sean whimpered to Carolyn. “Red E.”

“John, put it back,” she continued.

“Wait, Sean, tell me what letter this is,” John held it up but the boy did not look up.

“E!” Bill exclaimed.

“Sean, just say E,” Carolyn said quietly to Sean.

“E! E! E! Say E, Sean!” Bill was getting louder.

John looked at his whimpering wet son, heard his mumbling wife, and felt Bill’s exclamations like kicks in his back.

“What the hell is going on around here?!” he yelled.

Silence filled the room except for the slosh of the bathwater and Sean’s incessant moan about the red E. John stormed past Bill out of the bathroom. As he
walked down the hall to the bedroom, he heard Sean’s whimpering and Carolyn’s shushing resumed.

“What’s wrong with Dad?” Bill asked.

The gurgling of the bathwater down the drain was followed by a silence that commanded the evening. Carolyn was silent as she prepared dinner. They were both silent as they ate. Even Bill had deflated as he quietly pieced the United States puzzle map back together. Occasionally Bill looked at his parents but he couldn’t figure out how to pull them apart or put them together.

Sean sat on the floor and held onto the strings of the shrunken red balloon from a few days ago. He dragged it to his mother who was now seated on the couch, waiting for 7:00 when she would put on their video. She stared at the boys but only saw the floor. Sean handed her the string.

“Balloon,” he said. He looked down at the flaccid red latex. “Balloon.”

Bill looked up from the floor at his brother. “It’s dead, Sean. Dead dead dead.” He banged the Kentucky puzzle piece into position.

“Balloon,” Sean looked at Carolyn. There was no sadness in his face, but there was no joy either. He just looked to her to make it better and she couldn’t.

Carolyn woke two hours later, lying on the floor of Sean’s room. She saw his hand jutting through the slats of the crib and smelled the subtle plastic urine wafting from the diaper Genie. Her teeth were gritted tightly together but relaxed
slightly when she saw him sound asleep. She switched on the Thomas the Tank Engine nightlight and slipped out of his room. John called to her from the bedroom.

“Carolyn, I’m in here,” he said.

She went to the bathroom and sat far longer than her need required. When she lifted her head from her hands, she realized she was crying. The red letters and numbers remained affixed to the side of the tub, the others were scattered about. She put them all in a plastic tub, splashed some water across her face and looked in the mirror. Her eyes were red-rimmed and puffy. She must have been asleep on an article of Sean’s clothing because a seam line was now pressed into her face. She turned her head, examining her face in the mirror. Her eyes remained fixed in their reflection. Carolyn now spread her gaze away from the seam line to see the sagging skin beneath her eyes. She attempted a smile, her 11-year-old girl smile, but it wasn’t convincing. She wasn’t cute, she just looked drained. She took a deep breath and then pushed the wisps of her hair behind her ears. She rubbed her eyes and reached for her face cream which she rubbed into her dull skin. She carefully refolded the hand towel, closed the toilet lid, and straightened the fish bathmat on the floor. She placed the boys’ toothbrushes back in the stand and wiped the bit of toothpaste from the sink with a piece of toilet paper. All was in order now so she switched off the light and went to the bedroom.
“Hey, honey,” John said quietly as he moved to make room for her on the bed.

“Hey,” she said and the tears came back again, without warning.

“Carolyn, Carolyn, come here,” he pulled her into himself. She smelled his clean t-shirt and rubbed her face into its softness. “It’s OK.” He stroked her hair and felt her tears. She couldn’t speak. She didn’t know what to say or how to say it. She cried into his chest, muffling the sounds of her crying and releasing it into his body. He held her tighter, squeezing out her emotions.

“I don’t know…” she began but could not continue.

“Shh, you don’t need to talk now,” he comforted her. He held her until she fell asleep, both of them exhausted by her crying. He adjusted the pillow behind her so it was flat and gently moved her head on it. He pulled the comforter up to her chin and watched her sleep for a few minutes before switching off the bedside lamp. He lay in the darkness, listening to her heavy breathing. He was almost sure he could hear the boys breathing in their sleep in their bedrooms. If he could sync his breath to theirs he could fall asleep. This was a trick he taught himself in college when he had a roommate for the first time. He lay with his hands behind his head and breathed in and out with Carolyn until he fell asleep.

He awoke before the three of them, feeling as if he had only slept an hour. It must be early since Sean wasn’t even awake. Carolyn looked restful and
relaxed. The tears were gone, her mouth hung slightly open. He smelled her stale
morning breath as he bent in to kiss her sleeping face. No sooner had his lips
grazed her cheek than she turned away, pulling the comforter over her shoulder.
Maybe the sleep will do her good, John thought. He quietly got out of bed and
headed straight to the coffee maker.

He was groggy and slightly irritated but not sure why. He flipped on the
county light but with his eyes half-closed he slammed his toe into Sean’s high
chair. The pain awoke him in a jolt.

“Mother fucker,” he muttered unconsciously. The fact that he had cursed
in his own house caught him by surprise. He hadn’t cursed at home since Bill
started repeating everything that he and Carolyn said. With his awakened
hearing, he heard Sean in his room, loudly reciting the numbers 1 through 15,
over and over. By the time the coffee was brewing, John heard at least five
repetitions.

“Who’s counting so early in the morning?” John said cheerfully as he
entered Sean’s bedroom. Sean continued to count, fiddling with the satin edge of
his blanket.

“1, 2, 3, 4…”

“Sean,” John said. “It’s Daddy.”

“5, 6, 7, 8…”

“Let’s change that diaper, young man,” he said and reached into the crib.
“9, 10, 11, 12…” He continued to count as John picked him up. “…13, 14, 15, 1, 2, 3…”

“How about 16?” John said as he undid the diaper. Sean held onto his blanket with one hand as his other hand reached for his penis. He tugged at himself, “…2, 3, 4, 5…”

“Stop that, Sean,” John said. “Let’s get your diaper on you.” The boy continued to tug at himself and count. John hurriedly pushed his hand aside and slipped the diaper under him and velcroed the tabs. He stood him up to zip up his pajamas. They were face to face.

“How’s my little boy?” John asked. Sean briefly glanced at him and resumed counting, “…6, 7, 8, 9…”

Now John was the one who wanted to cry. Instead he began to count with him, “…10, 11, 12, 13…” Sean let John hold him and his blanket as the two of them counted to 15 and then began over. John would have done it all day if he could. They counted in rhythm as if a metronome were assisting them. “…1, 2, 3, 4…” John smelled the babyness of him, the shampoo and lotion that lingered on him from last night’s bath. His hair was silky, his skin was soft. “…5, 6, 7, 8…” He embraced him fully, wrapping his big arms around his small son. “…9, 10, 11, 12…” He could do this maybe 10 or 15 more times. He was unsure how much time had passed and he didn’t want to think about it. He just wanted to savor the moment. Yes, he could probably count a few more times before he had to get into
the shower, make some coffee. But he didn’t want to let this go. He had waited years for the moment and it had arrived. He was sure Sean could count to 15 all day if he let him.

“What are you doing?” Bill said as he skidded in his socks to the door of Sean’s room. “You’re being weird.” He looked at the two of them and John saw what he saw: the two of them rocking with a blanket, counting to 15.

“We’re just cuddling,” John said.

“Still weird, if you ask me,” Bill responded. “C’mon Sean, let’s get breakfast.” Sean dropped it all in an instant and followed his brother out the door. John was left holding a damp corner of the blanket in one hand and a dirty diaper in his other. He shoved it into the diaper Genie, turned the lid, then tossed the blanket into the crib. He picked up Carolyn’s shoes and walked them back to the bedroom.

“Carolyn, the boys are awake,” he gently rocked her shoulder. He could hear Bill’s shouts from the kitchen.

She bolted upright, unsure of where she was in time and space. She looked at John, reconstituting his face, piecing her life together.

“Right, OK,” she said sleepily.

“I have to get ready for work,” he told her.

“Sure, go ahead,” she said. She sat on the edge of the bed, summoning some strength to pull herself up.
In the kitchen, Bill threw open drawers almost to the point of crashing them to the floor. He slammed the cupboards and the cereal bowls clanged on the table.

“I’m fixing breakfast, Mom,” he said proudly. Sean sat at the table and watched his tornado of a brother as Bill poured three different kinds of cereal into Sean’s bowl.

“Let me put him in the high chair, Bill,” she said.

“Mom, he’s a big boy now. Dad put the high chair away.”

The high chair was gone.

“Where did he put it?”

“Downstairs.”

Carolyn sat next to Sean at the table. He stared at his cereal bowl as Bill shakily poured milk from the carton to near-overflowing.

“Bill, here, let me do that.”

“I got it, Mom!” A small splash of milk landed on her bathrobe.

“Oh, sorry,” He pulled four paper towels from the roll to wipe up his mess.

Carolyn’s attention drifted away to the removed high chair. These were the kind of issues before they had children that had landed them in couple’s therapy. John would do things without consulting her. In hindsight, they were
minor things but they had built upon each other over those first few years until she found herself sitting in the winter dark of their living room, waiting for him to come home from work so she could tell him she was leaving. She had already packed one suitcase. The only challenge was trying to figure out why she was leaving. It wasn’t just that he had painted the bathroom blue without consulting her. It wasn’t just that he persistently left his socks on the floor near the couch even though she had asked him not to multiple times. It wasn’t simply that she hadn’t figured out a way to connect with his family, his odd family. It would have been simpler for her to leave if there was another woman or if their sex life was in bad shape. But it was a litany of minor grievances that seemed to be all she could focus on. Each time she picked up a sock from the floor, shook it out from its dirty balled-up shape, she heard herself sigh. Each time she flicked the switch in the bathroom and saw the harsh blue of the walls, she got another jab of defeat. And now she sat, legs and arms crossed on the sofa. Her foot unconsciously pulsed up and down, absorbing some of the stress from her stomach. The headlights of the car flashed into the front window as he pulled into the driveway.

John flicked on the foyer light as he entered, “Carolyn? Are you home?” She didn’t respond. Her stomach dug into itself, pushing some bile up into her throat.

“Carolyn?” He walked into the living room. “Why are you sitting in the dark?”
If it were a usual spat she would have responded that she had asked him to switch out the 100 watt bulbs for 60 because the 100s were too bright. There was no going back to a usual spat once he spotted her sitting on the couch, staring out the front window. She had brought things to a higher level and the cold of winter he thought he had brought in from outside was already sitting there, invading every corner of their living room.

“What’s going on?” He didn’t sit, he just stood in his coat.

“I’m leaving,” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m leaving you,” she said, now looking down at herself. There were no visible tears but she cracked inside. A pit opened in her that she hadn’t expected. She was afraid she could not contain whatever might escape from her.

“What? Why?” he dropped whatever was in his hands onto the coffee table, his keys landed with a loud clang. She met his eyes for a brief instant. He looked like he just found out his dog had died. He reached to turn on the lamp.

“Please don’t,” she said. “It’s too bright with those on.”

“Carolyn, I’m kind of freaked out right now,” he said. “I need to see you to make sure you are still my wife.”

“Maybe not for too much longer, John,” she said.

“What is going on?” He slowly rubbed his hands up and down his face.

“If there was one thing, just one thing, I would tell you. But it’s
everything. Everything feels like it’s not working,” she said, almost as much to herself as to him.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked.

“I don’t know, John,” she said. “I just don’t feel the same anymore.”

“Bur, we can make this work, Carolyn,” he said. “What do you need from me?”

He sounded desperate and scared. She didn’t need anything from him that she hadn’t already asked for. She didn’t know what she needed.

“I just don’t know,” she repeated. “I’m going to go. I need to clear my head.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’ll go to my parents’ or something. I just need to get away from here.”

She felt light as she got up from the couch as if half of her self was left behind on the indented cushion.

The removed high chair had opened up the kitchen, providing space for Bill to skid back and forth in his socks as the energy from his breakfast seeped into his small frame.

“Watch this, Mom.” He slid across the floor, stopping himself by flinging both arms into the doorframe. “Mom, watch I’m going to come back.” He slid into the garbage can with a thud.
“Stop it, Bill,” she said when she heard him hit the garbage can. She was watching Sean as he slowly brought the spoon of soggy cereals to his mouth. She wiped away milk dribbles with the wad of paper towels.

“It’s fun!” He continued to slide back and forth until he crashed into John as he came into the kitchen.

“Whoa, pretty fast there, Bill,” he said as he tousled his hair before he slid away. He turned his attention to Sean and Carolyn at the table. “Look at that big boy sitting at the table,” he said to Sean. Sean continued slipping cereal into his mouth as Carolyn cleaned him up with each dribble.

“John, we should have talked about the high chair,” she said, turning away from Sean. “You know we should have talked about it.”

“Is it that big of a deal?” he asked. “Can we talk about it later? I really have to go.”

“I guess we can but it was a big step for Sean. Look, he’s having a hard time at the table.” She hadn’t wiped away the milk dribble and a small pond was forming.

“Later? Please?” he said.

“Fine,” she said. He kissed her on the top of her head and stroked Sean’s cheek.

