

# Second First Night

A STORY

BY JAN ELLISON



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**THEY HAD SPENT** one drunken night at a bed-and-breakfast in the English countryside five years earlier. Pauline never knew his name, or rather she must have known it and lost it the way she'd lost so much of that evening—not the texture, not the flat green glass of the lake and the polished silver of the sky and the low rumble of his voice in the little room above the pub, but the narrative thread, the salient events. Now she was standing in the middle of the exhibit hall at the annual online trading systems exhibition at Chicago's McCormick Place, and he was standing three yards away, feet planted apart, hands clasped behind his back, a tidy rectangle of neck visible between his dark hair and starched collar. He turned toward her, and there was his face with its relentless composure, its broad straight nose and roughened cheeks, its high forehead and frank brown eyes. It was a face, Pauline felt for a moment, that she alone understood. She alone knew how its equanimity could be overturned, how he too could be swept up, his tender interior laid bare.

He stepped toward her and she read his preprinted badge—Daryl Strong, a name suddenly familiar and comically, or ironically, appropriate for the man she would come to know. A man in the habit of restraint.

A man who faced pain or illness or adversity by drinking tap water and forging ahead. But who could also be moved to tears. Whom a year later she would watch come undone over a bird's nest fallen from rafters, its eggs shattered in the fall. It took him a minute to place her, and when he did he smiled in recognition, but he didn't embrace her, as she'd hoped he would.

Pauline was out from her company's Silicon Valley headquarters, scouting the competition. Daryl Strong was there, it turned out, as in-house counsel for one of her clients, negotiating a settlement over a patent dispute. She lingered in his hospitality suite two days running. At the end of the second day, they ducked out of the cocktail reception and went for a drive. He put the windows down and the snap of fall was all around them, the trees red and gold as they headed south into the dusk, out of the city and into farmland, fields stretching to the horizon as darkness fell. They ate at a diner in Champaign. Pauline waited to order a beer until he did, and then did not order another when he did not order a second for himself. She asked him for an update on his life. She made mental notes as he talked—three brothers, hometown in Indiana, law school in California, not far from where Pauline now lived. A year clerking for a judge in DC before opting out of public service and moving back to the Midwest. He offered nothing of his romantic history until she probed, then he spoke in a willing but businesslike manner, as if he were an expert witness being paid to tell what he knew but nothing more.

“Long-term girlfriend in high school. One in college. One in law school. That makes three.” And then, parenthetically, he added, “Not counting you.”

“I see,” Pauline said, pleased he'd included her at all. “So you're a serial monogamist. Very dangerous.”

“Really?” he said. “For them or for me?”

“Depends,” Pauline said. “Who did the breaking up?”

“Fairly mutual, I'd say.”

“It's never mutual.”

“Really?” he said. “I guess there was one, the one in law school . . . she used to watch a lot of TV.”

“TV?”

“What I mean is it was so clear to me we weren't going to last. I thought she must have seen that too. But maybe she didn't. Then again, maybe she did. Maybe it was just drama.”

“You broke her heart,” Pauline said.

“Maybe,” he said. “But I guess I don't really believe in that.”

“You don’t believe in broken hearts?”

“Not really.”

“She’ll never get over you, probably.”

“Of course she will,” he said. “So, anyway, if a breakup is never mutual, who would you say was responsible for us . . . for us not keeping in touch after that night in the Lake District?”

“That was different,” Pauline said. “That was one night.”

“But you left. I mean, when I woke up . . . you didn’t leave a note. And that woman at the bed-and-breakfast wouldn’t give me your address. I had no way to track you down. I didn’t even know your last name.”

He spoke without emotion, looking not at Pauline but down at the table. He’d been absently picking up his fork and putting it down again while they awaited their food, but now he folded his hands in his lap. In the stillness, Pauline felt the presence of her held breath as if it were a third person, an impatient visitor seated alongside them. She found herself pulling nervously at the skin of her neck. What could she say about that night? I was drunk, she could say, but she knew she was not going to say that.

She’d been a year out of college then, living and working in London, and she’d undertaken a solitary weekend trip to the Lake District. She’d worked hard to fill the day, making a long walk longer by taking two loops around the same lake and stopping to study a clump of cows in a wet green field. One cow had its head nudged up against a rock and was scratching an ear, a gesture that seemed to Pauline so plaintive and tender, so intimate she reached out her hand, but the cow startled and darted away. For some reason the exchange reminded Pauline of the pointless romantic entanglement (with the head swaps trader, of all people) she’d left behind in London, and she began to cry. It was then Daryl Strong had come upon her, overtaking her on the path, nodding politely and walking past. She’d stood and watched his receding frame. The sky was blushing with the last of the day’s light and she felt an unaccountable pull toward him. She caught up with him and introduced herself. She walked alongside him and they returned together to the pub. She sat very close to him, drinking continuously as night came on. His body gave off a feeling of heft and safety and shelter, and later there was a kiss in his room above the pub, her face tilted upward, his mouth moving down toward hers. He had not taken her in his arms, he’d touched her only with his lips, but he’d held her there nonetheless. She had experienced nothing like that kiss before or since. It had seemed to her tender and rapt and emptied of ugliness, and after a moment it had been too much.

