I'll Remember April

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To Philip, Matthew, Andrew, and Julia. You've given me so much.

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Rose DeMauro minds the block. She minds it most days and, when her knees ache, all night. Watches young women with workout calves stride subway-bound each workday. Watches mothers on their way to school, a child in each hand sweeping arcs around them like fans. Stickball players, junkies, brown kids and white dancing in the spray of johnny pumps, palsied old men leaning on carts as they shuffle home from the corner store, and pregnant girls leaving lipstick on the butts of cigarettes they flick in the gutter. Watches during the long years of her widowhood and long after her mother passed away in the next room, watches with her hair died copper and a swirl of grey at the crown. She sees men come home from the city with briefcases, or from the warehouses with lunch pails, all slower and less purposeful than when they set out. Cars crawling and racing down the street, garbage trucks blocking traffic like water buffalo, the daily sprint of alternate-side parkers, the smash and grab of car radios, pocketbooks, even a loaf of bread from those parked cars. And passing into night, in the streetlights and shadows, the neighborhood drunks, insomniacs, furtive couples, late shift workers, and young men on the verge of violence. Watches behind iron bars from the bay window of her front room, in summer she leans on the sill. Her nails are always done so well—plum and peacock, stripes and sparkle, her eyebrows meticulously plucked. Placid, shy, her lipid enormity filling the reaches of her armchair like a liquid, like melted butter. Waiting to be seen in turn by those who take the trouble, though in all her decades at the window she would never admit that, even to herself. And hopeful. Sometimes even hopeful.

You are on the block, too. Thinking of your divorce. Knowing it's coming, but not when. A spring Saturday maybe with the sky grey, the sidewalks wet, the kids sick. Or where. You know it's coming, but there are so many things to do when you get home—bills, kids' homework, a leaky faucet, working through

each evening chore until you have time for a TV show and meet your wife in bed, on schedule—that the only time it pops in your head is when you're dozing on the plane back from Chicago or woken by a car alarm long before dawn. So when it does come you may be surprised by the time and place, or even the manner, which has as many options as time and place and won't conform to your imagination, but not the fact. "It's *o*-ver," the "o" drawn out like a sigh. The delivery may be sad, or flat, or heated. Doesn't matter. Still, not a declaration. A summation, or simple observation. You might wish you said it first, but be glad you didn't. Let her be the aggressor. Better to be the victim here. Bite your lip. Hard.

When John Roads moved to Brooklyn, to the Hill, to the block; when he bought the brownstone with the mahogany mantle and stairs—mahogany polished and elegant as a leather bound Gibbon, not your precious teak or stolid oak; when he settled into his nice new job at Capital Insurance with the prospect of fat bonuses for the holidays, John Roads was not yet insufferable. Or was I? A bit. Maybe I did make too much of some things, little things. Telling my fraternity stories (they *are* funny), correcting people on geography (my god, what they don't know), quoting Beatles songs (accurately, accurately!). But you could laugh at yourself and people smiled and thought "Oh, John" and forgot whatever nonsense you were saying because pompous as you were, you were entertaining, endearing even. Dorie used to like you as a storyteller. It took time for your stories to become stale. Year after year with the same pauses and inflections, heedless that humor at forty-five is no more the same as twenty-two than your thin hair or thick waist. Don't tell me it was her. Ah, but it was you say. It wasn't my stories, my jokes, my wit that went stale. They were fine. She just couldn't stand me. I couldn't do anything right, you know.

But that very moment, John—the rupture—a rupture of time as well? Of time going back to the earliest days, the embryonic days, with Dorie, with your mother, and forward to your last bloody emesis. Time no bloody line here, not moving forward. Folding back, spreading out to finally end in this event or rather singularity that wasn't happening. I didn't know about her boyfriends. All her

friends did of course. So obvious. Why did I want to hang on so long, you ask? The one advantage over my father, vanished like a quark. Theodora the prom queen. Nothing like my mom. Ha! Or perhaps not a rupture, quite the opposite in fact, a tether keeping each end of your little universe from flying apart. Yes, I remember what I was doing. Eating a bagel. Reading the newspaper (that's how long ago it was). Dorie always looked so soft in her white robe with her hair falling over one eye, mussed, freckled, coy, dropping into the chair across the table from me. "We need to talk." And I nod, my eyes still on the sports, "Sure." And then it comes. But of course it's happened before. Before the kids. When you were traveling all the time and she was in school. A talk. When you cut back on your drinking.

And back when you stumbled upon letters, actual letters, between Dorie and an old boyfriend, you were civil and restrained. No fuming from John Roads, no unpleasant rants. As the poet says: He who deeply feels, behaves. Explicit as they were, you reasoned why shouldn't the demands of motherhood, the sly arrival of middle age, incite a fantasy, innocent really, in a sensitive, even sensible, woman? She did well-up in tears of course, angry tears, outraged at your invasion of her privacy. But you kept a steady hand at the wheel for the stakes were high and the prize yours only for the losing. Admit it, fear trumped your indignation. She just wanted to see an old friend for god's sake John, over coffee, dinner maybe, nothing going on, she protested. And then she agreed not to see him and you had your victory but at what cost you were clueless. She learned her lesson while you learned nothing. I always liked the way Dorie's hair draped across that eye, and the arch gesture she used to brush it back. I fell for it every time. No harm in talking. "When?" You were caffeinated, almost playful, ready for a little joust at the kitchen table. "Now," said Dorie. "Really?" you said. "So early in the day? More coffee?" "John," she said. "It's over." Pouring yourself another cup. "What's over?" "Our marriage. It's o-o-ver," drawing out the "o" with a sound that was almost comic. This is not a talk, you thought. "No, it's not," you said, because it couldn't be, it merely should be. Only you didn't say that. You said nothing. You didn't know what to say. "You know that," said

Dorie. “It’s been over a long time. I want you to move out.” I didn’t hear any of it, of course. I tried to pour her more coffee.

Though you had often rehearsed the next scene. “What about the kids?” you ask. And you knew what she would say, because you would say, “The kids will be fine.” To which you reply, indignant, “No they won’t!” And she would parry, “You think they’re fine now?” So you move quickly to claim the moral high ground. “Well, at least they have two parents.” Obligation, self-sacrifice. Bravo! Cracks appear in her restraint. Her next reply is not so poised, not so self-assured. “They’ll still have two parents. For god’s sake, John.” You’re shaking your head now, but not too plaintive, “It’s not the same,” you whisper. And then her clincher, “No, it’s not. It will be better for them.” There you have it. Her doing. You tried your best to hold things together. But that’s not what happened.

“Move out of *my* house?”

“Yes. The sooner the better.”

“You can’t kick me out of my own home. If you want to leave, be my guest.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The girls need to stay with me. You don’t expect them to move out, too.”

“They can stay with me.”

“We’ll see what the judge says. Think about it. It’s better if you leave.” Oh yes, I should just pack up and go. Abandonment. Not subtle, Dorie. No, it won’t be that easy. Though John Roads would have put up with her infidelities as long as they were discrete, with her sexual rejection as long as there was a third drink after dinner, with her criticism just as long as she would not leave him by himself, as long as they wouldn’t have to talk about it.

A gust of wind stirred the curtains in Rose’s first floor flat. Damp air fell at her feet, cool from the wet streets as Rose, in nightgown and slippers, paused in the center of her small living room like a retriever hearing a twig snap. Short, wide, ponderous, alert, gripping the handle of her cane she turned laboriously, breathing hard, as a sound from down the block caught her attention. Footfalls

on the sidewalk. Slapping the pavement, growing louder as they approached down her side of the street until a head streaked past the window bars. Eddie. Eddie from the building, and another pair of footfalls right behind. The mailman. The mailman chasing Eddie, Eddie pulling the mailman's cart. Eddie whooped with delight.

"Ma," called Rose. Raising her voice, calling louder over the sound of the television in the next room. "Ma!"

"What?" shouted her mother from bed.

"I just saw the mailman chasing Eddie. I think he took his bag."

"So what?"

"Isn't that a crime or something? A federal crime?"

"The mailman's an idiot. How'd he let Eddie get his bag?"

Rose shuffled back and looked out the window. Cards and envelopes littered the sidewalk. A man holding a coffee mug appeared on the stoop of the brownstone opposite. Not the dentist, she thought, the other guy, the one with the pretty wife. Then she heard the whoop of a police siren on the avenue.

"Ma, I think the cops got Eddie."

"What?"

"I think the cops got Eddie on the avenue. It's a federal crime, Ma."

"They'll just take him to the nut house. He'll be back before you know it. Get me a soda." Rose waddled through the bedroom to the kitchen, past her mother propped in bed on pillows in front of the TV. Pill vials and used tissues crowded the bedside table. "No ice." Rose poured the diet soda into a large plastic cup and brought it to her mother.

"Eddie really screwed up the mail."

The first thing Eddie saw when he stepped out of the elevator was the mailman's cart standing unattended in his building's foyer. Eddie was on his way to the park for some exercise. His muscles felt slack, his pants squeezed his waist, and winter seemed to stretch back forever. He couldn't remember the last time he had some real exercise. Eddie lived on the second floor of the building.

It was much faster to take the stairs, but taking the elevator was like a ride in his own amusement park. His view of the mailman opening the line of letter boxes in the foyer was blocked by the corner of the hallway. All he could see was the cart. He wondered what it would be like to deliver the mail. As Eddie entered the foyer the mailman was still at the line of letterboxes with his back to him, bent slightly forward manipulating a key on a long chain. Eddie grabbed the cart handle and pulled it through the front doors before the mail carrier, a placid man, realized what was happening. The chase was on. Eddie cut hard right when he hit the sidewalk running, reaching back for handfuls of mail, tossing them on stoops as he passed, over his head, into the street, sloshing through puddles as the cart veered into fences, upended trash cans and clipped parked cars. The letter carrier followed at a comfortable trot, neither gaining nor losing ground, while shouting at Eddie to stop, A young woman walking a dachshund saw them coming in time to hurry across the street and leave the sidewalk unimpeded. Eddie passed Rose's window without seeing her, dashed on to the end of the block and paused by the yellow *Productos Tropicales* sign on the corner store to drop a handful of mail on a pile of plantains before taking off on the avenue, slower now. When he saw a police car he tried to speed up, winded or not, loping into the next street, the cop car following until it pulled alongside him and gave out its whoop. Eddie let go of the cart in his effort to run faster, but his legs wouldn't go. He was too out-of-shape. The cops caught him by a minivan parked halfway down the block where Eddie proffered his hands. "Hey, Officer Pino," said Eddie, panting. "I didn't know you could run that fast." Pino cuffed him without rancor. "Christ Eddie, what were you thinking?" said the cop, trying to hide his breathlessness. "I'd be a good mailman," said Eddie. "Are you taking your medicine?" asked Pino. "I ran out," said Eddie. "My Pop's sick." They drove past the precinct house straight to the emergency room. He was home in two weeks.

A dozen people gathered in the street. You took a long sip from your coffee mug as you stood at the top of the stoop, your brownstone behind you,

the row of narrow brick eight-family apartment houses directly across, the large apartment building to the right of them toward the corner and the park, oblivious to the light drizzle that was more a spray in the air, watching your neighbors pick through envelopes and magazines, bills, flyers, and coupons scattered along the street, the cars, the sidewalk, wondering how many of them were on welfare. You recognized a few. You had passed them on the sidewalk—rushing to the train, walking their dogs, sitting on their front steps—but after three years on the block, not most. *Everyone you see is half-asleep. And you're on your own, you're in the street.* Funny. I like it here I realized. As you entertained the prospect of leaving. Yes, lousy timing. Then looking for your next-door neighbor, the dentist Deshpande, and remembering he had office hours on Saturday morning, set down your mug and eased down the wet steps to join the recovery effort. A large beachball of a woman, her massive limbs protruding from a tent-like gown, peered at me from behind the curtain of her front window. I didn't know her then. The mailman appeared after making his statement to the police on the next block, calling for everyone to bring the letters to him. No one listened. They went on sifting through the rain soaked envelopes for their own names, discarding any others on the sidewalk. I'm not leaving, I mumbled. You picked up some envelopes from a puddle by the curb. The names were unfamiliar. "Anyone find something for Roads?" you called out. Your neighbors ignored you. I handed the letters to the mailman—he eyed me suspiciously—and went back inside to find Dorie coming down the stairs.

"I'm going out," she said. "You can look after the kids. If Allison feels warm, give her some Tylenol."

"Where are you going?"

"Out. Does it matter? I'll be back in a few hours."

"And you think you can take care of the kids by yourself?"

"John, don't do this. You're being an ass," she said, opening the front door.

“You should take an umbrella,” I said, following her out the door where she stopped to remark the people in the street. “Some lunatic stole the mailman’s cart and threw stuff all over the block,” I explained.

“What next,” said Dorie. “I don’t have time for this.”

You watched her stride to the curb and search the oncoming traffic. The rain had stopped. “Jennifer? Allison?” you called from the bottom of the stairs when you stepped back inside. “How you doing?” They called back they were fine. You thought for a moment about taking their temperatures. Not now you concluded, padding to the kitchen, filling a tumbler with ice, pouring it half full of scotch, topping it off with seltzer and taking a long slow draught, a deep breath, then another long draught. But I needed something to go with it. Yes, popcorn. I finished off my drink while it popped in the microwave, poured another, took the hot bag from the oven, scalded a finger on the hot steam as it opened and grabbed my drink to find what was on TV.

We were too young, she was too thin, you should show more ambition, thank you Mother, you remembered—clicker in hand, surfing the channels—now won’t that be fun telling her. But Dad wouldn’t blame me though I always knew he would have liked her, a little sad maybe, a little disappointed—if he hadn’t decided to drop dead in the driveway—but he’s probably thinking he’s better off without her, thanks for leaving her here with me. Why you two married. Yes, the war of course. Though you stayed together all those years and she didn’t drive you nuts, god-knows-how. I should have divorced her—twirling the tumbler, clinking the ice, taking a sip, a mouthful of popcorn, another sip, tasting the salt on your tongue, the butter, washing it away—*my mother*. Too early for sports. Cartoons? Dad, you would have been proud of me. I got the better of you on that one. “Dad? Dad? Where’s Mom?” The girls, Jennifer and Allison, still in pajamas, are on either side of your lounger. “I think I’m going to throw up.” Allison looked distressed, like she wasn’t kidding, and hurled on the rug. You jerked your feet back just in time to avoid a splash of vomit, knocking your drink onto the floor while Allison sobbed and Jennifer started a coughing fit. “It’s okay!” you shouted, more to yourself than the girls. Allison started to gag. John

stood up, wobbly, woozy, steadied himself on the arm of the chair and pulled Allison to the bathroom where she dry heaved between sobs.

Theodora, ex-wife-to-be, hurried down the stairs and out the gate, absently brushing against the backside of a man picking up pieces of scattered mail from the curb. He's such an idiot she thought, meaning her husband. If he wasn't so clueless they could have done this a long time ago. Now she'll have to put up with more of his pleas, more excuses, more promises. Why can't he just get it? She looked at the puddles and the threatening sky, at the park down the block and hesitated, thinking of going back for that umbrella but quickly dismissed the notion. She hopped in the waiting livery cab for the trip to Manhattan. "Well, it's done now," she whispered to herself as the cab turned on the avenue and headed for the bridge. Small clusters of yellow and white emerged from the brown edges of the park—daffodils, dogwood, plumes of forsythia—overshadowed by the dullness of the day. "Finally. Thank god." She settled into the back seat and watched the traffic flow past, a brief moment of respite to sense her accomplishment if not her relief that faded with the thought of John drinking. No, not this early, she told herself. Not with the girls sick.

Both sides of the river were shrouded in grey. It seemed strangely quiet, with only the white noise of tires whining on the bridge's metal mesh. Traffic moved smoothly up the FDR countering the smooth flow of the river, making good time to 86th street to meet Justin for lunch. She was late, as usual. Justin was already at the restaurant when she arrived. As she stepped out of the cab she spotted him sitting at a table, unselfconscious, at ease, as unhurried in the city as at the beach. He waved from behind the window. She waved back. He stood and greeted her inside with a quick kiss.

"You made it," he said, in mock surprise.

"I had to get away." She inspected him discretely as they sat down, examining each small movement for hints of a new reserve, assessing his expression, decoding the tenor of his voice. Had she been expecting something? Just nerves, she thought. He passed her initial scrutiny. Justin was

his usual self—solicitous, graceful even in the simple act of sitting. False alarm. She felt vulnerable. She was tired.

"So it's done?" It seemed that Justin struggled to get the tone just right, as if he didn't quite trust himself.

"Yes. I told him. It's over." Dorie felt him regard her directly, looking perhaps for signs of relief or regret, perhaps just remarking the faint crow's feet at the corner of her eyes.

"Way to go. It can't be easy." He dropped his smile a moment to empathize. If Dorie found the remark a bit rehearsed or trite she let it pass. It was too late for him to take it back. She chose to simply appreciate the attempt.

"Easy enough. It's living with him that's the hard part."

"Not for long."

"No. I hope not. But he's so obtuse. He'll try to drag it out."

Justin resumed his easy smile, his rich reassuring tone. "Don't be too hard on him. He has to adjust."

"You're speaking as his friend now?"

"Yes."

"I don't think you'll be able to keep that up for long."

"Probably not."

"And what about me? Don't I have to adjust?" For the first time in years Dorie had the urge for a cigarette.

"I'll be here."

"I know." Dorie pressed the tips of her fingernails deep into her thumbs and tapped her toe impatiently. "Did you order?"

"No."

"I can't stay long. The kids are sick."

Rose, in a housecoat draped past her thighs, its hem ballooning over white gym socks stretched tight on her swollen ankles, her puffy feet below them wedged snug in pink slippers open at the heel and tinged grey with use, Rose stood on her stoop looking first left, then right. The block was empty. She

waited for the pain in her hips to ease a bit before returning to the door, bent forward to lean on the low stone rail as she went, preparing for the step up to the hallway, rocking back, taking it with a sudden thrust. “Ma,” she said. “You won’t believe it.” The mail on the whole block was jumbled up. Delivered to the wrong address, multiple wrong addresses to a single household, a confusion of names and numbers, a different letter carrier every day scurrying down the block as fast as they could and one, when confronted by the angry addressees, who simply left her cart on the sidewalk and walked away. Bills went unpaid, invitations unresponded, notes and news unnoticed. Residents of the block phoned the post office only to be kept on hold and disconnected. They marched to the post office where they waited hours before being told no one could meet with them. They complained to their city councilman whose office promised to investigate. “Believe what?” asked Rose’s mother. She poked her head out the door into the hallway stretching her wrinkled neck—curious, wary, poised to pull back at the first sound of someone on the stairs like a tortoise testing the air. “It’s still a mess,” said Rose, waving a handful of envelopes in her hand. “Let me see those,” said her mother. They trudged to the kitchen at the narrow rear of their railroad apartment. A thick metal screen, locked tight, covered the window that looked at a small backyard and a row of identical four-story buildings behind them. They squeezed into chairs by the table set against the wall and Rose dropped the mail. “Nothing for us,” said Rose.

“If they cut off the electric,” said her mother, “I’ll sue. I have a life threatening condition.”

“I know, Ma,” said Rose. “But it’s okay. I just paid it last week.”

“So who’s this John Roads? And Theodora?”

“They’re across the street. The ones with the girls.”

“Oh, yeah. Those snotty people. Why are they on the block, anyway?”

“You know—gentrifrication.”

“I don’t care what you call it. They won’t be here long. They’ll move to Jersey or the Island. Probably make a killing on their house.”

“That’s what smart people do. They look nice to me, Ma.”

“What do you know?”

“I said they look like nice people, that’s all.”

Rose determined to meet the Roads. She resolved to cross the street and climb their front stairs whatever effort it took, to introduce herself by bringing their mail to them. She would look in the front room from the stoop and see what they had done with the place. So Rose showered with her cherry blossom shampoo and curled her hair for the occasion. She plucked her eyebrows, put on eyeliner and blush for the first time since her brother’s funeral. A new housecoat, new compression hose—so much trouble to get on and such an invalid look, but better than swollen ankles and her feet now fit in a comfortable pair of sneakers. She sat by the window with her rolls of flesh lightly powdered, waiting for Mr. Roads (she would call him Mister) to come home from work—the time had sprung forward now, day lingering long enough so she wouldn’t be crossing the street in the dark—remembering the Gallaghers who lived there god knows how long, three generations at least until only Mrs. Gallagher was left and her daughter from Staten Island found her dead on the kitchen floor where she had fallen face down, smack on the linoleum. Mrs. Gallagher who planned for ages exactly how she wanted to be laid out: in her wool crepe dress, the string of pearls her husband gave her for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, dark stockings and three inch heels, and her face so smashed she had to have a closed casket at the wake. When the house sold, a dumpster was parked outside for months. Rose suspected the Roads had erased all traces of the Gallaghers.

John Roads is thinking of his house, too. The change of venue was meant to be a fresh start but became, at best, a diversion, a very expensive one. He does the math walking up the steps of the Brewster Street station feeling that he is in the flow of a current, carried along by the stream rather than his own effort while he thinks of equity, depreciation, return on investment, simply riding a ferry that will deposit him at his doorstep and he needn’t worry about traffic, stops or turns, can let his mind wander, do the math, or ponder the papers that were

handed to him at work by the marshal. “John Roads?” I did not recognize the man waiting by the lobby elevator in his shabby London Fog and plaid fedora. In fact I was trying to avoid eye contact when it felt like he was watching me. “These are for you. Have a nice day.” He tipped his hat and was gone before I could say a word, leaving me with divorce papers and the restraining order for transfer of assets. They are in your brief case unread, unopened. You stop on the sidewalk thinking of the papers, looking up at the solid Jurassic stone, the carved garlands on the arch over your front door, the cornice, the classic Renaissance revival symmetry without noticing them, swing open the iron gate into the tiny brick-paved courtyard—the lantern is on though it’s still light out—and absently climb the stone steps that turn a right angle to the paneled front door, like a man calling on a stranger. No one is home. You throw your trench coat on a dining room chair. “A beer?” you thought. “Yes, just one beer.” Sitting in the kitchen you pour it slowly, carefully, into a tall glass, watching the bubbles rise, the house silent, evidence of dinner in the sink, and look for a note, something that would tell you when the girls will be back. I want to tell them what I got at work. What their mother has done. You have just drained the glass and are reaching for the scotch when the doorbell rings. Through the glazed door panels you make out a large round human form and, annoyed that the reach for your drink is interrupted, on your guard for some ploy, you proceed to the front bay window to see who is intruding on your evening. It takes a moment to recognize by her massive profile the fat woman from across the street. Obese and doubtless on the dole you think, a sow fattened on the taxpayer’s tab. You jerk open the front door to confront Rose who is leaning on her cane, her shabby coat unbuttoned, dark red lipstick smudged on her top lip.

“Mister Roads?” she says.

“Yes.” Your answer is abrupt, business-like, a man who doesn’t like his time wasted.

“These are for you.” She proffers the envelopes bound together with a rubber band. You look at them blankly. “It’s your mail. Some of it anyway. They

delivered it to our place." You accept them cautiously and inspect the addresses.

"Thank you," I say as I turn away absently, rudely I must admit, then pivot back to her. "So what's going on with this?"

"I don't know. It's been like this since Eddie took the mailman's cart."

"Who?"

"Eddie. He lives in the building." She pointed down the street to the large brick structure with the gothic entrance. "I really like what you done with this place."

"That's very kind."

"I knew the Gallaghers."

"I'm sorry?"

"The Gallaghers. They lived here before you. Maybe you got some of our mail. My mother and me live across the street." Rose pointed to her building. "On the first floor."

"What name should I look for?"

"Rose DeMauro," said Rose. "But my mother's name is Wiggs, Grace Wiggs. DeMauro is my married name." Rose stopped and looked down at the floor out of respect for the memory of her late husband.

"Sure. If I find anything I'll bring it over." With that John Roads shuts the door and slips the bolt. He turns to his house and rolls his eyes. On his way back to the kitchen he notices letters scattered on the dining room table. None for him, none for Dorie. One, from Social Security, is addressed to Grace Wiggs. And there's another, to a different apartment at the same address. "Maybe tomorrow," you tell yourself, finally pouring a decent drink.

"Hi, Dad," said Allison. "Hi, Dad." Jennifer echoed her younger sister's greeting an octave higher. The girls were two years apart though Allison was almost Jennifer's height. Roads looked up from the TV, his briefcase unopened next to the sofa. "Whatcha doing?" asked Jennifer. "Whatcha doing?" Allison repeated. "Waiting to see you," said John. He stood up expectantly as they came forward for their hugs, each girl getting the familiar whiff of Johnnie Walker

on his breath that, at their age, they associated with father, not whisky. “Where were you?” “At the library. We had to look some stuff up for school.” “And your mother?” “She’s here.” “Do you know what I got from her today?” he asked. “No, they don’t,” said Dorie from the doorway. “Nor need they.” “I got a letter from your mother’s lawyer today,” said John, dismissing her answer and ignoring her presence, continuing, “I haven’t read it yet. Why don’t we read it together and see what it says?” The girls felt the familiar friction between their parents rise like a wave about to break. Without answering they stepped back to a neutral position. “Girls, time for bed,” said their mother. “Your dad can tell you about it some other time.” They raced up the stairs, not waiting for the nightly ritual of being told a second and third time. John flopped back on the couch. When Dorie heard the girls’ footsteps landing squarely in their rooms upstairs, she whispered. “That’s so like you. You have absolutely no tact. What were you trying to prove?” John Roads smiled for the first time that evening. “My, my,” he began. “We’re a little touchy on the subject. Feeling a bit guilty, are we?” Dorie saw only a spiteful smirk, another one of his pointless provocations. “The one thing I feel guilty about is staying with you so long. You and your emotional abuse.” Despite the effects of drink, the insult in his briefcase, the sting of her accusation, John Roads knew where this was going. He had taken the bait too many times before. He was not going down that road this evening. “So have you told them?” he asked, still taunting and wry. “Yes, as a matter of fact,” she said. “You told them you want to divorce their father?” “I told them you’re moving out.” John shot up from the couch without a word and marched to the foot of the stairs. “Jennifer, Allison,” he shouted. “I’m not moving out. Do you hear me? I’m not moving out.” He paused for a moment waiting for a reply. When none came he stomped slowly up the bottom steps. “Yes, we hear you,” called Jennifer from her room. “We hear you, Dad!”

A wedding photo sat on Grace Wigg’s dresser, the kind displayed in modest homes of her generation. An enlisted man in his khaki army uniform and a woman in her white gown, Grace, standing a good two inches taller than her

new husband. Beside it, smaller, stood a black and white picture of a young family in bathing suits on the beach at Coney Island—Grace and Rose's stepfather, Rose and her two half-brothers. And grade school portraits of Rose and her brothers, children smiling with big front teeth, children in the hair styles of the past. On the wall above them hung a faded profile of President Kennedy with his exhortation, the chiasmatic epigram from his inaugural address, and a print of Jesus appearing in a cloud. "Rose," Grace called to her daughter. "Rose. Get in here. I need you." Rose was settled in her chair by the front window watching a garbage truck's halting progress down the street. "In a minute," she called back, attentive and focused on the hydraulic panel as it compressed trash in the back of the truck, assuring herself the full satisfaction of a sight that always gave her pleasure with its power and finality. "Hurry up. I'm confused," said her mother, adding a touch of distress to her command. Rose lifted herself reluctantly and made her way to the bedroom. "What is it?" The window was open to the airshaft between apartments, but the room still smelled stale as winter. "My pills. Read me the labels." Rose lifted one of the plastic vials, holding it above eye level to catch the light of the ceiling bulb. "This is your blood pressure medicine," said Rose. "Not that one," said her mother. Rose set it down on the bedside table and lifted the next one, her lips moving as she read the label. "This one's for your nerves." "Yeah, give me that," said Grace. Rose handed her mother a capsule and Grace swallowed it with her soda, settling back on the pillow with the plastic cup still in hand. "Did the mail come?" she asked. "No, Ma. Nothing yet." Her mother raised herself on her elbows. "Something's wrong. It should be here by now." Her hand shook as she sat up and dropped the cup, spilling what was left of the Pepsi on the floor under the table. "My check. I need my check," she said, oblivious to the spill. "I know, Ma. Everything's screwed up." Rose shuffled to the dresser and tore sheets off a roll of paper towels. "Maybe it went to somebody else's place." She shuffled back to the bedside, dropped the sheets over the spill and mopped it with her foot. "Then we'll never get it," said her mother. "They'll steal it. Somebody stole my money." Rose saw the familiar seed of panic sprouting in her mother's chest,

thrusting out its shoots, feeding on itself. She hoped the pill would take effect before her mother got chest pain yet again so she would not have to call the ambulance, not have to watch her mother strapped to a stretcher one more time as the paramedics rolled her out to the street through sidewalk gawkers and neighbors peering down the stairway and out their windows. Because then Rose would have the expense of car service to the hospital where the doctors and nurses would tell her they had to keep her mother to check her heart, talking in their endless jargon that makes you feel dumb even when you know you're not and they don't mean to. "I'll look into it, Ma. I'll call the Social Security office. Maybe they can cancel the check and send another one." "God knows how long that will take. What are we going to do for money?" Rose watched her mother breath faster, her eyelids open wider.

"I bet it was one of them Spanish," said Grace.

"You mean Puerto Ricans," Rose corrected.

"Same thing."

"We don't know that, Ma. It could be anyone. We don't even know it's stolen."

"That Eddie from the building, he's Puerto Rican. That's why he did it. To get our checks."

"Eddie ain't that smart."

"Then somebody put him up to it. Those welfare cheats in the building. They're not stupid."

Rose caught herself giving plausibility to her mother's argument. "I'll call Social Security first thing in the morning."

"Tomorrow's Saturday."

"Okay, Monday then."

"We'll starve."

Ruben Guzman heard a siren approach as he was coming to terms with a passage in his text. Streaks of red bounced off buildings down the length of the block. They coalesced in a steady swirl on the brownstones opposite like

comets in a planetarium gone haywire as the screaming ambulance slowed to a halt. His concentration broken, Ruben set down his book and opened the front window, leaning far outside the unguarded sill until his torso was well past the ledge with his ample belly slung below him, peering down from the third floor at the roof of the ambulance and the heads of the paramedics. “Must be the old lady,” he thought, as the paramedics unloaded a gurney and carried it up the front steps. He pulled a cigarette from the pack in his shirt pocket as he dangled, steadied himself against the wall with one hand and retrieved his lighter from his pants pocket with the other, welcoming the impromptu break from his studies for a moment of observation. A small group was gathering on the sidewalk. He noted a young woman he hadn’t seen before and tried to estimate her age. The dentist stood in his doorway across the street. He heard the footsteps and banter of the gay couple from the fourth floor passing his apartment on the stairs, and a moment later saw the tops of their heads as they exited the building beneath him. He hung out the window until he finished his cigarette but the paramedics had yet to haul someone out. Ruben pulled himself inside and went back to his book. When he finally heard commotion from the first floor he went to the window again and saw the stretcher being eased carefully down the front steps carrying Rose, strapped in a fleshy mound over and around it with her face hidden by the enormity of her breasts. “Guess not,” he thought. “Call Junior,” yelled Rose from the stretcher to someone inside the front door, the old lady no doubt, but he could not make out her reply. He watched absently as they packed Rose in the ambulance, as the ambulance departed, until it was around the corner, and he hung there a moment longer remembering the flashing lights on the passageways of his submarine and the feeling of being strapped to his bunk like a corpse headed to the graveyard. He didn’t feel like reading now. He would have to let the terms go. He phoned his aunt in the Bronx to ask about her eviction. He phoned his girlfriend to see if she could come over tomorrow. He was not ready to sleep. He knew he couldn’t study. He played a few rounds of solitaire in front of the late news and began an acrostic without gaining traction. “I’m going out,” he thought. At the bottom of

the stairs he heard someone whisper, “Ruben.” He turned and saw a sliver of light where the old lady’s front door cracked open. “Is that you? Ruben?” she whispered. Ruben stepped toward Grace’s door that was still hooked on its chain.

“Yes, it’s me,” he said. “What is it?”

“Did you get mail today?” asked Grace.

“No,” said Ruben, “nothing.”

“Do me a favor. Check again.”

“Why?”

“Maybe it came later.”

Ruben checked his box and stepped back into the hallway. “Nothing.”

“See? What did I tell you? They’re stealing our mail.”

“Could be,” said Ruben. “What happened to your daughter?”

“She slipped on the floor. I think she broke her ankle. Couldn’t stand up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me, too. How’s she gonna take care of me?” Grace shut the door and bolted it tight.

Ruben stepped onto the stoop and paused to take in the block. To his left some young kids were playing in front of the building oblivious to any school-day bedtime, to his right a car squeezed into a parking spot, banging the car behind it and shoving it back a few inches to make room. He lit a cigarette and sat down. His aunt’s rent was past due and his tax refund to help pay it had not arrived though he had completed the return meticulously, sent it registered mail and received the receipt six weeks ago. There was something about problems with the mail lately but he hadn’t paid much attention—as a rule he didn’t like getting mail. But his aunt’s landlord had started the eviction process, and Ruben assured him that rent and back rent would be paid in full. Ordinarily he would let the proceedings drag out, but this time he wanted the matter settled. Ruben’s aunt had moved so many times to so many apartments that she no longer had the energy for another. Ruben’s job was steady, his vices few. He would help her

the best he could. If his refund check did not arrive on Monday he was not sure what that would be.

After your engagement, after you phoned your parents with the announcement and your mother asked about the weather, when you and Dorie found an apartment in Hoboken and finally moved in together happy enough, you felt that you went to work each day—reading your twice-folded Wall Street Journal on the PATH train, sipping your coffee black—with keen anticipation as to a tournament. To a contest often exhausting but never grim, always fighting fair (so you thought) in your pin stripes, eager to joust with challengers, office rivals or other firms or just yourself, seeking rewards and recognition and trying not to boast too loudly over fallen foes along the way. (No, you are not quixotic. There is no Quixote without a Sancho.) That was how you thought of them. Foes, not enemies or opponents or adversaries or the competition, though it was a word you kept to yourself. And if you had heard someone speak it aloud you would have thought it a silly, archaic, precious word, and quickly mocked its sound with plays on “faux” or your poor imitation of Ebonics. But now you have a different kind of struggle as you pause on the stairs after Jennifer’s reply, poor Jen’s helplessness made clear as well as her fear for you and her fear for herself. So John Roads backed down the stairs and downed the last of his drink.

“Doesn’t that bother you at all?” said Dorie.

“Not a bit.”

“Your children seeing you drunk.”

“I’m not drunk,” I said. “But I have good reason to be.”

“Another reason to move out. For your own health.” With that she marched up the stairs and you went for a refill, thought the better of it and returned to the couch with a glass of seltzer and ice after pouring your aborted refill in the sink. You slouched down to a comfortable position with your head on the back of the couch, gazing at the tin ceiling, thinking of the house. Thinking what you wanted to do with the place. My castle. I was thinking of Lord Stirling and the Red Lion Inn, and Howe at Howard’s tavern, of capture and release, lost

battles and escape, when I fell asleep or, as Dorie would say, passed out. It was a restless sleep, without dreams, or none I care to remember.

The dentist, Deshpande, adjunct professor of prosthodontics at NYU, was as angry about the mail as anyone on the block. When he spotted his next-door neighbor hauling out the garbage he charged out his front door and almost tumbled down the steps. “John, this is too much,” he protested across the waist-high iron fence that separated their front enclosures, the pitch of his voice rising steep, abrupt, and falling just as fast, while Roads set a bulging garbage bag on the ground in order to greet him. “Good morning, Pete.” Deshpande had no need for small talk. “This is not acceptable.” Sunday. Still grey, still cold, though the wind had dried the sidewalks. Roads felt a bit foggy, his neck was stiff and sore. At first he thought the dentist was complaining about garbage etiquette. He examined the trashcans on his property—all in order, chained to the fence with snug lids and the pavement swept clean. More orderly than Deshpande’s battered cans, he noted. Roads rose to his full height with both hands on his hips, the sleeves of his cable sweater pushed back to his elbows, a worn blue polo shirt beneath it with the collar turned up, khaki cords sagging at the knees, tassel loafers on his sockless feet. “Say what?” said John. Deshpande took a step back. “This is not acceptable,” he repeated. “We can’t go for days without getting proper mail.” So that’s the problem, thought Roads, the stupid mail again. He remembered a letter addressed to the woman across the street. “Not just that,” Roads answered. “It’s weird.” The dentist flung his hands in the air. “My wife is expecting a letter from her sister.” “Have you been to the post office?” asked Roads. “I don’t have time for that,” said the dentist. “I’m going to lodge a complaint.” “Do you get mail for other people?” “Of course,” said Deshpande. “None of it is for us. We keep looking for the mailman to give it back, but we can never find him.” Roads dropped his trash bag in the garbage can and fixed the lid, rotating his neck and body together in one stiff robotic movement saying, “Maybe they’ll have it straightened out tomorrow,” thinking: I don’t care about your mail. Or your wife’s sister. I’ve been served

papers. My wife wants to kick me out of my house. My kids are sick. But Deshpande was a good neighbor as neighbors go, even if his wife was status-conscious in such an elemental way it was almost un-American. His kids were older, quiet. Even his large gatherings, which were frequent—women in saris and men in robes attended by some holy man or guru—were blessedly reserved affairs. But this was not a good day, for good neighbors or anyone. When John got back inside he remembered the letters for the building across the street and went to retrieve them from the dining room table. They were gone. He looked in the kitchen and the den with no luck. “That’s okay, Dorie must have done something with them,” he thought, giving up the search.

You lack discipline, John. Despite your achievements, your so-called success. You never could settle into routines for the long haul, you were always jumping to something new. Odd for someone in the insurance industry, isn’t it? A steady, cautious, orderly enterprise, bold as a new pair of wingtips. But back to my shortcomings. Yes, I lack a certain discipline (not my worst fault, surely). But you can’t say I’m lazy. I put my nose to the grindstone as hard as anyone when it’s crunch time. I work quite hard jumping from one thing to another. I work quite hard, just not always at the right thing. It’s the long, continual, relentless slope of improvement that I lack. Certainly the relentless slope of marital improvement. But you lacked discipline in all your relationships. Yes, but not commitment. Inertia? That’s a misreading of the record. You can’t win without commitment, and never underestimate my fear of losing. (We’ll talk about my mother later.) I thought marriage could be held together as surely by an act of will as an act of love. More surely, if need be. Sometimes when you look back at that April morning—the Event—you will remember Dorie making her announcement in the living room. Remember reading your newspaper on the couch after another Friday night spat when both of you were tired from a long week. Nothing strange about that, nothing new about Dorie saying she needs “something more”. And you always wondering what? and why? when it seemed she had what she wanted and you hadn’t changed. Kids, house, job, prospects,

and nice beach vacations every year. You didn't have affairs. You hadn't done drugs since Allison was born. Yes, maybe you could have drunk a bit less on the weekends. Things were a little stale, granted. They're supposed to get stale. It's *okay*. Why should I change when I worked so hard to get exactly here? You were reading the sports section when Dorie marched downstairs in her trench coat with the belt drawn tight around her waist, a Balenciaga bag hanging from her shoulder, knee length boots on her long legs, dressed, in other words, as if she were going to meet someone, and planted herself firmly by the front door. "It's *o*ver," she said. And you replied without looking up from the paper. "What's over?" And she answered, "Our marriage." You put down the paper and said, "Come on. It's not that bad," puzzled that she's still angry from the night before since you had let it go. "I don't want to talk about it," she said. "I'm going out." "I'm sorry, okay?" you replied. "When will you be back?" "When I feel like it. John, I want you to move out." She left and you went back to your paper remarking for the umpteenth time that her walk, though not exactly sexy, was light and graceful. And how much you liked that.

Grace Wiggs startled awake at the sound of her door buzzer. She hurried out of bed as best she could while it continued, shrill, insistent, threatening, mumbling and crossing herself, holding on to the furniture for balance as she made her way toward the front door. "Who's it?" she queried the intercom. A livery car was idling in front of the building in the first light of day. "Ma, it's me. Rose. Buzz me in." Grace pushed a well-worn button to release the lock of the building's entrance door and peered into the hallway. Rose was standing on crutches, the splint on her left foot and ankle dwarfed by her immense bulging thigh. The driver of the livery car, a large man fortunately, helped her into the hallway. "Thank you," Rose called after him in place of a tip, then turning to her mother as she approached, explained, "I don't have my keys." Rose advanced with care, setting her left foot on the floor gingerly with each step.

"They sent you home?" Grace exclaimed. "Like this?"

"They said I didn't need to stay in the hospital."

“That’s crazy. You can hardly walk.”

“It hurts, Ma. Get me your wheelchair.”

Rose waited in the hallway with her left leg flexed in a parody of a flamingo balancing on one leg. “Hurry up. It hurts.”

Grace trundled out the wheelchair she retrieved from a corner of the living room and fumbling, grunting, kicking, managed to unfold it behind her daughter.

“Lock the wheels, Ma.”

Grace secured the brake bars across the wheels and stepped behind the handles as Rose, in one massive heave, hopped back a step until she felt the edge of the chair against her legs and, dropping the crutches, groped for the arms of the chair as her backward momentum landed the vast expanse of her buttocks, too big for the seat, across the wheelchair arms she could not reach. The chair, despite its brakes and Grace’s brief pantomime of resistance, shot back, pinning Grace between its handles against the wall of the stairway. As the pain bore deeper into her ankle, Rose slipped inexorably to the floor with screams that echoed up and down four flights of stairs.

“Call 911,” yelled Grace to the doors opening in the hallways above.

Rose was home again that evening, her ankle re-x-rayed, still a bad sprain with no sign of a fracture she was told, this time returned by ambulance with three men who lifted her by stretcher up the stairs into her apartment where they deposited her in an extra-wide heavy duty wheelchair provided by the women’s auxiliary.

“I got a prescription for pain killers,” said Rose.

“I can’t go out for it,” said Grace. “I need to lie down.”

“Call Junior,” said Rose.

“I can’t,” said Grace. “This is too much.”

Grace went back to bed and turned on the TV while Rose wheeled herself to the phone and called her half-brother Junior.

Nick Deshpande’s father was too angry to check the mail. The family designated the eldest son to do it, which was Nick. He sorted through a pile of

envelopes, but there was nothing from his aunt. He wondered why his mother didn't just phone.

"What do you want me to do with these wrong addresses?" he asked his mother.

"Nothing. Put them back."

His mother was a big woman, as tall as his father, but wider at the beam and thicker in the waist. Nick was several inches taller than her but still in the slimness of youth. His mother ruled their home the way his father ruled his operatories. She was especially incensed that her detailed horoscopes had given no warning of the mail disaster.

"There's one for the building across the street. I could just deliver it."

"No. We're not mail carriers in this family."

"Okay." Nick noticed the return address, The University of Notre Dame. He noted the name of the addressee, Nydia Abreu. Someone from the building going to college? In the Midwest? That seemed curious. He bound the letters with a rubber band, attached a note and was about to put them in the mailbox when it occurred to him there might have been a switch.

"Hey Mom, maybe they got our mail."

"Who?"

"The people across the street. I could go check."

Roopa Deshpande was scandalized by the thought of anyone from her family going into that building. She stayed as far away from it as the dimensions of the block allowed, scrupulously adhering to her side of the street, avoiding at all costs the shiftless men clustered outside drinking beer, the girls with makeup so thick they looked masked, the sound of babies crying day and night. She weighed her revulsion of the building against her anxiety over her sister's letter. It did make her pause.

"No. We are not post office workers," she concluded.

Nick dutifully put the errant letters in their mailbox and went back to his studies. The semester was almost over and he would soon begin his applications to business school. He hoped for a nice recommendation from his

neighbor, the insurance executive, though insurance was the last thing he wanted to do. He was aiming for Palo Alto. As he walked absently up the stairs to return to his room, he wondered how many Puerto Ricans there might be in Indiana. Or East Indians for that matter. Not that he had ever thought of living any place between the coasts.

Nydia Abreu, teen from the building and college applicant, sat with her classmates on the low stone wall that ran along the sidewalk at the edge of the park. Three boys, four girls, lined up facing the sidewalk, the avenue, and the end of high school. They passed a joint followed by a bottle of sugary wine in a brown paper bag, kicking their heels against the stone and laughing at any thought that popped into their heads. The air was cool, but the winter chill had evaporated. Brick-red buds beaded the tips of the oak branches above them. People paraded by with kids, with dogs, on roller skates. It all seemed amusing and ridiculous. “I like this song,” said Nydia to the girl next to her. “Turn it up.” Her friend turned up the volume on a tape deck she held in her lap until the bass line distorted the speakers to a muddy rumble, and the whole line of kids swayed and rocked their heads in time. Nydia was not thinking about next year, or next week, or tomorrow, or that evening. She was just rocking and swaying, not thinking about anything. “Uh, oh,” muttered her girlfriend with the tape deck. “Nydia…” Nydia could barely hear her over the screech of electric guitars. “Nydia, your father…” The girl slid off the wall and dodged away just as Nydia turned to witness a huge hand above her swinging down, a rough thick-fingered hand that grabbed her by the shoulder and jerked her off the wall to her feet. “You’re done with this,” said her father, dragging her down the sidewalk in a vice grip that squeezed out any notion of protest or struggle. He marched his daughter across the street to the building where they lived, keeping his grip firm, neither of them saying a word until they were back in their apartment where her mother waited.

