

1.

MOST MEN IN MY FAMILY MAKE WIDOWS OF THEIR WIVES AND orphans of their children. I am the exception. My only child, Kate, was struck and killed by a car while riding her bicycle home from the beach one afternoon in September, a year ago. She was thirteen. My wife, Susan, and I separated soon afterward.

I WAS WALKING IN the woods when Kate died. I'd asked her the day before if she wanted to pack a lunch and go to the Enon River to hike around and feed the birds and maybe rent a canoe. The birds were tame and ate seeds from people's hands. From the first time I'd taken her she'd been enchanted with the chickadees and titmice and nuthatches that pecked seeds from her palm, and when she was younger she'd treated feeding the birds as if they depended on it.

Kate said going to the sanctuary sounded great, but she and her friend Carrie Lewis had made plans to go to the beach, and could she go if she was super careful.

“Especially around the lake, and the shore road,” I said.

“*Especially* there, Dad,” she said.

I remembered riding my rattly old bike to the beach with my friends when I was a kid. We wore cutoff shorts and draped threadbare bath towels around our necks. We never wore shirts or shoes. We would have laughed at the idea of bike helmets. I don't remember locking our bikes when we got to the beach, although we must have. I told Kate, all right, she could go, and she told me she loved me and kissed me on the ear.

KATE DIED ON A Saturday afternoon. The date was September 1, three days before she would have begun ninth grade. I spent the day wandering the sanctuary without any plans. Enon had been in a heat wave for a week and I had been up late the night before watching West Coast baseball, so I took it slow and mostly kept to the shade. I thought about Kate going to the beach so much over the summer, working on her tan, suddenly conscious of her looks as she'd never been before. The milkweed in the sanctuary had begun to yellow, and the goldenrod to silver. The edges of the green grass were about to dry to straw. Silver and purple rain clouds rolled low across the sky and piled into towering massifs. The slightest wind pushed ahead of the weather, eddying over the meadow, lifting dragonflies from the high grass. Bumblebees worked on the fading wildflowers. I hoped for rain to break the heat.

Chickadees wove around one another, back and forth between the bushes along the path. I hadn't brought any seeds to feed them. I remembered telling Kate about the first

time I'd fed the birds from my hand, when I'd been in seventh grade, with my grandfather. We didn't have seeds because he'd forgotten about the birds. When he remembered, he and I stood still on the path, with our hands out, and the birds came to us anyway. The episode had happened so long ago, and I'd told it to Kate so many times, since she'd been a little kid, that I thought it might be fun to try it again, just so I could tell her and bring up the story about my grandfather. (Kate said once, "I never met Gramps, but you talk about him so much I feel like he's somebody I know.") It was getting late and I still had to run to the market to buy food for dinner. Carrie's coming home with Kate, I thought, if they're both not too tired from being in the sun and the bike ride. I decided to buy salmon and asparagus and a lemon and potato salad, and the corn Kate had asked me to get. I figured that if she was hot and tired, she'd want something light. Susan'll like that, too, I thought. I'll get a carton of lemonade, pink if they have it. Kate always said it tastes sweeter, less tart than the yellow kind, although I could never taste the difference.

I had almost reached the end of the boardwalk, at the boundary of the marsh, where the path took up again through the trees and led back to the meadow, where by then swallows would be lacing through the sky, feeding. Although I felt like I didn't have the time, because I didn't want Kate to have to wait too long to eat, I stopped and stood still and held out my empty hand, like I had twenty-one years earlier, eight years before Kate was born, fifteen years before I brought her there. It suddenly seemed lovely, the thought of standing there, coaxing even a single bird, if only for a fluttering instant, just so I could go home and cook dinner and when

Kate came out to the picnic table, fresh out of the shower, her hair still wet, maybe even staggering a little to be silly, groaning and saying something like “Argh, I’m so *tired*,” I could say, “Hey, I tried to feed the birds without any seeds, like that first time with Gramps, and it worked!” In the two or three minutes I allowed myself, one bird approached my hand and pulled up short and rolled off back into the bushes when it saw I had no food. I decided that that was close enough and hurried toward the car, glad at the prospect of making Kate a good meal that would comfort her after a long day.

I came out of the woods and hiked up the path alongside the meadow, which was studded with a grid of numbered birdhouses where swallows nested every year. The sun blazed behind the towering thunderheads and backlit their silhouettes. The sky above the clouds was a bright, whitish yellow. The birdhouses and goldenrod and milkweed were suffused in granular, golden, pollinated light, and the swallows spiraled through it, catching insects on the wing. I reached the gravel parking lot and smiled at a woman urging her young son the last few yards to their car. He looked about three or four years old. He tottered and whimpered. The woman stopped pleading and picked him up and murmured something soothing to him and squeezed him to her and kissed his cheek and carried him. I walked across the lot to my station wagon and when I reached it I dug into my pockets for my keys. I saw my cell phone on the passenger seat.

