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ANDRE DUBUS III

best-selling author of

HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG

DIRTY LOVE

*"FANTASTIC."
—Ron Charles,
Washington Post*

DIRTY LOVE

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ANDRE DUBUS III



W. W. Norton & Company

New York London

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LISTEN CAREFULLY

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AT FIRST THERE IS ONLY THE COFFEE TABLE IN FRONT OF HIM, a swath of sunlight across its glass surface. There's the neat stack of women's magazines, the TV remote lying perfectly parallel beside them. There is the oak floor and yellow wall, the tiled kitchen and granite countertop, the closed bedroom door. He wakes up because his mother left hours ago because it is almost noon on a Saturday in July and he is waking once again in the garage apartment he built for her. There is no dust, no empty cans or glasses, though his mouth is salt and ash and a familiar ache grips his head. He closes his eyes, but there's the video again. The picture is color and high-resolution. It is a bright spring day in a park in New Hampshire, and there are patches of snow on the ground. Mark Welch has not seen this in a while. The first weeks it came daily, but then, as things have become what they have, he's stopped seeing it so often and its power has faded. Still, he'd rather not see it now and he'd only made himself watch it twice, both times on the Sony flat-screen in the living room of the main house, his heart kicking like a hanged man's feet.

The sun is shining through pine trees onto a clearing of vacant picnic tables and an empty fire pit with its cinderblock walls scorched black. Just beyond it is a two-door coupe, a white import, its trunk closed and facing the camera. The doors are closed, too, and now the lens slowly moves in as if the camera operator one filming does not wish to startle. There, in the front seat, a man behind the wheel talks in profile to a woman. He is bald from his own hand, the way so many men are now, choosing to shave away their thinning hair so as to appear younger, still virile, though the effect is coldly narcissistic. He is talking and smiling at the woman. Her hair is long and tied back in a ponytail, and now the camera zooms to the rear window quickly so there is only the reflection of pine branches in the import's rear window. The frame of the image shifts slightly, pulls back, and the woman is visible again, her small curved nose, her left eye, how it turns down at the corner when she laughs, the way she does now with the bald man behind the wheel. This was one of the first things Mark had noticed about her, and he had seen it in the movie theater in that silly romance they went to that first time, how when she'd laughed he'd half turned to watch the flickering glow and watched her face; there were other things he'd noticed before that: there was her voice, tentative but somehow decisive too, the sound of one who consistently willed herself through fear or embarrassment. There was her thick, straight hair falling down her back like a girl's and not the thirty-one-year-old showing him condominiums along Pickering Wharf in her navy business skirt and white blouse, those runner's legs leading to maternal hips. And it was the way she smiled at him in the realtor's office, as if she'd been waiting for him for years and now that he had finally come she was shy about it.

But in the video, in that front seat of that two-door under the sun-mottled pines in the park, there are gray streaks in her hair that has thinned over the years. There are small bags under her eyes that turn down as she laughs. There are lines at the corners of her lips. And what about those other changes? Though to the man behind the wheel, there are none for he has only known her a few months, maybe a year, so even though he has probably visited her flat belly and seen the stretch marks—light purple and in a vertical pattern—between her navel and pubic hair, they can mean nothing to him, not like

they do to Mark. No, he used to kiss them with gratitude, a sign not just of the births of their daughter and son, grown now, but of her body's aging alongside his, a measure of their two and a half decades together.

In the video all this is covered by her nylon jogging suit because they've both just run side by side in that park in New Hampshire, the bald man behind the wheel and Laura. He and she have run together in the woods and now the man passes her a water bottle and she drinks. In seconds, she will lower the bottle. She will smile at the bald man behind the wheel and he will lean toward her, then sink out of sight. In seconds he will sit up and place Laura's running shoes on the rear dash, then Laura will lift her hips to make things easier for him, and soon there will be only Laura sitting behind the wheel of this two-door import, her head back, her hand gripping the dash as the bald man does. She will tell her what he does, and Mark Welch, the husband of Laura Welch, who twenty-four years ago was Laura's father, Murphy, he now stands in his mother's garage apartment, his temples pulsing, and he walks through her dim bedroom into the bathroom.

He uses the toilet, splashes his face with cold water three times. He squeezes his eyes shut, and there are the smells of toothpaste and chamomile and cotton. In the darkness he sees the reflection of the swimming pool from last night. He'd been sitting at the round table near the diving board sipping rum and Bacardi with a splash of Coke, his second or his fourth. He'd been watching his wife through the kitchen window, watched her rinse her plate or glass from hours earlier, watched her load them into the dishwasher. When Mary Ann and Kevin were small, when the house was full of their friends and various cousins, that machine would be filled and emptied twice a day, but Mary Ann is in business school down in Cambridge and Kevin has dropped out of Pratt to design his own video games in his cramped apartment in Brooklyn, so now, while her cuckolded husband lives with his mother in the attached garage, only Laura Welch inhabits the house and it will take her a full week to fill the machine with what she's used and left dirty.

Maybe she knew he was out there beside the pool alone after midnight. But probably she did not. Just before she flicked off the kitchen's overhead light she studied her reflection in the window. It was the look a mechanic gives a car engine she knows very well, checking the trouble areas first, then those—thanks to good design and her own hard work—that are still reliable; it was the look of a woman who knows there are probably fewer miles ahead of her than there are behind her, but right now the ride is fairly smooth and there are places along the way to look forward to, places where she will not have to be alone, and for this she's grateful.

Then there was nothing, only a black window and the yellow glow of the exterior light, its stark reflection on the pool's surface. Mark stared at it and sipped, stared and sipped. It has not been a smooth ride for *him*, has it? No, it has not. But there's a distance now, a distance from everything. Work and all its endless tasks, his mother and her constant caring for him up there in that apartment he built her—cooking for him, pouring him a drink, making his bed on the couch, trying to get him to talk about Laura and the eviction and divorce his mother insists he must demand. There's the distance from his own body. He'd never kept it as fit as Laura had hers, but he had not neglected it either. He didn't smoke, didn't eat badly, had always drunk moderately, getting drunk only two or three times a year. He occasionally lifted weights in his basement, or jogged for half an hour around his neighborhood, and in the summer he'd swim laps in his pool till he was tired and he would climb out and sit in the sun beside his solitary, sunning wife.

But now his body feels like some dumb beast he merely exists inside, and every now and then it lets him know it needs him to do something: To eat. To piss or shit. To move or just lie down and rest. He does not remember climbing the exterior stairs to his mother's apartment and couch last night. He does not remember how long he sat near the pool in the dark or when he left the bar where he'd been earlier. But he remembers the woman's face. Not Laura's at the kitchen sink but the one in the parking

lot. She wasn't much older than Mary Ann, probably thirty or thirty-one. They'd been talking at the bar under all the noise, the loud mindless chatter, the blaring sound system—ghetto rap that made Mark feel like some white relic from a forgotten time—the drunken laughter of young men in tight t-shirts showing off their gym muscles, tans, and tattoos. It was a place for people his kids' ages, and Mark felt conspicuous in his Tommy Bahama silk shirt, his slightly gelled hair combed back, the silver glint of his Movado wristwatch, a gift from his company after delivering the Infinity System project two weeks early. In the bar mirror behind the top-shelf vodkas, under the amber light of the lamps hanging from a tin ceiling, he did not appear unattractive to himself. Or, to be more precise, he did not appear unattractive to a woman he almost hoped might be looking. At fifty-six, like his very own Laura, his hair had thinned and there was more of his upper forehead visible now, but there was only a scattering of gray at the temples, and his face, while lined around the mouth and under the eyes, the skin more loose under the chin, was still the face he'd had all his adult life, his blue eyes deep-set, his chin not square but not weak either, his teeth small but fairly straight and still in his head.

A drunk woman was talking to him. She had too much makeup on in some places and not enough in others. Her eyes—blue or green or brown—seemed unadorned above cheeks caked with some sort of blush that was supposed to hide acne scars, though Mark could still see them, and he felt immediate sympathy for her till he took in the rest of her—her braless breasts behind a bright green sleeveless tube top, her tanned belly, the faded denim skirt riding too high above smooth legs and small feet in high-heeled shoes, her nails painted an almost fluorescent orange. What he felt then was something other than pity, though now, as he leaves his mother's bathroom to make coffee in her galley kitchen, he does not remember what that was only that he was surprised the woman was talking to him and he began talking back. It was about music. He had to lean closer to hear her.

