1

HELEN TRIED NOT to look at her watch, because looking at your watch never changed anything, but it was already a quarter to seven and her husband's headlights had yet to appear at the top of the hill. Evening had darkened to the point where she had to press her forehead to the kitchen window and frame her eyes with her hands just to see outside. Meadow Close was a dead end street, and so even if she couldn't make out the car itself, the moment she saw headlights of any kind cresting the hill there was a one in six chance they were Ben's. More like one in three, actually, because by turning her face a bit in the bowl of her hands she could see the Hugheses' car parked in their driveway, and the Griffins', and that obscene yellow Hummer that belonged to Dr. Parnell—

"Mom!" Sara yelled from the living room. "Can I have some more seltzer?"

Twelve was old enough to get your own fanny out of the chair and pour your own third glass of seltzer. But it was Tuesday, and on Tuesday evening guilt always ruled, which was why Sara was eating dinner in front of the TV in the first place, and so Helen said only, pointedly, "Please?"

"Please," Sara answered.

She couldn't help stealing a look at the kitchen clock as she closed the refrigerator door. Six-fifty. Mr. Passive Aggressive strikes again, she thought. She wasn't always confident she understood that expression correctly—passive aggressive—but she referred to it instinctively whenever Ben failed to do something he had promised her he would do. Sara was sitting on the couch with her plate on her lap and her feet on the coffee table, watching some horrific show about rich girls; she still wore her shin guards but at least she'd remembered to take her cleats off. Helen placed the seltzer bottle on the table at a safe distance from her daughter's right foot.

"Thank you?" she said.

"Thank you," Sara repeated.

Then they both turned to watch a beam of light finish raking the kitchen, and a few seconds later Helen heard the lazy thump of a car door. Instead of relaxing, she grew more agitated. She hated to be late for things, and he knew that about her, or should have. Ben walked through the front door, wearing his slate-gray suit with an open collar and no tie. When he was preoccupied, which was his word for depressed, he had a habit of pulling off his tie in the car and then forgetting it there; last Sunday Helen, passing his Audi in the garage, had glanced through the window and seen three or four neckties slithering around on the passenger seat. It had sent a little shudder through

her, though she didn't know why. His eyes moved indifferently from Sara to her dinner plate to the TV as he trudged past them toward the hallway, but his expression didn't change; he was sunk too deep in whatever he was sunk in even to make the effort to convey his disapproval. Helen followed him into their bedroom. He finished emptying his pockets onto the dresser and then turned toward her without a trace of engagement, as if she were trying to talk to a photo of him.

"We're late," she said.

He shrugged, but did not so much as consult the watch right there on his wrist. "So let's go," he said.

"You're not going to change?"

"What for?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's Date Night?" she said.

He scowled and started taking off his pants. Really, it was like having two adolescents in the house sometimes. So that he wouldn't lose focus—he was perfectly capable, these days, of sitting on the bed in his shorts with his lips moving silently for half an hour or more—she stood there and watched him pull on a clean sweater and a pair of pressed jeans. His hair still looked like he'd been driving with the top down, but whatever. That kind of detail Sara was very unlikely to notice. When he was done they marched back out through the living room and Helen grabbed her bag and kissed Sara on the top of her head.

"You can call either cell," she said. "We'll be back by eight thirty. You know the drill."

On the television a girl and her father appeared to be auditioning a group of male strippers. "Happy Date Night," Sara said in a deep voice meant to sound hickish or retarded, and with one finger she mimed inducing herself to vomit.

They took Ben's car because it was still in the driveway. Helen tossed his necktie onto the back seat. He drove too fast, but only because he always drove too fast, and they were ten minutes late for Dr. Becket. Not that Becket seemed to care. Why would she? She got paid for the hour either way. So if she doesn't mind, Helen thought as they took their seats at the threadbare arms of the couch, and Ben doesn't mind, then why am I the only one who minds? What is the matter with me?

"So how was your week?" Becket said. She wore her hair in a tight gray braid whose teardrop-shaped bottom was nearly white. The office was in the rear section of an old carriage house that had long ago been converted for commercial use by a real estate broker, who operated out of the half of the house that faced the road and rented out the back. Fourteen years ago, when they were trying to make themselves look stabler and more prosperous for the insanely superficial Chinese adoption agencies, Helen and Ben had bought the Meadow Close house from that very broker. Now it was night and the only light on in the house was Dr. Becket's. Where was her husband? What did her kids do when she worked nights? Helen didn't always feel that certain about her, but unless you wanted to drive all the way to White Plains and back, Dr. Becket was the only game in town.

"Maybe a little better," Helen answered, when it became apparent Ben wasn't going to say anything. It was a lie, but in the atmosphere of this sorry room the truth was generally something you had to work up to. "We tried some of the things you suggested last time. We tried to at least sit down for meals together, even though that's difficult with Ben working past seven most nights."

"I know a number of couples," Becket said, "find that it works well to set aside one night a week for spending that kind of time together, make it part of the schedule rather than subject to the schedule, if you see what I mean. Like a Date Night." They both snorted, and it gave Helen a little nostalgic pang, honestly, just for the two of them to laugh at the same thing, at the same time. Becket raised her eyebrows, with her typical maddening dispassion.

"We can't really use that one," Helen explained. "We've been telling Sara that we're on Date Night every week when we come here."

"Maybe we can tell her that Thursday is our night to date other people," Ben said.

"That's not really that funny," Helen said, but it was too late, Becket was leaning forward, sinking her teeth into it like she did into any stupid, spontaneous thing either of them might ever blurt out. "I'm curious why you say that, Ben," she purred. "Is that something you'd like to do? See other people?"

Helen closed her eyes. Dr. Becket was just confirming every stereotype Ben held of her, every complaint he went through on the drive home every week about how she was a huckster, a charlatan, who didn't do anything except repeat whatever you said to her and then ask you what it meant. Why are we even doing this? he would ask. What is the point? Because you had to do something: she had no better answer than that, which was why she usually delivered it silently. You had to try something, even something as wasteful and frustrating and demeaning as this weekly hour in the back of the carriage house, because to do nothing was to find it acceptable that you were in a marriage where you hardly spoke to or touched each other, where your

husband was so depressed he was like the walking dead and yet the solipsism of his depression only made you feel cheated and angry, and your daughter was old enough now that none of this was lost on her whether she knew it yet or not.

But now thirty seconds had gone by and Helen hadn't heard him say anything or even make some kind of immature, derisive sighing sound, as he usually did; and when she opened her eyes again and looked at him, what she saw, to her astonishment, was her husband wiping his eyes with the back of his hand like a child.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. I mean Jesus. I would love to see other people."

Which could only be followed by a momentous silence; but since silence was anathema to Dr. Becket, on the grounds that silence might belong to anyone but vapid professional jargon was something that could bear her own distinctive stamp, she said to him, "Stay with that."

"Not anybody in particular," he went on. "In fact, a stranger would be best. I would like to wake up tomorrow next to someone who has no idea who I am. I would like to look out the window and not recognize anything. I would like to look in the fucking *mirror,*" he said with a truly inappropriate laugh, "and see other people. I mean, I cannot be the only person who feels that way. Are you seriously telling me that you don't feel that way too?"

It wasn't clear which of them he was speaking to; he was staring at the carpet, tears hanging from his nose, and stressing certain words with a kind of karate-chop motion of his hands.

"Helen, what are you feeling right now?" Dr. Becket said.

Ben was right, she thought; it was all an act, the gray-haired

old fake maintained an air of smug control even though she had no better idea what the hell was happening in front of her than either of her patients did. "A lot of things," Helen said, trying to laugh. "I guess mostly that that is the longest I have heard him talk at one stretch in like a month."

"Because it's all so *unsurprising,*" Ben said, very much as if he hadn't heard anyone else's voice. "I'm scared of it. I'm scared of every single element of my day. Every meal I eat, every client I see, every time I get into or out of the car. It all frightens the shit out of me. Have you ever been so bored by yourself that you are literally terrified? That is what it's like for me every day. That is what it's like for me sitting here, right now, right this second. It's like a fucking death sentence, coming back to that house every night. I mean, no offense."

"No *offense*?" Helen said.

