

*“May we be forgiven,” an incantation, a prayer, the hope that somehow I come out of this alive. Was there ever a time you thought—I am doing this on purpose, I am fucking up and I don’t know why.*

Do you want my recipe for disaster?

The warning sign: last year, Thanksgiving at their house. Twenty or thirty people were at tables spreading from the dining room into the living room and stopping abruptly at the piano bench. He was at the head of the big table, picking turkey out of his teeth, talking about himself. I kept watching him as I went back and forth carrying plates into the kitchen—the edges of my fingers dipping into unnameable goo—cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes, a cold pearl onion, gristle. With every trip back and forth from the dining room to the kitchen, I hated him more. Every sin of our childhood, beginning with his birth, came back. He entered the world eleven months after me, sickly at first, not enough oxygen along the way, and was given far too much attention. And then, despite what I repeatedly tried to tell him about how horrible he was, he acted as though he believed he was a gift of the gods. They named him George. Geo, he liked to be called, like that was something cool, something scientific, mathematical, analytical. Geode, I called him—like a sedimentary rock. His preternatural confidence, his divinely arrogant head dappled with blond threads of hair lifted high drew the attention of others, gave the impression that he knew something. People solicited his opinions, his participation, while I never saw the charm. By the time we were ten and eleven, he was taller than me, broader, stronger. “You sure he’s not the butcher’s boy?” my father would ask jokingly. And no one laughed.

I was bringing in heavy plates and platters, casseroles caked with the debris of dinner, and no one noticed that help was needed—not George, not his two children, not his ridiculous friends, who were in fact in his employ, among

them a weather girl and assorted spare anchormen and -women who sat stiff-backed and hair-sprayed like Ken and Barbie, not my Chinese-American wife, Claire, who hated turkey and never failed to remind us that her family used to celebrate with roast duck and sticky rice. George's wife, Jane, had been at it all day, cooking and cleaning, serving, and now scraping bones and slop into a giant trash bin.

Jane scoured the plates, piling dirty dishes one atop another and dropping the slimy silver into a sink of steamy soapy water. Glancing at me, she brushed her hair away with the back of her hand and smiled. I went back for more.

I looked at their children and imagined them dressed as Pilgrims, in black buckle-shoes, doing Pilgrim children chores, carrying buckets of milk like human oxen. Nathaniel, twelve, and Ashley, eleven, sat like lumps at the table, hunched, or more like curled, as if poured into their chairs, truly spineless, eyes focused on their small screens, the only thing in motion their thumbs—one texting friends no one has ever seen and the other killing digitized terrorists. They were absent children, absent of personality, absent of presence, and, except for holidays, largely absent from the house. They had been sent away to boarding schools at an age others might have deemed too young but which Jane had once confessed was out of a certain kind of necessity—there were allusions to nonspecific learning issues, failure to bloom, and the subtle implication that the unpredictable shifts in George's mood made living at home less than ideal.

In the background, two televisions loudly competed among themselves for no one's attention—one featuring football and the other the film *Mighty Joe Young*.

"I'm a company man, heart and soul," George says. "The network's President of Entertainment. I am ever aware, 24/7."

There is a television in every room; fact is, George can't bear to be alone, not even in the bathroom.

He also apparently can't bear to be without constant confirmation of his success. His dozen-plus Emmys have seeped out of his office and are now scattered around the house, along with various other awards and citations rendered in cut crystal, each one celebrating George's ability to parse popular culture, to deliver us back to ourselves—ever so slightly mockingly, in the format best known as the half-hour sitcom or the news hour.

The turkey platter was in the center of the table. I reached over my wife's shoulder and lifted—the tray was heavy and wobbled. I willed myself to stay

strong and was able to carry out the mission while balancing a casserole of Brussels sprouts and bacon in the crook of my other arm.

The turkey, an “heirloom bird,” whatever that means, had been rubbed, relaxed, herbed into submission, into thinking it wasn’t so bad to be decapitated, to be stuffed up the ass with breadcrumbs and cranberries in some annual rite. The bird had been raised with a goal in mind, an actual date when his number would come up.

I stood in their kitchen picking at the carcass while Jane did the dishes, bright-blue gloves on, up to her elbows in suds. My fingers were deep in the bird, the hollow body still warm, the best bits of stuffing packed in. I dug with my fingers and brought stuffing to my lips. She looked at me—my mouth moist, greasy, my fingers curled into what would have been the turkey’s g-spot if they had such things—lifted her hands out of the water and came towards me, to plant one on me. Not friendly. The kiss was serious, wet, and full of desire. It was terrifying and unexpected. She did it, then snapped off her gloves and walked out of the room. I was holding the counter, gripping it with greasy fingers. Hard.

Dessert was served. Jane asked if anyone wanted coffee and went back into the kitchen. I followed her like a dog, wanting more.