"I ate wrap."

"You ate a wrap?"

"No." Her voice had been warm and moist in his ear and he could feel it in his groin, a stirring where for months nothing had stirred.

"No, I hate rap!"

He nodded in agreement. He was drawn to her: her hatred for this music; her warm, wet voice in his ear; her smell—fruity perfume, cigarette smoke, and coconut oil. Then they were outside in the restaurant parking lot leaning against her car smoking menthol cigarettes. He wasn't sure why he said yes when she'd offered him one, but he smoked it like a cigar, inhaling only to his jawbone before blowing out the smoke and watching it rise in the light of the neon beer signs in the bar's windows a floor above them. And he watched her profile as she talked on and on about something he only vaguely remembered now staring at his mother's coffeemaker. But then the woman was no longer talking and they were kissing hard up against her car, a ten-year-old Chevy sedan. They were kissing and her tongue was in his mouth. He remembers how soft her lips were, how she tasted like menthol and beer. He remembers his erection pressing against his pants against her tanned belly above that faded denim skirt, and there's the feeling, though far away, as if it's floating ten feet above him, that something precious has been irrevocably ruined, and it is not he who should be held accountable. No, not at all: it is Laura, his very own Laura who sleeps alone in their king-size bed, who eats alone at their kitchen's peninsula, who watches TV alone on the sectional sofa in their living room, and does she still watch those same TV shows? The crime dramas where so often a family's life appears ordered and comfortably predictable and then one early morning a man or woman is soon watching her own nest burn?

Almost always, however, it is the husband who does it. This is Laura's view, too. It's his fault. Even for this. Eleven weeks and four days ago, she is filmed spreading her legs for another man's tongue after having just exercised and so she must have still been sweating quite a bit and yet the bald man did it anyway and she said, well *screamed* really. "It's because of *you!* All you do is *criticize* me! I'

never good enough no matter what I fucking *do!* You *made* me do it!”

“I made you do it.” He was still breathing hard, one hand resting on the kitchen’s tiled peninsula. A pool of water and bits of broken glass. Behind him three chairs lay in various pieces on the floor, the heavy birch table on its side, one of its legs gone. Above him, the light fixture was swinging slowly back and forth, its glass face undamaged, the bulbs inside unbroken, though the fixture was hanging by its wires and there was a gouge in the ceiling where the chair he’d swung over his head had scraped the sheetrock before hitting the light, then the floor. This was a detail he would not notice for hours, but he would remember her screaming face and how the light, swinging slowly overhead like that, made her appear as if she were on a night train heading somewhere away from here, away from him, her contorted, raging face so lovely in its betrayal.

She had called ninety minutes earlier. The sun was low in the trees behind their house, and Mark listened to the phone ring until the machine picked up. His fingers were steady as he turned up the volume and listened.

Hey, it’s me. I had a late showing and now I’m off to the gym. There’s leftover lasagna in the fridge. Be home soon.

Mark played the message back three times. What struck him were four things. One, she referred to herself only as *me*, as if no one else could be calling him, as if she were rightfully the only other *me* in his life. Two, she ended her message with no subject: *Be Home Soon*. By using no *I* or *will*, she was removing herself from whatever would precede her returning home, which meant that when she called she was heading to be with Frank Harrison Jr., for that was the bald man’s name, and maybe she was even sitting in his white two-door import—a 2009 Audi TT coupe—about to unzip his pants. Or maybe they were driving to that Marriott on the highway two towns over, the one Mark had seen in the second video, Laura and Harrison holding hands as they walked in, then—forty-three minutes later—walked out, their arms around each other’s waists. Maybe Frank Harrison Jr. was driving with one hand on her knee while she called her husband, and what did he feel when she advised Mark on what there was to eat? Did he *hear* that? That people cooked for each other over here? Ate with one another? Did he hear the word *home*?

Three, her voice. It was high in her chest, the way it had sounded both times she’d walked into the living room, her pregnant belly stretching the cotton of her nightgown, and said, “Honey, I think it’s coming.” Both times it had happened like that, late at night, her walking in to announce to him in front of the television that he needed to help her go do something momentous. Four, her choice of words: *There’s leftover lasagna in the fridge. Be home soon. Work with me, honey. Sit down and eat and believe I’m in Pilates class at the gym. Help me do this thing I must do.*

Thirty minutes after dark her Civic pulled into the driveway, the security light switching on as if this were any other night. Maybe that night, a cold Wednesday in March, she and Frank Harrison Jr. had driven to the Marriott down the highway, and afterward, in the hotel bathroom, she’d had to sit on the toilet and let the bald man’s semen drain from her, for she was fifty-five years old and birth control was no longer an issue and so there would have been no need for a condom. There were other diseases to think about, but would she consider this? Mark didn’t think so.

He had stood at the darkened living room window and watched her rise up out of the Civic, slinging her gym bag over her left shoulder, her pocketbook over her right. Her keys were clutched in her fingers. There had been a few moments, an hour or two after staring at those videos, when he had considered changing the locks, barring her from this house they’d shared and maintained since the early thirties. She would try the front door, then the rear, maybe a panic rising in her before she climbed the side stairs of the garage to his mother’s apartment. But Mark couldn’t have that. Not there, at least. He would not have his mother involved in this in any way. There was something else too; to kick her out would be to send her into the arms of Frank Harrison Jr.

So he'd left the locks as they were, and he'd stood in the center of the darkened living room and listened to her walk into the kitchen and set her gym bag and pocketbook down. There was the clank of her keys beside them, then a quiet stillness, something missing. Usually, after a long day at the real estate office or out showing properties, then a strenuous workout at the gym, after she'd stepped inside and relieved herself of whatever she was carrying, there would come an exhalation of air from her, a sigh—part exhaustion, part relief. But that night she seemed to be standing in the bright kitchen holding her breath.

Maybe she could sense him out there, the TV remote in his hand, the DVD cued just to where he wanted it. He could feel his heart beating in his tongue, and he wished he'd been in the kitchen when she walked in. That's where he'd usually be, waiting for her as eager and ignorant as a half-blind dog with dinner on the stove or in the oven because he got home before she did. No, that wasn't quite true. Many nights he would wait for her to cook, and he'd be in the living room on the sectional, his work computer open on his lap, CNN on the television, slickly packaged semi-intellectuals speaking earnestly into the camera. She'd walk in and he'd glance up at her over the rim of his glasses, puckering his lips for a kiss which she'd lean down and give him, just a brush of lips really. So it was the dark quiet living room that had probably stopped her. "Mark? *Honey?*"

Honey. How nice.

"In here." His voice had felt old and unused. When he leaned to switch on the lamp the room tilted a moment before righting itself, Laura walking in. She was in her nylon running suit and white Nike sneakers with the pink stripes. Her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, and it looked like she'd applied a little fresh blush to her cheeks. Her eyes appeared a bit sunken, though, those slight bags beneath them that never went away.

"Did you fall asleep?"

The word *no* was in his throat, but it wouldn't come out, and Mark, like the athlete he'd been in high school, the fast and reckless wide receiver, the diving shortstop, aimed the remote under his arm at the TV behind him and watched her face as the image lit up the screen. At first, there was nothing. She was simply watching her silent husband turn on the TV behind him, his back to it. She was watching and waiting to see just what was happening before her. Then there was the gray light of the television on her face and it took only a few seconds; it was as if she'd been burned; her eyes widened and her lower lip twitched and she turned and stepped quickly toward the kitchen.

Mark's movement was a thing he would never remember, only the feel of her arms and ribs and belly as he picked her up and pulled her back and swung her around to watch the show. There were her kicking feet, and there were her screams—fear there, and desperation, and hatred. Yes, hatred. Her hair had fallen to each side of her face and she was looking only at the floor so her husband had no choice but to place his palm against her forehead and pull back till she saw it, Frank Harrison Jr. and her in the white Audi coupe, his profile sinking out of sight, but she twisted away, his always fit and physically strong wife, and she was shrieking, "I can't believe you! I can't fucking *believe* you!"

