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Even when her morning started at a reasonable hour her first waking utterance was a groan, followed by a shuddering series of stretches and a string of torporous obscenities. The onset of day surprised her; she resented the imperative to consciousness, as if she had a right to sleep forever, like the dead. Addie turned off the alarm – it was five in the goddamn morning, for Christ’s sake – rolled over and covered her eyes with a pillow.

Ben had been up in the night, again. It was impossible to get a full night’s sleep, too much to think about, unwelcome plans to be made, worries that could not be resolved. Rather than counting beasts jumping over fences, he preferred to mix himself a double martini. No, not a martini, why bother? In company he would carefully combine one part of vermouth with five of Gordon’s gin, agitate in a cocktail shaker, pour over crushed ice. But on his own he dispensed with the vermouth.

He’d been trying to write, sitting at the kitchen table. Not on the typewriter, which made an awful clacking sound, curiously exacerbated in the night-time silence, but long-hand on his yellow legal pads, appropriated by the half-dozen from his office at the Department of Justice. *To each according*

to his needs? Another Communist lurking at the heart of government! One of 205 reds! Or was it now 57? The number didn't matter, it was as unimportant as the number of metastasising cells in a tumour that threatened to annihilate the lives of so many, of his friends, of himself and his family.

And about this prospect he had nothing to say, nothing to write. It was unimaginable, beyond any language other than brute obscenity. Writing was in his past. It was absurd to try. He was a father of young children, had a constantly demanding job, would have been exhausted even without the additional stress, for these last few years, of constantly looking over his shoulder, being distrusted and investigated. His best friend from law school lost his job in the State Department last year, while other friends and acquaintances, presumed guilty by association, had resigned their positions in university life, in publishing and the film industry.

He had survived, just. Was still employed, could feed his wife and children. But he was exhausted, demoralised and morally compromised. He'd had enough, and twenty-five bucks for an occasional short story was hardly likely to sustain them all.

He'd wanted to be a writer, had always wanted to be one. Had written an 800-page *roman-à-clef* entitled *Nature's Priest* in his late twenties, which prospective publishers praised in one paragraph and rejected firmly in the next. Rightly. The experience taught him a lot: what to leave out, how to separate, to refine, to focus. To make less into more, like Hemingway. He'd honed concentration by composing short stories and had one accepted – what a moment! – by *Story* magazine in 1946. He sent a copy to his parents with a proud inscription, but neither gave the slightest sign of having read it. It was just as well; the portrait

of the marriage at the heart of it was depressing and familiar. Addie read it and handed it back with a single sentence. 'Fair enough,' as if she didn't hold it against him. Or perhaps she did.

He finished his gin with a final gulp, put the glass in the sink and went back to the bedroom to fall briefly asleep before the other alarm rang. Addie was snoring unobjectionably, a tremolo that he found oddly attractive, like some sort of wind instrument, reedy and wistful.

'Rise,' he whispered. 'Make no attempt to shine. I'll make the coffee, get things going.'

He got up with the weary steadfastness that was apparently yet another of his irritating characteristics and pulled on his bathrobe. She hunched under the covers, as potent an invisible presence as could be imagined. Her hair bunched on the pillow in a tangled ribbon.

He looked at her form, still and steamy, her early morning smell whispering from the bedclothes to his nostrils. He could have picked her out, blindfolded, in the midst of a hundred sleeping women. On the mornings after they'd made love – not so many mornings now, he'd rather lost interest – the smell was overlain by something sweet and acrid that bore scant resemblance to somatic functioning. Something primal, post-pheromonal, that caught in your throat. He'd once thought it exciting, heady as an exotic perfume left too long in the sun, but now? It didn't exactly disgust him, but he'd smelled better, fresher, and more exciting.

He crossed the hall, had a quick and not entirely satisfying pee, squeezed out the final reluctant drops, washed his hands and took the few steps from the hallway into the kitchen. Get the coffee going, make something for the kids to eat in the car – Becca would only eat peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwiches, while Jake had been addicted for

some months to bologna sandwiches with mustard. At least it was easy. And for the grown-ups? Perhaps some sliced hard-boiled egg sandwiches, with mayonnaise and tomatoes. A few pickles in Saran wrap. And the Thermos of coffee, of course.

No breakfast for the kids, best to lift them from their beds, floppy and warm morning-smelly in their jammies, carry them down to the car however it made his shoulder ache, settle them in the back seat with pillows and blankets. With a bit of luck they might sleep for a couple of hours, kill almost half the journey. A third perhaps. Addie wouldn't have much to say.

Best be on the road by six, miss the worst of the morning traffic, though they would be going against the flow, away from DC rather than into it, north into Maryland, skirt Philly in a few hours, miss the New York rush hour, get to the bungalow for a late lunch. Maurice would soon be at Wolfie's buying half a pound of Nova, herring in cream sauce, egg salad, poppy seed bagels and cream cheese, knishes, dark oily *maslines* and plenty of half-sour pickles. The pantry and freezer would already be loaded in anticipation of their visit. It was a prospect worth hurrying up for, and the weekend at the bungalow would pass quickly enough, until he could return on Sunday evening to the empty apartment, leaving Addie and the kids. He would visit them later, taking the train, but otherwise he was looking forward to the peace, the quiet, no needy noisy children, no needy silent wife – time to spend working and listening to music, more than that certainly, a lot more – with an intensity that rather alarmed him.

She hadn't been asleep, of course. He rarely noticed whether she was or wasn't, unless he wanted something, which he was beginning not to want. She rolled onto her

right side, pushed the bedclothes off with a hasty gesture and stepped onto the floor. Turned on her bedside lamp, though Ben had opened the curtains and a dispiriting half-light was making its way gingerly into the room.