She'd been the one to end it, not to draw back but to press forward. She'd clawed at him. She'd whispered wildly, brazenly, as if she'd been inhabited briefly by the star of a pornographic film. It was these hushed obscenities that returned to her when she woke naked beside him—and almost nothing else. Not the sex. Not where he'd grown up or where he was headed or where he'd gone to college. Not even his name.

Pauline was not, though she knew she appeared to be, the kind of girl who laughed off her indiscretions, or even tolerated them; a certain shame surrounding acts of excess and abandon was lodged in her chest. This shame was complicated and layered. It had to do with her father, of course. Her father—big, loud, effusive, his star burning brightest at a particular hour of the day, the late afternoon, when he had begun to drink but was not yet drunk. All of Pauline's most perfect, and most painful, childhood memories began with the lush orange dusk.

Instead of waking Daryl that morning in the bed-and-breakfast, as she'd wanted to, instead of tucking herself into the sanctuary of his body, she'd caught the first train back to London. For five years she'd carried a vague, tender nostalgia for those hours together in the pub and for that single moment of transcendence in his room, and she felt the weight of that sentiment now, across the Formica table of the diner in Champaign, as she worked to formulate a suitable response to the question he had posed. She released the air from her lungs and raised her head and looked at him.

“Leaving your room that morning was a mistake,” she said.

He said nothing. And Pauline said nothing. But already he could say nothing longer than she could. “I wish I'd stayed,” she said.

After dinner they got back into the car, and on the outskirts of the city Daryl pulled off the highway into the lot of a Walmart and parked. “This is the heart of America,” he said. Pauline liked that, the oddness of it, the way he was not afraid to stand by what he admired. He didn't try to kiss her that night, he never embraced her, and she liked that too. She took it as a sign he was allowing them to start afresh, to ease their way into something graceful and enduring. He did reach for her hand and hold it, and they sat in the empty parking lot that way for a long time, the traffic a kind of quiet around them. His hands were long and broad and calloused and she wanted more of him. She wanted to reach for him. But for once, she resisted.

IT WAS A Tuesday, the night the nanny stayed late so Daryl and Pauline could meet for dinner after work. Pauline had a bad cold and a big presentation in the morning, but they'd agreed to go to dinner anyway, ostensibly because these Tuesday-night

dates were sacrosanct, but really because Pauline knew it would be easier than being at home putting a toddler and a three-year-old to bed. Driving to the restaurant, though, she felt bereft; she would not see Jack and Annie until morning. She would not watch their faces peel open with pleasure when she arrived home. It amazed her, and sustained her, that night after night her reentry into her children's lives was cause for such forthright celebration.

They always chose this restaurant because it was close and parking was easy, and it was dark and quiet but not too quiet, and because they could eat at the counter and watch the chefs in their white hats labor over the wood-fired ovens, and when the conversation stalled, as Pauline imagined it did between married people the world over, they could stare ahead in a comfortable silence. Daryl had ordered the margherita pizza, Pauline the lobster ravioli with vodka sauce. They were sharing a bottle of wine and talking about the nanny, Raquel, how lucky they were to have her, how these Tuesday evenings out were a godsend. Raquel had not once in three years called in sick, and Pauline thought they ought to give her a raise.

"Good idea," Daryl said. "She deserves it."

"I'll do it tomorrow. Or next week, I guess, because tomorrow you'll get home before I will."

"I will?"

"Remember? It's the all-hands meeting? I'm hashing the VP thing out with Ben first thing, then the meeting will go all day. And there's a big dinner afterward at Spago with the bankers. You need to be home right at six so Raquel can leave. And they'll both need their hair washed. Or should I ask Raquel to do the baths? I can have her feed them too, if you want."

"Either way," Daryl said.

Pauline sneezed, then blew her nose into a handkerchief. "It's going to be brutal getting up in front of all those people with this cold," she said. "Trying to present and be coherent. My throat's getting so sore I can barely swallow."

She sat waiting for him to respond, wishing she hadn't said anything. It was exactly the sort of wheedling complaint she had tried to stop making since she and Daryl had gotten married, the sort of thing he himself would never say.

"Maybe a good night's sleep will help," he said.

"Maybe."

There was a silence, and then in a voice that seemed rehearsed, Daryl said, "I'm not sure you should be drinking wine if you're sick. I was reading something about alcohol suppressing the immune system."

“It’s not like I’m getting drunk,” Pauline said, although she was, a little. “And as a matter of fact, in antiquity human populations that drank had longer average life expectancies. Drinking spirits instead of contaminated water turned out to be an advantage. It was an accidental survival strategy.”

Daryl said nothing, and Pauline said nothing, but he could always say nothing longer than she could. “Really, when you think about it, the human proclivity to drink has a sound basis in evolution.”