“You’re not hanging out in the park like some low-life,” screamed her mother, her voice shrill and penetrating in Spanish so rapid and slurred the sentence sounded like one word, one syllable even. “Have you no shame?”

“Shame?” Nydia answered in English. “They’re my friends.”

“You’re getting a reputation,” said her mother, switching to her accented English. Nydia rolled her eyes as her mother continued louder and more shrill. “You’re out of control. Just because you want to go to college you think you can do anything you want.”

“I want to go to college to get away from you.”

Nydia saw her mother’s hand move but didn’t flinch. Her cheek went numb for a moment before she felt the sting of her mother’s slap.

“Then go. Get out of here,” screamed her mother.

“I can’t,” said Nydia flatly. “They don’t want me.”

Her mother’s expression softened as she absorbed the news. “Notre Dame doesn’t want you?” she answered, calmer. “What did they say?”

“They didn’t say nothing. It’s past the deadline.”

Her mother was offended, but also clearly pleased. “Then you can go to college here,” she said. “Like we wanted.”

“Forget college. It was a stupid idea.”

“No, *nena*. You can live here. You can work.”

“Maybe I’ll flip burgers the rest of my life,” said Nydia, about to add “or get married,” thinking to escape her parents. She looked at her father standing mute by the door with his huge fists hanging at his side and checked herself.

“If I catch you smoking marijuana in the park like some hippie, I’ll call the cops myself,” he said. Nydia went to the room she shared with her younger sisters and lay on her bed with her face to the wall. Her shoulder was sore and her cheek still smarted. She didn’t want to go to college in Indiana, anyway. It was her teacher’s idea.

“I’m not moving out,” you said again, tossing a handful of popcorn in your mouth as Dorie passed through the room with her hair pulled back in a

cheerleader ponytail, looking quite fit in running clothes and doing her best to tune you out. “I’m not moving out,” you said, meaning nothing, adding nothing, just trying to attract her attention. To your surprise it worked. She stopped abruptly, straight and firm, and turned to you with a deep cleansing breath. “I’ve been thinking about that,” she said in tone so casual it startled you and put you on your guard, sensing she was about to deliver a new thrust and you were lounging on the couch unprepared. “I don’t want to stay here. We should sell the place.” You try to parse her motives. A feint, a whim, some financial scheme? Or perhaps she was just making sense.

“I never liked Brooklyn,” she concluded.

“You never gave it a chance.”

“John,” she said with a deep sigh as she dropped in a chair and eyed him earnestly, “I’m tired of catcalls from scuzzy men every time I run in the park. I’m tired of music blasting from that building down the street all summer. I’m tired of the beer bottles on the sidewalk and crack vials on the corner. I’m tired of people who don’t speak English. It’s all bad for the girls.”

You were sitting up now. She pursed her lips and leaned forward, eyes widening expectantly as she awaited your response. “I’m fine staying here,” you finally sputtered, though far from fine with the prospect of being by yourself. “And then there’s the investment. Right now we’d be lucky to break even with the place. The market is about to take off. We’re better off waiting.”

“That doesn’t matter. I want a clean break. Let’s not drag it out.”

“Forget it,” you said, turning to the TV, holding up the remote, clicking through the channels.

“You can think what you want. But that’s what we have to do.”

“No, it’s not.”

“And we need some counseling. We have to learn to co-parent, at least.”

“Forget it. I know how to parent,” you said, flicking more popcorn in your mouth, clicking the channels.

And that’s what did happen, of course. You both stay in the house while it goes on the market. You marooned in the master suite with the king-sized bed

that was your first wedding anniversary present, while Dorie moves to the spare room. Otherwise your routines are much the same as they've been for years, as are the topics of your daily conversation. The girls, the house, shopping, crime, welfare moms, property values (two blocks over they were skyrocketing), new immigrants from god knows where. You keep putting on weight while Dorie gets thinner, the new pounds going straight to your gut (alcohol an efficient energy source, indeed), your waist expanding, your collars tighter, breathing harder when you walk up the stairs from the train. You're more irritable at work but not making any announcements, some priggish fear of stigma because, though half your colleagues are divorced, their failures would not be yours, not one of John Roads'. Because your choice of spouse was what distinguished you, if not in your father's eyes at least in your image of your father's eyes. If never in the eyes of your mother your having, if not escaped a winner, at least found a better substitute. But even that was going away now and you're back to square one. No, that was not going to happen. You were going to save your marriage. You would turn divorce counseling into marriage counseling. An act of will for an act of love.

"Just give it a try, for god's sake."

"Okay, I'll go."

And work was harder to take. The young guys lazier than ever, the older ones not nearly as clever as you, and everyone feeling entitled to make tons of money. The whole enterprise, once so exhilarating, was now perfectly asinine. "We're bookies," you said to friends, colleagues and clients alike after your second drink. "That's all, just bookies." Where you once might have blathered on about gathering assets, efficient flows of capital, the production of new wealth, or expounded on moral hazard. "The only difference, if a bookie doesn't pay he's in trouble." Then you'd wink and order another round. "Risk? Insurance companies?" When the merger came you were the first to go. But that was later, another April in a different place, and now you were going into counseling with your college sweetheart who wanted to break up, as you would soon find out, so she could take up with her lover, your old friend and fraternity brother.

For several days mail delivery almost returned to normal. If not timely, at least accurate and complete. A feeling of cautious relief swept the block, like a tribe that had weathered a natural disaster. Checks arrived, bills and birthday cards, packages and papers, magazines, circulars, letters. Residents were pleased to encounter their new mail carrier, a sturdy middle-aged woman in blue shorts and black knee-length socks who greeted them politely at their mailboxes in a soft Jamaican accent, never rushing, and finished her rounds in good order. But she disappeared as abruptly as she arrived and the mail went back to its former disarray. It was an isolated outbreak whose cause remained unknown. Neighbors on adjacent blocks went unaffected. It became harder to simply blame incompetence or mismanagement. Many on the block began to suspect a plot to ruin them or drive them away. Some thought real estate speculators must have a hand in it. Others, depending on their predilections, were convinced it was the Mafia, the IRS, the INS, FBI, or drug dealers. A few argued forcefully it was the work of extra-terrestrials, and some said it was the evil eye. Eddie's father looked out the front window of his apartment at the street. Sprouting leaves, chartreuse in their newness, emerged from the sycamore trees lining the sidewalk. He was wondering when he would have the money to get his phone turned back on. It had been two weeks since they put Eddie away, over a month since he had gotten Eddie's disability check, over a year since he had a job. He peered at the trim flower boxes on the front windows of the brownstones across the street. A slim woman wearing a windbreaker strode along the sidewalk with two young girls. The woman stepped gracefully up the front steps of her house while the girls hopped behind her. Eddie's father tried to imagine a life without worry and caught his reflection in the glass. He needed a shave.

As you leaned on the blue-veined marble over the capstone of your fireplace, gazing through the double hung window past the sidewalk, the double line of parked cars, the bay windows of the apartments across the street, as you walked the cat backwards through bags and boxes of time in search of a tipping

point, some precise node where you could take a different turn, your thoughts end in mist opaque as clay. *But now I hear the clock a-ticking on the mantel shelf, see the hands a-moving, but I'm by myself.* Time before I was born? Tending toward me, obviously. Tending toward this, just as obviously. This singularity that is not happening. Not happening if I let go of time. Not happening if I work it back. No incantations, love potions, sacrifices or beaded idols for John Roads. John, by the clock on the mantel in his living room, would simply change the premises that determine what is possible. And if you had turned and faced the other way toward the deck, the backyard, the fence, the whitewashed brick on the rear of the next block's houses where mail was still delivered, you would see the other arm swing out with its bags and boxes and nodes towards another opaque space either identical but not the same, or the same but not identical. Your beloved space beyond marriage or divorce, reconciliation or revenge, sobriety or cirrhosis, parent or child. But not yet. That would come later, at the very end in fact, when looking back at the man leaning on the mantle who then turns from the street to the backyard. And you ask yourself, "What is a delusion to a man who won't let it go?" A question of no consequence. And that is when Dorie appeared on the stoop.

"How are the girls?" she asks.

"Fine," you reply.

"Did they have lunch?"

"They weren't hungry," you say.

Your wife looked at you skeptically as she rushed past on her way upstairs, exchanging the remnants of guilt for leaving her sick children with you for anger at your simply existing and wishing you would have the good sense to leave if just for the afternoon. After everything you had put her through she would get her fair share, thinking as she climbed, meaning everything she was entitled to. The girls were tucked neatly in bed asleep and smelling of soap from their recent bath. She stroked Allison's forehead and Allison stirred, opened her eyes and gave her mother a tired smile.

"How do you feel, baby?" asked Dorie.

“Better,” said Allison. “I threw up.”

“You still feel hot.”

“I’m thirsty.”

Doris went downstairs for some ginger ale. She shot a glance at her husband.

“You didn’t tell me she threw up.”

“She’s okay.”

“She’s dehydrated.”

“No, she’s not.”

“How would you know?”

You went to the kitchen to find salsa for your chips, and ice for your drink.

Rose sat in the wheelchair with her wounded leg propped like a fallen tree trunk on the living room coffee table. “I counted the pills,” she said.

“It’s my back,” said Junior.

“It’s always your back.”

“Don’t I get nothing for helping you?”

Rose dropped the subject. “You got problems with your mail?”

Junior looked perplexed. “Why would I have problems?”

“’Cause we do.”

“That’s right,” called his mother from the next room. “It’s some scam. I ain’t got my check.”

Junior shifted uncomfortably on the sofa. He shifted whenever he sat, stretching, twisting, squirming. No taller than Rose, with a beard grizzled like his hair that was combed straight back over his bald spot, thin limbs clad in warm-up pants and hooded sweatshirt over a gut round as a volley ball. Muddy eyeballs framed by the dark circles of his orbits darted about the room in a nervous twitch.

“I need a loan,” he said.

“Are you deaf? I said I ain’t got my check,” shouted his mother.

“I’m not talking to you,” he shouted back. “I’m talking to Rose.” Junior turned toward his sister. “Not much. I’ll pay you right back,” he said.

Rose winced slightly and shook her head.

“You know I’m good for it,” said Eddie.

“Like the last time,” sighed Rose. “And all the other times.”

“I’m making good money now,” said Eddie. Tending bar in Bay Ridge was good money.

“Yeah. So why the loan?”

“I came up a little short. Just temporary.”

Drugs or the ponies, Rose suspected. Maybe both. The income from her husband’s death benefit was steady but hardly generous, no matter what Junior thought of the perks of being a fireman’s widow.

Rose opened the purse that was slung over the arm of her wheelchair. “Here’s fifty bucks,” she said, holding out the bills.

“How ‘bout a hundred?”

“Fifty. Take it or leave it.” Junior jumped up and snatched them as Rose started to return the bills to her wallet.

“Okay. If that’s the best you can do,” he muttered, starting for the front door. “Next time get your own pills.”

“You got your share,” said Rose. “Ma,” she called, turning toward the bedroom. “I’m hungry. How ‘bout a pizza?”

Junior let go of the door handle and swung back to the room. “Sure. I can get it.”

“With whose money?” said Rose.

“I’m helping out here.”

“We’ll get delivery. Stay if you want.”

Junior strolled to the bedroom to watch TV with his mother. “Sausage and peppers,” he mumbled as he passed in front of Rose, which was exactly what she had in mind.

They ate in Grace’s room. Rose in her wheelchair, Grace propped up on pillows, Junior tilted against the wall on the back legs of a kitchen chair between

the two of them, washing down the cooling pie with diet soda as they licked their fingers and watched large men wrestle until Grace fell asleep with a snore and her children adjourned for the night. Junior helped Rose out of the wheelchair onto the living room sofa where she slept sitting up, and set two pillows under her leg on the coffee table. Then he straightened up slowly, grimacing, with one hand pressed to his lower back. “Okay, take one,” said Rose. Junior popped two of her pills in his mouth and said goodnight.

“You know I’m good for it,” said Junior as he walked out the door. Rose nodded but was too tired to laugh.

It was the Roads’ first dinner party since moving to their new brownstone. They had to coax friends from the Upper East Side and even Brooklyn Heights as if luring them to the far reaches of an alien metropolis. The dining room was newly furnished with French antiques. A Verot walnut table and buffet a bit dark, a bit heavy. High-backed chairs with allegories of the four seasons, grotesques, a gallant scene and chimeras that delighted John in a perverse way by reminding him of Dorie’s seven sisters dining hall. All nineteenth century Neo-Renaissance in accord with the rest of the house and, except perhaps the Vert d’Estours marble on the side table, not Dorie's cup of tea. Justin was there with his wife Naomi, and Dorie’s sister with her husband Tim. Their old college friend Samantha came with a date. A compatible group more or less even if Sam’s date was a new addition, a young oncologist serious and polite enough who John disliked from the moment he refused a drink with the excuse he had to make rounds in the morning. When the guests had all arrived, Jen and Allie were paraded before them bathed and ready for bed, formally presented in pajamas before retiring to their rooms for the night and leaving the downstairs to the grown-ups. And by the time the company had made it through dinner with all the customary compliments, lingering over desert and toasting the new homeowners (“To the urban pioneers,” etc.) with another round of cognac (except the good doctor), John’s conversation turned to college anecdotes as inexorably as if he were sliding down an alcohol fueled time tunnel. Justin

prodded him with a sly wink at Dorie. “Remember Stoltz?” and John was off. “You mean the time he took acid?” he said in a tone meant to silence any side conversation. After a knowing glance at Justin, Dorie removed herself to the kitchen to make coffee. She had heard this fraternity brother story countless times, as had Sam who warned her date to expect this kind of thing. Still Sam listened politely, enjoying the familiarity of the tale and John’s enjoyment in telling it, while Dorie felt she had to get away from the sound of her husband’s voice or she would scream. She heard John continue in the other room, “He was from this small town in Ohio and didn’t even smoke pot,” gathering the threads of the story, finding the right key, holding forth from the head of the table with his snifter aloft as the guests finished their tiramisu. The sound of the coffee grinder drowned out his voice and Dorie, relieved, glanced through the door at Justin. He was staring at his drink. Then she noticed Naomi looking back at her and turned away a bit too abruptly. The earthy smell of freshly ground beans filled the kitchen, bringing with it a childhood memory of a supermarket with her mother. She was riding in the seat of a grocery cart parked in front of a large machine that gave off the same aroma. She wanted to immerse herself in that smell, she remembered, imagining a sandbox filled with fine dark granules that exhaled the fragrance of mountains and rain. And she thought again of Justin and his marriage and of Naomi and where their lives had gone since college. To Brooklyn, somehow. To this evening on their new block. To a neighborhood they could barely see around them. And she was not the scholar or the artist she had once hoped to be, but a mother with a master’s degree. Yes, she supposed, pouring the water into the coffee maker, they had a nice house.

“Smart guy, Stoltz,” John was saying, “but strange. Played bridge all day and made good money at it. Liked to smash furniture when he was drunk.” Naomi excused herself to go to the bathroom, wobbling slightly as she rose from the table. John gave no indication he noticed. “Anyway, by the time the sun came up he was sitting naked in his room playing the Moody Blues’ ‘Nights in White Satin’, rocking back and forth with a huge smile and tears running down his face saying, ‘It’s all so beautiful’.” Justin held up his hand and interjected,

“He thought the song was ‘Knights in White Satin’.” “Right,” John corroborated. “With a ‘K’. A knight in a shroud or something. An hour later he was on the steps of the administration building waiting to buttonhole the Dean. He didn’t even let the Dean get inside the door, just kept him on the steps jabbering about how the university should use its endowment to buy a huge radio transmitter to broadcast his message for world peace.” “And play the *Days of Future Passed* album,” said Justin. “His mother picked him up that afternoon,” John continued. “And that was the last we saw of Stoltz all semester.” Justin nodded in accord and looked around the table, adding, “He went on to law school. I think he’s working for Pfizer now,” and raised his glass. “To world peace.” And the refrain came back, “To world peace.” “And pharmaceuticals,” added John. Sam’s date, the oncologist, forced a smile as he held up his glass of Perrier, thankful he had never engaged in such bullshit.

John and Justin cleared the table while everyone else repaired to the living room with their decaf. When they were alone by the sink John whispered “What’s up with Naomi?” noting how aloof she had seemed the entire evening. “We had a fight on the way over,” said Justin. “Things are a little rocky right now.” John always thought Naomi rather cold and aloof, perhaps because he suspected correctly that she never liked him. “Anything I can do?” John asked of his old fraternity brother. “No, it’ll be all right. But thanks. We’ll work it out.” “Life is very short,” said John. He started the dishwasher and they joined the others. John paused by the stereo. “How about some music? Any requests?” “Just one,” said Dorie. “No Beatles.” He considered simply ignoring her, thought the better of it and put on a Gladys Knight album instead, settling on the couch next to his brother-in-law with a deep drink of his brandy despite the heartburn it gave him. Tim had been giving Dorie’s sister a look that meant it was time to go. He didn’t like the idea of traveling home late at night from so deep inside Brooklyn. The others were quick to call it a night as well.

Grace Wiggs stood in the foyer leaning on her cane as she fumbled for the key to her mailbox when the crack of a hard object hitting the front door

almost startled her off her feet. She managed to right herself by the slimmest of margins, avoiding a fall that would likely have shattered the shell-thin bone of her wrist or hip. She shuffled onto the stoop and there they were, a kid with a broom handle and his comrades spread out on the street. “Hey!” she yelled, “Hey, you kids! You can’t play in the park? You almost broke the window here!” And then she saw that he, the kid with the bat, was not a kid but a burly young man wearing headphones, twirling the bat and dancing about nimbly in the middle of the street. Eddie. Eddie from the building. She felt the anxious flutter of skipped heartbeats as she squinted and pointed her cane at him like a gun. “You!” she sputtered. “Where’s my check?” Eddie smiled at the sight of a half-bald old lady hunched on the stoop in her bathrobe and slippers, pointing her cane at him and yelling something he couldn’t hear over the music blasting on his Walkman. He didn’t hear her say, “What did you do with it?” But when he saw his comrades stop their play and look at her, he slid the phones off and heard her scream, “It’s you Puerto Ricans! I know it!” Puzzled, amused, bat still in hand, he joined his buddies gathering around Grace’s stoop and heard her scream again. “You lazy welfare cheats!” The other stickball players had begun to jeer and hurl curses back at her like groundlings heckling a player on the stage. “Go back where you came from,” shouted Grace as she retreated to the foyer. “You illegal scum. I want my check!” She closed the door just as a spaldeen slammed against the wooden panel six inches from her head. She tottered trembling to her apartment, one hand sliding along the wall of the hallway and the other barely able to grip her cane. When she finally entered the living room she saw the boys hooting and jumping in front of her windows. Their expressions were fierce, their gestures menacing and ludicrous. Rose was fumbling wildly as she reached up from her wheelchair trying not to fall in a vain attempt to close the curtains. “Ma, they’re nuts out there. What’s going on?” she asked, panting more from surprise than exertion.

“They’re animals,” said Grace.

“I thought I heard you yell something about Puerto Ricans,” said Rose.

“Yeah, that’s them,” said Grace.

“All I see is Joey Kirk,” said Rose. “And Angie Foley’s kid, what’s-his-name.”

“Eddie’s out there,” said Grace. “Call the cops.”

“Forget it, Ma. It’s kids,” said Rose. “Just leave ‘em alone.”

The day after the stickball incident yet another letter carrier appeared on the block. He had the grey ponytail and searching look of a Viet Nam vet in recovery, though no one cared to notice. And no one seemed to notice that the mail was delivered uneventfully. It was the same the next day, the day after and the rest of the week. The mail went back to normal as suddenly as it had gone awry, and the late effects of the block’s postal aberration receded like a spent flood. But Grace’s check still didn’t arrive. News of her outburst in the street travelled quickly through the building. “That crazy old lady is disrespecting Boricuas,” they muttered. “To our face!” The old folks just shook their heads, indignant, and went about their business. But the young folks seethed. And the more they talked, the more they seethed until one night as Rose was settling in the front room with her pain killers and bad leg propped on its two pillows she heard hoarse whispers on the sidewalk just before a beer bottle burst through the window like a grenade, scattering shards of glass on the chicken pot pie perched on her belly. There was a peal of laughter and the quick tread of footsteps scampering away. This time she did call the cops. Then she phoned Junior and told him to hurry over with some Bay Ridge pals and baseball bats. When the cops appeared at Eddie’s apartment that evening to investigate, they pounded on the door with nightsticks until his father answered in his underwear.

“What the fuck you doing here?” he shouted, still groggy from falling asleep in front of the TV. “I didn’t do nothing.”

“Shut up,” said the cop. “Where’s Eddie?”

“He’s sleeping,” said his father.

“Get him up. We need to talk to him.”

“You got a warrant?”

“We don’t need a warrant for this. We just want to ask him a few questions.”

“Go fuck yourselves.”

The cops cuffed Eddie’s father, rousted Eddie, and brought them both to the precinct house. They were held overnight for questioning and released the next morning without charges. Junior sat on his mother’s stoop with a bouncer friend from a Bay Ridge disco and the short order cook from his bar, spinning a bat in the palm of his hand as Eddie and his father returned to the block on the other side of the street. “I didn’t do nothing,” shouted Eddie, obliquely addressing Junior with his head tilted back as if speaking to the rooftops. His father told him to shut up, knowing that Eddie hadn’t gotten his morning medication. Junior stared at them hard and Eddie’s father mirrored his stare back to him with interest all the way down the block. Soon people from the building began to appear on the sidewalk around Grace’s apartment in pairs or groups of three, young men mostly but also some girls and their mothers, and older men keeping to the back of the crowd. Junior and his buddies remained on the stoop with their baseball bats at the ready. Finally a slight young woman pushed her way to the foot of the stoop and spoke up.

“What you got against Puerto Ricans?” Nydia faced them squarely with her arms clasped across her chest, her sharp jaw thrust forward.

“I got nothing against Puerto Ricans,” sneered Junior. “I got something against punks who break my mother’s windows.”

“Then maybe she shouldn’t be talking that shit in the street,” said Nydia, wagging her head as the crowd murmured in agreement.

“She’s an old lady,” said Junior. “What d’you want?” There was a long pause as the two sides faced off and Nydia considered her response.

“She should keep that shit to herself,” she concluded.

“Go fuck yourself,” Junior shouted back, his spittle spraying the front steps for emphasis. “If I catch you breaking windows here I’ll bust your head.” The crowd yelled back a chorus of obscenities in two languages, and Junior stood up rapping the bat in his palm as he took a step toward them. His

companions followed suit just as Ruben Guzman hurried down the stairs and appeared on the stoop. Ruben had been watching from his window. He whispered something to Junior that made Junior pause and take a slow step back.

"This is my building, too," Ruben told the crowd in Spanish. "The old lady's sick. Just leave her alone. She doesn't know what she's doing."

"This is bullshit," said Nydia. She glared at Junior one last time and sauntered away with a nod of her head that signaled she was done. The crowd's obscenities gradually tapered off as they dispersed. Rose and Grace were watching from the window.

"I didn't know Ruben could speak Spanish," said Grace.

"Ma, Ruben's Spanish."

"No, he's not. He's a Jew."

"He's Spanish, Ma. Puerto Rican."

"A Spanish Jew maybe, but not Puerto Rican."

"Okay. You ask him." But Ruben had disappeared down the sidewalk. He had to hurry to the Bronx to help his aunt. She had called him from a pay phone to say she received her final eviction letter and was moving out. A police car whooped its siren once as it passed him on the corner, but by that time the block was empty.

The day Eddie returned from the hospital, Roopa Deshpande finally got a letter from her sister full of old news that only displeased her more. She was unaware that her son had brought their mis-delivered mail to the building and, unable to put the letters in their locked mailboxes, had rung the doorbells of the apartments to which they were addressed. Unaware that Nick was about to leave the lobby when Nydia bounded out of the elevator. Did not know he recognized her from the line of kids who hung out on the wall along the park. When Nydia saw the envelope from Notre Dame she was panic-stricken. She grabbed it out of Nick's hand without uttering a word and raced up the three flights of stairs to her apartment, where she went straight to the bathroom and

locked the door before ripping it open to find her acceptance letter. And the deadline to respond, which had passed. After reading it through a second time she tore it to pieces and flushed it down the toilet. Nick remained in the lobby perplexed, finding no one to ask if any mail for his family had been delivered to the building. Nydia sat in the bathroom until her sister pounded on the door and didn't leave until her mother threatened to call the police. Her mother was afraid it was drugs or boys, and Nydia never said otherwise.

The next afternoon Nydia was a young woman looking to be noticed, sitting on the wall by the park waiting for her schoolmates. Her lipstick was painted thick and red, and dark curls of hair fell to her shoulders over a crescent of earrings lining each ear. She was slight, petite but by no means frail, looking much taller sitting on the wall. It took Nick a moment to recognize her as the same girl he encountered in her building the day before. He waved tentatively as he approached her from the avenue.

"I know you," said Nydia. "You live across the street." She made no mention of their meeting at the mail boxes.

Nick introduced himself and leaned against the wall as casually as he could. "What happened with Notre Dame?" he asked.

"Nothing. I'm not going." She shrugged, as if she had decided not to go to the movies.

"Are you going someplace else?" Nick hopped up and sat on the wall beside her.

"I don't know. Maybe. You're in college, right? I seen you bring books home." Nick nodded, hoping he did not give the impression of bookishness. Nydia didn't know what else to say. She bit her lip, smearing lipstick on her front teeth. They both sat staring silently at traffic passing on the avenue in front of them as two of Nydia's friends arrived and greeted her. Feeling out of place now with these high school kids, Nick slid off the wall as nonchalantly as he could and wandered home. After dinner his mother appeared in the doorway of his room in a bright yellow sari that framed the brown folds of her midriff. The coolness of the evening did not seem to bother her.

"Who was that girl you were talking to?" Nick looked up from the textbook on his desk as his mother closed the door behind her.

"What girl?" said Nick.

"That girl you were talking to in the park."

"She lives across the street," he replied, unable to keep himself from smiling at the absurdity of his mother's severe tone. He was long used to these stern interrogations, which by now seemed a mere formality. "She was asking me about college."

"College? A girl from that building? You shouldn't be talking to her. I don't want your father to know about these things." His mother raised a warning finger as she backed out the door to the whisper of silk and the soft padding of her sandals. It would never occur to him to challenge her, nor to take her too seriously. An interesting thing about Indians east and west thought Nick, stretching his legs, looking at his arms as he flipped through a notebook, noting his complexion.

And now from your front window, tumbler in hand, watching the hard rubber sphere deform and burst off surfaces of metal and stone and concrete, deflect in crazy angles from the spin imparted by Eddie's broomstick, amazed that players don't crash into parked cars when looking skyward for a fly ball and somehow know without seeing when a car is coming down the street behind them, you ponder the suburban ballparks of your own boyhood—neat diamonds and base paths and thick outfield lawns—and remember your angry mother washing grass stains off your uniform. Whereas here they would be bloodstains from your knees. What would she make of that? Stigmata. But more to the point. Your wife had her lover then, as you will learn when you eventually see her pattern and purpose where now you have only her argument. So you still think, watching stickball players on the block, there must be some kind of mistake. And when she remarries (but she will not marry Justin, courteous and treacherous Justin, that would have broken the rules) and you have the invoices, but not the rewards, of fatherhood, you will have no choice but to accept the

irreversibility of the event. Yet for now you continue as a man shot in the chest can take a few steady steps and have a moment to look about, noting the color of the sky or the shape of a leaf, before collapsing. Across the street an old woman screeches invective from her stoop and the ball kids stop their play. And there he is with headphones and broomstick, the crazy would-be mailman who started it, grinning at the woman on the stoop, aping with his stick the gestures she makes with her cane. Maybe Dorie's right, you think with a frown reflected in the window glass seen only by you, maybe this is not the place to raise the girls. And why Aquitaine you wonder randomly as Dorie leaves the girls with you for her 'sanity break', until later when you finally discover yes, she has a boyfriend as your attorney assumed, and he is your old fraternity buddy who had a drink with you in Midtown just last month and told you how tough the single life was at this age.

John Roads returns to the kitchen. Seeing the Johnnie Walker on the counter, he opens the cabinet above to remove the bottle from view. An envelope flutters down. He retrieves it from the floor and notes the name, Ruben Guzman, and the address, a building across the street. He shakes his head thinking what the hell, might as well run it over, throws on a jacket and trots to Grace's building where he rings the bell for Ruben's apartment. There is no answer. He turns to a curly haired man with wheat-colored skin seated on the stoop.

"You know this guy?" asks Roads, holding out the envelope for inspection.

"That's me," says Guzman. Roads studies him closely and Guzman's features trigger a further inquiry.

"You work in the city?" asks Roads.

"Yeah."

"Where do I know you from?"

"The train," says Guzman. "We take the same train."

“Ah,” says Roads, and hands him the envelope. “Here. The mailman screwed it up and delivered it to my place. Government work. They should privatize the damn post office.”

“Sure. Like prisons,” says Guzman. Roads doesn’t know how to take the remark and Guzman doesn’t know how he gave it. Ruben stands up with his belated tax refund and makes for the front door. “Thanks. I’ve been waiting for this.”

Roads watches him walk in the building. He thinks Guzman a curious looking man.

Dorie hurried home, but didn’t rush. She strode briskly down the block with her casual authority, dodging through the throng on the sidewalk with little time to spare for the drama unfolding on the other side of the street, a drama which might as well have been taking place in a parallel universe. But two kids from that universe were on her stoop smoking cigarettes. “Hey, you can’t sit here,” she said, pushing past them as they rose slowly, cursing her in Spanish. She still had packing to do before leaving for the airport. When John heard her climb the stairs he trailed her to the spare bedroom a bit too obviously he knew, but didn’t care.

“What can I do to help?” he asked.

“Just look after the girls.”

“Do you really have to do this? I mean, the timing is bad. We have some things to work out,” said John.

“Yes, I really have to do this. It’s just a week. And no, whatever needs to be worked out can be done by our lawyers.”

“What I’m talking about can’t be done by lawyers.”

Dorie looked up from the open suitcase on the bed. “John, what about ‘over’ don’t you understand?”

“What I don’t understand.” You stop and correct yourself. “What I *can’t* understand, is how there can be no conceivable way of fixing this.” Forgetting your thoughts on those flights home from Chicago, those hours awake before

dawn, when divorce was not inevitable but imagined though you had no idea how to go about it. So here it is, and now you find yourself fighting against it the harder she tries to disentangle. And for what? For the record? For the kids? Playing the wounded loyal husband until you become the part? Like an empty show that seems to be taking place outside you. Your lines come too easily, as if the script had been there all along. And, as you watch her pack more forcefully in her exasperation, throwing in sweaters and skirts and jeans, mashing them down while she ignores you standing behind her, watching the suitcase fill as you realize there's a pinprick in your life's plan and it's deflating fast, you understand that she too is just playing her part, the words all preselected for the occasion. She has only to hand them to you.

"Because," she says, zipping the bag loudly for emphasis, "it's unfixable. Get it? Like an old car. The parts wear out. You replace them. It keeps going for a while. Not so well maybe, but it keeps going. Until finally, at some point," she stands and faces you squarely with her eyebrows raised, faking a smile as her voice drops to a low sarcastic whisper, "it's unfixable."

John carried his wife's bag downstairs as she hugged the girls good-bye. When the town car appeared in front of the house she insisted on taking the suitcase from him at the doorway and carrying it down the steps herself. The block was empty save for a seedy-looking man on the stoop opposite with a baseball bat propped beside him. The red glow of his cigarette tip brightened for a moment as he took a long drag. The smoke curled deep in his lungs. He looked over at her, and up at her husband standing in the doorway with a girl on either side of him waving at their mother as she drove away. Then he flicked his butt on the sidewalk, and after one last look up and down the street took his bat inside.

Justin waited for Theodora by the airline check-in counter. She was late again, but he was not impatient. He had pleasant things to think about. Vineyards, Benedictine monks, Eleanor and Henry, an affair with an engaging woman, even the prospect of commitment. But he was now of a somewhat

different mind. Best to be discrete, he thought. No point rubbing it in while an old friend's wound was raw. And probably best he and Dorie don't move in together he reasoned, at least not right away. It would be confusing for her kids. He was not trying to take their father's place, or abdicate his role with his own children. These things were settled comfortably in his mind by the time he spotted her wheeling her bag across the floor. He greeted her with a relaxed, welcoming smile.

"Hey, we're on vacation."

"Hard to believe."

They stretched out in business class and sipped their drinks. At least that's how you later pictured them. He clasping her hand, she nuzzling against his shoulder while you, John Roads, father and husband, checked the girls' homework and put them to bed.

"Dad, what was going on out there tonight?"

"Out where?" you say, thinking of the unfixable and the town car taking your wife away.

"Across the street. We heard something about Puerto Ricans."

"And somebody's check."

"I don't know. I don't get mixed up in those things. What do you think about moving someplace else?"

Your New England beach in August. A curving slice of sand bounded by rough boulders that jetty into leaf-green water and submerge like giant sea turtles. Idle summer clouds slide overhead. Their shadows cool you gently as you follow the line of the horizon (a tanker?) for a moment before your eyes come to rest on Dorie as she wades through the surf. A plain residents-only New England summer beach plainly marked, its resident beach-goers sitting separate and distinct like ascetics in the desert. A private moment for young parents when the girls could still amuse themselves with a bucket and shells. Dorie sits next to you on the blanket, salt-lipped, her red hair twisted and dripping, reaching for the sunscreen to re-coat her freckled skin. "Do my back?" Her back

has already taken on a faint rose hue save the white strip under her strap. You attribute your headache to dehydration, your dehydration to Margaritas (hidden in the thermos, no alcohol on the beach posted plainly as well), the Margaritas to vacation, the vacation to habit. You sweep her skin and feel the smooth outline of ribs and backbone. She's a decent mother, you think. Not bad for the prettiest girl in the class. I did good, you think, and smile a Margarita smile. Your hand reaches down the back of her bikini to her tailbone and she reaches back to arrest it. "That's enough." You brush your fingers across the top of her buttocks. "No one can see us," you whisper as she pulls your hand away. "So what?" she says. With each little movement your head throbs lightly to your pulse. You slide to the shade of the umbrella for a glass of iced tea. *We're all alone and there's nobody else. You still moan, keep your hands to yourself.* The sound of the surf is a steady drum followed by the crackle of sea-smooth pebbles. A gull squeals overhead. Drum, crackle. Like your pulse.

Funny what you remember when your wife is away. It was that same summer Jen bumped her head on the dock and needed stitches, and it was your fault for making her stand in the front of the boat to throw out the line. Your fault somehow there was no plastic surgeon around. Jen fell back in the boat. She was fine till she saw her own blood, then shrieked like she was being beaten and everyone on the dock looked at you like you were some kind of child molester. And you were sober as could be that afternoon, just taking the girls out for a sail while their mother browsed boutiques. And a boy? What about a boy? We did try, after all. That summer. Sincerely wanted one, too. But there was just so much she could put herself through. So it was two girls and you learned to be okay with that, quite okay in fact. But it's not over till it's over, Dorie. Just wait till you get back. *I'll get you in the end. Oh yeah.*

"It's almost done, Ma." Rose hovered over the stove, shaking mashed potato flakes from a box and stirring them into a saucepan of boiling water. Her mother sat facing the wall at their narrow formica table set tight in a corner of the small kitchen, its metal edge protruding well into the entryway. The aroma of

meatloaf filled the room. Grace couldn't quite catch the thought that flitted through her mind. A question perhaps, a mouse or djinn dodging about the edges of her consciousness eluding her efforts to find it but refusing to leave. Rose opened the oven and reflexively turned her face away from the wave of heat that poured out. When the worst of it had passed, she slid out the oven rack and smiled in satisfaction. She knew how to make a meatloaf. "Did you call Social Security?" Grace blurted out. Rose lifted the hot baking pan with a pair of potholder mittens, her face dripping with sweat, and set it steaming on the stovetop. "Yes, Ma. I told you twice already. Nobody cashed the check. They're going to cancel it. They're sending a new one." Grace stared intently at the wall and turned this news over in her mind as Rose sliced the loaf. "Are you sure they're not giving you the run around? That's what they do, you know." Rose set the meatloaf and potatoes on the table. "We'll know when the new check gets here," Rose answered. "We'll starve first," said Grace. Rose was about to take her seat when Grace snorted, "No bread?" Rose pushed herself back to her feet and retrieved a loaf of bread from the refrigerator, settling at last in her chair to butter her potatoes. "There's nothing to drink," said Grace. Rose looked around the table. Her mother was right. She took a quick bite of meatloaf and rose once again, annoyed with herself, and shuttled to the refrigerator where the only thing she could find was an old carton with a few drops of orange juice. From the cupboard she pulled down a family size bottle of Diet Pepsi, turned to the freezer and grabbed a tray of ice cubes. After she had poured soda for the two of them, she forked out iceberg lettuce and beefsteak tomato slices from a plastic salad bowl onto side dishes. A healthy meal, she thought, and the thought pleased her. She squirted large swirls of ranch dressing onto the lettuce, gripping the plastic bottle with both hands, and smiled at her mother. "Eat, Ma. Enjoy."

Beyond your anger that won't extinguish, despite the many medications trialed and discarded and therapy that only highlighted what you already knew (it's characterological said your shrink), from a source much deeper than even

your daughters' eventual estrangement, are those maudlin moments when you don't know which you fear more, your life or your death, and the darker and less maudlin moments when you think you do. But at the end these moments and questions blur together in a kind of peace, or rather sedation, that give the outward appearance of calm even as your breathing becomes irrelevant. But strange how the affect was held together all those years through some strange molecular thread kept intact as the DNA of a wooly mammoth frozen in the tundra. How tiresome the endless spinning of cause and effect. You can only hope it's the end. Because as you toss in your habit of fractured sleep (even when bothering to use your CPAP, the doctor at the sleep center counseling you to "cut down on your alcohol intake"), you see it going back beyond the beginning.

Theodora Roads pushed lightly and the front door of her brownstone swung open. The house was silent. Her trip was just behind her and the cab was already down the block. She stood on the stoop for a moment with her suitcase at her side taking it all in. All was still the way she hoped it would be, the girls at school and her husband at work. She needed an hour to herself before returning to the dissolution of her marriage. She stepped into the vestibule. The mahogany staircase was heavy and obscure. She looked around and sighed. She liked the house at first, but never as much as John. Now she could not help but feel that the scent of cigars and old women hung about the place. Drawn absently to the dining room, she spotted the week's mail piled on the dining table and began to sift through it out of habit, sorting piles of bills, catalogues, senseless notices. And out of habit she took the bills to their place at the kitchen desk. She liked the kitchen she noted once again, the one modern room in the house, a room remodeled to her own taste. When she opened the drawer of a small desk recessed under her glass-paneled cabinets she noticed an unopened envelope from the Social Security Administration addressed to a Grace Wiggs in an apartment across the street. "Hmm," muttered Dorie. Part of the mail mix-up, obviously. She made a mental note to have John run it over. The sink was piled

with dirty dishes, and through the window above it she could see the cherry tree blossoming in the back yard. A pitiful postage stamp of a yard, she thought. This is limbo, neither the real city nor the suburbs except for the need to commute, a bedroom borough with all the city's congestion and none of its excitement. I live in Brooklyn, she thought, but not by choice. She wondered how the girls would like Connecticut, or Seattle. She would float that past Justin as well. She did not feel like unpacking quite yet. She wanted to appreciate the silence and the memory of early spring in vineyards along the rivers of Aquitaine. Thank god it doesn't have to be like this she thought, sitting stiffly on a Queen Anne chair in the living room. She looked at the anniversary clock on the mantle that John had found in Vienna, watching its pendulum rotate monotonously first to one side then the other, put off by its Baroque gilt and glass as ponderous as her husband, realizing she just had time to unpack before getting Allison and Jennifer at school. She paused a moment to indulge herself with one last image of Justin before rising slowly to retrieve her bag and haul it up the stairs. As she passed her old room she saw the bed unmade, John's shirts and socks strewn about the floor. She closed the door and rolled the suitcase to her room.

You hear a car coming up the driveway and glance out your bedroom window to see what you expected to see, a red Buick arriving at the usual hour. Your father is home from work. It's late June and the evenings have grown warm. You are looking for subjects to try out your high school graduation present, a new Japanese camera. You wave. He is not looking at you, but you snap a picture anyway just as a presence not caught by the photo steals up behind him and taps him on the shoulder. Your father opens the rear door of the car, takes out his briefcase, pauses and looks up with an expression of surprise alien to him, feeling sensations that make no sense. He falls against the car door, incredulous, and slides to the asphalt as his eyes go dim. You take another shot but the intruder is too quick for your shutter. This time your father's face registers something new and striking, not pain and no longer surprise. Recognition perhaps, or resignation. When he fails to rise you run out to see if

he is hurt. The thing that sticks in your mind is the way his legs were splayed at a weird angle like a doll dropped on the floor, an angle that would cause excruciating pain to any living creature. You don't have a photo of that, nor do you need one. Then you remember that your wife should be home. You rehearse your words one more time. Calm and welcoming. Like nothing has happened. Those photos are in the basement at your mother's house. You haven't looked at them since that summer and you never will.

"Mom, how's this?" Jennifer posed in front of the bedroom mirror tucking her hair under the beige beret her mother had brought her. "No, honey. Leave your hair out." Jennifer made a face and lifted the hat off her head with both hands. Her mother smiled, noting how Jennifer's taste always seemed to put her in the worst light even though she was not an unattractive child. Moody, but not unattractive. Allison tried on an oversize orange hat with a brim, a bold look that her mother knew would suit her. Dorie had tried so hard to get each hat exactly right for each of them but knew, no matter what she did, they would want it otherwise. And then there was Sam who should be arriving any minute. She had a hat for her, too. Having no idea what to expect from her husband and fearing the worst if he were drunk, Dorie made it clear she needed Sam with her when John got home. The girls were relieved to see their mother, but wary of the tension that returned to the house with her. There were moments Dorie felt guilty for having such a good time without them. But now she was back and could direct her full efforts to their welfare. Allison grabbed the hat off Jennifer's head and the protests began. "Stop it, Allison," said Dorie. She held out her hand for the hat. "Why were you gone so long?" said Allison, unflinching, without handing it over. Jennifer stopped whimpering to listen closely. "I just needed to, that's all." Dorie knew how inadequate that sounded. "Is Daddy leaving?" asked Jennifer, now standing shoulder to shoulder with her sister. "Because he said he doesn't want to leave," she added. "Come here," said Dorie. She sat cross-legged on the bed and patted the comforter to indicate they were to climb up and join her. "I know he doesn't. But it's for the best." She knew that claim, too,

sounded weak. “No, it’s not,” said Allison. “It’s for the worst,” said Jen. “We’ll both still be your parents,” said Dorie. “That won’t change. Someday you’ll understand.” Or if not at least forgive, a qualifying thought she kept to herself. “No, we won’t,” said Allison, as if also addressing what her mother had left unspoken. Dorie paused to consider a frank response. “Yes, your father’s leaving. He won’t be going far, but he’s moving out. We need some time apart. I know it’s not easy for you. But it will be better than us fighting all the time.” The girls slid off the bed unconvinced. “Why don’t you just say you’re getting divorced?” said Jennifer. “Lots of kids’ parents are divorced.” “Kirstin’s parents are divorced,” Allison chimed in. “She gets twice as many presents at Christmas.” The doorbell rang. “Sam’s here,” said Dorie. “Go let her in.”

Samantha was the perfect buffer for the occasion, Dorie’s confidante without taking sides. The two old friends, college roommates, sat in the kitchen sipping white Bordeaux, souvenir of Dorie’s trip, while the girls circulated through the house swapping hats. Dorie always believed there was a time before their marriage when John had been interested in Sam. She didn’t know if it was ever reciprocated. Maybe she would find out soon enough, she mused as she looked at Sam across the table, at her round, open face and eyes that seemed to warn the world not to take itself too seriously.

“Well, this sucks,” said Sam. “But I can’t say I’m surprised. How are the girls taking it?”

“Not well.”

“Naturally. So how are you?”

“Fine. Mostly. Sometimes I just wish I hadn’t waited so long.”

Sam looked down at the wine as she swirled it in her glass. “Like maybe you never should have married him?”

“No. The first years were good. I have my girls. I just wish he hadn’t turned into such a jerk.” They laughed together.

“How does that happen?” asked Sam.

“I don’t know. Alcohol, maybe.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Their laughter seemed to summon the girls. They ran in with their berets to show Sam.

“Mom has one for you, too,” said Jen. Dorie fetched it from her room while the girls modeled for Sam. It was black and a bit too small, but Sam wedged it on her head like a good sport and they all went to the living room to look in the mirror over the mantle. “C’mon, Mom. Put something on.” Dorie ran back upstairs and returned with a new twill scarf. She knotted it loosely around her neck and the four of them posed in front of the fireplace, two on either side of the anniversary clock that twirled away timelessly between them.