She wore her nudity with ease, if not grace. When they'd first become lovers she'd tilted her shoulders slightly backwards when she was naked, throwing her breasts into sharper relief. In later years she had none of the hunched self-consciousness of other women he'd known, breasts retracted. Now her walk was simple, upright, all traces of erotic display long gone.

Young lovers are curious children giggling, peering and peeping, naughty, anxious both to show off yet not to be caught, as if behind a bush with the grown-ups only just out of sight. She and her first boyfriend Ira had laughed when they made love, sometimes stopped to still themselves, perfectly aware that the impulse would abide, carried on, laughed and fucked and cried in mutual release. It hadn't been like that with Ben, not even at first, not so innocent, so pure, so full of wonder. But it had been more powerful, more grown up, and she'd wanted him with an intensity that surprised her. It was gone now, he knew it and seemed hardly to mind.

She pulled the shower curtain carefully, lest the stays on the rail popped again, and shrugged her way into the tub, turning the tap on carefully so as to avoid the downpour onto her hair, not bothering with the ugly rubber shower cap. Not that anything could make it look worse; let it frizz, the hell with it. Poppa Mo had given her a hand hairdryer for her birthday, proud to be up to date on the latest gadgets, but she'd never figured out how to make it work, was certain she'd be electrocuted.

She hated going to the hairdresser's, head stuck in an

ugly helmet blowing hot air, half-listening to more hot air on either side of her, the inconsequential gossip, the babble. It made her hate women, having her hair done. They all loved it, basked and wallowed in the heat like animals. Ugh.

They'd packed the suitcases the night before and put them in the trunk, enough simple clothing and beachwear for the visit, assembled a bag full of puzzles, colouring books and packets of (dangerous) jellybeans, likely to cause discord over who got the oranges, or drew a black. Dr Seuss and *Peanuts*, as well as *Nancy* and *Sluggo* cartoons – but reading in the back seat had to be rationed for the highways, when there wasn't too much sway and things were as stable as you could get with two fidgety kids – Jake was constantly widening his territory, but the little one always had a reliable response up her sleeve. If he offended her sufficiently, she'd say, '*You're Sluggo! That's what you are!*'

The comparison to the ugly, dunderheaded orphan infuriated him.

'Keep it up,' he'd warn, 'and I'll sluggo you!'

The prospect of the car trip – indeed, the prospect of the coming months – filled Addie with an anxiety bordering on dread, though anything was better, even this, than a summer – their last! – in the heat and humidity of DC.

They deposited the children, still fast asleep, dribbling in the corners of their mouths, in the back seat, propped them against the doors, placed pillows behind their heads. Addie brought Becca's Teddo, a slight orange bear with eyes beginning to protrude, the strings showing, and placed it gently beside her. She'd be upset without it, had only just been weaned from sucking her thumb. She was an anxious little girl, vigilantly doe-eyed, focusing first on one then another of the family, though quite what she was watching and waiting for was unclear. Some sort of unexpected disaster,

like a jug sliding off a table, which if she could only spot it coming might be averted.

Neither child stirred. Addie placed the back-stick between them, dividing the territory exactly in half. They usually woke within a few minutes of each other. Most mornings, Becca would rise abruptly, rubbing her eyes, looking round the room to orient herself, for she had occasional moments when she awoke from a dream feeling displaced and would begin to cry. On normal mornings, though, comfortable in their small shared bedroom, she awoke alert and cheerful.

‘I’m a morning person!’ she’d proclaimed. ‘Like Bugs Bunny!’ She would reach across to Jake’s bed and grab him by the shoulder, fingers digging in.

‘Wake up, sleepyhead,’ she’d say, shaking him until he grudgingly opened his eyes. She loved that moment, it was why she woke first, when she was in charge and he had to do her bidding. In a few minutes things would revert, Jake would rise, enfold his territory, and she would return to her natural place in the scheme of things: on the edges, looking in, vigilant, a solemn freckled owl, unseen, seeing. Darwin would have been proud of her. It was a highly intelligent bit of adaptation.

Her father adored her, held her hand when they were out together, teased her by squeezing her dear little knuckles, gave her little pats and tickles when they were on the couch watching TV, rumbled her hair, could barely suppress a smile when she entered the room, called her freckle-face. It made Addie furious with disapprobation, *not* jealousy, she wasn’t worried that the little one would supplant her, take the position as number one girl. Why worry about that? It had happened already. No, what she disliked was the fawning. It made her uncomfortable to the point of nausea.

She’d been her father’s favourite, she too, but Maurice

had never debased himself like this at the altar of fatherly love. What could one say, it was all over the place: *Jewish fathers and their daughters*. She'd been given such priority, and been aware of it, but nothing like this. She'd tried to compensate by bonding more intensely with the boy, nothing yucky or overstated, mind you, simply tried to treat him with heightened respect, and interest, and admiration when it was deserved. He seemed not to notice, looked under his eyelids at his father's love affair with his sister, turned away, retracted.

In the back seat the wake-up ritual was unfolding, though they'd been pretty good really, it was almost eight-fifteen. The Thermos of coffee had been shared in the front of the car, half of the egg sandwiches eaten, though it was too early for pickles. They could be a treat later. The kids didn't like them, thank God. Bad for their stomachs, and teeth.

First cigarettes of the day were tapped out of the pack, lit with the Zippo, inhaled greedily, tapped into the ashtray. The first, the best. None of the thirty-odd that would follow had the same freshness, or an equal kick.

Jake had pushed his blanket to the floor, leaned over and moved the stick.