Then she was past him in the kitchen and what could he do but follow? What could he do but race ahead of her and block the doorway? What could he do but flip the table into the air? What could he do but stomp off its closest leg and start swinging chairs over his head down to the tiled floor, six of them, those tiles still cracked now eleven weeks and four days later, the three chairs still splintered and leaning in the garage, the three-legged table upside down in the corner of the kitchen so Laura had to eat at the peninsula, or maybe off her lap in the living room while she watched shows of families being devastated by one of their own.

MARK DOES NOT MAKE COFFEE. He has taken two Motrin for his Bacardi headache, and he needs

something cold and sweet to drink. A Coke. He has none left, but there may be some in the fridge of the main house. He peers out the side window overlooking the pool. Normally on a July Saturday afternoon, Laura would be lying in her bikini on a chaise longue on the concrete soaking in the rays, but that by September left her darker than any of their friends. Mark would sometimes warn her about the weakened ozone layer, the increased likelihood of skin cancer, but she would half smile at him behind her sunglasses and say, "You worry too much, Mark."

It's true. He does. He always has. But what's a senior project manager to do if not to anticipate threats and opportunities, to manage risk, to deliver the finished project on time?

The poolside is empty, the sun too bright off the concrete pad. Mark steps to his mother's ham closet, the one she has cleared out for him, and he undresses, then pulls on shorts and a shirt and walks to the front window overlooking the driveway and street. There is only his BMW sedan. Laura's space is empty beside it, which means she's with tall, bald Frank Harrison Jr., a man Mark now knows many things about: he knows that Harrison is fifty-three years old, his fifty-fourth birthday coming in August. He knows that at six foot one he weighs two hundred and eleven pounds and was a wrestler at Boston College, undefeated in his weight class his senior year. Mark knows that Harrison has nagging sciatica for which he sees an acupuncturist every Tuesday afternoon at 4:45 p.m., and that he lives in a three-story white Federalist with his oblivious wife on High Street in Newburyport, that town nine miles east that at one time was an abandoned cluster of tannery mills and shipyards at the mouth of the Merrimack River, but for years now has been so gentrified that tourists travel to its downtown boutiques and restaurants, its coffee shops and pubs and bookstores, its waterfront theater with a view of pleasure boats moored on the water or cruising east under the bridge. It's the town where Frank Harrison Jr. will stroll with his wife of twenty-three years on a Saturday evening, and they will dine either at a lobster place on the marina, or eat Italian or Thai in the square of clothiers and day spas that used to manufacture leather.

Mark knows that Anna Harrison is a narrow-hipped, large-breasted woman with an automatic smile. That she works part-time as a legal secretary in a law office six blocks from their Federalist, and she usually walks there and back, her sandy hair shoulder-length and pinned away from her face, a face Mark would consider still attractive were it not for that smile and her eyes that, glancing up from the sidewalk in front of her, appear to him weary and slightly dumbfounded and a bit frightened too, as if to do anything other than what she does every day might invite catastrophe. Or perhaps he's wrong about that. Maybe she's just constantly thinking of their children who are no longer under her daily care: Frank III, Thomas, and Gayle, the younger two in college—the boy a hockey player at Bates, the girl at the University of Florida at Gainesville, Frank III following his father into the banking business, though not at Providential where Frank Harrison Jr. is a commercial loan officer, a well-groomed fleecer of the public who arrives at work between 8:13 and 8:17 a.m., who parks his white coupe in front of the concrete river wall behind the bank in this upriver town where, just two miles east, there's the gym Laura has been a member of for twelve years. It's where she stretches, lifts light dumbbells, takes classes in yoga and Pilates. It's where she does all this, then goes running after five she never lets anything come between her and running. Even when she was pregnant with Mary Ann and Kevin, she ran into their third trimesters. It's a habit she developed as a withdrawn child growing up in central New Hampshire, a solitary activity that matched her solitary nature.

That's how she'd always explained it to Mark anyway, that she needed time to herself, that she never should have gone into real estate because it's a job that forces her to talk to people, but that's also why, Mark would tell her, she's been so successful at it; prospective buyers can sense just how little she cares whether they like the property or not, that what she really wants to do is be done with this walk-through, pull on her sweats and Nikes, and run away from them all; this is the softest sell possible and so she sells more than most, her lack of charm a quality Mark had come to trust for himself.

always knew where he stood with her. Other women, women like Anna Harrison, seemed to smile on reflex, as if this were something they were taught to do as young girls—be nice, be pretty, nice and pretty—and so you never knew if a woman was genuinely pleased with something you'd said or done or not. But Laura only smiled when she felt like it, her eyes turning down at the corners, so it was a gift to them all when she did, a gift to Frank Harrison Jr. too, who must have charmed her into doing that at the gym, the place he drove his Audi coupe to every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, pulling out behind the bank between 4:33 and 4:39 each time, driving through town along the river, past the brick post office and the old Whittier Hotel, past the music shop and Pedro Diego's Mexican restaurant and the insurance office above Valhouli's Barbers that has been there since Mark's father was a boy and he would go there for a nickel haircut and years later, when he was husband to Dorothy and father to Claire and young Mark, he'd own two of the abandoned mills near Lafayette Square, one he sold for a profit, the other he lost so much money on he spent fewer and fewer nights at home going instead to the bars of Railroad Square till he was hardly ever home at all. After a while, only a year or two, it seemed, he was no longer Bill Welch, property owner and entrepreneur, but Welch who drank boilermakers with off-duty cops and men from the mills, Welch who bought dawn breakfasts for old waitresses and young runaways, Welch who ran up tabs he couldn't pay and who died on a moonless night in February in the backseat of a '63 Impala that belonged to a man who had gone through the dead drunk's pockets and called the Welches' house at two-fifteen in the morning. Mark Welch was still a boy then, but he remembers his mother's voice on the phone in the hallway outside his bedroom. He remembers the crack of light beneath his door like some unnatural fire that would never escape. "Are you sure? *William* Welch?" There was some kind of wire being pulled through her words, one that was about to snap. But then she said, "Thank you. Thank you very much for calling." And Mark could hear the phone being set carefully into its cradle. He heard little else. Only his own heartbeat; for the first time it was no longer in his chest but in his head, something steady he listened to between his ears even as the police car pulled in front of the house, even as the front door opened and closed twice, even as he began to hear the nearly calm voice of his mother telling Mrs. Steinberg from next door to let them sleep until they wake up, let the poor children sleep. But there was no sleeping. There were his mother's words on the phone from earlier, and there was his father's name, and there was Mark Welch's heart having moved up to his head where, all these years later, he'd heard it once again as he watched those videos he'd paid an investigator from Boston to film, heard it as he walked by Anna Harrison on the sidewalk, heard it as he followed her husband in a white coupe three cars behind as Frank Harrison Jr. drove past the car dealerships on River Street, the machine shops and boarded-up Dairy Queen, past the Exxon station and Dunkin' Donuts, then across the highway overpass for the turn to the gymnasium on the hill where he'd met and wooed the apparently restless and unhappy Laura Murphy Welch.

THE HOUSE IS TOO COOL and smells like itself. Fabric softener from the laundry room, rust in the pipe on the floor varnish where the sun's been shining through the windowpanes all morning. Laura has the air conditioner on too high and goose bumps rise along Mark's forearms as he opens the fridge. How empty it seems. In the bright space there are five or six containers of strawberry yogurt, a carton of eggs, jars of condiments, raw hamburger meat wrapped in plastic. On the bottom shelf, behind a grapefruit, two cans of Coke lie on their sides like forgotten children. He pulls one out and opens it, in a sudden spray surprising him, but not really. He ignores any mess he's made, and drinks long in the open doorway of the fridge.

He belches and tastes last night's rum. He's been drinking too much too often. He knows this. If he were a team member on one of his own projects, Mark would identify himself as a possible risk and

would begin to monitor and control that risk, for if he did not, he could become a threat to the long-term integrity of the project.