It’s another April and you scuttle out of the subway, speeding up the steps of the stone parapet to the old bridge’s walkway back to Brooklyn. Confinement in cab or train is unthinkable today, you must walk to breathe. Busy all morning at the office without doing any work because marking time at home was unthinkable, too. You called Sam and she told you she had not seen Dorie for months. You heard her sigh as she wished you luck. Sam, who had finally given you the lowdown on Justin clueless as you were, and babysat the girls when Dorie was out with him until that favor passed even the limits of girlfriend support. Warmed by a bright sun between gusts of wind but noticing neither, tilting across the slats, hands in your trouser pockets with your shrill shirt ballooning, head down, you see nothing. No flight of strings, no cordage. Not the overturned trash can at your side. The foundries are gone and the ships few. And hear no vibrant breath, no telepathy of wires. Voiceless generations of a tired bridge. I’m thinking of what Sam had said. Before you can be happy you must first be not unhappy. Thank you little Buddha, maid of honor, maid of neutrality. Not me. Someday my girls will know the truth about their mother. Until then I will convey my outrage to the generations before me and the generations to come. Over the Fulton Ferry Landing with its circling seagulls, past Cadman Plaza onto Adams. Seeing nothing until the massive hive of the court building on your way up to the tenth floor matrimonial court and judge. A settlement has been reached. The gavel comes down. Your marriage is dissolved. Dissolved.

The word echoed back to my high school chemistry class. To crystals vanished in a clear solution, not a particle left floating or suspended. But though in dissolution they persist until, potentially as I recall, taken out of solution as they once were. Or react invisibly, irreversibly (which I still reject) to combine in new and unrecognizable forms. When I got home I didn't know whether to get drunk or vacuum the place. So I did both. *Man buys ring, woman throws it away. Same old thing happens every day.* You must take the girls to see your mother soon.

Rose was watching TV in the bedroom with her mother when Junior returned from the stoop and set his bat against the front door frame. "Thanks for smoking outside," she said.

"Yeah. No problem," said Junior.

"And thanks for coming over," Grace added.

"Like I said, no problem," said Junior. They were silent for a moment as the images flickered in front of them. Grace hadn't looked up from the TV. "Maybe you should get outa this neighborhood," said Junior leaning against the doorjamb, his tattooed arms folded across his chest. "Move to Bay Ridge."

"Why would we do that?" asked Rose.

"Why?" said Junior, his eyes widening in mock amazement as if the answer was obvious. "Why? All them PR's."

"Not many coloreds though," said Grace.

"More than Bay Ridge," said Junior.

"More Arabs and Chinese in Bay Ridge," said Rose.

"So what? Chinks got money."

"But they're cheap," said Grace.

"How am I gonna get there to look for a place? I can't take the train," said Rose. The last time she'd climbed the subway stairs was four years ago. Her knees almost killed her. And car service was for emergencies.

"I'll take you. Maybe we could find a place for the three of us."

"Yeah, right," said Rose thinking, how dumb does he think we are?

Junior reached for a cigarette. "Ma, you get that check yet?"

“Why?” his mother asked without taking her eyes from the screen.

“I could use a loan. Not much.”

“Rose says they’re sending another one. I’ll believe it when I see it. Ask me then.”

Junior turned to Rose. “Sorry,” she said. “I don’t got it.”

Junior crumpled up his cigarette pack and threw it on the floor. “Next time you need help call the cops.”

Rose rummaged through her purse and handed him a twenty.

“Forget it,” said Junior, tossing it back at her. Rose let it lie on the floor until he picked it up on his way out.

A strong wind seemed to rise from nowhere and the temperature in the street plummeted as if someone had opened a freezer door. The living room darkened so fast Rose thought her electricity had gone out until she realized the lights weren’t on to begin with. She put down her Reader’s Digest and stood by the front window as a fierce rain began to drum against the glass. Fat drops splattered like paint balls on the grimy roofs of cars parked in front of her. From the direction of the park a flash of lightening backlit the storm clouds. As she listened for the boom of thunder to follow, she heard instead a pelting like marbles falling in the street. Hail cracking on car roofs, on windshields, bashing trash cans, ice balls the size of grapes bouncing three feet off the sidewalk. There was another sound too, an incantation that seemed to well from the pavement, growing louder as she scanned the block. As the thunder boomed, Eddie materialized in the middle of the street wearing nothing but flip flops and a red blanket pinned at the neck like a cape, stopping in mid-block the line of traffic inching its way through the storm. With the headlights of a Honda illuminating his torso, he lifted his arms and face to the sky, howling, “Thor, god of thunder, take me!” As the Honda’s horn blared at him, Eddie climbed on its hood. The woman driver, already terrified by the hail exploding around her, jerked the car in reverse and smashed into the car behind it, sending Eddie spread-eagle over the middle of the windshield with his uncircumcised member

squished flat against the glass below the rearview mirror like an empty windsock. A thin, bearded young man bolted cursing from the stricken car and pounded on the driver's window of the Honda as Eddie scrambled over the car's roof, down the trunk and onto the hood of the now driverless car behind it. With a string of Arabic profanity, florid and arcane, the bearded driver stove in the rear door of the idling Honda with the heel of his boot and wheeled around toward Eddie who was bouncing on the hood of his car. The Honda took off, its wheels spinning and sliding on the wet pavement as it fishtailed down the street. The bearded driver grabbed for Eddie's ankle but Eddie jerked away in time to escape. The driver managed to grasp his cape, which remained in his hand torn from Eddie's neck as Eddie jumped down to the other side of the car leaving his sandals on the hood as well.

"What's all the racket?" yelled Grace from her bedroom over the sound of car horns reverberating down the length of the block all the way to the avenue, through the sound of clattering hail and the TV blasting in her room. "It's Eddie. Blocking traffic," Rose yelled back from her ringside seat at the window. "Figures," shouted Grace. "I hope they run him over." Rose stood up to get a better look at the commotion on the other side of the street. "He's naked," she said. "Naked as a newborn baby." "Like I said," yelled Grace.

Eddie tried to open the passenger door of the next car in line. At the wheel sat Dorie on her way home from dance class with Allison and Jennifer firmly strapped in the back seat. He jerked hard on the handle but it was locked tight. Dorie, oddly fascinated, was too stunned to scream but for some reason both girls started giggling at the same instant. "Warn Thor," gasped Eddie, pressing his face to the window, "Loki… " He let go of the door handle before he could finish his message as the bearded driver came around, and splashed through the gutter's ankle deep water to the sidewalk. The man started to give chase but slipped to the pavement, and finally heeding the car horns echoing down the block or perhaps tired of being pelted by hailstones, returned still outraged to his dented Dodge and drove away with Eddie trotting parallel on the wet sidewalk waving and wagging his hardware as he went. When Eddie

reached the Deshpande's he could no longer keep up, and plopped down winded on their stoop watching cars file past as the squall petered out. When he had caught his breath he climbed the stairs and rang the doorbell until Roopa Deshpande appeared.

Sam's bridesmaid dress clung tight to her waist, dropping sheer as water along her hips and thighs to three inch heels that lengthened her short legs as best they could. She always looked good to you. "You know I'd do anything for you," you say. "Just ask." You're leaning too close and Sam pushes you back, steadies you, afraid you'll spill your drink. You can't hear her reply over the sound of the band. It doesn't matter. "C'mon then. Let's dance," she said. She takes your gin and tonic and sets it on a table before leading you to the floor. Sam is brave. You don't dance well though you've had enough drinks not to care. Dorie is dancing nearby with her brother. "She looks great, doesn't she?" Sam remarks. You nod. You too think Dorie looks great, but her gown doesn't. For once you agreed with your mother. "Burgundy?" you shout, pointing to Sam's dress. "I like that color." "Aubergine," she shouts back. "You're kidding," I say, "Burgundy sounds so much better." She repeats the word slowly in her best French accent, "Au-ber-gine," breathy and singsong like Edith Piaf. Who knew eggplant could sound sexy? She sways gently, smiling, eyes closed, holding her flounce to the side with her right hand. You lurch. You're trying hard not to fall and stay with the beat. She is trying her best to stay with you and make it look like you're dancing. Your mother has already left feeling exhausted, thank god. Sam looks so good you would do anything for her. And that's all right because you know you're in love with Dorie. Proudly, willfully in love. Sam looks so good but Dorie is all you think you will ever need. How many times that day did I wish my dad were there? But now you're home in Brooklyn, looking up at the front door. Walking up the steps. And you know she's home, and the girls are home, but Sam surprises you. Like you had conjured her. "Hi honey," you say. "How was the flight?" But Dorie gives you a cold stare and says nothing, which is what you should have expected when the word 'honey' slipped from your tongue.

“Hey, Sam.” You give her a quick kiss on the lips, a peck, but on the lips nonetheless. “You know, I was just thinking about you and here you are.” Sam is thicker in the middle now, has lost the smooth hourglass sweep of her waist, but her face has the same freshness and appeal. “I asked her to come over,” says Dorie. “I think we should be alone as little as possible.” Allison and Jennifer come traipsing down the stairs in their new hats. “Look what mommy brought us.” Both twirling around, Allison crossing her eyes and getting dizzy. “Ou là là,” you say. “Ou là là,” they repeat in unison. “What did you get Daddy?” Jennifer asks. “Nothing,” says Dorie. “Daddy has enough things.” “No beret?” says Allie. “No, Daddy doesn’t like berets,” says her mother. I don’t, actually.

“Allie, you can come in my room. There’s more light in here.” The window in Jennifer’s room faces south over their backyard and the backyards of the houses on the next block, high enough to catch the late morning sun that today is nothing more than a wan disk behind the clouds. There are twin beds flanking the window. Jennifer stretches out with her book, resting on her elbows at the foot of her bed with her feet on the pillow near the window. Allison enters and does the opposite, lying supine with her head on the pillow of the other bed. “Let’s switch books when we’re done,” says Jen. Allison raises her eyes for a moment but neither agrees nor disagrees. She wants to keep her options open. The house is quiet downstairs. Both girls are in their pajamas. No music lessons, dance, soccer, sleepovers, or museum trips today, a sick day reprieve from the enhancements of their lives. Jennifer would prefer to curl up in a ball and be left alone, but Allison is needy when she doesn’t feel well. They hear a murmur, their parents’ raised voices from the kitchen, the sound of chairs sliding over the tile floor, and bury themselves deeper in their books. They’ve already decided what they will do when they grow up. They will make movies together. Movies about sisters growing up in the city. They hear their mother’s footsteps and her soft knock on Allison’s door. “We’re in Jen’s room,” says Allison. Dorie enters in knee length boots, her raincoat unbuttoned. She is wearing makeup unusual for a Saturday morning and she’s in a rush. “How are my girls?” she asks. They

shrug. “Okay, I guess.” Dorie takes their temperatures with an ear thermometer. “That’s better,” she says. “I’m going out for a while. Daddy will check on you. He’ll be downstairs if you need anything.” She kisses them and leaves behind the faint almond scent of her body wash. “Where you going?” asks Jennifer. “I have to run some errands,” says her mother as she hurries out the door.

The girls, silent, somber now, return to their books. Allison feels a chill, and after reading the same sentence three times puts her book on the floor with a sudden malaise blocking her thoughts. She drifts into a jumbled reverie. Characters from her book, kids from school, people appearing and disappearing in a large house saying things she doesn’t understand, until she wakes suddenly to a brackish taste and the brisk flow of saliva. “I don’t feel so good,” she says. She eases out of bed and hurries unsteadily down the stairs with Jennifer trailing behind. Their father is stretched out on the couch watching TV with a bag of popcorn on the floor beside him and kernels scattered on his chest. “Dad? Dad? Where’s Mom?” The spasm hits Allison just as her father sits up and her vomit splashes on the floor in front of him. “Shit!” he says, terse and loud, then “What the hell?” as he glares at the mess. “I’m sorry, Dad,” says Allison over and over again between sobs as her father drags her to the bathroom and Jennifer follows, coughing and tracking bits of Allison’s breakfast across the floor, smelling her sister’s puke and the whisky that splashed out of her father’s glass onto her pajamas.

It was late evening on the block. Here and there a window was still open despite the cold that returned each night, and in the cooling rooms television sets flickered prime time soap operas. The corner of Rose’s eye caught a slight movement in the shadows across the street in a gap between the light of two street lamps by the dentist’s house. She couldn’t say why she noticed, perhaps something furtive and familiar that caught her attention. She has seen her share of drug deals and wasn’t shy about calling the cops. Rolling her wheelchair closer to the window, she made out the shadowed forms of a young man and a young woman and saw them exchange what looked like a small package,

exchange a few words, and part. The young woman crossed the street and went into the building. The young man turned to the dentist's brownstone and disappeared in the darkness of the basement door. Rose called the tip line to make a report fearing for the safety of her neighbors across the street, and settled by the window once again for a longer vigil. Her ankle throbbed despite the painkillers and she knew she would not get much sleep that night. Ten minutes later a patrol car cruised down the street and slowed in front of the dentist's house, then passed and stopped in front of the building. Two men with a boom box, beers in hand, leaned against the facade by the entrance. Eddie wearing headphones over his backwards-turned Mets cap stood at attention and saluted the policemen from behind the glass door of the foyer. The patrol car went on to the corner alongside the park where it stopped and shined a spotlight on a row of kids sitting on the stone wall. Their zombie faces lit up chalky and grey, and they shielded their eyes with arms uplifted like a chorus line. The cop driving the car rolled down his window. "You kids haven't seen any drug deals going down around here, have you?" His partner passed the spotlight back and forth. One of the kids finally spoke up. "We didn't do nothing." The cops grinned and drove on as the kids slipped away into the park.

When Nydia got home she took a paper bag from her pocket and a thin paperback book from the bag. *The Painter of Signs.* She looked it over skeptically. Across the street Nick felt the two joints in his pocket, unsure of where he could go to smoke them. For a moment each wondered why they had done this. Nothing more happened on the block that night that Rose could see. She started to doze after the patrol car passed and finally made her way to bed in the middle of the night when the yelp of a car alarm roused her from her chair. She managed a fitful sleep until awakened by her mother's toilet flush just before dawn. Her leg always felt better when she was lying down but it was harder to breathe.

You hate the potholed BQE. There was always some broken down shitbox on a shoulderless stretch blocking traffic, guaranteed. Then the

inevitable slow lane you're in at the Whitestone or the Triboro, doesn't matter, take your pick. The delay by Pelham Parkway, the drab monoliths of Co-op City signaling the end of the Bronx. It's Saturday morning, traffic already heavy, the girls belted in the back of the Volvo. A trip to Rye is not that far, really. And then you're finally off the wretched interstate onto the suburban streets of your childhood lined with forsythia and rhododendron in the yards of modest colonials. Their front porches are small and unobtrusive, their detached garages like an afterthought. But nothing that quaint for your mother. She remains in her "modern" house, a ranch built forty years ago around the time and setting of the Dick Van Dyke show, which your mother wouldn't watch because she didn't like 'Jewish humor'. You pull into the short drive in front of the attached single car garage. The girls perk up. "Grandma has a nice yard." Which indeed she has. She is watching from the picture window as the girls race toward the daffodils lining the house. She knocks on the pane. They stop and look up, wave, but can't make out the words she is mouthing. She raises her finger signaling them to wait and comes out the front door. "Don't touch the flowers." The tulips are beginning to unfold. The girls step back. "Hello, Mom." She is tall for a woman of her generation, stooped ever so slightly, wearing a blond wig of high quality. She waves you in.

The house is spotless, smelling of air freshener and cigarette smoke. You see the latest issues of *Time* and *Life* magazine arranged on the coffee table in precisely the same positions you've seen them in for the past thirty years. The flower arrangement, the collectibles, the photos on the mantle. "Have them take off their shoes." You look down at your feet and decide your shoes will stay on.

"So, it's final?" Your mother's voice is huskier than you remember.

"Yes."

"It must have cost you a pretty penny."

"Can we talk about something else?"

She has coffee cake on the kitchen table and juice boxes for the girls.

“I just heard from James.” Your brother in California, the attorney. “He has a new position.” She cuts sections from the cake ring and sets them on plates as the girls take their seats. “They made him a very nice offer.”

“Good for him.”

“Computers or something.”

“Intellectual property.”

“Yes, intellectual property. He must be very good at it.”

You don’t want to hear anything more about your brother.

“So girls, tell your grandmother what you’ve been doing.”

“Taking dance lessons,” says Jennifer.

“Is that what you mother wants you to do?” asks her grandmother.

“No, I like it,” says Jen.

“Dancers have such unhappy lives.”

And all the while you sense how pleased she is. Pleased at further proof of the fecklessness of her grandchildren’s mother and the flawed judgment of her willful son. So you think. Though she may have been thinking about her shopping list, or the garden club, or the cigarette she is dying to smoke as soon as the kids leave. *I wonder should I get up and fix myself a drink?*

Dorie paused at the edge of the bed as she pulled on the first leg of her panty hose. “I’m going to tell him.” Behind her Justin lay idle under the sheet with his hands clasped behind his head, watching the practiced way she unrolled the hose up her thighs as she resumed dressing, and the way she turned away from him in a quaint and pointless gesture of modesty. The drone of afternoon traffic was soothing and he took pleasure in the sight of her handsome shoulders and the smooth lines of her back. His thoughts were drifting to the anticipation of drinks and dinner and a quiet Friday evening when her silence told him she needed a response. “When?” he asked. Dorie was sensitive to his delay but could not blame him for being skeptical. How many times had she vowed this? Visualizing, rehearsing. Not so easy to just slip off the chains of a marriage. “Tomorrow,” she said, pulling on her sweater. Justin sat up

naked except for the sheet covering his lap. He sensed something different in her tone. “You talked to David?” His friend, the divorce lawyer. “Yes.” So she was finally getting her ducks in a row, he thought. Seeing the end now of the simple phase of this affair and wondering where it would lead. As if an affair with a friend’s wife could ever be simple. “And?” reaching for his robe as she pulled on her skirt. “He said I’ll get…” She stood and took a deep breath, reaching down for her shoes, “an equitable settlement.” An ‘equitable settlement’. She lingered on the phrase with a sense of relief. “Which is?” Justin prompted. “Half, more or less,” said Dorie, her attention returning to the bedroom, the traffic sounds, the hour, and the practical considerations at hand. “And primary custody. And child support.” She turned to him and smiled. “We’re going to be fine. Your little Anna Karenina will not be destitute.” Justin rose and tried to hush her with a finger to her lips, “Believe me, you’re no Anna,” he interjected, but she continued, “I can’t thank you enough for insisting on caution. I was so miserable I would have bolted months ago. Just packed a bag and moved right in with you. God knows what that would have done to the settlement.” “And the kids,” he added. Dorie went to the bathroom to fix her hair. Justin studied the light coming from the window. It had a new quality, clear and soft. The seasons had changed. “Why don’t I meet you for lunch tomorrow?” she said. “I don’t think I could stay home after I tell him.” Justin was on his way to the kitchen. “Of course,” he called back. “I think it’s going to rain.” Dorie watched her movements in the mirror. “April showers,” she said. She did not look different. It was her same nose, lips, breasts, arms. It was the same tilt of her head she always made when brushing her hair. She kept brushing, brushing, brushing until she finally stopped to straighten her sweater with a quick, decisive tug.

Ruben Guzman took the subway to the Bronx to make his aunt’s landlord a simple proposition: I will pay the rent. The headphones on passengers seated across the aisle reminded him of his days in a different steel tube traveling underwater rather than through bedrock, recalled a line of sonar techs patching *Purple Haze* and *I Want To Take You Higher* into their circuits while a light show

danced on the phosphorescent screens in front of them, hearing colors and shapes with their scrambled senses, pretending to listen for the Russians who, across the ocean rifts and canyons, or maybe in the trench nearby (who could be sure?) were as high on vodka as they were on psychedelics, and of the megatons of deterrence between them. Petty officer third class Guzman, now running subalterns to the steady clack of rails under Lexington Avenue. S*ome Russians may not be drunk, so it's not true that some Russians must be drunk. Though it can't be said some Russians can't be drunk or even that some Russians may be drunk. And if it's not true that some Americans are tripping, then all are not. Which is contrary to fact.* The train rattled on, swaying and slowing, speeding and swaying under the Upper East Side, under Spanish Harlem. He was neither unconcerned nor without hope that his proposal would forestall his aunt's eviction. He had to assume that some landlords were not unreasonable. That some people who cut you a break are landlords. But it is always possible, he continued as his logic reached back through his six years experience on submarines, that landlords were like officers. And in his experience officers were usually unreasonable, though he would admit there might be exceptions somewhere in the universe of officers beyond his experience, and again there might not. Like the guy across the street with his tassel loafers and prep school vowels. But the service had its benefits, like the GI bill. The insurance business probably did, too. He got off at Brook Avenue and walked over to Willis. The landlord's office was on the corner on the second floor over a mini-market. As he mounted the creaking stairs under its burned-out light bulb Ruben concluded he had a chance. The landlord may accept my promise to pay my aunt's back rent, because it's possible he is not usually unreasonable. The landlord probably doesn't evict tenants who will pay their overdue rent, because of the inconvenience of getting a new tenant. It's possible the landlord won't evict my aunt. It steadied his mood.

Rose and Junior bumped down Second Avenue on their way to Bay Ridge. They passed the new whitewashed hospital in its old factory building and

came alongside the immense symmetry of the Army terminal. Rose stared at the piers, the rail yards, the warehouses of that vast, empty monument. Warped railroad tracks sank below the buckled pavement. The shades of soldiers, longshoremen, and merchant mariners of a more industrious age hung over them.

"Can you believe Elvis shipped out of there?" said Junior.

"Elvis," said Rose, and thought of Aldo.

Rose was wedged sideways in the back seat so she could keep her bad leg straight across the length of it and her foot propped up to give some relief to her sore ankle. They were going to see an apartment in Junior's borrowed car.

"I don't know why I came," said Rose.

"Because it's a great deal," said Junior.

"It don't matter. We're not moving."

"I just want you to see it."

They passed under the rusted girders of the Parkway and into Bay Ridge. Rose looked westward toward a pier reaching into the bay, gazing past an anchored freighter to the outline of Bayonne on the Jersey side beyond. It was nice, she had to admit, as she glimpsed Staten Island where she had a cousin who owned a laundromat. They pulled into a parking space just around the corner from the pub on Third Avenue where Junior tended bar. "It's right there," said Junior. He held the door while Rose inched her way out of the car. She hobbled into the dark foyer of an art deco apartment building, as past its prime as any Norma Desmond, pausing to steady herself with each step on the worn marble floor. Junior rang a doorbell from a dented panel and someone buzzed them in. The elevator was tight for the two of them. A tired looking woman in an ill-fitting suit, her hair dyed jet black and her eyebrows stenciled, met them on the fourth floor and escorted them to a corner apartment.

"So what's the story here?" asked Rose. The apartment was empty.

"You and Ma could have one bedroom, I'll take the other," said Junior.

"No, I mean what's the story. Who's renting the place?" And she was more convinced than ever they would have to be crazy to leave their rent-

controlled apartment and the block no matter what Junior's motives were, no matter how bad the mail delivery got or how many Puerto Ricans and madmen lived in the building down the street.

"Honey, come here," called Dorie as she sat at her kitchen desk sorting through a stack of bills left unpaid by her husband while she was on her mental health break in France. Jennifer dutifully appeared in the doorway. "Run this over, will you?" Dorie, with pink reading glasses perched on the end of her nose, held up an envelope and turned smiling with maternal authority toward her eldest daughter. Jennifer came closer and examined it. "It's for someone across the street. Your father must have put it in the desk. God knows how it got here." Jennifer was dutiful, but unsure how to proceed. "Who?" she asked. "Oh, I don't know," said her mother. "Someone on the first floor. See? Wiggs. Just ring their doorbell and give it to whoever answers." "Okay," said Jen, unable to hide her reluctance. "Thanks, dear," said Dorie, ignoring it.

Jennifer took her jacket from a hook by the back door while her mother returned to her checkbook. She looked outside at the bright patch of sky arching over their shadowed backyard, thinking through her task, and saw a gust of wind bend the bare sumacs growing like weeds in the yard next door. "What if no one's home?" she asked, already anticipating failure. "Then just leave it," answered her mother. Jennifer nodded though her mother wasn't looking, and proceeded to the front door. The thought of meeting strangers always made her uneasy. Why should I bother to ring the doorbell, she wondered? Why don't I just leave it anyway? She hesitated in the front hallway undecided but afraid to interrupt her mother again. "What's the problem? Just do it," said Dorie, shooing Jennifer away with a wave of her hand. Jennifer scooted out the door and paused on the stoop to reexamine the address on the letter and the number on the building across the street, gaining some comfort from the sunlight warming her face. She could hear the sounds of traffic on the avenues but the block was quiet. She checked for cars coming from the left, then the right, though the street was one-way—you never know with people

around here, her mother warned constantly—and skipped through the gap of parked cars, up the stoop of the building directly opposite to the line of buzzers in the vestibule. A handwritten label read Wiggs/DeMauro in fading red ink, indicating the apartment number addressed on the envelope. Jennifer, resolute now, pushed the button above it and was startled by the harsh ring that sounded simultaneously from the first floor apartment to her left. She began counting to herself though she had no idea how long she would count if no one came. It didn't matter. A door opened and she heard brisk footsteps in the hall. A short man with thin graying hair and tattoos coating his arms appeared and stared down at her. "Yeah?" he said, impatient. "My mother sent me over to deliver this," said Jennifer as she handed him the envelope. Junior looked at her suspiciously. "Where'd you get it?" he snapped, like a detective grilling a suspect. Jennifer wanted to flee but instead blurted out, "I don't know. My mom found it. I think my dad had it." Junior snorted and threw the door shut as abruptly as he'd opened it. Jennifer heard his footsteps recede and another door bang closed. So that was it. She returned home and reported to her mother. Without looking up from her checkbook, Dorie complimented her daughter on a job well done.

"What was that?" asked Rose, disturbed by the door slamming. She had just returned to her post at the window, soda-in-hand after snacking on a corned beef sandwich in the kitchen, to see one of the Roads girls skip across the street and Junior in the living room holding an envelope.

"Some kid," said Junior. "She gave me this." He held out the letter to show Rose while keeping it firmly in his grasp. "From Social Security," he added. "Imagine that."

"Must be Ma's check," Rose confirmed, inspecting the familiar envelope and its return address. Junior pulled it back. "Go ahead. Open it." Junior ripped out its contents, their mother's Social Security check. "Ma," called Rose to Grace in the other room. "Ma, it's your check." She motioned Junior to bring it to their mother. "See? Nobody stole it."

"Where was it?" yelled Grace over the rising volume of a commercial.

"The Roads. They had it," Rose answered.

"From the building?"

"No Ma, from across the street."

"So when did they get it?"

"Ma," said Junior. "If I cash it today can you loan me a hundred?" Her mother endorsed the check over Rose's half-hearted objections and Junior rushed to the bank, arriving just before the noon closing time to find the check had been cancelled. After he stormed back to his mother's apartment with the news he took Rose's last two pain killers before she could stop him, and was halfway through a bottle of Amoretto left over from Christmas when he saw a tall man leave the brownstone across the street. "Who's that?" he asked.

"Mr. Roads," said Rose.

"Mister?" sneered Junior.

"So what you got against him?" asked Rose. "He's a nice man."

"You said he's a drunk," shouted Grace.

"So why'd he keep Ma's check?" said Junior.

"I don't know," said Rose. "He didn't screw up the mail."

"Rose, didn't you bring him his mail?" shouted Grace from the bedroom. "You give him his mail and he keeps my check?"

"You brought him his mail?" said Junior. He looked out the window at Roads on the other side of the street in his cords and cable sweater, his tassel loafers and sockless feet, and Junior's lip started to twitch.

"Don't…," Rose began, but Junior was already out the door. She sank down in her chair with her glass of soda, resigned to watch the altercation on the other side of the street unfold as it would. The push, the blow, Junior running toward the park, and the small crowd around Mr. Roads. "Ma, Junior did it this time. He just decked the guy across the street."

"So what," said Grace.

"That's jail time, Ma."

"Only if they catch him."

"Ruben's over there. I think he saw it."

“Well, talk to him. Tell him to keep his mouth shut.”

Sam was staying for dinner, take-out yet to be determined. The women were on their second bottle of white Bordeaux chatting away while you hung on the edge of the conversation like a poor relation, Dorie doing her best to shut you out every time Sam tried so diplomatically to bring you in. And then you pour yourself another drink and find you’re out of seltzer. No seltzer and it was going to be a long evening, so you ask if the ladies would like anything from the corner store and excuse yourself. You note without alarm that you’re a bit unsteady going down the front steps. On the sidewalk you stride with deliberate control and precision. At the bodega you get two bottles of seltzer and a bottle of tonic just for good measure, appalled by the price they charge for “convenience” as the law of supply and demand conveniently slips your mind. *I look at the floor, and I see it needs sweeping.* The woman in front of you pays with food stamps so slowly you think of dropping your bottles on the counter and walking out. A fitting gesture, but then you’d have no seltzer. As you watch her fumble with her bag, finger her wallet, count her change, finger her wallet again, fumble with her bag, you hold your tongue and dwell on the amount of federal, state, and city income tax you have recently paid, and spend a moment estimating the percentage of a percentage of it that just went for the transaction in front of you. *Ah-ah Mr Wilson. Ah-ah Mr Heath.* I paid briskly to show the guy behind the counter how it should be done, but on the way home let it go as I turned my thoughts to Sam and regained my stride. Just life in the neighborhood, after all. As I neared my stoop I began to wonder what life would have been like had I married her. Not that it was ever an option. And try as I might the image of that outcome remained blank. It was a pointless exercise anyway, given the fact that the most important thing in my life was saving my marriage. Resuscitating it, shocking it back to life. At any cost. Wondering about a gift perhaps, how Dorie might appreciate a double-string pearl necklace—not an apology, simply a token of my devotion—when this scuzzy little man runs across the street and blocks my path. “Excuse me,” I say, careful not to make

eye contact as I try to step discretely around him. “You remember this?” he says, waving a piece of paper in my face. “What?” I say, stepping back. “This is my mother’s check,” he screams, spraying me with spittle. “Grace Wiggs. Across the street. The old lady. How long did you have it?” “I’m sorry,” I say, “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” enunciating carefully so my words don’t slur. “The fuck you don’t,” he says, and pushes me. Pushes me on the chest with his grubby little hands. This little punk. That was too much. Though I admit I might have been a bit reactive. “You stupid asshole,” I might have said, “I don’t give a shit about your check.” Or something to that effect. What happened next I don’t remember all that well. Perhaps I dropped the seltzer and pushed him back. Maybe I just tried to walk past him. What I do recall is lying on the sidewalk hearing shouts and the footsteps of people running. Blood is dripping from the hole in my lip, punctured by a tooth where he sucker punched me. My ribs hurt too. Possibly from my fall, but I suspect he kicked me before he ran off. It was the guy across the street, Ruben with the curly hair who said he rides the same train, who got to me first. I became aware of him asking me questions and checking my head as I lay staring at the sky and the parapets of the roofs overhead. He helped me to my feet just as Dorie and Sam came racing down the steps. “I’m all right,” I assured them, though of course I was not. “My god, what happened?” said Dorie. Deshpande’s kid appeared, too. He said somebody hit me and ran off. “A mugger? In broad daylight?” Dorie was horrified. I felt for my wallet. It was still in my pocket. There was broken glass on the sidewalk from the seltzer bottles. “I’m calling the police,” said Dorie. Ruben and Deshpande’s kid helped me to my stoop where I had to sit for a minute. “You need to go to the hospital,” said Sam. “You’re bleeding.” And so I did, while she held a tissue to my lip.

After her first child was born, John’s mother wanted a girl and made no bones about it. As she sat at the kitchen table with her granddaughters she cut four slices from the ring of coffee cake and passed them around on paper plates. Halfway through her second pregnancy she had girl colors picked out for

the baby's room, and tiny dresses, hats, ribbons, and dolls. But it's a boy. She already had one, what was the point? Mrs. Roads looked at Jennifer and Allison across the table sucking at their juice boxes and wondered why he, that son, of all people, got girls. Her name was picked out: Meredith. When it was a boy she still wanted to name him Meredith but his father wouldn't have it so they made it his middle name. John M. Roads. Didn't stop him, though. Worse than his brother, she thought. Much worse. She could have put up with another one like James. But John, always making a mess. "Be careful with that juice. Wash your hands when you're done." The mortifying thought of a child of hers in Sunday school with mud on his pants and his shoes untied. She coughed a long hoarse cough and John said, "Have you quit yet?" She had the urge to light up then and there but looked at the girls and said, "I cut down," coughing again. "You need to quit, Mom. You'll be on oxygen soon if you don't." And she without a daughter who, unlike sons, would most assuredly be there for her if she were on it. A boy who wouldn't listen when she hinted that Theodora was not right for him. So she had to tell him loud and clear to try to get it through his thick head, because she knew that Theodora was a self-centered girl, a vain and manipulative young woman, who did not really care for her son or his family. That Theodora only liked her son's prospects and his mother was not duped by the young woman's All-American cheerleader act. Dorie could have been a harpy from the seventh ring of hell and her son would still have mooned over her as long as she were slim and fit, clueless boy that he was. And his naïve father probably would have, too. I keep the house as tastefully appointed as any spread in *Town and Country,* make sure there's a nice dinner on the table for him every night, for what? So my husband can leave me with two boys? "If you smoke around oxygen you can blow yourself up," said Allison. "Where did you hear that?" asked her grandmother. "On TV," said Allison. "Now wouldn't *that* be nice," said Mrs. Roads, turning toward her son. "Girls," I said, "why don't you go play outside for a while. Grandma and I have some things to talk about."

Theodora is at your wake. She inspects you resting in your casket, noting your smooth-shaven face and the lifelike hint of color in your cheeks. She stands poised and straight in the classic lines of her well-tailored suit wearing a hat with a flourish like the kind Black matrons wear to church, but no sunglasses —that would be too theatrical, too Jackie O—thinking fondly of your brownstone and what it would be worth today as she chats sympathetically with your widow, your second wife who, by the way, is not Sam. They laugh discreetly behind their hands as they wonder what you must be thinking as you hover over the scene. "Where are my headphones?" or "I forgot to set the alarm." or maybe "I hope you two can't stand each other." Actually it was, "*You know my name, look up the number.*" Can't blame them for trying, though. Your three-piece suit looks elegant if a bit dated and somehow the folks at the funeral home managed to give your corpse the look of the body you had thirty years ago, at least in clothes. Give them credit for that. Jennifer and Allison are there with their husbands, husbands you approve of. Good for them. There's even a grandchild or two. And they are still young children because you didn't live that long—like your father but for different reasons—which is no surprise to anyone. At least that's the way you pictured it. On the sofa in your living room, with your lip stitched and the head injury discharge instructions on the floor next to you. So why, in the end, did you decide to be cremated? Because then I wouldn't hover. I wouldn't have to know who's there and who's not, or what they said or couldn't say. I'd just be gone. And there really was a second wife, but no widow.

So there would be no casket, just a simple marble urn. No wake, just a memorial service. Or as they say nowadays, a 'celebration of life'. My life, ha! Though whether any life is actually worth celebrating is a very dicey question. And if it's truly a celebration of life shouldn't we include everything, our moral lapses, poor choices, lousy jokes, prejudices, bad posture, vanity, arrogance, as equal parts of the whole and give our lives their full due? Forget that *nil nisi bonum* bullshit. Seriously. Why the whitewash? Why the selective memory, the marketeer's embellishment? Smarter, funnier, more generous, more accomplished, more loving, the moment we kick the bucket. Not for our sakes,

or course. We couldn't care less. Yes, I was a failure. A complete failure. So what? And the drinking? Too facile an explanation. (You think you know what alcoholism is? Really?) Then perhaps a celebration of struggle. Futile struggle, mostly. A celebration of wasted energy. I mean it. A *celebration* of waste. Why not?

Later, reflecting on your marriage, Dorie would call you an architect of aversion. True or not, the alliteration alone seemed to give the charge some credence. It was your fault the marriage ran off the rails because you would not address the important things, i.e. the things about you that bothered her, the things she would not point out to you because you should have been able to recognize them on your own if you'd cared enough. So I wasn't a mind reader—find one if you can—but I have another name for it with my own alliteration: master of mitigation. Constant damage control while she looked for new ways to stir things up. Keeping the lid on things. Or maybe they're both just mindless habits from years in the insurance business. Or maybe I got in the insurance business because those were my proclivities. Eh, Mom? Eh, Dad?

Ruben walked home from the subway after his failed mission to the Bronx. Perhaps some landlords are not unreasonable he concluded, but not this one. Not irrational either, if you figure he found another tenant and jacked up the rent. Jew *pendejo*, he muttered. Now he had no choice but to move Titi Ada into his apartment this weekend, at least for the short term, and then try to hand her over to her sister in Caguas or her daughter in Chicago. As he entered the block thinking of things he should do with his income tax return and wondering where to put his aunt's furniture, strolling past window boxes with faded daffodils and a dog barking from a basement apartment, he fell in step with a tall man carrying a plastic grocery bag going the same direction on the other side of the street. Ruben, observing him closely, could tell the guy was tipsy by the purposeful look on his face as he walked a bit too carefully from the corner store. Who looks purposeful walking home from a bodega? And it was still light out. The guy must have gotten an early start on his drinking. Roads did lurch slightly—it

was Roads, the guy from the brownstone across the street who brought his check over—but that was not the tip-off. He looked like the naval officers who staggered out of their club pretending to hold their liquor. And then Ruben was almost knocked down the steps of his building as Junior raced out the front door in his undershirt shouting profanity, his gait agitated and swift, trying to slick back the strands of hair blowing in his face, crossing the street without stopping to look for traffic to get right in the guy's face. Or as close as he could get with Roads being a head taller. Roads was oblivious to Junior's approach and almost bumped into him before he could stop. Ruben saw them exchange words, then Junior push Roads backward. Roads dropped his bag and looked like he was about to push Junior in return, but Junior punched him first. The guy didn't go right down. He swayed for a moment like a branch in a puff of wind, bent forward and fell to his knees. That's when Ruben got there. By that time Junior was halfway down the block. Ruben held Roads by the shoulders and carefully laid him supine on the sidewalk. Roads' eyes were glazed and he smelled of booze but seemed awake and said something about his wife and divorce and then asked where the seltzer was.

"The bottles broke," said Ruben.

"Oh," said Roads. He was lying on his back, looking up at the sky and Ruben's bearded face turned 180 degrees from his own, feeling rather comfortable and detached. After a pause Roads said, "You're a curious looking man."

"Have you seen yourself lately?" said Ruben.

"Where are you from?" asked Roads.

"Across the street," said Ruben.

"That's not what I mean."

Nick Deshpande appeared, and they were helping Roads to his feet when Dorie and Sam arrived.

"What happened to you?" said Dorie in a tone that meant whatever it was, it must be my fault. Or so it seemed to me.

"Some guy jumped him," said Nick.

“I think he’s okay,” said Ruben. “Let’s get him up.”

“Quite okay,” I said as they helped me to my feet, but I could tell from the look on Sam’s face that I was not, which was confirmed when I noticed the blood clots on my shirt and the blood smear in my hand when I felt my lip. I wasn’t even aware of the pain until I was aware of the injury. Sam pressed a tissue on me and I sat down on the steps of my brownstone.

“I think he needs stitches,” said Ruben.

Then I heard Dorie say, “The house goes on the market tomorrow.” And I thought, what house?

“I think we should hold off for now,” I said, when I finally realized what Dorie was referring to. It was dark with the drape over my face.

“Don’t talk,” said the doctor. “I’ll let you know when I’m done.”

I couldn’t feel much. The only hint that someone was working on me was the clicking sound of small metal instruments.

“Dorie’s not here,” said Sam. “She said she’d wait outside till they’re through.”

I started to say something but the doctor shushed me.

“She said she doesn’t do well with this kind of thing,” Sam added.

So I lay there under the drape with my eyes closed. I could feel a faint pulling on my lip but that was about it. After the nurse cleaned me up, Sam gave it a close inspection. “Not bad,” she concluded.

“You’ll probably have a small scar,” said the doctor.

“More than one,” I said. He looked at me puzzled. “Emotional scars, I mean,” putting my hands over my heart. He smiled and nodded. “The stitches should come out in five days. From your lip,” he specified, just to be clear. I sat up with an impulse to kiss Sam but felt dizzy and fell back on the stretcher. I was still pretty loaded. So I said to her, “Kiss me and see if the stitches hold.” “Not for five days,” said the nurse, with that special lack of empathy ER staff reserve for drunks. Sam kissed me on the forehead. “They’re fine,” she said as Dorie came around the curtain.

"I think we should hold off for now," I said, regaining my train of thought.

As you hover above a marble urn, the dustbin that holds your residue, you are first puzzled, since you thought you wouldn't be hovering after your cremation, then wonder not about yourself or the people gathered at the service, nor the fact that you are, in fact, dead, but about your father and what he might have thought when he undoubtedly hovered at his more traditional funeral. Quite logically you imagine him viewing his casket in the crosshairs of a Norden bombsight from his B-17. You knew he must have peered through a bombsight, but until this moment you did not know it was a Norden. Thinking that he was amazed first to have lived through those missions and then even more to have returned to live what used to be called the Good Life. The Good Life as he was expected to live it. Did he know you thought this man who was home punctually every evening, who kept his underwear folded neat as origami, whose most cherished possession was a new Buick, who would not miss a Sunday service at the Methodist church or an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, was somehow very cool? At least you thought so after his death. Did he think about how he hovered in that former life, in the war, peering through his bombsight? And he must have been precise, as precise as the instruments would allow, and sorely distressed that despite his skill bombs went awry all the time. (Right, dad. And if by analogy my marriage was a bombing run?) It wasn't until I reached midlife that I realized why he never talked about it. Why he married his girlfriend on a three-day leave just before he shipped out—romantic in a desperate, needy kind of way—with two nights of Methodist sex in the bargain, hence my brother. Remembering up there above my urn that he never expected to return from that war and realizing for the first time that my mother didn't expect him to, either. My father, the CPA. And as he looked through the eyepiece taking aim at the adolescent standing in front of his casket, let go of his accountant's tightly held regret about many things. We both liked that Buick. I liked to help him wash it in the driveway, which was the only time he'd talk about growing up in his hometown upstate. I think you secretly approved when I defied Mom because you never would. Why

should you? You'd already had several lifetimes' worth of risk. You'd go through the motions but weren't angry when you disciplined me for her sake. My brother never gave you that opportunity. Not that side of you anyway, because James had little problem with Mom's approval and more power to him. I stopped trying, you know. Birth order or something. So fuck that. I think my dad liked me. His Buick had a V-8 with bucket seats and a Dynaflow transmission, he was fifty-seven when he died and never smoked a day in his life. How different would things have been if he'd lived? Don't kid yourself. How can things be different? Loop back all you want. As the poet says: the free believe in destiny, not fate. I know where that puts me. Hovering over my cremains thinking about the moment it was over, when I poured Dorie another cup of coffee, when time split and fell toward each end of my non-existence. Or not.

John Roads drove through the Battery Tunnel, up the West Side Highway, over the top span of the George Washington Bridge to the Palisades Parkway traveling north toward Tenafly to visit his children. A Sunday morning clear as his resolve. Traffic was light and he made good time, carrying gifts for his daughters and a check for Dorie. When he pulled in the driveway of Dorie's new house he saw a man blowing leaves in the side yard who seemed quite familiar despite his trappings of safety glasses and ear protection. John looked closer at the man, who either hadn't noticed his arrival or was ignoring him, as he walked to the front door. When John rang the doorbell the man turned and John recognized Justin, his old fraternity buddy, just as Dorie appeared. From the welter of implications this triggered, his mind filtered but one conscious thought, "Now isn't this a nice domestic scene?" not realizing that he had actually spoken the words, not "Good morning," or "How are you?", not meaning to be sarcastic which was how he always sounded to Dorie these days. He gazed incredulous at Justin working with a leaf blower strapped to his back, sweeping the patio like any weekend homeowner while Dorie stood in the open doorway. She held up a hand to stop him as John stepped forward absently. "Don't come in. I'll get the girls." She shut the door tight and John drew back to look at the house

whose down payment, to his way of thinking, had been paid by him. “Don’t come in.” He pondered that. The full meaning of the domestic scene was not quite clear. He walked to the side yard where Justin was working and tapped him on the arm. Justin turned and stepped back cautiously, shut off the blower and lowered his earmuffs. “Justin? What are you doing here?” said Roads. “Hi, John.” Justin smiled his polite social smile, having anticipated this moment for months. “Just helping Dorie with the new house.” Roads started nodding his head, and soon Justin was nodding along with him for a moment as each gauged the other’s thoughts. “Since when does my wife need your help?” said Roads. Justin shrugged as if offering an apology. “She’s not your wife anymore,” he said. Justin held his ground as John took a step toward him. “Yes, actually, she is, ” said John. “Not really, John,” said Justin. “We’re seeing each other.”

“I can see that.”

“I should have told you before.”

“That would have been the stand-up thing to do, bro.”

“You have two great daughters, by the way.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Look, I don’t blame you for being mad.”

“I said shut the fuck up.”

“Okay.” Justin repositioned his earmuffs and reached for the starter pulley. He didn’t quite make it. John grabbed his arm with one hand and ripped off the muffs with the other.

“Sure is tough being single at our age,” shouted John.

Justin straightened up and removed John’s hand. “John, I’m sorry. Let’s be grown-ups about this.”

“Stay away from my fucking kids.”

As if on cue the girls came running out the front door with their backpacks, arms held out in greeting, calling “Daddy” and “Hi, Dad.” John relaxed his fists as he saw his daughters bounding toward him. He hugged them and held them up and twirled them around as Justin left the leaf blower on the lawn and walked to the house.

“Bye, Justin,” they called. Justin smiled and waved back.

As soon as they were in the car, out of the neighborhood and onto the highway, John said, “So your mom has a boyfriend.”

“I guess,” said Allison.

“How long has that been going on?”

“Mom told us not to talk to you about it,” said Jennifer, shooting a look at Allison next to her in the back seat.