She sounded ridiculous, even to herself. She had not meant to insist they order a bottle at all, then she’d meant to stop after the first glass. After the second, she’d meant to stop before the third. She could feel the wine—and the shame—igniting her cheeks. He would not notice, she hoped, or he would think it was only the heat of the blazing ovens.

WHEN SHE WOKE at six, the kids were in the bed between her and Daryl, the baby’s head pressed into her neck and Jack’s knees hot and hard against her ribs. She extracted herself, blew her nose, showered and dressed, and stepped silently toward the stairs, her shoes tucked under her arm like loot. But then she glanced back at the three of them asleep in the pink light of morning. The baby’s hair, bleached white from the sun, was silken across her cheeks. Jack’s three-year-old legs were tanned and lean and elongated, extending from his pajamas like an older boy’s limbs. Daryl’s features were solid and his hands and feet hung over the sides of the bed, the mattress unable to contain the whole of his body. They seemed to her flawless, a statistical aberration, a windfall that had come to her in the night. She wanted to lie down with them and nestle in. She wanted to close her eyes and accept the protection they offered. Instead she tiptoed around and kissed Daryl purposefully on the forehead, willing him to open his eyes and wish her luck. But he didn’t move, and she couldn’t linger. It was the day of the all-hands meeting with the investment bankers who would take her company public, the day she was to be promoted to executive vice president.

“IN LIGHT OF the institutional investors’ historical preference for a seasoned executive management team,” Pauline’s boss explained, whacking a yellow highlighter on the edge of his desk, “and the critical importance of valuation maximization in a high-profile liquidity event . . .”

He paused, opened his top drawer, dropped the marker in, and delivered the news. The EVP title (and the commensurate mountain of Series B Preferred Stock)

had been given not to Pauline but to Simon Stapleton, a “financial industry insider,” the top risk manager at Credit Suisse First Boston.

“This guy’s a big deal,” her boss said.

“I know who he is,” Pauline said.

“We really believe this is in your best interest,” he said, walking around his desk to where she stood, her shoulders hunched, her arms crossed over her heart. “This is going to increase the value of the company, and that’s good news for all of us.”

“That’s it, then?” Pauline said. “It’s final?”

He nodded. He took a step toward her and touched her arm. “Pauline?” he said. She could smell the coffee on his breath—strong and burned—like in the early years, when it was just ten of them in their twenties, pulling all-nighters, working to make a company out of nothing. Back then she would have cried. Now she knew to turn away.

He was there as she passed the boardroom on the way out of her boss’s office—Simon Stapleton—the financial industry insider, the top risk manager at Credit Suisse who’d once been a trader on the swaps desk at Barclay’s in London and with whom Pauline had been briefly and fruitlessly entangled. He’d also once been a grad student in theology at a small college in Kent, and long before she’d met him he’d taken off all his clothes in the middle of a campus assembly and stormed the stage, certain he’d had an important message for the students gathered before him. After that he’d spent ten weeks in a sanatorium while his fiancée went off and married another man. To get back at her he’d taken up with a woman he met at the sanatorium. They’d had a child and gotten married, finally, and moved to London, where he’d landed on the trading desk at Barclay’s, the bank that was the first European beta site for Pauline’s company’s analytic library and to which she’d been assigned as account assistant when she was just twenty-three. She’d been profoundly underqualified to take on that job, but the company had been bootstrapped and she’d been the only one who would agree to relocate without a housing allowance.

Simon was ten years her senior and, by the time she met him, already the head trader on the desk. He took her under his wing. He seemed to want her to know him. He shared with her his dark secret—the history of his mental health—and they became friends, although in many ways she objected to him, his pink shirts and double-breasted suits, his face so sharp and angular it seemed to her that pieces of it had been carved away. But her objections were easily overruled when she’d had a few drinks—they were often having a few drinks—and they were intimate exactly six times, three times on the floor of his office after hours and three times in her room in a shared house in Hackney. She told herself she ought not to have been surprised

when he treated her carelessly. She ought to have understood that he possessed a child's myopia, an ability to think and speak endlessly of himself. When he finally did brush her off, she pretended indifference. She took herself to the Lake District for a weekend, to lick her wounds and consolidate her resolve, and there was Daryl, in that drenched green field, canceling Simon Stapleton out and becoming, in a single night, the festering sore, the object of confusion and regret.

She stopped and watched Simon now, through the glass. The all-hands meeting was assembling and he was shaking hands and smiling his careless, predatory smile. Watching him she felt like a voyeur, a witness to intimate dealings that were no longer her own. She walked right past the boardroom and stepped resolutely into her cube. She snatched the photo of her kids off the filing cabinet and dropped it into her briefcase and headed out the back door into the dull heat of late summer. It was not so much that she'd made a decision as it was that, in a spasm of bitterness and fatigue, she'd failed to imagine a posture—a sucking up or spitting out of breath, a squaring or shrugging of shoulders—that would have allowed her to step into that room and greet him calmly and wait out the day.