“I’ll see all of you later,” he said as he sidestepped Bill and left for work.
In his car, John wondered why Carolyn was so thrown off by him putting away the high chair. The boy was three years old already. John had been struck by how much he had grown up when he was in the kitchen with the boys. Sean had actually removed the tray, climbed in, and secured himself with the safety strap. John could barely budge that tray when he tried.

“Good boy, Sean,” he said.

“He does that all the time,” Bill said as he pulled out every box of cereal he could find.

“Well, maybe you should sit at the table, big boy,” John said to Sean. He put the high chair tray aside. Sean looked down where John’s hands fiddled with the buckles. He pushed his father’s hands away and unsnapped them himself and climbed down. He walked towards the living room, expecting to watch his one episode of Thomas the Tank Engine that he always watched after breakfast.

“Sean, you need to eat first,” John called. He had the high chair on its side as he tried to fold it up.

“Do you need help, Dad?” Bill asked.

“No, I’ll figure it out but why don’t you get your brother?” he replied.

“Sean, no Thomas now. I’ll make you cereal,” Bill said. He gently steered his brother back into the kitchen. “You sit here,” he said and put Sean’s Thomas the Tank Engine bowl and spoon on the table. “This is for you, Sean, see?” Sean
looked confused and sad.

“It’s ok, Sean, you can eat at the table now,” John tried to echo Bill’s tone of voice. The high chair folded onto itself with a loud thud. “I’ll be right back, boys,” he said as he gathered the baby furniture and took it to the basement. When he came back to the kitchen, Bill was sliding back and forth in his socks while Sean stared at the empty space left by his high chair.

“I’m big, too, Dad,” Bill slammed into him.

“Well, if you’re so big, why don’t you fix breakfast for you and Sean? I have to get ready for work. I think Mom fell back asleep.”

“Awesome!” Bill slid into the refrigerator. “Go go go, Dad, I got this.”

He had left the kitchen feeling that he was doing just what a father should do—encourage his boys to be independent, praise them for their accomplishments, and have some fun while doing it. Sure, Sean seemed a little confused by it, but once his cereal was in front of him, he was fine. It was Carolyn who seemed more thrown off. He knew they would have to talk about it later but he wasn’t sure what needed to be discussed. He couldn’t even prepare the conversation in his mind as he so often did during his commute. When “Go EZ Pass” flashed at the toll booth, he flipped on the radio and forgot about it as Meatloaf’s “Two Out of Three Ain’t Bad” filled the car.
Chapter Six – The Playdate

Had Carolyn actually agreed to a playdate with Wanda Wallace? She tried to come up with an excuse to get out of it. She felt raw from last night’s tears, exhausted from a sleep that felt solid only because of its emotional toll. In the cheerful sunshine of the day, it didn’t feel like it counted at all. Her eyes were puffy; her face was blotchy. When she looked at herself in the mirror while she brushed her teeth she needed to stare a bit longer than usual to see any trace of someone she recognized. Maybe she just needed a new hairstyle. Makeup would do in the meantime and she spent a few extra minutes to carefully apply her eye makeup, something she usually limited to two swipes of a mascara wand. One final look. Better, she thought, but not great.

She dressed Sean in a polo shirt and khakis while he silently paged through his train book. This book was his favorite and its pages were worn from his small hands which had turned the pages at least three times daily since he received it last Christmas. If nothing else, Sean would look cute on the playdate. She heard Bill rattling around in his room as he dressed himself.

“Mom, it’s J day, look!” Bill said as he held up a juice box. “And on my shirt!” He pointed to a Jedi on his Star Wars t-shirt.

“OK, that’s great, Bill,” she said, knowing her five-year-old would not note her false praise. “Let’s get going. Sean, you can bring your book,” she said.

She poured the last of the coffee into a travel mug. It was 9:00 am, only 11
hours until they would be asleep, she thought. Bill spun around the kitchen to make himself dizzy, his lunchbox flying out from his arm while his backpack propelled him that much faster.

“This is awesome!” he said right before he collapsed in a breathless heap.

“C’mon, boys,” she said as she held the door open. Bill stumbled out. She juggled her coffee mug and purse as she lured Sean with his train book.

As Carolyn pulled up in front of the preschool, Wanda Wallace was waving and encouraging her daughter Isabelle to do the same. Bill patted little Isabelle on the head as he bounced towards the front door. The girl turned to follow him but Wanda stopped her. “No, Izzy, We’re going to play with Sean today.” Carolyn knew there was no way to back out.

“Hey, Wanda,” she said as she walked towards her. “Let me just get Bill settled inside.”

“I’ll watch Sean if you want,” she offered.

“No, that’s ok,” Carolyn replied. Really? she thought, leave Sean standing outside alone with two people he barely knows?

“Fine, we’ll just continue as the welcoming committee here,” she laughed.

“I brought a juicebox for J day,” Bill was boasting to the other kids. “And look, Jedi!!” He made crashing sounds as he maneuvered an imaginary lightsaber.

“I brought Jane,” said Thomas, Jane’s husband. Bill paused for a moment, then laughed.
Sean had migrated to the toy garage on the rug and picked up the first red car he saw. He began rolling it around the periphery of the play mat, ignoring the clearly designated roads.

“Carolyn, I’ve been meaning to talk to you,” Jane said as she stood up from the table where four children were playing with wooden abacuses. “We haven’t received Sean’s application for next year. We need to start firming up our numbers. I’ve counted him but need you to fill one out.”

“Jane, Wanda and Isabelle are waiting upstairs for me. Can we talk later?”

“Pickup is always a tough time to talk,” she said. “Let me just give you one now.” She pulled a green sheet of paper from the top of the cubbies. “Pretty standard stuff.”

Her eyes grazed the form, past the standard parent’s name and address to the open space that followed “Other Information.” She had no idea what she had written for Bill but the space didn’t seem long enough for all they would need to know about Sean.

“Thanks,” she said as she tucked it into her purse. Sean continued to roll the car around the rug, Bill was now engaged in building the world’s highest tower of blocks with two other boys. She couldn’t imagine her quiet Sean in this milieu of activity but Bill had started when he was 3.

“OK, Sean, time to go.” She caught Jane’s eye one more time to be sure it was okay that Sean took the car. She smiled and nodded. “Bye, Sean,” Jane
called.

“Here they are!” she heard Wanda exaggerating to Isabelle. “Say Hello! Sean! Hello! Carolyn!”

“Hello! Hello!” the girl seemed to sparkle as she said it.


Wanda looked as proud as could be with Isabelle’s successful greeting and held her smile as she looked at Sean, awaiting the same.

“Sean,” Carolyn said gently, “Sean, say hi.” She knew he wouldn’t but she also knew she at least had to make an attempt for Wanda’s benefit. “He seems more into his car right now.” Sean spun the wheels of the red car with his small fingers.

“Hello! Hello!” Isabelle leaned in close to Sean. “Hello! Hello!”

“Give him some space, OK?” Carolyn gently touched her shoulder.

“Is he going to say hello to me?” she asked. “Mommy, it’s a playdate, he’s supposed to say hello.” She looked to her mother for confirmation on this playdate rule.

“It’s OK, Izzy,” she said. “He’s inspecting his car right now. Remember when Daddy took our car for inspection.” She attempted to change the conversation.

“But that’s a toy car,” Isabelle responded.
“Yes, but maybe Sean is the inspector. Just let him be, Izzy,” she safely navigated her daughter away from the demanded hello. “It’s a beautiful day, should we just take them to the park?” Wanda asked Carolyn.

“That will be fine,” Carolyn said. She didn’t want to be any place with Wanda and Isabelle but maybe in the park Isabelle would find other children to play with and leave Sean alone. Better than in their home where Sean would be expected to play dress-ups or have a tea party. In the park at least he could roam if he wanted and not be captive to the petite Emily Post of playdates.

“The one at the end of the street isn’t the best but it’s close, let’s go there,” Wanda suggested.

They strolled at their children’s pace, attempting to have a conversation but Isabelle constantly interjected with whatever thought crossed her mind. Carolyn had taught her children as she had been taught—you don’t interrupt when grownups are talking. Young Isabelle had missed that deportment lesson. If she wasn’t prompted by a crocus or dandelion on someone’s lawn, she talked about what her sister had worn to school that day or what her sister had brought for J day. Sean pulled slightly away from Carolyn, perhaps he wanted to get away, too.

“Can I go on the swings?” she asked when the playground was in view.

“OK, swings first,” Wanda replied. Carolyn realized why she avoided these playdates. Isabelle, the three and a half year old, nearly always dictated where they went, what they had for lunch, and how everyone should be behaving
at any given moment. As Isabelle lead Wanda and Carolyn to a bench in the sun, she said “You two sit here.” Then, “Watch this for me, Mommy,” as she handed her small pink purse to Wanda. “C’mon, Sean, we’re going on the swings,” she now reached her hand for Sean’s. “Leave the car with your mom, you don’t need it on the swings,” She reached for the car in Sean’s hand and tried to pry it from his fingers.

“He can keep the car,” Carolyn interjected.

“You can’t have toys on the swings,” another Isabelle rule that wasn’t posted.

“It’s okay, he can keep it with him,” Carolyn said. Carolyn had little patience for the girl. “Leave him alone.”

Now Wanda joined in, “Why don’t you go ahead, Izzy. Sean can stay with us.”

“But it’s a playdate. He’s supposed to be playing with me,” she pleaded.

Sean was unaware of the fuss for his attention and started to roll the car back and forth on the bench. Carolyn couldn’t wait until Isabelle left for the swings.

“This playdate is different, honey,” Wanda told her. “Go on the swings.”

Isabelle crossed her arms, pushed out her bottom lip, and a darkness came into her sunlit eyes. “I don’t want it to be different,” she said.

“Well,” Wanda responded, not taking the threatened tantrum seriously,
“That’s your choice. I’m going to talk to Sean’s mommy now. You can go on the swings or play with Sean here. Those are your two choices.”

Wanda turned away from her angry daughter towards Carolyn. She leaned in and whispered, “It’ll pass, just act like nothing happened.”

“So, Carolyn, is Sean excited for school in the fall?” Wanda not-so-smoothly changed the subject. She said it just loud enough for Sean to hear but he was absorbed with his car.

“I guess,” she responded half-heartedly, glancing at her son.

“He is going, right?” Wanda asked. Though neither of the women looked, they could sense Isabelle’s anger was dissipating.

“Why do you ask?”

“I just didn’t know if he was going to go somewhere else,” she said. “Can Jane provide services for him there?”

“What do you mean by ‘services’?”

“I’ve seen other kids there with one-on-one teachers so I’m sure it will be okay.”

“Wanda, he doesn’t need one-on-one services,” she said. They looked at Sean whose attention was diverted by a boy with a punch-balloon. The sand inside shimmied as the boy punched it back and forth; it sounded louder than any of the squeals going on around them.

“Balloon,” Sean said.
“Yes, balloon,” Carolyn responded, trying to make it sound like they were having a conversation. “Sean likes balloons, right?”

“Balloon,” Sean said again.

“Not today, Sean,” Carolyn said. “That’s a noisy balloon. You don’t want a noisy balloon.” She turned to Wanda, “He loves balloons. Balloons and trucks, right, Sean?”

Wanda glanced at Isabelle who was now swinging. She wasn’t big enough to pump herself too high but seemed to be commandeering an older child to push her.

“Carolyn, I’m sorry,” Wanda said. Her face was red from embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to suggest….”

“Wanda, really,” she responded. “Let’s just let this go, okay?” The pounding punch ball continued behind their heads.

“It’s hard for me to let it go,” she said. “Especially when I look at your lovely boy. He’s so sweet but he’s so quiet, just kind of in his own world.”

“Wanda, I wish you wouldn’t…”

She continued, ”Can I tell you something? Before I had my kids, I worked at a special needs school. I wasn’t a teacher or anything, I just handled administrative stuff. I loved it there. Everyone was so dedicated to those kids. They were just good people, you know? I got to know the families, too. We were like one big family, really. I think you and me are close too, with our older kids in
preschool and our younger ones the same ages. I just honestly thought this was something you were dealing with.”

“Dealing with? Sean is not a ‘something’ either,” she said, confusion filled her mind. She hadn’t even wanted to be here with this woman in the first place. “Maybe we should go, now.”

“No, Carolyn, please don’t,” she said. “You’re taking this all the wrong way. I shouldn’t have assumed that. I’m sorry.”

“Wanda, you don’t know what sorry is,” she said, her anger was only mitigated by her desire to contain herself around other people. Thank God they were in a public space. The punch balloon now bounded over their heads, closely followed by a straggling group of children competing to reach it first. Carolyn stood up to leave.

“Noooozz!” she heard Isabelle shriek as she ran towards them. She threw her body around Carolyn’s. “You can’t leave. The playdate’s not over!”

“Izzy,” Wanda cooed, ”Izzy, honey, let go.”

“No!”

Carolyn glared at Wanda as she tried to pull the child off herself. Isabelle let go, only to wrap herself around Sean who instinctually tucked the car under his polo shirt.

“Sean is on a playdate. He can’t leave,” Isabelle’s anger was rising to meet Carolyn’s. They locked eyes.
“Wanda, please get her off Sean,” Carolyn struggled to keep her voice calm.

“Okay, everybody needs to calm down,” she replied.