'It's not fair!' he said. 'I'm bigger than she is, I need more room. She's just a squirt.'

'I am not a squirt! Addie! Addie! Make him put it back! I have a right!'

Becca had only recently learned about rights. Negroes had a right to sit in restaurants with the white people! DC was having a major court case about segregation, it was on the TV news, a debate which she had followed as best she could. It was simple really, just a question of what was right and what was wrong. A matter of brown and white, Addie called it. Becca liked that.

Jake didn't care. It was just fine with him, people eating

what they liked where they liked, same as he did. But he wasn't interested. He already had rights. He was bigger, and older. And a boy! He deserved more territory than Becca. He shifted his hip and pushed the stick slightly further towards her side.

In his very occasional spare time, Ben had helped the ACLU pursue the test case against Thompson's Restaurant, a modest segregated establishment close to the White House. One Saturday he and Addie had taken the kids on a moral education trip to see the Negro student protesters, with their signs and angry faces, knowing themselves in the vanguard of a great and just cause. It was a bit frightening for the children, all that chanting and sitting down in front of the door. It wasn't the sort of place they would eat themselves, though that didn't matter. Becca was delighted by it all, everybody should be able to eat together, whenever they wanted. She was pleased when she found that the Supreme Court agreed with her. Negroes have rights! The idea made her feel morally replete. She was promiscuously keen on rights, especially as they applied to her.

In the car, Addie wouldn't even turn round. Took a deep drag of her cigarette, her window only partially open, exhaled with a weary, prolonged sigh, the fug deepening.

'What'd I tell you two! Button it!'

It was a script as predictably fraught as a play by Eugene O'Neill. She kept drifting off, shaking herself as her head slumped, kept awake by the purity of her spirit of opposition. This wasn't what she'd wanted, what she'd planned for, there was nothing sustaining in it. Next to her Ben studied the unravelling road intently. She felt obscurely jealous as he did so, his eyes unwavering as if to avoid looking at her. He rarely did, these days, hardly noticed her at all.

When they'd met at Penn in the thirties, she doing her MA in Social Work, Ben at law school, they had bonded over what looked like common causes. They had passionate sympathy for the poor and the dispossessed, went on marches, picketed here and demonstrated there, made public avowal that things could change for the better, as they were palpably changing for the better in Russia. But it didn't take her long to discover that their similarities were actually a form of differentness.

Ben had read widely on leftist subjects, could quote Marx and refer to Engels, was fascinated by the unwieldy superstructures that supported his new beliefs. But Addie, though mildly conversant with the terminology, eventually found she didn't give a damn about all that verbiage, those fatuous, meaningless categories, all those beardy pontificating men. To generalise is to be an idiot, she'd maintain.

Ben counter-attacked, it was like a war between them. 'You can't run a state on the basis of fine particularities: you need politics, and laws, and a moral creed. You need ideas!'

Ideas? Phooey. What Addie wanted and needed was not *the people*, but people: breathing, suffering, in need of succour. The notion of the workers or the proletariat – the masses – only produced a foggy blob in her mind, whereas she could focus perfectly on a pregnant teenager, an alcoholic or drug addict, a family in need, a child who was being abused or neglected. To care about the people, you take care of people.

While Ben was studying his boring torts (whatever they were), Addie was ensconced in the relentlessly modern, Freudian-based School of Social Work, taking courses that touched her heart, real topics about real people. In Contemporary Love and Marriage, they did a

case study on the relationship of D.H. Lawrence and Frieda Von Richthofen, which was a remarkable inclusion in the syllabus, given that he had only died a few years earlier.

‘See,’ the students were told, ‘this is what a working, highly passionate relationship can be,’ and by implication should be. Lawrence became a hero to this generation of young women: if only Billy or Joe, or indeed Ben, was burning with such an inward flame! If only Edna or Sheila, or indeed Addie, could respond to that flame, ignite, passionately embrace life in every manner and fashion. Be prompted by the loins, the blood, the bowels – any number of inward bits, the heart even, but not the head! They were bad, heads.

She read Lawrence’s poetry to Ben, in bed. Her favourite of his books was *Look! We Have Come Through*, which celebrates Lawrence and Frieda’s first years together. Addie would read with appropriate intensity the opening line of ‘Song of a Man Who Has Come Through’: ‘Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me!’

‘I feel like that sometimes, after I eat too many beans,’ he said.

She put down the book and turned her back. Passion was no laughing matter.

‘Anyway,’ he said, intending to provoke this disciple of the wrong kind of bearded prophet, ‘they may have come through, but I don’t see why I have to look.’

Yet it had been a wonderful period of a few years, in the sunny climes of passionate engagement. And then the rains came, and everything was washed away. The rains were first called Jacob and then Rebecca, like the names of those hurricanes that sweep up the East Coast, buffeting. The end of sleep, and peace, and happiness. That dopey DHL never

knew fatherhood, even second-hand, or he could never have talked such tripe. Ben escaped every morning, he wasn't an inmate, just a visitor. She thought, *Well, that was us, wasn't it, fellow travellers, and look at us now!*

No social work jobs for the foreseeable future. Poppa Maurice helped send the children to private school – he regularly supplied brown paper bags stuffed with a surprising amount of money, held together with rubber bands, stacked randomly, ones, fives, tens, twenties, even some fifties, as if released from a cash register at the end of a working day, several working days. But it wasn't enough to pay everyday expenses, it was extra. And so she took a part-time job, when Jake was at school and Becca in nursery, selling *The World Book Encyclopaedia* door-to-door.

She was bright and engaging and actually believed in her product, but her desperation was etched in heavy lines; people wanted to get away from her, sales were few.