"It's not that Helen herself is especially boring, I don't mean that, or that some other woman might be more or less boring. It's the situation. It's the setup. It's not you per se."

"Oh, thank you so much," Helen said, her heart pounding.

"Every day is a day wasted, and you know you only get so many of them and no more, and if anybody uses the phrase 'midlife crisis' right now I swear to God I am coming back here with a gun and shooting this place up like Columbine. It is an existential crisis. Every day is unique and zero-sum and when it is over you will never get it back, and in spite of that, *in spite of that,* when every day begins I know for a fact that I have lived it before, I have lived the day to come already. And yet I'm scared of dying. What kind of fucking sense does that make? I don't think I am too good for it all, by the way. In fact I am probably not good enough for it, if you want to think of it like

that. I am bored to near panic by my home and my work and my wife and my daughter. Think that makes me feel superior? But once you see how rote and lifeless it all is, you can't just unsee it, that's the thing. I even got Parnell across the street to write me a prescription for Lexapro, did you know that?" He finally looked up at Helen, whose hand was over her mouth, as if miming for him what she wanted him to do, to stop talking, to turn back. "Of course you didn't know that, how would you know that. Anyway, I took it for two months, and you know what? It didn't make the slightest fucking difference in how I feel about anything. And I'm glad."

Helen stole a glance at Becket, who was sitting forward with her fingers steepled under her weak chin. She could not have looked more pleased with herself.

"Something's got to give," Ben said. He sounded tired all of a sudden, as if the act of denouncing his wife and child and the whole life they had led together had taken a lot out of him. Poor baby, Helen thought hatefully. "Something's got to *happen*. It is hard to get outside yourself. It's hard to get outside the boundaries of who you are. Why is that so hard? But the pressure just builds up until there's some kind of combustion, I guess, and if it doesn't kill you then maybe it throws you clear of everything, of who you are. Well, either way. I suppose that's how it works."

He sat back into the couch, the same couch where his wife sat, and within half a minute he had disappeared again, his face had resolved into the same zombie cast Helen had been looking at for a year now, two years maybe, without ever really guessing what was going on behind it.

"I know it may seem painful," Becket said, "but I think we

have really, really given ourselves something to build on here tonight."

He drove them back home, because it was his car, even though she was newly afraid he would just run them into a tree or a lamppost if he saw the opportunity. In fact, she kind of wondered why he didn't. When they reached the top of the hill and came in view of their house, where every light was burning, he broke the silence by saying gently, "Can we at least agree that we are never going back to that heinous cunt's little office again?"

"Absolutely," Helen said. The end of Date Night.

The darkness made the thin ranks of trees at the end of their property line—this early in the spring, you could still see right through them to the back of the water treatment plant—look deep as a forest. He walked ahead of her through the vestibule and turned left into the kitchen to pull the cork out of the bourbon. Sara was in her room with the door closed; her light was still on and the tapping of her keyboard faintly audible, which meant either that she was doing homework or that she was not. Helen wanted to go in but knew she probably couldn't look into her daughter's face just then without crying; so she stood there in the hallway, her shoulder against the wall beside the door, and listened to the inscrutable tap of the keys. Back in the living room, she heard the television click on.

She knew what the right thing to do was. Dismantle it together: help him find a new place, work out the money, sign whatever needed to be signed, put on a united front for poor Sara, who'd already had two parents abandon her, after all. But for once in her life Helen didn't want to do it. Why should she make even this easy for him? She'd made everything easy for

him for eighteen years, and he repaid her by making an explosive, weepy public display of his horror at the very sight of her. Screw the right thing. If he hated her so much, if life with her was such a death sentence, then let's see him be a man about it, for once, and devise his own escape.

SHE DIDN'T HAVE to wait long. Every June, a new crop of summer associates arrived at Ben's law firm in the city for their strange audition. They were given a modicum of real work, though everyone knew and even joked about the fact that this was an extended bait and switch and that if they were lucky enough to be hired full-time they would then be worked as remorselessly as rented mules. It was really an audition for the lifestyle, for their receptivity to perks. They came from Harvard and Michigan and Stanford; they were young and obedient and performed simple tasks in a sportsmanlike way and were then sent out into the night with free passes and the account number of a car service and a sense of coming into their inheritance as dauphins of privilege.

They were at the very bloom of everything for which they felt destined and everything that others would begrudge them, at the very instant of life that a certain type of old hedonist would look back on and wish could have been arrested forever, and one of them, a short, blond, gregarious, almost comically well-built second-year from Duke named Cornelia Hewitt, attracted Ben's attention. He asked to have her assigned to a simple probate case he was working on—it was customary for junior partners to request summer associates based on nothing more than could be gleaned about them from seeing them walk

past one's open office door—and by the Fourth of July he had lost his composure to the point where one or two of his fellow partners took him aside, not in any official capacity of course, and advised him to cool it. He could not have cared less; or, to the extent that he did care about potential risk to himself or to the firm, such concerns were powerless against what was driving him. He took Cornelia out to lunch almost every day; he even called her in to work on weekends, which was unprecedented, but in order to be near her there was nothing at Ben's disposal he was unwilling to use. He had a photocopy of her personnel file hidden under the driver's seat of his car.

Cornelia was uncertain how to play it. There had to be an advantage in exciting this kind of intense personal interest from a partner, even if she wasn't sure what sort of advantage; the specifics were hazy, but there was something elemental about it that seemed as though it should be quite clear. She was smart enough to know that the woman tended to get blamed in the end, in these types of situations, if things went too far. She was always searching for a line in her dealings with him, a line where propriety met savvy, both when others were in the room and when they weren't. For Ben's part, watching her struggle to find that line, to figure out in this new adult context what consequences of her own allure she was or wasn't in control of—struggle with womanhood, in a way—was intoxicating. He began texting her, and calling her on her cell if she didn't respond to the texts, and when the summer was half over, when he began to sense that this whole infatuation was like his life in miniature in that the opportunity to act transcendently was now drifting away from him, he told her that he had fallen in love with her.

Actually, what he told her was that if he didn't have sex

with her very soon he was going to die. The rest was implicit. Once he declared himself, once he had renounced for good any claim to ambiguity, legal or otherwise, Cornelia felt the power in the relationship, which up to that point had seemed fluid, shift decisively onto her side, and that was when she really grew interested—if not in taking things to any sort of next level with this old married man, then at least in the potential of his agonizing status quo. By now most of her fellow associates had stopped speaking to her. She grew curious about the limits of what she, in her apparent irresistibility, could get this man—forty-five, previously dignified, successful in precisely the way she planned to be, an emotional slave to his lust for her—to do, and in what that might let slip about her future in her chosen field.

She stopped evading his casual touches, stopped hanging up on him when his descriptions of specific longings went past the point of self-restraint. She was not sure whether his complete loss of decorum meant that she would be hired by the firm for sure or that there was no chance in hell they would let her back in the building once her summer contract expired; but by now it had all become an experiment for its own sake, a sustaining of certain emotional inequities in the pursuit of knowledge about the way the world worked and where the best available seat in it might be. A woman of her gifts, she reassured herself, would get hired somewhere. Oddly, Ben realized at a certain point, without the realization slowing him down at all, that while he was irredeemably in love with her, he didn't really like her all that much. But he seemed to have decided that the only way to go out was to go out as a fool, an antagonist, exciting the crowd's derision, because having your cock in the mouth of a

gorgeous young girl was the only tolerable state of being he could imagine anymore, and was worth anything the cowardly circle of his peers could throw at him.

Helen had no inkling of any of it, but it would be unjust to conclude that she was stupid or oblivious or in some sort of denial. She didn't miss the signs, because from her perspective—seeing her husband only in the half hour before he slipped out the door in the morning, or in the hour between his arrival at home at night and his climbing into bed after three bourbons and turning out the light—there were no signs to miss. All was as it had been for some time. If he seemed a little more euphoric in the mornings, in a little more of a hurry to drink his coffee and knot his tie and get into the car and drive away from there, she read that only as a reflection of his feelings toward her: he was driving away from something, that is, not toward something else. Conversely, the long drive home up the Saw Mill at night seemed to drain all the dark exuberance right out of him, and when he came through the door there was nothing about his blank face and flat voice that was in any way unfamiliar. What weighed on her most was how poor a father Ben had become. The crazy bored rictus of a smile he wore whenever Sara talked to him was something Sara herself must surely have noticed, or felt. This made Helen sadder than anything else. She couldn't really remember anymore, except in a sort of evidentiary sense, a time when things had been better between herself and her husband, but she remembered piercingly how good they used to be between father and child.