Stupid—lucky no one took it, I thought, but then laughed at the image of a mild, pale birdwatcher in a sun hat and khakis smashing out a window with his walking stick and making off with the phone.

Lightning forked into the meadow and thunder blasted over the field and parking lot. The little boy and his mother shrieked. Rain poured out of the sky as if from a toppled cistern.

I unlocked the door and ducked into the car. The rain sounded like buckets of nails being dropped onto the roof. The backs of my legs felt tight, as they always did after hiking. The screen on the cell phone showed there was a voice mail from Susan. I dialed for the message and wedged the phone between my ear and shoulder so I could unscrew the bottle of spring water I'd left in the car. The water had warmed in the heat so it tasted stale and slightly impure. The phone sounded the sequence of tones for the voice-mail number. I screwed the cap back on the water bottle and tossed it onto the passenger seat.

"Blech," I said, irritated, and took the phone in my hand. I put the car into reverse and twisted around to back out of the parking space. Susan's voice came over the phone. It was hard for me to hear what she was saying over the noise the rain made as it hit the car.

"Charlie, Kate was killed. She was on her bike, near the lake, and a car hit her and killed her, Charlie." Susan's voice broke. A car honked its horn behind me and a woman yelled. My car was moving backward. I stomped the brake. A woman out in the rain, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, still wearing sunglasses for some reason, pounded on my window.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Are you *crazy*?" she yelled at me. "You nearly ran that mother and her kid over!" Susan's voice started speaking again, telling me to

get home, that she was there with two police officers. The woman in the rain looked ferocious, water soaking her hair and her clothes and her expensive training sneakers and streaming down her face. I felt as if I'd been struck on the head and could not shake my brain back into place.

The woman pounded on the window again. I looked at her, and even as I understood what Susan's voice was telling me on the phone, even as I was already thinking, No, no, no, this can't be true, I thought, Aren't *you* determined to get your pound of flesh.

The woman stomped her foot in the muddy gravel, yanked her glasses off, pointed her finger at me, and yelled, "Roll down your goddamned *window!*" and spit away the rainwater running over her mouth. I cranked the window down and looked her in the eye. Rain poured through the window into the car, splattering the steering wheel and dashboard, drenching me. The woman must have seen something in my face, because she did not launch into the tirade she'd clearly intended. I held up the phone, allowing the rain to pelt it, as if it might be an adequate explanation.

"My daughter," I said. "This—that's my wife saying my daughter just died."

The woman frowned and her face went slack and she slapped at the car door. She slicked her hair back and pointed her forefinger at me and dropped it.

"Oh, God," she said. "You'd better not be—Oh, God. Go; go."

I have remembered many times the sight of that woman in the rearview mirror, standing in the rain and looking at me, clearly unsure whether she'd been duped or I had told

her the truth. That was the first thing I remember seeing as I was thinking, I had a daughter and she died.

THE MORTICIAN WHO TOOK care of Kate's funeral was the son of my grandparents' next-door neighbors. On the day Susan and I went to make arrangements for Kate's cremation and funeral, he wore a charcoal gray suit. He had close-cropped, receding hair that had turned mostly white over the course of the four times I had met with him in my life: when my grandfather died, when my grandmother died, when my mother died, and now when my daughter died. He smelled faintly antiseptic. He held his hand out and I shook it. His hands were very soft and clean, as if he regularly scrubbed them with pumice. His nails were manicured.

"Hello, Susan, Charlie," he said. "Come right into the office. Would you like anything to drink, coffee, spring water?"

"No, thank you, Rick." I was embarrassed to call him Rick. The family had always referred to him as Ricky, as if he were still a little kid, the son of the neighbors, Ricky Junior. I didn't know what name he went by as an adult. It occurred to me that I had no idea what name I'd called him when my mother had died, which was the first time I had dealt with him directly, as the person making all the decisions about services and burial. When my grandfather had died, my grandmother had made the arrangements, and when she had died, my mother had done so, calling Rick Ricky, I remembered clearly, but as one adult speaking familiarly and affectionately to another with whom she had shared some of her childhood.

“Please, sit,” he said, waving his hand at a burgundy-colored leather sofa. Susan and I sat.

“We have taken care of everything. I just need to ask you about an urn, and if you could bring us something loose-fitting and comfortable for Kate to wear, pajamas or something similar, for the cremation.”

Susan said, “She liked to sleep in a T-shirt and cotton pajama pants—I don’t know what you call them. Ha, they’re those things the kids wear to bed but to school, too, if you let them.”

“Yes, yes, I know all about those. Lounge pants.” I didn’t know whether Rick was married or if he had children. There was a gold wedding band on his left ring finger. If he had children, they’d be my age. So, I reasoned, if he knew about kids wearing pajama bottoms and fleece slippers to school, it would be because he had grandchildren Kate’s age or even older. I nodded. I had no idea what to say. Susan continued.