“Wanda, I am calm,” Carolyn said through clenched teeth, “But I don’t know how long it will last.” The punch balloon was now headed back in their direction with the hoard of children following it. Carolyn’s head was throbbing. Isabelle maintained her grip on Sean.

“Who wants ice cream?” Wanda burst out. Isabelle immediately released Sean.

“I do! I do!”

“Can I at least buy him an ice cream?”

“No, it’s 10 a.m. We don’t eat ice cream in the morning,” Carolyn replied. “Bring your car, Sean.” She picked him up, adjusted him on her hip, and walked away from them. She heard their conversation fading, “But you said I could have ice cream, I want ice cream.”

Special needs? She should look at her own kid, she thought. Sean leaned his head on Carolyn’s shoulder and fiddled with her ear lobe. She kissed his silky hair as tears welled in her eyes.

“You’re a perfect little boy,” she murmured to him. “Mommy’s perfect little boy.”
John arrived at the office plaza at the same time as Jenny. He pulled in next to her beat-up Toyota, noting her peeling “Hey Rube Get a Tube” bumper sticker.

“Hey, John,” she greeted him. Had he never seen her outside the fluorescent lights of the office? In the broad sunlight she seemed as if she had just come from the beach. Her hair was still damp from her morning shower. Her smile seemed brighter than usual. He couldn’t see her eyes behind her mirror sunglasses but he caught a glimpse of himself in them before she moved them to the top of her head. He looked goofy, a little too happy to see her.

“Good morning, Jenny,” he said. “Any plans for the weekend?”

“Did you see all the gear in the back of my car? My boyfriend and I are going to a friend’s wedding in Virginia,” she replied.

“Sounds fun,” he said as he held the door open for her.

“It’ll be awesome,” she said. How old was she? 26? 28? She seemed so young to him. “Hey, John, would it be okay if I ducked out a bit early? It’s a long drive and we want to beat the traffic. I’ll work through lunch to make sure everything gets done.”

“No worries, Jenny,” he said. “But you owe me one!”

She smiled, like she had been practicing a smile for a wedding photographer. “Thanks,” she said as she settled into her cubicle.

Her need to leave early increased the productivity for both of them as she
was super-efficient all day. He ordered in lunch so they both worked straight through. They were in sync. At 4:00, her work was just about complete for the day.

“If it’s OK, I’m going to head out now,” she said at his office door. She had changed into jeans and a t-shirt. Her hair was pulled into a ponytail.

“Before you leave, can you show me where the files are on your computer, just in case I need something?”

“Sure,” she said. He followed her to her tidy desk. She knelt below her office chair to reach the computer tower under the desk. Her orange thong crept just enough above her jeans. She turned too soon and caught his eye, maybe even some expression on his face that he hadn’t realized he was making. He was instantly flustered.

“You know what, just go, I’ll figure it out,” he wanted her to leave as quickly as possible. “You don’t need to wait for it to boot up.”

“Are you sure?” she pulled her jeans up a bit as she stood up.

“Yeah, go, have a great time.”

“Oh, wait, I need those shoes,” she bent once more under the desk to retrieve a pair of heels. It’s your freaking assistant, he reprimanded himself. He was able to get a second glance in before she emerged.

“There, now I’m ready,” she was flushed from fishing around under her desk. “Woops, got up too soon, I’m seeing stars.” She closed her eyes and took a
deep breath in. Then another. Please, just leave, he thought.

“Okay, see you on Monday,” she said. He watched her walk away, swinging her heels in her hand. From his office window, he watched her climb into her Toyota and drive out of the parking lot.

John tried to work on the slides she had put together but his focus was gone for the day. It didn’t help that the slides all had hints of orange on them to subliminally encourage the thoughts of the orange juice they were trying to sell. The only orange color he could see was the thong peeking above her jeans. The harder he tried to concentrate, the more difficult it became. They had accomplished a lot that day so he decided to leave early, too. He could surprise Carolyn and the boys. He shut down his computer and then went to Jenny’s desk to shut down hers. He found a scrawled note that said “Carolyn 10:15.” In her haste to get out early, she hadn’t given him the message. And of all days not to give him a message from Carolyn. He was reminded of the high chair he had moved and how he knew they would have to talk about it. He was thrown back to considering what he had done wrong by putting it away. His giddiness from his day with Jenny seeped out of him. He could clearly focus now and he knew he would have to clearly focus on Carolyn.

With the abrupt end of the playdate, Carolyn had an hour to kill before picking up Bill. She hit her speed dial for John’s office.
“This is Jenny, how may I help you?” his ever-enthusiastic assistant answered.

“It’s Caroline. Is John available?” she tried to keep her voice from waver ing but she heard herself sounding a bit high-pitched, almost hysterical.

“Oh, sorry. He’s on another call. I’ll have him call you right back,” she replied.

“Thanks,” she said and quickly hung up.

She stared at her phone, willing it to light up with John’s number. She sat in the car with Sean and let his Train Songs for Children CD play over and over. She stared out the windshield, listening to “Down at the Station.” Wanda Wallace thought Sean was “special.” But really, Carolyn thought, what about her Isabelle? Demanding, physically aggressive. Carolyn didn’t even want Sean in school with her. Maybe she could hold him out for another year. He wasn’t even able to defend himself against Isabelle. He didn’t have an aggressive bone in his body and she feared that preschool would completely overwhelm him. The kids were rough sometimes. Bill had had his fair share of rough and tumble there. At the same time, Jane and Thomas seemed to have it all under control. She knew they wouldn’t tolerate Isabelle’s bossiness. It was all about the children learning to be together. Maybe Sean’s calmness could be a good thing for the other kids. They could learn from him. It would be easier if Bill was there with him, somebody familiar, but he was off to kindergarten in the fall. She pulled the application from
her purse. It was pretty basic: Date applying, year applying for, number of days per week. She was sure she had filled out some “social history” at some point for Bill but maybe that came later with the questions about potty training and favorite activities. This was simply name and address information. Under “Other Information” she wrote “likes red cars!” as she knew Jane would get the inside joke. Her phone remained silent.

“Are you ready for school, Sean?” she turned to face him in the back seat. He had fallen asleep, clutching his train in one hand and his train book in the other. His knees now hinged over the side of the car seat, no longer chubby stubs that pushed at the back of the driver’s seat. His mouth hung open, glistening with saliva. His baby face was gone having been replaced by a longer, narrower, more mature one. He looked older in his polo shirt as his slender arms extended gracefully from the sleeves. Just going by physical appearance, he was certainly ready for school. She just worried about how fragile and precious she knew he was on the inside.

Wanda and Isabelle strolled towards the school. Isabelle was eating an ice cream sandwich. Wanda was chatting away as the child intently licked the sides of the sandwich. Carolyn waited in the car until Wanda and Isabelle walked past and soon emerged from the school with Isabelle’s older sister. Irritated by the fourth round of “Dina won’t you blow, Dinah won’t you blow…”, she flipped off the train songs. She gently undid the straps to Sean’s car seat. She slipped her two
hands under his armpits but couldn’t lift the dead weight of the sleeping child.

“I can wait with him if you want,” Wanda called from the sidewalk, with a conciliatory tone in her voice.

“No, I’ll get him,” she said. But she couldn’t lift him. She was reaching into the back seat at a bad angle and he was just too heavy for her.

“Oh, let him sleep. He must be tired from the playground.”

Their kids would be in school together. She had to make this work somehow.

“Thanks, Wanda,” Carolyn said. “I’ll be right back.” And so, they resumed their odd relationship.

Inside, she handed Jane the application. She glanced around the school room, seeing it through Sean’s eyes. There were tons of Brio trains which she hadn’t noticed before. He would love the toy garage and its cars and trucks. There was the kitchen and the dress-ups, which he would have no interest in. There was the tee-pee and a tiny plastic slide. There was a rocking horse. An easel which started each day with a clean white sheet of paper and ended with a saturated, dripping hand-painting usually in some shade of brown. There wasn’t much that would be of interest to Sean but there was enough. Trains, cars, and trucks. And the number chart that marched around the walls, of course.
Chapter Seven - Normal

As she drove the boys home, Carolyn felt light, like a balloon drifting untethered into the sky. She was raw from the lack of sleep the night before and the emotional upheaval of the playdate but she had smoothed it all somehow. She put in Sean’s application for school. She could see him there. Not in the same way that Bill inhabited the space but he would carve out his own niche. He still had a few months before he would be there, too. Time for potty training and learning to ‘use your words.’ He had made one big step this morning. No more high chair. John had made the right choice. She still wished he had discussed it with her but there was no harm done. Hadn’t they been taught to choose their battles when they were in therapy? Don’t sweat the small stuff. Was this really such a big deal? Now they could all eat at the table, a family sitting down together for a meal.

She hadn’t even been listening to Bill’s listing of the day’s “J” items. “Jacks, jack-in-the-box, jewelry…um…..” She had refined the skill of nodding and saying ‘uh huh” at the appropriate times with John. It was even easier to do with a five-year-old. She had barely switched the car off in the driveway before Bill was bolting to the front door, holding his penis.

“Hurry up, Mom! Or I’ll go in the bushes!”

“No, wait,” she unlocked the door as quickly as she could and he was gone in a flash.
Sean was still sleeping in the car. She stroked his cheek. “Wakey wakey lovely,” she cooed. His eyes slowly opened and focused and his entire body awoke with a shiver. His train and book fell from his hands.

“I’ll get it,” she said, then reached to the car floor. Simultaneously, he kicked his not-a-baby leg so his knee landed hard on her face. She instantly felt the throbbing.

By the time John arrived home, she had a goose egg right near her cheekbone.

“Rough day with the boys?” he joked.

“Not funny,” she said. “If you had called me back I would have given you all the gory details.”

“Sorry about that. Jenny didn’t give me the message. I found it at the end of the day, when I was leaving. But, I’m home early if that counts for anything.”

She reached for a new ice pack in the freezer. Bill slid into the kitchen, intending to use the refrigerator to stop himself but crashed into Carolyn instead.

“Bill, out!” she commanded.

“Sorry!”

“Where’s Sean?” John asked.

“Watching television. He’s been a little off today.”

“How so?”
“We had a terrible playdate with Isabelle. Nothing that Sean did but that little girl is wretched and her mother’s no prize either.”

“I thought you liked Wanda.”

“I try,” she replied. “Anyway, it ended early so he had a long nap in the car.”

“Carolyn, I’m sorry about this morning, y’know, with the high chair and everything” John said. It was that easy to make it all right.

“So much has happened since then, John. The high chair is the least of it.” She held the ice steady to her face so he could only see one of her eyes.

“Wanda wanted to know if he was going to a special needs school.” She waited for his reaction. The ice numbed her face.

“What? Special needs?”

“She said she used to work in one. Not that she was a specialist or anything but that supposedly gave her more insight.”

“What did you say?” he asked.

“I just left. What do you say to something like that? Then I put in Sean’s application for preschool next year.” She moved the ice from her cheek so John could see all of the triumph in her face.

John smiled. Maybe the high chair was the right move to get her to see how much he was growing up. Maybe he needed to push it occasionally. He went in to hug her but she pushed him away.
“My face hurts,” she said.

“Right, sorry.”

They enjoyed a meal of buttered pasta and broccoli. John set the table with 4 place settings. One was Star Wars, one was Thomas the Tank Engine. It felt right and it felt normal. The bath and bed time routines still needed some tweaking but they were content in these first few small steps. John and Carolyn were moving in the same direction at the same pace. Life was as it should be and together they had gotten it to that point.

“Carolyn, remember we’re going to my parents’ this weekend,” John said as they were changing for bed.

“No comment,” she replied.

“C’mon, don’t be like that. They love seeing you and the boys,” he said.

“I know,” she said. “But I don’t feel comfortable there.”

“It’s my dad’s birthday,” he replied

“I always go, right? But I don’t have to be happy about it,” she said. This was not a new conversation.

“What should we get him?” John asked.

“Scratch offs?” she said with a chuckle. “I think I need more ice on this bump.”

“I’ll get it,” John said. “Remember, it’s just one afternoon.”
Carolyn’s bruise was a marbled greenish yellow by Saturday. She was glad she could cover it with makeup because it was a stupid story that she didn’t want to tell. She had spent the last few days in her usual pathways of school, supermarket, and Target occasionally aware of people taking a second look at her. She would forget she had the bruise until she saw an older woman’s scowl or a young man’s lingering stare. She felt like she was walking in another woman’s shoes as the onlookers’ silent opinions defined her as an abused woman. Fortunately, Sean was with her on these errands so she could focus her energy on him. She maintained a light chatter with him as she chose a birthday card (Happy Birthday, Grandpa! You’re a winner!). She found a baseball cap that said “World’s Greatest Grandpa” and was satisfied with the gift. She had learned not to overthink his birthday present.

John and Carolyn had been dating for about six months. She had met his parents just once when they were out for dinner before being invited to his father’s birthday. She had never been to the house. She knew other family would be there, she had probably bought a new outfit for the occasion. She hardly knew him but wanted to make a good impression. When she asked John what to get him he told her she didn’t need to bring anything, just having her there would be enough.