She ignored me.

“Are you ignoring me?” I asked.

She said nothing and then handed me the coffee. “Could you let me have a little pleasure, a little something that’s just for myself?” She paused. “Cream and sugar?”

From Thanksgiving through Christmas and on into the new year, all I thought of was George fucking Jane. George on top of her, or, for a special occasion, George on the bottom, and once, fantastically, George having her from the back—his eyes fixed on the wall-mounted television—the ticker tape of news headlines trickling across the bottom of the screen. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I was convinced that, despite his charms, his excess of professional achievement, George wasn’t very good in bed and that all he knew about sex he learned from the pages of a magazine read furtively while shitting. I thought of my brother fucking his wife—constantly. Whenever I saw Jane I was hard. I wore baggy pleated pants and double pairs of jockey shorts to contain my

treasonous enthusiasm. The effort created bulk and, I worried, gave me the appearance of having gained weight.

It is almost eight o'clock on an evening towards the end of February when Jane calls. Claire is still at the office; she is always at the office. Another man would think his wife was having an affair; I just think Claire is smart.

"I need your help," Jane says.

"Don't worry," I say, before I even know what the worry is. I imagine her calling me from the kitchen phone, the long curly cord wrapping around her body.

"He's at the police station."

I glance at the New York skyline; our building is ugly, postwar white brick, dull, but we're up high, the windows are broad, and there's a small terrace where we used to sit and have our morning toast. "Did he do something wrong?"

"Apparently," she says. "They want me to come get him. Can you? Can you pick your brother up?"

"Don't worry," I say, repeating myself.

Within minutes I'm en route from Manhattan to the Westchester hamlet George and Jane call home. I phone Claire from the car; her voice mail picks up. "There's some kind of problem with George and I've got to pick him up and take him home to Jane. I had my dinner—I left some for you in the fridge. Call later."

A fight. On the way to the police station, that's what I'm thinking. George has it in him: a kind of atomic reactivity that stays under the surface until something triggers him and he erupts, throwing over a table, smashing his fist through a wall, or . . . More than once I've been the recipient of his frustrations, a baseball hurled at my back, striking me at kidney level and dropping me to my knees, a shove in my grandmother's kitchen hurling me backwards, through a full-length pane of glass as George blocks me from getting the last of the brownies. I imagine that he went out for a drink after work and got on the wrong side of someone.

Thirty-three minutes later, I park outside the small suburban police station, a white cake box circa 1970. There's a busty girlie calendar that probably shouldn't be in a police station, a jar of hard candy, two metal desks that

sound like a car crash if you accidentally kick them, which I do, tipping over an empty bottle of diet Dr. Pepper. “I’m the brother of the man you called his wife about,” I announce. “I’m here on behalf of George Silver.”

“You’re the brother?”

“Yes.”

“We called his wife, she’s coming to get him.”

“She called me, I’m here to pick him up.”

“We wanted to take him to the hospital but he wouldn’t go; he kept repeating that he was a dangerous man and we should take him ‘downtown,’ lock him up, and be done with it. Personally, I think the man needs a doctor—you don’t walk away from something like that unscathed.”

“So he got into a fight?”

“Car accident, bad one. Doesn’t appear he was under the influence, passed a breath test and consented to urine, but really he should see a doctor.”

“Was it his fault?”

“He ran a red light, plowed into a minivan, husband was killed on impact, the wife was alive at the scene—in the back seat, next to the surviving boy. Rescue crew used the Jaws of Life to free the wife, upon release she expired.”

“Her legs fell out of the car,” someone calls out from a back office. “The boy is in fair condition. He’ll survive,” the younger cop says. “Your brother’s in the rear, I’ll get him.”

“Is my brother being charged with a crime?”

“Not at the moment. There’ll be a full investigation. Officers noted that he appeared disoriented at the scene. Take him home, get him a doctor and a lawyer—these things can get ugly.”

“He won’t come out,” the younger cop says.

“Tell him we don’t have room for him,” the older one says. “Tell him the real criminals are coming soon and if he doesn’t come out now they’ll plug him up the bung hole in the night.”

George comes out, disheveled. “Why are you here?” he asks me.

“Jane called, and besides, you had the car.”

“She could have taken a taxi.”

“It’s late.”

I lead George through the small parking lot and into the night, feeling compelled to take his arm, to guide him by his elbow—not sure if I’m preventing him from escaping or just steadying him. Either way, George doesn’t pull away, he lets himself be led.

“Where’s Jane?”

“At the house.”

“Does she know?”

I shake my head no.

“It was awful. There was a light.”

“Did you see the light?”

“I think I may have seen it but it was like it didn’t make sense.”

“Like it didn’t apply to you?”