For five days running, in August, Ben rented a room at the Hudson Hotel in the hopes that he could talk Cornelia into going there with him. He had not seen it. All week, each time

they were alone, he would remind her that the room waited there, empty and expensive, just for them, and would continue to wait there until she said yes to him.

On Friday, in a sort of invocation of Zeno's paradox, she concluded that she could say yes to him without breaking, either explicitly or in her heart, her vow not to let him have sex with her. At four o'clock he called the car service and the two of them rode in air-conditioned silence up to West Fifty-eighth Street. Ben was shivering. The people who flowed around the windows at every red light passed by as silently and impotently as ghosts; though in another way, Ben thought, he himself was the ghost, for they searched malevolently for him from their side of the smoked glass but still could not see his face. In the elevator at the Hudson he stood gallantly behind her and silently checked out the smooth skin rounding her shoulders, the patch of neck beneath her upswept hair, the incomparable, exaggerated heart of her ass, the legs in high heels that still brought her head up only to the level of his chin. The room was not the nicest in the hotel; it had, in full accord with his imaginings, a vast bed in it, and a shuttered window, and very little else. He sat in its one chair and stared at Cornelia as she stood in the narrow space between the foot of the bed and her own reflection in the dark screen of the television.

"We are not going to have sex, Ben," she said.

"All right," Ben said. He continued to stare, not in an effort to demean or unsettle her but almost as if he believed she did not even know he was there. After half a minute, the impatience of youth got the best of her, as he had guessed it would.

"Well then why did we come here?" she said. "What did you imagine would happen? Did you get what you wanted?"

"Take off your clothes," he said.

"What?"

"Take off all of your clothes, and just stand there and let me look at you. That will be enough." Who knows, he thought, maybe it will be enough. Probably not, though.

"Like hell," Cornelia said. "You'll jump me."

"I promise you I will not."

"I may be small but I can defend myself."

"It's the furthest thing from my mind."

"You'd just sit there in that chair and not get up?"

"I will. You there, me here."

"For how long?"

He considered it. "I don't know," he said. "Until whatever happens next happens, I guess."

She tried to think of it from every angle. If she couldn't come up with some good reason not to take him at his word, she was in danger of becoming a little aroused by the idea. Just the sight of her. Just the sight of her would be enough for him. No harm, no foul. She had always enjoyed the sensation of being admired, and though opportunities to let men admire her had never been in short supply, something about the sight of Ben, sitting patiently in the stiff-backed hotel chair in his tan summer suit, impressed on her that it would not be this way forever.

"You're not going to pull your dick out and start masturbating?" she said.

"Please," he said. "Who do you think I am?"

She stepped out of her heels, and when she straightened up again she was three inches closer to the floor. She had a boyfriend, a large, servile, sullen former lacrosse captain whom

she'd dated since college, when she was a sophomore and he was a senior. Over the past two years they had seen little of each other, mostly on weekends when one or the other of them could afford to travel, because she'd been in Durham; but when she came for her summer in New York, where he was already living while working as a junior analyst at Bank of America, it seemed only logical, not to mention kindly optimistic, for the two of them to share his apartment in Fort Greene. It had not gone all that well, in her mind at least, but that didn't mean she was going to cheat on him. He knew all, or most, about the texts and the cellphone calls from her boss. It would matter to Cornelia that standing frankly in the nude in a hotel room for ten minutes or half an hour, while one of the junior partners looked at her with actual tears running down his face, emphatically did not fall into the category of having sex with, or even being touched by, another man. She unzipped her dress, not slowly or provocatively, and when it fell to the floor she picked it up and laid it carefully along the foot of the bed, smoothing it with her hands. Her bra left red lines under her breasts and along the smooth skin below her arms; Ben stared at those lines as they faded away to nothing and felt as if he had triumphed over time. The bounty of her seemed endless. She took off her simple panties, and he saw that she had shaved her pubic hair, not completely but down to a small strip, as they all seemed to do these days, because it was beautiful that way. What a wonderful world, he thought, where women will do something so difficult and intimate and utterly pointless just for the sake of beauty. What a blessing to be a man in it.

"Okay?" Cornelia said finally, resisting the urge to fold her arms over her breasts.

He tried to speak but could not, so instead he nodded and smiled. It was a sad folly, he knew, to assume that even this feeling, the most powerful he could remember, wouldn't weaken in time just like every other feeling; but for the moment he was so suffused with gratitude for living that he could not imagine ever feeling any other way.

When she was dressed again he stood and opened the door for her, and there on the threshold—in no way out of breath, but rather as if he had been standing there for quite some time—was Cornelia's boyfriend. Ben heard Cornelia gasp before he actually saw the boy (he was looking at her ass again, and thinking about the difference between imagining what it looked like unclothed and remembering it) and he lifted his head just in time to receive the first blow right on the mouth. It was like being kicked by a horse. He couldn't believe how much force was behind it. He intuited what was happening, mostly from the quality of Cornelia's screams—she was trying to control the young man rather than plead with him—even though he'd had no idea there was any sort of boyfriend in the picture at all. He didn't appear in Cornelia's personnel file. His name, evidently, was Andy. Ben dropped to his knees and then felt a kind of splintering in the area of his nose before everything went white. The blows were all just one blow for a while, and then they had stopped. "No police," he mumbled in a voice that didn't sound like his own voice at all, and he opened one eye and saw that there was no one there to hear him anyway; the corridor he viewed sideways from his prone position on the carpeted floor was empty, and both Cornelia and his young assailant were gone.

His first thought, naturally, was to go back into the room,

which was paid for. But the key card was not in his pocket. It was entirely possible that he had forgotten it on the dresser, or even that he had left it there on purpose since he'd thought they were checking out. It seemed too long ago to remember now. Avoiding all mirrors, he rode down to the lobby, bulled his way through the horrified stares of strangers and bellhops in the lobby, and ordered the doorman to get him a cab.

"Sir?" was all the doorman was able to say.

Ben gave up and barged past him, head down, into the back seat of the first cab he saw. "Thirty-eighth and Tenth," he said. The cabbie was one of those who spent his whole shift talking incomprehensibly into a hands-free cellphone. He might have had Bigfoot in his back seat for all he knew or cared. Ben smiled, and immediately wished he hadn't. Something was broken in there, or if not broken, then way too loose.

The parking garage attendant at Thirty-eighth and Tenth was someone Ben had spoken to five afternoons a week for the last four years, and so the quality of the man's reaction gave Ben a little bit better idea just how bad he must have looked. His lapels and shirtfront were brown with blood, that much he could see, but his new face was still a mystery to him. The attendant—Ben had tipped him a hundred bucks last Christmas but was suddenly unable to remember his name—stood there like a statue, pale and terrified, even though Ben's mere presence should have made the fact that he wanted his car crystal clear without any further instruction. But the man's fear of him brought home to Ben that his spectacularly fallen condition, paradoxically, lent him a certain fleeting authority, a license to say anything, and that gave him an idea. He pulled out his wallet and gave the attendant—Boris! that was the name—two fifties.

"Boris, my man, go across the street," he said as clearly and haughtily as he could, pointing to the liquor store directly across Tenth Avenue from the garage, "and buy me a liter bottle of Knob Creek bourbon. If they don't have the Knob Creek, then Maker's Mark."

And Boris did it, if only to get away from the bloodstained arm around his shoulders. When he returned, Ben took the bag from him and made an extravagant gesture of impatience, as if to say, And where the fuck is my car? Once that was accomplished, Ben climbed in and shut the door, stuck the bottle between his thighs and uncorked it, and began, for the very last time, his nightly commute home to Rensselaer Valley.