'If I had a soul,' she said to Ben after a wasted four hours patrolling the streets of the neighbourhood, 'this would have killed it.'

He was sympathetic. He would have hated that job, couldn't have done it for a second. *Please, Missus, may I have just a moment of your time? I have an offer that will transform the lives of you and your children . . .*

'Thank God for that,' he said.

'Not at all, this is worse. What I do have is a self, and it's killed that instead.'

It was true. She didn't remember who she'd been, in those hopeful spirited sexy days, could hardly recognise the person she now was, save for the clear recognition that she didn't like her.

And as for her world, she detested it. It was intolerably

sylvan in Alexandria, promiscuously treed and bushed, but it was just across the Potomac from DC and the smells wafted across the river. One Sunday, as they were crossing the bridge on the way to an enlightening children's afternoon at the Smithsonian, Ben had looked down at the brown sluggish waters and remarked how polluted the river was.

'Yeah!' said Becca. 'You can even see the pollute!'

You could see it in DC, too. The city landscape was polluted. Shit steamed in the streets. Shits walked the streets (they were called Republicans) and the faecal current swept across America, over the cities and the plains, polluted the rivers and the lakes, crossed the Rockies, stinking and malign. Everyone breathed it, everyone was infected. It was almost impossible to escape.

Ben had a variety of car activities for diverting the children, to get their minds off their struggle for dominance. There was the licence plate game, a singsong, the alphabet game, I spy, tongue-twisters, various simple riddles, though the kids had heard them all by now. Chickens crossing the road? Boring! He amused himself inventing new ones that left him belly-wobbling, giggling like a schoolboy.

'What's the difference between a duck?' he asked.

There was a pause while the children waited for him to continue.

'Do you have any questions?' he asked disingenuously, already beginning to giggle. Addie stared out the window. Jake was first to respond.

'That's stupid. You can't answer that . . .'

'Why not?'

'You didn't say, the difference between a duck and a . . .
what!'

Ben allowed a little time to coagulate in the smoky air. Becca leaned forwards: *That was really smart of Jake!*

He half-turned from the driver's seat and looked at each of the children, wisely.

'I'm not giving any hints,' he said, and burst into laughter so protracted that the car began to drift across the lane. Drivers honked furiously. He pulled himself together, straightened their trajectory, wiped his eyes, laughed some more. From the back, you could see his shoulders shaking.

'That's not fair!' said Becca.

'That's not funny!' said Jake.

'Grossman slays Grossman!' said Ben, proudly.

'Again!' said Addie. Ben was unusually animated; it didn't ring true, all this fun. What the hell was there to have fun about? She looked at him sharply. Something was up, he looked shifty and evasive.

'I spy with my little eye,' she said tersely, as the kids began to scan the unfolding countryside, the orange and yellow and brown cars, two-tones, with their chrome and white-walls, the billboards on the side of the road pimping boisterously for Nabisco Oreo Cookies and CANvenient 7Up. More intelligence and wit went into them than into the governance of the whole nation.

'Something beginning with A.'

Jake, reflexively competitive and four years older, looked round the car. Unwilling to miss out, but only just competent, Becca looked wherever he did, in the vain hope that he might miss an A and then she could name it.

'An arm!' he shouted.

'Nope.'

'An ankle!'

Becca scanned her body anxiously.

'Not that either.'

Unwilling to be drawn further into this dangerous body parts inventory, guessing all too easily which one Addie had in mind, Ben joined in.

‘There,’ he shouted, pointing across the road. ‘Amattababy!’

There was a snort of derision from the rear.

‘Ben, you can’t just make things up!’

‘I didn’t!’

‘Did so! What’s a mattababy?’

His shoulders started to shake.

‘Nothin’, baby. What’s a matta with you?’

It was a *brocheh*, Perle reminded herself, such a blessing to have Addie and the children coming, and that Frankie and Michelle and their little ones had settled in Huntington after the war.

‘It’s a *brocheh*,’ she said firmly.

Maurice put down his coffee cup, paused to light his filter-tipped Kent cigarette and place it in the ashtray on the dining table, let enough time go by to suggest unexpressed disagreement, as if he needed to consider whether it was such a blessing after all. You could get *brochehed* half to death during a hot summer with a tiny house full of needy, squabbling, overheated and over-entitled family.

He could hardly have admitted it to his wife, nor entirely to himself, but he was anxious about their imminent arrival, the invasion of a home hardly big enough for the two of them, stuffed for the summer with Addie and her kids, Frankie and Michelle with an uncertain number of babies popping in as fast as they popped out, *Die Schwarze* moping in the tiny maid’s room next to the bathroom. The children would be put into the guest room, and Addie – and later in the month Ben, when he joined them in a couple of weeks – would sleep in the back area, which had screens

separating it from the porch, and a glass door that could be closed at night, a curtain drawn across. Hardly private, hardly comfortable. A thin partition wall separating the cramped space from the parents' bedroom. He wondered how they ever managed to do it; they gave rare sign of having done so. No noises in the night, no sly smiles in the morning.

No guest ever leaves too early. A month, no, seven weeks this year, of Addie and the kids! They'd be arriving in a few hours, and he was already apprehensive. She was spiky and difficult, had been since her childhood, or at least from those early days when she was supplanted by the arrival of baby Frankie. Perle had adored her son since he first peeked into the world and her recalcitrant displaced daughter had never recovered.