“Like I didn’t know.” He gets into the car. “Where’s Jane?” he asks again.

“At the house,” I repeat. “Buckle your belt.”

Pulling into the driveway, the headlights cut through the house and catch Jane in the kitchen, holding a pot of coffee.

“Are you all right?” she asks when we are inside.

“How could I be,” George says. He empties his pockets onto the kitchen counter. He takes off his shoes, socks, pants, boxers, jacket, shirt, undershirt, and stuffs all of it into the kitchen trash can.

“Would you like some coffee?” Jane asks.

Naked, George stands with his head tilted as if he’s hearing something.

“Coffee?” she asks again, gesturing with the pot.

He doesn’t answer. He walks from the kitchen through the dining room and into the living room, and sits in the dark—naked in a chair.

“Did he get into a fight?” Jane asks.

“Car accident. You’d better call your insurance company and your lawyer. Do you have a lawyer?”

“George, do we have a lawyer?”

“Do I need one?” he asks. “If I do, call Rutkowsky.”

“Something is wrong with him,” Jane says.

“He killed people.”

There is a pause.

She pours George a cup of coffee and brings it into the living room along with a dish towel that she drapes over his genitals like putting a napkin in his lap.

The phone rings.

“Don’t answer it,” George says.

“Hello,” she says.

“I’m sorry, he’s not home right now, may I take a message?” Jane listens.

“Yes, I hear you, perfectly clear,” she says and then hangs up. “Do you want a drink?” she asks no one in particular, and then pours one for herself.

“Who was it?” I ask.

“Friend of the family,” she says, and clearly she means the family that was killed.

For a long time he sits in the chair, the dish towel shielding his privates, the cup of coffee daintily on his lap. Beneath him a puddle forms.

“George,” Jane implores when she hears what sounds like water dripping, “you’re having an accident.”

Tessie, the old dog, gets up from her bed, comes over, and sniffs it.

Jane hurries into the kitchen and comes back with a wad of paper towels. “It will eat the finish right off the floor,” she says.

Through it all George looks blank, like the empty husk left by a reptile who has shed his skin. Jane takes the coffee cup from George and hands it to me. She takes the wet kitchen towel from his lap, helps him to stand, and then wipes the back of his legs and his ass with paper towels. “Let me help you upstairs.”

I watch as they climb the steps. I see my brother’s body, slack, his stomach sagging slightly, the bones of his hips, his pelvis, his flat ass—all so white they appear to glow in the dark. As they climb I see below his ass and tucked between his legs his low, pinkish-purple nut sack swaying like an old lion.

I sit on their couch. Where is my wife? Isn’t Claire curious to know what happened? Doesn’t she wonder why I am not home?

The room smells like urine. The wet paper towels are on the floor. Jane doesn’t come back to clean up the pee. I do it and then sit back down on the sofa.

I am staring through the dark at an old wooden tribal mask made with hemp hair and a feather and laced with tribal beads. I’m staring at this unfamiliar face that Nate brought back from a school trip to South Africa, and the mask seems to be staring back as though inhabited, wanting to say something—taunting me with its silence.

I hate this living room. I hate this house. I want to go home.

I text Claire and explain what’s happened. She writes back, “I took advantage of your being gone and am still at the office; it sounds like you should stay the night in case things deteriorate further.”

I dutifully sleep on the sofa with a small, smelly nap blanket covering my shoulders. Tessie, the dog, joins me, warming my feet.

In the morning there are hurried phone calls and hushed conversations; a copy of the accident report crawls out of the fax machine. We will take George to the hospital and they will look for something, some invisible explanation that will relieve him of responsibility.

“Am I going deaf or what the fuck is going on around here?” George wants to know.

“George,” Jane says clearly. “We have to go to the hospital. Pack your bag.” And he does.

I drive them. He sits next to me, wearing well-worn corduroy pants, a flannel shirt he’s had for fifteen years. He’s unevenly shaved.

I drive self-consciously, worried that his complacent mood might shift, that he might flash back, erupt, and try to grab the wheel. The seat belts are good, they discourage sudden movements.

“Simple Simon met a pieman, going to the fair. Said Simple Simon to the pieman, ‘Let me taste your ware,’” George intones. “Simple Simon went a-fishing for to catch a whale; all the water he had got was in his mother’s pail. Watch out,” he says to me, “or you’ll get what you asked for.”

In the Emergency Room, Jane goes to the counter with their insurance information and the police report and explains that her husband was involved in a fatal car accident the evening before and appeared disoriented at the scene.

“That’s not what happened,” George bellows. “The fucking SUV was like a big white cloud in front of me, I couldn’t see over it, couldn’t see around it, I couldn’t help but punch through it like a cheap piece of aluminum, like a fat fucking pillow. The airbag punched me back, slammed me, knocked the wind right outta me, and when I finally got out I saw people in the other car, pushed together like lasagna. The boy in the back didn’t stop crying. I wanted to punch him, but his mother was looking at me, her eyes popping out of her head.”