At home, she sat down and opened her laptop and drafted her resignation letter. She set out the promises made and broken, the ethical standards discarded. She labored over every word, and when the nanny left, she put a Barney video on for Jack and took the baby into her lap. She helped Annie work the mouse, and together they were running a spell-check as Daryl arrived home. He stood over them and read the letter on the screen, pressing the Down arrow to scroll the pages. He rested his other hand on Pauline's shoulder.

"You might not want to go into that much depth," he said gently.

Pauline sighed. "I know," she said. "Forget it. I'll do it tomorrow."

She stood up and turned and Daryl bent down and kissed her meaningfully, right on the lips. It was a rare display of affection, and it might have been only a gesture of solidarity, or simple kindness, but as he turned to go upstairs and change his clothes, the day's betrayal and the shock of seeing Simon and that one, decisive kiss converged into a single truth. What her husband wanted was a wife who stayed home and made meat loaf and swept the porch in the languid afternoons. He'd said as much once, when they were already married, that he'd always assumed he'd marry a woman who stayed home. Pauline had dismissed it as an oddity, a quaint idea he would outgrow in time.

She lifted Annie onto her hip and headed up the stairs after him. He was standing in his underwear, hanging his suit pants in his closet.



“You’re happy about this, aren’t you?” Pauline said.

“I’m not happy or unhappy about it.”

“It’s a hundred thousand shares, Daryl. It’s not exactly pocket change. It’s ten years of my life. Now the party’s about to begin and they’re giving me the boot.”

“They’re not exactly giving you the boot, honey,” he said in his slow, hopeful rhythm. “You still have a job. If you want it. And you’ve got what you’ve vested so far. If the IPO goes you’ll do all right.”

“We’ll do all right,” Pauline said. “And anyway, the money’s not the point.”

“Maybe give it some time,” he said. “You could hang around here while you work it out.”

“I could learn to knit,” Pauline said. “I could join a scrapbooking club like your sisters.”

He bent over to pull on his shorts. She could see the muscles in the back of his neck and she could sense his mind at work, searching for the thing that would calm her or redirect her or make her laugh.

“Don’t quit, then,” he said. “Maybe you’ll learn something from the guy.”

“What are you, on their side?”

“Okay,” he said, drawing out the word. “Take a leave of absence. Think about it.”

“No way,” she said. “What’s done is done. It’s over.”

THE FIRST DAY was the longest. Pauline stayed in bed and nursed her cold and read an entire novel while Raquel fed the kids and took them to the park and fed them again and read to them in terrible English and sang to them in effortless, lilting Spanish. On the second day, she began to feel like an intruder in her own home. She didn’t know how to coexist with Raquel, whom, in truth, she could no longer afford. Her preoccupations seemed trivial compared to Raquel’s, since it was Raquel who was charged with the care of Jack and Annie. It occurred to Pauline that she had never seen Raquel do a thing for herself. She had never seen her eat. She had never even seen her drink a glass of water. And here was Pauline, digging around in the pantry for a snack and lounging about in her robe.

A week later, she let Raquel go. She gave her three months’ pay and a tearful hug and she leaped into the job of raising her children and keeping a home.

IN THE BEGINNING, it was like a holiday. Pauline packed the kids into the car and they went on day trips, north to Golden Gate Park and the Marin Headlands and Stinson Beach, south to Santa Cruz and Big Sur and a dozen points between. They

hit the zoos and the museums and the beaches and the amusement parks and the airports, where they watched the planes take off and land. They took buses and trains and long slow walks. They ate takeout in the car and listened to Steely Dan and David Bowie and the Stones. They went to the Monterey Aquarium and watched the sharks, gliding low and fast, and a jellyfish glowing gold against the deep-blue tank. Annie stood so close her lips left imprints, tiny rosebuds of breath on the glass. On the beach Annie dug holes in the sand and Jack chased seagulls, raising his arms as if he might be able to fly too. They watched the sun move toward the horizon, and Jack asked if that was where the world ended.

“No,” Pauline explained, “it’s just as far as your eye can see.”

“Which eye?” he wanted to know.

They drove back in the carpool lane and listened to a country station on the radio, clapping and singing and waving their arms. Clouds piled up on the western hills, deepening with color as evening came on, and Pauline felt an old happiness bear down, dense and final.

Daryl was already home when they burst into the house. Pauline handed him the baby, turned on the oven, skipped to the freezer for a frozen pizza, and popped open a beer. She started to tell Daryl about their day. He nodded, looking not at Pauline but at the beer in her hand. “Do you think it’s good for them to spend so much time in the car?” he said. “Is there any chance it’s hurting their ears?”

“Is there any chance what’s hurting their ears?”

“The music. Sometimes it seems loud when I start your car.”

“I don’t think it’s that loud,” Pauline said. “I don’t think I’m really blasting it.”

“Maybe it would be good for them to stay home sometimes too. I mean, you know, play with some kids around here.”