He never made it, though he did get as far as County Route 55 just four and a half miles from his house, which under the circumstances was an impressive enough achievement. The trip from West Thirty-eighth Street to Meadow Close should have taken two hours at most; the extra hours were something Ben was completely unable to account for, and no one else ever came forward to do so either. Possibly he was just driving and drinking. The police, called by Helen after she was called by the senior partner at Ben's firm, were not the first to find him; an early-morning cyclist came across Ben's Audi just after dawn, lights on, windows down, having drifted to a stop half in the roadway and half on the shoulder. The fuel gauge was well below E. Ben's breathing was shallow and rapid, and he was lying on his right side across the front seat. He did not respond when spoken to, or when shaken squeamishly by the ankle. The cyclist pulled out his cellphone and dialed 911. He thought he probably ought to wait for the police or the ambulance to arrive, just in case anybody had any questions. He lifted his chin

and turned his head, but he heard no sirens, only a light wind moving the leaves. Then he held up his phone again and took some pictures with it.

Ben's unresponsive state was the work more of the bourbon than of his head injuries, though the swelling caused by the latter made things difficult for the paramedics at first. But though it was touch and go in the hours after he was found, in less than a week Ben had stabilized to the point where he was cleared to return home, pending arraignment. For by then criminal charges had been brought against him, and not just a DWI, which by itself might have been felonious enough to threaten his career. Instead, two detectives drove up from Manhattan to stand beside his hospital bed and arrest him for attempted sexual assault. He was so surprised he thought maybe it was just the morphine, but when he asked one of the floor nurses the next day if all that had really happened, she tightened her lips and nodded. Cornelia, Cornelia, he thought. Maybe she really was that ruthless about getting where she was going; or maybe she was that scared of the psychotic boy-giant who apparently considered her his own. Either way, he realized, he was now out in the open water, and he had gone all that way for her sake without ever having the first clue who she was.

Helen didn't even want to let him come home from the hospital, but he was so weak and in so much pain—these days hospitals turned you out pretty much the moment they felt they could do so without killing you—that she caved. Still, she couldn't believe how little sympathy she felt for him. Eighteen years. At night she left the Vicodin and a glass of water by his bedside and went to the living room to sleep on the couch. Sara came out of her room only for meals; school started in less than

two weeks. Their phones were all turned off. By the middle of each afternoon Helen longed frantically to get out of the house and just be somewhere else, even for an hour, but she was scared to leave Sara alone with her father and more scared to leave Ben alone by himself. She sat in the kitchen and watched for strange cars through the blinds.

Any old-fashioned hope that this was the sort of indiscretion powerful men might cause to disappear was undone by the camera-phone photos, which were all over the Web in a day, and in the newspapers the day after that. A letter of resignation, which Ben signed, had been brought to him in the hospital. His former partners then let him know, via registered letter, that, in an effort to send the message that they did not condone his behavior, they had filed disbarment proceedings against him as well; they had no real grounds to do so, but just knowing they considered their reputation damaged enough to care about the symbolism of filing was chilling to him. He had a few acquaintances who were litigators at rival firms, but even those who returned his phone calls wouldn't take his case. With a bail hearing imminent, it didn't seem like a great idea to represent himself. In the end he had to settle for a lawyer right there in Rensselaer Valley—the only one in town, in fact—who insisted on a large cash retainer because, as he said to Ben and Helen while drinking a cup of take-out coffee in his second-floor office above the hardware store, he wasn't at all sure that when everything was said and done they would have a cent left to pay him.

"If it's as hopeless as all that," Helen asked the lawyer, whose name was Joe Bonifacio, "then what do you suggest we do?"

"Two things," said Bonifacio. He must have been around

the same age as Helen and Ben, sallow and sharp-eyed, and dressed as if for yard work; though he was polite and engaged, she couldn't help feeling there was something obligatory, something ginned up, about his interest in them. You'd have thought he saw a case like this every day. He had apparently spent his whole life, apart from college and law school, right there in Rensselaer Valley, which made it remarkable that Helen couldn't remember ever seeing him before. "One, Ben, we have to start to lay the groundwork for the idea that you are not responsible for your actions, that they were committed in an altered state. You admit nothing, you apologize for nothing. Let me ask you this: had you been under any particular stress in the weeks or months leading up to the incident in question?"

"No," said Ben.

"Yes," said Helen, looking at her husband in amazement. "Yes, he was. He was emotionally unstable. We have a doctor who will surely testify to that. Well, not a doctor, really, but close enough."

"Stop it," Ben said coolly to her. "I don't want to be a coward now. Let it fall on me. If I'm going out, I don't want to go out as one of those guys claiming he's not responsible for his actions."

Which Helen actually found somewhat moving, insofar as she could be moved by anything to do with Ben these days; but when she looked over at Bonifacio, he wore a smirk like he was enjoying a bad TV show. How he must have hated guys like Ben, Helen thought—lawyers who rode off to Manhattan every morning while he climbed the stairs beside the hardware store and tried to act outraged over whatever sad grievance one of the locals might bring in.

"Here's the thing to remember, though, Ben," he said. "It doesn't all fall on you. If you want to go the noble route, while you're off in jail writing your memoirs or whatever, your wife and your daughter will be put out of their house, and any money you have anywhere will be taken away from them faster than you can say 'mea maxima culpa,' all right? Now I am sure you would like to avoid their having to suffer for your sins any more than absolutely necessary, and if you want to avoid that, or at least negotiate it, the only way to do so is to find a way to contest the idea of your guilt."

Ben's response was an acquiescent sigh. His usual practice was trusts and estates, but at bottom, Helen saw, both men were lawyers, and shared an acceptance of the immutable truth of what Bonifacio was saying.

"So here's what we do. Ben will be voluntarily committed to an institution in Danbury called Stages, maybe you've heard of it, where he will be treated for his chronic depression, bipolar syndrome, attention deficit disorder, panic attacks, alcoholism—"

"I don't really have a drinking problem," Ben said.

"Did I ask you if you did?" said Bonifacio, not unkindly. "You'll recall I said there are two things you need to do, and that's number one. Now, as to the rape charge." Helen winced but did not correct him. "It's my opinion that they know there's no there there, in terms of evidence, and that their plan is to withdraw the charge before trial no matter what. They just threw it because they know that you'll never get the stink of it off you. And the reason that's smart, as I'm sure Ben has figured out, is that it softens the ground for the civil case, which in my opinion is where this whole flaming bag of poo has been aimed from the beginning. We have to start insulating you against that

judgment as best we can, and we have to start today. So forgive me if I seem to overstep my bounds here, but thing two, Helen, is that you file for divorce immediately, on grounds of infidelity. Ben will not contest it."

Ben frowned. "Does it have to be infidelity, though?" he said. "Because, not to get all Talmudic about it, but, as Helen knows, I was not actually, literally unfaithful to her."

"As Helen knows?" Helen said. "What the hell do I know about anything? I only know what you say."

"It's the truth," Ben said. "No reason to lie anymore."

"If I may," Bonifacio said, tossing his Starbucks cup in the wastebasket behind his chair. "The two of you are straying down a path which, while of course I understand and sympathize, is not really constructive to our purpose. You're getting worked up about how to know the difference between what appears true versus what is true. You might as well forget about all that for a while. Everything you say or do now, no matter how intimate, is being performed for an audience, namely the jury pool here in town and in the rest of the circuit. It would be good for you to get used to that as quickly as possible."

"Look," Ben said weakly; Helen could see he was tiring. "I know this isn't a very lawyerly thing to propose, but just in terms of, as you say, softening the ground, I think if you could just get me in a room with her—"

Bonifacio was already shaking his head. "If what you want is to let everyone know how sorry you are," he said, "then good luck, God bless, and get yourself a new lawyer. But I'll tell you what I will do. Since you seem to need to get it out of your system like that, why don't you say you're sorry right now?"

"Right now?" said Ben.

"Right here and now. And then never again."

Ben looked down at the floor, and then, with great difficulty, at his wife. He did seem changed, Helen thought, but only in a kind of animal way, wounded and in pain and without his usual instincts. "Please believe me," he said to her. "Even though I don't necessarily understand everything I've done, I take total responsibility for it. You and Sara don't deserve any of this. I am so sorry."

"I don't know why," Helen said quickly. "You got what you wanted. It's all destroyed now. I don't know why you don't go back to the house and put up a big Mission Accomplished banner."

"Feel better now?" said Bonifacio. "I didn't think so. Still, if you get the urge again, you can repeat as necessary. Just as long as it's always in this office, and always in front of me."