As George is talking, two large men make their way towards him from the rear. He doesn’t see it coming. They grab him. He’s strong. He fights back.

The next time we see George he’s in a cubicle in the back of the Emergency Room, arms and legs tied to a gurney.

“Do you know why you’re here?” a doctor asks him.

“I’ve got bad aim,” George says.

“Can you remember what happened?”

“It’s more like I’ll never forget. I left work at about six-thirty, drove towards home, decided to stop for a bite, which is not something I normally do, but I was tired, I can admit that. I didn’t see her. As soon as I realized I’d hit something, I stopped. I stayed with her. I held on to her. She was slipping out from under herself, fluid was leaking out, like a broken engine. I felt sick. And I hated her. I hated her for how stunned she looked, how gray, the pool forming beneath her—I didn’t even know where exactly it was coming from. It started to rain. There were people with blankets—where did the blankets come from? I heard sirens. People in cars drove around us, I saw them staring.”

“What is he talking about?” I ask, wondering whether I’m confused or George is entirely disoriented. “That’s not what happened, that’s not this accident, perhaps it’s another one, but it’s not his.”

“George,” Jane says. “I read the police report—that’s not what happened. Are you thinking of something else? Something you dreamed or something you saw on television?”

George offers no clarification.

“Any history of mental or neurological symptoms?” the doctor asks. We all shake our heads. “What line of work are you in?”

“Law,” George says. “I studied law.”

“Why don’t you leave him with us for now. We’ll order some tests,” the doctor says, “and then we’ll talk further.”

Again, I stay the night at George and Jane’s house.

The next morning, on our way to see him, I wonder aloud, “Is this the right place for him, a psych ward?”

“It’s the suburbs,” she says. “How dangerous could a suburban psych ward be?”

He is alone in his room.

“Good morning,” Jane says.

“Is it? I wouldn’t know.”

“Did you have your breakfast?” she asks, seeing the tray in front of him.

“It’s dog food,” he says, “Take it home to Tessie.”

“Your breath stinks—did you brush your teeth?” I ask.

“Don’t they do it for you?” George replies. “I’ve never been in a mental hospital before.”

“It’s not a mental hospital,” Jane says. “You just happen to be in the mental unit.”

“I can’t go into the bathroom,” he says. “I can’t look at myself in the mirror—I can’t.” He begins to sound hysterical.

“Do you need me to help you? I can help you clean up,” Jane says, opening the toilet kit they have left for him.

“Don’t make her do this,” I say. “You’re not an infant—snap out of it—stop acting like a zombie.”

He begins to cry. I am surprised at myself for the tone I’m taking with him. I walk out of the room. As I leave, Jane is running water on a washcloth.

In the evening, after work, Claire comes to the hospital, bringing Chinese food from the city for the four of us. For someone of Chinese descent, Claire is surprisingly indiscriminate about Chinese food—as far as she’s concerned, it’s all the same, variations on a theme. We reheat it in the microwave marked “For Patient Use—No Medical Products.” We clean our hands with the bottles of foaming cleanser that are on every wall of every room. I worry about putting anything down, touching any surfaces—suddenly I fear I could be eating deadly germs. I look into the Chinese food and see a worm, which I discreetly show Claire.

“It’s not a worm, it’s a grain of rice.”

“It’s larva,” I whisper.

“You’re nuts.” She uses her fork to extract the grain of rice.

“Does rice have eyes?” I ask.

“It’s pepper,” she says, wiping the eyes off.

“Where did the food come from?” I ask.

“The place on Third Avenue that you used to like,” she says.

“The one the health department closed?” I ask with a measure of alarm.

“You have a big trip coming up,” Jane says, distracting us.

“I’m going to China for a few days,” Claire says.

“No one goes to China for ‘a couple of days,’” George growls.

Claire does.

Refusing to eat, George will only allow himself to suck the hot mustard directly from the plastic packets—self-punishment. No one stops him. “More for me,” I am tempted to say, but don’t.

“When are you leaving?” Jane asks.

“Tomorrow.”

I pass another packet of mustard to George.

Later, in private, Claire asks me if George and Jane have a gun. “If not, they should get one,” she says.

“What are you saying? They should get a gun? That’s how you end up dead, you get a gun and then someone shoots you.”

“I’m just saying that I wouldn’t be surprised if Jane comes home one night and the family of the people George hurt are waiting for her. He destroyed their lives, and they’re going to want something back. Stay with her, don’t leave her alone; Jane is vulnerable,” Claire says. “Imagine if it were you; if you went nuts, wouldn’t you want someone to stay with me and keep an eye on the house?”