“There aren’t any kids around here,” Pauline said. “They’re all in daycare. Or they’re with their nannies.”

“Maybe at the park,” he said. “There must be kids at the park.”

Pauline tried not to take what he was saying as criticism. She tried to remember that they were no longer in the same sphere, that the basic shape of their days had diverged. Understanding too would diverge. They would have to work harder to synchronize their perceptions of each other’s realities. On the other hand, what right did he have to tell her how to run things? He wasn’t doing the work, yet he expected to collect the reward. And yet she was spending the money he earned; wasn’t that the same thing?

“Also, I was thinking,” Daryl continued, “maybe since you’re not working we could start having regular dinners.”

“What do you mean by regular?”

“I don’t know. Lasagna. Pork roasts. Whatever you felt like cooking.”

Pauline slid the frozen pizza into the oven and let the door close with a smack.

FOR A MONTH they were polite and careful and quietly cold. Then the night before Thanksgiving Pauline made a pumpkin chiffon pie to take to Daryl’s cousin in Danville. It was her grandmother’s recipe, involving egg whites beaten into peaks. She let Jack crack the eggs and she helped Annie push the button on the mixer. Daryl sat on a stool at the counter while they worked, smiling when she dotted the kids’ noses with egg white.

After they put Jack and Annie to bed, Pauline went downstairs to finish making the pie. Daryl followed and stood close behind her. She was aware of his body, its size and heat, in a way she hadn’t been for a long time.

“Would you consider these to be stiff peaks?” she said, lifting some of the egg whites with a spoon.

“Definitely stiff,” he said. He wrapped his arms around Pauline and rested his chin on her shoulder. She folded the whites into the pumpkin mixture and poured it all into the pie crust and turned to him and he kissed her, a kiss that was like a first kiss, tender and true and bending toward a future.

In the morning, Pauline woke late to a silent house. Downstairs there was coffee made and she poured herself a cup and went outside to the brick patio. The day was brisk and clear, the sky an unbroken sheet of blue. Daryl was giving the kids rides on the old lawn mower and Pauline stood and took it all in—the bright spots of cold on their cheeks, Daryl’s wrinkled jeans hanging low and baggy on his hips, a day’s stubble on his chin. She felt the lingering satisfaction of sex after a long, dry spell, and she knew, right then, that her life with Daryl and the kids was superior to any other life, and that there was nothing she would not do to keep it intact.

SHE GEARED UP. She worked to maintain goodwill. On New Year’s Day she got up early with Annie and made pancakes. Together they picked calla lilies from the yard and put them in a vase on the table. When Daryl came down, Pauline kissed him and gave him a cup of coffee.

“What’s all this?” Daryl said.

“It’s a new year,” she said. “Are you making resolutions?”

“I thought I’d cut down on the crack and the prostitutes.”

“Ha-ha. But really, are you?”

“Course not,” he said good-naturedly, as if she’d asked him if his shoes were untied. His brand of resolve was different; it was robust and unceremonious. When

they were first married, he decided to lose weight and without a pronouncement of any kind, he dropped ten pounds in eight weeks and never gained it back. When Pauline asked him how he'd done it, he'd said, "I ate less."

"Are you making resolutions?" he said.

"Nope. Not this year."

SHE MAPPED OUT a new routine. In the mornings she took Jack to preschool, and in the afternoons after Annie's nap, she loaded the stroller with sunscreen and sippy cups and sandbox toys and took the kids to the park. She played children's music in the car and stocked the house with food. She served up hot breakfasts and lunches and nutritious snacks. She gave up her five o'clock beer and put a family dinner on the table at six.

Women did this, she told herself. Women all over the world throughout time have done this and succeeded. But that line of thinking didn't help; it only made her feel inept and self-indulgent. She couldn't buck up, though all her life she'd believed herself to be brash and competent.

She thought of calling Simon Stapleton. She picked up the phone and set it down again. Twice she dialed the number, thinking it wouldn't hurt to set up a lunch or dinner to catch up. But she hung up when the receptionist answered.

She set herself little challenges. She shopped at the farmers' market. She switched to whole-grain pasta. She went a whole day without letting the kids watch television. She broke out a cookbook and took on a complex recipe—poached salmon filets with a red wine reduction. She stood over the stove, stirring the sauce, the baby strapped to her back and Jack milling about her legs. She dug out the linen tablecloth they'd gotten as a wedding present and put out wineglasses and lit candles. She changed the kids' clothes and combed their hair and washed their faces. The phone rang at six, and the gentle muffled quality of Daryl's voice told her he wouldn't be home for dinner.

She ate alone with Jack and Annie. They pushed the food around on their plates, and Pauline felt a blackness pressing down on her eyelids. She knew it was only one meal. She knew her life was a good life and that she was lucky. She lived in a nice house in a pleasant neighborhood. Her marriage was essentially sound. Her children were healthy and whole. But she couldn't push the blackness away.