Helen drove home (Ben's license was now suspended) faster than she liked; she wanted to beat the school bus and be home when Sara arrived, and also to minimize the time spent near him. Ben asked to speak to Sara alone when she got home, and Helen almost agreed to it, just to spare herself the guilt and agony of seeing her daughter's face at the climactic moment of their betrayal of her, a betrayal the girl might have seen coming years ago if she hadn't been so young, too young to anticipate or even, very likely, to imagine it. But it had to be borne, for her sake. Sara didn't cry; instead she withdrew solemnly, deep inside herself, nodding at all the appropriate times, her face a mask, never once contradicting or mocking them, as she would have done in almost any other sort of conversation. Then she went into her room and closed the door and played music (nothing sad or angry, just the same pop music she always played) while

Ben packed his suitcase to check in to Stages, and Helen sat in the kitchen and her anger gave way to a meditation on her own role in having failed to prevent the end of life as they had all known it up to now.

For the next few weeks, everywhere she went—which, she realized with the sad, clear vision brought on by misfortune, wasn't really that many places (the Starbucks, the Price Chopper, the middle school, the dry cleaner, the dump)—her neighbors and casual friends pretended not to see her, or to be busily on their way elsewhere across the street, not because they condemned or looked down on her but because the level of disgrace she'd been subjected to was so epic that they weren't even sure how to acknowledge it and thus how to talk to her in the way that they used to. Only her closest friends made a show of everything being just as it was before, which was worse, in a way. There was now an element of performance to their friendship, even when no one else was around to see or be upbraided by their example, which brought home to Helen that it was really themselves these friends were performing for—burnishing their estimation of themselves as people who would not abandon an unjustly scandalized friend.

And in truth it was that notion of herself as a victim that put Helen off too, that made her come up with excuses when friends called to invite her forcefully to lunch or to ostentatiously offer her a ride to the next Parents' Coffee at school. She had genuinely no idea of the depths to which her husband had been descending over that summer, but did that exonerate her—having no idea? It had been well over a decade since she'd had any job other than to maintain a happy home and family environment for their only child, and she had failed at that job

rather decisively. So spectacular was her failure that the mushroom cloud over her happy home environment was featured in the newspaper every day for a week, not just at home in Rensselaer Valley, where there was never much going on, but even in Manhattan, where the destruction of some rich Brahmin at the hands of his own perverse compulsions was always a tabloid chestnut.

Every day was a limbo, in which the house—a white, weathered, green-shuttered ranch with a finished basement, which everyone always said was more spacious inside than it looked from the outside—served as both prison and fortress. Ben had not contacted his wife and daughter since passing through the doors of Stages—quite likely he was forbidden to, for a while anyway, according to some twelve-step protocol—and Helen made no attempt to contact him. Though they'd never discussed it, or even said goodbye, it would not have surprised her terribly if she never saw him again. When eighth grade began for Sara a week or so after his departure, it was still much too soon for anyone there to have forgotten anything; at the end of the first day Helen asked her how it had gone, seeing her classmates again, and Sara gave the worst, most distressing answer possible, which was that she didn't want to talk about it.

Then there was the question of money. It hadn't disappeared, exactly, but it was hard to trust that the seventy-five thousand posted for bail would ever grace their account again; and then a Manhattan judge, at the request of Cornelia's lawyers, had taken the extraordinary step of freezing all of Ben's assets, including the house, which prevented them from selling it, for financial or any other reasons. The lawyers argued that Helen and Ben's pending divorce action was nothing more than a

cynical attempt to shield themselves from future civil liability, and the judge, without deigning to ask Helen or anyone who knew her whether she was the sort of person who would break up her child's home as a legal maneuver, agreed. Stages cost $850 a day, and there was no timetable for Ben's discharge. Bonifacio's retainer was sixty-two thousand dollars. Helen had a checking account with about eight grand left in it. Her life was such that her only expenses were food and gas, but still.

She would have to go back to work, and she had to do it somewhere other than Rensselaer Valley, because there were no jobs there outside the service industries and because they needed a fresh start anyway, out from under the dark umbrella Ben's madness had opened up above their lives. They needed to begin again. It was just the two of them now. Helen thought about returning to Manhattan after fourteen years and permitted herself to get a little excited, despite the fact that her previous, and really only, job experience had been as a sales manager at Ralph Lauren, a job she'd quit during her second pregnancy when a doctor had consigned her to bed. She had little sense of how employable she might now be in the city (or anywhere else, really), and so she decided to set up a few exploratory interviews. On a Monday morning in mid-September she dropped her daughter, sad and stoic, outside the front doors of the junior high school, then sped home, changed into a suit, and drove herself to the train station.

It had been a long time since she'd held a salaried job. Not that she'd been idle all these years; on the contrary, being a young, bright housewife of means in a community like Rensselaer Valley meant that your commitments gradually expanded to fill your days and then some. People found you;

they called you up and invited themselves over on behalf of an array of local organizations: the elementary school, the library, the pool club, the book club, the Democratic Town Committee. She'd even written some stories for the local weekly. All that, of course, was shot to hell now, less by scandal than by the toxicity of pity. Helen had four interviews lined up for today and high hopes for none of them. She was forty-three and had had to go online to learn how to put together a decent-looking CV. No one to help her with that stuff now, and only herself to help Sara with it when the time came. Helen took a deep breath and shook herself to ward off the pessimism she felt settling over her. The train, after all, was full, even though it was past the start of the workday. All these people were headed to the city, yet none of them, or very few, could have had the pretext of a nine-to-five job there. So she wasn't alone. There were plenty of others in the same position which now seemed so marginal to her, even if none of them had gotten there quite the way she had.

The first interview was at Condé Nast. She'd subscribed to some website that listed an editorial assistant's job at *Condé Nast Traveler,* but apparently all the job openings at all the Condé Nast magazines funneled down into one big slough of HR despond that didn't differentiate between one magazine and another. Too bad, because work at a travel magazine sounded attractive to Helen, but it scarcely mattered in the end because it seemed she had grossly misunderstood the nature of an editorial assistant's job in the first place. She thought it had to do with assisting in the editing of the magazine, a notion of which the HR person disabused her with the exaggerated patience usually reserved for dealing with the very old. The

second interview was for a fund-raiser's job with the Mercantile Library. It seemed to go well enough. At least there was no condescension or hostility involved, not on a visible level anyway. She did notice a sort of quizzical cock of the head when she answered the interviewer's question about the size of the average donation she'd solicited in her work for the town library in Rensselaer Valley. Still, asking for money was asking for money: how different could it be?

She ate lunch at a Chipotle—horrible, but she didn't want to go anywhere nicer and ask for a table for one. Her dignity had taken enough hits as it was. Nervously she checked her cell to make sure there was no emergency call from Sara or from Sara's school. The way her life had been going lately, it would figure that such a call might come on the one day she was two hours from home and didn't want anybody to know about it. Her third interview was in the neighborhood of the Empire State Building, in a shabby little office building with a lobby about as wide as a walk-in closet. Judging from the framed directory she perused as she waited a minute and a half for the one elevator, it seemed mostly full of accountants and tax preparers; she was headed, though, for Harvey Aaron Public Relations. They had advertised, in the *Times,* for an entry-level position as junior vice president, which was confusing, though less so after she walked in and saw that the office consisted of two rooms of identical size, one of which belonged to Harvey Aaron and the other to everyone else—three desks, two of which were occupied by bored-looking young Latina women reading magazines. The third desk, presumably that of the junior vice president, had a pair of running shoes on it.

When Harvey stood up to greet her as she entered, he was

still holding a plastic fork and a container of some sort of pasta salad. "Come in, sit down, excuse me," he said, looking around for something suitable on which to wipe his fingers, eventually just giving up and waving her into the room's only other chair. He was older than Helen, maybe sixty or a dissipated fifty-five, and she was comforted by that, since her other stops that day had contributed to the sense that no one worked aboveground in Manhattan who was over the age of forty. He wore a beige suit and a blue tie, a rather stylish one (though it had a new oil stain on it), which suggested the attentions of a Mrs. Aaron. He seemed a little nervous just to see her walk in, as if she weren't the kind of person who normally came around during the day, and maybe for that reason she felt like she could relax a little in front of him.

"Sorry to interrupt your lunch," she said.