“And the slippers, too. Fleece-lined, open-back things. She tried to wear those to school, too.” Kate’s favorite clothes to sleep in had been a white pair of pajama pants with different flowers and their Latin names written under them in black, and a thin, soft T-shirt silk-screened with the word SUPERGIRL on it, both of which I knew must be on the floor next to her bed, because she’d been wearing them the night before she died, when she’d come downstairs to use the bathroom between three and four in the morning while I was watching a late Red Sox game. She’d have changed out of the pants and shirt and into her bathing suit and denim cut-offs and bright green, short-sleeved polo shirt, the clothes in which she’d died, it occurred to me, and in which she must still be dressed, unless the morticians had removed them.

“Can she wear the slippers, too? Can we get her slippers?” Susan asked. “We’ll go get the clothes right now.”

“Yes, of course, Susan. That’s fine. And we can talk about the urn when you come back.”

“Great. That’ll be great. Perfect.”

Susan and Ricky stood up, and I followed. They shook hands and I put my hand out to Rick and took two steps in his direction. He stepped toward me and put his left hand lightly on my shoulder for a moment and shook my hand.

“Very good, Charlie. Just let me know whatever we can do.”

“Thanks, Rick. I’m sorry, I can’t really talk. I really don’t know what to say—”

“It’s okay, Charlie. That’s fine.”

When we arrived back at the house, Susan went to the basement to get the clean laundry from the dryer. She said she’d washed Kate’s underwear.

“Will you go and get her T-shirt and pajama pants?” she asked.

I went up to Kate’s room. There were some flowers for pressing on her desk, chicory and a magenta-colored zinnia and an orange tiger lily, and some seashells she must have picked up at the beach. I opened the middle drawer of her bureau. I looked at her small, colorful, neatly folded T-shirts and my knees gave out. I almost dropped to the floor. I squeezed the edge of the drawer and closed my eyes for a moment and took a couple of deliberate, deep breaths and opened my eyes again and took a top and a bottom from each pile, without looking at them more than to confirm that neither had cartoon characters or some other inappro-

priate design on it. What could be inappropriate, though? I thought. What's appropriate? Who at the funeral parlor's going to undress and dress her? Rick? Some guy in a rubber smock and gloves? There might well be health codes or laws about what clothes people can be cremated in. Ricky might have been humoring us and he won't even put Kate's slippers on, just throw them out. Who, I thought, is going to trundle my daughter into the fire? Then my legs really did give out and I sat down on the rug in the middle of Kate's room. I sat with my legs under me and the clothes I'd chosen for her in my lap. My body shook and I could not hold myself up. I lay down on my side until Susan found me, fifteen minutes later.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I can't do anything," I said.

"We need to, Charlie," she said. She came into the room and knelt next to me. She'd been crying. She combed her fingers through my hair. "We have to do all this stuff."

"I don't think I can, Sue. I want to, but I can't even get myself to move."

SUSAN'S PARENTS AND HER sisters were gigantic Finns from Minnesota. Sue herself was tall, but not as tall as her parents and siblings. Her dad was six foot five and her mom was five foot eleven. Both of her sisters were nearly six feet tall. Sue was the shortest in the family, at five nine ("Five nine and *three-quarters*, Charles," she'd remind me), and that was still two inches taller than me. Her family skied and biked and hiked together and looked people straight in the eye and were in intimidatingly good physical and moral health. They

were always affectionate toward me but I was certain they were disappointed that their daughter had taken up with me. I felt like I must look puny and sound as if I did nothing but mumble to them. My deeply ingrained habit of proceeding by irony was lost on them, and when I was with them I deliberately had to make an effort to be straightforward. Luckily for me, Susan was just enough unlike them to want to keep a loving but firm distance. When we visited Minnesota or they came east, they mobbed her and tried to get her to go off on some alpine excursion or other. Or so it seemed. Her sisters, both of whom looked like Olympic athletes, would get on either side of her and take her by the elbows as if they were going to whisk her away to a ski lodge. "Sue," they'd say, "you look pale; you need to get some oxygen in your blood." Susan's father, a tree of a man, with a white mustache and a white halo of hair running from ear to ear and a perennially sunburned and freckled bald-topped head, used to look around at my stacks of books and maps and say, "The scholar. Charles Crosby, you need some exercise, too. You'll get water in your lungs." He'd give me a pat on the back with his huge hand that felt like being belted with a wooden oar.

When Kate died, Susan's family stayed for three nights at a hotel off the highway two towns over. They came to the house the day before the funeral. Susan and her mother and sisters sat on the couch and went through the shoe boxes of family pictures we had and chose the ones she liked best so they could make a display for the funeral. Susan sat in the middle and her mother and sisters pulled stacks of photos from the boxes and shuffled through them and showed them to her.

“Look at this one, Susie. She’s so cute in this canoe.”

“What about this one, hon? Which birthday is this?”

“Look at the face she’s making here. Jesus, she looked just like you.”