JACK TURNED THREE and a half and suddenly became intractable. He wouldn't sleep or eat or dress when he was meant to, and the smallest tasks became lengthy negotiations or all-out battles. A developmental milestone, the parenting books called

it, a temporary disequilibrium. Pauline ordered a “Good for Me” reward kit out of a catalog and wrote a list of daily tasks on the laminated poster, using the handy write-and-wipe pen. Each item had a box next to it for a red star.

“Okay, buddy, let’s get dressed,” she said, “then you get your star. And when you get all your stars, you get your Batman cape.”

“I don’t want stars,” he said. “I want my Batman cape right now.”

“That’s not the deal, Jack. Here’s the deal. You either get dressed now, by yourself, and get a star, or Mommy will get you dressed, and you get no stars and if you get no stars, you get no Batman cape. So please go now and get dressed.”

“No,” he said, and he ran. Pauline charged after him and found him in the bathroom, crouched between the toilet and the wall.

“Come out of there right now, Jack Strong.”

“No,” he said. He peeked at her over the toilet seat. His smooth cheek contorted and his nose wrinkled and he snarled.

Pauline stormed toward him, squeezed his shoulders hard, picked him up, and carried him back into his room. She threw him onto the bed, slammed his pants on, and jerked his shirt over his head. She yelled. She told him he would not get his Batman cape, that only good boys could be Batman and that he was not a good boy. She gave herself over to the pure wild pleasure of her anger. She wanted it to go on and on, and there was nobody to stop her, only Annie standing in the doorway, pulling at the plastic clip in her hair.

Then the anger was gone and Pauline returned to herself—and there was Jack, sitting on the bed crying, with his hands over his ears.

She gathered him up and pressed her cheek to his.

“Did you hold my arms hard, Mommy?” he said, as if he wanted her to deny it, as if to carry on in the world he needed to believe his mother would never do a thing like that.

PAULINE FOUND AN online listing for a local mothers’ club and signed up for a play-group with meetings every Tuesday at a park across town. But Tuesday opened like a gust of summer, a dry, hot midwinter gift that set loose a yearning Pauline hadn’t felt since college. It was a day to waste, a day to skip classes and hike up to Felt Lake and drink cheap red wine. It was a day for raw sun and bare skin and the blond hairs on the back of a boy’s hand.

She made sandwiches and packed the diaper bag and got the kids into the car. She stopped at Nordstrom to pick up a sports coat of Daryl’s that had been altered, and her yearning followed her right inside. She pushed the stroller and pulled Jack

behind her, past the hats and watches and scarves, and she lifted the stroller onto the escalator. In the designer section, she probed the racks until she found what she wanted—a St. John Knits dove-gray two-piece suit in her size that she could in no way afford. It was something her mother had always wanted; dressing for a date, in the years after Pauline's father disappeared, she would get a wrinkle in her forehead that held all her disappointment but also her intractable hope, and she would tell Pauline that someday, she was going to go out and buy herself a fortune in St. John Knits. Pauline bought the suit without even trying it on.

When they were almost at the park, she remembered she'd left the diaper bag and the lunch at home by the back door. There wasn't time to go back so she did the drive-through at McDonald's. They arrived at the park late, just in time for lunch. There were five mothers and ten kids sitting on blankets under an old oak tree, and there were gifts in a pile in the center for one of the women, Sarah, who was expecting her third child.

The women seemed cool and competent. They introduced themselves and made room on their blankets for Pauline. They unloaded Tupperware from their bags and set out the lunches they'd brought. Pauline handed Jack a cheeseburger and a vanilla shake and sat down, and Annie lay in her lap. Pauline spread French fries out on a paper bag and fed them to her one by one. With her free hand, she set to work on her Big Mac. Special sauce dripped onto the smoothness of Annie's cheek like a pink tear, a sign of something, and for a moment Pauline longed for her father. She longed for his padded shoulder and his hard embrace and his ability to slip from his predicaments—blackouts, dead-end jobs, bad debt—with his peculiar spirit unharmed. At least, she hoped it was unharmed.

THAT EVENING IT rained through the night. In the morning, Pauline strapped the kids into their car seats and drove to Jack's preschool. The road was wet, the air heavy. Up ahead were three women in rain slickers, pushing strollers. Pauline watched as their faces cracked open with laughter. In a minute they'd be in one of their kitchens drinking coffee, and Pauline was stunned with envy. How had she missed, or refused, the possibility of finding herself among friends?

She resolved to give the playgroup mothers another try. They were having an early dinner at a new restaurant on Sunday—Moms' Night Out. On her way to the restaurant, Pauline stopped at Macy's and bought a crushed-velvet bodysuit for Sarah's baby and paid to have it gift-wrapped. She managed to arrive at the restaurant right on time, and there at the bar was Simon Stapleton.

She stood with the gift in her hands, unable to move forward or turn back. Simon saw her and smiled, motioning her over. As Pauline moved toward him she was conscious of her print dress and sensible flats, her hair pulled back in a clip. It was an ensemble she'd labored over, but now it seemed ridiculous.