“But it’s his birthday!” she said. “Just give me a hint. Does he drink?”
“Only an occasional scotch but we have bottles lining the pantry.”

“OK, what else?”

“He likes the lottery,” John had replied. “But you really don’t need to get him anything.”

She knew she couldn’t show up empty-handed. So, she bought him $20 worth of scratch-off Happy Birthday lottery tickets. She found the most generic card she could that was just the right mix of manly and mediocre. The lottery tickets folded onto themselves along the perforations and easily fit into a card. Not a big gift, not a little gift, but a gift all the same. She was feeling lucky and bought herself a “Queen of Hearts” scratch-off, too. She used a key to scratch-off her card. If she matched four hearts, she would win $1,000. One heart, two hearts, three hearts….and a spade. She won nothing but hoped that John’s father would have better luck with his.

When she arrived at John’s parents’ home, the street was full of cars. There were two balloons bouncing on the mailbox. She had driven through an upscale neighborhood on the way to the house but theirs was a simple split-level on a cul-de-sac of six other split-levels. Nothing fancy but nice. She imagined John as a little boy running across the lawn, chased by a puppy. And then there he was, opening the door to greet her.

“C’mon in!” he called. As she neared, he lowered his voice. “You look great, Carolyn. And I am so glad you’re here. The family is just warming up.”
Inside she was greeted with a flurry of “So you’re the special lady” and “Oh aren’t you pretty.” John had mentioned that his mother had 5 siblings and there they all were, with various spouses and children, looking at her, commenting on her, taking her all in. She felt like she had walked into a surprise party for herself such was their anticipation for her arrival.

“OK, everyone take a step back and let her through,” John silenced them and cleared a path to the kitchen for her. “Now, what would you like to drink?”

“Just a light beer,” she said quietly.

“Don’t worry, they’ll calm down. They were just so excited to meet you,” he told her.

“There she is,” his mother said as she came into the kitchen. “Did you meet everyone?”

“I think,” she said with a smile. “You have a big family.”

“Don’t expect to know everyone’s name by the time you leave,” she said.

“You’ll see them again, I’m sure.”

Carolyn accepted the vote of confidence from her. John’s father was sitting on the back deck, alone. She felt like she had detracted from his birthday just by showing up.

“I’m going to wish your dad a ‘happy birthday,’ John,” she said.

“I’ll come outside with you,” he said as she popped the cap off a beer.
“Happy Birthday, Mr. Dougherty,” she said cheerfully as she handed him the card.

“Oh, thank you,” he said as he briefly rose to meet her.

“Go ahead, open it,” she said. She wanted to get the gift-giving out of the way.

“Does anyone need anything?” John’s mother poked her head out of the back door. The mob of her family crowded onto the deck, seemingly following Carolyn. “Oh, forget it, get whatever you want,” his mother said.

Mr. Dougherty held the card in his hand as they circled around him, encouraging him to open it.

He slipped his finger under the flap of the envelope and withdrew the card. He briefly read the cover and as he opened the card the scratch-offs fell to his lap. Everyone looked, quiet in their shock but eagerly anticipating his reaction. Mr. Dougherty slipped the lottery tickets back into the card without saying a word and took it inside. Carolyn could see him through the back door talking with John’s mother. Now the rest of the family started to console each other and her. “She didn’t know” and “He does like it, don’t take it the wrong way.” She looked to John for some explanation, something to make sense of this reaction. He was taking a long drink from his beer and she did the same.
“I need to show you something,” he said as he took her arm. Again, the relatives parted, small children were pulled to their parents’ legs to make room for Carolyn and John.

He quickly walked her past his father until they were alone near the bathroom. “What did I do wrong, John?” she asked. “I am so confused right now.”

“Nothing, Carolyn, you did nothing wrong,” he said. “I should’ve warned you but I didn’t know how.”

“Warned me about what? What’s wrong with scratch-offs?” she asked.

“Nothing. Maybe I should just show you,” He hesitated for a second, then opened the door to the basement, pulling the string to light the bare bulb over the wooden stairs. She smelled the dampness of the basement waft up.

“Where are we going? There’s a party going on,” she said. She didn’t want to make any more mistakes as the new girl.

“It’s okay,” he assured her as they crept down the stairs. “Just don’t touch anything.”

He pulled another light cord and, with another click, a bare bulb revealed the full basement. It was refinished with paneling and olive carpet. A metal desk commanded the dank space. On the desktop there was a large pad of paper and a cup full of pens. Was this his dad’s home office or something? Carolyn wondered. More like a bunker down here, she mused. She felt John release her hand as she
slowly drifted towards the desk. The giant pad of paper wasn’t empty, there was a
grid carefully drawn on it. The grid was half full of numbers and dates. It made no
logical sense to her.

“What is this?” she asked quietly. As she looked up towards John she
noticed that completed grids were tacked up on the paneling. They rimmed the
entire basement, breaking only where a pipe or beam interrupted the flow. “I
don’t understand.”

“We call it ‘the matrix.’ Sort of as a joke. My father tracks the lottery
numbers every day.”

“Does he do it so he can win? Is she trying to break the code or
something? Does he actually win?” she asked.

“Sometimes but I don’t think he wins any more than anyone else. He only
plays on the first Friday of the month. He does come pretty close,” he replied. He
walked over to the flat files that Carolyn hadn’t noticed were lining the perimeter
of the basement. “Look.” John opened one drawer after the other to reveal
completed grids of lottery numbers. “These go back to the 70s. I’ve never shown
anyone before.”

She felt a rush of tenderness towards him at that moment that overcame
her bewilderment about the matrix. She had never seen anything like this.

“So, maybe you can understand a little bit why scratch-offs don’t fit into
his lottery vision?” he asked, a small smile coming across his face.
“Well, there are no numbers and they are totally random. So, yeah, I get it but it’s embarrassing.”

“This room?” he asked.

“No,” she replied. “That I actually game him of all people scratch-off lottery tickets.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “He’s just odd sometimes and I don’t know how to explain it to people. You can’t actually believe it until you see it.”

She glanced around, taking in all of the numbers and the neatness of it all.

“This may seem like the strangest part of it all,” he continued. “This makes him happy. If he doesn’t take the time to fill in the numbers at the end of the day he is just impossible to deal with.”

“I can’t say that I get this on any level, John,” she said. “But I at least feel like I can ask you a very personal question…do you have a thing for numbers, too?”

“No,” he smiled. “But now that I’ve shared one of my family’s biggest secrets, you know I have a thing for you.” He pulled her into him and kissed her with a new intensity. One of his little cousin’s yelled from the top of the stairs, “Cake time!” and pulled the chain up and down, flashing the light on and off.

“Let’s go,” John said. He pulled the chain and the overhead light switched off. His cousin continued flashing the light at the top of the stairs and Carolyn glanced one more time at the number grids, quickly seeing them, then not. She
followed John upstairs and flashed a smile at his relatives as he wrestled and tickled his cousin to giddy tears. She felt like she knew them all by something more important than their names.

…to be continued
A Period

It is hot outside but I switch into dark capris. No beach today. No shorts, no swimsuits. Change of plans. Let’s ride over the bridge instead. Let’s ride as far as we can. I mount my bike and the adhesive of the maxi-pad grabs hold of one of my pubic hairs. I pedal the half mile along the highway to Michele Ann’s, oh sorry, I mean Shelle’s house. If I say Michelle Ann, she will punch me in the arm. But I have called her Michelle Ann for all of elementary school and now in 8th grade she wants to switch. And really, if I call her Michelle Ann, she punches me in the arm, hard. Everyone else calls her Lisa Ann but I will try to call her Shelle.

Maybe I won’t call her by her name, I’ll just launch into something about my maxipad, my period. We can have a laugh about the commercials that pour blue liquid rather than the reddish brown that we see. Why not green? Why not yellow? Ha ha. My mind cycles through the planned conversation. Do you really think that gymnast Cathy Rigby is wearing a maxipad in that commercial? Not a chance! Mostly I wonder if she will even talk to me or will she just be quiet. If I can get her to laugh, or even just smile, it could be a good day.

I skid into her driveway and walk halfway up the stairs but she is already slamming out the door, away from her mother. “Girl, don’t think you’re so
grown!" She runs past me and grabs her bike from the weeds on the side of the house. The dog barks from his pen. “Shut up, Butch!” she yells. She crookedly gains her balance, the handlebars turn back and forth. I run to my bike and hop back on. She wears her capris, too. We bought them together.

I follow her as she heads to the bridge, away from the one-mile square beach town. She pedals an even pace but I pant a bit to keep up. I finally come up next to her but she pedals faster. I fall behind. She is graceful and assured. If I had just run off from a fight with my mother, I would have tears streaming away from my eyes, but I know her eyes are dry. I know she has that determined and confident look that only black girls can earn.

I ride behind her, the maxipad pressing against me, now sticky and contouring to the bike seat. I want to stop her, tell her my corny jokes. “Feminine hygiene, what the hell is that?” I’ll crack. I want to chuckle with the hope that she will laugh long and hard, that these will be the jokes that pull her closer to me.

I probably won’t tell her that a car beeped at me as I rode to her house. I won’t tell her that my sister slammed the door in my face and yelled nigger lover from the other side. My eyes sting. The red light is blurry from my tears. Shelle blows the red light and a car stops short. I skid to a stop. She glances back and laughs.
I cross at the green light and her eyes meet mine. “Oh you’re not crying again are you?” She rolls her eyes and says, “C’mon, let’s go over the bridge.” If she asks, I’ll say it’s just because I have my period, that’s why I’m crying. If she asks.

Shelle doesn’t even stand to put the weight of her body into the pedals to ride up the bridge. I pedal, standing, pushing the bike side to side until I pass her. We are on our own adventure now, just us. I smile at her to let her know I’m OK. She passes me, gliding on her coaster brakes, her feet positioned symmetrically. Brakes on, slow on the gravel, watch for the sand patches, you won’t skid, I concentrate as I follow her lead.

“Watch the sand!” I call, thinking she might not notice it.

We hear a honk.

“NIGGER!”

Tossed out of the car like a beer can. I see the flash of the blue and gold bumper sticker. Their family supports the Lions' Booster Club.
The word is a direct hit. The steady coast of her downhill glide twists side to side and she falls into the pebbles at the curb. She lands with the bike in a sprawl on the side of the road. On her leg, the red blood oozes, small bright red drops.
At the Dumps with Games


His son, Fisher, threw the truck into gear with a victory of force that pressed Grant’s body into the seat. A clump of grass flew up from the lawn yet Grant didn’t launch into a parental lecture about lawn care or safe driving. He was actually a little charged to be driving away from the house in a truck laden with the debris of his life. His ex-wife and Ted waved from the porch, their hands coming out from either side of them as they held onto each other at their waists. He imagined her sighing to Ted, “I hope Grant can talk some sense into him.” He imagined Ted pressing her into him, gently rubbing her back, reassuring her, “Don’t worry. These things have a way of working themselves out.” She would lift her face to him and it would be filled with trust. Ted knew exactly what to say and when to say it. Grant thought he had this talent, too, but the trust had dropped off ages ago and his very same words, even with the appropriate strokes and mumbles, were meaningless to her.

Earlier that afternoon, with every crash and thud of furniture and discarded games into the back of the pickup truck, Grant felt the final destruction of the scrap of his relationship with his ex-wife. He now glanced at the hillbilly pile of mattresses and broken dining chairs in the back of the truck. The mattress still claimed the best posturepedic support on a satin label and he knew he must have
paid extra for this, hoping it would aid his chronic back pain. It hadn’t helped.
The dining chairs were bought when the boys were young and his ex-wife
planned elaborate Christmas dinners. The house would be filled to capacity with
in-laws, each bearing gifts for the boys until the presents were piled higher than
their heads. The scents of roasting meat and fresh pine tree mingled and filled the
house.

Her family was a gaming family. From the earliest days of their courtship
he remembered the dinner plates being cleared, the crumbs wiped away, and a
game coming out. Her younger siblings would stand to the side, watching the
grown-ups play, suggesting strategies that they would occasionally use. The
unique pieces of each game seemed fresh in the children’s young hands. They
lined up as many Scrabble tiles as they could in the pew-like holders, always
seeking out their own initials first. They tossed dice in the velvet-lined Yahtzee
cup then transferred the dice to a regular cup to see how loud or soft it could
sound. They took turns pressing the Pop-o-matic globe, getting faster with each
pop. Eventually, their own boys did the same when they were at their
grandparents’ house.

Each Christmas her siblings exchanged games, trying to find the next hot
game. Hours would be spent popping plastic pegs out of their manufactured,
secure bliss, sticking sticker A onto part A, sorting and counting money, and
figuring out where to place the deck. While one of them read the instructions out loud, the players would silently strategize.

“Roll the die to determine who goes first,” his ex-wife had read. That year, she was pregnant with Fisher, their oldest son. She had a command of the room as she stood in her pregnant pose, hand on hip with one foot thrust forward as she occasionally swayed. Everyone searched under their legs, between sofa cushions, and around the chairs until the die was found and placed in the center of the board, its rightful place, as it surely determined the outcome of most games.