“I have a right to know anything that affects my children.”

“It’s not affecting us,” said Jen.

“A strange man in the house is not affecting you?”

“Justin’s nice,” said Allison.

“What about you, Jen. Do you think he’s nice?”

“Yeah… I guess,” said Jennifer. She said it with a slight hesitation, hoping this was the right way to answer.

“What do you mean, you guess?” pressed her father.

“I mean he doesn’t bother us or anything.”

“And does your mother think he’s nice?”

“She told us not to talk about it,” said Allison.

John Roads did not get his reply but his question had been answered. They were almost to the Bronx and he had plenty to think about. “*Tell me why you cried*,” he sang softly. “*And why you lied to me*,” glancing at his daughters’ expressions in the rearview mirror to see if they registered the lyrics. It was the least he could do.

They had a good outing and he was grateful for that. The kids behaved. They liked the zoo and there were moments when he did too, enough to forget momentarily what he had just witnessed. Back in Tenafly he dropped them off in Dorie’s driveway without getting out of the car. When he saw the girls were safely in the house he left, noting the other car in the driveway must be Justin’s. His attorney was right. She had another vine to swing to. But John Roads would have played the willing wittol had she stayed in Brooklyn. I should have been given the chance, he thought, I deserved that much. And on the drive home

through evening traffic heavy now and sluggish, he tried to pinpoint the spot where things began to unravel rather than when they became irreversible (as if there are such points), because he still denied that possibility even as he slipped into the routines of divorced fatherhood. He remembered getting home that evening thinking murderous thoughts, and fell violently asleep. He still had Dorie's check in his pocket.

The first thing that struck Roopa Deshpande when she opened her front door after the hail storm was the look in the eyes of the young man confronting her. Distant, other worldly, yet purposeful. There was something familiar about it, too. Outside the thunder had passed, the downpour continued but without its former strength. Then she noticed he was wet and naked, totally unselfconscious but too chubby to be an ascetic despite his demeanor. "Can I come in?" He grinned at her and flapped his arms. "No, go away," said Roopa. "I'm calling the police." Eddie managed to get his leg in the door before she had a chance to shut it. "I'm freezing out here." Roopa pushed the door firmly against his fleshy thigh but Eddie didn't flinch. "Please. Let me in." She realized he wasn't going to budge. As she leaned her ample bulk against the door a possibility struck her, from where she had no idea, that made her hesitate and consider the situation more closely. "What if…," she left the thought unfinished. Cautiously, she lessened her resistance and allowed him to enter the hallway. Eddie shook and shivered like a wet dog, tossing rainwater about the room and dripping a puddle on the floor. "The god sent me," he announced. Roopa nodded as if she knew exactly what that meant, and looked at him anxiously. "Wait here." She went to the bathroom and returned with a towel. "Dry yourself," she said. Eddie rubbed himself down and fastened the towel around his waist. "He talks to me," Eddie continued. Roopa nodded. "Would you like some tea?" she asked. Eddie looked at her blankly. No one had ever asked him if he would like some tea. "Come. I have biscuits." She led him to the kitchen and sat him down while she put the kettle on the stove. When Nick walked in from class he saw his mother at the kitchen table sitting opposite a young man with thick

eyebrows and a bushy mustache, wrapped in a large bath sheet like a pudgy sadhu, munching biscuits and sipping tea. “Nick, this man is Eddie,” announced his mother. “He came for refuge to our home.” Eddie grunted in agreement. “Refuge from what?” said Nick. “From the hail storm. I think he is a…,” she began but couldn’t finish her sentence. “Where are you from?” asked Nick since Eddie had no visible clues to his identity, though Nick really wanted to ask what happened to Eddie’s clothes. “Over there.” Eddie pointed to the street. “In the building.” Roopa’s eyes widened but she said nothing. “The apartment building down the block?” Nick clarified. “I gotta go,” said Eddie. “Thor is angry.” Nick looked with some concern at his mother and escorted Eddie to the front door. When they were on the stoop and out of Roopa’s earshot, Nick asked. “Do you know a girl named Nydia?” “Sure,” said Eddie. “She’s my cousin.” The rain had stopped. Eddie handed Nick the towel, trotted across the street and disappeared into the building.

Rose perched in her wheelchair by the window, surveyed the street and tried to imagine a new life in Bay Ridge. She couldn’t. Bensonhurst maybe, where she lived with her husband until his untimely death, but not Bay Ridge. And then thinking no, not even Bensonhurst, when a car slowed to a halt right in front of her. She watched closely as Ruben and an older woman emerged. The woman, a shade darker than Ruben, wore white socks, white running shoes, and a purple sweater over a blue dress. Her sinewy legs supported a lax middle-aged belly. Ruben paid the driver and took two bags from the trunk. Rose heard the front door open, then footsteps on the stairs. It looked like someone was moving in. She didn’t know how she felt about that.

“Titi, you take the bed,” said Ruben as he and his aunt entered his apartment. “I’ll be fine on the couch.” He had installed a curtain to separate the sleeping area from the living room.

“This is too much trouble,” said his aunt. “I can sleep on the couch.” Titi Ada, his mother’s older sister, had reared him from the time he was a toddler.

They both knew Ruben would be sleeping on the couch. Ruben swung her bags onto the bed.

"You can use those drawers." He pointed to a dresser near the airshaft.

Ada opened a suitcase, took out a small bottle of Florida Water and sprinkled it on top of the dresser. Then she unpacked a white cloth and spread it over the wet surface. After standing silently in front of it for another moment, she returned to the suitcase and resumed unpacking a series of small objects—beads, statuettes, photographs, candles, plastic flowers, drinking glasses, sea shells, a cigar—and soon had an altar arranged on top of the dresser.

"Don't light that cigar," said Ruben.

"I know," said Ada. "Your asthma." She took a small bottle from her purse and poured water into the drinking glasses. "There. Now let me bless your apartment." She lit a candle and sighed, thinking of her ancestors in Humacao and how she hated that town. Ruben looked out the front window to the street below. "This place is pretty quiet," he said. There was one person on the sidewalk. The leaves of a small linden tree were beginning to unfurl. "Don't pay any attention to the old lady downstairs. She's not all there. But her daughter is nice."

"*La gorda*."

"Yeah."

"I will pray for her, too."

Ada had taken Ruben with her when she left Humacao for the Bronx, when she had no children of her own and thought she was barren. That was thirty years ago, while Ruben's mother was struggling with three more kids in San Juan. His mother moved to the Bronx when Ruben was twelve and took him back. She was like a distant relation and his siblings more like second cousins. He hardly saw her anyway. She was working two jobs and he was running in the streets with his friends. He stayed with her until he graduated from high school and joined the Navy. After he left he didn't think about her much until her suicide. He got the news at sea, or rather under it. For a month he saw her in dreams as a young woman, and then she said good-bye and that was it. By

then, Ada had borne four children of her own. The first died of meningitis. Her daughter, the second, married and moved to Chicago. One son worked in Orlando and the other was in Rikers. Her husband of fifteen years walked out when she was pregnant with their last child, moved to Arecibo and started a new family. Ada was stubborn. She wouldn't leave the Bronx. But now she was in Brooklyn. It was like a foreign country.

"Her brother's bad news. Junior. He just punched out some guy across the street. And he has trouble with people in the building. Stay away from him. But I don't think he'll be coming around much." Ruben scanned the length of the block. No sign of Junior or any neighbors. "There's some weird shit going on here since the mail screwed up." Ada lit another candle.

"Someone should pray for him."

"He needs more than that."

Ada sat on the bed and smoothed the covers on either side. "This is a nice mattress." Ruben smiled. He knew it wasn't but he could get a new one with his tax refund. "I need to lie down. I'll unpack later, " she said, undoing her shoe laces and letting her sneakers drop to the floor. Her feet hurt. She swung them onto the bed and lay back next to her suitcases with her eyes closed, trying to decide which saint would be best to solicit for a new apartment. Ruben pulled the curtain. "Get some rest, Titi. I'll be here." That night Ruben dreamt of his mother for the first time in years, and now she was old. He thought she was starting to tell him about his father, but he woke up and realized she was talking about her father. Who was still alive. Where, Ruben had no idea.

"Ma," said Rose. "I think someone just moved in with Ruben."

"Man or woman?" Grace called back.

"Woman. It looks like his mother."

"Sure it's not his girlfriend?"

"Sure I'm sure. I know what his girlfriend looks like."

"I didn't know Ruben had a mother. What did he say about Junior?"

"Don't ask, don't tell."

"What's that mean?"

“It means I think he’ll keep his mouth shut.”

Rose resumed her vigil at the window. There were strange happenings at the dentist’s house and new people moving in two doors down. Mr. Roads was getting divorced. Angie Foley was pregnant again. She noted it all with concern, with interest, with satisfaction. I can’t leave here, she thought. What on earth is Junior thinking? The sun was out. People were strolling from the avenue to the park, and at the end of the street some kids started a stickball game.

Ruben realized there was no way to avoid it. His aunt kept asking about his girlfriend and his girlfriend kept asking about his aunt, so the easiest way to satisfy them both was to invite Lynne over for dinner, giving Titi Ada ample warning that Lynne was a strict vegetarian by explaining she didn’t eat meat. “Okay, I’ll make fish,” said Ada, which required some further explanation on Ruben’s part. Reluctantly Ada made her arroz con gandules without pork or salchichon. She prepared her sofrito the day before, roasting red peppers and extracting the seeds, as exacting with her cilantro, aji dulces, and adobo as any pharmacist. She made fried chicken as well. Lynne was happy to show her appreciation by stuffing herself with tostones and arepas as well as the pigeon peas and rice, leaving the crispy chicken to Ruben and Ada but enjoying the aroma of garlic that filled the room. Lynne was intrigued by the arepas, and wondered what made such a simple food taste so good. “Boricua tender loving care,” said Ruben, without mentioning the lard. Over desert Lynne even tried her halting Spanish though Ada made a point of replying in her best English, asking Lynne’s advice on suing landlords. Later that evening Rose, with her usual vigilance, called Grace to the window when she heard Ruben and Lynne coming down the stairs, and pointed them out when they appeared on the sidewalk in front of the window.

“See Ma, that’s his girlfriend. I think she’s Jewish,” said Rose. She examined closely the young woman’s fair complexion, high cheekbones, angular face and eyes that looked almost Asian, and realized she wasn’t so sure.

“I told you Ruben’s Jewish,” said Grace.

“She looks nice,” said Ada the next day, also referring to Lynne. Ruben assumed she meant ‘for a blanquita’. They were going out the front vestibule on their way to the Bronx to look for apartments.

“What else?” asked Ruben, knowing there was more.

“Nothing. She’s very nice,” said Ada. They passed Rose leaning on the stoop rail catching her breath after returning from the corner store. Ruben introduced his aunt. “I knew you were related,” said Rose panting, then added, “Ruben’s such a good neighbor.” When they were our of earshot Ada said, “My goodness, Ruben. That woman is humongous.” Ruben was forced to agree, but realized he had stopped noticing. They strolled to the avenue where his aunt continued her former thread. “But the way she walks,” she said, referring to Lynne, “not like a Puerto Rican girl. Not sexy, you know,” adding quickly, “but I’m sure she’s very intelligent.” And can’t cook, Ruben assumed she was thinking, at least anything that's worth eating. Although Ada wasn’t thinking that at all. And if she had been, Lynne would have been the first to agree. She was in her second year of law school and cooking was not on her to-do list. Ada was thinking that Ruben should start a family.

Junior hurried down the block toward the park. When he glanced over his shoulder and saw people gathering over Roads lying flat on the sidewalk he began to run. A familiar throb in the knuckle of his right ring finger told him he had failed to use proper form with his punch once again and broken a bone in his hand. Tough shit, he thought. Once around the corner and out of sight of the growing knot of people attending to Roads, he slowed to a jog and crossed the avenue to enter the park, stopped behind a tree and lit a cigarette. Now what? he wondered. He had to think this through carefully. Disappear and he’d violate parole, another arrest and he’d be back upstate. Even if he wanted to disappear, where would he go and with what money? So the choice was easy—stay in Brooklyn like nothing happened, and stay off the block. When he emerged on the other side of the park he found a bar with a pay phone and called Rose.

“Did the cops come?” he asked.

“Yeah,” said Rose.

“What happened?”

“They made a report.”

“Do they know it was me?”

“I don’t think so. I think Ruben was the only one saw you.”

“Who?”

“The guy upstairs. I talked to him. Don’t worry. He won’t say nothing.”

“Okay.”

“Just don’t come around here. You shouldn’t done it, Junior. That was real stupid.”

“So what. When Ma gets the new check send me a hundred. I think I broke my hand.” He looked down and saw it was already swollen.

“Just stay off the block, okay?”

As he hung up the phone Junior looked toward the street just as a young woman turned her face from the window and hurried away. She looked familiar. He had an impulse to follow her but, exhausted and with his swollen hand pulsing like a drum, went to the bar and ordered a beer instead.

The girls were relieved you were home, and curious. “How many stitches did you get, Dad?” asked Jennifer. “Can we see them?” asked Allison. “Sure,” I said, “let’s check it out.” You all trooped to the bathroom where you set your drink on top of the toilet tank and stood facing the mirror over the sink. When you pulled off the bandage it was tinged with a tiny spot of blood that made Jennifer wince. “Cool,” said Allison. “They look like whiskers.” I mugged before my reflection. “Maybe I should grow a mustache.” Then reframing my future scar as a tasteful accessory, changed my mind. You turned to see Dorie and Sam standing outside the door. Dorie did not look pleased. “Girls, I don’t want you going outside by yourselves anymore,” she said, wineglass in hand. “It’s not safe. The sooner we get out of this place the better.” I stared at the mirror. Her directive struck a chord. Without looking away I reached for my drink and took a long sip, humming a tune that popped out of my addled brain, vocalizing a bit

timidly at first until I found the key, then singing in a slow, steady crescendo up to the chorus where I belted it out full voice into the hairbrush I grabbed as a microphone:

We gotta get out of this place.
If it's the last thing we ever do.
We gotta get out of this place.

Then with a theatrical pause pointing first at Dorie, then Allison and Jen, I continued hoarsely:

'Cause girl, there's a better life
For me and you.

Dorie turned away in disgust, but Sam gave me a wink as she followed her to the kitchen. I continued, softly now, crouching hairbrush-in-hand to sing directly to the girls.

Now my girl you're so young and pretty
And one thing I know is true
You'll be dead before your time is due, I know…

I gave Allison a toothbrush and Jen a bar of soap. Sorry props, but they were the best I could do for mics on the spur of the moment. We all danced out of the bathroom in time. Bopping along, brush in one hand and scotch in the other, I picked up where I left off with lyrics I had no idea I remembered, the words having been stored in some back drawer of my adolescence waiting for this moment to tumble out.

Watch my daddy in bed a-dyin'
Watched his hair been turnin' grey
He's been workin' and slavin' his life away,
Oh yes I know (can you hear me, Dorie?)
He's been wooooorkin' hard
I've been workin' too, baby
Woooorkin' hard…

By this time the three of us were parading around the kitchen table where the women had just uncorked another bottle of Bordeaux. Jen and Allie joined

me on the chorus. Sam, without the slightest hesitation, joined in lustily too. Dorie just gave up. She sang loudest of all as she raised her glass in a salute of resignation.

We gotta get out of this place.
If it's the last thing we ever do.
We gotta get out of this place.
'Cause girl, there's a better life
For me and you.

I started feeling dizzy again and packed myself off to bed, much to everyone's relief. But all in all, not a bad day.

Despite his short stature and the crush of bodies between them, Subhash P. Deshpande could see his next-door neighbor John M. Roads, Roads being a man of above average height, standing at the other end of the crowded subway car holding a strap with one hand and his briefcase in the other. Roads jostled with the movement of the train as he faced the window and the blackness of the tunnel wall with an expression that seemed blank or, at the very least, distant. They were on their way home from work. It had been a satisfying day for Dr. Desphande, a day of small technical triumphs and a successful lecture at the dental school, with a germinating idea for new research that could advance his career. What can he be looking at, Deshpande wondered? There's nothing there. Yet Roads seemed to be concentrating on something outside the window. But then his neighbor had been acting a bit odd lately. The dentist waved a friendly greeting in Roads' direction that went unnoticed. At the station Deshpande caught up with him on the stairs with the impulse to walk home together.

"Pete," said Roads, looking down at the dentist. "I didn't see you."

"I know," said Deshpande. "You look rather distracted."

"Well, actually, yes. I am," said Roads. "I've been quite distracted lately."

They walked out of the station side-by-side and crossed the street without a word until they emerged from the midst of the dispersing crowd. Water pooled along the sidewalks, and melting hailstones were piled along the curb

like crushed ice. For a moment Roads felt a sense of camaraderie in the brisk air cleansed by the recent storm, as if walking home from school with a classmate at the end of term until he remembered what he was walking home to, both in the present and the past.

"Pete, did you have one of those arranged marriages?" Roads blurted out. He didn't know why he said "one of those" but at this point didn't really care.

"Yes," said Pete, not taking the least offense. "It's simply the custom, you know."

"Maybe I should have had one," said Roads.

Deshpande was taken off guard, and couldn't help but laugh. "Excuse me for laughing, John. But I don't know what you mean."

"I mean it couldn't have turned out any worse. I'm getting divorced."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Deshpande, adding, "But it seems so common here."

"It didn't used to be."

"I must admit, I don't understand it."

"Either do I."

Their agreement on that point seemed to conclude the conversation. They walked the rest of the way home in silence, with separate thoughts from separate continents, until they were on the block and at their respective brownstones where they were about to say good-bye when Deshpande spotted what looked like the rear end of a butt-naked man entering the building down the street.

"Did you see that?" he asked Roads, not sure himself what he had just witnessed. Roads asked what it was. "A man without any clothes," said Pete. Roads replied he hadn't. By that time the man was gone.

"A man without any clothes," John repeated. "Sure. Why not?" With that they climbed their stairs and returned to their wives.

"Our neighbors are getting a divorce," Pete announced to Roopa as he hung up his coat. "And I swear I saw a naked man across the street."

“That would be Eddie,” said Nick, overhearing his father’s comment from the next room. “He was just here.”

“In our house? What was a naked man doing here?”

“I don’t know. Ask mom.”

Desphande turned to his wife who looked at him pointedly, making it clear that her action, whatever it was, was not to be questioned.

“Eddie deserved our charity. A deity speaks to him.”

“And what deity is that?” her husband asked.

“Thor,” exclaimed Nick, still from the next room. With the added thought ‘a comic book deity’ that he decided not to share with his mother.

Pete gave himself a moment to consider his response carefully, and with customary gravity concluded, “I think we should make the distinction between holiness and mental illness before we let someone in our home. This is Brooklyn.”

“I did what I did,” said Roopa. “And it was the right thing to do. It’s our next-door neighbors you should be worried about. The ones getting divorced.” The discussion over, she continued preparing dinner.

Callate, bruto! “Listen, Papi.” *Stupid, stupid. Shut up.* “Bonilla está bateando. El Sid pitcheando por los Mets. Alza el brazo, lanza….baja y afuera. Una bola. Right?” *I didn’t do nothing.* “Fernandez alza, lanza…un estraic!” *I saw you do it. I saw you do it to her. Shut up!* “Hernandez se tira a la bola.” *Callate! No hice nada.* “Right Pops? I’m a good announcer.” *Papi. Pops. I think I’m hungry. Tell him you’re hungry. I didn’t do nothing.* “Bases loaded, bottom of the ninth. Strawberry takes the first pitch, a curveball inside. That evens the count at one and one.” *Strawberry takes the first pitch, a curveball inside. Strawberry takes the first pitch, a curveball inside. Nothing. That evens the count at one and one. A curveball inside.” Tell him you’re stupid. Shut up. Pops.* “I’m going out. Stay here, Eddie.” *Tengo hambre.* “Where you goin’, Papi?” *I saw what you did. Mira.* “Gooden es un lanzador de poder.” “I’ll be back soon. “Alza el brazo, lanza…” *I saw you, stupid.* “Don’t go out.” *I saw what you did to her.* “I could be

an announcer, right Papi?" "No te muevas. I'll be right back. Have some saltines. I'll be right back." *Go ahead open the window. Go ahead open it.* "Pops! Billy Berroa! Billy Berroa soy yo." *Yo soy shut up your saltines I didn't do nothing I saw you. Shut up. Bruto. Me gustan. Me gustan.* "Atras…atras…atras… Yo soy locutor para los Mets. El Sid. Mo-o-okie. I could do it. See?"

You hadn't paid much attention to the ebb and flow of people on your block. An old man found dead in his armchair, cousins from some steamy island moving in three to a room, maybe a returning bachelor son out of work or a daughter just married and escaping to Staten Island, an up-and-coming young couple from the West Side with their new baby, the new Arab family grilling on the front stoop, renovations to the brownstone three doors down. Ah, but I did notice the renovations. I had my eyes and ears open for anything that might affect property values. Like the junkies living over the corner store, or the rumor that the apartment building with the welfare queens was going co-op. And the lawyer who bought the building next to the fat lady. A Black guy but still, a lawyer. And Ruben's aunt. God knows where she came from, coming up to me on the sidewalk to say she lit a candle for me. Could barely speak English. Mumbling about *mal de ojo* and *brujas*. She's been in New York how many years? Are we in America? Still, true for the most part. I was happy to be enclosed in my brownstone fortress making regular forays to Midtown, to the corner store, to the park. People moving in or moving out no more a part of my life than an anthill on the side of the road though equally accepted. But things did change after all. Movement is not an illusion, you can't step on the same block twice. Something happened on that wet Saturday morning. So I began to notice. For the past two weeks noticed the comings and goings, openings and closings, dog-walkings, deliveries, and diversions of my blockmates. Saw the raw implications of this movement behind my neighbors' brick and brownstone, barred windows, and double dead-bolted doors. And if I had to guess where it was all going, I'd have to say straight to hell. Right down the crapper. And taking my tax money and home equity with it.

The Black guy you saw from your front window, Guilford the lawyer and owner of an eight-unit building on the block, had a fair-haired wife Judy from a nice Irish Catholic family in Glen Cove, and a son Jerome, Jr. the color of cocoa. They had moved the previous spring to an apartment on the first floor of their new real estate investment next to Rose and Grace, with the express purpose of co-oping the place and making as much money as they could possibly squeeze out of it. Rose noted the subsequent evictions with alarm. Granted the tenants were deadbeats, but still. The Guilfords seemed friendly enough, yet Rose thought it best not to mention them or their comings and goings to Grace in order to avoid a long explanation of why Judy Guilford was not in fact a whore or a slut. One day Grace said to Rose, “There’s a white woman next door with a kid looks like a little Harry Belafonte. Adopting a colored. Can you believe it?” Rose expected to hear much more, but that was her mother’s last word on the subject. Still you kept tabs on them. Jerome, Jr. was two years older then Jennifer and went to the same school as your girls. Judy’s choice of dress showed unmistakable signs of the flower child she must once have been while you pegged Guilford, slim and tall in his tweed sports coat and the casual plaid shirts he wore on weekends, for a shrewd social climber, although you had to admire his guts for taking on the lowlifes in his building while he went through the conversion process living right in the middle of them.

Jerome Guilford, Sr. gazed upwards from the bottom of the stairwell by the front door of his apartment with his hands clasped behind his back and a look of dismay that tightened his brow like an angst-ridden pedant. He had miscalculated. Or rather had displayed an error in judgment by approving someone else’s miscalculation, which in his estimation was even worse. He could kick his own butt, he thought, for setting the asking price too low. The first two units, without renovation or even the slightest cosmetic upgrades, sold in a week with full price offers. He must pull the others off the market ASAP and go up twenty, thirty percent, maybe more. It’s a very fluid market indeed, his reasoning continued, since there was a time when he feared he might be

overreaching and was thrilled at the idea of getting his original price. He exited to the stoop and walked down the front steps doing his mental math. On the sidewalk he backed to the curb to get a better look at the identical apartment buildings on either side. Rose peered down at him from her window and waved. He returned her greeting with a curt nod as he leaned against the fender of his Camry. He wondered if her apartment were rent controlled. He hated miscalculating.

Judy in her earth shoes, sipping mint tea and thinking of glaze colors for mugs she was making in pottery class, smiled expectantly when Jerome returned to the kitchen with the impatience she had come to recognize as the prelude to an announcement. “We need another building,” he announced. She paused thoughtfully a moment before responding, “What’s wrong with this one?” She honestly felt more comfortable in their building, and on that block, and in Brooklyn, than anywhere else she’d been. “Nothing, except we sold too cheap. We need another one to make up for it.” That seemed like an awful bother to Judy. She paused again to consider. “Okay, if that’s what you want.” It didn’t really matter to her one way or the other and she knew better than to contradict her husband when he was in a foul mood, especially one that involved self-recrimination and money. She was already thinking of ceramics for Christmas presents and jars of homemade marmalade. What Jerome really wanted, she knew, was a brownstone like the ones across the street. And to get out of his law practice and into real estate full time. But he was a patient man. Jerome Guilford, Sr., who did not smoke or let a drop of alcohol pass his lips, star sprinter and a respectable sixth man on his Division II college basketball team, who tipped waiters poorly as a matter or principle, knew exactly how much money needed to be set aside for his son’s tuition at an Ivy League school and was well on his way toward banking that amount. And more.

Nydia Abreu, as Nick Deshpande observed, was a slight girl, short and well-proportioned. Sometimes her head seemed a bit too big for her slender frame, but not nearly as big as her brother’s, who was called *Cabezon* by their

screaming and exhausted mother the moment he popped out of the birth canal. Though his was a smooth, round, well-shaped head, a prize pumpkin, and he never seemed to mind, actually took as much pride in it as if he had been nicknamed *Bichon* or *Huevon,* because he, and Nydia, always countered taunts by pointing out their antagonists' smaller brains. But Nydia's features were also slight, souvenir of some Basque gene, while her hair was straight and black as that of her Taino grandmothers. Sitting quietly on her bed, she thumbed through the book that Nick gave her and reflexively hid it when she heard her mother's footsteps approaching. Carmen Abreu was about to ask her daughter to run to the store for some Coco Rico and a can of Crisco, when coming through the door she saw the last of her daughter's furtive movement. She stood over Nydia, severe and distrustful, as her daughter remained seated with her hands folded discreetly in her lap.

"What did you put under the bed?"

"Nothing. Just fixing the sheet," said Nydia. Denial, out or habit, had become her opening gambit with her mother.

"*Mentirosa*. I saw you hide something."

"I'm not hiding anything. It's just a book."

"Stop lying. Get out of the way."

Nydia swung her feet up as her mother knelt at her bedside and swept her hand under the bed, pulling out Nick's book and a handful of dust balls. Carmen dove in further and ran her arm to the wall, coming up empty-handed save for two empty candy wrappers and more dust. Nydia was glad she always hid her marijuana, when she had any, with her tampons. Her mother stood up and brushed herself off, picked up the book and examined its cover.

"A dirty book? Is that what you're hiding? Who gave it to you?"

Nydia rolled her eyes and wished she hadn't stashed the book so needlessly. Now she would be subject to her mother's accusations for days, and her suspicion for god knows how long.

"It's a novel. I don't even know what it's about."

"You don't know? Where did you get it?"

"Just found it." Nydia did not know why she was lying again. It was automatic. When pushed she had to push back.

"I'm keeping this. I don't want you bringing filthy books home. Go to the store and get some soda for dinner. And hurry back. *Sucia*!"

Nydia took the money her mother thrust in her hand and, mumbling to herself as she walked out the door, vowed not to return for dinner. She imagined never returning home and comforted herself with a vision of her mother's unending grief and remorse. When she reached the sidewalk she noticed a seedy-looking man directly across the street glancing over his shoulder as he hurried toward the park. Following his backward line of sight, she spied a man down the block slumped to his knees and another man hurrying across the street to his aid. Nick appeared at his gate, and two women rushed out of the brownstone next to him. She watched the guy opposite her break into a run and disappear around the corner. With no plans other than not going home, and intrigued that some drama had unfolded on the block, Nydia decided to tail him. When he ducked in the park she followed at a discrete distance, meandering on the paths, keeping him well in sight until he emerged on the far side and crossed the bordering avenue to a corner bar. Having shadowed him this far she determined to get a good look. She approached the bar casually, peered in the door with a hand above her eyes as if searching the gloom for an acquaintance, and spotted him at a pay phone staring right back at her. It took a moment but she recognized him—the greasy guy with the bat she confronted on the old lady's stoop. She did a quick about-face and retraced her steps through the park, careful she was not being followed in turn until she came to her stone wall by the avenue. It was still early for her friends to gather. She sat there by herself, wondering how stupid she'll appear to Nick when he asks about the book and she'll have to make excuses why she didn't read it. She told herself she didn't care. The exchange was a waste of two joints, joints she wished she had with her right now. But not a problem, she realized. She had the money her mother gave her. She would find some way to get high. The day had cooled and she wished she'd worn a jacket. As she watched the evening traffic rush down the

avenue she wondered what her life would be like if she did go to college in Indiana—or Pennsylvania, or California. Happy to be away from her parents no doubt, but how could she leave life in the city? Where anything you could possibly want was a train ride away. And how could she wear those clothes or eat that food that people wore and ate out there in the rest of the country? Though she wouldn't mind studying psychology or maybe criminal justice, anywhere. She was almost beginning to regret her decision to walk out on dinner when her friend Mary appeared with her tape deck.

Music always attracted Eddie, the louder the better. When he heard it blaring from the direction of his cousin Nydia and her girlfriend on the wall he hurried over, and speaking into an imaginary microphone started to perform in front of them, "*Un flai, profundo al jardin derecho...atras, atras, atras...jonron*!" Eddie snorted and gave his hoarse laugh, dropped to his knees and sprang up again with a flourish as he looked for their reaction.

"*Pendejo, dinos en Ingles*," said Nydia. "Mary don't speak no Spanish."

"Fly ball, deep to right field, going...going…gone! Home run!" Eddie repeated his shuffle and his laugh, pulling his glasses from his pocket to get a better look at Mary. "Hey, you got a cigarette?" Mary pulled a pack of Marlboros from her purse. "You don't got no menthol?" He took a Marlboro and looked her up and down. He'd seen her in the park before, realized in fact he had trailed her on more than one occasion. With a quick smooth motion he pulled a new Zippo lighter from his pocket, flipped it open with one hand and lit the flame with a snap of his fingers on the flint wheel. Girls, he assumed, were as taken by acts of prestidigitation as he was.

"We need some weed," said Nydia. "You got some?" Eddie snorted and began nodding with excitement.

"I can get it. How much?"

"Ten bucks."

"Okay. Come with me."

The girls looked at each other and slid off the wall. Eddie started walking toward the block but Nydia whistled him back and pointed the other way. "I

don't want no one to see me," she said. Eddie obliged and they walked two streets over before turning right, going down three avenues where property values dropped steeply block by block, building by building, descending like feudal ranks until they came to a line of abandoned brick and shingle row houses as the street leveled out at the bottom of the hill. Sheets of stained plywood covered their broken windows, large blue and white letters ballooned across their façades. They entered one of the houses through a splintered outer door whose paint had all but peeled away, and came to a halt in a cramped vestibule that smelled of rot and rodents. In front of them stood the entrance to a first floor apartment, a large metal door with a mail slot. Eddie pounded on it with his fist and stepped back.

"What?" came a voice from the slot.

"It's me. Eddie."

There was a brief pause, then the voice said. "How much?"

"Ten bucks."

"Drop it in."

Eddie looked at Nydia. "Go ahead," he said. "Give it to him."

"This better work, Eddie," whispered Nydia, fondling the bill in her pocket.

"If you got a problem, fuck it," said the voice. "We don't need your business. Don't bring these kids here no more, Eddie."

"It's okay," said Eddie. "No problem." Then to Nydia, "Just give him the money."

Nydia dropped her mother's bill in the slot and they heard booted steps pound away from the door. She noticed darkness was falling quickly on the street outside while Eddie played with his cigarette lighter, snapping it open, running the wheel along his palm to start the flame, snapping it shut. Mary looked bored and unimpressed as she held tight to her tape deck. Each sensed it was best to keep quiet while they waited. As the minutes ticked away Nydia began to wonder why she tried to hide that stupid book, why she ran out on her mother, why she had traded grocery money for weed, and why she was in this dark vestibule with Eddie of all people. Mary was inching toward the outer door

about to break for the sidewalk when a white envelope dropped to the floor from the mail slot. Eddie opened it with a grin and pulled out two fat spliffs. Mary was already out the door. They hurried up the street, peering warily into the shadows of each building they passed until back on their own turf where they slackened their pace. When they were safely settled on the park wall they lit one of the joints and Eddie broke into his little dance in front of the girls.

"Bases loaded, bottom of the ninth. Strawberry takes the first pitch, a curveball inside. That evens the count at one and one."

Eddie grunted and laughed his hoarse laugh. The girls laughed, too.

I saw you do it. I saw you do it to her. Shut up.

They passed the joint while Eddie cut up for Mary's amusement, lip-synching to the music on her boom box. The girls kicked their feet against the wall, stretched their arms over their heads, closed their eyes and yawned as the evening slowed and stretched out across the park. Nydia was lost in a brief reverie when the sound of approaching footsteps brought her back. She startled, almost falling off her perch in fear it might be her father. When she looked up it was Nick.

"Hey, Eddie," said Nick.

Eddie stopped his prancing and looked away.

"You know Eddie?" said Nydia. Mary started giggling. Perhaps it was the way Nydia said it.

"Sure," said Nick. "He was just over for tea. Right, Eddie?" Eddie didn't answer, concentrating all his mental powers to make Nick disappear. "How's Thor?" Nick continued.

Eddie grunted. "I don't know no Thor."

"Sure you do. The hammer god."

"That's a comic book," said Eddie. "I gotta go." Eddie slipped away, whispering to himself as he scrambled along the parkside to escape Mary's laugh.

Nick hopped on the wall and sat beside Nydia. He introduced himself to Mary but her soft, mumbled reply made him feel unwelcome. Nydia seemed

uncomfortable with his presence, too. Why did these high school girls make him feel so ill at ease, and why were they so ill at ease with him? Perhaps it was just his imagination.

Finally Nydia spoke up. “Did you smoke the pot?”

“No,” said Nick. “Not yet.” Nydia nodded with a sense of relief. Nick continued, “How do you like the book?”

“I didn’t start it yet,” said Nydia. And then, without planning to, she told him that her mother had confiscated it.

“Why would she do that?”

“She thinks it must be pornography or something.”

Nick laughed. “Are you kidding? We’re not talking the Kama Sutra here. Indians are as prudish as you can get. At least the ones I know. She should worry about you reading American novels.” Then he thought about the book. It had been a while since he read it, and he wondered if he had forgotten something.

Nydia was not listening. For the first time since she ran out of her apartment she sensed the implications of the trouble she was in. “Mary, can you lend me ten bucks?” she pleaded. “You can keep the other spliff.”

Mary shook her head. “I would, but I ain’t got it.”

Nydia turned to Nick. “Can you lend me ten bucks?”

Nick hesitated, but her direct appeal caught him off guard. “Okay.” He supposed he was involved somehow in her predicament. Eddie stood watching from down the avenue as Nick pulled out his wallet and handed her a bill.

“Ma, I’m gonna start a diet.” Rose was in the kitchen bulling her way through the cupboards. “What?” said Grace, sitting on the toilet with a diaper around her ankles. “I said I’m gonna start a diet,” said Rose louder as she inspected the expiration date on a half-empty jar of mayonnaise. Her mother looked straight ahead at rust-colored streaks on the mineral-stained bathroom sink that almost touched her eyeballs, puzzled, and as the news sank in, alarmed. “A diet? Why?” Whenever Rose showed an interest in her appearance

Grace was terrified her daughter was trying to bring a new man into their lives. “I think I should lose some weight.” Grace heard cupboard doors slam and the faint rustle of plastic wrap with increasing distress. “You been putting on weight?” she asked, probing for her daughter’s motive. With an act of determination and self-control hard to fully appreciate, Rose dumped a package of Fig Newtons into a garbage bag. “No, but I need to lose.” She moved from the cupboards to the refrigerator with a sense of mission and a growing sense of accomplishment. “Are you finished yet?” she asked her mother. “Finished what?” answered Grace, certain she had not been on a diet herself recently. “Are you finished in the bathroom?” Grace fumbled with the toilet paper for a moment. “No,” she answered emphatically. It took her a moment to remember why she was sitting there and return to the issue at hand. “Okay, Rose. Do what you want.” Riding a surge of energy that made her feel slimmer already, Rose tossed out a full tub of chocolate ice cream she had bought only the day before. “Grapefruit and lots of salads. You know I like salad.” Her mother hated salad. “Don’t expect me to eat that rabbit food,” yelled Grace. Rose had already stocked the refrigerator with lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, green peppers, and an ample supply of ranch and Thousand Island dressing. “Grapefruit makes you lose weight, Ma. I read that.” Grace was getting more agitated at the prospect of salad as well as a strange new man to deal with. “Didn’t you try that before?” Though Grace was well aware of her daughter’s many failed attempts, it wasn’t enough to quell her concern that one day Rose would succeed. “Not really. I didn’t stick to it. And you’re supposed to exercise. The weather’s getting better. I can get outside more. I think I could lose twenty pounds. Maybe thirty, Ma. How about that?” Grace reached for her diaper. “Get me back to bed.”

Rose hobbled to the bathroom to pull her mother to her feet. The space was tight for two normal-sized people. Standing half in the doorway she secured the diaper as best she could while Grace steadied herself on the sink. “Do you want your walker?” Grace leaned heavily on her daughter as they made their way to the bedroom. “I don’t need no walker.” She plopped down on the edge of the bed, swung her legs up and propped herself on a pile of pillows as Rose

dressed her in a clean pair of sweatpants. With her mother settled for the morning, Rose looked about the room and thought she would like to paint it yellow someday. Something bright. She straightened a hairbrush and comb on top of the bureau, took a string of rosary beads from the bedside table and set it on the frame of the picture of Jesus-in-a-cloud so the cross hung down dead center. Then she returned to the kitchen humming softly as she imagined herself shopping for a new wardrobe. She sat down but slightly out of breath to peel a large grapefruit she plucked from a fruit bowl on the table, carefully separating the slices so as not to spray the juice. When she had rested long enough to get her breath, she ferried the snack with a large glass of Dr. Pepper to her chair by the window in the front room. A siren blared on the avenue, a sound that still made her think of her husband. And sometimes, when she felt really down in the dumps, made her remember the battalion commander himself calling on her in the middle of the night to tell her she was a widow and her telling him how sorry she was he had to come by so late. And Aldo's death reported in the *Post* and the *Daily News* the next day with her name there, too. She saved the clippings. But she was not down in the dumps today. Her leg was feeling better. And the block? She was not down in the dumps but had an unsettled feeling about the block. It was hard to keep up. Maybe things were changing too fast. She felt sorry for Mr. Roads because he was a drunk and his wife was leaving him. But his wife was stuck up anyway and Rose understood why he might want to drink being married to her, even pretty as she was. And then Junior had to slug him—poor guy, as if he didn't have enough trouble—when everything was all right with Ma's check in the end, and now Junior could wind up at Rikers again. For god's sake, he should've beat Eddie up for what he did to the mail, not Mr. Roads. Eddie's the one who started it, but it's bad luck beating up a lunatic. People keep coming and going. She wasn't sure what to make of the new Arab family, though she heard they were Christians. What kind of Christians come from Arabia? Ruben's aunt is upstairs lighting candles. And she couldn't believe the dentist's wife had let Eddie into their house. What was she thinking? Foreigners, they don't know any better. Someone should've warned her. And someone

should've locked Eddie up the way he was dancing around naked in that storm. It didn't used to be that way. She had a cousin put away in Pilgrim State when dancing naked in the street would earn you a long vacation on Long Island. When you didn't have all these people talking to themselves on the sidewalk wearing winter coats in July, twitching like they got the heebie jeebies. I feel sorry for them, but it's for their own good. Rose hoped the flux was temporary. She tried to recall other times when so many things had happened all at once, but came up blank. She washed down her last slice of grapefruit with a slow sip of soda, inspecting the street for further signs of its new instability.

And just when you reach the comforting conclusion that you are not alone, that the whole world is going to hell in a hand-basket, not that you'd enjoy the company, they open a McDonald's in Belgrade. Or so says the morning news. The stitches are out and your cut has healed but you are extra careful running a razor over the small pink suture line. You'd think we'd get a clue—as you wipe the shaving cream from you nostrils and earlobes, noting the bags under your eyes—but no, any peon can hop a banana boat and get free health care the day they arrive. And why do their kids get citizenship, for god's sake? Just for being born here? Come on, they're *illegals.* Who knows how many of them are packed in that building. Splashing cold water on your face to reduce the puffiness. How many years do you think it would take to get them all out? Pity the landlord. Knotting your tie, adjusting your collar. That's better. Yes, I'd love to see it go co-op but I'll never live to see that day. Grabbing your briefcase in the hallway. Tenant's rights, bleeding heart judges. What a city. Where's the market here? So hello, get a clue, even the Brits have had it with the nanny state. And not just the foreigners, Americans won't work. Why should they? Especially those of the Negro persuasion. You don't see skinny people on food stamps. And you think for the record, as if there was someone eavesdropping on your musings, recording and reporting them for some future judgment, or perhaps just as a remark to an acquaintance with whom you are conversing: Don't get me wrong, I'm no racist. I judge people for who they are,

as individuals. What I'm talking about here is pure economics. Because years ago you observed that deadbeats are what you get when you amputate the invisible hand. Out the door, remembering your upcoming appointment with the couples therapist, thinking of your staff meeting, interest rates, basis points, quarterly earnings, when you run into Ruben on the corner and judge it's too late to avoid him without appearing rude. He's dressed neat but casual. Light jacket, open collar shirt, khaki pants. Maybe—a public school teacher? "Thanks for helping me out the other day," you say. Though you can't help but feel the humiliation of being cold-cocked while intoxicated in full view of your neighbors no matter how sympathetic they seem. "Sure." Guzman is quick to notice in turn your rep tie, your cufflinks, your black cap toe shoes. "They haven't caught the guy, you know," you continue. "The police don't have a clue." Roads touched his scar without thinking. Ruben had trouble feigning surprise. "Yeah? Too bad." He still had half a mind to give up Junior but wouldn't for Rose's sake, and even more because it wasn't his business. "They don't care. It's like mugging's decriminalized in this town." Ruben nodded as he remembered without regret jumping the Bronx Science kids on their way to school. He gave your face a quick examination. "You look good, though. Things healed up nice." You shrugged. "I suppose." But you were aware that the small compliment, however perfunctory, felt good. You hadn't heard many kind words lately. The two men, fellow commuters, near neighbors, fell in together uncomfortably, resigned to the fact that it was too late to gracefully part ways before the station. "So where do you work?" asked Roads, not curious really, just trying to fill the silence. "Bellevue," said Guzman. Ruben waited a moment to let Roads speculate as to what that might mean, watching curiously for his reaction. "I'm a brain surgeon," he deadpanned. Roads nodded, looking dubious, thinking it best not to comment. "Just kidding. Not a rocket scientist, either. I work in the microbiology lab." Roads was a little vague on microbiology but figured it must have something to do with microbes and, even if Ruben's job was not teaching in the public schools, there must be a union connection with lab assistants or whatever Ruben's job was. "And you?" Roads remembered the microscope he

got for Christmas when he was a kid and science was important for a year or two. “And you?” Guzman repeated, not impatient, more as if concerned with Roads’ welfare. “Me? Right. I work at Capital Insurance. On the investment side.” That figured, thought Guzman, suddenly feeling more charitable toward Junior. “I see you survived Black Monday.” Which was not long ago in linear time. “Yes. All those brokers throwing themselves off the roofs of their BMW’s.” Guzman thought that was funny but best not to show it. Some of the funniest people he knew were alcoholics. “By the way,” said Roads, changing the subject as he did not like talking about finance with people who he assumed knew nothing about it, “was that your mother who said she’d pray for me?” Ruben flushed unnoticed under his dark cheeks. He had no idea Titi Ada was already accosting his neighbors. “No, that’s my aunt. She’s visiting for a few weeks.” But Ruben need not have been so sensitive. “That was kind of nice. Thank her for me, will you?” said Roads. “Where is she visiting from?” By now they were in the crush of the crowd funneling downstairs to the station. They lined up at different turnstiles, “The Bronx,” said Ruben, and allowed the current to separate them as they descended further to the platform. Roads took his newspaper from his briefcase, backing against the wall to read the headlines as he waited for the Manhattan-bound train. When it arrived he looked along the platform as he stepped in and saw Guzman about to enter the car ahead of him. Roads grabbed a strap and held on tight as the train jerked forward.