He would make himself scarce. Go into the garage to his workbench, find things to make, or to fix. The fence round the back of the house needed new slats, do the undercoat and painting, put them up next week. There was always something to do at the bungalow. He quite liked Harbor Heights Park, the trip from the city on Grand Central Parkway and Northern State, the slow retreat from his beloved concrete to the occasional pleasures of grass and trees, the mildly alarming rural peacefulness. No horns honking, no traffic, no crowds. It was fine with him, so long as it didn't last too long.

A post-First World War development of summer homes for New Yorkers, the simple bungalows formed a self-enclosed community just ten minutes' walk from Huntington Harbor. It was a promising wooded site, bounded by roads on three sides, unimaginatively divided into lettered lanes. By 1925 seventy units had been sold to city lawyers, engineers, architects, professors, civil servants, builders and

small businessmen, anxious to get away from the oppressive heat of the city, to enjoy days on the local beach with their children. Brown's Beach, it was called locally, and brown it certainly was.

Only a few years later, the residents, who had not been warned of the menace of the local waters, signed a petition for an immediate amelioration of their parlous state, complaining of 'a polluted harbor, constituting a menace to health and life . . . with sewage and other disease-breeding material continuously distributed into the waters of the harbor, including the effluvia from cesspools and toilets, making the harbor unfit for bathing purposes or for the cultivation of shellfish'.

Not many of the residents, most of whom kept kosher homes, gave a hoot about shellfish, but the pollution was disgusting, the smell at low tide noxious. The waters were only negotiable at high tide, and grandparents warned of the dangers of getting your head in the water. The children went on frolicking, splashing and ducking. None of them died. The adults donned their swimsuits and paddled. Now and again one of them, swimming in the deeper waters, would encounter an itinerant floating turd, like an organic grenade. Ben called it Perle Harbor.

Becca fought for territory in the back seat, was bored quickly and kvetched, got carsick if she read or ate too much junk. She worried incessantly that they would get lost, particularly if Ben turned off the highway for one reason or another.

'How will we find our way back?' asked the little one, increasingly anxious. 'Is it on the map?' She had a lot of faith in maps, but only Ben could read them. If Addie started unfolding, peering and muttering, tracing various lines with

her finger, Becca knew there was going to be trouble and they would end up in fairyland.

‘Ben!’ she ordered. ‘Stop the car! Then *you* can look at the map.’

‘I am looking at it just fine,’ said Addie, peering down intently, trying to get the damn map to hold still.

‘Do you know where we are?’

Addie pointed randomly. ‘Here!’ she said. ‘And we are going – there!’ She pointed at a place higher up. ‘Towards the North!’

Becca looked outside, at the unwinding landscape of the highway. The North was uphill, like mountains. But the road was flat. They were lost.

The bungalow was at the top of the unpaved Lane L, which had three other houses on it, off Cedar Valley Lane. It was a simple, unheated wooden structure, thrown up by a developer who could hardly produce them fast enough to meet the demand. When Maurice bought theirs for \$2,000, in 1939, they were already considered good investments, though Perle worried about the cost.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ he said breezily. ‘I’ll pay it off.’ He would never have said ‘we’. She acceded with her own version of good grace: silence, a shrug, acquiescence. Paying wasn’t her problem. Morrie would provide, he always did, almost always.

A screened-in front room led into the kitchen, through which was a modest living room, three bedrooms and two simple bathrooms. At the back was a porch, with a gate that led to a small lawn, and a couple of mature crab apple trees between which Poppa could hang the orange striped hammock. The children had to be taught that a gate was not also a swing, except that it was if you wanted it to be.

One day the hinges broke and Becca fell over and skinned her knee. She didn't do that again.

From the very first day, Perle adored the heavenly expanse after the cramped two-room apartment on the fourth floor of the Hotel Brewster, kitchen, dining room and living room together as you came through the door, with a double bedroom and bath. And in Huntington, six rooms! A porch, a yard! She loved furnishing it, choosing fabrics and furniture from the current Sears Catalog, a bedroom suite for only \$37.75. That was very reasonable! A red lacquered rocking chair, a few throw carpets, a sofa, some occasional tables: only another \$32.40, for them all. She had a few bits and pieces she could spare from the apartment – it was too cluttered anyway – and from the local goodwill shop she bought a dining table and six chairs – eight bucks! – and three sets of used curtains at fifty cents a pair. The empty space soon became a home, if only for the summers. She loved it! A summer was a long time, you could stretch it at both ends as the developers recommended. Residents went to Harbor Heights in the early spring and didn't leave until after Labor Day (for those with children at city schools) or October (for those fortunate enough to stay on for the beautiful fall).

It was a happy period, the two of them in unusual harmony, proud of what they were creating, Perle on the inside, Maurice, the out, members of a professional community of gregarious city residents. They made friends quickly: Momshe and Popshe Livermore (he was the boss of a fancy department store), further up the road Sam and Martha Lowry, and across from them the Cohens (he was named Edwin, but she seemed only to be called Honey). The women became friends, which was a *brocheh*, because it left the men to their baseball, cigarettes and beer, their pinochle

games in the evening, while the women schmoozed in the living room.

Maurice had no idea what they talked about. The children, obviously. Clothes, recipes, matters of housekeeping? TV programmes? Who cared, as long as they were happy, and quiet? He would have been surprised by the range of their conversations, would have forgotten to add the topic 'husbands', about whom they were sometimes amused and frequently exasperated. But to a woman they were loyal, occasionally indiscreet, but anxious never to overstep that unspoken line that would make them emotionally unfaithful. They all knew about men, what they were like. No need to say everything, was there?