"Well, you weren't. I mean you sort of were, but as Mona out there will tell you, I don't really have a set lunchtime, I'm just kind of picking at food all day. Helps me think. Mona?" he said suddenly, much louder. "Any napkins out there, by any chance?" Mona didn't appear, not then or for the remainder of the interview. "So where do we begin? I never know where to begin these things. I know I have your résumé on the computer somewhere." He tapped a few keys and sat back hopefully. "No," he said. He typed something else and hit Return with a flourish. "Son of a bitch," he muttered, and then flinched guiltily. Helen unsnapped her bag and slid him another copy of her CV.

He looked it over. "Computer skills are obviously a big requirement around here," he said. "Just kidding. Anyway, I don't see any sort of public relations background here, and for this job, even though it could technically be an entry-level

thing, I am kind of hoping for someone with some experience in the field. Of course I may not get that. You have no experience at all in the field?"

"Not in public relations per se," Helen said gamely.

"Not per se? What do you mean? You have experience that's whatever is the opposite of per se? Per don't say?"

Helen laughed. There was something very unassuming about him, both cheerful and apologetic, even as he was in the process of brushing her off just like everyone else had. "Well, I guess what I mean," she said, "is that I'm actually not entirely sure what it is you do."

He raised his eyebrows. "'You' meaning me, or 'you' meaning what the hell does 'public relations' mean in general?"

"Both," she said, surprising herself with her bravery. If this had happened at Condé Nast, she would have smoothed out her skirt and left by now.

He pursed his lips. "Rensselaer Valley," he said, surprisingly. "Nice town. I have a house in New Paltz myself. May I—I hope you won't think I'm presumptuous if I ask you something?"

"Not at all."

"There is a certain thinness to this résumé," he said, quite kindly, "a certain, um, provincial quality, that suggests to me that you have a life—a married life, a family life—in which circumstances have maybe changed recently?"

Helen colored, and nodded. She had meant for the CV to cover that up, not reveal it.

"And you have children?" he went on. "Because this is the résumé of someone who has spent the last ten or fifteen years raising a family—"

"One child," Helen said. "Yes."

Harvey beamed at her, as if she would want to share in his professional pride at having guessed these embarrassing facts about her. "Then you already know what we do," he said, tilting his chair backwards. "We tell stories. We tell stories to the public, because stories are what people pay attention to, what they remember. Why? Because when they were little, they had devoted, beautiful mothers like you, who told them stories, and stories are how they first learned to make sense out of the whole big, confusing world."

"Stories," Helen said indulgently, though the truth was that his mere invocation of Sara, whom he did not know, whose existence was no more than generic to him, had caused a little tightness in her throat that kept her from wanting to risk saying anything more. That kind of thing had happened to her a lot these last few weeks.

"Now, because our services cost money, the protagonists of these stories tend to be people who are rich, or famous, or better yet rich and famous. But the stories themselves are everyman stories, familiar. Archetypal. Am I pronouncing that right? We put these figures in stories whose outcomes we're already familiar with from childhood, so that way we know how the audience will judge them when we finish telling them. The stories lead the people to the judgment we want. Is all this making sense?"

"Don't they ever object?" Helen asked.

"Who?"

"The celebrities, the rich people. Do they ever resist being put into these everyman stories?"

Harvey smiled, a little condescendingly, Helen thought. "They're used to it. They live in publicity, it's like their

atmosphere, so they already know they'll get judged, and it's just a question of influencing how. Unlike the rest of us, they don't really have the option of assuming there's no one watching. Anyway, it's what they pay us for. We don't go to them, you understand; they come to us. Do you know any celebrities yourself?"

Helen was, naturally, thinking of her husband, who had not long ago been on the front page of the *New York Post,* and whose name a man like Harvey would surely recognize in an instant. In Harvey's world this association with the public realm might even have advanced Helen's case; still, she just didn't feel like getting into it with him. She shook her head.

"Not at present," she said.

"Not at present?" He laughed. "I like you. What about at past, then?"

Helen smiled shyly. "Well, if you want to go back a ways, I actually went to junior high with Hamilton Barth."

She was worried he would laugh at her, at the pathetic tenuousness of this connection, but he did not. Any point of contact with someone as famous as Hamilton Barth was worth cultivating, and respecting. His eyes grew wide. "No kidding," he said. "Where was this?"

"In a little town in northern New York," said Helen, "where we both grew up." "Little town" didn't begin to describe it. They sat in the same Catholic school classroom every year from kindergarten through the eighth grade; Helen's family moved from Malloy to Watertown the following year, but Hamilton made it through only two and a half years of high school anyway before dropping out and heading south to the city, and then west to L.A., to become an actor. Was there any hint, back then,

of the deep, tortured, mercurially tempered, disarmingly handsome movie star he would later become? No, there was not, unless you counted the fact that he was short, as the great male movie stars tended to be for some reason, distilled and without excess, like bonsai trees. They weren't close friends back then, but they knew a lot about each other, because you knew a lot about everybody your age in a town that small; and if you wanted to get technical, it had gone a little further than that. The two of them were once paired off in a game of Seven Minutes in Heaven, one Saturday night in the vacant apartment over Erin White's parents' garage. Even though Helen had to bend her knees slightly to kiss him, Hamilton was—and she probably would have remembered this just as vividly even had he not gone on to become a brooding object of desire all over the world—a fantastic kisser, relaxed and confident and patient, and she remembered her shock and curiosity about whom he'd been practicing with, even during the kiss itself. He tried to get under her skirt, just as they all did, but she only had to knock his hand away one time, which struck her as gentlemanly, almost romantic. "You have nice lips" was what he had said to her after; again, not much, except when considered in relation to the soulless things other eighth-grade boys usually had to say to you after you pushed their hands out from under your skirt. She and Hamilton were never alone together after that night, though, and four months later Helen's father announced that they were moving. She'd stayed in touch for a few years with a couple of the old Malloy girls who were still in touch with Hamilton when he started to get famous, but she'd never laid eyes on him again, at least not without buying a ticket like everybody else. She'd made out with Hamilton Barth: it was a

story Helen told only her closest friends, not because it was so private but because she worried how lame it would make her sound, this seven-minute brush with greatness from a quarter of a century ago. She certainly wasn't going to trot it out for Harvey, whom she'd known for all of half an hour.

"How about that," Harvey said softly. "Are you still friends with him?"

"No," Helen said. "I mean, it's not that we're not friends, or that we stopped being friends. I hope he'd still remember me fondly, if he ever even thinks about the old days at all, but we haven't been in contact for a very long time."

Harvey's ardor cooled visibly. "Well, in all honesty, he'd be kind of a big fish for a little operation like ours anyway. So, Helen, here's the skinny, as we used to say around here. I've really enjoyed meeting you, and in all honesty I think you could learn to do this job just fine over time; but I have two more people coming in today who actually know how to do the job already. One of them used to be at Rogers and Cowan, for Pete's sake. So I really wish I could help you, but honestly, at this moment it doesn't look too good."

"I understand," said Helen as she rose, and in fact she did understand. She saw how she looked—earnest, naïve, unremarkable—to this sweet older man, and to the whole world of prospective employers at large. He edged around his desk and escorted her to the door, still brushing at crumbs on his torso. "Thank you for your time," Helen said. "That's a sharp tie, by the way. A present from your wife?"

He looked down at it, as if he'd forgotten he had it on, and smiled. "Yes it was," he said. "That was our last birthday together. Of mine, I mean. She passed away that summer."

Here she was feeling so comfortable around him, Helen reflected two hours later on the train home, that she'd forgotten the cardinal virtue of knowing when to keep one's idiot mouth shut. He still wore the ring, though, which was interesting, and excused her mistake a little bit, but did not excuse her opening up a subject like that when she knew nothing at all about him. No wonder the professional world seemed so closed to someone like her. The fourth interview had been so mortifying she was already having trouble remembering it. She was back in the house and in casual clothes ten minutes before Sara got home from school.