Once she put her mind to it, Dorie worked with admirable speed. Lawyer, therapist, real estate agent, job prospect, all lined up one after another in a matter of weeks. Her sudden burst of energy was in sharp contrast to the past year’s lethargy when most days she felt it was hard just to move, hard just to breathe, as if the medium she lived in had the consistency of molasses. It’s a wonder she didn’t drink heavily too, she thought, congratulating herself on her fortitude considering what she had to put up with, and how heavily her mother drank. John constantly railing about how he knew better than everyone else at work, and everyone in government and politics, and anyone who ever coached a

baseball team, or even how best to arrange the contents of the drawers in the kitchen or the bathroom. Her husband, the armchair prophet anathematizing mankind for its sin of incompetence. Didn't he realize he was clinically depressed? Had always been depressed? But that was not her problem any longer. She did not allow herself regrets and probably had none. Her problem now was Justin's divorce, or lack thereof. There were still issues that needed to be worked out, he said. And Justin was far too comfortable visiting his kids at his not-quite-ex's. He needed to put limits on his affability. As she hiked up her front stairs with a bag of groceries Dorie nodded at her neighbor, the dentist's wife sweeping her stoop with angry flicks of the broom. Roopa Deshpande turned and gave her a grave, formal nod in return, and her expression seemed to say that the indignity of holding a broom was a regrettable accident she endured in this strange land. Neither woman wished to be the first to speak. But who knows, thought Dorie. Maybe if I stayed longer I'd get to know her. Get her to lighten up a little. I always liked her saris. And anticipated, as she unlocked the door, that when she had finally swept away the rubbish of her marriage and put John's snoring and ranting and pontificating behind her, how much she would enjoy meeting new people without the worry of a soused husband tottering along. Though she would of course be obliged to see him at graduations and weddings. She was resigned to that, the fact that the girls would always be his kids too, a small price to pay for the certainty that he would always provide for them, voluntarily or not, quite generously. And she would meet him with cordial indifference at these events, even pity perhaps once her anger cooled, but not embarrassment. Not any longer. Yes, Justin, she wondered as she unpacked the grocery bag and opened the refrigerator, how to manage Justin. The phone rang and thinking magically it must be him responding to her concern (these things do happen) dropped a carton of milk and rushed to answer. It was John. "I won't be home for dinner tonight. I have to work late. Just thought I'd let you know." She was too dismayed to respond. He's doing this on purpose, she told herself. He's pretending nothing's happened just to annoy me. After a prolonged silence she finally answered, "Do what you want. It doesn't matter." And then she

speculated it might truly be his denial at play here, or simply blind habit. “Just thought I’d let you know,” he repeated. “Good-bye, John.” She hung up and resumed her chores preoccupied now, her mood changing to doubt not about her divorce—of that she was more certain than ever—but about her future, placing the blame squarely on her thoughtless husband for triggering the uncertainty she now felt. How did he manage to do that? She poured herself a glass of wine and called Justin. He wasn’t in, which was just as well because it was time to get the girls from school. She finished with the groceries, downed the last of her wine and set off to escort them home, pausing on the stoop to check the activity on the block for a moment before she went on. Traffic was picking up. A young mother pushed a stroller on the other side of the street. An elderly man was walking his terrier, and the fat woman sat at her window directly across from her. Dorie thought of pictures she’d seen of fat whores sitting in windows in the red light district in Amsterdam. Wouldn’t be surprised, she thought, though it was hard to imagine.

The school was a short walk down the avenue along the park. Dorie arrived just as the girls burst from the entrance with their backpacks, streaming down the front stairs with their classmates in a rush of bobbing heads, kids squealing and hooting, eager to squander the day’s bottled energy. Jen was on the lookout for her mother. She quickly gravitated toward her while Allison remained in heated discussion with a girl in her class. “Come on Allie, time to go home,” called Jen. Allison grabbed something from the classmate’s hand and ran to join her mother. A young woman suddenly appeared on the sidewalk blocking her path and asked Allie to show her what she had taken. Allie revealed the small figure of a toy ballerina. “Please give that back,” said the woman, Allie’s teacher, as Dorie arrived on the scene. “We need to talk about Allie,” the teacher informed her. “She’s been having some difficulty lately.” Dorie felt strangely mortified. Allie reluctantly gave the figure to the teacher who returned it to her classmate. “She said I could have it,” was Allie’s only explanation to her mother on the way home.

Our mother was there for us. Physically at least, but don't discount that. The rest of her was someplace else. One thing after another. Her unhappy marriage, then her party years, then remarriage. Yet she always seemed closer to us than Dad no matter how absent she was or how present he tried to be. Maybe it was because she conditioned us to focus on his flaws. We saw him through the lens of his alcoholism and failed to appreciate his quaint, old-fashioned morality. Which the closer you look is more conceit than true conviction, but real nonetheless. Or merely the early wiring of maternal imprinting. I remember the day Mom told us Dad was moving out. It didn't seem like a big deal to me, Dad wasn't around much anyway. But Jen was scared. Scared for us *and* him. Because, unlike me, she knew how powerless we were and how hopeless he was. Something I never accepted. And how that night we heard Dad's footsteps pound up the stairs, bellowing he wasn't moving out and we were afraid he'd stagger into our rooms to give us his wet whisky kisses and tell us how pretty and smart we were with his boozey smile and thick-tongued words. Telling us every night how pretty and smart we were, always the same way, always after the alcohol had convinced him what a loving father he was as if we had never heard it before and his display was a spontaneous outpouring of affection. Jen found the repetition comforting but it bored and disgusted me. And I felt ashamed, too. Didn't he know how foolish he was? Then the move to New Jersey and a few years later my angry, out-of-control adolescence. Dad blamed it on Mom and the divorce of course, and Mom blamed it on Dad and his drinking. I think I was just born that way. My drug habit would have happened if the Mormon high priest had raised me. Like I had the gene. So I identify with Dad even if I can barely stand him. And I think he looks at me and is appalled to see what he passed on and doesn't wish to see the implications for himself. Though I eventually embraced my (yes, court ordered) recovery, he never did his. Denial? No. Arrogance? Yes, but not entirely. He simply liked drinking. Jen could stand it, even accept it because she could retreat to her shell with a book or some fantasy game and block out all the unpleasantness but I had to let people know I was there and they had to pay attention to me. Pay

attention to me. I don't care if I have to puke on your shoes for it. I don't care if you curse at me as you haul me to the bathroom to dry heave. I don't care, Dad. I just don't care.

You were there for us. Mostly. It was bad timing when you disappeared for a week after Dad said he wasn't moving out. Bad timing, Mom. Then you met us at school as if nothing had happened and walked us home along the park. It was spring. The trees had started to sprout their little pale leaves and the yellow forsythia were giving way to green. As if nothing had happened. We walked past the wall where the older kids hung out after school getting high and blasting their music at the avenue, past the building where all the poor people cursed out their windows, where the schizophrenic lived who ran down the street naked, the sidewalk where Dad had his lip split open when someone jumped him coming back from the store and he had to get stitches. You were there but you weren't. Didn't even seem to care that I got in trouble that day. I have no idea what preoccupied you. It could have been anything, I hadn't met Justin yet. It didn't take me long to understand my mother was as false as me. When she'd confront me with my drug use I'd throw that up to her and her defense was always that she was forced to. She had no choice. She was so unhappy. That she had to escape my angry, abusive, alcoholic father or lose her mind. Boo hoo. But I wanted her to be okay. I wanted to protect her, too. I just had no idea how.

There were flower boxes outside the front windows and planters by the iron fence, a large urn on the stone landing and small one on the front stoop by the double-leaf doors. Heliotrope, lantana, marigold. Petunias and salvia. I helped mother plant them. And on the deck off the kitchen. Geraniums, periwinkle, impatiens. We planted them together, too. And the mint, basil, rosemary, oregano, thyme in our herb garden. I loved the sound of the words as much as the scent. I loved the house even more than the flowers. Slanting voussoirs above the door's stone frame and garlands in relief on the entablature —you don't see that in Tenafly. And before us it was the Gallagher's. There has

to be a connection between families who lived in the same house, don't you think? Some thread. If only because they shared the same wood and stone, light, shadow. It must have an effect, and their behaviors shaped by that common experience. Years later when I could search online I tried to find out more about them. The connection, that is. I found the lawyer paterfamilias (a tea-totaler, so much for that connection), learned about the boys at Polytech and seminary, the mothers and nuns, a family fortune rising and falling until only the widow was left who hung on, I imagined, without replacing so much as a doily for another thirty years while, housebound and oblivious, all around her the accents changed, complexions darkened, half the block transformed itself to rooming houses, the park devolves to a playground for predators, and by the time she had long abandoned any use of stairs and moved her bed to the living room it was on its way back again like it had merely stumbled a moment and righted itself. Allie was too young to remember much about the house but I recall the pleasure I had running my hand along the mahogany banister. A rich, smooth sensation as much sight as touch. Which is perhaps our only connection to the Gallaghers, if there is one. Dad never got over his regret when he sold the place, which was more than simply the loss of a great investment (indeed). For a brief moment it represented the high water mark of his life, that *Patna* moment, rather than the setting for a humiliation from which he never recovered. My mother, I know, did not belong there. And Dad, if he was honest, did not either. But when was he ever honest, least of all with himself? The block belonged to the fat woman and her mother across the street, the Puerto Ricans in the building, the dentist next door, and even the invading hipsters more than it would ever belong to us. But in its solid symmetry, its dignified proportions, its restrained and refined ornamentation, it was certainly a handsome house. Just not a good fit. It was meant for another time, a time much better suited to my father. Not Victorian, that would be too severe. Edwardian. That's where he belonged. In that short-lived, gilded, giddy, false window before catastrophe. When there were no alcoholics, just hard drinking men. Though let's not be too melodramatic. It was just another bad marriage and one more bitter divorce. The

kind that helps real estate agents and divorce lawyers to a very good year. The kind that left my father adrift for the rest of his life for reasons I'll never fully understand and he doesn't want to.

Ada sat in a folding chair by Ruben's front window in the same pose she assumed forty years before when she sat outside the front door of her family's stilted shack near Humacao. Solitary, attentive, still yet restless, watching the tops of cars on the street and heads on the sidewalk the way she had watched pigs and dogs forage in the cane fields beyond a muddy rutted road. She looked at the brownstones across the street and the simple line of dentils under their cornices, reaching for a comparison that was impossible to make. It was on that step by the front door, while her father was away on the preaching circuit and her mother boiled clothes in the back, that she spat in the mud and vowed to go to New York. And here she was forty years later, she mused, still looking for a home. "Titi, let's go," said Ruben. Unhurried, she roused herself and pulled on her sneakers for the hour's trip to the South Bronx first by train then bus to the Hub in Melrose. Ada looked at Ruben as they descended the stairs at the Brewster Street station, assured by his ease in this city, with the language, with neighborhoods beyond the South Bronx, a man with a college degree no less which still amazed her, though troubled that his Spanish sounded like he came from pa'lla without realizing that by now hers did, too. Their shoulders touched lightly as the car jostled north. They said little nor did they need to. They crossed under the Harlem River and got off at Third Avenue where not long ago she witnessed the city tear down the El as if burning bridges after the neighborhood's white flight, leaving her and her compatriots on another kind of island stripped of what little wealth it had. From there they walked to the storefront real estate office that posted the apartment they were looking for. "Sorry, it's taken. We rented it this morning," said the agent, making it clear by his accent he was Cuban or wanted customers to think he was. Ruben looked at Ada's impassive face with frustration. "Why don't you move to Brooklyn?" he asked. Ada shook her head and looked at the agent. He rifled through his files.

“Here’s one.” A small studio at the right price. The agent took them around the corner to a fourth floor walkup in a building that looked like it was about to collapse. The floors sloped in different directions, cracks zigzagged across the ceiling, layers of tobacco smoke caked the walls. A burned-out shell festered across the street. “Rent is negotiable,” said the agent. “I can talk to the landlord.” Ruben snorted in disgust. “Forget it. This place should be condemned.” The agent tried to appear insulted. “Then I don’t want to waste your time,” he said, adding, “or mine.” Ada wanted to keep searching but Ruben and the agent had enough. Aunt and nephew headed back to Brooklyn on the bus. “Titi, you can’t live like that,” he said as they crossed the river into Harlem, dismayed at the squalor that he used to take for granted. “It’s what I can afford, *mijo*. It’s not so bad,” she answered. She always felt uneasy crossing into Manhattan. “I can help you,” Ruben countered. “Some, anyway. What about Wanda and Nelson?” her son and daughter. “They have their own troubles,” said Ada. They’re useless thought Ruben, but kept the thought to himself. He considered the options. Have her stay with him? Move in with his girlfriend and give Ada his apartment? Send her to Chicago? The bus jostled them wordlessly together once again. Ada sat straight with her arms in her lap like a schoolgirl on her way to class.

Grace told Rose to alert her when she spied Ruben return. She wanted to speak with him personally about Junior’s situation, and Rose gave her the word when she saw him coming down the block with his aunt. When Ruben and Ada got to the vestibule Grace opened the door to her apartment and whispered, “Psst. Ruben. I got to talk to you.” Ruben turned and saw her peeking out. “You won’t say nothing about Junior, will you? He’s on parole, you know.” Grace raised her voice as if Ruben was as hard of hearing as she, carrying her plea up to the fourth floor and back. “I know,” said Ruben. “Just keep him away from here.” “Okay.” Grace peeked out farther and saw Ada. “It’s nice you let your mother move in. I won’t say nothing to the landlord.” With that she closed the door and fumbled with the deadbolt. When they got back to Ruben’s apartment Ada lit a candle on her altar. “This is for the old lady downstairs. I don’t think

she's long for this world." Ruben, skeptic and logician though he was, had sense enough to pay attention to his aunt's prognostications. If only her rose water and beads, candles and incantations, could conjure her a decent place to live.

As she resisted hunger with an ascetic pleasure on the third day of her diet, and feeling she must have lost five pounds at least, Rose peeled another grapefruit and tried her best to remain attentive to the block, watching closely as a rented moving van backed to a spot along the line of parked cars on her side of the street where there was an opening big enough to unload. Two young men, in their mid-twenties she guessed, stepped from the cab dressed in faded jeans and hooded sweatshirts. They looked up at the building next door to her and pointed to an apartment on the third floor as they walked to the back of the van, pulled out the metal loading ramp and lifted the large rear door to reveal a truck bed packed floor to ceiling with boxes and furniture. She knew Guilford's place had gone co-op, five of its eight units sold in a matter of weeks, one bought by current renters at the insider price and three units finishing out their lease. Two young women and another young man, similarly dressed, greeted them on the sidewalk and the unloading began to music ringing from a cassette player they planted by the front stairs, the music of college campuses and suburban homes alien to the block. Rose watched them intently and unabashed, curious (as was her nature), and despite her gnawing hunger noted each item that was wheeled or carried down the ramp and the easy banter of the group as they worked—teasing, joking, efficient—throughout the afternoon. Their speech was like people on TV. When the truck was empty, one of the young women brought out a six pack of beer and a bottle of wine. They sat on the ramp and the back edge of the truck drinking and laughing as if the block had passed to them. A quick series of inquiries to Rose's sources revealed the new couple were from Boston. A graphic artist and a musician. "A musician?" said Grace. "A musician? Next door?" She slapped her forehead, scandalized. The last time there was a musician on the block he played his horn by the front widow in his underwear at all hours of the night. And there would be drugs no doubt. "Musicians are worse

than Puerto Ricans," she complained to Rose. When Rose told her how much they paid for the place she would have reconsidered her opinion had she believed it.

Similar trucks arrived in the days that followed. Similar couples moved into their similar units, all young, some with infants, most white, driving Volkswagens and Toyotas they quickly learned to move from one side of the street to the other on the days stipulated, double-parking with signs on their windshields indicating their apartment numbers to those they had blocked so they could be easily contacted, cordial and obliging, to move them. Everyone on the block noticed the change and Rose, glad as ever she had never owned a car, was not the only one watching. Dorie observed them from her front window, as did John. On one of the few occasions they spoke she said, "This is a good sign," and he agreed. There was still the large building down the street with its riff-raff, but John wasn't holding his breath for it to convert. It soon hit Rose that her building might be next. "Ma, what's happening here?" she asked as if Grace had a clue. In her panic she thought of Junior and his offer in Bay Ridge, though having a rent-controlled apartment must afford them some protection, she reasoned. She realized she was in need of legal advice here. And she would ask the landlord about his intentions straight-out the next time she saw him. In the meantime she accosted Ruben with her fears. "Don't worry," he told her. "We have eight units." She was reassured though she had no idea what that meant. Ruben was a smart guy and knew what he was talking about but she wanted to hear it from a lawyer. "We can't afford no lawyer," said Grace. "They can't move me out. I know my rights." And that was the end of it as far as her mother was concerned. Then a Chinese family direct from Hong Kong moved into the renovated brownstone across the street. "Hey, Ma. Sonny Bono is mayor of Palm Springs. Did you know that? Sonny Bono." Grace had no idea about any of it. She felt it would all pass, whatever it was.

You said you had a thing or two to tell me. Would it be too much to ask of you what you're doing to me? When you told me you didn't need me anymore,

well you know I nearly broke down and died. (When she says her love is dead, you think she needs you.) I can't believe that she would leave me on my own. Was I to blame for being unfair? If it's something that I've said or done, tell me what and I'll apologize. You said you don't understand what I said. I said, no, no, no, you're wrong. I know you never even try. I think I know, I mean a 'Yes', but it's all wrong. That is, I think I disagree. But if I seem to act unkind, it's only me, it's not my mind that is confusing things. Haven't I the right to make it up? Do I have to keep on talking till I can't go on? I've got every reason on earth to be mad—you tell lies thinking I can't see. Everything has got to be just like you want it. Can't you try to see that I'm trying to get to you? Who put all those things in your head? Not guilty of getting in your way. I know your mind's made up, you're gonna cause more misery. I've had a drink or two and I don't care. I realize I've left it too late. I'm down. I'm really down. You know I'd give you everything I've got for a little peace of mind.

Eddie stopped on the avenue in the shadows between streetlights to study from a distance the trio that remained sitting on the park wall. He snorted once, loud, indignant, witnessing the money pass from Nick to Nydia, and snorted each time the act replayed itself in unbidden flashes while he circled back, brooding in the gloom of the park far behind the wall where his cousin sat, seeing once again the wallet, the bill, the gesture, the acceptance, and having assumed its meaning felt compelled to witness the result. All thoughts are intrusive he knew, though it never occurred to him they were his own. The park felt dead with the onset of rain beginning as a fine mist. Ever vigilant, he saw the outline of two men on the path ahead, feeling their menace, and stepped into the brush to let the night envelope him under a stand of leafless oaks. When the threat passed he ventured into a meadow from which he could see the outline of streetlights and buildings far off on the edges of the park as if looking at the illumination of a shoreline. Stepping tentatively he sensed the blackness of a pit in front of him, attracted by the hint of movement it gave, attracted by a momentary impulse to fall into its depths. A pond. Ducks. Whispers along the

bank, *I saw what you did*. Looking into the gloom, crouching, furtive, he could no longer identify the spot where Nydia and Mary and Nick were sitting if indeed they were still there on the wall. Witness the result. He took his best bearing, refocused, and began to run, feeling his legs begin to move in a slow simian trot, build to an easy jog and finally throttle to the limits of his body's locomotion. He was sprinting faster than he had run in years, hurtling over roots and stones and flowers beds, feeling the freedom of his flight, rain stabbing at his eyes and pelting his face and hands as he drew air deep in his lungs—*atras…atras…atras* —sprinting toward the wall following the arc of a deep fly ball, holding up his hand for the exquisite juncture of ball and glove—*back…back…back*—until he feels his feet hit the warning track and he is about to leap when his knee smashes against a hard wooden edge, his chest heaves onto the back of the park bench that he crashes into full speed, tumbling him on his head and flipping him onto the wet grass where he lay still drawing the air deep in his lungs and feeling pain spear the left side of his chest with each breath. But he could see himself hold up the ball in his outstretched arm despite the pain, and the crowd cheered, and when he woke up the rain had stopped and the clouds had cleared though there was still not a star in the sky and he found that he could sit up and he could stand, though why he was there he could not recall. And there had been no wallet, and no bill, and no exchange. There had been nothing.

Nydia took Nick's ten-dollar bill, reached under her sweater and tucked it in her bra. Before Nick turned to go she lit the other joint and offered it to him in her outstretched hand, smoke swirling from her palm with the unlit end pointing toward him like a dare. He pulled his head back for an instant as he recognized what she was doing. "Here," she said. "Try some." Mary looked at him coolly. "Yeah. Go ahead." He took the joint and hopped on the wall next to Nydia, taking a drag through the crudely rolled paper and trying not to cough as the rush of vapor seared his throat. He held it in his mouth until it cooled and wisps of smoke drifted from his nostrils, inhaled again and tensed tightly to arrest the

cough welling up in his chest. He exhaled when his brain could no longer resist the need to breathe. He passed it back and Nydia leaned gently on his shoulder as she grasped it, resting her head a moment as she took the joint and inhaled in turn, straightening up as she passed it on to Mary. Her light pressure against him, accidental as it may have been, was disconcerting. “I should get back,” he said. “I have exams.” Nydia and Mary broke out laughing together, not mocking or scornful, gently amused, sympathetic even at the thought of Nick, of anyone, studying. Though there was no way he could discern their reason and felt foolish once again. “Tell your mother there’s nothing pornographic in that book. Have her ask me if she doesn’t believe you.” His father liked the book he recalled, so how risqué could it be? With that he was gone, leaving Nydia with Mary and her predicament. “I better get back,” said Nydia, and slipped off the wall to get her mother’s items at the corner store.

When Nydia arrived home she found her mother, father, brother, and sisters watching television in the darkened apartment. They did not acknowledge her entrance or her purchase. Nick’s book was on the TV tray next to her father, face down. She took it without uttering a word and without a word from her parents she went to her room, opened the book and began reading the first page. Why isn’t it called *The Sign Painter*, she wondered? And then remembered it was written by some foreigner.

Grace felt a peculiar weakness as she dropped in her chair at the kitchen table, a giddy sensation of soaring and falling at the same time. Though her eyesight was dim, she could see her husband grasp the chair next to her, twirl it around and sit leaning forward with his arms resting on its back like a cowboy in from the trail. At first she did not know which husband it was. She inspected his dark eyebrows, his jowls and the beard stubble that covered his face. It must be Frank she thought, Rose’s father, so like him not to shave, and she wondered why he had waited so long to visit. “Hello, Grace,” he said, with a smile she did not recognize. “Who did you expect?” And for a moment she wasn’t sure. Surely not Raymond, Junior’s dad. But Frank’s features shifted and blurred as her

vision weakened further, his dark hair changed to a bald shine, his stocky build thinned and shortened, and the more she looked the more he indeed resembled Raymond. And he was wearing a suit as if he had just come from church. It was confusing. “You’re not real,” she finally concluded. “Somebody made you up.” Her husband, or husbands, looked at her blankly. “Who did?” he asked. “I don’t know,” said Grace. “Somebody who makes things up.” Grace looked about and saw herself sitting in the tiny kitchenette of her first apartment when she was a new wife in Red Hook. “It never happened,” she said, fumbling with the buttons of her housecoat. “Somebody made it up.” Grace felt as if her body was about to whirl, not round in vertiginous circles but head-over-heels in a weightless somersault like she had been cast into outer space. “What’s the difference?” said Frank. He rose from his seat, picked a piece of lint from his lapel and straightened his sleeves with a quick tug. “Wait a minute,” said Grace, grasping the edge of the table to steady herself. “Don’t go.” She wanted to get him a slice of crumb cake. When she tried to rise from the chair her legs gave out and she fell back. “Rose sure got fat,” said Frank. “She’s on a diet,” said Grace as her head continued to spin. “And I think Junior’s in trouble,” she added. “Junior’s always in trouble,” said Raymond. “The difference is...” The difference is, thought Grace, no longer listening as the logic of her conversation triggered a shock as sudden as her finger in an electric outlet. A slow panic pressed her lungs in apprehension of a grand error. “Rose!” she gasped, “Rose!” Rose found her mother fingering the air as if trying to touch something in the chair next to her. “It’s all a movie,” said Grace. “They never happened. You never happened.” Rose thought hard about calling an ambulance, but mindful of the cascade of events that would surely follow opted to put her mother back to bed and hope whatever it was would pass. “Something happened to your father,” said Grace as Rose held her mother’s head forward and arranged the pillows beneath her neck. “Do you know what it is?” Grace turned the senile arcs of her eyes toward her daughter. “He died, Ma. Dead forty years.” Rose smoothed the blanket. “Buried in Greenwood.” Grace held up her hand and traced a spiral in the air. “I was afraid of that.” When her mother finally closed her eyes, Rose trudged back

to the living room. “Are you real?” called her mother. “Yes, Ma,” Rose called back. “Now get some sleep.” “You’ll come back won’t you?” said Grace. “You’ll visit me?” “Don’t worry,” said Rose. “I’ll be here.” Rose stopped, and looking back from the doorway watched until her mother lay still. Returning to her post at the window she shook her head thinking, what difference would it make? What difference would it make if she wasn’t real, or if her mother just had a stroke, or if the block became a playground for smart young people from the suburbs?

Grace had many visitors while she slept. Frank, who was dead, and Raymond, who was probably still alive—Junior got a call from a social worker last year who told him his father was in a nursing home or sanitarium somewhere in Florida. They arrived together and politely departed in opposite directions when she waved them away. Small animals—a baby squirrel, a cat, a pair of horseshoe crabs, a box turtle who settled on the bedspread, and an owl she shooed away from the headboard. Her mother dropped by as did her sisters. A troupe of children, brown, black, and white, (she assumed they were Puerto Rican) came up from the basement and danced around her bed with an iguana who wagged his dewlap in time to the music, and she had a brief chat with Saint Anne and Mary Pickford about child rearing and the social stigma of female infertility. She awoke entangled in a skein of twine twisted round her spine and throat, rolling about to loosen it, crying out in fear that she was about to be bundled off to a nursing home in the Poconos.

You put the facts together while pacing the living room floor to postpone going to bed for another sleepless night. Jen said she delivered a letter to an apartment across the street just before you were mugged. She gave it to a man whose description matched your memory of the mugger. Then recalling the mail mix-up and the fat woman who brought your mail over, and a letter from Social Security for her mother that was on the dining room table, you established a plausible motive. I do think it’s funny now, and rather pathetic. So at least you figured you weren’t the victim of random street violence that so haunts the

middle-class imagination. It was very personal. And absurd. In fact it's all very personal and absurd, including the randomness. Especially the randomness. I was pacing the living room to postpone going to bed, dreading the prospect of another night lying awake listening to the slow ping of the radiator and sirens racing down the avenue. I paused by the front window fuming about Oliver North's indictment and refuting once again each of Kennedy's assertions in his Bork's America speech (don't get me started on Teddy), when I saw the old lady planted on the sidewalk across the street like a statue. I could not imagine how she got there. I had never seen her any further than the stoop. It was starting to rain again. She was wearing a bathrobe and slippers, leaning forward on a simple wooden cane. She seemed frozen there in the cold, trying to move but falling back on her heels every time she tried to push forward. Two or three people walked past, giving her a wide berth but otherwise paying no attention to her. So when it became clear she could not move and was getting no help, I grabbed my yellow reef jacket (I used to sail you know, and pretty damn well) and crossed the street to see what I could do. I asked her if I she needed assistance, neglecting to properly introduce myself I must admit until I realized my oversight. She did not raise her eyes, and though I was standing directly in front of her she was gazing well past me with no expression, speaking in a hoarse monotone. I couldn't make out the words until I bent close. "Get me home," she said, then wobbled a bit but couldn't get her legs moving. As I helped her forward with one hand holding her wrist and the other supporting her shoulder, the rigid cogs released and her feet began to shuffle ahead in slow succession. We made it to the stairs. "Somebody made you up," she said. I couldn't have agreed more. I lifted her, light as a husk, one step at a time, afraid her brittle bones would snap in my hand if she slipped but an inch, until we were finally on the stoop. She whispered the name printed on the buzzer and I remembered it was the name of the fat woman's mother. Wiggs. Grace Wiggs. The name on the envelope. I pushed the button and waited, covering the old lady with my slicker until Rose—I suddenly remembered her name, too—lumbered into the hallway with her tremendous bulk heaving from side to side in

waves as she approached and opened the door for us distraught, mortified, near panic at the implications of her negligence. “Ma, what happened to you?” Panting for air, Rose took her mother’s free arm more gently than you could have imagined. “I found her on the sidewalk,” I said. “She couldn’t move.” “Thank you, Mr. Roads,” she said, composing herself despite her breathlessness and addressing me in the same formal tone she used when delivering my mail. “I fell asleep and didn’t hear her go out. Ma, where were you going?” I was struck by the sheer mass of Rose’s neck as it hung below her chin, and was much too obvious about it. A reaction she’s accustomed to, I suppose. “To the bakery,” said Grace. “I need a crumb cake.” I helped Rose lift her mother over the threshold and into the vestibule. It was too narrow for us to stand on either side of her, so I told Rose to go on ahead and open the door while I steadied Grace and eased her into the apartment. “Thank you, Mr. Roads,” repeated Rose. “I can handle her now. She gets confused.” I glanced around a room that fulfilled my expectations of modesty and poor taste. “Just you and your mother here?” I asked. “Nobody else to help out?” Thinking of Jen and the mugger. “Just us. We manage okay,” said Rose. “Is your building going co-op?” I asked. It wasn’t, I found out later.

When you finally sold the brownstone you made a handsome profit despite the proximity to Eddie’s shabby building, despite the mail snafu, despite Dorie’s haste. The closing price was nothing compared to its ridiculous value a few years later or the obscene value of the next decade, but enough to get Dorie to New Jersey and you a one-bedroom in Brooklyn Heights. I suppose I should be content with that. I’ve driven down the block a few times since. The sidewalk, the trees, the buildings look exactly the same you know, as if I’d merely blinked. Our house has the same stone garlands, the unfluted Ionian columns in relief, the same swirling scrolls of ornamentation over the door and beneath the windows. The same façade. The same time-tricking façades all the way down the block just as they were that spring of wet sidewalks and mad mailmen, divorce, denial, quaint acts of adultery and the fat lady at her window. Subjective time, elastic time. Layered back upon itself it seemed, any two points touching

from any distance, any three, any number, twisting gently in whatever topography you care to imagine, from your unyielding mother's mother to your boundary-less daughters. And their unyielding mother's sharp rent that sent time oscillating in all directions, still oscillating when that rent was long gone with not even a scar remaining. When you wondered if it really happened at all. Wondered, for instance, if you ever got to know Rose DeMauro. If after that rainy evening when you spotted the old lady on the sidewalk you always waved to Rose at her window across the street as you arrived home from work. Or chatted with her from the sidewalk as she sat on her stoop, asking about her mother. Getting the scoop on the block, new renters and real estate rumors. You don't choose your neighbors.

Eddie didn't know why he was in the park, or why his clothes were wet, or why his side hurt when he took a deep breath. It didn't matter. It was not the first time. He walked to the parkside avenue avoiding the winding paths without encountering another soul. The sight of the stone wall triggered a flicker of memory, something about the Mets and a fly ball deep to center field. He could picture a ball hurtling high overhead, but what came before and what came after was a mystery as meaningless as it was obscure. His father was watching a ballgame on TV when he got home. "Not again. What happened to you?" He looked up briefly at Eddie and went back to the game. "Why? What's wrong?" asked Eddie. His father answered without glancing back. "You banged up your face. And your clothes are filthy." Eddie looked down at the mud and grass-stains on his pants. "I guess I was playing ball," he offered. "You guess?" His father took a sip of his beer and Eddie sank onto the couch beside him. "I don't remember. My ribs hurt." Eddie, his father was well aware, often did not remember. "Take an aspirin," said his dad. "And take a shower. Did you see your cousin?" Eddie shrugged. "Which one?" he asked. "Nydia," said his father. "Her moms was looking for her. She was nuts, man. You know how she gets." Eddie tried to think how he could protect Nydia so that she knew he was the one protecting her, but the effort was too exhausting. He took off his shirt and felt the

spot on his ribs that was the source of his pain. “Man, you really banged yourself up good,” said his father, noticing the large bruise under his son’s armpit. “Put some ice on that.”

Eddie went to the freezer, filled a plastic bag with ice and returned to the couch. He was soon asleep, his rhythmic snoring but slightly out of phase with those of his father who had fallen asleep next to him with channel changer in hand so that their snores intermingled in a wordless rasping round. When he awoke next morning his father was gone. He showered stiffly, the soap stinging his abrasions and his side smarting with each movement. His father had laid his pills out on the kitchen counter before he left. Eddie dumped them down the sink. He was thinking of Nydia and the college kid across the street who had asked him about her. “*Pendejo*,” he said into the mirror.

After breakfast Eddie went up to Nydia’s apartment on the fourth floor to see if she was all right. Her mother answered the door. “*Buenos dias, Titi*,” he said respectfully as she stood blocking the threshold with the door half open. A young girl, one of the nieces Carmen watched while her sister worked, peered out behind her. “Yes?” His aunt leveled her gaze at him, her annoyance undisguised. “Is Nydia here?” he asked. “Of course not,” his aunt shot back. “She’s in school. Where do you think she’d be?” Eddie realized he had no idea what day it was. “My Pops said you was looking for her. Is she okay?” Carmen waved her hand dismissively. “You tell me. Why wouldn’t she be?” Eddie began rocking back and forth. A twitch of his torso sent an electric pain through his ribs but he didn’t flinch. “My Pops said you was looking for her, that’s all.” “My brother talks too much,” said Carmen. “If she does something like that again I’ll slap her silly.” Carmen was about to slam the door but hesitated on a sudden hunch. “So what do you know? You seen something?” Eddie squirmed and bobbed his head. “No, I ain’t seen nothing,” he answered. His aunt held him firmly in her gaze until he spoke again. “But I heard something. Some kid across the street asked me about her.” Carmen swung open the door and stepped back graciously. The sound of salsa romantica flowed into the hallway. “*Entra*. Don’t just stand there.” Eddie bounded in as if released from a spring. “What kid?” she

asked. Eddie recounted his meeting with Nick in the Desphande's brownstone across the street, without mention of his own nudity or the Norse god of thunder. "*Ellos son de India, verdad? Deben ser paganos,*" she answered. Now the book under Nydia's bed made sense. She made Eddie a cup of café con leche and brought out the saltines and butter. "They worship the cow or something," said Carmen. She crossed herself though the last church she had been to was Pentecostal. "They got a nice house," said Eddie. "*Come mierdas*," said his aunt. "They're not even citizens. Eddie, *hazme un favor* and keep an eye on him, will you? Tell me if he does anything with Nydia." Surveillance was Eddie's forte. He told her he would be only too glad. He would have lingered over the saltines and another cup of coffee but her business concluded, his aunt shooed him out the door and reminded him to take his medication. Eddie went straight to the sidewalk outside the entrance to the building, and though it was still morning began his vigil determined to remain until he spotted Nick.

"She's a nice girl. Maybe you should marry her." This was not what Ruben wanted to hear as he was running late to meet Lynne for dinner, or any time. His aunt was sitting barefoot on the edge of the bed with her spine relaxed and straight. Her hands were folded on the bulge of her belly in Buddha-like stillness. In contrast, Ruben rushed about brushing his teeth, changing his shirt, searching for his keys. "Why should I? Things are fine the way they are," he said as he pulled a belt from his dresser. Ruben had long ago, long before even his sojourns in the depths of the oceans and without much true reflection, rejected the goal of marriage and family as simply as some people decide not to smoke. The scars from his own upbringing ran too deep. His aunt thought him selfish. "Because at your age you should have children," said Ada, who viewed marriage as a rather informal arrangement. "And settle down?" said Ruben, trying to remain respectful but unable to hide his sarcasm. "I am settled down," he continued. "For now. Nothing is forever, Titi," a truism by which he meant that commitment might be a nice idea which purely by the nature of things—time, entropy, human self-interest—is bound to fail. Better to accept it, he was

convinced. Better to be honest about it. “Your children are your children forever,” said Ada, remaining still as a stone on the edge of the bed. “Whether they are alive or not,” she added, anticipating his reply. “And that is a blessing.” And look how much joy they brought you, thought Ruben. He understood better than most the biological principle at work but did not feel the need to pass on his genes just to satisfy his vanity or anyone else’s, which is what he assumed she meant. Though the only thing Ada could imagine worse than the pain of having children was the pain of not having them. She had no regrets on that score. “Here, let me straighten you.” Ada turned down the back of his shirt collar as he brushed his hair one last time in front of the mirror. “There. See how good you look? Any woman would be happy to have your children.” Ruben sighed, and despite himself smiled at his reflection. Handsome he was not. He realized that he did not know how Lynn felt about marriage. The topic had never come up.

Ruben, late as was his habit, met Lynn at her apartment on Union Street two blocks from the Plaza. She led him around the corner to a restaurant on Seventh Avenue that was only slightly overpriced, with décor designed to complement the Victorian look of its oak paneling and zinc ceiling. It was a neighborhood place, her favorite, staffed with handsome young servers, most of them awaiting their next audition, who looked for any small pretext to treat their patrons with irony and subtle sarcasm, which mattered little because Ruben ignored them and Lynne never noticed. After a piña colada and with little ceremony, Ruben asked Lynne to tell him more about her family. He knew she was an only child and that her parents were older—they had married in their thirties and been married thirty years—but having never met them had no clue what they were like apart from vague comments Lynne would make in bed from time to time before falling sleep. “You know,” said Lynne with a shrug, as if he should understand the full extent of the proposition, “they’re Jewish.” A fact he certainly did know, but had little clue what she tried to imply. Or perhaps she was trying to dodge the question. So he asked her to be more specific and she said, “Why? Would you like to meet them?” Ruben felt the conversation veering off track. “That’s not what I meant. I was just wondering how happy they are

after all these years. Do they ever get tired of each other?" Lynne looked puzzled. "They've had their problems," she said. "But I don't think it ever occurred to them to ask that question." Ruben's next inquiry was more blunt than he intended, and he could feel the weight of his own baggage even as he asked it. "So would they think it's better to stay together and be unhappy?" If Lynne thought the accusation odd or unkind, she kept it to herself. "They're not unhappy. They just act that way," she deadpanned, deflecting his question but not defensive, taking a sip of her drink. Ruben deferred for the moment. She looked at him slyly. "So why this sudden interest in old married couples?" Ruben recognized her cross-examining tone, playful as it was. "I don't know. I guess I haven't seen many couples stay together that long." She set her hands on the table and leaned toward him as if resting her case. "Then you haven't spent much time in Forest Hills." Concerned that their server was overhearing the conversation, Ruben gave him a look meant to ward off any comment. The server, about to point out that the Ramones came from Forest Hills, was barely able to hold his tongue before sauntering back to the kitchen. Lynne had decided months ago that she would go through the ordeal of introducing Ruben to her parents only if their relationship looked like it had a serious future. It had yet to reach anything close. She looked across the table at his rounded cheeks and copper complexion, his hair with its loose curls, imagining him as Sephardic perhaps, a physician at the emir's palace in Cordoba mixing love potions for the harem and poisons for the emir's assassins. At the same time she could not imagine him ever being faithful and wondered, in the long run, how much that mattered. She would be busy enough with her law practice. So they passed on to more neutral topics, like Ruben's work at Bellevue with resistant tubercle bacilli and the trial of Klaus Barbie, as Ruben enjoyed the sight of an appealing young woman across the table, anticipating the pleasures of a night of midweek sex. On the walk home she told him she worked in the morning and stifled a laugh.

Rose knew something bad had happened to her mother as surely as if she'd seen the lesion on an MRI. She accepted Grace's steady decline, her unsteadiness, failing memory, incontinence, as the price of old age, but this confusion was something different. And the hallucinations scared her. At first Rose found her mother's solipsism interesting, even amusing at times, as if she were playing a cagey game. Rose tried engaging in temporizing chat-chat, hoping her mother's fear would subside as quickly at it appeared. But each time she gently chided Grace by insisting that she, her daughter, was real, Grace had a ready reply: "Of course you'd say that. It's in the script." Other challenges to her mother's logic proved equally futile. After three days of watching Grace converse as readily with the dead as with the living, the inert with the animate, Rose decided it was time to see a doctor. Her mother's physician was a harried, soft-spoken young internist who quickly agreed Grace might have had a stroke. He wanted to send her straight to the hospital but Grace flat-out refused. Why would you believe a doctor someone made up? A doctor with a yarmulke? So glancing discretely at his watch while he twirled his beard, Dr. Rehman, who was balding but wore no yarmulke, wrapped up the session by handing her a prescription and orders for a battery of tests. When car service dropped mother and daughter on the curb in front of their apartment, Grace was so weak Rose could hardly get her to the steps. She knew the only way to get the testing done was with Junior's help, and that was not an option. So Rose filled the prescription and hoped for the best. "Try it, Ma. They're like vitamins," she coaxed with a look that said, what is there to lose? After taking one pill Grace was barely conscious for two days. She could hardly rouse herself to eat or drink. It was impossible to tell if she was talking in her sleep or hallucinating while awake, remembering her life or living out her memories. So Rose flushed the rest of the pills down the toilet and they were back to square one, minus expenses. Two days later Grace perked up and Rose ventured a delicate question: "Ma, am I real?" To which Grace replied, sitting up in bed and pointing a gouty finger for emphasis, "That's a dumb question. What's wrong with you?" Though her mother's mind was now remarkably clear, her gait was worse than

ever when Rose finally got her out of bed for a trip to the bathroom. “I’ve been having the strangest dreams,” she said, falling backwards on the toilet seat. “I thought your father came to visit.” Rose was delighted to have her mother acting like her old self. They celebrated with a brunch of cheese omelets, sausage, hash browns, and pancakes that Grace managed to nibble eagerly before choking so hard she threw up. But that didn’t dampen her spirits, or Rose’s. “Do you remember being out on the sidewalk in the rain?” asked Rose after her mother was gently washed, powdered, and eased back to bed. Grace looked at Rose as if she were joking. “Now how could I get out there? Are you nuts?” “That’s what I’d like to know,” said Rose. “I fall asleep and the next thing I know Mr. Roads across the street is bringing you up the steps. You were stuck on the sidewalk soaking wet.” “It never happened,” said Grace, dismissing the subject with a flick of her hand. “I told you he was a nice man,” said Rose. “Junior shouldn’t have beat him up.” “It never happened,” said Grace again.

The afternoon air began to hold some warmth and the dampness of early spring was gone. The buildings of the block, less shadowed with each passing day, displayed a new luminosity, and the sun at its zenith above the parapet of the brownstone across the street shined directly on Rose in her sunglasses at the south-facing window. “Ma, Eddie’s been hanging around the front of the building all day. It looks like he’s watching the dentist’s place.” She could see Eddie through her darkened lenses, pacing to the curb and back. “Probably wants to rob it,” whispered Grace, slumped forward in her wheelchair at Rose’s side with her eyes on the floorboards. “Call the police.” Rose observed Eddie closely as she replied. “No, Ma. He’s too obvious. Something else is going on.” It was a busy day. Rose was keeping tabs on the Chinese family that had just moved into a brownstone down the street, on the co-op situation next door, and the ongoing marital difficulties directly across from her. She was also tracking, as usual, any suspicious person who wandered on the block, which was anyone she didn’t know and some she did, and maintaining her daily routine of counting parking tickets handed out by the meter maid. She began to tire from her efforts

as the afternoon wore on, but determined to see what Eddie was up to. It was near dinnertime when Nick Deshpande returned from class and Eddie's sudden excitement was obvious. Rose, alerted now, her nerves strung tight with anticipation, set her sunglasses on her head to get a better look. Eddie began to circle around, passing on the sidewalk beneath Rose who turned discretely away from her window until he had gone by. He crossed the street to get behind Nick, head bobbing in his usual agitation, scratching his sides, sniffing the air, stroking his mustache in a bizarre attempt to look inconspicuous. As Nick entered his gate he glanced in Eddie's direction and gave him a wave that Eddie, looking away, did not acknowledge. "Ma, Eddie was waiting for the dentist's son. You know, the skinny kid."

"So what?"

"So that's strange, don't you think?"

"I don't think."

"Well it is, Ma. Something's up with Eddie and that kid."

"Go figure."

After Nick had disappeared inside his house Eddie strolled by, peering in the Deshpande's windows as he went, walking on till he reached the end of the block, turned back and repeated the same inspection from the opposite direction. This time Roopa appeared on the stoop. "Mr. Eddie," she called. "You seem to be looking for something." Eddie gaped at the tall woman towering over him like a saffron idol in her bright sari and, feeling unmasked, bumped into a sycamore sapling just planted on the edge of the sidewalk before he stumbled into the side door of a station wagon. "*Jonron*!" he shouted as he bounced away, racing to the building across the street without looking back. Rose witnessed it all as pantomime. She saw Roopa start to go down the stairs to help Eddie, and Nick call her back. "You're right, Ma," said Rose. "I think Eddie wants to rob the place." Exhausted from her vigil but still relieved to have her mother recovered from her delusions, Rose stood up, straightened her housecoat with two little downward strokes and put the street and its denizens behind her. I wish I had the good sense not to waste money on doctors and pills,

she thought. When will I learn? “C’mon, Ma. Let me get you up for dinner.” She helped her mother from the wheelchair and settled her on the sofa in front of the TV so they could eat on the coffee table watching Rose’s favorite prime time soap opera. Five minutes later Rose brought their lasagna steaming from the micro-wave. Grace picked absently at her plate as it slowly cooled. She put down her fork, lifted it again, mashed down the pasta, and put it down once more before finally taking a small bite on which she chewed endlessly, forgetting and remembering to swallow, all the while staring at her daughter’s plate with relief to see her eating normal fare again. No sign of grapefruit or hint of green. It meant things would remain the same, she thought as she rested between bites, just the two of them, the way it was meant to be. Rose was busy recapping the show’s plot as she did for her mother each week, embellishing details as if talking about the habits of old friends, but Grace hadn’t followed it for years or kept the characters straight no matter how much Rose tried to keep her up to date. It was hard enough keeping track of the people in her dreams, or the people she once knew, or the people on the block, the way they kept coming and going. She fell asleep with a mouthful of food halfway through the first commercial while Rose continued her explication as if preparing for an oral exam.