Sometimes, when the right four could be arranged (which was surprisingly difficult), they would play canasta. Perle was a student of the game, as adept as Maurice at his, but her aggression was not channelled into bonhomie, teasing and patronising instruction. No, hers was the untrammelled thing: she played to win, and when she snapped down her melds, taking the cards from her hand and twisting her wrist as ferociously as if she were trying to remove the recalcitrant lid of a jar of pickles, you could hear the snap as they hit the table, which wobbled under the impact. As did the other players. It was daunting, imperious. No one wished to play with her, no fun in that. Better to schmooze – safer, more relaxing.

And while they talked, they knitted. It was a skill required of the girls of their generation, and during the war they had formed a local group, knitting socks, sweaters and mufflers for the poor freezing soldiers. Afterwards Perle carried on knitting and (a new passion) crocheting, revelling in the freedom to choose her own patterns and colours, to brighten things up with oranges and greens, make sweaters less bulky,

socks for more delicate feet, ladies' mufflers to look smart on a winter's night. She knitted at such a rate that the family were swathed in warming garments, begging for less.

The overflow was placed in the cedar chest in the front room, opposite the freezer, which was Becca's favourite spot in the bungalow. When she arrived she'd run up the steps, pull back the lid, put her head right in and take a deep smell. It was heavenly; she couldn't get enough of it, would return several times a day and sniff away happily, like some sort of juvenile junky. Opposite her, Jake would make several trips to the freezer to sneak a Good Humor ice cream. Becca liked them, too. Sometimes he'd share. But he thought the cedar chest was stupid.

When it got just past eleven, the cigarette packs and beer bottles empty, one or another of the pinochle players would suggest that enough was enough, they should settle up. Maurice always won, but the stakes were low, less than five dollars would change hands. He hated having to stop, loved the niceties of play, frequently pointing out the errors of his fellow players, to their intense annoyance. One more round, he'd insist.

'Let's wait till the enemy squawks!' he'd say, shuffling the cards, starting to deal, the air still and blessedly cooler as the night wore on. 'Last round up!'

It had gone quiet in the car, the smoke yellowing and humid. Addie was resting her head against the window, a small floral cushion propping her up. Becca had gone back to sleep in the back seat. Though admonished to shut up, Ben was humming operatic arias, conducting with one hand and steering with the other. Jake was neither reading nor looking out the window, had jellybeans aplenty but was not eating them, had taken out a pad and pencil and was doing

some figures. After a time he looked up to see if he could locate an audience.

‘Ben?’ he said, looking down at his pad.

‘What, honey?’

‘I am trying to figure it out. Today is July 6th, isn’t it?’

‘Yup.’

‘And Addie says we are going to the bungalow until after my birthday. That’s August 25th. So . . .’ He paused to count, dividing the number of days by seven. ‘So, that’s over seven weeks, isn’t it?’

‘Sure enough,’ said Ben lightly. ‘It is.’

‘How come? We usually only go for a month, right? In August. Why are we going so early this time?’

There was a slight pause. Addie raised her head from her cushion.

‘I already explained this,’ she said. ‘I thought you would remember? This year we get the whole summer at the bungalow. That’s an extra treat, isn’t it? Who’d want to be in sweaty old Alexandria when they could be with Poppa and Granny and go to the beach?’

He remembered, but he hadn’t done the sums. ‘A little longer this summer’, that was how she’d explained it. It wasn’t an entirely appealing prospect. He shared the fiction that he loved it at the bungalow, though he was bored there most of the time, particularly when Ben and Poppa were away. Too many girls! Becca, and cousins Jenny, Naomi and baby Charlotte, with their silly games, dolls and dressing-up outfits. Of course he lorded it over them, got to be conductor of the swinging seats, had first call on the hammock, was the only one allowed on the roof or near the septic tank. He needed boys to talk to about baseball, but even if he found some at the beach they would be stupid Yankee fans. Or maybe the Dodgers or Giants. That was pretty bad too.

None of them had even heard of Mickey Vernon! And what was worse, no one to play baseball with. Not like in Alexandria, where he could play softball three mornings a week in the summer.

But at least there was plenty of time to read, to nosh fruit and jellied candies and ice cream, to go swimming at the beach, or into Huntington for a hotdog at Wolfie's, with sauerkraut and mustard, and a Dr Pepper straight out of the bottle.

The more he thought about it, the better it sounded. But something was wrong, and he could sense the evasiveness in his parents' immobile shoulders, their tones of voice, the inappropriate pauses and emphases. Nothing looked or sounded right.

'Yeah, OK,' he said, 'but I don't get it. Why extra this year . . . Nothing's different, is it?'

From the rear seat, Jake watched as Ben turned slightly to his right and nodded. Addie could do it, she was better at that sort of thing, had more of an anxious child in her, could respond to the uncertainty, get the tone right. He would be too matter of fact, too calm, too reasonable. There's nothing more worrying than being reassured.

It wasn't clear what to tell the kids, or how, or when. They'd avoided the moment until plans were further advanced, to spare them the anxiety of knowing both too much and too little. But the boy was already on edge, and likely to get more so. Becca thankfully was asleep, though she would take the news and accommodate the changes more easily than Jake.

'We're moving, aren't we? That's it!'

His voice was unsteady, and rising in volume. 'I don't want to! I won't!'

Addie didn't want to either.

Leaving Washington, renting an apartment in Huntington on Nathan Hale Drive (God forbid), where Frankie and Michelle lived, the loss of income and status, the dependency on Poppa's random largesse. Removing the children from their happy, progressive school in the Virginia farmlands, enrolling them in the Long Island public-school system with the suburban dopes. How utterly dreadful for them, for all of them. She searched in vain for someone to blame. They'd done nothing wrong, done things well and rightly and justly, believed in what was good. Son of a bitch!