Susan’s mother remained composed. It seemed she felt she had to, because she was parenting her daughter again, in a way that she had not done in a long time. Perhaps she had never had to help Susan through a tragedy. Susan had never told me about any deaths in her family. Her sisters wept and talked while they went through the photographs. They wiped their eyes with tissues and rubbed off the tears that dropped onto the photos. Susan’s father paced back and forth in front of the bay window in a discreet but vaguely military manner, as if awaiting orders.

“We should have two boards for pictures,” he said at one point. “No? One for either side of the urn?” Susan’s mother and sisters stopped riffling the pictures and looked at him.

“Yes. Yes, I think that’s right.”

“I’d better go get them, then. I saw an office supply store off the highway.”

Susan’s family debated about what sort of display board they should buy and with what to stick the pictures onto the board. While they weighed the advantages and disadvantages of cork and thumbtacks, they stole looks at Susan and had a wordless conversation about her over and above the discussion about picture arrangements. My impulse was to rescue her. Had it been my own family, I’d have felt overwhelmed. I’d have felt the need for quiet and solitude. The practical trivia of double-sided tape and making sure the photos could be mounted and taken down without damage was meaning-

less static. I suddenly had the urge to scream, to make all the prattle stop. It all seemed like a flimsy curtain of noise yanked in front of the silent void of Kate's absence.

"Sue," I said. Her family stopped talking. I tried to sound soothing, calm. "Sue, do you want to take a little break, go upstairs and lie down for a little?" Both of Susan's sisters put their arms around her and leaned their heads against hers.

"Yeah, Susie. You need a break?" her younger sister asked.

Sue wrapped an arm around one sister and put her cheek against the side of the other's face.

"No," she said. She took a deep breath. "No. This is good." She looked at me. "I'm okay, Charlie. Thanks. I'm good. Come help us. You took so many of these. Help us figure out what we should put up."

Susan's father said, "Okay, then. I think I've got what we need. I'm going. Want to come, Charles?"

"No," I said. "No. I think I need to lie down a little myself. Thanks. I just need to go upstairs and lie down a bit."

I BROKE MY HAND five days after Kate's funeral, three days after Susan's family flew back to Minnesota. I woke up that Sunday morning on the living room couch after having spent most of the night sitting in the dark, exhausted and unable to sleep. It was one in the afternoon. I experienced again the impossible grief of remembering that my daughter was dead after the little sleep I had managed had cleared my mind of the fact. Each time that happened, I felt more worn away, less able to suffer the weight. I was curled up in an old afghan and turned toward the back of the couch.

“You need to get up, Charlie,” Sue said. I couldn’t see her, but I could tell from her voice that she was in the doorway leading to the kitchen. “It’s one o’clock. I’ve been trying to be quiet all day, but I need to do things. I need your help.”

I stared at the green velvet upholstery, which Kate and I had always agreed was the color of new ferns, and said, “Everything is shit because Kate’s gone.” Susan remained silent.

“Do you know what I mean, Sue?” I said. I turned myself over to see her. She was leaning against the door frame, hands at her sides. Her face was pale and swollen and her eyes were bright red and had black circles under them. She shook her head.

“Yes, Charlie,” she said. “I know what you mean, but I need you to help.” She walked through the room and out the other door, into the front hallway, and went upstairs. I sat up then and walked across the room after her. I meant to help her. I meant to follow her and explain how I meant to help her and to be stronger but that I didn’t have any choice, that it was like I’d been withered, sapped of spirit. Susan moved around in our bedroom upstairs, opening and closing drawers. I meant to call up to her. I meant to go upstairs and to ask what she needed me to do. Even better, I’d find something essential that needed doing that she hadn’t thought of and tell her I was going to do that.

That was when I broke my hand. Everything failed inside me. Something snapped in my stomach and I cried out and put my fist into the wall of the stairway landing. The old horsehair plaster pulverized and poured from the wall like hourglass sand but I struck a stud behind it and broke eight

bones. I vividly remember crying out, because that was something I'd always consciously stifled whenever I had hurt myself around Kate, so I wouldn't upset her. I'd sighed and laughed out loud at my own foolishness in front of Kate when I'd pounded my thumb with a hammer, or had a pebble ricochet off a shin while mowing our lawn, or once had a two-by-four drop on my head when I was rebuilding the steps on the side porch and had to drive myself to the emergency room for stitches. "Your dad, the genius," I'd said as I'd fetched the first aid kit and wrapped a handful of ice cubes in a facecloth. But the pain when I broke my hand was something else altogether. It obliterated my will and I remember gasping in awe at how much it hurt and how neatly I had felt the bones in my fingers and hand snapping. I dropped to my knees, holding the wrist of the broken hand with my good hand, suddenly wondering how in the world I could tell Susan what I'd just done. I had obviously knocked myself half senseless, because the punch had sounded like someone trying to go through the wall with a sledgehammer, and Susan had lunged out of the bedroom and to the top of the stairs, as if the punch had released the ratchet locking a coiled spring, the way an angry parent might pounce when she heard her kid knock over a lamp after she'd told her six times to knock off tossing the tennis ball in the living room. She held one of her crewneck shirts in front of her by the shoulder seams, and clutched it to herself as she looked down at me kneeling on the hall floor.