“We live in an apartment with a doorman. If I went crazy, you’d be fine.”

“That’s true. If anything happened to you, I’d be perfectly okay, but Jane is not me. She needs someone. Also, you should visit the surviving boy. The lawyer is going to tell you not to, but do it anyway—George and Jane need to know what they’re dealing with. There is a reason I run Asia,” Claire says. “I’m always thinking.” She taps the side of her head. Think. Think. Think.

And so the next day I visit the boy, more out of a kind of familial guilt and less out of the need to calculate the impossible cost of making the boy “whole.” I stop at the gift shop, where the selection is limited to brightly colored carnations, religious necklaces, and candy. I pick a box of chocolates and powder-blue carnations. The boy is in the same hospital as George, in the pediatric unit—two floors higher. He is sitting up in bed, eating ice cream, his eyes fixed on the television—*SpongeBob SquarePants*. He is about nine years old, chunky, a single eyebrow arches across his face in the shape of the letter “M.” His right eye is blackened, and a large patch on the side of his head has been shaved, and there’s a meaty purple line of stitches exposed to the air. I give the gifts to the woman sitting with the boy, who tells me that he is doing as well as can be expected, there is always someone with him, a relative or one of the nurses.

“How much does he remember?” I ask.

“All of it,” the woman says. “Are you from the insurance company?”

I nod—is a nod the same as a lie?

“Do you have everything you need?” I ask the boy.

He doesn't answer.

"I'll come back again in a few days," I say, anxious to leave. "If you think of anything, you'll let me know."

It's funny how quickly something becomes a routine, a way of doing business. I stay with Jane, and it is as though we are playing house. That night I take out the trash and lock the door; she makes a snack and asks if I'll come upstairs. We watch a little television and read. I read whatever it was that George had been reading, his newspapers and magazines, *Media Age*, *Variety*, *The Economist*, and a big history of Thomas Jefferson that sits beside the bed.

The accident happens and then it happens. It doesn't happen the night of the accident or the night we all visit. It happens the night after that, the night after Claire tells me not to leave Jane alone, the night after Claire leaves for China. Claire goes on her trip, George goes downhill, and then it happens. It's the thing that was never supposed to happen.

The evening visit to the hospital goes badly. For reasons that are not clear, George is locked in a padded room, his arms bound to his body. Jane and I take turns peering through the small window. He looks miserable. Jane asks to go in and see him, the nurse cautions her against it, but she insists. Jane goes to him, calls his name. George looks up at her; she sweeps his hair out of his face, wipes his furrowed brow; and he turns on her, pins her with his body and bites her again and again, her face, her neck, her hands, breaking the skin in several places. The aides rush in and pull him off of her. Jane is taken downstairs and treated in the Emergency Room, her wounds are cleaned and dressed and she's given some kind of a shot, like a rabies vaccination.

We go back to the house. Jane heats hundred-calorie brownies in the microwave, I scoop no-fat ice cream onto them, she sprays them with zero-calorie whipped cream, and I cheer them further with chocolate sprinkles. We snack in silence. I take out the trash and change out of my clothes, the same clothes I've been wearing for days, and put on a pair of his pajamas.

I hug her. I want to be comforting. I am in his pajamas, she is still dressed. I don't think anything will happen. "I apologize," I say, without knowing what I am saying. And then she is against me, she puts her hands on the sides of her skirt and slides it down. She pulls me towards her.

There was a time when I almost told Claire about Thanksgiving—in fact I tried to tell her, one night after sex, when I was feeling close to her. As I started

to tell the story, Claire sat up straight and pulled the sheet tight against her body, and I backed away from what I was about to say. I changed it. I left out the kiss and just mentioned something about Jane brushing against me.

“You were in her way and she was trying to get past you and not get to you,” Claire said.

I didn’t mention that I felt the head of my cock pressing against my sister-in-law’s hips, her thighs pressed together.

“Only you would think she was making a pass,” Claire said, disgusted.

“Only me,” I repeated. “Only me.”

Jane pulls me to her; her hips are narrow. My hand slides down into her panties. It is a new jungle. She sighs. The feel of her, this private softness, is incredible. And I’m thinking, this is not really happening—is it?

Her mouth is on me; she reaches for something, some kind of cream, it starts cold and then goes warm. She strokes me, looking me in the eye. And then again her mouth is on me and there is no way to say no. She pulls my pajamas out from under, is quickly upon me, riding me. I explode.

Drenched in her scent, but too shaken to shower or to fall asleep in their bed, I wait until she is asleep and then go downstairs, to the kitchen, and wash myself with dish soap. I am in my brother’s kitchen at three in the morning, soaping my cock at his sink, drying myself with a towel that says “Home Sweet Home.” It happens again in the morning, when she finds me on the sofa, and then again in the afternoon, after we visit George. “What’s the story with your hand?” George asks Jane the next day, noticing her bandages. He’s back in his room, with no memory of the night before.