Dorie had researched the best child therapists in Brooklyn, and was extending her search to Manhattan when John returned from work. Unlike the past months or years, she was quick to tell him about her day. She had been to the girls’ school for a conference about Allie. Allie’s teacher had been friendly, even deferential, while making it clear that Allie’s behavior was ‘disruptive’ and needed to be ‘addressed’. Dorie felt humiliated, for behind all the smiling and expressions of concern the insinuation was obvious. And though her first reaction was to take offense, she realized it confirmed her fears before she had properly acknowledged them. It took her the remainder of the afternoon to temper her guilt with a variety of solutions.

“Allie doesn’t need a therapist. She needs parents,” John replied as he emerged from the kitchen and settled onto the living room sofa with his first drink of the evening.

“John, denial doesn’t work here. This is our daughter. Go talk to her teacher.”

“She’s just acting like a normal kid,” said John, crossing his legs while he sat back and twirled the ice in his glass, thinking denial was every bit as good an option as Dorie’s alarm.

“A normal kid under a lot of stress,” said Dorie, exasperated at her husband’s opposition.

“So whose fault is that?”

“We are *not* going there. That’s a dead issue.”

“You’re the one who wanted to talk about Allie,” said John as he sipped and paused. “That *is* the issue.”

“What are you trying to prove, that you’re the good parent here?” Dorie’s voice rose quavering now, strident, goaded by the perception that her simple plea for help was being willfully distorted to serve her husband’s pointless agenda. “Blaming me for everything. Getting plastered every night. Getting beat up on the sidewalk. Don’t be absurd. You’re the stress here.”

John leaned forward so abruptly his drink sloshed over the front of his glass. “So now it’s my fault I got mugged?”

“God knows what you do when you’re drunk. You can’t even remember.”

“Concussions will do that. And what kind of mother are *you*?” said John, rising to his feet as Dorie simultaneously rose from her chair to square off with him. “Abandoning your kids for some bogus mental health vacation.”

“Because I had to get away from *you*,” Dorie snapped, a response as heartfelt as it was barbed. She acted quickly to shift the argument away from anything to do with her affair. “And what’s the first thing I see when I get back? You coming on to Sam. Admit it. You always had a thing for her.”

“Now you’re delusional,” said John, seizing the opportunity for outrage regardless of how near it came to the truth, still oblivious to his wife’s infidelity. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“You’re delusional if you think there’s any chance of saving this marriage,” said Dorie. She turned away to signal the end of the conversation.

But John wasn’t finished. Fixing his level stare at the back of her head he added in a carefully measured tone: “You just want Allie medicated so the school won’t bother you.” A statement that, retaliatory as it was, he really believed. Dorie whirled back as if her husband’s words had smacked her like a spitball.

“You conceited prick. I want you out. You’re the one who needs to be medicated. And detoxed.”

They glared at each other in mute stalemate, temples pounding in a silence broken by the sound of small footsteps upstairs. As if they cued him to action, John strode to the kitchen and started pulling liquor bottles from their cabinet. Holding one upturned in each hand he poured their contents into the sink like a bartender mixing a giant cocktail. “There,” he shouted to Dorie who had trailed behind, standing next to him to thwart any attack on other items in the kitchen. “No more alcohol problem. Now what’s your excuse?”

“I don’t need an excuse. I just need a man who can satisfy my needs.”

“You’re such a c....” Roads didn’t even get the word out when Dorie’s hand flashed at his face. He caught her arm just above the wrist and gave it a twist hard enough to pull her off balance.

“I’m calling the police,” she hissed as she broke free.

“The hell you are.” John pounced on her as she reached the phone and ripped it from her hand. As she spun around Dorie glimpsed Jen who, more fascinated than fearful, had come downstairs to witness the commotion. “Call 911,” she whispered. Jen dutifully scurried up the stairs as her parents tussled for a moment longer in the kitchen. When John realized what was happening he rushed to the second floor and found his daughter on the phone in his bedroom giving their address to the operator on the other end. He slipped the receiver

from his daughter's hand and assured the operator that everything was all right. False alarm. Just kids, nothing going on. But a report had been made. The call could not be cancelled. Someone would be sent out to check, sir. Procedure. Jen was more terrified now at the thought she had erred than at her parents conflict. She held her sobs until her father was off the phone. He followed—to Jen it felt like chased—her to her room where she lay down on the bed with her face buried in the covers waiting for what consequence she did not know. Her father stopped at the doorway frozen in his silent outrage at the realization that the police were on their way, and managing to gather his wits for what lay ahead said as gently as he could, "It's all right, Jen. It's over," and retreated downstairs.

When the police arrived John was courteous and calm. He greeted them at the door like a proper host and ushered them in. Dorie sat composed at the dining room table. They both said they had an argument over the children. They were angry and had raised their voices. It frightened the girls. They weren't used to their parents arguing. But everything was fine now. As the officers listened from across the table, inspecting Dorie for bruises, abrasions, a favored limb, she assured them she had not been hurt. She felt perfectly safe. They said they still had to file a report and asked to speak to the girl who made the phone call. Jen trotted downstairs in her pajamas determined to say the right things. She said she was scared because her parents were shouting at each other. They asked her if her father had hurt their mother. She said no. They asked if she were afraid. She stepped to her father's side and took his hand. "No." The officers inspected the kitchen, the living room, the den, and politely took their leave.

As soon as Jen was back in bed Dorie broke the silence. "Next time I get a restraining order."

"For what, calling you the c-word?"

Dorie gave him the finger and marched upstairs. She should have known better, she told herself. Why on earth did she think she could get any help from him? What a fool she was. The best thing she could do for the girls was get them away from their father. As soon as she was gone John located an unopened bottle of scotch in the pantry—advance planning, no shortage of

reserves for our John—and settled on the couch in front of the TV. He considered sobriety for a moment but the thought only repulsed him. Dorie lay in bed spent but restive. To dampen her anger she willed the sensation of Justin pressed against the length of her body, her cheek pressed against his chest, their legs intertwined, and slowly drifted into a rueful sleep. Above her in their separate rooms Jen and Allie remained on guard, the house's self-appointed sentinels. They could both hear the occasional rush of a car down the street, a voice on the sidewalk, the sound of the television downstairs, but couldn't make out the words. It's all Allie's fault, thought Jen. They held their bodies as still as they possibly could in parallel vigils bound to diverge.

You're not hungry. You shun hunger because you can't stand it. You eat so it never happens. Not like pain. You have a high tolerance for pain. Ma knows I always had a high tolerance, like when my periods started. When they hurt so bad I could hardly stand up but I walked to school anyway. Even when you couldn't pay attention in class, when the teacher called on you and you couldn't hear the question let alone think of an answer yet you wouldn't tell them it was because of the pain. Because I could bear it, the curse as Ma always called it. But hunger is an empty space that sucks you in, while pain is just a constant background to your day like heat coming up the radiators or electricity running through the wall. Like the pain now in my knees or my hips or my back, if I stop to notice. Always there. But you have trained yourself not to. Because I had to. And the pain of your periods did stop after all when you finally said go ahead, take it out, I don't need it after Aldo died in the fire and all that. So they just took everything out and I don't have to worry about it no more. So maybe the other pain will stop someday, too. There will be more operations. For now you just find ways to take your mind off it. Keep busy. Watch the block, do things for people. Like Ma. I always helped her. And Aldo's mother and his sisters. You helped them and didn't mind when they found fault with you because you know some things you're not good at. I didn't mind? Up to a point. Because when they start saying I'm faking, that's too much. I never faked anything in my life. Like I said, I

can take pain, and if I can't get out of bed when I get my headaches it's because it's a pain that would kill most people. I'd like to see what they'd do with headbangers like that. I had more pain in one of those headaches than they had their whole life, but I still didn't ask them for nothing. No disrespect. I had to move back with Ma. And you left them all your husband's things. Sure I did. Where was I gonna put them?

Rose hoisted herself to her feet from the armchair in front of the window. Not much going on, she concluded after a final sweep of the sidewalk. A light rain was falling. Eddie had appeared from his building and disappeared toward the park. Kids were home from school, but the workday had not yet ended. Her knees creaked, bone grinding on bone but she felt steady enough. In the bedroom her mother's walker blocked her path. She folded it and set it against the wall while Grace slept, proceeding quietly to the kitchen for a snack after she assured herself her mother's chest rose and fell, rose and fell again, picking up a plastic cup from the bedside table as she went and dropping it in the trash. Grace woke to the sound of the refrigerator door opening. "Get me a soda," she shouted, though Rose was but ten feet away and already pouring it into a clean cup. She left the iceless drink on Grace's bedside table as she shuffled back to the living room. Grace had closed her eyes again and gave every sign she did not want to be disturbed. Rose settled into her chair with a bowl of potato salad, homemade and German-style because she liked it sour with the mustard and the bacon, cold because she didn't feel like heating it. Better than the stuff at the deli she thought, except maybe the Polish one two avenues down. The block was wet and still. She ate daintily, dabbing her lips with a sheet of paper towel, handling her fork with care, knowing she could be seen from the windows across the street and mindful of her status.

And your mother knew, as you knew she knew, that when something hurt you said nothing—being helpful if not always as cheerful as she might like—that would upset her because she had a lot on her mind with your brothers and your stepfather. And you know she would have helped you too if you had said anything but you didn't because you wanted to be like her, which she could see

and which brought you close even if no one said a word about it or a word about what your stepfather did to you. You spared her that. And she could bake. I could never bake like her. Nobody could. It was the German in her, the Mueller somewhere on her mother's side. Mueller, Miller, Molinaro, people are pretty much the same. My fear of hunger has nothing to do with want. We always had a well-stocked pantry. Banana nutbread, raspberry cheesebars, hamentaschen, lemon walnut cake, ruggala, chocolate cupcakes. I can cook, but bake? Won't even try. Ma wouldn't eat it if I did, wouldn't be up to her standards. Outside the damp afternoon wore on, a faint echo of winter. Dreary sky, drab reflections in the windows across the street mirroring a line of parked cars that seemed abandoned. You can't help but think gloomy thoughts on a day like this. Impossible not to be part of the outside. What's going on outside happens inside and vice versa. But I'm not a gloomy person. You've had your dark moments, though. Of course I have, who hasn't? I ask God sometimes why he does these things to me. I get up the nerve to question His goodness now and then, and I'll keep doing it if I have to. Like why He gave me this body. Never got an answer. Now I can't even get to church anymore and not because I don't want to. God knows how long it's been since I could kneel. My knees feel like broken glass, bring me to tears. Rose of Lima. I did it as long as I could. So what's that about? God gives me a body I can't get to church in. Is that a joke? Ma gives me the same old stuff. He has his reasons—inscrutable you know, or the sanctity of suffering. Sometimes I get the point but not quite. Not quite, but you have to keep it in perspective. Look around. Why should you feel sorry for yourself when you see all those people worse off? Even the Roads. Look at their poor girls. The cops coming to their house. They should be ashamed. You see? All their money and education, where does it get them? But give me their money and I'd be a lot happier, guaranteed.

Rose dabbed her mouth one last time, folded the paper towel in neat quadrants and set it in the empty bowl. She was not hungry and knew she could bear it, knew she could always bear it. Her mother stirred with a grunt and lay still. It was almost time for her pills. Things were beginning to pick up on the

street. The co-op people next door were arriving home in pairs with baguettes and bok choy. Ruben's aunt appeared on the stoop in a green sweatshirt over her flowered dress and paused to count her food stamps. Ada unfurled an umbrella before carefully descending one step at a time in the firm tread of her running shoes and started for the corner store to buy cooking oil and her daily lottery ticket. Rose noted the smoothness of Ada's skin, her face but slightly wrinkled, shiny despite her age and the dullness of the day. It's the dark complexion, thought Rose. Less sun damage. Melatonin. Protects the blood cells. Rose took another mouthful of potato salad and chewed thoughtfully. I still don't see why Puerto Ricans get all that welfare. Why them? Nobody gave my people a thing. Maybe people were just too cheap back then. But if they're gonna hand it out at least give it to citizens. Otherwise they should work, like Ruben. Rose was pleased she had twice voted for Reagan. She checked the clock. It was time to get Grace up for her pills and start dinner. She looked out the window to inspect the block one more time. Water filled the gutters but the rain had slackened. A livery car splashed through puddles, the whine of its tires on the wet pavement passing slowly down the street. My block, she thought. Washed clean. What will it be like when I'm not here? How can it even be here when I'm not? Then she realized it was just a gloomy thought on a gloomy day. It would soon be May and she would be sunning herself on the stoop, chatting with her neighbors, watching kids dodge between the cars and people pass below her on their way to the park. She rocked back and forth until she gained enough momentum to ease her ascent, kept one hand on the table until she was sure of her balance, and started toward the rear of the apartment and the beginning of her evening.

Grace blinked. The wall in front of her did not move. Then it did, like a slide show from an old projector dissolving to her left, as if the kitchen had a sliding panel. She blinked again. The wall froze and melted away, forgotten. She was glad to see her mother sitting at the table, but a bit puzzled that she had put on so much weight. An enormous amount of weight, in fact. She's not

having another baby is she, Grace wondered? Twins? It'd be hard to tell. Grace did not feel like eating. She had hardly eaten in days. Purple veins traced tortuous paths through skin lying loose and translucent on her face. Her eyes had dulled to ground glass. Dinner lay untouched on her plate. Rose cleared it away and set down a dish of ice cream. Grace looked at it and blinked once more as Rose took a small spoonful and raised it to her mother's lips. They pursed involuntarily and at the first sensation of sweetness opened searching, nibbling, closing around the spoon. "Good, huh?" said Rose. Grace opened wider and licked the remaining ice cream into her mouth to the gratification of her daughter. Rose handed the spoon over to her mother who grasped it feebly yet firmly enough to begin feeding herself. Her hand wobbled as it veered toward her mouth but she kept at it, pausing to stare at the wall with each mouthful, Rose wiping her chin with a napkin when she forgot to chew or swallow and the melted ice cream drooled through her front teeth. She finished the bowl. "Coffee, Ma?" "Yeah," said Grace. "Regular." Rose poured her a cup. She had been serving her mother decaf for the past two years. "Sure," said Rose. "Regular." Grace took it black, sipped it once noisily and splashed the trembling cup back on the saucer. She blinked at the cup and then blinked at the wall. "Get me back to bed." She wondered where her mother had gone. "My mother was just here," she said as Rose guided her to the bedroom. "She put on weight. Who are you?"

Waking toward dawn from a prolonged episode of REM sleep, Nydia Abreu retained a strong impression of Nick Desphande. She dreamed he was a virgin, which she thought strange for such a good-looking boy unless perhaps he was gay. Before falling back asleep she resolved to have sex with him as soon as possible and make sure the whole thing seemed like his idea. The thought remained with her all morning, as did her resolve. That she wasn't sure why didn't matter. It had to be done. For the next two days she hurried home from school, applying her makeup a bit too thick and her clothes a bit too tight, to hang out on the parkside wall as long as she dared given her father's warning.

But there was no sign of Nick though Eddie seemed to be skulking about more than usual and had to be shooed away more than once. A more direct approach was needed. "*Mami*, have you seen that book? I need to give it back." But her mother had thrown *The Painter of Signs* in the trash days ago, frustrated from searching in vain for pornographic passages, though finding the words 'contraception' and 'birth control' had been enough to justify her fears. "Give it back? Back to who?" Nydia at once realized her mistake. "The boy across the street," she answered honestly for a change. "It's for a college class," a false and unnecessary elaboration she felt compelled to add. "I just wanted to see what they read in college." Her mother looked at her skeptically and scowled. "Boys don't give you something for nothing. Stay away him," she warned, then softened her tone, "*Nena*, I don't care if you have boyfriends. But not those people," she explained. "His mother's the biggest *come mierda* on the block. She looks down her big nose on everybody." Carmen waved her hand and drew down the corners of her mouth in a gesture that was meant to dismiss the all Deshpandes and their ilk from the whole borough, from the entire hemisphere. Which not only made Nydia more determined than ever to have sex with Nick but sharpened her desire, just as her mother's concern rose to full alarm and reminded Carmen to make sure Eddie was on the case. Which he was.

So Nydia wrote Nick a letter that said she had something to tell him, and specified the time and place for an assignation. It was delivered promptly by the new ponytailed mailman (Rose was the first know to his name was Pascal and he hailed from Sheepshead Bay) and immediately confiscated by Nick's mother who, suspicious of the handwriting, opened it directly upon receipt without the least qualm, and exulting at the validation of her fears had spread the letter on the dining room table with a sense of triumph awaiting her son's return from class. "There's an interesting letter you should see," she reported the moment he set foot in the door. Her air was ominous and dark as she could make it. Nick was duly conducted to the dining room. He read the letter, folded it in his pocket without a word and, expressionless, rose from the table to mount the stairs to his room when his mother stopped him. "Who is this girl? The one from the

park?" Nick was not in the mood to be infantilized. "Yes. She wants to go to college. She asked for some advice. Is that so strange?" And as he resumed climbing the stairs he stopped listening to his mother's words though he couldn't tune out her hectoring tone, and the fantasy he entertained of sex with Nydia since their first meeting at the mailbox in her building's foyer became more compelling than ever. "Give me that letter," shouted Roopa. Nick pulled it from his pocket, ripped it in half and tossed it down the stairs. "Your father will hear of this." She picked up the two halves and shook them at her son. Nick didn't really care. He was meeting Nydia in the park on Saturday. Until then his imagination was free day and night.

Two weeks with Ada and Ruben was at the end of his rope. Not that she was difficult to live with—she was neither intrusive nor demanding. Not that he didn't appreciate her cleaning and cooking despite his recent weight gain. But she was always present with her rose water and plastic idols and he was most comfortable when left to himself. And she must be getting hard of hearing because she kept turning up the volume on her *telenovelas* until the neighbors complained. It was difficult to concentrate on his acrostics or simply flow with the drift of his own thoughts. A solution had to be found before he lost his hard won equanimity. So one evening after a few drinks and some Vicodin that was lying around his medicine cabinet from a sprained ankle months ago, or perhaps for an occasion such as this, he asked Lynne to marry him. Not blurted out so much as mumbled. A proposal his aunt would certainly approve of and had probably petitioned her saints for, even if she would find herself alone as a result. "Whoa," was Lynne's reaction. "Where did this come from?" Left field it seemed to her. She had sometimes wondered how she would feel if asked that question. Now she knew. Flattered and frightened. Confused. Terrified, in fact. The brakes were immediately applied to the question, a time-out that Ruben was quick to appreciate when he woke up the next morning and remembered vaguely what he had done. But on further reflection as the day wore on—riding the train to work, pipetting in the lab, entering data on his spreadsheet, riding

home again, and over many cups of coffee—he found he was quite okay with the idea, acknowledging in his behavior the common phenomenon of not knowing what you think until you say it, and the practical goal of moving in with Lynne or finding a new place together so they could leave his apartment to his aunt. Voilà. It all came together somehow.

Samantha couldn't say she didn't see her friends' divorce coming. Saw it, in fact, as she sat in Dorie's kitchen recalling her observations, long before Dorie did. Saw it when she first observed Dorie take digs at John in the company of friends just to get a laugh. "Only kidding honey, don't be so thin-skinned. But it's *true.*" Witnessing the deniable venom that comes after the second vodka tonic when grievances fester. An uncomfortable humor, and one of the many telltale signs Sam had seen escalating for how long, three years? After post-concussive John excused himself and passed out with his newly stitched lip and the girls were finally in bed if not asleep, Dorie confided to Sam her affair with Justin, finally casting off the restraint she felt from the messy fact that Sam and Justin were a brief item in college. Sam did not know how she felt about John anymore. Or Justin. Or Dorie. More sad than anything. "For how long?" she wondered as she received the news. It would be one thing if Dorie had been fooling around for years, quite another if she had just fallen in love. Though why did it matter really, and why did it have to be Justin? She knew the attraction but it was all too weird, too hermetic, another illustration of the incestuous world she was trying to leave behind. So she asked, "Does John know?" and Dorie shook her head. "Not yet. I want to be out of here when he finds out." "But he must have some idea," said Sam. "John?" laughed Dorie. "He's too self-absorbed to see anything he doesn't want to see." Then after a brief silence added, "You want him?" As if pulling out something from the back of her closet. Sam saw the conversation taking an uncomfortable turn. "I have enough problems. I think I'll pass." She smiled a blank, neutral smile. Dorie's eyes locked with Sam's and lingered there a moment before she spoke. "I always thought you two were suited for each other. I don't know why." Not meant as the insult it could be

taken for perhaps, though Dorie was thinking back to the time before her wedding when personality flaws were just personality and excess a virtue, at least in young men. “Maybe because I accept him, that’s all,” said Sam, holding the edges of her smile. “It’s much easier when someone isn’t making demands of you. He always treats me like his sister. Which is fine with me,” she concluded, with a nonchalance she knew sounded slightly forced. “Come on now,” said Dorie, into her cups now, feeling a bit too clever, with a hint of hostility she would be quick to deny. “Fess up,” “There’s nothing to confess,” said Sam. “I need to go. It’s getting late.” They said goodbye with a fond hug that brought a tipsy tear to Dorie’s eye. Samantha Syms drove home to her studio on the Upper West Side with the utmost caution and a brooding sadness, sad not for the passing of their vain, headstrong youth—she was happy to let that go. She saw middle age as equally vain and headstrong, if more somber. Sad not for the breakup of yet another stale marriage, or for the children of those marriages who would never understand their parents’ pain. Perhaps it was because she could not escape the folly of so many of her old friends.

Our block, my Camulodunum, its thick walls of Portland-quarried stone and brick obscure in this April’s drizzle, appeared for its appointed moment promising neither bread nor circuses. And certainly, like the original, neither fidelity nor safety despite the walls. Two hectares of rectangular space, an abstraction really, carved from a Dutchman’s stolen field to compact its inhabitants and number their bodies like their dwellings. Like the original its bricks, beds, and mattresses will undoubtedly lay beneath a layer of ash one day. But it’s not really our block. That would imply some common bond. There is nothing collective here since Verrazano passed the Narrows, if not before. How could it be otherwise in this land of tribute? It’s yours alone, to act upon or to witness. The threads between you and her, you and him, you and me severed and restrung as if by some impatient spider scurrying to reweave her web after the storm or the broom, and severed again and restrung again. Walking the same wet sidewalks, watching the same mail carriers, hearing the same sirens

and car alarms, each on our own block in a space as permanent and substantial as a Higgs's boson. I'd begun to realize the dead exist in equal measure to the living. Not because the dead have become more present, rather the living less so. Or so it seems when you can't sleep.

You saw Rose speaking to her neighbor the lawyer. And Rose saw Mr. Roads coming across the street. John stopped and nodded. "Hello, Rose. Hi, Jerry." Guilford's wife would later pull you aside just before you moved away with the admonition that he prefers Jerome and hates, truly hates, being called Jerry. And Roads probably thinks addressing me in the diminutive narrows the distance between us, thought Guilford. Which explained his reply. "Hey, Johnny-boy. What you up to?" Looking for news on the local real estate market and co-op conversions, naturally. "Not much," said Roads, turning to Rose. "Just wondering how your mother's doing." Rose paused, broom in hand. "Not so good," she answered. "Sorry to hear that," said John, finding himself a bit disappointed that his recent sidewalk rescue had not turned the tide for the old gal. "What you gonna do? She's no spring chicken," said Rose. Looking at Jerome then back at Rose and coming right out with it. "So does DeWitt want to co-op your building?" The two next-door neighbors glanced at each other. "Funny you should ask, John," said Jerome. "I hear your place may be going on the market soon."

You, Rose, thought that remark wasn't quite right. It must be a very sensitive subject for Mr. Roads and, after all, news of their divorce was still gossip. You would prefer to respect his feelings but Mr. Guilford was a lawyer and it was no big deal to him because he probably saw things like that every day, like doctors see blood and people's private parts. Besides, lawyers have to get to the point, don't they? "Where'd you hear that?" asked Roads. He seemed so stung you felt embarrassed for him. But Guilford was unmoved. "Just word on the street," said Jerome. "And your wife may have mentioned it."

How does a feeling of shame suddenly shoot to the roots of your hair from such a casual remark, welling up before the words have properly registered

in your consciousness? Because it most certainly did and Rose saw it and Jerome Guilford, Sr. had seen things go below market more than once when divorcing couples were hell bent on disentanglement and desperate for closure. If Dorie mentioned anything to Judy, you thought, the word was all over the block. You make a mental note to caution Dorie to be more discrete, which you knew would send her ballistic but you had to do it anyway, pragmatic goals and spite an irresistible combination and almost worth the cost. That's how far behind you were, the fat lady and the Black guy across the street knew more about the real state of your marriage than you did. And the last thing in the world you were going to do was disentangle below market so a real estate predator like Guilford could snap it up. Dorie would just have to cool her jets on this one.

And maybe the changes on the block weren't all that bad you thought as you leaned on your broom and looked down at the two men on the sidewalk below you. Not just any two men. Professionals. Intelligent men. People you can have a nice conversation with right on your own stoop.

Another afternoon on the block. Eddie sniffed twice and with a brisk head tilt cracked his neck as he skipped out of the building. His father was asleep on the couch with the Fania All Stars playing *Mi Gente* on their battered stereo. Roopa's brother-in-law V. K. Patel, systems analyst, saw Eddie from the bay window of the Deshpande's living room as he sipped a Coke. Three blocks down Jerome, Jr. conjugated the Latin verb *ponere* in the perfect passive subjunctive. Judy Guilford looked through three catalogues until she found a peasant dress she would like to make. Nydia Abreu, daydreaming, dropped her head on the desk while her history teacher turned to write an assignment on the blackboard. Titi Ada sneezed on her way to the botanica for some amansa guapo, witnessed the hard-hatted Con Ed worker descending through a manhole on the avenue, and said a prayer for Grace Wiggs. Lynne sighed as she composed her response to Ruben while twisting a strand of hair around her finger. Pete Deshpande hoped in vain that his sister-in-law was not planning to move to America. Rose DeMauro watches the block, rubs her eyes, and

watches again. Theodora Roads wondered if she should take back her maiden name or keep Roads for the sake of her children. Her maiden name, she decided. And she would keep it if she remarried. Though she didn't. Junior took the D train back to Bay Ridge after an uneventful meeting with his parole officer. He finally placed the girl's face at the window outside the bar on the other side of the park after the sidewalk incident with Roads. The girl with the big mouth in front of the crowd. The one from the building. Samantha was not totally shocked when Justin asked her to meet him for lunch and she agreed, wary but curious she'd have to admit. Grace Wiggs' cortical neurons fired in slow, synchronous waves. Her breathing stopped for a moment. Then started. Then stopped. Nick Deshpande decided he had been a virgin long enough, and was going to get into a top business school no matter what. Jennifer Roads doubled down on her long division. She got it right this time. Jerome Guilford, Sr., attorney-at-law, went to the gym for a lunchtime workout. Allison was having her second session with a counselor. Carmen Abreu could not help but wish her daughter Nydia would leave home soon, knowing full well she would never allow it. John Roads stewed again at the thought of what the Senate hearings did to Judge Bork. Without the slightest connection to confirmation hearings, he thought of Sam in her bridesmaid's dress at his wedding. Justin asked Sam to lunch after Dorie told him she had confided in her. To explain, he explained. Roopa Deshpande heated water for tea with her sister. The Yankees were playing the Kansas City Royals and the Knicks were in the playoffs against Boston. Three tickets were given for alternate side violations on the block. Con Ed had a crew at the corner checking for a gas leak. The Dow-Jones gained 22 points and the weather forecast was for brief showers followed by sun and seasonal temperatures. Eddie turned to his left and walked toward the park where he would await Nydia's vigil on the wall, listening to the Mets game on the radio.

Rose was exhausted from the events of the day. She had no trouble falling asleep without having to coax herself. Soon she was snoring, which often bothered the couple upstairs but in the next room Grace was too deaf to notice.

She roused once, repositioned her pillows, and found she was thinking of Aldo. The more she tried to fall asleep the more she thought of him with an almost physical pleasure. It felt agreeable to lie like that neither awake nor asleep, and conjure a memory that mingled with her dream: “I love Jones Beach,” Rose exclaimed to Aldo, now her fiancé, when he phoned. An hour later Aldo was at the curb in his Pontiac and Rose was waiting. She paraded down the front steps in her new bathing suit—watercolors, abstract pastels and the black squiggles of a cityscape falling to the top of her ample thighs. She was full-bodied then, curvy she called herself, her true obesity not to appear till after Aldo’s death. Aldo loved Jones beach too, loved to float on light swells far from the horns and sirens of the city gazing at unimpeded sea and unimpeded sky all the way to the blue haze of the Jersey shore and, when he turned, the pleasing sight of sun baked bodies packing the broad swath of sand. If only they sold beer, he wished, and if only there weren’t so many coloreds. But he brought his own beer and the coloreds kept to themselves. Aldo slid to the passenger side to open the door for Rose. She threw her bag over the front seat to the back of the car, lunged at him excited and kissed him on the mouth as she stretched on all fours before seating herself on the slick vinyl and smoothed the skirt trim of her suit. Aldo was ten years older than her, hefty and bald, a man respected in his neighborhood, a fireman with health benefits and a pension. Rose was unsure what a grown man like him, so settled and accomplished, was doing with her but here he was and she was having fun and she, too, respected him. Traffic moved slowly on the parkways. They were in no hurry. They spotted the telltale spire of the water tower soon enough and parked on the heat-soaked asphalt of a vast lot. At the concession stand they paused to watch the surf-churned sand rise in breaking waves that bowled over the squealing bathers who crowded there. Aldo rented an umbrella. Sand splashed from the footfalls of children darting among them, stinging their legs like gnats as they hiked toward a spot near the water, and music in a dozen keys and tempos, a dozen languages and dialects sounded down the expanse of that endless beach.

Near dawn Rose wakened, then succumbed to a sudden drowsiness and dozed off to the sound of a garbage truck idling at the end of the block just as daylight broke. She awoke for good when she heard Grace stir. She knew she had dreamed but not what, and did not feel rested. This will be a nap day, she thought, whether I like it or not. “Rose,” yelled Grace. Rose sat up and peaked at her mother. She feared Grace was trying to stand and was relieved to see her still in bed merely struggling to roll over. “Coming, Ma,” said Rose, thinking don’t wet your pants and smiling to herself at the absurdity of the sentiment.

Four students on their way home from school walked unhurried on the sidewalk along the park. From their shapes and sizes, their facial features part man and part child, the inanity of their gestures, they were clearly boys in the fitful start of adolescence. The weekend had arrived and they halted, jostled, hooted and yelped without much purpose. They tried hard to sound raucous and derisive though their cheeks were still smooth and their eyes still had the softness of children. The pack paused at a corner, forming a circle to face each other and chant the latest pop song. Once the ritual was done they bumped fists and one of the gang veered off down the side street toward his home. “Tomorrow. At the bandshell,” shouted one of his mates after him. The departing boy turned and waved as the three remaining continued down the avenue. “So Guilford, why no baseball this year?” Jerome Guilford, Jr., the tallest of the bunch, looked down at the sidewalk. “I don’t have time,” said Jerome. “My dad wants me to work on tennis.” “Tennis is for faggots,” said his interrogator. Jerome gave the boy a stiff but playful shove to the chest with both hands. “You’re a faggot, Santoro” said Guilford. Playful or not, the shove smarted. “Christ Guilford, take it easy,” said Santoro. They continued their desultory route, slouching under the weight of their backpacks. Santoro looked at Jerome’s face and the word mulatto came to mind, dredged from the obscure chapter of some textbook. “Hey Guilford. You’re a mulatto.” Jerome stopped in his tracks and looked at Santoro in disbelief. “What the fuck did you say that for?” The other boy shrugged. “I don’t know. You are, that’s all. Your mother’s

white and your father's Black." "What's that got to do with anything?" said Guilford. The third boy broke in. "Santoro's an asshole. Don't pay any attention to him." Santoro was perplexed. "What did I say? I mean you are, aren't you?" Guilford shook his head and separated from the other two. He was near the turnoff to his block anyway. "And you're a dumb fuck, aren't you?" He turned and hurried away toward his apartment.

The next day after finishing his math assignment, Jerome Guilford, Jr. looked out his front window at the Saturday activity on the street and sighed. The sky was overcast with lead-colored clouds. He hoped it wouldn't rain. He looked absently up and down the block as he anticipated his afternoon tennis match, with no clue to the events that would soon unfold nearby. His father had gone to his law office early that morning. His mother was shopping and said she'd come by the courts later to watch him play. His gear was packed in his sports bag. He took up his racket and went out the door. A young girl from his school looked at him through the window of her brownstone across the street. She waved and he ignored her. He walked past the large apartment building at the other end of the block in front of a short man with a bushy mustache who rocked on his heels by the entranceway as he maintained a watch on something or someone across the street. Jerome had noticed another tennis player, a college student, living there. He had seen the tall young man carrying a racket though he had not found occasion to speak to him. The guy had the air of a good athlete, willowy and quick, with brown skin like his own. He looked at the back of his hands and thought of the word mulatto. A strange, foreign word, he thought. And the descriptor 'mixed' seemed an antiseptic version of the same thing, while the term 'biracial' sounded like a clinical diagnosis. Whose business was it what color he was? Without a doubt, Santoro was a dumb fuck. And then Jerome was across the avenue and on the path to the tennis courts. It was the last day of April, an eventful day on the block.

Nydia never did find Nick after school despite her vigils on the park wall. She found him Saturday, however, as planned. She had prepared for the event in

her customary way with makeup meticulously applied and jeans as tight as she could make them. She knew this look caught the attention of men and boys alike, though she was not yet sure exactly what that meant. Nick, eager as he was, dressed down to feign a lack of concern, as if going to an everyday encounter with no particular expectations. He thought it wise to take precautions not to be made a fool of, especially by a high school girl from the building across the street who at least was college material he reminded himself, despite the manners she'd adopted from the street. They both had a hard time dismissing the possibility of their mothers' extra-sensory perceptions tracking them from home, with Nydia also mindful of her father's psychic powers though the notion of such powers in his dad did not occur to Nick. For cover, Nydia made a point of leaving her apartment in the company of her friend Mary—clothes shopping downtown they said—while Nick decided to busy himself for a few hours in the business school library before returning to Brooklyn. Nydia imagined several ways it could go, all of them ending with her yielding to his unsteady advances. But if he was indeed a virgin as she suspected, she should be prepared to help him, which added to her apprehension. Nick for his part felt as prepared as he could be from the many details gleaned from his male friends, readings of the Kama Sutra, Hollywood movies, one soft and one hard porn film he had seen in Times Square matinees, and the flights of his own imagination.

While compelled by their biologic drives, each wrestled equally with their anxieties. Nydia that she was too young and too short for Nick, though confident enough in her appeal. He that she would be put off by his inexperience, which was a most vulnerable position indeed. Nonetheless, they both determined to roll the dice and see where events would lead. They met as arranged by the statue of Kosciuszko in the far corner of the park. Nick spotted Nydia sitting on a bench directly behind the large bronze figure of the Revolutionary War hero mounted on his horse, sword upraised as if demanding the money the Continental Congress owed him and never paid. She seemed absorbed in a distant meditation, and in that pose appeared more mature than he recalled her. As he strode into view, reining in his pace to steady himself, she straightened up

and waved a friendly greeting. He took this as a good sign, seating himself next to her with his hands thrust in his pockets and a serious expression he did not intend and that only served to put her off. For a moment she wondered whether she had it all wrong. “I got your note,” he said, glancing at her. He was not mistaken. She was very pretty. She would still be pretty without all that makeup. “You want to take a walk?” she asked, keeping her options open for a hasty exit. When they had strolled onto a quiet path Nydia lit a cigarette and offered one to Nick. He took it not to appear aloof, but expelled the smoke without inhaling lest he choke. They talked about college, and the block, and without intending to about their families, surprised they found so much to talk about and that time passed so quickly. Their arms brushed as they walked, the palm of his hand accidentally grazed her hip and he almost apologized. In a clearing by the duck pond they found another bench and Nydia pressed gently against his side as they sat down. I should be more aggressive, thought Nick, I’m the guy, though he was quite happy to let her make all the advances she wanted. Nydia for her part was about to refrain from any further contact for fear of being repulsed when she was jostled by a sudden movement and felt Nick’s lips on hers. She was taken off guard but recovered and pressed her body more firmly against him. Neither said a word. His lips again reached hers and this time she was ready, pressed back, and let his mouth linger as her lips opened and worked in slow circles. Nick’s mind went blank. He held his breath with her floral and tobacco scent filling his throat and lungs and wondered, where could they go? And his mind went blank again as, to anyone strolling by, they were just another young couple in the park doing what young couples have always done in the park. When their kiss ended he straightened up and leaned back on the bench to appreciate what was happening. Nydia allowed him his moment. His eyes were glazed. She could tell she had made an impression. When he recovered they kissed more deeply and now she felt that she, too, was being swept into something that perhaps she was not prepared for. “I have to go,” she said. Nick jolted upright as if he’d been jabbed. “You what?” He felt suddenly disoriented. His first thought was that he must have done something wrong and any number

of things came to mind. “I have to go, that’s all.” She stood up and beckoned. “Come on.” He rose and joined her, confused but acquiescent. They trudged silently, holding close to each other along the winding paths until they neared the parkside by their block where Nydia let go of his hand and said, “Wait here a minute. I don’t want anyone to see us coming out of the park together.” Either did he, though of course someone had. Nick watched her go and realized he had no idea where they would have had sex, anyway. It was all very strange and somehow all right, whether he saw her again or not. He remembered to wipe away the lipstick around his mouth before returning home to find preparations in full swing for a large gathering to welcome his aunt and uncle. He threw himself into them, saving reflections on the afternoon’s encounter for a more solitary moment. Nydia watched from the foyer of her building as he entered his house and when she turned there was Junior.

When you step outside of Junior's bar in Bay Ridge and look down Third Avenue toward the Narrows and the swooping cables of the bridge, its towers seem to rise like huge tuning forks or giant stelae from a different dimension off the edge of the earth. A graceful, handsome bridge indeed but the perspective is distorted so that its span divides somehow rather than connects—at least from Junior’s angle. He liked the Verrazano, if for no other reason than it brought in customers from Staten Island. You can have your Brooklyn Bridge, he mused, or any of those bridges to Manhattan. Music boomed from the bar’s jukebox onto the sidewalk as he opened the door to return to his post after making a run to the OTB on Fifth Avenue. Granted it was afternoon, but business was even slower than usual. Too much competition, he reasoned. Too many IRA illegals getting paid under the table. He had nothing against Ireland, but if one of them took his job he’d report them to the INS in a heartbeat and be the first to wave good-bye. He lit a cigarette and leaned his elbows on the counter. He was overdue on a certain loan payment. He asked the waitress, “Marcie, can you lend me fifty bucks?” Marcie was looking out the front window at traffic snaking its way through the double-parked cars that lined the avenue, enjoying the

boredom that offered her a few moments' rest. She dismissed him with a shake of her big hair as if the request itself was rather funny. "I can't hardly pay the baby sitter and I'm gonna lend you fifty bucks? Get real, Junior." Marcie liked Junior nonetheless. He was always ready to step in when a patron had a few too many and wouldn't stop hitting on her. Junior watched the tantalizing movement of her breasts as she leaned over an empty table to clear the beer mugs, interrupting for a moment his speculation about the risk of returning to his mother's block with an image of those breasts bare and pressed to his lips, a small fantasy of his as frequent and habitual as pouring a shot of tequila. But returning to his money worries. The only one who saw him assault the guy across the street from his mother's place was the Spanish guy upstairs and Rose said he'd mind his own business. But there was the girl who followed him across the park, the one who gave him crap in the street with the rest of the spics after someone threw that beer bottle through his sister's window. She had it in for him. He'd have to do something about her. A solitary customer, a red-faced regular with two days' grizzled beard, settled on a bar stool and sighed as if he'd just returned home from a long journey. Junior opened a beer and slid it down the counter. "Hey, Bobby," he grunted. "Hey, Junior," Bobby grunted back. Junior returned to his dilemma with the girl. What was he going to do about her? It wouldn't matter so much if he had an alibi. Some little spic's word against his. "Marcie, come here. I got a favor to ask you." So he squared away an alibi with Marcie, who was only too happy to comply with a favor that cost her nothing. He'd try to get someone to cover the bar for him later that evening and run over to the Hill to see his mother.

You consider each word carefully. You want to be perfectly clear, to have the desired effect, and most importantly to achieve the right outcome. Consider tone, inflection, and body language. Body language most of all. How many communication seminars have you been to from how many over-paid consultants? The ape brain, the reptile brain. That's what she'll pick up on. Your words won't matter, she won't even hear them. Then you rehearse. Different

scenarios, alternate responses, anticipate every avenue this could go down until you feel you're ready. And timing of course. Timing is everything. When she's calm and well rested. When she is not dealing with a host of other demands. You know you must do everything you can to assure she will not feel attacked. So directly after dinner when the kids are upstairs and you're clearing the kitchen in silent, parallel work, you sense the moment to introduce the topic with an offhand remark. "Guilford sold another unit." Preoccupied or perhaps just uninterested, Dorie continued loading the dishwasher without responding. Or perhaps she hadn't heard you. You continue wiping the table and wait until she has straightened up and moved to the sink. "Guilford sold another unit, but it looks like DeWitt isn't planning to convert." Again, no response. It appeared she couldn't care less, but that remark was just the prelude to your point. "Guilford heard our house is going on the market." She must have been listening to you after all because she nodded slightly like it was old news. "I was just wondering where he might have gotten that…information." Information, a neutral word, no? "We haven't even seen a realtor yet." She was obviously listening now because she turned and replied. "So? We *are* selling, aren't we?" And you nod vigorously, making an exaggerated point of agreeing with her. "Yes. Yes, that's probably the best thing. But I think we should be discrete about it. One step at a time." You continue wiping the table though it's spotless. "John, just be clear for a change," she says. "What's your point?" And you answer matter-of-factly, still wiping, "That *is* my point. I think we should be discrete about this. For the girls' sake. Our neighbors don't have to know our business." Dorie seems faintly amused. "For the girls' sake or your own? Which is it? Because I think hiding the truth from the girls is the worst thing we can do." "No, no," you agree. "I understand. We need to be honest with them. But the whole block doesn't need to know. I don't want it affecting the girls." You are pleased with your even tone. You have made a simple plea, a request not an accusation. Dorie narrows her eyes in thought, and still holding a wet sponge plants her knuckles firmly on her hips. "Wait a minute," she answers. "Who told Deshpande? It wasn't me." And there of course it all became obvious. John, you dope. Like the time you threw a

tantrum at your mother for throwing out your old LP's and then remembered you hadn't stored them in her basement, you'd left them with your brother who took them to California. Or when in time to come you will blame your doctor for making you delirious when in fact you mistook your diuretics for the ulcer medicine and doubled the dose after a little binge one weekend. "I'm just sayin'," you said. "In general, I mean. Both of us." End of subject, time to retreat and reconsider? No way. I was not going to slink away with my tail between my legs. Not this time. Not any more. How did she know about Deshpande? "What about Desphande?" you ask. "Who did *you* tell?" you demand. Dorie stares back at you a moment to make sure she has your full attention before answering. "I'll tell anyone I damn well please." I was shocked by her reckless attitude, her wanton lack of prudence. Reason was clearly futile here and persuasion not in the cards. "Okay, if that's the way you want it." Having kissed his playbook good-bye, John Roads strode to the front door seeking a different effect without regard for outcome. He jerked it wide open to face the evening street and whoever was on it, shouting, "Attention all neighbors. Dorie wants you to know we're getting a divorce. She doesn't give a damn what it does to the kids. She just wants to get the hell out of here."

Do the cost and consequences of your ex-wife's declaration that April morning ripple on simply because you let them, ripple not merely across the surface of your pond but in n-dimensions like a sphere falling outward? And at the end of this age say the sages, all costs and consequences will contract to a single point that leaves their echoes far behind before taking samsara for a fresh spin. But what if they got it wrong here? What if the point is not to opt out, it's to opt in. Who's to say, maybe the rules change each time. But what do I know? Divorced alcoholic, failed father and lousy son you say. And then you must take into account I was the victim of betrayal. Of birth order, demographics, pettiness, selfishness, molecular biology, my own neurotransmitters, my varices. In short, of circumstance—bleeding down to my last breath and heartbeat with my beliefs still intact. If you hold onto them firmly enough, defend them

vigorously enough, leave them properly unexamined long enough, they will eventually become true. Try it, you'll see. Things impossible to let go even if I wanted to, and I assure you I didn't. *Nothing's going to change my world.* That'll show you. My second wife was a kind woman. She knew I felt deceived, robbed, and demonized. She lived with the thought I would go straight back to Dorie if I could. Strange thought. As if I'd ever get the chance.