But what if the larger project has already been jettisoned completely?

Mark closes the refrigerator door and glances over at the upside-down table in the corner. The broken leg lies in the middle of it between the other three. It is a clean break, the upper part of the leg splintered but still fastened to the tabletop. To fix it, all he has to do is glue and clamp.

He stares at the floor. Six cracked tiles. He still has a box of them in the basement from when he hired a crew to lay a new floor five years ago. It would be more work to replace those. He'd have to break them up fully, wouldn't he? Pry the pieces up off the dried mortar bed, scrape the old mortar down to the subfloor, then, on and on. He is tiring just thinking about it. He glances up at the light fixture. It's back where it belongs, Laura having fixed that one herself.

He takes his Coke and walks through the dining room. They'd only used it for holidays, and it seems impossibly small to him now, the table covered with a lacy runner down the center, the silver candelabra there in the middle with its five new ivory candles, their wicks still white and coated with wax. It was a wedding gift, and when did Laura apply that wallpaper border along the tops of the walls? It's one continuous illustration of cows grazing in a field, and it had taken her all afternoon, Sunday not so long ago because the kids were gone and Mark would walk through the room now and then and ask her if she needed any help. She was in shorts and a dark top, her long hair pulled back. She was standing on their stepladder, the adhesive roller in one hand, the other on the border she was slowly rolling against the wall, her reading glasses at the tip of her nose. She'd said, "No, honey. Thanks," and kept working. Mark stared at her long runner's legs, a varicose vein behind her left knee. He stared at her ass and her hips and straight back, and he watched the twitch of the smaller muscle in her forearm as she smoothed the cows along. All these years and she was the only woman he'd slept with, a fact he gave himself no extra credit for, for that's what he'd vowed after all, but he'd wanted her then as fiercely as when they'd first begun to make love in their early thirties in that condominium she'd sold him on Pickering Wharf. Later that afternoon, after the border was finished and their dining room looked more colorful but cheerfully antiseptic, like something from the kind of home magazine Laura enjoyed reading, Mark had brought her a bottle of light beer and stood beside her as she pointed out two air bubbles in the corner above the door. They were in shadow and she hoped no one would see it. He could smell her sweat and that deeper woman smell that Laura's sweating gave off, and he pulled her to him and kissed her deeply, her glasses still at the end of her nose. A surprised sourness came out of her, and she pulled off her glasses and dropped them on the table and soon they were making love on the carpet, her shorts and underwear around one ankle, the stepladder inches from her lovely head.

Mark drains the Coke and leaves the can on the dining room table. He climbs the front stairs to the second floor. He avoids the kids' rooms and walks down the hallway into the bedroom he no longer considers his. Very little has changed. There is the same coral duvet spread across their king-size bed. Three decorative throw pillows are stacked in a pyramid on top of where both their heads used to lie, and he can see she's taken another pillow and put it where his was before he'd carried it to his mother's next door. On her bedside table is a magazine, *Runner's World*. A page is marked with a subscription flyer, and he sees that she's reading an article of advice on running in all four seasons, something she's been doing for years so why does she need to read this? And isn't it interesting, he thinks, that she no longer runs alone but with Frank Harrison Jr., that that time she needed so badly for herself she's given so readily to another?

He closes the magazine and walks to her bureau. It's a dark walnut that matches his smaller one, now empty, on the other side of the room. The surface of hers is as clear and spare as it always was. There's the jewelry box sitting on the lace coverlet. There's her antique hairbrush and comb and hair

mirror, though she only uses the large one against the wall in front of him. In the upper corner of the mirror, stuck between the glass and the wood frame, are photos of the kids when they were in middle school. The pictures have been there for years, and many times Mark has leaned closer to study them but not today. Today he notices the mirror is tilted down at a slight angle, something he'd probably done months ago just before he and Laura had made love late on a Saturday night or early on a Sunday morning.

Laura preferred being on top, and Mark would sometimes peek around her shoulder and hair to see their reflection in the mirror, to see himself penetrating his lovely, athletic wife. Once she'd caught him doing it and whispered, "That turn you on? Huh? You like a show?" He hadn't answered, just kissed her deeply, but he liked how game she was, how she'd always seemed to enjoy the lovemaking as much as he did. Over the years they'd heard of friends of theirs who made love rarely, maybe once every two to three months, if that.

This was something Laura would tell him, for husbands did not offer that kind of information though one did, Charlie Brandt. It was a pool party at the Welches'. The yard was crowded with friends and their kids, some of them grown. One was the Salvuccis' daughter, a dark-haired university student in a bikini, and it was hard not to linger on her as she walked barefoot and flat-bellied under the sun to one of the coolers for a beer. Charlie had nudged Mark. He'd leaned closer, smelling of gin and hair gel. "I got one just like that."

"Marie know this?"

"You shittin' me? But hey, she's got no leg to stand on, brother. She stopped fucking me soon after she got fat and she's been fat for *ten* years."

Mark had never liked Charlie much. He was an insurance salesman who stood too close to you and talked too loud, mainly about himself. But his wife was Laura's friend from the Salem realtor's office and so he'd become a regular at the Welches' various parties, and now Mark judged him for cheating like that. Charlie kept talking. Mark had turned over the chicken breasts on the grill. He squinted at the smoke and glanced at Marie sitting with Laura and three other women at the umbrella table. She was a heavy Italian woman with a kind and pretty face, and she was laughing at something one of the others had said and Mark felt sorry for her then and told himself that if Laura ever shut him off he'd go to counseling and do whatever it took to get her back, but he wouldn't cheat like Charlie Brandt who was now wandering off in the direction of the Salvuccis' daughter in his Bermuda shorts and flip-flops, his gin and tonic in his hand like a conversation starter.

Mark opened the top drawer of Laura's dresser. Fifteen or twenty pair of panties were rolled up and nestled beside one another, three neat rows of pink and pale blue, beige, white, and even a few red. Did she wear those for Frank Harrison Jr.? He pictured her standing before him as he lay waiting on the Marriott's bed. Did she shuck them off quickly so they could get to it? Or did she make a dance out of it, something she'd never done for her husband?

That's when he'd first felt the cool draft of suspicion blow between his ribs, when she'd done something entirely new. It was a weeknight, and they'd both gone to bed early. He was tired and distracted, thinking of his next project, an alternative search engine whose design they had to deliver in fourteen months. He was the lead PM and already suspected the scope of this was too large for its projected cost and time required. Laura's lamp was on. She was reading a novel for her monthly book club, this one by a woman writer with an Indian name. Mark lay on his back and began to plan the meeting he would have to run the following morning.

He'd have to bring in all the principals, sit them down in the Mauer Conference Room at the long table that could seat twenty-two. His first few jobs as project manager, he'd sit in a chair at one side and another, his suit jacket off and his tie loosened, just one of the many contributing members of the team. At the time he was a believer in Motivational Theory Y, that all people are naturally driven and

all you have to do is treat them with respect, hold the bar high but not unattainably high, and set the loose.

But his first two projects were managerial disasters. They were completed, but they came in weeks late, over budget, and three of his people had quit halfway through. He'd almost lost his job, but Teddy Burns gave him a second chance. He called him early on a Friday morning, Laura and the kids still in bed, and said, "Retraining Day, Mark. Come in in hiking gear, running shoes if you don't have boots. See you at seven."

It was early May. They drove up to the White Mountains, a two-hour ride in Teddy Burns' black Range Rover, Mark's young, fit, and prematurely bald boss behind the wheel. Mark sat beside him in the Nike sweatshirt Laura had bought him the previous Christmas. On his feet were the worn sneakers he reserved for yard work, and he sipped from the insulated mug of dark roast he'd brewed at home, sipping it slowly. He looked out at the weeds alongside the highway, the newly leafed-out trees, and he tried not to feel patronized and insulted by all this.

Teddy Burns was a lanky vegetarian who supervised every project manager on the East Coast. Before rising to upper management, he'd delivered some of the biggest projects the company had ever contracted: Elco Systems right before they went public; Bascomb's Internal Review software; and Zebra Inc. right after the Chinese bought every share of its stock. He had a girlfriend he called his partner, an angular blonde attorney who at office parties sipped Pinot Grigio and eyed the roomful of project managers before her as if she were there to make some sinister but necessary decision about them.