That image of Susan, at the top of the stairs in her bathrobe, her face ravaged and pale, holding the shirt—a fitted white T-shirt with a pattern of flowers and vines embroi-

dered in black around the neck and sleeves and a small yellow bird embroidered just above the left breast—seemed like a photograph from a movie or a play that you see in a magazine you're leafing through while waiting to have your teeth cleaned or have blood taken, and you think to yourself, Oh, I remember *that* scene; that's when it all comes apart; that's when he puts his hand through the wall and she runs out of the bedroom and stands there at the top of the stairs, like she's a parent about to yell at her kid, but she sees him down on his knees at the bottom of the stairs, gasping, and he's gray in the face, in a cold sweat, and he's holding a hand up and the fingers look all mangled, and you can tell just by the expression on her face—it's so well done—that she's acted from reflex, that she's still conditioned, still habituated to parenting her daughter. But it's true: her daughter is dead, still and always and even though her mind still makes these little loops back in time to before her daughter died if she lets go of the fact for even a moment, and every time it's like hearing for the first time all over again, *Your daughter has been in an accident*, and that is the moment she realizes, It's all over and I'm going back to my parents' house, and I'm going to stay in my old bedroom, even though it has been my mother's sewing room for nearly twenty years. And whether or not she really believes that that is what she will do, that spare corner room with no rug and no curtains or shades and a chair and a table with a sewing machine on it and a lamp bent down over the machine and a single framed piece of embroidery of a red-headed moppet wearing a sunbonnet with a basket of flowers hooked on her arm and a rabbit at her feet, which used to be her room when she was a girl, is the concrete picture her

mind makes of the certainty that she must go away, and that is the moment he realizes that that's what she's thinking.

When that instant passed, whether it was between us or in my mind alone, Susan said, "Let me get some clothes on," and rushed back to the bedroom.

Susan drove me to the regional hospital and sat with me in the emergency room for two hours, crying. My hand hurt terribly and I was exhausted and I felt humiliated for us. Not only did we have to bear our only child's death, but we had to do so in front of a room full of miserable strangers. I tried to comfort myself by looking at the faces of the other people in the emergency room. There was an old couple holding hands. The wife had a mask over her face, with a tube running from it to an oxygen tank. Her skin was gray. Her husband held her hand and stared at the floor. There was a young kid, maybe fourteen years old, with what looked like his older brother, or maybe a young uncle, who was holding a bloody dish towel to the top of the boy's head. The brother or uncle kept asking the boy how he was doing, saying the doctor was going to see him soon. The boy was woozy and said "All right" every time his brother or uncle spoke to him. I tried to think about whom it was these people had lost. What mothers and sisters and best friends. Susan was slouched in her chair, her clenched left fist pushed up against her mouth. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, like she was trying to breathe fast enough to keep ahead of sobbing. She gazed across the emergency room through the glass doors to the roundabout where people were dropping patients off. She shook her head as if she were saying no, no, no over and over. Tears drained from the corners of her eyes. She wiped

her face and looked at me. I smiled at her but she didn't smile back. She shook her head no again and put her fist back to her mouth.

IT TOOK THREE MORE hours at the hospital to have X-rays and get my hand set in a cast. I spent the next day lying on the living room couch, trying to sleep but unable to. I could not sleep that night, either, despite the painkillers the doctor had prescribed, and left our bed for the couch, where I sat semi-conscious in the dark, having nightmares from which I periodically started, only to find the waking world worse than my dreams.

Susan's older sister called at nine the next morning and they talked for half an hour. When the call ended, Susan came into the living room.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Oh, you know," I said. "Awful."

"Do you think you can get up today and maybe help me with some things?"

"I'll try. I didn't sleep at all. My hand is killing me. What'd your sister have to say?"

"She—they—my family—wants us to go out there and visit."

"What'd you say?"

"I said I'd talk about it with you."

It was Tuesday morning, when I normally would have been mowing lawns and Sue would have been at the elementary school in Salem, where she taught reading. A heavy wind rumbled outside, through the trees, and broke against

the house in gusts. The mailman came up the walkway and I heard the squeak of the mailbox opening and closing.

I knew it was all wrong, that I was snipping the single, thin thread by which our marriage was barely still suspended. But I felt it was my obligation. I'd spent the week since the funeral lying on the couch in a daze. I'd lost my mind and punched a hole in the wall and broken my hand so that I couldn't work or do much of anything that needed doing. I thought, Poor Sue. She shouldn't have to deal with me. I'm no good for her, I thought. She's being loving and gracious because she has a good heart, but I just can't ask her to stick this out.