Ruben's proposal blind-sided Lynne with the full force of a blow she did not see coming. This is so not right, she thought. Why did he do this? Pleased, she had to admit, with its substance but incensed by its prematurity, she held to her belief these things must be better planned. Worst of all it was perturbing. She didn't want to say no, yet was not ready to say yes. Maybe a conditional yes. No announcement for a while, a trial period living together. She would go through the ordeal of introducing him to her parents. What else? He'd have to lose weight. No, that was wrong. She sighed and crammed her notebooks in her backpack, quite aware that she should be studying for finals rather than ruminating on a marriage proposal. Perhaps she did want to marry him, but why did he have to go about it in such an insensitive way? This was not like him. She walked briskly from the law library onto a sunlit, bus-fumed Queens avenue and felt a mild breeze in her face. Spring, she thought. It's actually here. She had lived in the city so long she sometimes failed to notice the change of seasons. Something gave her pause on the sidewalk, the need to examine what was behind her own desire to marry. But not right now. Now she was simply going to walk down the street and feel the sun and the air, the motion of her hips, the easy swing of her arms, the rhythm of her steps. She would walk and let her thoughts appear as they would, unforced and unchanneled. Which did not happen. They drifted straight back to Ruben, where they were checked once again and redirected to the anticipation of her final exam in constitutional law. The expenditure of energy this required soon exhausted her. When she arrived home she make a cup of tea and fell asleep with the teabag steeping in a mug of tepid water. She dreamed that she stepped out of a subway car in a

nightgown and ran up the exit stairs to a crowded street where she ducked into a taxi idling by the curb, driven by a girl from high school she had not seen in years and never particularly liked. A windswept, rocky beach covered in sheets of ice appeared before them illuminated by their headlights. “Go ahead,” she said. The girl gunned the car into the blackness of the ocean and they stopped with seawater up to the hubcaps. She escaped effortlessly, climbing on top of the car where she found herself wearing a cocktail dress in a large room crowded with well-heeled couples her parents’ age chatting incoherently. It was a country club, or perhaps a hotel ballroom. Her father stood across the room gesticulating and trying to tell her something, but a band played so loud she couldn’t hear a word. He finally just shrugged and pointed. She turned to look in the direction he indicated and saw a blank wall. Her eyes were open and her limbs felt washed out. She had slept for over an hour. After she made another cup of tea she called Ruben and told him she had to study. He asked her if she had thought about his proposal. She said of course. She would talk to him about it on Saturday.

When Ruben told his aunt about his evening with Lynne, Titi Ada gave him a knowing smile as if his marriage was a foregone conclusion. While he appreciated her approval even if he didn’t seek it, he was not as certain of her conclusion. His impulsivity frightened him as much as the prospect of rejection. Not wishing to elaborate or watch Ada rearrange knick-knacks on her altar any longer, he slipped outside for a smoke and met Rose on the stoop she had just finished sweeping for the third time that day. Rose, wearing a frayed housecoat draped to her knees, feeling her muffled heart pound deep inside the vast expanse of her breast, leaned against the rail for a brief respite as Ruben opened a new pack of cigarettes. “Don’t drop your ashes here,” said Rose. “I just swept.” Ruben considered returning to his apartment for an ashtray but was impatient to light up. “Okay. I’ll put them in my pocket.” He inserted his thumb in the side pocket of his jacket and pulled it open to indicate what he would do. “You look like you need a smoke,” said Rose. “I suppose I do,” said Ruben,

inhaling deeply. Rose remained silent until her fatigue eased a bit, watching him closely as Ruben tapped his ashes into the palm of his left hand before tipping them into his pocket, ready to admonish him if the smallest fleck dropped to the ground. “How’s your aunt?” she asked. Ruben blew a blast of smoke. “I just proposed,” he blurted. He took another drag, and without thinking dropped the cigarette butt on the stoop, crushing it with his foot in a slow twisting motion. “I’m giving you a pass on that,” said Rose, moving toward the butt with her broom, “considering what you just told me.” With a deft flick of her wrists, Rose launched the still smoking butt goalie-like into the air. It landed on the bottom step and skidded onto the sidewalk. “So what did she say?” she asked. “She said she’d think about it and tell me on Saturday,” said Ruben. “Right. Keep you in suspense,” said Rose. “That’s a good strategy. I did that to Aldo.” Ruben bristled at the implication he was being manipulated. “Why?” he asked with sudden insistence. Rose arched her eyebrows. “Why what?” she asked. “Why is it a good strategy?” said Ruben. Rose paused to give the question its due consideration. “I don’t know. Maybe I wanted to give him a chance to back out. I couldn’t believe it at first. I wanted to be sure he meant it. Ma thought he was just playing with me. She didn’t like his family.” She looked down and brushed the broom lightly across the spotless stone. “I haven’t met her family,” said Ruben as his outburst cooled, leaving him in a more pensive mood. Rose looked at him quizzically. “You’re Puerto Rican, right?” Ruben nodded. “You’re not Jewish too, are you?” Ruben laughed. “Oy, me? No. Pure Boricua.” “But your girlfriend?” Rose persisted. “She’s Jewish,” said Ruben, nodding. “And you never met her parents?” He nodded again. “Ruben, you got a problem.” Ruben reached for another cigarette. “Could be. I’ll let you know.” Rose lifted her broom and shuffled slowly to the front door. “Good luck. Just clean up your butts, okay?” She took the step heavily and wattled into the vestibule, her vast haunches swaying like ham hocks as she made her way toward her apartment. Her swollen fingers took the key from the pocket in the folds of her housecoat and grasped it with the utmost care lest it drop out of reach. She entered her living room listening closely for any change in her mother’s condition. Grace

seemed at peace as she lay propped in bed in front of the TV, yet her shallow breathing had a raspy edge.

"Ma, you okay?" asked Rose. Her mother turned to her with a puzzled look and nodded. "You sure?" Rose persisted. "Is something bothering you?" Grace shook her head and wrinkled her brow as if to say she was bothered only by Rose's questions. "Can I get you anything?" Grace turned back to the TV and shook her head once again. Rose continued through the bedroom to the kitchen where she filled a large bowl with cheese puffs and poured a glass of Dr. Pepper, returning through Grace's room while eyeing her snack with relish. She was planning to settle at her post by the window, but a continued uneasiness about her mother made her hesitate as she came to the living room. She sank down on the couch so she could watch her mother through the open doorway. Grace's blank eyes shut slowly and popped open as soon as they closed. The cycle repeated itself several times before Grace finally drifted off into what appeared to be sleep. Rose sipped her drink and nibbled from the bowl, passing from reflection on Ruben's news to thoughts of her married home in Bensonhurst and the duplex she shared with Aldo's mother and younger sister. The two boys with fair skin, onyx eyes, straight shaggy hair, gathered round her kitchen table bickering and eating raw cookie dough while she baked. Aldo's nephews. When she turned her back to tend to the oven they slung handfuls of dough at each other and ran out of the room laughing. The shrill sound of her mother-in-law haranguing Aldo's unmarried sister carried through the wall, the mother-in-law who hectored Rose from the house and the neighborhood after Aldo was gone. It seemed like someone else's life. She thought of Ruben and smiled at his discomfort. She couldn't picture him and Lynne as husband and wife, but who was she to say? She'd seen stranger things. And then there was his aunt. She seemed nice and Ruben was fond of her, but Rose wasn't sure the woman had all her marbles. And it wasn't just the way she dressed. Things were crazy enough on the block with Eddie's antics, she didn't need voodoo going on upstairs. Drawn by a sudden sense of alarm Rose returned her gaze to her mother's room, but once assured Grace slept soundly raised herself with a

groan and continued to her chair by the window. As she settled into her usual inspection of the block she could not shake a sense of foreboding, of a vague, elusive threat, that was not about Ruben or Eddie or even her mother whose thread she knew, as well as Ruben's aunt, would soon be snipped.

Jerome, Jr. played one of his better tennis matches. He felt light on his feet from start to finish and pounded the ball with a newfound aggression. After each game he looked to the sidelines and was relieved that his mother was not there, as her cheering always affected his concentration. And almost to his dismay, the two sets were over quickly. He shook his opponent's hand, sheathed his racket and felt suddenly adrift, a hollow feeling as if he were the one soundly beaten, or had suddenly found himself in a strange town. He practiced a few spiritless serves on the empty court in an attempt to gather himself, and when that failed went to scout future opponents in the other matches still going on. As he leaned on the fence grasping the chain links, his nose and forehead pressed against the cool metal, numbed by the monotonous puck of the swatted balls, he noticed a familiar figure pass along a path on the other side of the court. A short thickset man with a mustache, bobbing his head and looking about with a strained comic alertness that bordered on bizarre. The same man he had passed on the sidewalk in front the building earlier that day. It was obvious this strange person was searching for something. Jerome zipped up his windbreaker, and being in a mood neither to mingle with other players or go home, decided to pass the time by seeing what Eddie was up to. It was a relief to slip away from the courts and fall in behind him. He maintained a careful distance with his racket on his shoulder and his bag at his side, strolling through the park like any kid making his way home from a tennis match. As they approached the Kosciusko statue, Eddie suddenly veered off the path and slipped behind the twigs of a weeping elm. Jerome walked past him into the small square, his eyes searching to find what made Eddie so skittish. And there were Nick and Nydia seated together on a park bench with pigeons strutting about their feet. He kept going to the other side of the statue without slackening

his pace as if merely passing through until he had a good vantage point to observe Eddie. Meanwhile Eddie had lit a fat spliff with his zippo, cupping it from the wind as he coughed and spat a wad of phlegm, watching the young couple intently by peering through the high-arching branches in an awkward crouch. A funny way to appear inconspicuous Jerome observed, but the young couple took no notice as they rose from the bench and stood uncertainly for a moment before starting off in the opposite direction. And so the procession continued—Eddie dodging behind the dogwood and azalea, trailing marijuana smoke as the young couple ambled down the winding path, Jerome strolling casually behind Eddie and entertained by his antics but now becoming fearful for Nick and Nydia as he realized they were being stalked. The young couple settled onto a park bench once again, this time pressing close against each other in newfound intimacy, and when their deep kiss came and Jerome saw Eddie reach in his pants that was enough for him. Curiosity has its limits. He turned around and made a wide circle in the opposite direction before heading toward the block and home. Eddie sensed Jerome's movement and looked around in time to recognize the boy walking away with the tennis racket as the kid who lived down the block, a kid he had seen at the tennis courts and by the statue, with the sudden awareness he had been spied on in turn. Laughter welled up around him, from the stones and shrubs and flower beds, from the air, the sky, faint at first then rising steady until it settled inside his head no longer laughter just noise. He felt the impulse to run, but in the end remained at his post and endured the familiar mocking sound until it faded like a train rumbling away in the distance. There was much work to be done and the day was far from over.

Sometimes you ask yourself, why is it I hardly think of Aldo? You sit at your window every day watching strangers come and go and wonder what makes them tick, but what about your dear departed husband? That's not quite fair, you say. I do try to think about him. I just can't picture him any more than I can picture my dear departed father. There's a blank space where his face should be. Just his face. I can picture the rest of him. Which is odd, don't you

think? About Aldo. Sure, maybe it is. Could be there's a good reason. Rose shifted in the chair to ease the ache in her spine and paused, staring at the quiet street to collect her thoughts. A good reason. Like what? Ah, that's for you to say. I was too young to remember my father. I know what people tell me and make up a likeness of him. Sometimes this way, sometimes that. Whatever strikes me at the time, you know, whatever I want him to be. Maybe a tall man in a suit and a fedora. Well-groomed like he was going to church, with a big smile. A big man who could be a politician or a union boss. They tell me he wasn't tall, but so what. And Aldo? You weren't too little to remember Aldo exactly as he was. Rose folded her hands on the mattress of her belly and pondered. Now that's a different story. I can describe him, no problem. He was bald. He had a bull neck. Ma called him stout. I can tell you he was not graceful. I can see his walk, lumbering around like a bear. I can hear his voice. It was not a growl like you'd expect from a bear. It was soft and what's the word. Meek. But I can't picture his face. So maybe that's telling you something. Something like what, I don't want to remember? My memory is going, that's all. I'll be like Ma before you know it. The streetlights were coming on, casting shadows of cars down the line of the street. Be honest with yourself now. Is there some reason you don't want to remember? Think. Was there something about him you don't want to go back to? She bit her lip and looked with pleasure at her finely done nails, holding them up to the light to admire them. No, of course not. Are you trying to psychoanalyze me? Don't be stupid. He was my husband, why wouldn't I want him back? A man with a good job. He wasn't a drunk. He never raised a hand to me. What more could I want? You are indignant at the insinuation. But Rose, maybe for starters, not standing up for you against his family? That might be true, I admit. He could've stood up to his mother once in a while. It would've made me feel better. But he wanted to be a good son, too. You can't blame him for that. I couldn't ask him to go against his family. What kind of person would that make me? Rose fingered the last crumbs of the cheese puffs in the bottom of the bowl and dabbed them on her tongue. What kind of person would that make me she thought again, as she looked out the window and finished her last

sip of soda. I can't complain. Ma gave me her blessing and let me go. She had her hands full with Junior. I do want to see his face, though. Rose closed her eyes and tried to reconstruct her dead husband feature by feature, but it was as futile as ever. Each one of them—heavy brows, Roman nose, full cheeks—disappeared before the next one was added as if erased from a blackboard, leaving a frame without the picture. She tried to recall Junior's face. It appeared without effort. That's 'cause I seen him lately, she told herself. She closed her eyes and tried to think of Aldo again but this time the face of John Roads rose up clear as could be, Roads answering the door to his house when she brought him his mail. She thought of Mrs. Gallagher languishing in her parlor and, much to her amazement, recalled a childhood memory of Mr. Gallagher, the pale-faced patriarch, standing on his stoop across the street with his hands in his pockets and his shock of snow-white hair as he puffed on a cigar and surveyed the street like it was his own fiefdom. An apprehension came to her with a start. Maybe that house was cursed. The possibility that a hidden crime was committed there decades or generations ago. And that's why the Roads's are so miserable. It's not their fault. If they never bought the place they might be happy. Once they gutted it they didn't stand a chance. Riled up the ghosts. Rose was pleased with the conclusion of her fantasy. It was the kind of amusement she enjoyed to pass the time at her window. So how long has it been since you can't imagine your own husband's face? Aldo, you specified. Let me see. Rose glanced at the ceiling as if making a calculation. The moment I heard he was dead. I light candles for him. That's how I remember. I put flowers on his grave every year till it got too hard to make it to Greenwood. There's something wrong with you, Rose. Yeah, I know there is. Is suffering such a bad thing? No, but who cares. I'm not suffering. I'm not even mad at his mother now, may she rest in peace. Or his sisters. I don't have to be. Ma did that for me. Why don't you just close your eyes and fall asleep? Good idea. And she did.

Junior was angry. Angry that his mother was ill. Angry that he hadn't gone to see her last night. Angry that he had to plead for money from the old lady.

Angry that some spic girl on the block could send him back to prison. But that last problem he could fix. He walked past Rose's apartment toward Eddie's building on the off chance he might run into her. And if he did, he'd make sure she kept her mouth shut. He approached the building cautiously, aware that someone might recognize him from the stickball incident, but the entranceway was empty. He kept going toward the park, knowing that kids her age have been hanging out on the stone wall forever. And there she was, not on the wall but behind it with a tall skinny guy who walked away to the other side of the street and left her watching him go. Junior ducked into the foyer when he saw her make her way to the building, and waited out of sight. A minute later she appeared, still gazing across the street at the brownstone her companion had entered.

"You know me? 'Cause I know you," he whispered.

When Nydia turned and saw him she startled but quickly composed herself. She was on her home turf and reasoned if anyone was in a risky position it was him. "Sure I know you," she answered. "The baseball bat man."

"That's right," said Junior. "Anything else?"

"I seen you on the block when that guy got mugged."

"You followed me. What for?"

"'Cause I felt like it."

"What else?"

"You're a creep, that's what."

Junior took a step toward her and halted. "You didn't see a thing, got it?"

"I mind my own business," said Nydia. "What's it to you? Now get outa here before I scream bloody murder." Nydia couldn't have cared less about the rich white guy Junior jumped, but now she resolved to let Roads know who his mugger was the first chance she got.

Junior heard footsteps and voices on the stairway. He retreated to the sidewalk. "That's right," he hissed on his way out, "just mind your own business."

The leaves on sycamores bordering the park had not unfurled far enough to shade the afternoon light. Beyond their reach, Eddie's shadow stretched along the sidewalk in attenuated caricature from the bench where he waited. There was no sign of the kid with the tennis racket. Maybe he was mistaken, maybe his self-mockery was misplaced. He pulled his hat lower to shield his face as first Nydia, then Nick, appeared on the path that brought them to the avenue. He had done his job well. He had followed Nydia from the moment she left the building and witnessed the entire affair. The rendezvous by the statue, the tryst on the bench, the light kiss and the deep kiss, the hand held in hand, the scripted parting. And he took pleasure in the secrecy of his successful mission as he took pleasure in his indignation and his desire. His next task was to inform Nydia's mother and await further instructions. He rose from the bench, inching cautiously to the corner of the block just in time to see Nick entering his townhouse and Nydia start walking to their building. He forced himself to wait long enough to be sure she had returned home without noticing him, finally stepping onto the block just as Junior made a hasty exit from the building and hurried away. Eddie thought he was hallucinating. He called on his powers to give him guidance. His powers told him to continue with his task and he proceeded directly to Nydia's apartment and in his excitement banged too loud on the door, intending to leave word with her mother. "Who is it?" called Nydia from the other side. The shock of her voice sent Eddie jumping back as if he were expecting her to grab him through the wall. "It's me, Eddie. Tell your moms I got a message for her." Nydia opened the door to the end of its short chain and peered at him through the narrow slit. All he could see in the opening was one hostile eye. "Tell her yourself," said Nydia, so sharply he backpedaled to the stairway and almost fell. "I gotta go. Just tell her." He raced downstairs to his apartment where he made straight for the neglected pills on the kitchen counter and swallowed them dry. An hour later he was lying face down on his bed when there came a sharp knock on his door. He let his aunt into a living room filled with the scattered clothes, full ashtrays and empty glasses of male living, and

told her about the meeting between her daughter and the kid across the street. "*Sinvergüenza*," spat Carmen. "I told her not to see that *pendejo*." Eddie's eyes flared in indignation and his head started weaving. "I got an idea," he said.

Grace Wiggs was propped on three fat pillows still facing the TV on the table at the foot of her bed. From time to time she was aware that she actually lay in bed, a circumstance that seemed strange and pointless but she had to be somewhere she supposed, and it was as good as being anywhere else. In fact she wasn't sure she was not somewhere else. At the moment it seemed she was in her mother's kitchen. Her mother took her to the landing of the fire escape outside the kitchen window. There were flowers and herbs arranged in pots of all sizes. Her mother told her the names of the plants in a foreign accent, and named them in a foreign tongue when she did not know the English word. Grace was amazed now, unlike she was then, not just that her mother could make things grow, but that she had such knowledge of their care and use that could not have come from books. Her mother was more present than the images that flickered and spun on the screen at her feet, and the empty sounds that droned from it. Her sight went bad years ago and her hearing was almost gone yet the TV played on—nightlight, decor, background, link to a parallel world of canned laughter and relentless commerce. Phlegm rattled in her throat. She was not aware of it and could not have cleared it if she were. "Rose!" she called out. "Rose!" Her daughter's blurred, massive face appeared above her. "What Ma?" Grace struggled to lift her arm off the covers but the effort was too much. "I want to go with you," she said. Rose lifted her mother's head gently and rearranged the pillows. "I'm not going anywhere," she answered. Grace stared straight ahead into Rose's vast bosom. "I want to go with you." Rose eased her mother back on the pillows and patted her hand. "I'm not going anywhere," she repeated. Her mother kept staring at some distant point. "I want to go with you," she said, more insistent and agitated. Rose said nothing. She sat patiently on the edge of the bed holding her mother's hand while Grace repeated the same wish a dozen times. When she finally lapsed into silence Rose said, "Relax and

watch TV." She turned up the volume on a soap opera that was just going to commercial and made her way to the kitchen. "Rose," called Grace, "I want to go with you." Grace continued staring at that fixed point with her cloudy gaze. Her pulse was ragged now, her breathing sporadic. She was awake yet dreaming, her dream a memory of a dream, her memory a hallucination of the past. It fascinated her almost to alarm. The fluidity of time without sound, and space without light, was both startling and curious. Where was all his leading? A place more intriguing than bed, no doubt. Even nothingness, that peculiar notion, would be more intriguing. A thrill, in fact. Soon Rose reappeared with a pill and a glass of water. "Here, Ma." Grace summoned sufficient strength to push it away. Her breath came rapidly and her hand trembled. Rose saw her mother's ribs quiver like a bird's breast with each heartbeat. She leaned down and whispered in Grace's ear to be sure she could hear her. "Ma, maybe you should go to the hospital." Grace now found the strength to lift her hand. "No!" she gasped, faint but emphatic, closing her eyes to give the pretense of repose and end the discussion. Rose watched her intently. Her mother's breathing slowed. She lay still with her head slightly raised as if she had overheard something. "Should I call a priest?" whispered Rose. She asked once again a bit louder. Her mother was resting peacefully and didn't answer. And if she had been a better mother, a better daughter, a better wife? Rose and Grace pondered separately with separate conclusions.

When she left her mother's bedside Rose phoned Junior at work, trying her best not to sound panicked. "I think you better get over here. I don't think Ma's gonna last long." Junior had trouble hearing her over the din of bar patrons and music blasting from the jukebox. "What?" he said, holding the receiver between his ear and the white bar-towel on his shoulder as he continued filling glasses with the soda gun. Rose spoke louder. "I said Ma's not looking good. I think you should get over here." Junior left the glasses on the countertop and turned around to face the rows of bottles arranged on shelves in front of a mirror reflecting their shapes and colors. "What do you mean?" he asked, grabbing the phone as it started to slip and holding it to his ear in his wet hand. "She's out of

it," Rose replied. "I can't wake her up. I don't like the way she looks." Junior saw his loan going out the window. "So get her to the hospital," he shouted. "She won't go," said Rose, "and I'm not going to make her." Junior gestured obscenely at his image half hidden by the bottles. "I gotta work. I'll see you tomorrow." He slammed down the receiver and called to the other bartender at the far end of the counter. "Hey, Jimmy. Don't worry about it. You don't have to cover me. I'm not going anywhere tonight." A familiar sense of dread came over him. He wanted to punch the first drunk who looked at him funny.

The night after John's evening rant on the front stoop, Dorie had more trouble than usual falling asleep despite the recent increase in her antidepressant and the sleeping pill 'as needed' which she sorely did most every night for the past two months. Although her rumination was not so much on John's behavior—that was par for the course and only served to further justify her actions, as if she needed to—as on the news that Sam was having lunch with Justin. Sam had phoned to ask "permission". Dorie improvised a casual reply admirable for its restraint, asking why on earth she would have a problem with something so perfectly normal, and assuring Sam she didn't need anyone's permission. But she appreciated the courtesy of being informed. In return Sam assured her she just wanted everything on the up and up. So everything was fine, right? Dorie tossed fitfully for fifteen minutes more before popping another pill. When she rose the next morning her legs were like rubber and she performed her daily routine in a trance hardly aware that she had gotten the girls off to school on time. The fact was, it was she who told Justin she had told Sam about them. It was Justin who had called Sam to have lunch. It was her doing, not that she could have foreseen the consequences. And what were the consequences? Justin finding a confidante to whom he could speak about his feelings for her? Justin having an informant to learn the true state of her marriage and divorce? Justin connecting with an old flame to see if there were any sparks left? As noon approached she took another Valium (John insisted brandnames were better than generics) and fell into a stupor at the kitchen

table. Yes, Justin had brought romance into her life and sex with him was truly exciting even if reaching orgasm was harder thanks to the drugs, which was an annoying yet necessary price to pay. But Justin or no Justin she knew her marriage was dead. She couldn't go on being smothered by John and his drunken conceits. But now she wondered how much you could trust a man who has an affair with a friend's wife. If Justin were merely an opportunist what would stop him from hooking up with Sam, or anyone else? A man who perhaps did this kind of thing all the time. Interesting, she thought, as her forehead lay heavy on her folded arms and arrays of red and orange drifted slowly along the backs of her eyelids. And so what? Even if true, so what? She felt that she shrugged her shoulders though her muscles didn't move.

Justin waited for Sam long past their appointed lunch hour. It was the same restaurant, the same table, the same chair in which he had waited for Dorie the Saturday she announced the end of her marriage. He waited poised and patient as always, sipping a cup of mint tea as he examined his manicured nails, fingering the menu one more time. He checked his watch and beckoned the server for another cup. He waited, thinking of the options for his future with growing clarity. But for the present, even as he accepted the apparent fact that Sam would not show, he was content with the direction his life was drifting. And Sam did not show. She told Dorie that it all seemed too weird, and the truth was she did not want to get mixed up in this business, explanations that did not provide Dorie one bit of relief. She could not be sure if Sam's decision was in fact a good sign, or if Sam was afraid to meet Justin for entirely different reasons. Odd, thought Dorie lying in bed once again, the only person I trust to be what they seem is John, and once again she didn't care. She made a mental note to get back into therapy. The next day the world looked less complicated and she discarded it.

It's the weekend, why not a breakfast beer? Being a sensible adult you will not pair it with breakfast pizza like you did in your college days, though it's tempting. And once the sun is over the yardarm, a scotch? Why not. Who's

going to care? It's in your hand and you are swirling the ice in the tumbler as you notice Jennifer at the window waving to someone outside. On closer inspection you see Guilford's kid with a tennis racket slung across his shoulder walking away on the other side of the street. Feeling a rush of fatherly affection you place your hand on Jen's shoulder and gaze at the street with her in kindred contemplation. *Keeping an eye on the world going by my window.* "How would you like tennis lessons?" you ask, feeling guilty that you didn't start her playing tennis as a toddler. Jen shakes her head. "No. I don't think I'd be any good." Jen, destined to be a spectator. "How do you know unless you try?" you say, the cliché tumbling out without the effort of thought. "I just know," she says, so serious she almost convinces you. Dorie called her from upstairs. Jennifer slipped your hand and went to join her mother. "Mom's taking us to the aquarium," she explains. You watched her go and your gaze lingered with anticipatory loss on the rich dark mahogany of the stairway, inferring correctly that once you give it up you won't have anything like it ever again. And then I was alone at the window once more and the block seemed unusually empty. Yet I felt a strange sense of optimism. Not a feeling that things will eventually work out for the best, but rather they will somehow manage to stay just the way they are. Merely ebb and flow, in the end remaining much the same. A feeling that change is an illusion, a uniquely human conceit. The illusion of an army of overpriced change management experts consulting to thousands of innovative organizations with visionary leaders managing change in the rapidly changing environment of a financial services industry undergoing unparalleled change change change. Or of certain ancient Greek philosophers. The Grandiose Illusion—cui bono? Your meditation is cut short by the drumming of three pairs of shoes marching down the stairs and you turn to wish them well. "Check out the octopus's garden," you say. "Dad, why don't you come?" asks Allison. You start mulling over the offer when Dorie catches your eye. "I'd like to sweetheart, but I have things to do here. You go and have a nice girls day out." "No, really Dad," Allison insists. "Why don't you come?" You look to Dorie for a cue and

find her dark, familiar stare uncompromising. “Not this time. Tell you what. We’ll pick another day and go to the zoo.”

Dorie shepherded the girls out the door as if shielding them from you, leaving you abandoned within your Renaissance facade gazing once more at the cracks in the sidewalk after refreshing your drink, when you see Deshpande double-park his car and begin unloading bags and boxes of groceries from the trunk. A good soul, Deshpande. You hurry out the door in a flush of neighborly good will to join him. “Pete, don’t you have a big, strong son for jobs like this?” you ask as you arrive on the scene. The dentist, leaning into his trunk, says, “I do. But he’s at the library.” You roll up your sleeves and strike a workman-like pose. “Okay, let me help you.” I noticed several cases of soft drinks and the absence of beer. “Thank you, John, but that’s not necessary,” says Deshpande, trying to wave you away. “Nonsense,” you say, oblivious to his gesture, still full of warm feeling. “Here, I’ll take this.” You lift one of the cases, properly mindful of your lower back, and follow Deshpande to the front door. “Having a shindig?” you ask. He looks puzzled and you rephrase your question. “A soiree, a get-together, a party of some kind?”, concluding that Anglophone Desphande has little interest in American slang. Deshpande nods as he rests a grocery bag on his lifted knee and fumbles for the front door key. “Yes, a party of sorts. My wife’s sister and her husband are visiting.” And after brief consideration continues uncertainly, “Why don’t you and your wife drop by?” thinking it was the courteous thing to do, an invitation he hoped would be appreciated and rejected. “We’d love to,” you answer, without giving its implications the slightest thought. Inside the house I have a big neighborly grin for Roopa. “Special delivery. I hear you have visitors.” It could have been the first time I ever spoke to her. She does not reciprocate and eyes you warily, unsure how to respond to this intrusion. You maintain your cheery smile for her nonetheless as you pass through the living room but lose sight of where you’re going and trip on the foot of a chair, stumble forward and bang the case of soda into a wall that fortunately keeps you from falling. “That was close. No harm done,” you announce, meaning not done to you, paying no heed to the marks on the wall. You spin into

the kitchen behind Pete and deposit your load on the counter. “So where are your in-laws?” you ask, quickly putting the stumble behind you. “Still sleeping. Jet lag, you know.” Deshpande allows you to bring one more load into the house, thanks you profusely, and politely insists he needs no further help.

There’s something to this good neighbor business you think, once back in your house with a new drink in hand. I may be moving away soon but that doesn’t mean I can’t be a standup guy on the block with the time I have left. Who knows what I can offer here? You move to the stoop and sit there scanning the length of the sidewalk, the windows of the apartments across the street, feeling the pulse of the day picking up, feeling this day is leading somewhere. And there she was, the Rose of the Block, facing me from her station on the other side of the street. You raise your glass to Rose who salutes with hers in return. The Rose of the Block. Yes, I was quite pleased with that. Memo to self: I must ask about her mother. You espy a shadowed figure behind the huge mass of Rose’s outline, a male figure who begins to speak heatedly and make violent gestures. Rose appears to acquiesce to the man’s exhortations, rises ponderously and disappears into the depths of her apartment. You sense something amiss and surmise it’s about her mother. Now you wish you’d taken that CPR course they offered at work, and consider rushing over anyway to improvise emergency measures as best you can. After another sip you decide to keep steady at your post, remaining vigilant and half expecting an ambulance to come crashing down the street, but after a few minutes Rose settles back in her chair without a hint of crisis. You relax and finish your drink. You’ll call on them later. And I did, though perhaps I shouldn’t have.

Eddie had an idea, at least that’s what he told Nydia’s mother. Though the truth was that he planned to have an idea, which was all they same to him though not to her. Carmen required specifics. When she pressed him for his plan all Eddie could say was “Wait and see,” and “You’re gonna like it,” which had her rolling her eyes because of course she should have known better. She returned to her apartment fuming, and despite her zeal to teach her daughter a

lasting lesson in respect, which in her book needed a strong element of pain in order to be truly learned, was at a loss what to do. She doubted Eddie had the brains or skill to inflict the kind of humiliation she had in mind, though she had confidence in his raw cunning. Eddie, undeterred, still planned to have an idea. And though he had to fight the lethargy of his nerves and muscles from the handful of pills he gobbled up when he got home, it was not long before he devised a simple ploy that would satisfy his aunt as well as his own sense of street justice and, needless to say, give him great pleasure. He phoned Aunt Carmen and explained it all to her. All she had to do was send Nydia down to his apartment later that evening. He'd take care of the rest. But he needed some help.

That help, he realized with growing uncertainty, would have to come from Nick's mother, the strange woman who served him tea. She had treated him special, though he had no idea why. For a moment he felt guilty plotting against her son until he recalled the money changing hands between Nydia and Nick in the shadows of the park. Then his lethargy left, his thoughts surged in waves, and voices returned to urge him on. *I saw you do it. I saw you do it to her. Shut up! Hernandez se tira a la bola. Callate! No hice nada.* He shot up from the sofa and paced the floor, his head thrusting birdlike forward and back with each step, lost in anticipation of the chain of events he would soon set in motion until he found himself at the window staring across the street at Deshpande's brownstone. Something was gathering there, something that disturbed him and stiffened his resolve. *Callate! No hice nada.* A well-dressed middle-aged couple emerged from a car parked down the block and make their way to the house. *Paganos. They worship the cow. Thor, god of thunder.* Evening light filtered onto the block.

John awoke in his armchair to the sound of the front door opening. The girls were home. They chattered and pranced into the living room while he slowly gathered his wits. Where did they go? Ah, the aquarium. "Ahoy, there. Did you sail beneath the waves?" He was pleased to note his head hardly hurt.

“What waves?” they asked, still prancing. “In your yellow submarine, of course.” A song they had heard since they were toddlers splashing in the bathtub. “And our friends are all aboard,” sang Allison. “Many more of them live next door,” added Jen. Doris shooed the girls up to their rooms. “We stopped for pizza on the way back. There’s a slice in the refrigerator if you want. I’m going to lie down.” That appeared to be the sum of the evening’s dinner plans. “The Deshpandes invited us over tonight,” said John, his mind clearing further. “They’re having a get-together for relations from India or something.” Dorie poured herself a glass of wine in the kitchen. “Really? That’s strange,” she answered, facing the open door of the refrigerator. “What’s strange?” said John, thinking from the tone of her voice she found something moldy he had left there. “I mean, why now?” she said, obviously referring to the Deshpandes. “Beats me,” said John. It was a question he had not bothered to ask. “That’s nice, I guess. A little too late, though. Do what you want.” She took her wine glass and retired to her room, wondering when he would finally realize they were no longer a couple. “Why not?” thought John, noting the fact that he had not eaten since breakfast. He went to the kitchen for a beer with his pizza slice. On the way he glanced out the widow and saw a well-dressed middle-aged couple going up the stairs next door. The dentist’s shindig was under way.

After finishing his evening snack John popped open another bottle of beer to take with him to the bathroom where he showered and shaved, brushed his hair with great care, and after much deliberation decided to dress country club casual: polo shirt, khakis, socks with his tassel loafers as a sign of respect for Pete’s guests and because, regardless, it was the proper thing to do. As he came downstairs struggling to button the placket of his shirt he wondered if he should bring a gift. Perhaps a bottle of the well-aged single malt he kept in reserve for special occasions. Perfect, he concluded. They’re not Muslims. After a hasty shot of his house scotch for the road—must leave the gift spirits intact but he’d get to them later—he was ready to venture forth with his mood restored, returning to the warm neighborly feelings that had come upon him earlier in the day. So when he reached the bottom of the front steps next door

and saw Eddie walking toward him down the sidewalk he was not put off. And when Eddie followed directly behind him to the Deshpande's doorstep he was perplexed but not alarmed. In fact, after ringing the doorbell he turned to Eddie with a nod of cordial greeting and asked jokingly, "Are you joining the party?" to which Eddie pawed the stone on which they waited and said, "Yeah," a reply that might ordinarily have taken John aback, but at the moment seemed perfectly natural. When Nick Deshpande answered the door Roads gave him a hearty handshake and clapped him on the back like a favorite nephew. Eddie slipped into the living room crowded with Deshpande's friends and relatives conversing in raised voices and polite laughter. John gradually found his way to his host. Pete was holding forth in the dining room where his guests loaded their dinner plates from a vast array of serving dishes. John greeted him effusively and presented him with the gift box. Deshpande looked a bit surprised. "Thank you. That's very kind. And has your wife come, too?" He took the bottle from the box and set it down on a side table next to a line of juice and soft drinks that ended in a single bottle of white wine. "No, she couldn't make it I'm afraid," said John. "She's home with the girls. And then there's the divorce thing," signaling it was all out in the open now and okay to mention it, though of course it wasn't and he had no idea why he put it that way. "Oh yes," Deshpande lowered his voice, "of course, it must be difficult." Then returning to his conversational tone, "Come. Let me introduce you to some people." John was duly escorted about to meet the friends and in-laws, a host of engineers, doctors, dentists, and systems analysts, men in sports coats and bulky sweaters with scuffed shoes and sandals, women in an assortment of saris, skirts and jeans. When Pete launched into a conversation about prosthodontics with a colleague from NYU, John made his way back to the dining room and ran into Eddie about to pour ginger ale into a plastic cup half full of his gift whisky. "Whoa there, buddy," he called out, "not so fast." And grabbing the cup he noticed ice cubes floating in the drink. "If you're not going to drink it neat, at least stick to ice. Here." He added two more cubes and handed it back to Eddie, then poured himself a large cupful. "Cheers," said John, tapping his plastic cup to Eddie's. "*Salud*," said

Eddie. They both took a large gulp and exhaled simultaneously. “I like rum better,” said Eddie. “Puerto Rican rum. Rum and Coke.” John took another long gulp. “That’s okay, you’ll get used to this stuff.” Eddie laughed with a long phlegmy snort and drank again. “Maybe you’re right,” he coughed. “Not so bad.” They both grinned at each other for a moment, John looking down from his height with Eddie looking up at an angle, profiles like the disproportioned image of a Mayan frieze. “Are you friends with Nick?” asked John. Eddie’s eyes darted sideways and he began bobbing his head. “No. With his mother. He don’t like me.” And just as John realized he had yet to see Roopa, she sailed into the dining room in a flowing red sari and gave a curt bow in Eddie’s direction without paying him the slightest heed. He thought her behavior rather rude, but interesting. “What a lovely party,” John offered, though she still had not acknowledged him. “I’m glad you’ve been sent here again,” she said to Eddie rather stiffly. “Please, eat. Enjoy yourself.” She gestured to the food spread on the table and handed him a plate, describing the dishes in words he did not understand while she served him. Eddie looked in vain for *pernil* or sausage, even a meatball. As she came around the table Roopa finally addressed John. “I hope your wife is well. I’m sorry to hear you are leaving the neighborhood.” The smug formality of her tone was not lost on him. “I am, too,” he said. “But we’ll see.” Roopa cocked her head politely. “Indeed. I hope it all works out for the best.” As she swished away John noticed young Nick hovering near them and realized he was keeping an eye on his mother’s interaction with Eddie. Meanwhile Eddie had downed another large gulp of scotch while John was speaking with Roopa, and when she disappeared into the next room he went with his head nodding straight to a startled Nick and said, “I have a message from my cousin.” Cupping his hands to his mouth, he continued, “She wants to meet you tonight.” Nick put a silencing finger to Eddie’s lips and lead him through the kitchen to a small deck off the back of the house, while John followed Roopa into the midst of her guests. “Nydia?” Nick asked when he was sure no one could hear. “What are you talking about?” Eddie grunted as he scanned the backyard. “Nydia wants to meet you tonight. At my place.” Nick

looked back at the house to be sure no one was eavesdropping. “Why your place?” he asked although he knew the question was unnecessary. “‘Cause no one’s gonna be there,” said Eddie. Nick remained silent and looked at the empty yard, then the kitchen. “Okay. When? And what’s your apartment?” Eddie gave him the time and the number. “She’ll be there. She’ll be waiting for you,” said Eddie, raising his voice so loud Nick had to shush him. The thought of going into that building made Nick uneasy but he resolved to go. “Okay. Tell her I’ll be there.”

Meanwhile in the living room, Roads sought out Roopa’s brother-in-law and introduced himself as the Yankee next door. “Can I get you a drink?” he asked. Gautam, the brother-in-law, glanced around and, not seeing his wife, agreed. “Be right back,” said John. He returned with two glasses of his single malt and welcomed the new arrival with a toast to the family of Indo-European languages. Not sure how to respond according to local custom, Gautam took a sip of his drink and mentioned he fancied German cars. “Ah, car wrecks in German cars,” said Roads, his associations quite loose by this time. “I had two fraternity brothers who crashed a Porshe one dark and stormy night.” Roads paused waiting for Gautam’s attention, unfazed that his guest was now being greeted by other people. “What a pair, the odd couple,” he continued. When he saw that Gautam was otherwise engaged, he turned his attention to a grey-haired woman on his left and proceeded as if she had been part of the conversation. “They were coming back from a party.” The woman smiled and nodded as John held up his arms like a driver gripping the wheel of a speeding automobile. “They’d been doing shots of tequila and it was raining the way it always does when your friends get in car wrecks.” As he pantomimed a sharp turn, his drink sloshed onto the woman’s blouse. “They spun out on a curve and hit a telephone pole. Totaled the Porsche. But forgive me, I’m being rude. Can I get you a drink?” The woman shook her head as she blotted the whisky with a napkin, searching the room for her husband. “Nobody wore seat belts back then of course,” Roads continued. “One guy was thrown through the windshield and got this huge gash down the middle of his face. The other smashed the

windshield with the top of his head and was in the hospital three days with a concussion. So what's the point?" John paused for a sip of his drink. "Dumb kids with fast cars? Drinking and driving? Fasten your seat belt? No. The point here is the guy with the gash was vain about his looks, and the other one was conceited about his brains." You hummed the Twilight Zone theme which was known to no one else in the room. "Weird, but true," you concluded. You excused yourself to refresh your drink, as if anyone had been listening or would hold you back.

Nick looked from the deck toward the kitchen and saw John wander in. "Do you know Mr. Roads?" asked Nick. "Sure." Eddie snorted and grinned. "We're old amigos." Nick led him back to the kitchen where they encountered John filling a cup with water at the sink. "Hello, Mr. Roads," said Nick self-consciously. "Hi, Nick," said John with a smile. "What are you guys doing? Smoking weed out there?" He clapped Nick on the shoulder and laughed, "No harm in that. Just don't let your mother catch you," he winked, chuckling to himself. "Not that I'd know much about that. But at least booze is legal. C'mon, try some of the good stuff."

John marched Nick back to the dining room with Eddie trailing behind, and the three of them toasted each other with another round. Eddie was swaying to his own silent rhythm as he talked and laughed so loud he drew looks from the guests. And John, enjoying the food and the people mingling about him and a night out for the first time in months, had the sudden whim to test the guests' knowledge of Beatle's tunes, curious how well the Fab Four had fared on the subcontinent and what generational differences there might be. He sidled into the living room and singled out a serious-looking young woman who informed him she was a pediatrician on faculty at the state medical school. "I don't really know much about them myself," she admitted. "But what about the Maharishi, and Ravi Shankar?" prodded John. "I know Ravi Shankar, of course. Maybe my husband can do better." She found her husband, an affable man she introduced as a biochemist. "No, not really," he said. "Sgt. Pepper or something. That's about all. I think my father might know." I think your mother might know,

John whistled to himself as the biochemist lead him across the room to a distinguished-looking man with a head of thick silver hair. In his tweed jacket and sweater-vest he looked like an Oxford don, or English professor at a small liberal arts college a generation ago. “Yes, there was some Beatlemania in the 60’s when they visited Delhi,” he told John. “The press was quite keen on them at the time. They were hounded by deranged teenage girls or something. I never listened to them, I’m afraid. There wasn’t much interest in Bombay.” And as he was speaking, Roads’s eye rested on a new CD player sitting on top of a cabinet at the far end of the room. “What a pity,” he replied, without knowing why he tried to sound British. “Please excuse me.” With an abrupt about-face he made his way to the front door and flew out of the house, racing down Deshpande’s steps and up his own. As he turned the key to enter his home he became aware of Eddie standing behind him. “Wait here,” said John. “I’ll be right back.”

Eddie sat on the Roads’ stoop and surveyed the block, a restless chimera pondering the progress of his snare, fighting to remain on guard through the effects of John’s whisky. Across the street he recognized Rose at her chair by the window talking to someone who appeared familiar, though from his distance he could not tell it was Junior. He trotted over for closer inspection and realized it was the guy with the baseball bat who put the cops on him after his father threw the beer bottle through Rose’s window. He was about to climb the steps to peer directly in the room and taunt Junior with some well-chosen gestures when he noticed John exiting his front door and sped back to meet him. Roads was juggling a stack of CD’s in one hand and a drink in the other. “What’s that for?” said Eddie, pointing to the CD’s. “Dance music? You like disco?” John watched scornfully as Eddie spun a full circle on the stoop, chanting, “*Stayin’ alive, Stayin’ alive*.” By the time Eddie finished his twirl, Roads was indignant. “Keep that crap to yourself. This is the Beatles. Rock ’n’ roll, for god’s sake. Real music.” Without skipping a beat, Eddie held his fist in front of his face as if gripping a mic and crooned, “*Michelle, my belle*,” in a raspy tenor, then croaked the first verse of *Yesterday* on one knee with his arms spread like Al Jolson. John had to admit it was amusing. “C’mon,” he said. “I want to play this next door.

We're going to liven up the party." He started down the steps but stopped short. "Wait. You need a drink." Eddie followed John back to the kitchen where his host sat him down and poured a large rum and coke. "Sorry, it's Jamaican," said John. Eddie assured him it would do. Roads held the glass up to the light and its effervescence looked refreshing. He dumped his scotch and poured another rum and coke for himself. Dorie was still upstairs but the girls were in the den watching TV. When they heard voices in the kitchen they came to see who was there. "Hi girls," said John. "This is Eddie. We had to get some CD's for the party next door." The girls shrieked and ran away giggling when they recognized him as the naked man who tried to hop in their car during the hail storm. John watched them disappear without explanation and shrugged. "Let's go," he said. The two men tramped back to the Deshpande's toting their Cuba Libres.