* * * * * * *

Grant noticed the dice hanging from Fisher’s rear view mirror. They weren’t big fuzzy dice. There were several dice, of various sizes, that someone, presumably Fisher, had drilled a hole through and strung together. There were probably at least 10. They clacked slightly as they hit a bump in the rough road leading into the dumps.

Grant fingered them and asked, “Where did these come from?”

“No where.” Fisher replied. He half-shrugged and made the left into the dumps. “That lady is here again.” Grant shifted into his role as protector. She had hassled Fisher when he came with the smaller shipment of rusted bicycles and deflated basketballs yesterday. His anger had barely cooled.

Grant was expecting someone rougher and older, bigger and messier. The lady was wearing cutoff shorts and a flannel shirt, her tan legs stunted at the
bottom by thick socks and work boots. She wore a visor with the town logo on it. She was leaning into the window of the landscape truck in front of them, laughing. As she laughed she put her head down onto her arm as if she were drying tears from her eyes. She waved the landscapers off and urged Fisher to come forward. Grant saw a seriousness in his son’s face that he had not seen since high school graduation when he felt a distinct distance from him, as if he had missed more than just six months of his son’s life during the divorce.

“What do you have here?” the lady asked, glancing at the truck. She was not smiling or laughing now. She was all business.

“Old furniture, some lamps, games,” Fisher responded. Grant glanced over to get her attention but she gazed at her clipboard. Fisher looked as if he had been pulled over for speeding, with his tense shoulders and intense focus out the windshield. The dice were motionless. Grant looked up at the seagulls circling around and wished he hadn’t come.

“Anything for charity donation?” she asked as she checked items on her clipboard.

“No, nothing,” Fisher replied. Grant almost interjected that there were two lamps that were probably salvageable and maybe some of the games but he remained silent. “Do not pass go, do not collect $200” repeated in his head. “Pop-o-matic spins the dice; pop a six and you go twice!” Why did he remember such things?
“Take this lot around to the right, there. Keep going until you can’t go any further,” she said. “Plastics need to be separated from everything else. Bring the plastics back and I’ll tell you where to put them.”

“OK,” Fisher replied. Grant offered a half-hearted wave but her head was in the clipboard again.

“Not too bad,” Grant said, though he was relieved to be driving away from her.

“No, nothing like last time. But I feel like we better produce some plastics for her or we’ll be in trouble.”

The smell of rotting garbage was accented by the caw-caw-caws of the seagulls. Clouds were slowly blocking the jigsaw puzzle perfection of the blue sky earlier in the day. They silently unloaded the pickup, grunting only when they needed an extra push for the heavy mattress. They didn’t have much plastic but knew they had better produce at least a small bag for the lady.

“What about the Twister mat?” Fisher asked.

“No, that’s vinyl,” Grant replied. “Grab the Pop-o-matic board and the Sorry pieces. Here are some little cars with plastic pegs from the Game of Life, too. Battleship, there it is, it’s all plastic.”

“What about the chess pieces? Are they plastic?”

“No, wood.” Grant said. He remembered specifically choosing that set.

“Grab that chess set. I don’t want to throw it away.”
“You never wanted to play it before,” Fisher said.

“Well, I want to play it now!” Grant replied, the day’s emotions poured onto the statement. His voice sounded as harsh as the Yahtzee dice in a regular cup, not muffled by velvet.

“Whatever,” Fisher said and roughly tossed the game at him. Grant caught it but the crumbling box could not hold its contents. The king and queen landed in the dumps with their subjects surrounding them. He instinctively bent down to retrieve them.

“Dad, c’mon, the dump is going to close soon.”

“But what about the game?”

“Dad, just let it go. You never even liked chess.”

“I did like chess!” he said. “I just didn’t like watching you lose.”

Was this how they were going to patch things up? Grant wondered. He looked at Fisher and saw the same frown he had had when he lost as a boy. The sad and confused face that made Grant want to reach out to hug him and reassure him even if he would be shrugged off.

“Here,” Fisher handed him a plastic bag, letting the chess conversation go.

“Just put the plastic pieces in here for her.” Fisher added some plastic soda bottles to the bag when they got in the cab of the truck. The pink and blue pegs of the Game of Life mingled with the red and white Battleship hits.

“That should make her happy,” he smiled, holding up the bag.
“Sure, son,” Grant said, forcing a smile.

As they pulled to the front booth, the lady was gone. Fisher tossed the bag of plastics towards the half-door and floored it. Grant fingered the rescued king in one hand and opened the other to reveal a die for Fisher’s collection. He tossed it on the seat and rolled a six.
The Towel

Brian’s efforts at a quick jerk were thwarted when the doorbell rang. “Fed Ex!” he heard through the intercom. Click clack, a plastic pen scrawled across a plastic surface, registering his receipt of the Birth Pool in a Box.

Maybe Julianne, his stepmother, would be cheered up a little by the large package, he thought. She was mostly tired. Each thump, from the Innocent, was bittersweet since she and his father, Mike, had agreed that they would have only one child together (his third, her first) How selfish of others to have child after child, clothe them in disposable diapers, buy bigger cars, deplete our limited resources. Brian had heard the rant many times.

His father and stepmother cared deeply, religiously, about the planet. They held strongly to each other in their beliefs. No plastic toys for the baby. Cloth diapers and glass bottles. Brian knew there was no room for discussion. To their credit, Mike and Julianne researched everything extensively and consulted with naturopaths and acupuncturists, herbalists, and one Chinese medicine man they trusted. For a long time, Brian thought this was how all kids lived. The conversations about the danger of radio waves and the harmfulness of computer screens were daily and relentless.

So, he drank the organic celery juice that Julianne prepared every day, sure this concoction was only contributing to his chronic erections. He knew from
his own online research that 16 year old boys were prone to them but was sure his were excessive. Sometimes it seemed he would grow his own “stalk” for each stalk of celery tossed into the Juiceman. As he briefly caressed himself, nudging himself to a higher height, it was Julianne flashing in his mind.

During his last winter break, visited his mother and sister on the West Coast. Mike and Julianne, anticipating the time alone, had spent a few months detoxing their systems and boosting their fertility through herbs. Julianne drank 2 cups of Red Clover blossom infusion a day. They both drank 4 cups each of a Nettle leaf infusion. She took the Vitex berry tincture as a dropperful 3 times a day. She charted her ovulation cycle for months. The sexual energy between them was alive and Brian couldn’t wait to leave. Julianne packed a cloth sack of Brian’s supplements and included a list of forbidden foods.

The Innocent was created in an aromatherapy-soaked bedroom. Cedarwood essential oil evaporated over a candle. Mike and Julianne were momentarily suspended from themselves as they experienced intense, surprisingly violent, orgasms. Surely the primordial grunts were aiding the conception of the Innocent.

Julianne felt nauseous for a few days with a slight pain in her abdomen. Mike recommended she drink more celery juice and she began to drink Brian’s share in addition to her own. By the following week, when Brian returned, Julianne felt better. She craved beef jerky and more than once Mike was
summoned to pick some up at Whole Foods on his way home. Mike and Julianne eventually told Brian about the Innocent.

“How can you add another human being to an already overcrowded world? That is so selfish. I suppose you will want to move to a bigger place and use up more resources.” In an adolescent reactive state, Brian quickly flipped their words against them. It was easy for him to do.

With each question, he wasn’t sure who responded. The answers would have been the same from either of them: We are only having one; Julianne wants the experience of having her own child; we will never move from here, we can’t afford it.

“Another person in this tiny apartment?” he lamented, grasping at the practical side of things.

“It’s a tiny infant we’ll be cosleeping with. Don’t be so selfish.”

The decision of the home birth was easily made as Julianne and Mike had shown their disdain for the medical profession throughout Brian’s life. Other homes banned curses and name-calling. In their home, “psychopharmacology” and “doctor” were not allowed. When Brian’s second grade teacher recommended an evaluation since he showed some classic signs of a learning disability, Mike had berated her. “No doubt,” he had said, “medicating children would make your job easier but, if you could just do your job, my son would be fine. Why not
mediate everyone else? Maybe if you got rid of the computer monitor right next to his desk (!) he wouldn’t be having these problems.”

The following year, they transferred Brian to a private school. They did not consider Brian disabled at all and knew that the right combination of discipline, diet, and exercise would ultimately serve him best. He started eating popcorn sprinkled with cod liver oil and taking a myriad of supplements to control his learning disabilities. They consulted the acupuncturist and herbalist on the recommendation of their naturopath. Slowly Brian had improved, at least in hockey, though his grades were consistently low. His father encouraged Brian’s love of hockey since it seemed the only activity he had any enthusiasm for. All discretionary funds were put aside for new blades, sticks, pads, and training. Brian was good at it too. While they traveled around, mostly winning, Julianne rarely joined them. She told Mike he needed time with his son. Of course, she loved Brian too, but not like his biological father could. That male bond was sacred.

Julianne began living in her own sphere, going deep inside herself to experience each fleeting moment of the pregnancy. At around the fifth month, she lay still an entire weekend hoping to feel the Innocent move but she only felt a sensation of gas. Mike was forbidden to touch her breasts as they had become tender.

Brian often had to call for pickup from hockey practice as he was the last one left of his team. He found himself spending more time in his room, alone. His
occasional late night touching as he fell asleep had blossomed into a thrice-daily habit, and even that was a modest guess. Brian could not get the image of Julianne’s expanding breasts from his mind. No longer could the bathroom towel reach around her as she left the shower. Brian experienced yet another intense sensation when he had this same towel in his hands, alone in his room. The image of his stepmother fed his pulsing hand. The rough towel relentlessly flapped until it was soon covered with Brian’s warm ejaculate.

Julianne went to the midwife, the one who would tend to all of her needs throughout the pregnancy and shortly after the birth of the Innocent. Julianne was supported in her decision to have no invasive procedures done during the pregnancy or labor and delivery. This midwife had a 100% success rate. (“Water birth is the way to go. Alleviates the discomfort. It is the most gentle birth possible. We could do a sonogram at 20 weeks just to make sure all is progressing. No blood tests, just a shared journey of pregnancy and motherhood as we listen to the heartbeat.”) Julianne felt good for the first time in forever. She was going to have a baby and she was going to do it the way she believed it should be done, and certainly had been done for an eternity, in a natural and comforting way.

Brian noticed her smile when he came home. She so rarely smiled. “Hey,” he said, as he dropped his hockey gear bag and stick with a thud. In his room, he
heard the Juiceman whirring as he mopped himself up. In today’s visual, Julianne had been mixed up with drooping sunflowers.

The Birth Pool in a Box, a huge inflatable tub, took up half the living room where it had been placed since it didn’t fit in any other room. Mike moved some furniture around and set it up near the window so Julianne could glow in natural light. So much nicer than the glare of fluorescents she would have been subjected to somewhere else. She grew tired of answering the question of where she was going to have the baby. Everyone assumed they would have the baby in a hospital. We’re having a water birth at home, she would respond. The only one championing them was their tireless midwife. As the birth date grew closer, she insisted on making plans to celebrate the birth. (Some people make a mold of the placenta. I am more than happy to cook it for you if you want. The nutrients are unbeatable for you and the breastfeeding infant.) Julianne felt the baby swirl inside her. Her nipples tingled as if the tiniest fingers were touching them gently but insistently from inside her.

The labor came in the morning, at 6:03 am. Julianne timed her contractions. Mike laid the disposable liner in the Birth Pool in a Box and began filling it with water from the kitchen. Brian woke to guttural moaning from the bedroom next door, not unlike his own brief moment as he came for the first time that day. Today the Innocent would be born.
The midwife arrived and they all surrounded Julianne in her Birth Pool in a Box. Brian was to continually bring warm water. Julianne moaned, her breasts floated at the surface of the water. Mike gently mopped her brow as the midwife hummed and encouraged. There was some grimacing but the Innocent really did seem to have the gentlest birth possible. The midwife quietly asked Brian to get some more towels and he quickly returned with the only one he could find, from the floor of his bedroom.

The midwife wiped down his new baby sister with the towel.

Within one week, the baby, who they named Cassi, developed a cold. Julianne nursed and nursed her but she struggled as her little nose was clogged. The breast milk kept coming. Cassi took as much as she could in five minutes but then would doze off.

“Is she going to be OK?” Brian asked Julianne. He was afraid to touch her.

“Yes,” she replied. “We just need to help her along. We need to be strong for her.”

Brian tried to strengthen himself through the discipline of not touching his erections. Julianne was often found with an open blouse or a breast hanging out of a scoopneck t-shirt so Brian especially had to avoid her. He busily helped Mike with laundry and celery juice, anything to distract himself. He told coach he could come early and stay late for practice. But the baby’s cold did not go away.
Julianne nursed on demand and they trusted that nature would protect the baby and provide exactly what she needed.

Cassi was 10 days old when the midwife reminded them to take her to the pediatrician.

“Remember, within two weeks of birth, she has to see a pediatrician. She’s the only one who can issue a birth certificate. I have a holistic pediatrician for you,” she said when she visited them.

Julianne didn’t want the baby getting shots. She didn’t want the pediatrician to give the baby antibiotics for the cold. The midwife assured her that this pediatrician didn’t believe in antibiotics, on principle, and besides, her color seems a little off, she added. Mike and Julianne wrapped the infant and left their apartment for the first time since the birth. Brian waited at home for Fed Ex to pick up the Birth Pool in a Box.