While Teddy drove he'd been talking about new software applications on one of the many electronic gadgets he owned, something to do with GPS systems and the world's dwindling supply of water. Mark nodded and sipped. He responded when needed, but he was from a generation of phone booth users, people who grew up with just a few channels on the TV you couldn't get without fiddling with the antenna on top, a generation of people who went out and bought a hardcover book or vinyl album and then had to wait till they got back home to read it or listen to it; they didn't download the files from wherever they were, sampling one song or chapter before pressing a button to skip over to another.

"You're a big sister, Mark."

"What?"

"Like right now. You don't give a shit about my new apps, but you're acting like you do."

"I thought we called that being polite."

Teddy Burns was staring at him, one hand on the wheel, his eyes expectant yet scrutinizing. "Polite's one thing. Being a big sister's another." He shifted into the passing lane though there was no one to pass. Mark could feel the effortless acceleration of the Range Rover, his head pulling back slightly against the leather headrest. "Is this when you go after my manhood, Teddy?" He was surprised he'd said it. Teddy Burns could fire him before he even eased up on the gas. He could pull over and tell Mark to find his own way home. But Teddy was smiling and shaking his head.

"I knew it. I knew there was a real PM in you somewhere. Boston wants me to send you packing, but here's what I know: you're playing the role of big sister, but you're really the mean little brother."

"Pardon me?"

"You heard me."

Burns was right. When Mark and his older sister Claire were kids, especially after their father died, Mark had always hated being left out. More than once, whenever she was set to go to a party without him, he'd let all the air from a tire of her Camaro. He'd listen in on her phone calls for anything he could blackmail her with later. If she didn't lend him five or ten bucks, he'd call her fat and ugly, two things she was not, though he suspected Claire secretly thought she was. Every American girl did

“Yeah, well, whatever. I appreciate your giving me another shot, Teddy.”

“Not good.”

“What’s not good?”

“You just established your edge with me and now you’re softening it by sucking up. That’s Weak Matrix, man.”

“How’s that Weak Matrix?”

“Because now your people don’t know who’s in charge—the edgy guy with balls? Or the smooth and compromiser?”

“I wasn’t compromising—”

“No, but you were smoothing. That’s what you did for the Laity account, and you did it even more with Converse.”

“I had to keep them happy, didn’t I?”

“Yes and no.” Teddy accelerated past a lumbering motor home with California plates. Its driver was silver-haired and tanned, his plump wife beside him, all their putting-up-with-bullshit-like-them forever in their rearview mirrors. Teddy shot past them over a rise into a banking curve. Off to the left was a sloping valley of pines and blue spruce, mountains looming over them like benevolent big sisters.

“Smooth things out with the client, yes. But do not be the smoother and compromiser with your own team. That gives *them* the power. If they can’t work out a solution to a task, then you *force* them to.”

“What? Put a gun to their heads, Teddy?”

“See, good. Keep that edge. Hold on to it. Look, do you know *why* I am where I am?”

Because you’re a self-absorbed prick.

“Do you?”

Mark could feel Teddy Burns staring at him. To the north, snow lay lazily in a ridge between two peaks. “Because you’re not a big sister.”

“True, but that’s not what you were going to say. What did you really want to tell me?”

“That’s it.”

Teddy slowed for a curve. Mark sipped his coffee, tepid now, bitter. Fuck it. “That you’re a self-absorbed prick, that’s why.”

Teddy Burns started to laugh. He glanced over at Mark and laughed harder. It was high and unrelenting, like the guttural chatter of some exotic monkey, and Mark began to laugh too.

“Stellar, man. That’s *stellar*. I *am* a self-absorbed prick, which is why they pay me so fucking well. Your problem is you’ve subscribed to the wrong motivational theory. That’s what big sisters *do*. They believe everyone has their heart in the right place at the right time and all you have to do is point them in the right direction. *Wrong*. People are naturally fucking *lazy*. They’d rather lie around all day eating, fucking, and scratching their balls. That’s why pricks are needed, my friend. It’s called micromanagement and it works.”

He went on from there, gleefully lecturing as he parked the Rover in a dirt lot in a sunlit clearing, continuing to make points as they both began to climb a shaded trail under the pines, and while Mark still didn’t much like Teddy Burns, he admired how he could climb and talk without being winded, but more, he admired his insight into him, Mark Welch, who on this mountain hike over ten years ago began to feel free now to work the way he’d been pulled to for a long while yet was semiconscious and ashamed of himself for; he’d always wanted to sit at the head of the conference table, not alongside the others, and he’d never felt right taking off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves elbow to elbow with his team. Instead, because he was overprepared for each project and knew it, because he had done his goddamned homework, he’d wanted to issue directives, to delegate and wait, to monitor and control risks, to send his people off to do what he damn well told them to and then to complete the

project under budget and on time.

~~Since that morning with Teddy Burns, despite a few, but only a few, backward steps, Mark had become overwhelmingly successful. He had earned himself a reputation as an immensely productive hard-ass, a PM who was consistently given all the important projects because he could be counted on even before the project commenced, to prepare and to plan, as he was doing that weeknight as he lay beside Laura reading her book, picturing himself in the Mauer conference room the following morning, addressing his new team, already searching for any negative and positive risks, and that when Laura had sidled over, run her hand across his hip, and began to play with his balls.~~

At first it was just her fingertips, a light scratching, and at first Mark had barely noticed. He was thinking of Lucas O'Brien, a software engineer they'd hired as a consultant who would have to be given, once again, a written set of tasks and a firm deadline. He held a doctorate from MIT and encouraged others to view him as somewhat absentminded, a genius of course, so he'd be free from the same constraints everyone else was forced to work under. Now Laura's head was under the covers and when she took Mark into her mouth, he made himself forget Lucas O'Brien and the rest. He closed his eyes and lay his hand on her back. He felt grateful for this distraction, grateful he had a loving wife doing this to him now, though she'd never done it quite this way before, cupping his balls as she did what she did with her mouth. And a few moments later, as she straddled him the way she preferred, she'd reached behind and touched them again, twice, these testicles of Mark's she'd barely seemed to notice before. It was like being with someone in the woods who has just read an Audubon guide on trees, then seeing her awakened appreciation for them, the novelty of them.

After, as he lay beside her in the dark, her breaths rising and falling in an easy sleep, he could feel again the touch of her fingertips on his testicles—tentative, then inquisitive, then, as she cupped them in her palm, comparative; she seemed to be *comparing*. And not one against the other either.

Mark's face had flashed with heat. He seemed to be lying more still than he had been just one heartbeat earlier. He turned his head carefully on its pillow and took in what he could see in the darkness: Laura's narrow back to him under the covers, the strap of her nightgown over her bare shoulder, a wisp of hair. Through the curtains came the shadowed glow of the streetlight in front of their sidewalk, yard, and home, all of which felt to him, in this moment of unwanted clarity, suddenly imperiled by some malicious presence he should not be so surprised at only just now discovering. For there were other details to consider: her more frequent trips to the gym, sometimes two on Saturday—one for weights, she said, the other for Pilates or yoga. Her longer and longer runs. There was the way she'd been greeting him at the end of the day. There was still the brush of her lips on his as he sat in front of CNN, but there was also how happy—yes, that was the word—how *happy* she seemed at dinner. Just the two of them sitting side by side at the island or sometimes at the round table they used when the kids still lived here. She'd ask him questions about his day and work, and she really seemed to be interested in whatever he told her, her eyes on his as she chewed and sipped and swallowed, her hair down around her lovely, muscular shoulders. She'd ask him follow-up questions too, even technical ones that should have bored anyone. "*Did* he enter those stats into the program?"

And this revived interest in him made Mark ask *her* questions about her day, questions he actually meant, which told him there'd been a time when he did not really care what she told him, but he forgave about that, enjoying instead his revived wife and her renewed interest in him, the way, after dinner they washed dishes together side by side, how, if it was warm enough, they'd then go for a walk down their street past their neighbors' homes, half-acre lots like their own, the houses set back away from the street.