"Well," I said. "How about you go? I can't. I feel like I have to stay here. But you've got another week's leave. Why don't you go?"

Sue stared at me for a moment. It's the last time I remember the two of us looking each other in the eye.

She said, "I need to think about it."

The teakettle whistled in the kitchen. Susan went to make herself tea. I remained on the couch and listened to the cupboard door open and the mugs clink against each other as Susan took one out and the door slap shut and another door open and the rustle and scrape of her opening the box of tea bags and that door slap shut and then the utensil drawer opening and Susan getting a spoon.

"Sue, I think that's good," I called to her. "Your sisters and your mom, and your dad."

SUSAN HAD A BENIGN aloofness that made her irresistible from the moment I saw her. She was a mystery and remained that

way for the duration of our marriage. We were at school the first time we met. She and three of her friends visited the house I had just moved into with four other guys because she knew one of them. We all sat across from one another in old flea market chairs and a couch left out on the curb that we'd carried home. It was a rainy, late, luminescent August afternoon and I chain-smoked cigarettes and we talked about music and art and books and I exaggerated my enthusiasm for anything Susan mentioned that I liked, too. She poured red wine from a green jug into a blue glass. When she raised the glass to her mouth, the daylight lit the glass purple and it seemed as if her eyes turned the same color. When she lowered the glass, her eyes returned to the silvery turquoise of her scarf. She wiped the wine from her top lip and smiled at what I'd just said, but more to herself than me, and I knew that I'd never get through to her, really, fully, and that if I did it'd dispel what was already enchanting me anyway, and that made everything impossible, but it also—or especially—made her all the more attractive. When she stood up to leave with her friends a couple hours later, she stretched her arms over her head and looked out the window and her eyes turned the gray blue of the thunderclouds gathering over the vacant fairgrounds across the street.

Since I'd been a young kid I'd loved books and read constantly. I loved mysteries and horror stories and books on history and art and science and music, everything. The bigger the book, the better; I deliberately found the thickest novels I could, for the pleasure of lingering in other worlds and other people's lives for as long as possible. I borrowed six books a week, the limit, from the library and devoured potboilers and war stories

and histories of the Apollo space program and Russian novels I could make neither heads nor tails of and it was all thrilling. What I loved most was how the contents of each batch of books mixed up with one another in my mind to make ideas and images and thoughts I'd never have imagined possible.

School was another matter. I was a terrible student and regularly failed assignments and wrote pathetic essays and missed due dates. The only college I was accepted to was the state university, and that just barely. When I met Susan, I'd been on academic probation for a semester, and I dropped out the following fall. Susan and I moved in together while she finished her degree and I painted houses and mowed lawns and shoveled snow.

We moved to Enon when Sue graduated. By then, she was already three months pregnant. I went to work painting houses full-time for one of my grandfather's neighbors, a guy named Louis, who'd hired me for summers in high school. Louis had moved into a converted boardinghouse across the street from my grandparents with his wife and four kids a few years earlier. My grandparents had been friends for decades with the woman who'd lived there and let rooms before, mostly to Enon's bachelor civil servants: firemen, cops, mail carriers. When she died and Louis bought the house, he renovated and repainted it by himself. My grandfather liked to stand around in the side yard and pass the time talking about the neighborhood while Louis replaced shingles or primed the doors. Louis always called my grandfather "Mr. Crosby" and shoveled his driveway and the footpath to the front door whenever it snowed, "Because we're neighbors now, Mr. Crosby, and that's what neighbors do."

Louis paid me well, but I had to work with an old ex-con named Gus, who bragged and complained and spewed vulgarity without pause all day, each day, and nearly drove me mad.

“Shit, Louie’s a dumb wop, but I owe him,” he’d say. “You don’t know fuck-all, kid. I *killed* a guy down in Florida. I bought his old lady some fancy drink with a fucking *umbrella* in it and he pulled a knife. On *me*? You got to be *kidding*. You pull a knife on Gus and you are *fucked*, pal; you got that? I threw him right through a plate-glass window and the glass went right through his neck and he bled out like a fucking *pig*. Ha! And *you*? Are you *kidding*? I’ll kill you right here, right now, no fuck. I’ll drown you in this bucket of *paint*. You *look* at me funny and I’ll throw you right off this roof, and then I’ll *laugh*. And then you know what? I’ll take a big drink of paint and go back to work and whistle a little tune called ‘I Just Killed That Little College Prick Louie Stuck Me With All Fucking Summer.’ I will because what do I have to lose? What? I’ll tell you what I have to lose—*fuck-all*, that’s what. And *I* love paint. It’s in my blood, you little shit. My *blood*. If you cut me open right now, *paint* would come out. Do it; cut me. I’d like to *see* you try. That would be funny, you college *fuck*. You do not know fucking *shit* about paint, kid. I love the way it smells; I love the way it feels; I love the way it *tastes*. I used to paint fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, and then I’d go home and me and my old lady would hop into the sack and smoke a joint and watch dirty movies until dawn, because *I do not fucking care*. Shit, it’s hot up here. I’m not going to bust my balls and have a heart attack for *Loo-ee-gee*, that dago dick squeezer. Fuck it; I’m taking five.”