“How long has she been like this?” the pediatrician asked as she unwrapped the baby. “Didn’t you notice her color had changed? This is your first appointment? Where are the prenatal reports? You didn’t have prenatal care?! No, the midwife doesn’t count.”

“Holistic, my ass,” Mike muttered into Julianne’s ear. Cassi lay on the examining table, looking tiny in her cloth diaper. She cried a weak cry.
The pediatrician said all the wrong things. She reminded them, yet again, of why they had made the choices they had. But then she said, “I will call ahead to the cardiologist. You must go there right away. This is an emergency.”

They rushed two buildings down to the cardiologist who briefly examined her, pressing a cold metal stethoscope to her tiny body, then said, “You must go directly to this emergency room. They have the only pediatric cardiology team who can perform the surgery. There is no time to waste. I will call ahead.”

As they sat in dense traffic heading uptown, Mike ranted about the medical establishment, the pediatrician, the definition of holistic, and the trauma of it all that would surely affect Cassi for the rest of her life. The baby was hungry and Julianne felt her nipples tingle as the dammed milk pushed from inside, seeking release. She nursed her on the way to the emergency room which seemed to calm all of them as Mike’s rant subsided, too. The baby wasn’t sucking much now, not even for five minutes.

Brian signed the plastic box and pushed the Birth Pool in a Box toward the Fed Ex guy. “Congratulations,” he said, smiling. As he closed the door, Brian realized that the Fed Ex guy thought the baby was his. The man-to-man exchange made him feel proud though he knew he had nothing to be proud of. He was home alone for the first time in weeks so naturally he jerked off with liberty, pants fully down, ending with a moan as loud as he wanted. No images of Julianne. He
glanced for something to clean himself up with and used a dirty pair of underwear from his clothes pile. He had shoved the towel from Cassi’s birth deep in his gear bag. He superstitiously believed he should leave that towel there until Cassi was better.

The glare and shock of white as the automatic doors slid apart made Cassi cry. Two black nurses in Elmo scrubs came right away, the cardiologist had called ahead.

“Come this way,” the nurses waved them through the waiting room, which could have doubled as a bus station for the number of people in disheveled heaps on chairs. “We have a lot of surgeries today but she’s our priority. Where was she delivered? Do you have her medical records? We need all the information you have. When did she last eat? Do not feed her again or we can’t do the surgery. The anesthetic won’t work.”

Mike and Julianne protectively huddled around their baby, too overwhelmed by the flash of health care they had been swept into. Did they say surgery? The nurses continued with their questions until they heard the response from Mike, “Water birth at home.” The baby began to cry again, shaking slightly in Julianne’s arms. Their pink little baby seemed to turn gray but it must be the hospital lighting, they told themselves. She must be as stressed as they were. Her breathing was light and airless. When they arrived in the hospital room, they
wrapped her in a second blanket to warm her. The nurses left to check the status of the operating room. Had Julianne and Mike really signed off to surgery? They had not been offered any options. There was no caring here, just procedures. No one called their baby “Cassi”. Here she was “Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome,” “the HLH baby,” or simply “the emergency surgery.”

When the nurses returned for Cassi, they pulled the hospital curtain aside with urgency. Julianne sat in the rocking chair, nursing her infant. “She’ll be done nursing in a few minutes,” Mike said and aggressively pulled the curtain closed.

The surgery would need to be postponed. The room the nurses had cleared by postponing three other surgeries would not be available later. How many times had they told her not to feed the baby? The Elmos on their scrubs would have fled if they sensed even half of the nurses’ rage and frustration.

Julianne and Mike came home without Cassi.

“Where is she?” Brian asked. He had never seen them look so wounded.

“She didn’t make it,” his father replied. “She just wasn’t strong enough to make it.”

Julianne sat in the rocker they had bought off Craigslist. “No, she wasn’t strong enough, that’s what they said,” she repeated.

“But all she had was a cold,” Brian said, “I don’t get it.”
“No she had Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome but we think they just made that up,” his father replied. “How could such a sweet, innocent, perfect baby get that?”

“How does a baby get that?” Brian asked.

“We don’t know. We just don’t know.” His father stood behind the rocking chair and gently pushed Julianne back and forth and the two entered into a private silence that Brian could not share.

Brian went to his room and stared at his gear bag. It remained unopened when he awoke the next morning. He walked around it in his room as if it contained the remains of Cassi. As the weeks passed, everyone understood that he had no desire to play hockey, the bag remained sealed. Eventually the bag was put in the closet, then pushed further back into it. At all times, Brian knew where that bag was and could smell the moist towel festering deep in the bottom.
The Same Page

It was late to be at the office, 9:00 pm, but this was Renee’s favorite time. The chatter from the other cubicles was finally gone. She spent time organizing her calls for the following day. She made three-quarters of her sales commission in November. Nothing could fall through the cracks.

A ringing phone jolted her from her internal pep talk. “Renee Ogden, how may I help you?”

“Want to know how you can help me, sexy?” her husband replied. “How ‘bout getting your hot bod home soon?”

“Hi, honey,” she said. “God, it’s good to hear your voice.”

“So, you coming home soon? I’ll open the wine and let it breathe a bit.”

“I’ll need at least a half hour, I think.”

“Love you, honey.”

The office was close to being empty. One person was photocopying. The machine chugged on and on, occasionally jamming. The copier finally stopped and all was quiet again. She set up the next day’s call list in about fifteen minutes. On her way out, she glanced into the other cubicles, noting the personal effects that hung about them like forgotten holiday decorations. Wedding pictures in small brass frames; a singing toy fish that had fortunately stopped working; a small stuffed animal perched on a computer; and finally, in the last cubicle, the 8
x 10 photograph of her friend Sarah, with her husband Adam, that was taken last summer in the Hamptons. Sarah’s tan skin and white teeth were framed by her thick brown hair. Waiting for the elevator, she applied lipstick and fingered through her hair. She had recently changed the color to a slightly lighter shade and still wasn’t sure if it made her look old.

* * *

Halfway up the stairs to their apartment, she smelled the garlic and onion of her husband’s sauté and heard classical music playing. She opened the door to find Dennis, standing with his arms outstretched. He enveloped her into his chest and over his shoulder she saw the table laid out for dinner. Two candles flickered and a bottle of merlot was “breathing” as promised.

“It is so good to be home.”

“Good to have you home,” he said. “Let’s eat.”

Dennis and Renee had been married for three years, and at 50, he was fourteen years her senior. She was impressed by his sophistication. “I only listen to classical music,” he had said when they first started dating. He cooked and ran or swam almost every day. Every New Year’s Eve since they had met, they ran in Central Park. As the fireworks burst over Tavern on the Green, she internally renewed her commitment to Dennis and another year of fitness and healthy living. When she met other men his age, she was impressed with how much younger Dennis seemed in comparison. Dennis was a personal trainer at a private health
club and stayed in great physical shape. She tried to get him to trim down his bottle-of-wine-with-dinner habit but he resisted her. “We all have one vice, darling,” he would say.

When they first met, Renee was very conscious of the age difference between her and Dennis, so she had kept their relationship hidden for the first year. It bothered Dennis but she enjoyed the secrecy of it. No one knew about them except her closest friend, Maura. When no one knew, she didn’t have to suffer the critical comments of others. “When are you getting married?” “What are you waiting for? He’s not getting any younger and neither are you!” She wasn’t sure if anyone actually said these words to her but she heard them in her head.

She had watched her little sister, Katie, date, get married, buy the house, and start working on having children. It just seemed too traditional and simple. She enjoyed working and watching her salary increase. She enjoyed dinners out and the theater with Dennis. They lived in a small apartment in the city and she liked not having the responsibility of a big house and yard to take care of. Dennis and Renee’s time was their own. Most of the time, she felt like he worshiped her. She loved his romantic nature as he was always thoughtful with flowers and unexpected presents. In return, she made Dennis a priority in her life. His ex-wife had been distracted with an affair and Renee wanted Dennis to have faith in their
relationship. She rarely met a couple that was as dedicated to each other as she and Dennis. She even took off the day for their anniversary, a personal holiday.

“We’re trying to have a baby,” Katie had said just two weeks after she was married.

“That’s great!” Renee had responded with as much enthusiasm as she could. She quickly got a visual of Katie and Jim, her brother-in-law, having sex in the middle of the day on their lunch breaks. She always got a visual of a sex act when someone said they were trying to have a baby. She found it mildly offensive. That was months ago and Katie still wasn’t pregnant.

“We’re still trying,” she said at Thanksgiving.

“All the time,” Jim added. Renee didn’t think he winked when he said it but she couldn’t be sure.

As they left, no doubt to go home and have lots of sex, her mother was smiling warmly as she kissed them goodbye. This was not the same response she had given Renee earlier when she told her that she expected to earn a big commission this year. Her mother had jumped up. “Oh, the potatoes are probably done,” she said and went into the kitchen.

On the way home from her parents’ house, Renee began the conversation with Dennis about children. “Katie and Jim really want a baby.”

“Good for them,” Dennis replied. “Babies are great if you really want one.”
“Sometimes I think I do, but then other times I think I don’t.”

“What?” Dennis said. “I thought we were on the same page with this.”

“Yes but I do think about it sometimes and what it would be like.”

“You know what it would be like, Renee. A huge responsibility. And let’s do the math again—I’ll be how old when he’s 18?”

“68, I know,” she replied.

“And remember that time we went to dinner with Sarah and Adam?” he said.

“How could I forget?”

“Why would anyone take a child to a nice restaurant at 9:30?”

“Your parents did,” she reminded him.

“When my father told us to sit with our mouths shut, we did it, or a hand would come across the table. Kids today are spoiled.”

“Well, people say it’s different when they’re your own,” she replied.

“Of course it would be different. We wouldn’t be in restaurants at 9:30, we’d be home changing diapers with a screaming kid.”

“No, c’mon, you’re not taking me seriously.”

“Seriously? Renee, we had this conversation before we got married, we had this conversation right after we got married, we have this conversation almost once a month. When I was 40, I thought maybe, maybe I’d be somebody’s father but there was no mother. When I was 45, I thought I might still have a chance to
be somebody’s father but I was in the middle of a divorce—not a good time to become a father, by the way.”

“Let’s not even go there.”

“We won’t.” He knew she hated any talk about his ex. “And now, here I am. I am 50 years old and, honestly, I don’t want that responsibility at this point in my life.”

“But what if I do?” she felt tears coming into her eyes, her chest was getting heavy. She had never gone this far, almost admitting that she wanted to change her mind.

“Renee, there are two of us in this marriage. It’s not just about you.” He slammed on the car horn as a convertible cut him off. “Can we talk about this later before we both get killed? Because that would end this discussion once and for all.” He tried to make it into a joke but she had too much to ponder now.

There was no discussion later.

“Do you want to talk this through?” she had asked as they were changing into their lounge clothes. Renee picked up the sky blue velour top and pulled it over her head.

“I’m just too tired, Renee,” he replied. “That drive was a nightmare. Tomorrow, OK?” He kissed her on her forehead. “You know I love you.”
On the way to the office the next morning, she ducked into a card store. The first of the month was her “Hallmark Day” when she stocked up for the month’s birthdays and anniversaries. She was also in search of a congratulations card because her best friend, Maura, had succeeded in getting to the fourth month of pregnancy. She grabbed two birthday cards for John’s mother and her own and wandered over to the wedding/baby/thank you/sympathy section.

There was no card that said “Sorry about the five miscarriages…glad this one took.” She picked up a blank card with a black and white picture of a pregnant belly. God, she thought, is she really going to look like this? It wasn’t the first pregnant belly she had seen but the thought of it being part of Maura was hard to imagine. She put it with the other cards and walked to the cashier.

A tiny baby in a pink snowsuit was crying in her stroller while her mother tried to soothe her, unsuccessfully.

“Excuse me, do you mind if I go ahead of you?” the mother smiled pathetically at Renee. “She won’t last much longer.”

“Go ahead,” Renee replied with an internal sigh. She wondered if Maura would turn into a woman like this, using her baby as an excuse to get ahead in line.

As she rushed to work, she thought about what to write in the card. She had known Maura since she had first started working in the city when they were
both 22 years old. Renee had been there for Maura when she had her abortion.

She had made chicken soup and lasagna. Before Maura came home, she went to her apartment, set up a bouquet of flowers, changed her sheets, scrubbed her bathroom, and vacuumed. It was a difficult 24 hours but just being together, silently watching movies and eating homemade food helped. In return, Maura had helped Renee through her own what-am-I-going-to-do? pregnancy scare. Maura’s suggestion of taking a pregnancy test, which came up negative, was the best advice anyone could give. They still laughed about this. While most of their 20s were spent indulging themselves with shopping and going out, these two events always came to mind when Renee thought about their friendship.

When she arrived at the office, everyone was there, not working, but chatting, as they always did in the mornings. All were wearing black pant suits; “it looks like a secret service convention” she had described it to Dennis once. She wasn’t afraid to wear some color, and stood out today in her teal blue suit.