They'd walk along in the twilight, chatting about what they saw—a broken bird feeder in front of the Kazarosians', a new satellite dish on the roof of the Doucettes', the screened porch being built onto the back of the Battistinis'. Often, Mark and Laura would talk about Mary Ann and Kevin, and

Laura's voice sounded lighter even then, as if she knew she'd done her best with them and now it was up to their children to live their own lives; it was as if she'd finally accepted something in herself Mark hadn't even known she'd been wrestling with; he'd always seen her as a good mother. Loving, attentive, consistent. Hadn't *she*? When had these changes in her begun?

He kept seeing the leaves of fall, candy in a basket. Even though their daughter and son were grown, Laura still left the porch light on every October 31st. She bought wrapped chocolates and left them in a basket next to the railing outside. But last Halloween, she wore a witch's hat and greeted each group of kids herself. She welcomed them warmly, complimenting their costumes every time. Mark had been on the couch in front of the TV. He tried to remember her ever being this way before. In her voice—almost overexuberant—was not simply holiday cheer but joyous relief, like some terminal ill patient who's just been told she's not sick anymore. Then those more frequent workouts, those longer runs, the way she began to really see and listen to him. Gone was that weary, and wary, look she'd had around him for years, that she was bone-tired from all that being a mother and realtor asked her to do, and now she had to be a wife, as well, whatever that meant.

Mark pushes shut Laura's underwear drawer. Outside the front windows are the bright green leaves of their maple trees. His eyes ache just looking at them. She's with Harrison now. Mark knows this. She got up early, the way she always has. She pulled on her running shorts and athletic bra and all that rest. She probably ate a banana and drank half a cup of coffee, and did she bring a change of clothes? Would she and Harrison drive to the Marriott after their run in the state park? Would they shower, then shower again?

MARK DRIVES HIS BMW up the highway. His Oakleys help with the glare off the asphalt, though not quite enough. His AC is on and his sunroof is open and he drives just beneath the speed limit. He does not know this until he becomes aware of cars passing him, a driver or passenger glancing at him. Briefly he is clearly irrelevant.

He knows where he is going, though he is not sure why he is going there. It's no longer to catch her in a lie because she has stopped lying to him. How beautiful she looked to him then. In the kitchen ten or twelve days ago now. That's when all things began to feel far away. She was clearly out of his reach and grasp, free of his control. His recognition of this truth was at first a dizzying plummet into a black void from which he would never return. But then came that distance, this detachment of the observer and now he sees the sign for the Marriott rising above the planted maples around its parking lot, then he is taking the exit and is soon pulling slowly past the parked cars, their windshields and chrome blinding under the sun. He does not see Laura's Honda or Harrison's white Audi coupe. So Mark backs into the shade of an ancient pine, his tires touching the curb, and he puts the gear in park, leaves the engine running for the AC, and he waits.

He watches his finger press the button to close the sunroof, though he had no thought about doing so beforehand. There are advantages to this new feeling, a certain lightening of the load. The management of risk is one of his primary tasks as a PM. You must identify it, analyze it, then develop a response to it. You must monitor and control it.

That first night of the detective's DVD, eleven weeks and four days ago, Laura's screaming voice. "You *made* me do it!" There was the breaking of furniture and the smashing of floor tiles, there was the inadvertent damage to a ceiling fixture, and then Laura was running to the front door and Mark was there, blocking it.

"Let me go!" She yanked on his shirt collar, she tried pushing him to the side, but she could not move him. She bolted through the laundry room for the back door, but his arms were around her again around her shoulders and upper arms and breasts. She struggled and then stopped struggling, both

them breathing hard. He dropped his forehead to her hair. Her heart was beating in her back against his chest against his heart.

“Why, Laura? Why did you do this to us?”

She was quiet. Her breathing was already slowing back to normal. “Please let go of me.”

He held on. There came the creaking of the stairs behind the door to his mother’s apartment. She was maybe one or two steps from opening that door. There was Laura’s voice, soft and hard at once. “I don’t want to see her.”

He let go of his wife. He moved to the door and opened it.

“Is everything all right?” His mother held on to the railing. She’d cleaned off her makeup, and her gray hair was matted on one side. She wore her yellow robe over whatever it was she slept in.

“We’re having an argument, Ma. Good night.”

He closed the door slowly. He turned toward Laura, but she was in the kitchen stepping over a broken chair, the light on her hair and back all wrong somehow. The stairs began to creak behind him and Mark followed his wife into the living room. The TV was still on, the screen blue. Laura sat on the couch with her legs drawn up and her arms around them and if he’d ever seen her sit like that, he couldn’t remember when. Without looking up at him, she said: “Did you film that yourself?”

“No.” He sat on the coffee table. There was the new thought that *he* had misbehaved somehow, and he dismissed instantly.

“Who did it?”

“No one you know.”

“You hired someone?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Who?”

“Does it matter?”

She shook her head. She stared at the wall across the room, though she seemed to be seeing something in the air. “Does he *know* us?”

“Why, Laura? Why do you care about that?”

“Do you?”

“What?”

She didn’t answer him. She was staring at the air again. Was she seeing Frank Harrison Jr.? His bare head? His— “Are you afraid for *Frank*, Laura? You worried about his wife over in *Newburyport* finding out? Are we talking about *reputations* here? Because—” his voice broke then, something he had no warning of whatsoever, and he would stop what was coming if he could but he couldn’t and now he was crying—“because I don’t care about *that*, Laura. I just can’t believe you *did* this.” There was only his crying now, his chin on his chest, his shoulders heaving up and down. Then Laura was there. Not crying herself, but kneeling on the floor beside the couch and the coffee table, holding him and saying, “I’m sorry, honey. I’m so sorry.” Then maybe she did cry a bit, though Mark did not know for sure. All he knew was that he was crying into her hair and squeezing her arm as if it were the one rope thrown to him as he hung over some new and unknown abyss and he wasn’t letting go. Ever. He would not let go.

But she did. She stood and brought him tissues from the bathroom. She sat straight on the couch across from him. “Mark. I’m sorry.” Her voice was raw and naked and he believed her. Her period of contrition had begun. This was a word he had not had in his head for years, not since church when he was a boy, but it came to him then as he wiped his eyes and blew his nose. In the warm light from the lamp, he stared at his beautiful, cheating wife. She was contrite now, and Mark began to feel the cloak of work fall around his shoulders. He began to see this as an opportunity and not a threat, a positive risk that must be managed and monitored and controlled. This was simply a problem to be solved, and

he was forcing the most logical solution. They talked calmly for a long while. She promised to break things off with Frank Harrison Jr. She promised never to see him again.

IN FRONT OF THE MARRIOTT a white painter's van drives slowly by the entrance. A man sits in the passenger side smoking a cigarette. He looks in Mark's direction, but he does not see him or even his BMW sedan, its engine running, the air too cool now. Mark watches his hand turn down the controls. He is thirsty. Or his body is. Water is needed. Cold, clear water. He sees himself buying a bottle of water somewhere. He could walk into the lobby of the Marriott for it. Or he could step into the restaurant there. It's a place he and Laura have been to with friends, the Salvuccis and one time the Brandts. Charlie drinking too much and going on about one thing or another. Mark could sit at the bar and order himself a beaded glass of ice water. Maybe his body would order a burger and a cold beer, and he would sit near the front windows where he could see anyone walking into or out of the hotel, though catching her in a lie was no longer the point, was it? No, the project of saving his marriage seems to have failed and he's inherited a new task. This is not unusual. Some projects collapse for any number of reasons: investors withdraw at the last minute; a design flaw is discovered that prevents forward momentum; the contract with the company is cancelled for reasons both opaque and obvious, often a lack of innovative nerve on the part of stockholders in one boardroom or another. But in this case there's simply been a change of heart. Or, more accurately, a shift from the hiding of the heart to the showing of it, though Mark had to force that exposure, didn't he?