The two of them ate dinner together, at opposite ends of the table. A chicken breast with a ham-and-cheese roll-up under the skin, some yellow rice and string beans. Sara had always hated eating dinner with her parents, and took no pains to disguise it. Like all of her contemporaries, she was restless when not doing at least two things at once, and the thought of eating—just eating, without the TV or her iPod on, without a phone in hand, without a book to read—struck her as not just wasteful but sentimental. She talked to her mother easily enough when the atmosphere was more relaxed and spontaneous, but at the table it felt quaint and enforced, all the more so now that the conceit that they were a Normal Family, one that Sat Down To Dinner Together, had been debunked forever. Nothing provoked a teenager like the whiff of hypocrisy.

"What did you do today?" Helen asked tentatively.

Sara shrugged. "Same old," she said. "Class, lunch, class, soccer."

"Weren't you going to Sophia's house after, to study?" Sara shrugged, which could have meant any number of things, but

some of those things were so potentially heartbreaking—when seventh grade had ended, and everything was still outwardly normal, Sophia was Sara's best friend—that Helen didn't have the heart to pursue it any further. "How was soccer?" she said instead.

Sara scowled. "The coach is so unfair," she said.

She was developing an acne problem already, just a few months after turning thirteen. One of the many revelations of adoption: whatever had happened to you at the age your daughter was now, good or bad, whatever changes you went through, early or late—it was irrelevant, it was of no value to anyone. Even the fact that Sara and her mother were of different races somehow hadn't prepared Helen for the shock of her own uselessness in that regard. There were no genetic predictors. You were as surprised by what she became as she was.

On Thursday Helen was filling out some parental-consent forms for school and watching CNN with the sound down, in case anything major happened somewhere in the world, when the phone rang. "Helen, it's Harvey Aaron," she heard. "Listen, I am very pleased to tell you that for various reasons those two other guys didn't work out and so I'd like to offer you the job here, if you're still available, that is. Probably rude of me just to assume that you're still available. I'm sorry for that. So are you?"

"Yes," said Helen, amazed, hearing her own voice while watching the anchorwoman's lips move silently on the TV. "I am available."

Harvey asked if she could start as soon as Monday, and she almost said no, but then she realized that there was nothing other than fear of the unknown that would prevent her starting two hours from right now, if it came to that. She hung up and,

after a few moments, whooped with laughter. What the hell had she just done? Harvey himself seemed so chaotic, and the office so moribund, that it wouldn't have surprised her if the whole operation went under before she cashed her first paycheck; she had to remind herself that the place had somehow stayed in business for thirty years. It was the first instance of good timing her life had seen in quite a while. She finished off the endless school forms—liability waivers, most of them—with a much lighter heart. That night at dinner, she told Sara what had happened, and what to expect in terms of the change in their routines.

"They hired *you*? Really? A PR firm? No offense," Sara said. "Well, it's a good thing, I guess. I mean I've been wondering if we were just going to go broke or what."

"We're not going to go broke," Helen said quickly. "But it's true, we do need some money coming in while your father's not working." It was so much more dire than that, but Helen was constitutionally averse to talking about money with her child. Besides, she didn't really want to find out how much Sara already knew. "And now we'll have it. So that's great."

Sara looked thoughtful. "What time will you get home?" she said.

"Six," Helen said, though in truth she and Harvey hadn't discussed it. She hadn't even thought to ask him. "But you've got soccer until five most days anyway, and you can go to friends' houses if you don't want to be here alone, and you've got the cellphone if you need anything and the neighbors—"

"Yeah, I think I can survive here for an hour or two all by myself," Sara said acidly. "But I mean—"

"What?" Helen said.

"What about just moving to the city?"

Helen blanched. It was something she had planned to wait at least a month before bringing up as a possibility, on the grounds that there was only so much change a child should be asked to accommodate in one shot. But Sara's whole life was founded on upheaval. It was Helen, really, who had a limit on how much of a chance she was willing to take that life might improve if they just tried their luck somewhere else.

"First things first," she said. "Let's bank a few paychecks and then see where we are. But that's something you'd be willing to consider?"

Sara snorted. "Consider? Try dream of," she said. "These people are hicks. And now they all think they're better than us. Plus I'm not saying I want to forget about Dad or anything but it would be kind of a relief to be able to look at something, or someone, that doesn't remind me he's not here. Is there dessert?"

On Monday Helen took the earlier, more crowded train, full of tense faces and clubby nods of recognition, and showed up at work so far ahead of schedule she had to wait in the hallway for ten minutes until Mona arrived with a key to let her in. She expected some kind of formal orientation, but instead Mona just showed her how to set up Google news alerts for all nine of the business's current clients, as well as twelve other names Harvey had identified as potential clients. When that was done, it was just a matter of waiting for these alerts to show up in her inbox; in the meantime she was handed a stack of gossip magazines and asked to scan them thoroughly for any mention of those same twenty-one names. Harvey came in around eleven; he looked surprised to see Helen sitting there at her

desk but then nodded quickly in embarrassment, went into his office without a word to her and shut the door.

Mona and the other employee there, whose name was Nevaeh, spoke all day long to each other but never once to Helen, unless it was to answer some question they couldn't pretend not to know the answer to, like where the ladies' room was. At four forty-five they reapplied their makeup and left without a word to the boss or to Helen. The whole first week was like that. She didn't mind the idleness, or the feeling of being ignored—this wasn't some journey of personal growth or something, she was just looking to keep herself and her child out of the poorhouse—but so little happened around there that she didn't see how any of their jobs could possibly last. She was relieved when Mona handed her her first paycheck and then relieved all over again when it cleared. When she mentioned to Harvey that she didn't feel like she had that much to do, he looked embarrassed and said, "Hurry up and wait, as they used to tell us in the Army," and went back into his office with a bag full of Chinese food and shut the door.

"The guy who used to have your job quit to go back to school," Mona finally told her. "He didn't have nothing to do either. But if Harvey doesn't hire someone to take his place, that's like admitting that the business is shrinking."

Then one morning Harvey came in on time for once and called all three women into his office. "I think we may have something here," he said. "I went out to Brooklyn last night to have dinner with my son, and the two of us ordered out for some Chinese. Any of you ever heard of Peking Grill?"

Mona and Nevaeh nodded sagely. "There's one up in the Heights," Nevaeh said.

"Right," Harvey said, "there's like eight of them. Anyway, we call and ask for a delivery, and they say no. No? They say no, we can't, because our delivery guys are on strike. But you're still open? I say. Sure. So Michael and I walk three blocks to Peking Grill, and we have to cross a god damn *picket* line to get in, and inside it's empty except for one guy who's sitting alone at a table and *crying,* for Pete's sake. Sobbing. He's the owner."

"Disgusting," Mona said.

Harvey glanced at her curiously but then went on. "So someone is apparently trying to unionize the deliverymen at all the Peking Grills, which I would think would be difficult because pretty much everyone who works there is illegal, but nevertheless. They are picketing the owner not only for a wage hike but for back wages for all the years they say they were underpaid. I ask him if he's had any calls from the papers, and he says yes, just that day, from somebody at the *Post*. He hasn't returned it yet."

He sat back in his chair. "So I sense an opening here," he said. "For us. For us to intervene."

Mona and Nevaeh just went on nodding, but Helen, who couldn't help herself, said, "On which side?"

The two women shot her an angry look, and all of a sudden Helen understood that they weren't really following any of what Harvey said either but had just settled on nodding as the quickest way to get through these enthusiasms of his and back to their desks. Harvey, though, looked delighted and indulgently thoughtful, as if he were only pretending to think through a question for a student's benefit, even though someone of his intelligence would have known the answer instinctively. "Well," he said, "the deliverymen don't really have much of a public

image problem, do they? I mean, they risked their lives to get here, they're being paid about two dollars an hour, they're sleeping Christ knows where. Everybody already sympathizes with them. In New York, they do, at least. If we were somewhere in flyover country, they'd have a posse out for these guys, but hey, this is Manhattan. Whereas this owner, who came here in exactly the same circumstances but then had the temerity to actually succeed, to make himself a millionaire—his name is Chin, by the way—he's being portrayed as the villain, he's the one with the story that needs to get out. He's the one in need of our expert services. Which is what I convinced him of last night while we ate some very delicious chow fun."