She extended a few half-hearted hellos to anyone who made eye contact with her as she slithered to her desk. She normally didn’t eat at her desk, preferring to linger over an herb tea and biscotti at Starbucks, but since it was Hallmark Day she hadn’t had enough time. She ate a bran muffin as she perused her list of calls.

“Oh-mi-godd, you missed the best, I mean the best, episode of the season!” she heard one of her co-workers say to another. “It was phenomenal!”
“I couldn’t help it,” the other replied, “the baby was teething. I finally gave him Tylenol at about 11:00 but that doesn’t kick in for at least 10 minutes. Then he threw up. It was horrible.”

“Oh, you would’ve loved the show even more,” her friend replied. “They were going through the same thing--it was hysterical!”

Renee stared at her list, watching the letters and numbers blur together. If she could do it, if it was socially acceptable, she would scream “SHUT UP!” at the top of her lungs. Her phone rang and she popped her head up over the cubicle, “Hi, sorry, could you keep it down? Thanks,” and she picked up the phone.

“Renee Ogden, how may I help you?” By the end of the call, she had secured a $1,000 ad. When she hung up the phone and heard them still talking about teething, she thought, I’ll probably make $5,000 in sales by the time they finish talking about TV and kids.

She took a few minutes to compose Maura’s card. She practiced on some scrap paper until the words came.

Maura,

As with many things in your life, your determination has paid off. I am so happy for you and Peter. Let me know if there is anything I can do, especially as ‘your time’ is near. I will always be there for you and love you.

Renee
She wrote it into the card, read it once through to make sure there were no errors, and sealed it in the envelope.

“Hey, Renee,” Sarah called into her cubicle.

“Hi, Sarah,” she said as she turned in her swivel chair. “Where have you been all morning? I’ve had nothing but office drones humming around me,” she whispered and laughed.

“Running late today,” she replied. “Are we still on for Saturday night?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Renee said, mentally noting to buy more wine. “Glad to have you back.”

Sarah had just returned from a business trip to Atlanta. She was gone for three days and Renee felt alone in the office. She barely spoke with anyone else, unless she was on the phone. She hadn’t enjoyed eating lunch by herself. She felt like she and Sarah understood each other. Except for a very young scatter-brained phone operator, they were the only two women in the office without children. They never had conversations about children during lunch because they had many other interests to talk about. They both enjoyed romantic comedies. Within any given month, they usually read the same book, always something from the New York Times bestseller list. They had been out to dinner three times with their husbands, usually to very nice restaurants. Sarah’s husband, Adam, was an investment banker and he always insisted on picking up the tab. Sarah had invited them to the Hamptons, too, but they were never able to coordinate that.
When she arrived home at 9:00 there was a note on the table, written by Dennis in his neat handwriting on her personalized stationery. She was a bit annoyed since she had placed a pad of paper with stars around the edges for him to use when writing her notes or making grocery lists, but he just didn’t get the hint. This stationery was for thank you notes and formal correspondence, not for jotting down this evening’s message:

6:00 pm  
_Sweetheart, I’m at the pool. Come over. XXXOOO Dennis_

She knew he wasn’t still there since the pool closed at 9:00. She hoped he wouldn’t come home too late or too drunk because she had an important client presentation in the morning and needed a good night’s sleep. She ate some leftover pasta, had a bath by candlelight, drank some chamomile tea and was in bed by 10:30. Dennis came in after midnight, whispered to her with boozy breath, “Sorry I missed you, honey. I watched the game with the guys. Sleep well, sweet dreams.” She couldn’t get back to sleep and lay there listening to his heavy drunken breathing. She woke up groggy in the morning to find him sound asleep, fully clothed. She slipped out quietly, wanting to get to the office early to prepare for her presentation.

When she arrived, three of her co-workers were standing around the receptionist’s desk with their coffee. “Play it again!” one said, “It’s so cute!”

“OK, one more time, here goes… ‘Mommy? Mommy come home?’” They laughed and the mother beamed from ear to ear. “Isn’t he adorable?”
Renee groaned on the inside. “Renee, listen to this, it’s so cute. It’s my son… ‘Mommy? Mommy come home?’ He left it on the machine last night. He must have pressed one of the speed dial buttons. Isn’t that funny?”

Renee played along, “Yes, that’s cute. How old is he?”

“He’s almost three.” she turned to her friend, “My God, is he really almost three?”

Renee said an almost-silent, “See ya,” and ducked into her cubicle.

After her presentation, which she thought went very well, she called Dennis.

“What happened to you last night?”

“I hadn’t heard from you so I figured you were working late. Josh was going to watch the game so I went to the bar with him.”

“I didn’t work that late,” she said. “Well, do me a favor, OK? Don’t use my good stationery to leave notes.” Her voice had an edge to it.

“Sorry, honey” he said.

“I have to go. Bye.” She was about to slam down the phone but saw Sarah standing next to her cubicle. She dropped her anger under her chair.

“Hi, Renee,” Sarah said. “How’d the presentation go?”

“Really well, thanks.”

“That’s terrific. How’s Dennis?”

“Fine, he’s fine,” Renee replied. Had she heard her conversation?
“What do you want to do for lunch today?” Sarah asked. “Chandelier’s doing prix fixe lunches for $21.00.”

“Great, how about 12:30?”

As they walked the few blocks to Chandelier, they talked about shoes and jackets, whatever was in the store windows. “Wait, I have to put this in the mailbox,” Renee said, holding up Maura’s pregnancy card. “My friend Maura’s four months!”

At lunch, Renee continued the conversation about Maura. “She’s had more miscarriages than I thought was possible and it didn’t look like it was going to happen…but here we are, waiting for a baby! I’m excited for her but I know this is going to change our relationship, I’m just not sure how. It’s almost like people with kids live in a separate world from us. They talk about schools and strollers. Really, who cares, you know?”

“She’s four months pregnant?” Sarah asked.

“Yes. She’s pretty anxious.”

“Well that’s just two weeks more than me!” Sarah’s face lit up and Renee saw small tears form in her friend’s eyes.

Renee reached her arm across to Sarah, not instinctively, but because she knew it was the right thing to do. “Congratulations! I am so happy for you!” And she was, but inside her stomach wrapped itself around the bread she had just eaten.
“Adam is so nervous,” Sarah chattered on through lunch. “But, you know we can’t wait forever. I’m not getting any younger.”

“Right,” Renee agreed. “I know.” The food tasted bland in her mouth.

“I wanted to tell you first, Renee,” Sarah said as they were putting on their coats. “You are my closest friend at work.” Sarah lightly touched her stomach, as if she were flattening a sweater or shirt.

Sarah made the announcement at work shortly after they returned from lunch. Renee was happy she had told her before everyone else. When she saw one of her co-workers in the ladies room, she said, “Have you heard about Sarah?”

“Mmmhmmm,” Renee responded through pressed lips, waiting for her lipstick to set. “She told me a while ago.”

She didn’t work late that evening. When she arrived at the apartment she heard Dennis on the phone, “Adam, that’s great news! And we’re on for Saturday for dinner.” When he hung up he turned to Renee, “Honey, have you heard? Sarah and Adam are having a baby.”

“I know,” Renee said. “I guess we’re on our own.”

“What do you mean? They’re coming over for dinner on Saturday.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she said. He just didn’t get it, she thought. She wished he would just go in the kitchen and make dinner. Both of her closest friends were pregnant and she might never be. He was all she had and all she was
ever going to have and she was feeling, not for the first time, that it wasn’t enough.

“Do you think we’ll still go to the Hamptons with them once the baby is born?” Dennis called from the kitchen.

“I doubt it,” she replied. Better to make small talk, she thought. She was feeling vulnerable. She might say something too hurtful. “I’ll probably be too busy working, covering for her maternity leave. I wonder if she’ll even come back to work, it’s not like she has to.”

She reached for the pad of paper with the stars on it. She jotted down “pregnancy card for Sarah” to remember for next month’s Hallmark Day and she absentmindedly doodled around the stars. She got up to set the table for dinner, the country French tablecloth, gold placemats, and porcelain blue napkins. Dennis put on some classical music. She opened a bottle of cabernet. As they sat down to eat she said, “We should go for a walk after dinner; I don’t think I can handle a swim tonight.”

“Sounds good, sweetheart,” he held up his wine glass and met her eyes. They were puffy and red. “Are you OK?”

“No, I’m not OK,” she replied. “Maura’s pregnant. Sarah’s pregnant. And, I guess I’m never going to be pregnant.” This last comment landed like a dropped piece of silverware on a tile floor. It was loud. It was obvious. No one bent to pick it up.
“Is that why you’re upset?” he said. “C’mon Renee. I thought we straightened this out. If you need to cry to get this out of your system, you know you can cry with me.”

She knew he thought he was being supportive. And she did cry, she cried until she couldn’t cry anymore. She cried every variety of crying—sobbing, coughing, aching, moaning, and a few she didn’t know existed. He held her until she got up to blow her nose. Then, he drained his wine glass. Though her eyes burned and her vision was blurry, she felt like she saw him more clearly than she ever had before. He wanted her to himself.

“Do you still want to go for that walk?” he asked, when she had calmed down, mostly from exhaustion.

“I guess,” she said. She was glad when he turned off the classical music. She drained her wine glass, too.

As they walked, Renee said, “Should we invite Maura and Peter over on Saturday, too?” She wanted to have her friends with her. Even if she couldn’t talk to them about her and Dennis, just being near them might be a comfort. She wanted one more fun night where they could just be girlfriends before the babies were born.

* * *
Dennis prepared a dinner of lamb and couscous. Renee polished the silver and wiped down the champagne flutes. She placed new tapers in the candlesticks. Everything looked elegant and calm.

Sarah and Maura, who had met only once or twice before, were full of excitement as they came in.

“Congratulations! Do you know if you’re having a boy or a girl?”

“A boy.”

“We’re not going to find out,” Sarah said.

“Oh, I had to know,” Maura said. “I need to decorate.” They laughed at a joke that Renee didn’t understand.

The two women used to only have Renee in common, but now they seemed to share so much more. Renee cleared the plates. Dennis kept the wine flowing and the music playing. Renee excused herself, went to the bathroom, applied some lipstick, adjusted her scarf on her neck, and wiped the basin of the sink with a tissue. She had gotten her period that morning and was surprised she had not emptied the garbage can before her guests arrived. She covered it now with excess toilet paper.

When she returned to the group, she squeezed herself between her two good friends. She was the only one of the women drinking wine and was feeling a little tipsy. “So,” she said.
They both looked at her, expecting her to complete her sentence, but she didn’t. She only completed the thought to herself, ‘this shit really sucks.’

“What about names?” she said instead.

The women needed little prompting. They talked over and beyond her as she randomly called out names, “Alexander? Georgia? Lily?”

Maura patted her leg and said, “Renee, are you OK?”

She replied, “Andrew? Grace?”

The joke was only hers and she wasn’t sure they heard her say “How about Renee and Dennis?” Dennis heard her, looked up from the men, and smiled. She held up her wine glass to him and mouthed ‘cheers.’ He held his glass up to her and Adam and Peter raised theirs. “Toast, toast,” someone said. Adam stood up and addressed the women on the sofa,

“To the sexiest pregnant women I have ever seen,” he, too, was a little tipsy.

Renee stared into her glass, listening to Maura and Sarah giggle on either side of her. Finally she brought her eyes up to meet Dennis’s, but his were closed as he swallowed the last bit of wine in his glass.
The sharp buzzer of the dryer rang so Ruth put her knitting aside and pulled herself out of the chair with the slight groan of an old woman. She pondered what would become of Vincent and Theresa, now that the baby had died and, while they thought its prematurity had killed it, it was actually the nurse, Vincent’s jealous ex-lover. She checked the digital clock on the microwave and was glad she would only miss the closing credits of her soap opera as she folded the clothes. She pulled the dryer door open and breathed in the scent of warm, dry laundry, a smell she had never stopped appreciating, even at the age of 73.

The construction dust in her son’s jeans had washed out completely. She felt no need to dance around the laundry room as women did on the commercials, but she was pleased nonetheless. A sock fell to the floor and she bent to pick it up, feeling a pain in her knee. She tossed the sock back into the dryer to meet its match.

Cross at the center seam and then in half again. How many times had she folded a pair of jeans? She had learned so much about her two sons by this simple act. Michael, the older one, was the rock collector. How many times had a broken shell or rock fallen to the floor, usually accompanied by lose change? Jimmy, her younger son’s laundry revealed no surprises as he was the one she knew best. Only nails and screws dropped from his pockets, usually with a loud
“ping” and then an inconvenient roll under the agitator. Occasionally a pen leaked from his back pocket.

As she folded Jimmy’s underwear, two sides in and then once in half, she appreciated the practicality of a man’s underwear. Nothing fancy there. She remembered the little boy underwear that was an exact replica of a man’s underwear. How tiny the “tighty-whiteys” had seemed. At times she thought she heard the boys’ sounds echoing in the house. Their boy energy had been squashed into those little boy bodies. Like the baking soda and vinegar volcanoes they made together, they seemed, at first, so calm but could easily explode within minutes.