Gus would work himself up into fits about Louis, that “skinny guinea who knows *fuck-all*,” and we’d climb down off the plank we’d run between two ladders across the front of the house we were painting, and Gus would cover his head with a wet towel and complain and threaten me. (Later, we painted with a guy named Frankie Shuey, who got paint all over people’s roofs and driveways, and Gus took to threatening to murder him instead of me.) I’d smoke a cigarette and think about the envelope of cash I’d get at the end of the week, and about Kate being on the way, and how strange it was to think of her, a little newborn girl, and Gus over there, all greasy and sweaty and decrepit, and to try to picture him as having been someone’s baby, once, to try to think of him as a newborn infant. I imagined Kate at about ten years old, wondering about me at work and what I actually spent my time doing and with whom I worked. I used to do that with my grandfather, when I was in school. Instead of paying attention to geometry, I’d wonder about what he was doing at that exact same moment—whether he was in the basement, in his workshop coat, dipping clockworks into an ammonia bath by a wire hanger, or in his black windbreaker and black Greek fisherman’s cap, driving one of his station wagons (he and my grandmother always had two matching station wagons, for which he always paid with cash that he took from one of the deposit boxes he had around the North Shore) to different banks, so he could cash the checks his customers paid him with where they had their accounts, so he didn’t have to report the income, a practice one of his neighbors, an accountant for the IRS, had taught him.

I used to think about Susan, at the room we rented then,

in Matt Gray's house. Matt Gray was the chief of the Enon police. My grandfather and grandmother knew him well because they had been friends for many years with his father, Matt Senior, who had been the police chief before Matt. I used to sit on the lawns of the houses I painted, smoking cigarettes, drinking cans of soda, Gus spewing his dreadful jive talk, and try to think about what Susan was doing at that very moment. I imagined her, in the cool, damp summer morning light, maybe doing the couple of dishes we hadn't got to the night before, maybe folding some clothes and putting them away in the bureau we shared, maybe deciding to take a walk to the library to see if there were any books that interested her. She liked to read mysteries while she was pregnant with Kate. I'd get worried sometimes, thinking about what she was doing, because here she was, living with me, in a single room, in the police chief's house, in her boyfriend's hometown, with no job then and no money and me painting houses and her six months pregnant and summer getting hotter and hotter, and it made me half panicked to think of her being unhappy, maybe, and me being the cause of her feeling disappointed that her life wasn't going as well as she'd always hoped and that I was a big part of the reason that the plans we'd talked about at the kitchen table all those nights weren't working out, instead of being the reason they all came true.

ONE AUGUST NIGHT WHEN Susan was six months pregnant with Kate, she couldn't sleep and so we went outside to see what it was like and it was clear and beautiful and there was

a cooling wind flowing up in the trees and there were fireflies in the meadows and we took each other's hand and started to walk together.

"Susan," I said after a while, "I can't wait to meet our kid." I touched her stomach through her maternity blouse. "Who are you in there?" I asked. "I'm your dad," I said. "Me and your mom can't wait to meet you and see who you are and find out about what you're like." Susan took my hand from her stomach and kissed it.

"Whoever it is, she's going to make us better people, isn't she?" Susan said. We never checked the gender of the baby. Susan knew it was a girl from the moment she learned she was pregnant.

"She is, Sue." I started to try to say something to her about how I was sorry I wasn't as good a husband as she deserved, or as good a partner, or as successful or ambitious. "Susie, you know, I'm sorry, sorry that—"

"Don't, Charlie," she said. "It's funny and sad, and a little scary. But it's okay, too." She stopped walking. We stood where one of Enon's oldest roads splits in two, one branch turning toward the center of the village, the other leading to the section called Egypt. Four small neat, old houses, each with a small barn, faced the intersection. A single streetlight stood at the divergence and moths and other insects swarmed around it. Susan took both my hands in hers. She leaned toward me and kissed me.

"I know I'm no bargain, either," she said.

"Tut tut! Not another word yourself, my dear. I understand. Let's just walk some more and be happy about the little cosmonaut on her way." It felt like Susan had been just about

ready to lie to try to make me feel better, and that seemed awful. She wished better for us and that was like a blessing, in that moment, like love itself, if a little sideways, but that was enough.

“My legs feel restless even when I’m walking.” She pressed the heels of her hands against the small of her back and arched and grunted. “Whew,” she said. “This is something, Charlie, having a baby. Let’s head home.”

We walked home and I held the door open for Susan and moths followed us in. I took two bowls from the cabinet and two spoons from the drawer. I grabbed a carton of ice cream from the freezer and scooped some into the bowls and we both sat at the table savoring the cold sweet sugary crystalline ice cream while the moths bounced and plinked against the ceiling lamp above our heads.