Helen Googled Chin and, sure enough, most of the references to him were scathing. She was printing out a few of them—Harvey disliked having links sent to him—when he opened his door and tried to beckon her into his office without the other two women noticing. "Mr. Chin and I are having lunch today at the Peking Grill up on Seventy-eighth Street," he said when she came in. "I'd love it if you'd come along. You don't have to do anything but take notes. But I think it would be useful if he saw that we're, you know, an operation here, that he wouldn't just be putting his business in the hands of one old Jew who likes Chinese food."

They arrived at 11:30, which seemed early for lunch but was probably scheduled with an eye toward minimizing the presence of picketers; indeed there was only one sullen young Chinese man sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk who lifted his head and glared at them as they walked past him and the row of locked, scarred bikes.

"Mr. Chin," Harvey said. Chin sat by himself at the table

closest to the kitchen, his hands in his lap. "My associate, Helen Armstead," Harvey said as he sat down and looked around hopefully for a waiter with a menu.

"You say you help me," Chin said without looking up. "How you help this? Nobody come. Nobody call for delivery. Sixty percent of our weekday business, delivery."

"Well, it is a little early for the lunch trade," Harvey said encouragingly. "Though I confess I didn't have much breakfast myself."

"Fucking liberal Upper West Siders," Chin said abruptly. "They get hard-on for anybody say they oppressed. Guess what? I was oppressed too! I came here with nothing. Same province as all these guys. Only difference between me and them is that I work hard instead of complain and I make something of myself. What you supposed to do here, right? But do they congratulate me, respect me? No. I'm the bad guy now. Some fat bitch with a stroller call me a fascist."

"Well, that's a term that gets thrown around a lot," Harvey said. Chin looked up at him then; his lips began to quiver, and he put his napkin to his face and started to cry again. "Here's the thing," Harvey went on, his calm voice at odds with the panicked darting of his eyes back and forth between his weeping client and Helen, as if expecting her to know, by virtue of being a woman, how to comfort this wounded man whose hardships and resentments she could not possibly guess at. "What you just told us? You've got to get that story out there. You've got to tell people who you are. This isn't just some management-labor dispute. You are an authentic American success story. You need to let us fight back, take the moral high ground from these jealous, petty, self-entitled people who would cut you down,

and correct the injustice of the way you've been portrayed by the other side. Right, Helen?"

"No," said Helen.

Harvey fell silent and stared at her in wonder, and, a moment later, Chin lifted his eyes and did the same. Helen had stunned herself as much as them. She hadn't planned to say a thing. She felt what she was about to say coming over her, moving in her, before she understood what it was, and with an air of total conviction she began saying it so that she could hear it too.

"What is the goal here, Mr. Chin?" she said.

He looked at her confusedly.

"To get people back at these tables?" she prompted him.

"Yes," he said. "To get people back into the restaurant."

"Then here's what we do. We apologize."

"For what?" Mr. Chin said, bristling a little.

"America is the greatest country in the world," Helen said. "When there is an honest dispute between worker and boss, you humbly put your trust in the wisdom of the courts, which are the people's instrument. I mean, that's what's going to happen anyway, right? The whole thing is probably on its way to court already, and you'll have no choice but to abide by that decision. So you might as well make it seem like your idea. In the meantime, you only want to be fair. You only want to be a good American and give your countrymen the same opportunity you had, the opportunity to earn what you yourself have earned. We will put you on the front page of the *Post* and the *News* and on local TV."

"What will I say?" Chin asked.

"You will say that you are sorry," Helen said. "You will not defend yourself. You will not contest any particular charge,

because contesting it is what allows people to keep talking about it. Without getting into specifics, you will apologize, and ask your customers and the people of New York for their forgiveness. And they will give it to you. They want to. People are quick to judge, Mr. Chin, they are quick to condemn, but that's mostly because their ultimate desire is to forgive."

Chin and Harvey regarded each other submissively. Able neither to agree with her nor to challenge her in front of a client, Harvey pretended somewhat absurdly that this speech had brought the meeting to a satisfying end, and ten minutes later he and Helen were riding back downtown in shocked silence. She had no idea anymore what had come over her. She wondered if she had done the seemingly impossible and gotten herself fired from a job where no one expected her to do any work at all. Harvey, who hadn't even gotten any food out of the meeting, wouldn't so much as make eye contact with her, though in truth he seemed less angry than disoriented and embarrassed, as if he had climbed into the back of the cab only to find a stranger already sitting there. He went straight into his office and ordered out for lunch, and Helen borrowed Mona's old Rolodex and started working the phones. The story was still fresh enough that she found takers everywhere she called. At four o'clock, staring at Harvey's half-closed door, she called three different Peking Grills until she found Mr. Chin again and ran down the list of every media outlet that wanted to hear what he had to say. Over the next two days she sat in his eye line at every interview, just out of camera range but close enough to remind him of his commitment to repent. That weekend the picket lines were still active, but business was up to about two-thirds of what it had been before the lawsuit; customers asked

so often if Mr. Chin himself was there that he took to traveling to all eight of his locations every night, just to shake hands with the diners and have his picture taken with them and thank them for coming back. Two weeks later the lawyers for the deliverymen settled out of court for $38,000 with no admission of liability. In return for a raise, they waived their demand to unionize. Mr. Chin celebrated the return of delivery service by going back to 1991 prices for a night, 1991 being the year he arrived in America. Business was so enthusiastic the deliverymen made more in tips that night than they had ever seen before.

Though Helen's own name was naturally left out of the newspapers, Harvey's was mentioned once or twice, and a few of his old colleagues called to congratulate him. One even used the phrase "teachable moment," with which Harvey was very taken. Over the next three weeks they picked up four new clients, a bonanza by Harvey's standards. When Peking Grill threw itself a twentieth anniversary party at their first location, in Murray Hill, Helen spent the day pitching the event to various papers and freelance photographers and then put on a dress and accompanied Harvey to the restaurant. Chin made a special toast to the two of them, in the midst of which he began crying again.

Harvey, after a carafe of complimentary white wine, began to talk himself up a little too. "I must say," he told Helen, "I haven't lost my touch. Not a lot of people would have hired you, you know. But I know people. I can spot talent. And now we are reaping the benefits. You have brought new life to the whole enterprise."

"To your genius," Helen said with a laugh, clinking glasses with him.

"You have brought new life to me too, actually," Harvey went on. "Because after all, I am the enterprise. The enterprise, c'est moi. What I am saying, in part, is that you look quite stunning all dressed up like that."

She laughed again, then stopped. "Harvey?" she said. "Are you coming on to me?"

"It's been a long time," he said, "but I think so, yes. I have a friend who keeps a suite at the Roosevelt. You probably shouldn't be driving home to Westchester, after all."

She put her glass of wine, which was only her second, down on the nearest table and stared at him, flattered and amazed, but mostly disappointed. "You'd do that, Harvey?" she said. "After everything you just said, you'd risk the business by sleeping with an employee?"

He waved grandly. "Business, life, life, business," he said. "I have no use for people who draw the distinction. It is all one. It should all be one. No?"

There was no real danger in the air. Laying her hand gently on his forearm, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "You've revitalized my enterprise too," she said. "But come on. Let's not be kids about it. You don't need to get laid to celebrate every good thing that happens. Anyway, I have a daughter at home, and it's a school night. Just promise me you'll go to that suite at the Roosevelt and have a good night's sleep and I will see you at work tomorrow."

He took her hand and kissed it. "I shall," he said. "But if you think this is all just about horniness or euphoria or whatever, it's not. You are a remarkable, remarkable woman. Joanie would have agreed with me." Helen, though she hadn't heard the name before, did not need to ask who Joanie was. Harvey said his

farewells to Mr. Chin and his wife and went outside to hail a taxi on Third Avenue to take him up to the Roosevelt. In the cab, though, with the windows rolled all the way down, he was feeling so good, so awake, that he redirected the driver west, toward his office. He picked up his car from the attendant at the underground garage across the street from the Empire State Building and headed out of town toward the house in New Paltz, even though he'd turned off the oil burner and drained the pipes three weeks ago; Joanie had never minded the cold, but since her death he'd closed it up for the winter a little earlier every year. He crossed the Henry Hudson Bridge and left the city. He drove with his window down, listening to the crickets at the stoplights, feeling the invigorating change in the air. On the Taconic he fell asleep and the car sped straight through a turn and down a short embankment, turning over once and landing upright on its tires. He was killed instantly.