Most of the memories of when her sons were little were distant but some remained vivid in her mind. “Mom, mom! Look what I found!” Michael would shout, as she heard the aluminum door slam shut like the exclamation point of a summer day. She knew she was moments away from being confronted with a frog, garden snake, or a beetle. “Not in the house!” was her automatic response. “I’ll see it outside.” Rainy days were the biggest challenge as the boys were growing up. She loved listening to their individual imaginations blaze as the good guys prevailed over the bad guys yet again, but after a few hours the two boys seemed to seek each other out in the four bedroom house. The walls closed in a little bit more with each gust of rain against the windows.
“You just went in my room and took my rocks without asking,” Michael cried. “I’m going to kill you. One was a fossil!” His tone was harsh. Small issues were bubbling into bigger ones. It was the third rainy day in a row.

“They’re just rocks,” Jimmy responded. “I needed them to build a fireplace for my model.”

“You’re an asshole!” Michael screamed. And then they went at each other. But Jimmy was no match. Michael could easily have Jimmy pinned to the floor in seconds as he muttered threatening words that only Jimmy could hear.

“Knock it off!” They were both surprised to see her standing right next to them. “What happened?”

“He took my rocks,” Michael was red in the face and sweating, all heated up.

“I needed them.”

“Get your own, stupid jerk.”

“Michael,” she replied, “it’s pouring outside, he can’t.”

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t mean he can take mine!”

“Calm down, Michael,” she said. He wiped his nose with his sleeve.

“Jimmy, you’ll have to give those rocks back.”

“I can’t,” he said, “Look what I built.” He pointed to the rocks, tidily glued together and stacked up, a perfect replica of their own fireplace. The accomplishment showed on his face and pride splashed out of her.
“Oh, Jimmy,” she said. “It’s exactly like ours!”

“Mom,” Michael replied. “Are you forgetting those are MY rocks?” But Michael’s moment had passed.

“We’ll find some more when it stops raining, Michael.”

He stomped away and slammed his door. There was no argument to be won. Jimmy seemed to have an invisible pass to a special place within his mother. Somehow he knew the secret password that Michael could never figure out. She expected Michael would stay in his room until his father came home or supper was on the table, whichever came first.

It would be hours before her husband, Brian, came home from work. He worked hard when the boys were small, leaving at 7 in the morning and not coming home until at least twelve hours later. He was at the height of his career and he had so much to tell her after a day out in the “real world” of selling Michaelboard advertising. When he finally came home, he often found them all asleep, his wife usually curled up with little Jimmy. The image was comforting the first few times. When it became a pattern, he didn’t even bother to check on them when he came in.

* * *

Within a few years, Michael became involved in adolescent activities, both good and bad. While she was pleased he played soccer, she was not so happy about the afterparties when Michael would come home and pass out, sometimes
in the bathroom, sometimes on the couch. At times, the house permeated with the adolescent boy smells of old socks and new sex mixed with the scent of day-old alcohol. Even in winter, she was known to throw open the windows for a few hours.

Jimmy spent most of his time around the house, building things, drawing, or talking to his mother. As she mechanically rinsed and chopped, she watched Jimmy through the kitchen window. He had a box of nails and he just hammered and hammered, seemingly in time to the rhythm of her chopping. By 6:00 every night, dinner was on the table. Michael flew in and used a dishtowel to wipe away the sweat from an afternoon of soccer practice. Dinner was the only family activity he never missed. The one connection she still had with him was food though everything else about him became more and more alien to her. Jimmy was absorbed in hammering a straight line of nails down the side of wood. He was officially a teenager at 14 but he still seemed to have one untied sneaker in boyhood.

“Jimmy, come in and eat,” she called.

“In a minute,” he replied, not looking up.

Michael had already begun heaping his plate with double portions—a full plate of spaghetti, three pieces of bread on the side, and two veal cutlets on top. He poured a tall glass of milk and, in a reach back to childhood, added heaping tablespoons of chocolate mix.
“Ma,” he spoke with his mouth full of food, “Release form. Coach needs it.” This was as close as she got to a conversation with Michael.

“OK,” she said. End of discussion.

“Jimmy!” she yelled out the door. “C’mon already!”

Michael rolled his eyes. ‘C’mon already Jimmy’ he echoed mockingly and chuckled.

“Stop it,” she said glaring at him. He gave her a final snort and shrugged ‘what?’

Jimmy finally came in and sat down as she fixed his plate. His hands were filthy.

“Jimmy, please. Go wash your hands,” she snipped.

As he left the table, he nearly tripped over the chair on the way to the sink. Michael found it hard to contain himself. He managed to stifle his laughter by staring at the milk carton. He focused on the “Message from your Dairy Farmer” printed on the side of the carton.

“Knock it off,” his mother said.

“What?” Michael replied, still not looking up.

“You know what.” She then ignored him and mixed chocolate milk for Jimmy.

“It got dark so fast,” Jimmy said to his mother. He still talked to her in complete sentences. He still appreciated her. He still needed her.
“Did you clean up the tools and wood from the driveway?” she asked.

“I’ll get it later.” He didn’t gobble his food like Michael but chatted casually about how he intended to build a weathervane like he had seen on television. Michael got up from the table now, left his empty plate, and grabbed a handful of cookies as he left the room. Jimmy and his mother talked about the weathervane for at least another 45 minutes, though it could have easily been two hours.

* * *

“Jesus Christ!” Goddamn it!

Her husband’s scream was loud enough for the neighbors a block away, no need for their alarm clocks this morning. She hurried out to the driveway.

“What’s wrong?”

“Jimmy! Jimmy!” he called for his son, his anger bubbling. “Look at the tires. All four of them. I’m going to kill him!”

She looked at the tires and they were all flat. A box of nails was strewn across the driveway, the half-finished weathervane was splintered in two where her husband had run over it.

“Why can’t he just put things away!?”

“OK, OK, I’ll talk to him. Take my car.”

“I don’t want your car! I want him to take some responsibility around here.”
“Calm down, I’ll talk to him.”

“What the hell is that going to do? You talk to him all the time. When is he going to learn?! Goddamn it.”

She wished he would leave for work. “Let me get my keys for you. I’ll get the tires fixed.”

“You’ll get them fixed? Why doesn’t he get them fixed? Why are you always cleaning up his mess? Take it out of his allowance. That’ll teach him the value of things.” She chose not to respond to this. He would only rant longer.

“Honey, I’ll get my keys,” she patted his arm. She sensed the slight shift in him and knew he was going to let it drop, for now. “C’mon, you’ll be late for work.”

She went inside to get the keys as Jimmy was coming down for breakfast. “Hey, Ma.”

“Just stay in here. Your father is ready to kill you.”

She ran the keys out to her husband and gave him a kiss goodbye. The kiss was as familiar as a handshake between business partners.

“You’ve got to quit making things all better for him, honey. He’ll never learn.”

From that day forward, whenever Jimmy left things out or misplaced them, the response from his father was the same, “Four flat tires.”

* * *
Years of listening to “four flat tires” passed and eventually, Michael married Patty, a woman he had met at Neilly’s, the local bar that he went to when he was home from college. Patty had been in Jimmy’s grade during high school and Ruth had known her mother when they volunteered in the school library. Michael and Patty had two children, a boy and a girl, who Ruth saw mostly on holidays. They spent more time with Patty’s family. It had been the same when Michael and Jimmy were little. She had preferred the familiarity of her mother over the casual disapproval of her mother-in-law. Her mother’s kitchen smelled like her own, as Ruth’s recipes were the same. Drying her hands in her mother’s bathroom, Ruth smelled the same soap on her hands from her childhood. At Brian’s mother’s, most things were foreign except for the Joy dishwashing liquid, the only brand they seemed to agree on.

Jimmy, too, moved out of the house but only to the garage apartment Brian decided not to rent anymore. He had to evict the former tenants and the lawyer fees ate up most of the rent they had paid. She could not picture Jimmy in Neilly’s, picking up women. The few blind dates his friend had arranged for him had not developed into anything. She didn’t think women today would do for Jimmy what needed to be done. They didn’t want to be bothered with the cooking and cleaning and laundry that her generation took pride in. She knew for a fact that Patty sent Michael’s shirts to the cleaners because he had left a stapled tag on the buttonhole once.
“Michael, what’s on your shirt?” she had asked during that visit. Who would put a staple on the front of a shirt, she wondered.

“Oh, I forgot to take it off.” He picked it off and flicked it onto the coffee table.

“What is it?” she asked him again.

“From the cleaners, I think.” he replied. “What’s going on in there?” he called to his children in the other room, one was crying. He left the room and soon they were roaring with laughter as he made loud monster sounds.

She had intended to give Patty some spray starch because she had bought four cans on sale. It was more spray starch than she needed since Brian was retired now and didn’t wear dress shirts too often. She pictured the new cans lined up in the pantry and estimated it would take over a year before she used them all.

Jimmy was a contractor who struggled to find work but when he had a job, he worked hard. Early on, she had tried to get Michael to work with him but there was an explosive argument between the boys before the end of the first week. After two or three attempts, she gave up.

“You should hire some Mexicans,” she said to Jimmy one day. “They’re lined up at Home Depot and they want the work.”

“No, Ma,” he replied. “It’s too much trouble. You can’t trust anybody when you’re working in someone else’s house.”
She was at the sink, making turkey meatballs. He sat in his usual spot at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee he would make last as long as her task. In this repeated, daily scenario they worked out the details of an addition to someone’s house, the right tiles for another’s bathroom renovation. The conversation only hit a rough patch when Brian came into the kitchen. It annoyed him to see his adult son sitting and talking for hours and hours.

Brian’s retirement was demanding a forced relaxation. “These are supposed to be our golden years, honey. This is what I’ve worked my life for? To listen to you two talk on and on? To watch you do his laundry?” He planned trips and they went. When they were away, it was almost like a second honeymoon, but once home, she settled into being Jimmy’s sounding board and helpmate. Brian retreated to his home office. His retirement was spent in front of the computer, chasing penny stocks. He was planning a 42-day world cruise for the two of them.

“Jesus Christ, you’re still pissing in your mother’s ear?” he said as he took a moment away from his computer to refill his coffee.

“We’re talking,” she replied, not looking up from the meatballs.

“You’re always talking to him. Why don’t you get to work?” he directed this at Jimmy.

Her meatballs became tinier as she patted them just a little bit harder than she intended.
“Yeah, I was just leaving, Dad.” Jimmy put on his coat. “Let me just grab s’more coffee.”

Brian peaked over her shoulder. “Meatballs tonight?”

“Yup. Is that ok?” Her shoulders relaxed into a gentle rolling of the meat.

“Yum,” he said and rubbed her back. He had become more affectionate, maybe because he was no longer stressed about work or maybe simply because he was around more. She had no retirement from her household tasks and didn’t foresee one in the future. If anything, she had more to do now. She had to prepare more meals and she had more laundry since Brian’s work suits had been replaced with stretch jeans and polo shirts.

“I’m going to drop off that broken grill at the dumps. I’ll be back in a half hour.” He kissed her as he had done at least a million times in their 50 years together, a long lingering kiss with a solid hug to back it up. Occasionally, she was surprised by her genuine response to him when she felt herself hugging as tightly back. “Love you,” he said and smiled.

After his father left, Jimmy opened up his jacket and relaxed into the kitchen chair. She was all his.

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One Wednesday, she had more laundry than usual since she and Brian had just returned from an overnight trip to the Indian casino. She wanted to get it started before her soap opera came on since she had missed two days of Vincent
and Theresa and the baby nurse. She combined all the whites into one load--Brian’s t-shirts and boxers, her bras and panties, and Jimmy’s crew socks and underwear, “tighty-whiteys! tighty-whiteys! tighty-whiteys!” the boys used to chant as they dressed in the morning. As the washer filled, she added detergent and half the recommended amount of bleach. Any more and, experience had taught her, the clothes would yellow and disintegrate over time, especially the underwear elastic. She distributed their clothes equally around the machine and closed the lid. The resounding thud of padded metal on padded metal sounded musical to her.

The television played on, like talkative cousins at a barbeque. She found she wasn’t paying much attention but welcomed the sound. The baby nurse was now imprisoned and the storyline was about her trying to escape. This didn’t interest Ruth too much but without the t.v. on, the house would be silent, accented only by the charged buzzing of the refrigerator and the wet grinding of the washing machine. She had removed the batteries from the three ticking clocks and relied on digital now. The ticking had been too loud and too constant. Each clock was suspended at one individual time, the time she just couldn’t take its sound anymore. It was permanently 3:20 in the living room, 7:50 in the kitchen, and 1:17 in the bedroom. The only digital time was found on the microwave. A visitor without a watch could find himself in a state of limbo never really sure of how much time had passed.
She had put the clothes in the dryer on a commercial break. It buzzed, as insistent as a ringing telephone and she rose, slowly and deliberately. She walked the three rooms and opened the dryer door. The warm scent from the dryer eased her limbs. She folded. She folded. She folded. She stacked. As she pulled the t-shirts from the dryer, she put them to her face to absorb the soft, dry cotton smell. Like new shower curtain liners or rubber gloves, this was a scent she could not resist. Soon she was left with only socks to pair up, a tedious job that reminded her of an unfunny joke about square pegs in round holes. A match here, a match there but always one was left over without a partner.