"Hullo there, Pauline," he said, taking her hand and pulling her in and delivering a kiss to her cheek.

"Hello, Simon," she said coolly. "How are you?"

"Not bad," he said. "Not wonderful, either. I got divorced."

"I'm sorry," Pauline said.

"What about you?"

"Not divorced. Married. Still married. Two kids. A boy and a girl. I'm at home with them these days."

"Wonderful," he said. "And are they here? Is your husband here?"

"No, not tonight," Pauline said.

"Will you join me for dinner, then? We ought to catch up. We ought to clear the air, at the very least."

"I can't," Pauline said. "I'm meeting some people. Some women. Moms' Night Out."

He surveyed her. "You look pretty," he said, with the vigilance she remembered about him when it came to women.

"Oh, thanks. You too. I mean . . . you look good too," Pauline said, though it wasn't true. He looked tired and puffy. He looked as if he'd had a bit to drink, which made Pauline want to drink too. "I'd better go join the ladies," she said. She reached out to shake his hand, but he pulled her in and hugged her, and she could feel the bones of his chest against her.

"Will I see you Saturday?" he said, when he'd released her.

"Saturday?"

"At the kickoff."

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe. I hadn't planned on it."

It was the launch party for the company's road show, and she'd stashed the invitation in the junk drawer weeks before. She was holding on to her grudge, though she'd come to understand it was childish.

"I hope to see you there," Simon said.

"I'll think about it," Pauline said. "I'll try to come."

At the table, the conversation was about party favors for a four-year-old's birthday. Pauline smiled and nodded. She laughed when the others laughed, but it seemed to her they were speaking in a code they'd agreed on before she sat down.

She ordered a steak and a glass of wine. She drank the wine too fast and found herself flagging the waiter down to order a second glass, then a third. After dessert, she reached under the table and handed Sarah the gift she'd brought.

"Oh, how sweet," Sarah said, when she'd opened it. "Now, is this the kind that can be worn as sleepwear?"

"I don't see why not," Pauline said.

"I mean, is it flame-retardant?"

Pauline looked at her—the filed nails, the careful hair, the maternity sweater set—and she felt herself snap. "Oh, right, 'cause that law didn't just come out of some obscene litigation," she said. "I mean, when you think about it, is a polyester blend really going to save the day when the baby's crib is going up in flames?"

Silence settled over the table. Pauline felt she was outside her own body, watching from a distance, as Sarah's lips began to tremble, and pools of hurt welled up in her pretty eyes.

When the dinner was over Pauline went straight to the bar, thinking she'd have a drink with Simon. But he wasn't there. He'd gone. Lithium was what they'd given him in the hospital that time after he'd stripped and stormed the stage. It hadn't worked, he'd told Pauline, and in the end he'd had to set about healing himself.

THE KICKOFF PARTY was the following Saturday evening at Pauline's old boss's new estate in Atherton. Pauline put it on the calendar and booked a babysitter. On Saturday morning, she hung the St. John Knits on the back of the closet door and put a photo of the kids in her purse. She imagined herself arriving on Daryl's arm and taking out the photo and delivering her lines. "They're little for such a short time. It's wonderful to be home with them."

It occurred to Pauline they were not just lines; it *was* wonderful to be at home with them, but it was also awful, and there seemed to be no truth in between.

At four the babysitter called and canceled.

"I'll never find another sitter," Pauline said to Daryl. "Not this late."

"No, probably not." He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes. His face seemed unnaturally pale, and there were dark circles under his eyes. He'd been staying up late for a week, working downstairs in the kitchen finishing a brief. "Let's skip it," Daryl said. "It's not like you owe them anything."

"Fine," she said, an edge rising in her voice. "It's not like anybody cares whether I'm there or not."

"Great," he said, standing up. "I'm going to go and get some work done, then."



“It’s still a Saturday, Daryl.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, Saturdays are not typically part of the workweek.”

“Okay, I won’t get work done,” he said. “What should I be doing right now?”

“You should maybe be wondering if I still want to go,” Pauline said. “You should maybe be offering to watch the kids. You should maybe be thinking about somebody besides yourself.”

Daryl didn’t say anything, and with concentrated effort, Pauline stripped the emotion from her voice. “You don’t mind staying home so I can go, do you? That’s fair, isn’t it?”

“No, I don’t mind.”

Pauline heated up leftovers and set them on the table. She went upstairs and brushed her hair and put on her new suit and stood in front of the mirror. The jacket was boxy, and the skirt pulled obnoxiously against her thighs. In the darkness of her mind, this too became Daryl’s doing, and she left without kissing him good-bye.

THE HOUSE WAS huge but tasteful—all teak and chrome and glass—with soaring ceilings and modern, geometric rugs. Pauline drank gin and tonics and kept an eye out for Simon. Engineers were standing in clumps, talking in millions—the boss would take away eight or nine hundred, they were saying, the other execs would get two hundred, maybe two-fifty. Nobody else would get more than twenty. Pocket change, they called it. Three salespeople from New York were whispering about the house. He paid eight for it a year ago, they said, but it had to be worth fifteen by now. He bought it on margin against his stock.