Jane starts to cry.

“You look like hell,” he says. “Get some rest.”

“It’s been a difficult time,” I say.

That evening we open a bottle of wine and do it again, more slowly, deliberately, intentionally.

The hospital lets him out, or more likely he simply decides to leave. Inexplicably, he is able to walk out unnoticed in the middle of the night. He comes home in a taxi, using money that he’s found at the bottom of his pocket. He can’t find his keys so he rings the bell and the dog barks.

Maybe I heard that part—the dog barking.

Or maybe he didn’t ring the bell and maybe the dog didn’t bark. Maybe

George took the spare key from inside the fake rock in the garden by the door, and, like an intruder, he came silently into his own house.

Maybe he came upstairs thinking he'd crawl into his bed, but his spot was taken. I don't know how long he stood there. I don't know how long he waited before he lifted the lamp from her side of the bed and smashed it onto her head.

That's when I woke up.

She is screaming. The one blow isn't enough. She tries to get up; the lamp isn't even broken. George looks at me and then picks the lamp up again and swings it at her. The porcelain vase that is the base explodes against her head. By then I am out of bed. He tosses aside what remained of the lamp—blood streaming down his fingers—picks up the telephone, and throws it to me.

"Call it in," he says.

I stand facing him, wearing his pajamas. We are the same, like mimes, we have the same gestures, the same faces, the family chin, my father's brow, the same mismatched selves. I am staring at him, not knowing how this is going to work out. A disturbing gurgling sound prompts me to dial the phone.

Accidentally, I drop the phone. I bend to pick it up, and my brother's foot catches me under the chin, kicking me hard; my head snaps back. I am down as he leaves the room. I see his hospital gown under his clothes, hanging out like some kind of tail. I hear George's heavy footfall as he goes down the stairs. Jane is making an alarming noise. I reach across the floor, pull the phone towards me, and dial "0." I dial "0" like it is a hotel, like I expect someone to answer. There is a long recording, a kind of spoken word essay about what the "0" button can do for you, and I realize it will be forever before a real person comes on. I hang up and after several shaky attempts am able to dial "911."

"A woman has been beaten. Hurry," I say, and give them the address.

I pull myself to standing, go into the bathroom, and get a washcloth, as though that will help, as though I can wipe the blood away. I can't even find the spot; her head is a mash, blood and hair and bone and lamp, and I just hold the washcloth and wait.

It takes forever. The fire truck comes first. The house shakes as it pulls up. I leave Jane and go to the window. They come across the grass in full fire gear, hats and coats, immune to the predawn spray of the irrigation system.

I don't know if he opens the door or they come in of their own accord.

"Upstairs," I shout.

Quickly they are upon her. One stands apart, talking as if narrating into his radio. "We've got a middle-aged woman, open head injury with exposed matter; bring long board, full air, medic bag; request paramedic and police support. Who is this woman?" the narrator asks.

"Jane. My brother's wife."

"Do you have a driver's license or other identification for her?"

"Her purse is downstairs."

"Relevant medical information, allergies, underlying conditions?"

"Does Jane have any medical problems?" I shout down.

"A lamp hit her on the head," my brother says.

"Anything else?"

"She takes a fuck of a lot of vitamins," George says.

"Is she pregnant?" the narrator asks.

Just the question makes me weak.

"She shouldn't be," George says, and I can't help but think that's got an edge to it.

"Stabilize the neck," one of the firemen says.

"It's not her neck, it's her head," I say.

"Stand back," the narrator says.

The paramedics arrive, slip an orange board under Jane, tape her to it with what looks like duct tape, and wrap her head in gauze—she looks like a mummy, a battle casualty, or maybe a Shriner en route to a convention.

Jane makes a noise, a low guttural growl, as five of them lift her and carry her out, leaving a trail of sterile debris and heavy footprints. Turning the corner, they knock into the banister, and with a crack it snaps. "Sorry." They are out the kitchen door and into the back of the ambulance faster than you might think.

George is in the kitchen drinking a cup of coffee. There's blood on his hands and flecks of something on his face, pieces of the lamp—shards. "No parking on the grass," he says to the first police officer who arrives. "Please inform your troops."

“Which one of you is Mr. Silver?” the cop asks. I assume he must be a detective because he is not wearing a uniform.

We both raise our hands, simultaneously: “I am.”

“Let’s see some identification.”

George fumbles as if looking for his, flapping the hospital gown.

“We’re brothers,” I say. “I’m the elder.”

“So—who did what to whom?” He’s got his notebook out.

George sips his coffee.

I say nothing.