Nick Deshpande checked his watch. Half an hour to go before his assignation. He couldn't tell whether time passed too slow or too fast. He checked his watch again. All he knew was he must be prepared to make his exit. And where was Eddie? Nick searched all the rooms downstairs, checked the bathrooms, looked on the deck, but there was no sign of him. Time to get ready. He proceeded upstairs to his bedroom and locked the door. When he was sure no one had followed he pulled two condoms from a sock in the bottom drawer of his dresser and slid them into his pocket with the utmost care. As he went down to rejoin the party he felt as if the guests could read his thoughts, and steeled himself with a look of defiance over the heads of the people chatting unaware. He spotted Eddie and John at the far end of the living room fumbling with the family's new CD player. Fumbling and laughing. Eddie was crouched on his haunches faun-like, directing John with excited gestures and telling him which buttons to push. Lights on the console flashed red and green while John, exasperated, cursed so loud guests edged away. Eddie babbled on and rubbed his eyes. Though they had managed to load the disk and run through a variety of routines, the new machine wouldn't play. "Eddie, can I talk to you for a minute?" Eddie looked up, and the sight of Nick towering over him gave him a such a

start he toppled backwards on the floor. “You scared me,” said Eddie, breaking into nervous laughter as he lay supine. “Nick, how do you get this thing to work?” asked John, grasping Eddie’s hands to pull him up. Nick reset the CD player and pointed to the play button. “Just hit that,” he said, and turned to Eddie, “I have a question for you. But not here.” He helped Eddie to his feet and lead him out of the crowded room as the curious guests parted to make way. John yelled out, “*Beep beep, beep beep, yeah*” as he hit the play button and Nick heard the opening guitar riff of “Drive My Car” explode from the speakers as he rushed Eddie into the kitchen. “Wait here,” he commanded. “Don’t move.” He raced back to the living room and dove at the CD player to lower the volume. The bewildered guests hushed, looking about uneasy with the sudden breach of decorum. John grabbed at Nick and held him back forcibly before Nick could reach the controls. “That’s okay. I’ll change it,” John said calmly. “Don’t have a cow, man.” When Nick backed off a step, John skipped the disk forward to the next song and lowered the sound level himself. “This one has a sitar on it. *A sitar, okay?*” he shouted over the heads of the whispering guests. By this time Pete and Roopa had gathered around him as Nick slipped back to the kitchen to find Eddie. “Are you having a problem here, John?” asked Pete while Roopa glowered her disapproval. John stood up and swayed against the cabinet before finding his balance. “No problem,” he said in as respectful a tone as he could muster, regaining his full height, his speech but slightly slurred. “Just trying to entertain your guests, Pete. Sorry about the volume.” Unable to restrain himself he began singing along. “*So I looked around and I noticed there wasn’t a chair.”* Pete was sincerely embarrassed for his neighbor. “Thank you for your effort,” said Pete. “But please lower it more. This music is not for everyone.” Oh yes it is, thought John with a knowing smile as he nodded. Roopa was mortified by this further affront to the dignity of her home but suppressed it as best she could, adding simply, “You can play it all you want at your house.” She inspected the room and noticed that Eddie was not in sight. She was especially perturbed at John’s new influence on him. “Eddie should not be drinking, you know,” she added before turning away. She was surprised to find Eddie in the

kitchen speaking with her son. The young men halted their conversation as soon as they noticed her. “Eddie, I think Mr. Roads is not a good influence for you,” she said. “I would caution you to stay away from him.” Eddie stretched his neck from side to side as if trying to loosen a knot. Nick gave his mother a sidelong glance and looked away. Roopa was struck with the instant certainty there was something they wanted to keep from her. Her first and only thought was that it must have something to do with that girl. “Come back and join the party,” she said, addressing Nick. “You should be talking to your cousins.” She vowed to keep a closer eye on her son the rest of the evening, and thus forewarned could not help blaming herself for the way things turned out.

John returned to the living room with another tumbler of whisky in search of the affable biochemist. “*Time after time*,” he mumbled, thinking of no one in particular, “*you refuse to even listen.*” He spotted him in a huddle of older people speaking to each other in a language that took John a moment to identify as something other than highly accented English. “So, what do you think,” he asked, slapping the young man on the back. “Not bad for a bunch of limeys, eh?” He started guffawing at his own remark, aspirated, and launched into a fierce coughing fit that caused him to shake so violently he spilled his drink down the front of his shirt. “Oh, shit,” he muttered, brushing the wet patch with his free hand, swaying unsteadily and laughing again. Pete appeared at his side and took him by the arm. “It seems you’re tired, John. Maybe you should go home and get some rest.” John stared down at Deshpande with his eyes half-closed and bloodshot, swaying slightly as he struggled to understand his host’s meaning. “Is that what your wife thinks, Pete?” he concluded, deciding to take offense. “Okay, I don’t want to spoil the party so I’ll go,” he said, holding his hands up dismissively as he walked toward the front door, “but…,” The rest of his response was interrupted by a loud scream. Eddie rushed into the living room shouting, “I didn’t do nothing. Get out of my face,” followed by the young pediatrician right on his heels. The woman was furious. “You get out of here,” she said, her voice severe, commanding and controlled. “You should be

ashamed." Eddie collided with John just as he was stalking out the front door and the two of them stumbled onto the stoop together. "Keep the album," yelled Roads, adding even louder, "This is America. Loosen up," before slamming the door shut. Eddie snorted and laughed his phlegmy laugh. "They pray to the cow," he pointed out. John grinned his approval as he put his arm around Eddie, and steadying each other like old drinking buddies they made their halting way down the stone steps. "Eddie," said Roads, his speech thick and deliberate, "you could be my Sancho." Eddie snorted once more. "No, my friend. You are *my* Sancho," and still laughing he patted John's little round belly, then slapped his own. Eddie's fly was open.

We were going back to your place after our little tete-a-tete at the restaurant by the park. We wanted your aunt to be the first to know. The only one, actually. I wasn't going to tell my parents. Not yet, anyway. You were trying to look so casual about it all and I admit I enjoyed toying with you without the slightest guilt once I knew my answer was yes. You have no idea how uncomfortable you looked. It was almost comic. But I have to confess I was a mess on the inside but at least I wasn't in suspense. Scared but determined. And it crossed my mind you were having second thoughts about your offer that was so out of character, and were trying to work up the nerve to take it back after I'd finally worked up the nerve to accept it. We were both so ridiculous. Still, I couldn't resist.

As if I couldn't see what you were doing. You enjoyed letting me dangle from the moment I proposed, at least it seemed that way. And I was mad at you and even more pissed at myself for giving you the power to do that. Right, we were walking home from the restaurant back to my place. We didn't say much. I was still in a daze trying to process the fact that you agreed. What that meant. And it was not buyer's remorse. I was happy. It was the feeling that my life up to that point was unreal. When we reached the block we saw two drunks staggering down the street arm-in-arm as if they owned it, almost run over by a livery cab without paying it the slightest heed. They made it to the sidewalk in

front of the building next to mine. One of them, the shorter one, gets all worked up at something or someone he must have seen in Guilford's apartment, yelling and pointing at their window and kicking over their garbage cans until the other guy calms him down. Then they stagger over to my building and start ringing doorbells. The last thing I expected after getting engaged was to come home and find Johnny Gentrification on my stoop arm-in-arm with Crazy Eddie. Though, as I said, I was still preoccupied and not paying much attention to what was going on. So when we get there the intercom is squawking back and forth and doors are opening all over the building because the drunks must have pushed every button in the foyer. "Can I help you?" I asked as I took out my keys and waited behind them. Roads turns around looking totally fucked up but finally recognizes me and tries to pull himself together. "Mr. Guzman, I presume," he says so smooth he almost sounds sober. And for some reason—maybe I was a little uneasy about the situation—I introduced you not as my fiancée but as my lawyer.

I did notice that. Strange way to start our engagement. Then the tall guy in the polo shirt greets me with this exaggerated formality as "counselor" and introduces his buddy as "Don Eduardo" like he was acting in a school play. Your aunt appeared at the front door blinking and when she saw us behind the two drunks she opened it a crack and they shoved their way into the hall.

Titi looked at me alarmed but I gave her the signal to relax. "Gracias, Señora," says Roads with a sweeping bow. "We're here to call upon Doña Rosa and inquire into the health of her mother." I swear, that's exactly what he said. Titi Ada shrank back and beckoned us to follow her up the stairs as Roads pounded on Rose's door with Eddie bobbing right along behind him. Eddie looks at us and points to Roads behind his back, making the crazy sign and silently mouthing "loco". You couldn't help it, you burst out laughing and Titi starts crossing herself as she runs up the stairs. I don't know why but I didn't follow her. I waited to see if Rose opened the door. Roads knocked again. Nobody answered. Finally he tried the doorknob. It was unlocked. He threw it open and ran right into Junior.

You hardly slept at all, having dream fragments of your father or a man meant to be your father, since you still can't remember what your father looked like. Unlike Junior's father who you'd like to forget but can't no matter how much you want to stick those memories in a vault and bury them for good. When you tried to remember your father you saw a tall man in a brown suit with wide lapels but his face was blank, blotted out as if someone wanted to protect his identity. And even the suit with the lapels was probably false, probably imported from an old movie or a black and white photo from some magazine. He didn't do or say anything in your dream, he was just there. As soon as you recognized him you'd wake up and listen for sounds from the next room, alerted because your mother was quieter than usual, not crying out as was her habit lately, no muttering or groans. How many times did I check on her? It seemed like every hour. Up and down all night. But you're mistaken. It was only twice. You dreamed about checking on her. Even your sleep was vigilant. Ma was never what you'd call an extrovert, you know. It got worse when my stepfather left. I felt guilty that I was so relieved. After that she hated to leave the building. She'd have done fine in a convent or a prison even. She often told you she wanted to be a nun. Sure, but that don't mean nothing. Every little girl wants to be a nun. But maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe she was really meant for the cloistered life. So I'd get up and check on her, or dream I got up and checked on her, and she was real quiet either way. I could tell there was a change because she'd start breathing fast and deep then slow down gradual and stop, then start the same thing all over again. A cycle, you'd say. There was a change but she seemed comfortable. Not peaceful exactly, but comfortable. I asked was anything bothering her and she shook her head. Yes, I'm sure she shook it. I didn't dream that. Then when day came it made me feel better the way daylight always makes you feel things aren't so bad and now you can handle them. Still she wouldn't wake up and I thought, how am I going to get her to eat? She was worse for sure but I didn't think she was going to die right away. I went to change her diaper and it was dry as toast, and her butt wasn't warm the way it

usually was. Her skin was this squiggly color like a purple quilt. I swear she mumbled something about Tommy but it could be my imagination. She never blamed Junior for his death. Never. Neither did I but Junior wouldn't believe it. He's so screwed up. Doesn't matter how much we do for him, he still thinks we blame him. I knew he'd come by because he always needs money. Ma would give it to him if she could. So would I. You can't win with Junior. You hate yourself if you do and hate yourself if you don't. Just the way it is.

But I keep asking myself why didn't I send her to the hospital. And you keep answering because I couldn't do that to her again. And like I said, I thought she wouldn't die yet. Not quite yet, anyway. Hang on for a day or two or even snap out of it and get back to her old self. Who knows? I'm no doctor. Though you phoned Junior just in case and told him he'd better get there right away. You wouldn't want him to blame you for not being with his mother at the end, even if someone spotted him on the block and he went back to Rikers. I could live with him going to Rikers better than blaming me for not letting him know about Ma, 'cause you don't get a second chance at things like that. But no, that's not fair. It wasn't the reason. You went back to your chair like it was any other day. As you rested there worn out from your dreams with sore knees and legs starting to swell again, looking out at a world that seemed remarkably small despite the events about to take place in your own home, you had the feeling that the block had not really changed since you remember first watching it. Was the same after all these years. The same world that will be there when it's your turn to lie as gone as your mother only maybe you're in a hospital bed, an intensive care unit with tubes and machines, and there is no one to watch the block, certainly no one to watch it the way you do. Because this block is not just your entertainment. It's your work and your duty. This little rectangle. Watching the neighbors, the traffic, all the people passing by dressed for each passing season. The sycamores, window boxes, even the brick and concrete. Stickball, and the stoops. The stoops tell the tale. If the block is your living room, the stoops are its furniture. That's your secret.

Junior came by. Not right away, but he came by. He didn't care about the risk, he needed money. And maybe he cared about Ma, I don't know. By the time he arrived Ma's breathing had changed again. Now it was raspy, shallow, like a hand was holding her chest so it couldn't move. I kept telling her to cough and I think she tried once or twice just to please me but couldn't manage it. Junior kept yelling in her ear about lending him five hundred bucks. It was pitiful. He swears she said yes. He put a pen in her hand and held it over her checkbook. Then he yelled at me because I let her get so weak she can't sign a check. He's in big trouble with his bookie and like it's all my fault. Well, let him rant. He doesn't know any better. And then we smell something and know Ma just pooped so we roll her on her side and I make Junior hold her there, looking away all disgusted while I change the diaper and just as I start to wipe her butt she takes this big breath. Almost sits right up and fills her lungs like the hand on her chest let go and then she goes limp and nothing. Then a little gasp and nothing. And then another little gasp, like a sigh. And then she's gone. Lights out. Silent and blue. Gone, with the pen still in her hand. Junior's freaking out, asking what happened though it was obvious she just gave up the ghost. I put my head on her chest, over her heart, and he starts shouting "Ma! Ma!" while I lie there and say, "Ma's gone," and he finally shuts up. Then something made me check her pulse just to be sure. Because I heard of people waking up hours or days later even in the funeral parlor and, like I said, I'm no doctor. So I asked Junior to check too, but he wouldn't touch her. All the same I didn't feel no pulse and she was starting to get cold so I put the sheet over her head and when I look over Junior's face is all twisted up like I'd never seen it before and tears are running down his face and he's shivering like he had the flu. God he looked awful. My heart went out to him. Then my heart went right past him out to everyone. Out to everyone on the block, out to everyone in the world. Went out with I don't know what, maybe it was something like what's the word, compassion, and with something else, not sadness though that was part of it whatever it was, maybe some kind of love, out to everything. To every *thing*. But it wasn't my love and it wasn't my love for Ma that went out. I had that in me.

This was different. If it was love it came from somewhere else and went through me. Just for that one moment, then it was gone. Poof. Which is no mystery to me or you. Death connects us all. Binds us fast. Binds us to everything. You better believe it.

I stayed there I don't know how long. Junior was sitting on the bed with his head in his hands. I think he was sobbing or maybe so mad he was shaking. It was hard to tell with his face covered. I finally came over to give him a hug to show him how my heart went out to him, but when I got there he shoved me away and bolted to the living room with her checkbook. He sat on the sofa writing checks to himself. I didn't care. Let him. He couldn't forge her signature worth a damn and even if he could, so what? I stayed with Ma until we heard this commotion in the front hallway and then our door flies open.

Nick's plan was simple. Take out the garbage and keep going, but first he had to deal with the aftermath of Roads' and Eddie's departure. There were calls to summon the police. His mother managed to dissuade the offended parties. His father explained that the man involved, a neighbor with mental health problems his wife was helping (god knows why), deserved their pity and medication. That Mr Roads from next door had a bit too much to drink because he was going through a difficult time with his marriage, poor man, and was actually a responsible executive at his insurance firm. None of it made much sense to Nick's aunt and uncle. The party deflated quickly and Nick's opportunity came easily enough. He busied himself cleaning up, staying inconspicuous as the flap died down. For some reason he put Roads' CD in his pocket. When he had filled two garbage bags he carried them outside from the basement, looked up to make sure no one was watching him from the living room, and made his getaway with a quick check of his pocket to assure himself his condoms were still there. He entered the foyer of Eddie's building just as his father was bidding farewell to the last guests at his front door. Dr. Deshpande could swear he glimpsed someone who looked like his son scurry across the street. He called for Nick when he came in the house a minute later. When there

was no answer he asked Roopa if she knew where Nick was. She had just seen him, she said. They both searched the entire house, his room, the den, the back deck, losing precious time. He was not to be found. “That’s odd,” said his father, “I thought I saw him go in that building across the street.” Roopa’s eyes widened. “You what?” Pete repeated his observation. “You have to go. At once,” said Roopa. “He’s up to no good with that girl.” Desphande was obviously at a loss. His wife explained it to him.

You threw open the door to find a fierce, unpleasant-looking man confront you with a baseball bat. “What the fuck!” he screamed. This unpleasant man threatening you looked oddly familiar. Rose was trying to hold him back. “Mr. Roads,” she said. “What are you doing here?” Eddie staggered into the room behind you while Ruben and Lynne looked on from the doorway. You pulled yourself up straight as best you could to address her. “I’ve come to inquire after your mother,” you said, with the false dignity of a hopeless drunk. “I hope she’s well.” Before Rose could formulate her answer, Junior snarled, “You’re a little late. She just croaked.” Eddie almost choked on his hoarse laugh and started making frog noises, certain that Junior was joking. “Get this nut job outa here,” said Junior, menacing Eddie with the bat. Rose continued to restrain her brother by imposing her formidable bulk between him and the intruders. “My mother just passed away, Mr. Roads,” said Rose. “But thanks for asking.” “Then forgive me,” you said quite graciously, adding a little bow as if you’d neglected to offer a lady your chair. “I didn’t mean to intrude on your grief. I didn’t know she had gone to the hospital.” You backpedaled slowly toward the door while trying to maintain your bow out of respect but lost your balance and fell sideways onto the floor. “What the fuck!” yelled Junior once again as Lynne and Ruben stepped into the room to help you to your feet. “You okay?” asked Lynne. “I don’t know,” I said, having the most amazing trouble regaining my footing. “I don’t feel that bad, actually,” though of course I did. Rose motioned them to bring me in and lay me on the couch. “Wait a minute,” said Junior, struggling to tear himself away from his sister and pointing his bat at Eddie. “You’re the fuck who threw

the bottle through the window." He broke free from Rose by letting go of the bat and lunged at Eddie who dodged away toward the bedroom yelping, "It wasn't me. I didn't do nothing." Junior gave chase, cornering Eddie by the head of the bed where Grace lay stiff under the sheet. Eddie waited until Junior closed in and lunged at him with an ill-timed head-butt that missed its mark. Junior answered with a solid punch to Eddie's face that knocked him backwards onto the bed. He curled up over Grace's body, covering his head with his arms as Junior rained down useless blows that only bruised his fists until Rose and Ruben pulled him off. "Have some respect. You're crazy as he is," cried Rose. "Eddie, get outa here," she ordered. Eddie was already racing out, past Lynne attending to you on the couch, and reached the sidewalk just in time to see Nick disappear into his building and realize his plan was in jeopardy. As he started to run, his path was suddenly blocked by Judy Guilford. "Clean up this mess right now," she said, pointing to the garbage strewn about the front of her building. Eddie pulled up short before he ran into her, and saw Jerome, Jr. looking down at him from the front window. "Tell your kid to stop following me," he answered as he tried to dodge out of her way. She grabbed his shirt and swung him into the fender of a parked car, banging his kneecap so hard he saw stars. "You're crazy, lady," screamed Eddie, "just like your kid," wresting himself free and hobbling down the block toward his building. Jerome, Jr. appeared on the stoop and his mother directed him to call his father. "I'll clean it up later," Eddie called back before he disappeared into his entranceway.

Meanwhile you had revived a bit. "Sorry," I said with an apologetic smile, "I may have had too much to drink," as if no one could guess. "Stay right there. I'll put on some coffee," said Rose. Junior came over and looked intently at your face. "Wait a minute," he concluded. "You're the fuck who screwed up Ma's check." That voice and those words sounded very familiar. I raised my eyes, and though focusing was a challenge somehow recognized him as the guy who sucker punched me on the sidewalk. "Yes," I said. "I know you, too. Too bad we haven't been properly introduced." For all I knew now I deserved that punch, deserved all of it, whatever it was. Still I laughed at my wit. "Way to go, Junior,"

said Rose. “Now you screwed yourself good. I’m sorry, Mr Roads. He got carried away. He was just looking out for his mother. You can understand.” “Of course,” you replied, at this point not caring one way or the other. Though you couldn’t understand, not the part about mothers. And for the first time you realized that Ruben and his girlfriend were in the room. “You saw it, right?” you said to Ruben, fishing around with a drunk’s muddled insight as you recalled the circumstances of your mugging. “You knew it was him all along.” Ruben just blinked. “Sure. What’s the difference?” You pondered that for a moment. “None, I suppose,” you said, feeling suddenly quite dizzy. “I’ll make that coffee,” said Rose. “Then you better get home.” “That’s not the first time I’ve been told that tonight,” you muttered with your tongue so thick it was hard to speak. Ruben stayed on with Lynne while you caffeinated yourself. Junior sat on the couch not saying a word, just fingering his bat. “I’ll take him,” Ruben offered. Which he did. When Roads finished his coffee he regained enough strength to stand and Ruben and Lynne walked him across the street after he mumbled “*Gracias Señora*” to “*Doña Rosa*”. They helped him with his keys and deposited him in his front hallway, then returned to their apartment to finally give Titi Ada the news of their engagement. They found her at her altar and the room full of smoke. This time she had lit a cigar and was chanting fervently. Ruben started wheezing the moment he walked in the door.

John Roads stood alone in his front hallway. The house he loved was dark and silent as the far side of the moon. He closed his eyes. The darkness deepened and space began to swirl about him with a rush of sound ringing in his ears, dissonant and disturbing as the concluding chord of a symphony. He opened his eyes. The chord stopped. He could distinguish objects in the room. His rugs, his chairs, his fireplace, his mantle, his clock. The Victorian cabinet he bought at a store in Canarsie from an old German woman. He lurched to the side, righted himself and walked to the dining room, sliding his hand slowly along the smooth maple surface of the table to imprint its feel more firmly in his memory in preparation for its loss and, more importantly, maintain his balance.

Making his way at last to the kitchen, Dorie's defiant modern Euro-kitchen, rummaging through a white Euro-cabinet next to the refrigerator until he found the bottle he was looking for. Port, he thought. A glass of Porto. Just the thing. The wine key was soon in hand and he began to remove the cork with surprising dexterity until the dry cork shredded and he shoved the broken piece into the bottle to pour it undecanted, cork bits floating about, vintage sediment and all, until it half-filled a sherry glass. Not a millimeter more or less he noted with satisfaction, exactly half. The taste was rich and cloying, to be sipped or gulped as he pleased. It had an oddly stimulating effect. He poured another glass, then stopped in mid-sip with a sudden notion. Sex. He set down his glass. Sex would revitalize his marriage. Yes, it all came down to sex. He took another sip and followed the thought. Not sex imposed in a display of machismo but sex coaxed gently, unfolding naturally, embraced playfully. And not just for physical pleasure (though his lust was aroused) but to reestablish their intimacy which, after all, was what Dorie really desired (who could blame her?) and he did too. Or perhaps to finally begin it. The house seemed more awake. It invited and encouraged him. It was, after all, a solid, vertical, Renaissance-inspired house. John took the glass from his lips and set it on the counter, listening for sounds from upstairs. All was quiet. He slipped off his shoes and made his way to the steps with a renewed sense of hope, of purpose, with a feeling of elation and relief. He ascended the banister hand over hand as quietly as the creaking boards would allow and tiptoed toward Dorie's room, turning the doorknob ever so carefully. She was asleep on her side with her back to him, and though he stumbled over the threshold she did not stir. Inside the room now he paused a moment to watch the covers gently lift as she breathed—lift, swell ever so slightly, and drop. The sight made his heart jump as he removed his socks, his shirt, and with one hand set firmly on the dresser to keep from tipping over removed his pants and underwear. Dorie sighed and shifted. Through sheer force of will he maintained his balance at the bedside without support and looked down at his sleeping wife. Still my wife, he mused. Her red hair swept forward over her upturned cheek and he stared at the exposed nape of her neck

with an intoxicated longing, eager to nuzzle it and smell the familiar, fresh scent of her hair and skin once more. He lifted the covers and with great tenderness spooned in beside her to kiss her shoulders and feel the softness of her buttocks pressing against him.

She stiffened at your first touch. Then startling awake she bolted upright and shrieked at the top of her lungs, throwing back the covers to leave you exposed naked with your half-erection and fall backwards off the bed as you sat up to grope for her. She shrieked again and withdrew against the wall as the girls appeared at the doorway and you grabbed the sheet to cover yourself with a sudden desire to fall asleep. “Girls, go back to your room,” Dorie screamed. They were quick to comply. She looked at you lying on the floor with your eyes closed, starting to snore. “No,” she shouted. “You are not passing out in my room.” She slapped and pushed you until you revived and sat you up with the sheet in your lap. “I want you out of here. I want you out of this house. Right now or I’m calling the police.”

John looked at his surroundings quizzically, not recalling how he got there. Dorie threw his clothes in his lap. “Rape? Is that what it’s come to? Get dressed and get out of here.” She had put on her robe, her soft white robe, not so coy now, and stood watching while he slowly and with heroic effort she failed to appreciate managed to rise and dress himself, still not sure what he was doing in her room. “Get going. *Now*.” She pushed him out the door towards the stairs. He sat wobbling on the top step about to slide straight down but righted himself and bumped to the bottom one slow step at a time as if descending in a yogic meditation. Dorie followed close behind and when he reached the hallway grabbed a jacket for him from the closet in one last act of charity, opened the front door and shoved him out as he spun around confused and unsteady. The door slammed behind him. He sat on the stoop to the sound of locks clicking with a new finality. He checked his pockets out of habit and noted Dorie must have taken his keys. Locked out or locked in, what does it matter? *Oh, that magic feeling, nowhere to go.*

The light was still burning in Rose's front room across the street. Squinting down the block you saw what looked like Deshpande leaving Eddie's building and Eddie himself standing by the entrance. Interesting, you remarked. As he got closer you saw that it was indeed Desphande. "Hey, Pete," you said with a neighborly wave. Deshpande hurried up his front steps without paying you the slightest heed. That was rude, you remarked, and waved at Eddie across the street who was polite enough to wave back. Your attention was directed to the sound of a door opening through the cool night air. Swiveling to face forward, you saw Ruben appear at the entrance of his building and heard the clear bark of his hacking cough. Lynne was right behind him. He raised a small object to his mouth and inhaled deeply. Also interesting. You managed to rise and lurch your way across the street. As you arrived on the steps of Rose's building, Ruben doubled over in a coughing fit and Rose shuffled out her front door in bathrobe and slippers. "It's his asthma," said Lynne, addressing both of you. "He needs some air." Ruben continued to cough. "You don't look so good," said Rose, and in fact his wheat-colored skin was ashen. "I'm calling an ambulance." Ruben raised his hands in protest. "No. It's okay. I just took my inhaler. Give me a minute." He was breathing hard, and a soft gurgling sound came from his throat with each breath. "I'll get you some water," said Rose as she shuffled back to her apartment. Ruben looked at Roads, and despite his distress managed to ask, "What are you doing here?" John blinked in reflection. His face went blank. "I just felt like," he began, and stammered, "I just felt like," and then stopped, not having any idea what he wanted to say until the words came out. "I just felt like fucking my wife, and I mean that in the best sense of the word, but she kicked me out. Kicked me out and took my keys. So here I am, footloose and fancy free." And indeed despite the lightness of his tone and his absurd attempt to keep a stiff upper lip, John Roads looked terrible. His face was puffy, his eyes half shut and bloodshot, his hair matted on his head and his untucked shirt buttoned cockeyed as if he had emerged half dead from a drunken train wreck. Ruben stared at him hard while he labored with his breath as if needing a moment to muster the strength to smile, and gradually broke into

a broad grin whispering, “You’re one fucked up dude.” He proffered his fist which Roads duly tapped. “Conservation of marriage,” Ruben managed to say between gasps. “Yours is breaking up and we just got engaged.” You agreed. “Ah yes, the sum of marriage remains constant.” Lynne had come to Ruben’s side and was holding his arm. “What the hell,” she added. “Why not?” and nuzzled up against his shoulder. You could have explored that question any number of ways but no longer had the energy for that particular exercise. “What the hell,” you simply echoed. “Congratulations.” And you were, in fact, perfectly sincere. Lynne returned upstairs to Ruben’s apartment to turn off the smoke alarm and call car service for a ride back to her apartment. The sound of traffic drifted from the avenue but the block itself was quiet. You looked up at the rounded contours of Ruben’s profile, his dark brow, his full lips and wondered again where he came from. “Ruben, where are you from?” you asked. “And don’t tell me the Bronx.” Ruben nodded thoughtfully. “Would you believe,” he began and paused for breath, “I’m from a people who don’t exist,” he wheezed. “Have you ever been told you don’t exist?” he added, thinking of his people. “Yes,” I said, thinking of myself. Ruben’s breathing had begun to ease a bit as the effect of his inhaler took hold. Rose returned to the stoop with a glass of water for both of you. It had started to drizzle. “*When it starts to rain everything’s the same*,” you said to no one in particular. Lynne reappeared and pulled Ruben back toward the door. “So where are you going tonight?” Rose asked. “I don’t know,” you said. “Maybe I’ll stay right here if that’s okay,” pointing down at the stoop. “You can’t stay out here,” she said. “Come on in. You can sleep on the couch. Figure things out in the morning.” I looked back at my brownstone across the street like a man just exiled. Which I had been actually, for life as it turned out. There was light in the upstairs hallway and I imagined Dorie looking out at me with one last touch of remorse. An understandable conceit. My face was wet from the rain and there was an enormous fatigue pulling me to the ground. “That’s very kind,” I said. “Thank you.” Lynne and Ruben helped you to your feet and you followed Rose into her apartment. “Junior’s here,” she said. “Don’t mind him. He’s sleeping in my bed. I’ll sleep in my chair.” Then

anticipating your objection, added, “No problem, I like it there.” Titi Ada came down the stairs blessing everyone. She stayed in the front hallway wishing her nephew and his fiancée happiness and babies until car service arrived to take the newly engaged couple to Lynne’s apartment.

“I can’t,” said Justin. “You know I’d be there if I could.” Dorie was on the bedroom phone shivering in her bathrobe as she listened to his reply. “But I need you. It was so awful,” she insisted. There was a long pause on the other end. Finally he answered, “I know. But you’re okay, right?” Now it was Doris’s turn to fall silent as tears welled in her eyes. “At least he didn’t rape me,” she continued, “is that what you mean? Believe me, I am *not* okay.” She could hear Justin exhale over the line and hoped he felt the full weight of the emotion she wished to convey as he considered the situation. “You said he was too drunk to do anything. Don’t worry about it,” came his answer. “He probably passed out somewhere.” The thought of John lying in the gutter bleeding or covered in his own vomit satisfied her sense of outrage but in reality would not be good for the girls, she concluded. Looking out the front window as they spoke she spotted him sitting among a motley group of neighbors gathered on the stoop of the building opposite, and blamed herself once more for not insisting he move out sooner. She watched him rise to his feet with their help and enter the building behind the fat woman who lived on the first floor. “He just went in an apartment across the street,” she announced. “Good,” said Justin. “then he’s probably not coming back. I’ll see you tomorrow after I drop off the kids.” It was Justin’s weekend with his children, the main reason for his refusal to rush over but not the only one. And tomorrow it would be no quick trip for him from the Upper East Side to New Canaan and back to Brooklyn. She would just have to make do.

As she hung up, Dorie continued to observe the activity across the street. John had disappeared into the fat lady’s apartment and a young couple remained on the stoop with a strangely dressed older woman who waved her arms excitedly and kissed them. A livery cab slowed and stopped, picked up the

young couple and they were gone. The older woman went back in the building and the stoop, the sidewalk, the street, were suddenly calm and empty. Dorie wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her robe. She knew it would be futile to try to sleep and she did not want to be alone. She considered phoning Sam, but Sam was not the company she wanted. “Girls?” she called. “Are you awake?” There was no answer. She went to Jen’s door and knocked softly. “Jen, are you awake?” she whispered. “Yes, mom,” Jen replied. Dorie entered her eldest daughter’s room and settled at the foot of the bed, leaving the light off as Jen sat up against her pillows. “I just want to let you know I’m okay,” she said. They heard footsteps in the hall and Allison tiptoed to the door clinging to the neck of a large pink pig that was her favorite stuffed animal.

“Come here, Allie,” said Dorie, and Allison hopped in her lap. “I’m sorry you had to see that. Your father has been acting very strange. He’s not well.”

“Where is he?” asked Jen.

“Staying with some neighbors,” said her mother.

“When is he coming home?” asked Allie.

“He’s not,” said Dorie. “It’s going to be just us girls. What do you say? We’ll have fun and take care of each other.”

“I don’t want it to be just us,” said Jen.

“I don’t care,” said Allie, and she really didn’t.

Doris kissed her on the forehead and hugged her close. “Well, I do. I care very much. Why don’t we go down to the kitchen and see what we can make?” Jen wondered why her mother looked so angry and scared if it was going to be so much fun.

Nick entered Nydia’s building while down the street Junior was chasing Eddie out of Rose’s apartment. Eddie’s father had returned home early from visiting his sister in Queens and buzzed him in. From the cooking smells in the hallway, the broken light fixtures, the blaring salsa and merengue, the graffiti on the walls, Nick had the sinking feeling he had crossed the border of a foreign country. He exited the elevator on the second floor just as Nydia came down the

stairway to Eddie's apartment where her mother had asked her to check on Eddie's medicine. "My god, what are you doing here?" said Nydia, shocked at the sight of him, posing a question that could only confuse Nick. "Eddie told me to meet you at his apartment. Isn't that where you're going?" he asked. "Yes, My god, no. I wasn't going to meet you. My mother told me to come down." Nydia stopped dead, her mouth gaping as she gauged the implications of what was happening. She immediately grasped both the dangers and the opportunities. "Come with me," she said, taking his hand. "Now." She pulled him to the stairwell and they raced downstairs just as Eddie was ascending in the elevator. They continued past the lobby floor to the basement, down a darkened passageway lined with rusting pipes and rows of thick wires until they came to a large room in the back of the building. Inside the doorway she groped for a switch and turned on a bare lightbulb that illuminated a storeroom filled with lumber and old furniture. To one side sagged a dusty couch. She led him to it and pushed him down. "Wait here," she said. While he watched unsure she pulled a candle from the drawer of an old blistered desk and lit it with her cigarette lighter. Then she closed the entry door and turned off the electric light. She joined him on the sofa and they sank noiselessly into the cushions. The hurried sex they enjoyed was a startling release, as intense and different as they desired. Even their confusion afterward brought its own sense of pleasure.

Eddie grunted with each labored step as he ran to his building with his head still smarting from Junior's blow, his right knee throbbing where it hit the car fender, and his simple, clever plot in disarray. He wished he were in shape. He almost wished he were sober. It was all the fault of that Sancho guy from across the street. Why did he listen to him? The man had no sense. "*Bruto!*" he bellowed to the air as he ran. "*Bruto!"* a voice inside answered each time. In the lobby he pounded on the up button of the elevator until it finally arrived, not giving a thought to taking the stairs as he wasted precious seconds foreseeing the fulfillment of Aunt Carmen's expectation of his failure. When he got to his floor young Nick was not in the hallway or the apartment. Only his father, home

from Queens after an argument with his sister. “Was there a guy here?” asked Eddie, rushing in and not even bothering to close the door, “ *Un Indio.* Dots not feathers. You know, the *come mierda* kid across the street?” His father, in his undershirt sitting by the TV with his bare feet on the coffee table and beer in hand, turned his watery eyes to his son and after what seemed an endless pause blinked and said, “What?” Eddie was bobbing desperately. “What’s wrong with you?” said his father “You gotta go to the bathroom, go.” Eddie forced his movements to stop. “Did you see Nydia?” he asked. His father seemed not to hear him at first, but after another slow sip of beer and a long, motionless pause answered, “Who, your cousin?” and turned back to the television, adding, “I ain’t seen nobody.” Eddie sat down and stared blankly at the screen for how long he had no idea, when Nydia’s mother burst into the room. She looked at Eddie and his father with disbelief, then outrage. “Where are they?” she shouted, her agitation rising with each word. Eddie’s father shook his head and sipped his beer without uttering a sound or taking his attention off the TV, making it clear that whatever was going on was not his affair. Eddie jumped up to stand at attention. “They ain’t here,” he said. “I don’t know what happened.” Aunt Carmen wagged her finger at him and Eddie cringed like a dog expecting a kick. “I sent Nydia down ten minutes ago. Where is she?” she shrieked. “I don’t know,” was all Eddie could say. “I ain’t seen her.” Eddie’s father signaled them to keep it down. “I got home an hour ago. Nobody came by, okay? Go look under the bed if you want. *¡Coño!*” Carmen thought about giving Eddie’s father a slap on the head but instead turned her wrath on Eddie. “A plan? You had a plan? Now where’s my daughter, *pendejo*!” And a voice in his head repeated *pendejo!* “I saw him. *I saw what you did to her.* He came in here. *Shut up.* I’ll find them Titi, I swear.”

Eddie raced out of the apartment before his aunt had a chance to answer, down the stairs this time, out the front door and smack into Pete Deshpande entering the building with the elder Jerome Guilford. “You. Mr. Eddie,” said Deshpande as Eddie dodged out of the way thinking his recent host had called the cops and was tracking him down after what didn’t quite happen to the

pediatrician at his party. Just as he sprinted past the dentist, Guilford grabbed him by the neck and pulled him up short. “I didn’t do nothing,” Eddie protested. “What about my garbage cans,” said Guilford as he spun Eddie around and landed him against the plate glass of the foyer. “And you said something back there about my wife and son.” “I didn’t say nothing,” grunted Eddie. “Wait a minute,” said the dentist, trying to calm both men. “I’m looking for my son. He went into this building.” That got Eddie’s attention. “I know,” said Eddie. “But he ain’t here. I came out to look for him. I think he’s with my cousin.” Deshpande stepped back, digesting the news as Guilford continued to pin Eddie against the glass. “The girl? She’s your cousin?” said Deshpande. He furrowed his brow and gazed at the sidewalk as if trying to solve a riddle. “Where do you think they went?” he asked. “The park,” said Eddie. “Just like this afternoon.” Though the reference to the park escaped him, Deshpande said, “I’m going with you. I have to find him.” He turned away, then wheeled back like a man with too many thoughts in conflict. “Wait here. I have to tell my wife.” “First he’s cleaning up my garbage,” said Guilford, already marching Eddie down the sidewalk in the opposite direction.

While the Deshpandes held a heated discussion about their son across the street, Eddie gathered up torn garbage bags from the sidewalk in front of Guilford’s building. When he tried to toss empty bottles and cardboard into the same trash can, Judy Guilford flew at him and pointed out the different receptacles for metal, plastic, glass and paper as she lectured him on the need to recycle, talking about the gar-barge to nowhere and landfills that won’t decompose for millions of years. Now Eddie knew she was crazy. He used all the energy of his special powers to levitate and transport himself directly to Nydia. He thought he was succeeding and felt himself lift several inches off the pavement until falling back into a slurry of coffee grounds. “I’m gonna sue,” Eddie shouted as he threw down Guilford’s broom and ran back to his building. “Next time you do anything like that I’m calling the police,” shouted Guilford. “Have a ball,” Eddie shouted back. “I don’t care about no cops.” When he got to his building he paced by the gothic facade of the entranceway trying to imagine

where Nydia and Nick would go. Deshpande returned a moment later and they set out side-by-side, striding toward the park. “My aunt told me to keep an eye on your kid,” said Eddie. “She don’t want Nydia hanging out with him.” Desphande was both consoled and slightly offended by the news. “My wife was keeping an eye on that girl,” he said. “Your cousin. For the same reason.” They said nothing more until they crossed the avenue and were in the gloom of the park. “You know, I’ve never been in there,” said the dentist, pointing with some anxiety to the blackness beyond the stone wall. “That’s okay,” said Eddie. “I know it. Just follow me.” “But I don’t think it’s safe at this hour,” Deshpande protested as he slackened his pace. “You just gotta be careful,” said Eddie. “Do you want to find your kid or what?” Deshpande nodded, concluding he would rather face the unknown dangers of the park than his wife without Nick. “Okay,” said Eddie. “Come on.” They climbed over the low wall and started walking through the grass, shunning the asphalt paths and the light of an occasional lamp. Soon Desphande had lost all sense of direction, all sense of even being in Brooklyn. It was almost exhilarating. They made it to the far end of the park where Eddie led him to a bench by the statue of Kosciusko. “Right here,” Eddie announced with the sudden apprehension they were being followed. *I saw you do it. I saw you do it to her. Shut up! Hernandez se tira a la bola. Callate! No hice nada.* “Did you say something?” asked Deshpande. *Paganos. They worship the cow. Thor, god of thunder.* “What?” Deshpande asked again. “What god?” Eddie snorted his short laugh. “It’s a comic book.” Eddie was starting to make Deshpande feel very uncomfortable. “I think we should go back,” said Deshpande, and turned around.

Their shoes were soaked from the wet grass by the time they returned empty-handed to their starting point. The night’s drizzle had abated and the lights of the borough lit up the canopy of clouds overhead like the flue of a giant fireplace. A block away Nick and Nydia strolled on the avenue talking in earnest tones about their plans for the future. Nick told her she should reconsider Notre Dame, and was emphasizing the increased lifetime earning power of college graduates when they saw his father and her cousin, of all people, exit the park

together just as Eddie noticed them in turn. “There they are!” Eddie shouted to Deshpande, pointing to the couple hurrying away before Nick and Nydia could make any sense of what they had just seen. Deshpande turned in time to see them disappear around the corner. Eddie started to trot after them. “No, wait,” said the dentist. “What’s the point? They’ll come home. What’s happened has happened.” He was too exhausted to give chase as was Eddie, despite his gesture. And all Pete Deshpande really cared about was that his son was all right. Let him have his little fling with the girl. It had been decided earlier that evening that Nick that would spend the summer in India with his aunt and uncle. Eddie shambled back and they continued toward the block. As they came under the light of a streetlamp Eddie halted. “You’re a dentist, right?” Deshpande nodded. “I think I got a bad tooth here.” He tilted his head back, opened his mouth wide and with his index finger pulled his cheek aside in a lopsided grin. “Right here,” he gurgled. Deshpande stepped up close and glanced in Eddie’s mouth. “Come to my office, I’ll see what I can do,” he said, and handed Eddie his business card.

Nydia and Nick repaired to the wall on the parkside after cousin and father parted ways. They had a full view down the length of the block that appeared before them like an empty movie set. They had almost run out of things to say. “Did you ever read that book?” asked Nick. “Did you ever smoke those joints?” she answered. “No,” Nick confessed. “Ha,” said Nydia. “Well, I read the book.” Nick noticed a plastic case in his pocket. It was the CD John Roads had left at his house. *Everywhere I go I hear it said, in the good and the bad books that I have read.* They shielded their eyes from the headlights of a car turning onto the avenue and sat in silence each thinking it was time to go home but not wanting to be the first to say it.

John Roads kicked off his shoes, wrapped himself in a blanket and laid his reeling head on a foam sofa cushion in the vain hope it might come to rest. Through an open doorway that kept revolving slowly counter-clockwise despite his best efforts to keep it steady, he could see Grace’s body lying rigid on the

bed covered by her shroud. That seemed perfectly okay. As did Junior snoring in the next room. “Rose,” he asked, as Rose was settling in her chair, “What are you going to do about your mother?” Rose sighed. “Don’t worry. I’ll call the funeral parlor in the morning.” That sounded reasonable. “I just hope she doesn’t start to stink,” she added. That seemed reasonable, too. “You know,” Rose continued, “if she didn’t stink I wouldn’t mind keeping her here. A few more Social Security checks wouldn’t hurt.” Also quite reasonable. John drifted into his troubled, tumbling sleep with the thought that when he awoke, or came to, his April would be gone. Thank god and welcome to May Day. Tanks and rocket launchers in Red Square, a line of tired old men waving from the balustrade. Mayday, m’aider. May Queen, Maypole. Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, his mind echoed the descending arpeggio and winked off at the last note.

You’ve been saying for how long, a year at least maybe two, you need a bigger chair. You’re wedged in so tight, one of these days your skin is going to peel right off your sides when you try to stand up. Forget about the chair. You promised you’d take care of Junior. Yes, Ma. You don’t have to remind me. I wish she wouldn’t worry about it. Ma, you don’t have to worry about it. The apartment shook with the snores of sleeping men. Snoring never bothered you but tonight is different. It’s like stereo. I didn’t think anyone could snore louder than Junior but Mr. Roads is giving him a run for his money. Drunks do that. Snoring to beat the band. Snoring to wake the dead. Wouldn’t be surprised if Ma hopped right up and slapped them both. God she hates snoring. I know it’s not very ladylike but I can’t help it I snore too, so it’s better if I sleep in a chair. I don’t mind. If I can’t sleep I have my front row seat. Like now, look down the sidewalk. Like what on god’s earth is the dentist doing out this time of night with Eddie of all people? You watched until the two men were absorbed in the shadows of their respective entries to leave the street empty once again. Settled comfortably now you can feel the enormity of your flesh, the solidity of your fortification. The wall and thicket that protects what? Oh, please. What am I, the

Tower of London? I told you don't get psychological on me. I'm a fat person. Maybe you're not, I am. That's the way it is. Why do other people want me to be like them? Leave me alone, for god's sake. You sniffed the air for putrefaction. Nothing yet. She's with my father now and Tommy. Which means maybe they're nothing together, I don't know. So what, I doubt sometimes. Don't make no difference. What I think don't change a thing. But I believe the priest, mostly. You fell into a light sleep imagining you were still awake, imagining maybe it's all right for Junior to move in with you as long as Mr. Roads won't press charges since you could use some help with expenses and look after him like Ma wanted. And you were worried about the rent control now that your mother was gone and have to check with a lawyer about that. And then there's the funeral arrangements and the rest of it. You opened your eyes as if prompted by something outside the window and when you looked down the street again you had to smile at the sight of that loud-mouthed Puerto Rican girl lit by the cone of a street lamp sneaking back in the building, and on the opposite sidewalk the dentist's kid slipping in his basement door. No mystery there. Aldo, you thought for some reason. Not his face, just his name: Aldo. You fell back asleep and that was the last you saw of the block that night. When you awoke it was still there, shadowed and still, like any Sunday morning.