And so this new task, what is it? He is not sure, but he begins to see those cracked tiles again, the splintered table leg, those broken chairs in the garage. There's the urge to repair things, to see some tangible fruit of his labor. He watches himself put the car in gear and pull out of the lot for the highway. He accelerates into the travel lane and is soon leaving other cars behind him. The sun is unrelenting and in the median is tall yellow-green grass the public works department has not cut. So it'll be filled with purple loosestrife, that weed that comes just as summer wanes. Its appearance always depressed Laura, for it signaled the end of her days by the pool, but for Mark it meant fall and crisp days and dying leaves that brought bare branches and the kind of clarity that made work easy.

Mark steers into the Home Depot parking lot. Because it is a Saturday in Seabrook, New Hampshire, the lot is two-thirds full. There are the trucks and vans of tradesmen, but there are more SUVs and minivans and sedans like his, the cars of American homeowners who have taken the day to tinker with or improve their most valuable investment. Mark walks away from his car without locking it. This is a town of gun shops and tattoo parlors, of one strip mall after the other selling beach furniture and Bibles, motorcycles and patio bricks, neon towels and American flags and stone statues of black men holding a lantern for your fine stallion, a lawn ornament Mark has seen in front of a mobile home on cinderblocks just past the Walmart and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

If anybody here wants his BMW, they can have it. Today it is just another object among heaps of objects, and as he moves into the shade of the entrance, he has to admire the ad man or woman who chose the word HOME over HOUSE, for who, when things are good, would not want to improve and fortify their very *home*?

He pulls a cart free and pushes it toward the automatic door. It slides open for him and him only. A man ten or fifteen years older than he is smiling at him, an orange apron tied around his small gut, a yellow tape measure clipped to his belt.

"Can I help you find anything today, sir?"

"I'm all set, thanks." Mark pushes the cart past him. He tells himself to be grateful. Be grateful you don't have to stand there in that corporate apron smiling at every bitch and bastard to walk through that door. Though there's something off about this thought, and he stops at the display of propane

grills just to turn and glance back. The greeter is now talking to an obese woman in hospital scrubs nodding his head and pointing down the length of the store. He laughs at something she or he may have just said and the woman laughs too, and Mark keeps walking. The truth is, he *does* need help finding things—the wood glue for one, the tile section for another. But has he ever asked for help?

You're hard on yourself.

A woman's voice. He hears it as he pushes his empty cart past shelf after shelf of lightbulbs and fluorescent tubes in boxes, floodlights and smoke alarms and radon test kits. Laura's? No, his mother's. Two nights ago as they sat side by side at her small kitchen island eating lobster rolls she bought them.

"What do you mean, Ma?"

Mark sipped his beer, a cold Bud Light his mother had cracked open for him before sitting on his stool with a glass of chardonnay.

"An A minus was never good enough for you, honey. Everything had to be perfect."

The last light of the afternoon came through the side kitchen window and lay across their hands and plates and beer and wine. Mark glanced at his mother. She was chewing thoughtfully, her eyes on the lifetime ago in her head, and even though there were those lines etched around her mouth and cheeks and her hair so thin he could see her scalp, he saw her again as a young woman, her drunk husband dead and gone, all those years ahead of her working as a secretary at Leary's Insurance company downtown. Coming home each night to cook him and Claire a hot meal they would then share at the mahogany table in the dark dining room that smelled like old drapes.

"But as much as you wanted that A, you would never ask for help." She turned to him. "Remember that?"

"Most men don't, Ma."

"Well that's a shame. It is."

In the corner of her lip was a dot of mayonnaise, her lipstick smeared just above it. She looked his age then, and Mark wanted to reach over and squeeze her shoulder. He kept eating.

He's hungry now. Or his body is. This distant rumble in his gut. Greasy fried chicken would do. Maybe that KFC just past the Walmart. But he sees the small plastic table he'd eat at, a loud family nearby, and the thought depresses him. He's passing racks of C-clamps now, bar clamps, hooks and chains and bungee cords.

Just before the shelves of fasteners and adhesive is a barrel of threaded pipe, gray and an inch and half wide and four feet long. They are just like the one that lies in the trunk of Mark's car, and he grasps one. It is cool and hard, the sure diameter of it fitting nicely inside his fist.

He sees himself swinging it into the bald head of Frank Harrison Jr., caving it in like a watermelon. The sheet pulled to Laura's shoulders in the Marriot's king-size bed, her mouth hanging open in a silent scream.

But this image seems to come not from his life, but from a movie Mark saw as a boy, and his hands let go of the pipe and he keeps walking. How exhausted he is. Soon he finds the wood glue, contractor's grade in a long plastic bottle he drops into his cart. He moves through busy people and their busy sounds and he finds the tile section, its various tools that apparently make any flooring job easier: wet saws and rubber gloves, grout floats and sponges and big plastic buckets. His stomach is an empty cavern. There's a throbbing in his forehead. Is he really going to do this? Take all this home and get on his hands and knees to repair the floor he no longer even treads? And does he even know how? Most of the process seems to be common sense, and there are directions on the side of the mortar bag, but will they be enough?

He begins to lift and drop items into his cart when something buzzes inside his shorts pocket and he nearly slaps at it. He pulls his cell phone free. He squints at it. It is a local number he does not

recognize. It could be work, though his new deadline is months away and he is surprised at his disappointment it is not Laura who is calling.

He watches himself press the talk button, "This is Mark Welch."

"Yeah well, this is Lisa Schena."

He stares at the stack of mortar bags. His stomach growls. He feels caught in a test of some kind one he did not know was coming. "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"Not yet." Her voice is young, her tone playful. Then he tastes last night's menthol cigarette, his erection pressed against his pants against the drunk woman's bare belly.

"From The Tap?"

"Probably."

"Probably?" He finds himself smiling at this. "You don't know for sure?"

"No, *you* don't know for sure. Tell me about this Lisa."

"She hates rap music—"

"And?"

"And she's—"

"What?"

"She's very—"

"Hungry."

"She is?"

"Yes. You promised her a meal."

"I did?"

"Mark Welch did. This is *you*, isn't it?"

"I think so."

"You don't know?"

"Not lately, no." Mark's breathing seems to pause in his throat. "Not for a long time actually."

"That's too bad, 'cause I kind of like the one I met."

"What'd you like about him?" He presses the phone into his ear. He seems to be holding his breath.

"His eyes. His sad eyes."

Mark knows he is supposed to speak now. He knows this, but he can't quite summon his voice from wherever it is it just went. He looks down into his orange cart and stares at tools and substances for repair.

BEHIND THE SEA SPRAY MOTEL on Hampton Beach, white sand is feathered across the asphalt under the sun, and he parks behind a faded VW Bug, its top down. There is still the far-off feeling that he is watching his body do things, but now he is a bit more interested in sitting back to see how things play out. In the trunk of his sedan are the tiling materials and the wood glue, and he tells himself he is just having lunch, that's all, that he is going to eat a meal with this Lisa Schena, then he will drive home and get to work. But he checks his face in the mirror twice and puts an Altoid under his tongue, letting it dissolve slowly as he walks through the heat of the lot.

Ocean Boulevard is thick with slow-moving cars and Jeeps and vans with open doors, its men and women, and kids looking out at the T-shirt and surfboard shops, the video arcades and pizza bars, the fish shacks and vending carts selling fried dough and cotton candy, the sidewalk crowded with sunburned people in their tank tops and baggy shirts and bikini bottoms, many of them ringed with sand and sea salt above dimpled or skinny thighs, rubber flip-flops flopping, Mark stepping into the dim, cool lounge of Carlo's.

It's a place he's never been. Its bar is U-shaped and there's a flat-screen TV hanging above a fish

tank built into the wall, five or six gold and black fish drifting listlessly up against the glass. Above them, ~~men play baseball in a bright green field and a song from long ago plays on the sound system~~ something about rain falling on all our heads, she is sitting at the bar, her back to the wall. A man leaning close and talking to her. He is sunburned and wears a white beard and a short-sleeved shirt with blue parrots etched all over it. She's blond, her hair clipped, two things Mark did not notice the night before, but there are her bare brown shoulders in another sleeveless top, this one white, and now she sees him and her expression turns from warmly tolerant to genuinely pleased, and he is not sure he is up for any of this, he is not sure why he is here at all, but he feels himself walk between the tables of families and couples eating and talking and being happily together, toward the bar and this Lisa Schena and the man turning to him now.