“It’s not a complicated question; either way we’ll dust the lamp for prints. Dust,” the detective calls out. “Get a full evidence team.” He coughs. “So—is there anyone else home, anyone else we should be looking for? If it wasn’t one of you that clocked her with the lamp, maybe the person who did it is still in the house, maybe there’s another victim to be found.” He pauses, waiting for someone to say something.

The only sound is the tick-tock of the kitchen clock. I almost lose it when the cuckoo pops out—cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo, six times. “Rake the house,” the detective shouts to his men. “Make sure there’s nobody else. Any evidence—bag it. That includes the lamp.”

He turns his attention back to us. “It’s Monday morning, I got out of bed to come here. My wife gives it to me every Monday morning, no questions asked, she likes me to start the week happy, so I’m not exactly feeling fondly towards you.”

“What the fucking fuck are you fucking thinking, you fuck,” George blurts.

Two large cops move to block the kitchen door. Suddenly there is no exit.

“Cuff him,” the detective says.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” George says, “I was talking to my brother.” George looks at me. “And those are my pajamas,” he says. “Now you’ve gone and done it.”

“I’m not going to be able to help you this time,” I say.

“Have I committed a crime?” George asks.

“Hard to know, isn’t it,” one of the cops says, cuffing him.

“Where are you taking him?” I ask.

“Is there a particular place you’d like him to go?”

“He was in the hospital. He must have walked out last night—notice the gown under his clothes?”

“So he eloped?”

I nod.

“And how did he get home?”

“I don’t know.”

“I fucking walked, in the fucking dark. Pussy Licker.”

The ambulance takes Jane, the cops take George, I’m left behind with an officer waiting for the evidence team. I start to go upstairs, the cop stops me: “Crime scene,” he says.

“Clothing,” I say, flapping my pajama legs—actually George’s pajama legs.

He escorts me up to the bedroom, which looks like a tornado hit, the lamp in pieces on the floor, blood, the bed undone. I change out of my brother’s pajamas, and without a word to the wise, I borrow George’s clean clothes, still in the dry cleaner’s plastic bag hanging off the closet door.

“Leave the dirties in the room,” the cop says. “You never know what’ll come into play.”

“You’re right,” I say, and we go back downstairs.

As the cop follows me down, I feel strangely like a suspect. It occurs to me that it would be smart to call George’s lawyer and update him on the turn of events, but I can’t remember his name. I’m also wondering if the cop is somehow watching me, if I should be worried about making fast moves, reaching for anything and so on. Also, how do I get away from him in order to make a private phone call?

“I think I’ll go put some laundry in the dryer.”

“Wait,” the cop says. “That you can do later. Wet clothes stay wet.”

“Okey-dokey.” I sit at the kitchen table and casually pick up the phone and go through the caller ID, thinking the lawyer’s name is there and will ring a bell. Bingo—Rutkowsky.

“Okay if I use the phone?”

“It’s your nickel.”

“Okay if I step outside?”

He nods.

“Did I get you at a bad time?” I ask when Rutkowsky, the lawyer, answers.

“Who is this?”

“Silver, Harry Silver, George Silver’s brother.”

"I'm on my way into court," the lawyer says.

I'm standing in the front yard, barefoot in the wet grass. "There have been developments." I pause. "George walked out of the hospital last night, and Jane has been injured, a lamp got her on the head. The police are here, waiting for an evidence team, and . . ."

"How come you're there?"

"I was asked to keep Jane company while my brother was in the hospital."

"Where is Jane?"

"She's off to the hospital."

"And George?"

"They've taken him as well."

"Is there the sense that the crime is serious?"

"Yes."

"When the police come, follow them even if they ask you to leave, you go wherever they go. Don't allow them to move anything, and if they ask you to touch or move anything, keep your hands in your pockets. They can take photos, they can pick up things with tweezers and put them in baggies."

"The neighbors are watching out their windows."

"I'll meet you at the house at four-thirty; until then, don't disturb the scene."

"I'll leave a key under the fake rock by the front door, in case I'm not back."

"Where are you going?"

"The hospital."

"Let me have your cell in case I need you."

I give him the number and he hangs up. In my head I hear Jane's voice: "Condoms?"

Yes. And where are they now? Gone, used, finished, dropped in the kitchen trash, loaded with jism.

I go back into the house. "Mind if I make a fresh pot of joe?"

"I won't stop you," the cop says. "Was that dog always here?" The cop points to Tessie, who is licking the water from my feet. Her bowl is dry. "That's Tessie."

I give the dog fresh water and kibble.

The evidence team suits up on the front lawn, laying out white Tyvek onesies and then climbing into them as if mounting a hazmat operation, complete

with booties and latex gloves. “No, really, it’s okay,” I say. “We’re not contagious and the carpet’s already wrecked.” They don’t respond. “Coffee anyone?” I ask, holding up my mug. Usually I don’t drink coffee, but this morning I’m already on my fourth cup; I’ve got my reasons. As directed, I follow them from room to room. “So you use film and digital?”