'I'm not going!' said Jake. 'You can't make me!'

At the weekends Maurice worked on the bungalow, made it more comfortable, more attractive, more his own. Dug a flower bed along the southern hedge, planted two hydrangeas and some phlox, installed a double swing at the bottom of the yard, paved an area for a swinging seat for the children, made wooden planters for the side of the house and filled them with red geraniums. He spent most of his time in his workshop in the garage, emerging occasionally to measure this, adjust that or install the other.

Put on the radio, listen to the news – though that was depressing enough – perhaps catch an afternoon Yankee game. Sometimes Jake would wander in and he could teach the boy, who was fidgety and had a short attention span but was greedy for the time the two of them spent together, could teach him how to use a lathe, a chisel, do simple joinery.

Last year he'd taught the boy how to hammer in a nail: took a good piece of sawn-off two by four, fit it into the vise, turned the handle firmly, then told Jake to finish it off with the final twist. The boy tried to show how strong he

was, heaved and grunted, got it to move a little, gave a satisfied little smile.

‘Good boy!’ He passed him the hammer – not the titchy ball peen, a proper hammer with a hefty wooden handle and large head – and a two-inch nail.

‘Here you go. Remember what I showed you?’

The boy took the hammer, gripping it halfway up the handle, fearful concentration on his face.

‘Not like that, down at the bottom.’ He shifted the boy’s grip, the hammer sagged slightly from its own weight.

‘Now don’t just go tap, tap, that won’t drive the nail in. You have to hit it. Like Mickey Mantle!’

‘Mickey *Vernon!*’ said Jake. He was a Senators fan and loved their great first baseman, and though he was stuck with the Yankees for the summer, he didn’t like them. Big show-offs! Mickey Mantle! Yogi stupid Berra!

Jake raised the hammer, holding the nail tense against the wood, his fingertips whitening. Poppa took it back from him.

‘Let me show you again.’ He held the nail just below the top, its point against the wood, raised the hammer, cocked his wrist, drove it three-quarters of the way into the board. He left the rest, handed the hammer back.

‘Now you. No need to hold the nail.’

It took the boy three taps, but the head of the nail now rested against the wood.

‘Good!’

Knowing he’d been spared, the boy felt patronised.

‘I want to do it myself! Let *me* do it!’ He gave a girlish pout that made his grandfather’s heart contract.

Yet Maurice had adored him from the moment he was born; would have, indeed, once the pregnancy was announced, but it was unclear who exactly was in there.

Might be anyone. Might even be a girl. So he waited, and when the announcement came – from a thousand miles away, for Jacob was born in St Louis – he was quite overcome. It rather surprised him, this genetic fundamentalism. A firstborn (grand) son! What was that old Hebrew word for it? Been a long time since he'd been a member of a *shul*; though he went on Yom Kippur, he could hardly be described as attentive, just attending. Like most of them, going through the ritual but indifferent to it. Atonement? Yeah, yeah.

Bekhor? Something like that. Firstborn: with extra rights to property, to respect. To love. The announcement of the arrival was complicated by the difficulty of using the telephone during the war; even telegrams were reserved for military and industrial purposes. Ben had got round this with lawyerly wit. The ensuing telegram announced the arrival of 'new merchandise with hose attachment'. His following letter gave details, with surprisingly adept cartoonish images of himself, first smoking a large cigar and in the next picture bent over, turning green. It was the cigar, wasn't it? He wouldn't have meant to suggest that babies made him sick.

It would be unfair to claim that it was the hose that Maurice fell in love with; though a no-hose addition to the family would have been celebrated, it would not have been a *brocheh* of the same order. Even before he'd seen the boy his heart had gone gooey at the very thought of him, and his was not a heart that goosed very frequently. And like most babies, Jakie (as he was first known) was rather more loveable in the idea than in the flesh. He was a colicky baby, crying most of the time, red-faced, insistent, what one of *them* would have called a perfect incarnation of original sin.

Maybe it was the difficult birth, the difficult baby. Who knew? But after she tottered home from the days at the hospital, clutching Ben's arm desperately, the baby in a pram gifted by his loving grandparents, Addie took to bed, silent and miserable, smoking cigarettes, drinking coffee, refusing to eat, wasting. Ben fell into the breach. They travelled cross-country by train, to the utter dismay of their fellow passengers, and inflicted the *bekhor* on his grandparents, soon after which Ben, a smile on his face, headed straight back to St Louis – *needed immediately at work!* Addie got herself up and dressed, and spent her days on the porch, gin and tonic in one hand, cigarettes in the other. 'It's a life,' she observed wryly, disbelieving. The drinks made her feel better for a time, then worse.

The indissoluble grandparent-bond with the new arrival was founded then, in spite of the fact that even Perle didn't entirely warm to the bundle of screaming neediness. 'A *brocheh*,' she said repeatedly, often enough to convince herself, though Maurice was not so easily misled.

But the baby became a boy and, though still restless and needy, developed charms of his own, of which the major one, in Maurice's eyes, was that he adored his grandfather. Maurice played catch with him, invented games, taught him pinochle, watched baseball on TV, had twice taken him to Yankee Stadium. Poppa Mo adored being adored, as long as it didn't take much time or effort. He was utterly compelling in half-hour bursts, amusing, engaged, delightful. But he soon tired of the very needs that he created.

'First one to fall asleep gets a quarter,' he'd say, resting his head on the sofa and closing his eyes. The children did the same, but never won the quarter. Occasionally he'd give them one anyway in order to be able to ask: 'Friends to the finish?'

They didn't even bother to reply.

'Lend me a quarter?'

He paused for a moment.

'That's the finish!'