The summer grew hotter and Susan grew larger. We could practically see Kate in outline. Whenever Kate moved, her elbows and knees and head and behind projected themselves in relief against Susan’s stomach. Susan had a terrible time at night and could not get comfortable. I spent the last three weeks of the pregnancy sleeping on the couch in the living room. Whenever the box springs creaked more than once or twice or Susan groaned, I’d bring her a glass of ice water and see if she needed me to rearrange her pillows or get her a book or just stay with her for a little and sympathize. Sometimes I’d fall asleep sitting up and rouse to find Susan still awake, frowning and trying to settle into a comfortable position.

When Kate was finally born and Susan saw her for the first time, the faraway look in her eyes vanished. Kate brought

Susan wholly and fully into this world. She made the tenuous threads that had held Susan and me together before obsolete. Kate's birth seemed to stop our drift away from one another, a process I had often contemplated before the news of Kate's arrival with the kind of melancholy one feels at an upcoming and inevitable sorrow. Kate bound us back together. Or, really, we were each separately fully bound to Kate and thereby to each other through our single, cherished daughter, and that was fine by us. After all, we did have a sort of real love for one another, or I did for Susan and she had a deep affection for me.

WHAT AN AWFUL THING then, being there in our house together with our daughter gone, trying to be equal to so many sudden orders of sorrow, any one of which alone would have wrenched us from our fragile orbits around each other. Susan took her tea up to the bedroom. I went to the foot of the stairs and called to her. I said I thought it was a good idea that she go by herself to be with her family. I raised my broken hand and fit it to the hole I had punched in the wall, as if to insert a casting back into its mold. I withdrew my hand a few inches, imagining the hole filling back in and broken bones mending. Stop pretending, I thought. Face facts.

"Susan," I said. "How does that seem to you, you going to see your family?" I lowered my hand. I felt like an actor in a play, the house a cutaway set, the first floor the living room and hallway and foot of the stairs, the second floor the bedroom. The husband stands at the foot of the stairs, calling up to his wife. The wife moves around the bedroom, putting

piles of clothes away but also selecting pieces that she makes into a separate pile on a small armchair—a hand-me-down, clearly, upholstered in an old-fashioned pattern of faded pink and blue bouquets of hydrangeas and roses and leaves and branches of berries. As the audience watches the husband, the actor playing the husband, the actor playing the husband struggling to figure out what to say, as if he strains to author his own lines, as if he is struggling to compose his own words, it becomes apparent that although the wife does not respond to her husband, the clothes she is setting aside are all hers and are what she is packing, or thinking she'd pack, for going back to her family. The audience already knows she will go and some members already know or suspect she will not come back, but the husband and wife must play the full scene, of course. The audience already knows that she will pack the clothes into a suitcase, something she does not quite yet know; nor does he. They are a young couple who had a single child young and who lost the child in an instant of combustion and are straggling around their home in shock at the child's death but nonetheless trying to spare each other in at least some slight degree the full blow of the end of their fragile marriage by acting as if it isn't the end for just a little longer, by spreading the blow over just a little more time so it does not fall on them all at once.

Time is mercy, I thought. Knowing that did me exactly no good and there I was at the foot of those stairs, part of me wishing I could just say out loud, "It's okay, Susan. You can go and I know it's done and let's just get it over with," but the rest of me struggling with what I should say next, so that the

inevitable would play out in the fullness of time. Even in the midst of so much pain, an impatience overtook me, and for the first time I imagined the cemetery, the headstone on the slope, the Norway maples and the granite crypts and the gravedigger's shack and the spigot and plastic jug for watering the flowers, and sitting behind and above Kate's stone and thinking about her, talking with her. I imagined the set of the house, with Susan and me moving around in it, revolving to reveal another set, of the cemetery. The actor playing the husband could go through a trap door in the set of the house, while it rotated, and up a narrow ladder, to a hatchway cut into the top of the cemetery set. He could open the hatch, climb onto the artificial cemetery lawn, close the hatch, and find his mark as the set turned toward the audience's view.

"Sue?" I asked. "I don't know. This is all so, so shit-ass *crazy*. But maybe it's something you should think about doing." Listen to the husband, I thought. Listen to the actor, how he takes the line and delivers it with a kind of strangled levity, imparting the truth that, even as he speaks the line, he realizes that the tone of his voice only intensifies the tragedy of what he says, rather than alleviating it, as he intended.

Susan left for Minnesota the next day. I was too groggy from the painkillers to drive her, so one of her coworkers from the school picked her up. Before she left, she went shopping and bought food she thought would be easy for me to prepare for myself, bread and cold cuts and jars of peanut butter and jelly and a dozen cans of soup. I told her to call me when she got there and to say hi to her family and to send my love and regrets, my embarrassment, at not coming along. We