“Yep,” the photographer says, snapping away.

“That’s really interesting. And how do you know what to photograph?”

“Sir, if you could please stand back.”

Before they leave, the cop takes out his notebook. “A couple of queries before I go. There are some blank spots, holes in the story.”

“Like what?”

“Were you having sex with her when your brother came home?”

“I was sleeping.”

“Have you been having a relationship with your brother’s wife?”

“I am here because my brother has been in the hospital.”

“And your wife?”

“She’s in China. It was my wife’s suggestion that I stay with my brother’s wife.”

“How would you describe your relationship with your brother?”

“Close. I remember when they bought the house. I remember helping them pick things out—the kitchen tiles. After the accident, I comforted Jane.”

The cop slaps his notebook closed. “All right, then, we know where to find you.”

When the cop leaves, I discover Jane’s purse on the front hall table and go through it, pocketing her cell phone, house keys, and, inexplicably—lipstick. Before I put her lipstick in my pocket, I open it, sweeping “Sweet Fuchsia” across my lips.

From the car, I call Claire in China. “There’s been an accident; Jane has been injured.”

“Should I come home tomorrow?”

In China tomorrow is today, and where we are today is tomorrow there. “Stay where you are,” I say. “It’s too complicated.”

Why was Claire so willing to let me go? Why did she send me into Jane's arms? Was she testing me? Did she really trust me that much?

"I'm going to the hospital now and will call again when I know more." A pause. "How's work?"

"Fine. I've been feeling punk, I ate something strange."

"Maybe a worm?"

"Call me later."

When I get to the hospital, they tell me Jane is in surgery and George is still in the Emergency Room, shackled to a gurney in the rear.

"You stupid fuck," he says when I part the curtain.

"What happened to your face?" I point to a row of fresh stitches above his eye.

"Call it a welcome-back present."

"I fed the dog and stayed until the cops were finished, and then I called your lawyer—he's coming later."

"They don't want me back on account of how I 'ran away.' It's not like anyone told me what the checkout policy was and that I needed some sort of permission to go."

A hospital housekeeper passes through with a metal mop and bucket.

"Is he contagious?"

"No, just violent; come in," I say.

A young male doctor wheels in with an enormous lighted magnifying glass. "I am Chin Chow and I am here to pluck your face." The doctor leans over him, plucking shards from his face. "You've got no tits," George tells the doctor.

"And that is a good thing," Chin Chow says.

I go to the nurses' station. "My brother has stitches in his head—they weren't there when he left the house this morning."

"I'll make a note that you'd like the doctor to speak with you."

I go back to George, his face now a polka-dotted canvas of bloody red spots. "Chow Fun fucking plucked me, trying to get me to confess: 'Oh, so what bring you here today? You have rough night at home?' He fucking dug holes in my face with no anesthesia. 'Stop,' I said a hundred times. 'Stop. Stop. Stop.' 'Oh, you a big baby, cry, cry, cry. You a big boy now, act like a man.' That was no doctor, that was an undercover agent, trying to pry a confession out of me."

"Really? I think he was making conversation. I doubt he knows why you're here."

"Yes he does, he said he was going to read all about me in the *New York Post*." And with that George starts to cry.

"Aw, come on, don't start that."

He sputters a little longer and then, snorting and snuffling, he stops. "Are you going to tell Mom?"

"Your wife is having brain surgery and you're worried I'm going to tell your mother?"

"Are you?"

"What do you think?"

He doesn't answer.

"When did you last see Mom?" I ask.

"A few weeks ago."

"A few weeks?"

"Maybe a month?"

"How many months?"

"I don't fucking know. Are you telling her?"

"Why would I? Half the time she doesn't even know who she is. How about this: if she asks about you, I'll say you were transferred overseas. I'll send her tea from Fortnum and Mason and let her think you're still a big macher."

He wriggles on the gurney. "Scratch my ass, will you? I can't reach. You're a pal," he says, breathing deep with relief. "A pal when you're not a complete son of a bitch."

An orderly brings George a lunch tray, and, arms and legs bound, he manages to contort himself sufficiently that with his knees he bounces it off the tray table and onto the floor.

"One per customer," the lunch lady says, "try again tomorrow."

"Start an IV on him so he doesn't get dehydrated," I hear the nurse say without missing a beat.

"They're not fucking around," I tell him, when she pulls back the curtain, needle in hand, with four guys singing backup behind her. "Speaking of lunch, I'm going to the cafeteria."

"You may not die today," he says, "but I will unwind you like a spool of thread."

"Can I bring you anything?" I ask, cutting him off.

"Chocolate-chip cookies," he says.