"Oh hi, hon," she says. "I got us a table by the window."

The man leans back slightly. He takes in Mark Welch as if weighing whether or not he is a true rival for her affections. Lisa Schena is off her stool. With two fingers, she taps the back of the man's hand. "Thank you for the drink. I have a lunch date with my husband."

She moves by the man, and Mark follows her. A black denim skirt hugs her hips and she's wearing leather sandals, and again, there is a stirring where nothing has stirred since there was snow on the ground and his wife, at least in his head, still belonged to him. He disciplines himself to lift his eyes as Lisa Schena leads him through the restaurant to the only available table in the corner near the window. It is small. On it are two dirty plates, a wadded napkin on one, half a Coke sitting in a glass beside an empty breadbasket. Mark glances back at the bar and the man in the blue parrot shirt. His eyes are on the game above, both his hands cupping his glass like he's afraid it too will disappear from him.

"You look different in the light." She's sitting already, smiling up at him. She has less makeup on today, her cheeks only slightly pockmarked. Her eyes are a washed-out blue, like robin's eggs left exposed to the weather by their mother.

"Is that good or bad?" He sits across from her. He can feel the sun's warmth coming through the glass.

"You look younger, but that's not good or bad for me because I don't give a shit."

"I don't either."

"Really?"

"I think so."

She's smiling at him as if she's known him longer than she has. This makes him feel comfortable, which then makes him uncomfortable for feeling so comfortable. He's tempted to stand and leave.

"You two snuck in." The waitress is a warm, fleshy face surrounded by gray hair, her hands gathering up the dirty plates, breadbasket, and half-empty glass. "Cocktails?"

"Bloody Mary for me."

"Two," Mark says.

Lisa Schena is still smiling at him, and he can see she's older than he thought, maybe ten years older than his daughter, closer to forty. This is good, but her smile is making him shy and he glances out the tinted window at the beach traffic, the white sand on the other side, the deep blue rim of ocean beyond that.

"You're a mess, aren't you?"

He looks back at her. "Probably. You?"

"Just with what I told you last night."

He nods his head. His face grows warm, and he glances down at her tanned shoulders and upper arms.

"You don't remember shit, do you?"

“I know we kissed.”

“Yeah we did, but that was your idea.”

“It was?”

“Yes.”

“Is that all right?”

“Hey, I called you, didn’t I?”

Mark looks back at the bar. The bearded man is gone, and on the TV above the listless fish, woman is holding a bottle of floor cleaner, smiling earnestly into the camera. It’s the brand Laura has always used. He sees himself kneeling on the kitchen floor with a hammer. He’ll have to break the tiles completely before he can fix them.

“I was talking about my son.”

Words come back to Mark now, Lisa Schena’s voice from last night in his head. She was leaning against her Chevy sedan, her ankles and tanned thighs touching one another, that faded denim skirt and the way she crossed one arm under her breasts while she smoked. Wants to live with his fucking father.

“He wants to live with his dad.”

“Correct.”

A busboy begins to wipe down their table, then set it. He is tall and slight. On the wrist of his left hand are the tattooed initials *A.R.* He disappears just as the waitress sets the Bloody Marys down in front of them, each with a stalk of celery too short for the glass, their ends just barely rising out of the vodka and tomato juice.

“Oh shoot, you don’t have menus.”

Then two bound menus are on the table between them, but Mark Welch and Lisa Schena leave them where they are. Without a toast they lift their glasses and drink, the vodka going into Mark like a mildly dangerous thought he ignores, and she begins to talk about her son. His name is Adam and he’s always been a difficult kid. “Never listened, always had to have time-outs and then I’d have to physically hold him to his little Fisher Price chair because he could never stay still. His father never did anything, and he’s just as bad anyway, can’t concentrate, can’t ever sit in one place unless it’s in front of a computer. He can’t hold a job now either, and he still has split custody but Adam wants to live with him full-time because there are no rules over there, or at least no boundaries, no expectations, or respect for anyone else’s space, and I can’t tell you how many times I’ve . . .”

Mark sips and nods and listens. She is clearly a talker. It’s what she did the night before too, talked and talked and talked while he smoked her cigarettes and stared at her in the bruised neon from the bar, drunk and trying not to glance too much at the soft swell of her breasts or her tanned belly or the denim skirt he wanted to unzip and pull down over her hips, half-drunk but grateful for what was happening to him, this old blood descending to his groin where its gathering heaviness left him feeling slightly new again, or at least not dead yet. Nearly three months of nothing, not even in the morning, and if it weren’t for his life floating away from him, Laura continuing to do all that she does, he might have begun to worry, he might have begun to think of his prostate and sicknesses that were not uncommon in men his age, but again, this was something happening to a body he merely existed inside and any maintenance beyond breathing and eating and drinking seemed to be someone else’s problem, and last night, when that gathering heaviness turned hard, it was as if a crack of daylight and fresh air had entered him somewhere and so he’d stepped toward Lisa Schena against her car and kissed her, something he wants to do now, too. Shut her up with a kiss, though she isn’t boring him, not in the least.

She’s telling a story about her ex, how she came home one day from work—an animal hospital where she’s an assistant to the veterinarian, an old, sweet lesbian named Carol—and found him and

Adam playing some kind of video game where men blew each other's heads off. "And they'd be doing it since I'd left that *morning* and it was a *school* day."

Mark shakes his head, then nods in sympathy, his eyes on her washed-out blues. Strange this ability for his face and head to do the right things. In the tinted sunlight from the window, he is looking at her more clearly now. Her short hair is a dazed blond, treated with chemicals so many times over the years it has no definable color at all. Her teeth are stained with coffee and tobacco, and just beneath her slightly pocked left cheek is a pink scar that directs one's attention to her weak chin and upper arms which have no tone and jiggle slightly as she talks, making points with her hands in the air above her still-full drink. She is absolutely nothing like his wife in any way, and is that why he is reaching across the table now and taking her small hand, squeezing it once softly and saying, "We should eat."

"Oh shit, I'm talking way too much."

"No you're not."

"Decided?" The waitress is standing there with her pad and pen. Lisa Schena looks up at her as if she's just been exposed in some way, a dark splotch spreading across her throat.

"Just a salad with chicken on it for me."

"Dressing?"

"Creamy Italian, please."

"And you, sir?"

"Same." Though he does not like creamy Italian dressing, but food now, as hungry as he was earlier seems entirely beside the point. "And two more of these, please."

They are alone again. She is smiling at him. "You drank that one pretty fast."

"Hair of the dog."

"Tell me about it. We had to put down three yesterday." She leans to her straw and takes it between her lips and sucks, swallowing twice. Her eyes are on the table but not on the table.

"What's your job when you have to do that?"

"I hold them down in a three-point restraint, then Carol administers the shot. Fun, huh?"

"That must be hard."

"What's hard are their fucking owners. We had to put down a perfectly healthy retriever just because the new wife didn't like dogs."

"You couldn't find it a home?"

"People want puppies. It's like that with kids, too. You know how many teenagers will never get out of foster care till they're grown? Just about all of them. People don't like to pick up where other people left off. People like to buy *new*." She shakes her head and glances out the window, one finger tapping the end of her straw. He wants to lean forward and touch her lightly scarred cheek.

She looks back at him. "Tell me about your ex."

"My ex?"

"You don't remember that either?"

Again, this warmth in his face that does not simply come from his body, but him—it seems to come from *him*. "No, I don't."

"And I thought I was drunk."

"We both were."

She points at his left hand, her eyes on his ring finger. "You were telling me why you still wear that ring? I said, 'You're married, aren't you?' And you said, 'No, not really.' And I asked you why you wear that ring, and you told me."

The vodka is a small grass fire spreading in his chest, and he knows he doesn't care where it goes or what it burns. Vow. His own voice in his head, the tissue memory of it leaving his vocal cords from the night before in the neon lot behind The Tap standing close to this woman sitting across from him now.

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