His feelings for Jake were archetypally pure, but more ambivalent in fleshy incarnation. He was a spoiled little boy, Addie and Perle constantly giving in to him, all he had to do was insist and he could have anything he wanted, just to shut him up. Still red-faced and crying really, only more subtly.

And so he let him have the hammer: let him, knowing that he was weak-wristed and the hammer too heavy; let him, knowing that it was dangerous; let him, knowing he might well hurt himself. Let him. It would be good for him. He was prone to crying over scratches and poison ivy, stubbed toes, bumps, bruises, frightened of wasps and jellyfish and sounds in the night. His fingers were covered with Band-Aids, his scuffed knees yellow from application of Mercurochrome – he was frightened of iodine. *Ow! It hurts!* No, it would do him no harm if harm it was to be.

It was. The hammer came up, not very far up, and down, not very hard, but it was high enough and hard enough to give the boy's thumb such a whack that, if it couldn't have been heard in the kitchen, the resulting screams certainly were.

Ten years old, making a fuss.

Perle came rushing across the lawn in her apron, waving her hands in her 'It's a disaster' motion, like a marionette operated by a spastic. Jake was lying on the floor holding his hand, screaming, face soaked, snot-ridden. *Making a meal of it*, Maurice thought unsympathetically.

'Maurice! What have you done? How many times have I told you!'

She leant down and lifted the crying boy, who was too big now to carry back to the house but seemed incapable of standing up. Unwilling, really.

‘Let me see, let me see!’ she said, unwrapping the one hand from the other to reveal the red swelling thumb.

‘Don’t touch it!’

‘Don’t worry, my darling,’ she said. ‘Come with me, we’ll put it in cold water and then put a lovely ice pack on it. That’ll make it all better.’

She glared at Maurice, who was sheepishly putting his tools away, and propelled the boy gently back to the house, brushing past Becca, lurking to the side, making herself simultaneously invisible and available.

‘I’ll turn the cold water on!’ she said, running back to the house. ‘And wake Addie!’

Perle loved to be needed, to make sure the children had everything they wanted, and then to worry after they had it. She spoiled them, and then worried they’d spoil, or worse. Being alive was dangerous. In the meantime *die kinder* needed to be watched over and protected. They’d eat too much fruit and get a stomach ache, go into the water just after eating a hotdog and drown of cramps, fall out of the tree, get stung by a bee or bitten by a dog, get a poison ivy rash, prick themselves on the blackberry bushes. Or get sucked into the septic tank. This was a fiction of Jake’s that Perle, who knew nothing of such tanks save what they were full of, curiously colluded in. If you got too close to the septic tank area, behind the garage, the ground would give way and you could fall in! Jake said so, it was like quicksand. Perle never went near it, and Becca wouldn’t go into the garage at all – which was, of course, Jake’s aim – for fear that the quicksand would reach out and grab her by the ankles, and in she’d go to the most horrible death she could

imagine, drowned in poo-poo. Worse than being eaten by the Great Danes up the hill, who howled all night and ate children. At least they were in their cage!

Becca slept for almost an hour, and woke up irritable and thirsty, rubbing her eyes.

‘Are we almost there?’

Jake knew she would say that – she was always asking, never satisfied.

‘No! It’s a long way still. You’ve got to learn to be patient!’

It was what Addie kept telling her, but Becca had no need to defer to her brother.

‘You be patient! I’m hungry and I feel sick!’

It was her trump card. Last year she’d been nauseous on the way to Huntington, vomited copiously in the car, almost missing Jake. Addie had insisted, before they set off, on making bacon and scrambled eggs for the children. Both resisted, but lots of ketchup and extra bacon had solved the immediate problem, and exacerbated the resulting one.

The copious ejaculate, which emerged in a muddy rainbow arc, made the rear of the car uninhabitable, ready for an emergency United Nations task force. Rotten half-digested eggs and red slush with brown bits covered much of the surfaces, and some of Jake’s. Fallout was nothing compared to this, just some dusty powder, nothing to it, whatever the consequences . . .

Ben had opened the window, put on the fan for fresh air and, gagging continuously, exited the highway five minutes later in search of a store where he could buy some cleaning materials, and a pharmacy to get something to settle Becca’s stomach, all of their stomachs. It took twenty minutes to find one, during which they had to pull over

twice for Becca to empty her stomach, and for the rest of them to fill their lungs.

They filled buckets with water, scrubbed and brushed and installed air fresheners, the result of which was that the car smelled like a hospital on a humid day, the air falsified by cleaning odours, underlain by the stench of decay.

Becca knew that none of them wanted that again.

'I ate too many jellybeans. I think I might . . .' She made a retching sound from the back of her throat and repeated it while clutching her stomach.

Jake glared at her. He'd heard that sound before, not when she had actually vomited, which she'd done quickly and without any fuss, but some time afterwards, when she was ostensibly playing in the yard. The first time he'd rushed over to her, to ask if she was sick. She looked sheepish, cleared her throat, walked away. She'd been practising.

Addie had brought a vomit bag from their plane trip to Bermuda the previous Easter and had it ready.

'Here, darling, try to hold on, and if you need to vomit do it in this. It's a special bag. You remember, from the plane?'

'I'm not doing it in a bag! I'll miss and get it all over me!'

'Better than getting it on me!' said Jake.

'I need the bathroom! Hurry!'

It was impossible not to stop, though Addie and Ben suspected, and Jake knew, that there was no danger of a barf.

He looked at his sister suspiciously.

'Becky,' he said, 'is drecky!'

She glared right back.

'Jakie,' she hissed, 'is snakey!'

'Shut up! Now!' said Addie.

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