When Simon arrived, he came right over and kissed Pauline on the cheek. “I’m glad you came,” he said. “And where is your other half?”

“At home,” she said. “The babysitter canceled.”

“What a shame,” he said. “Babysitters. Not the most reliable species. Never mind, I’ll be your chaperone, shall I?”

“I don’t know,” Pauline said. “You took my goddamn job.” Then she laughed and touched his arm.

They talked, and Pauline told him about her life. She told him about throwing Jack onto the bed, and about getting drunk at Moms’ Night Out. He listened as if what she said mattered. He told her about his wife, how she’d been in and out of institutions, how she was back in England, where their son was at boarding school. He told her he still struggled with his moods but that for the most part he was all

right, even in the aftermath of his divorce. All the time they talked, he brought Pauline drinks. He stood too close to her and she let him.

When the last of the guests were collecting their coats, he produced a pack of cigarettes and they stepped outside, standing with their drinks on the back deck, smoking. Pauline had reached the point in a night of drinking when time loses its hold. She saw meaning in Simon's pale fingers, and the thin moon, and the petals falling like ash from the plum trees. In one long swallow she finished her drink, and Simon slipped his tuxedo coat over her shoulders, took her hand, and led her across the lawn. They reached the fence that bordered the property, and he kissed her. She kissed him back. He whispered that he'd missed her smile and her beautiful hair. His hands moved over her body, undoing buttons and unclasping her bra. Then he pulled his wallet from his pocket to look for a condom, and there, beneath his half-buttoned shirt, was his narrow, hairless chest.

Pauline took a step back. She looked across the lawn at her car parked in the driveway. But Simon pulled the condom from his wallet and handed it to her and she ripped it open with her teeth and held it between her fingers, ready to slide it onto him when the time came. He took the tuxedo jacket from her shoulders and laid it on the ground. They slid down onto it and kicked off their shoes. Then a door to the house opened and the yard flooded with light and voices. Pauline dropped the condom in the grass, and they stood abruptly and giggled and brushed themselves off and buttoned up their clothes.

Simon fished a cigarette from the pack. "For the ride home," he said, and Pauline dropped it into her jacket pocket. He kissed her and promised to call her. She backed out the long driveway and put the radio on loud. She rolled the windows down and sped along the back roads, feeling the power of the car under her, and the clean, cold air on her face. With one hand on the wheel, she reached into her purse for the cigarette Simon had given her, and she put it between her lips. The car lighter popped out, and Pauline pressed the hot end against the tip. But the cigarette wasn't a cigarette; it was a crayon fallen out of the box she kept for Jack in the bottom of her purse. By the time she noticed her mistake, she had melted green wax down the front of the St. John Knits, and she was driving twenty-five miles an hour over the speed limit, and lights were flashing behind her and a siren was screaming, and she understood that she was behind the wheel of a car—fantastically drunk.

The cop was hulking and blond, with white eyebrows and faint-green eyes. He gave her a Breathalyzer test and handcuffed her. He slid her into the back of the police car and headed for the county facility in Milpitas. He rolled his window down

and her hair began to fly around in her face, catching on her eyelashes and creeping into the corners of her mouth. She asked him if he could help her get her hair out of her face, but he didn't reply, and after a while she started to cry. He glanced at her in the rearview mirror and kept driving, then he glanced back again and pulled the car over on the shoulder and got out and came around and brushed the hair off her cheeks. He tucked it behind her ears and when it slipped out he tucked it back again—awkwardly but not gruffly—with a faint gentleness in his hands and his face. What he meant, she thought, was that he did not despise her. He did not think her ugly and cheap and ruined. Just as she had never thought her father ruined. She had been rooting for him, right to the end. She was rooting for him even now.

As the cop began to drive it seemed to Pauline that it wasn't her bad habits and misplaced longings that had undone her. It wasn't her father leaving her to endure her mother's death alone. It wasn't Simon Stapleton. It was the overreaching and pretending. It was the self-doubt and the shame.

She would give it all up—like a sweet tooth, like a long-held opinion. She would set shame aside and she would summon whatever dignity she could, and the cop with the pale eyes and the white hair would offer her a reprieve. He would flip a hard, fast U-turn across the highway, and she would spend the night not in a holding tank in a prison in Milpitas, but home with her children, zipped up tight in their footed pajamas, asleep in their bright rooms painted butter yellow and cornflower blue. Instead she woke up the next morning in the holding tank of a jail in Milpitas.

SIX MONTHS HAD passed since Pauline's DUI and night in jail. The dot.com bubble had burst, and her old company had failed to go public. Pauline had given up drinking, and she and Daryl had managed to stay married. She'd also hired a private detective to track down her father. Not to absolve him, exactly, but to see if she might be able to pull him over to the side of life on which she was now standing.

She sat at one end of the therapist's sofa and Daryl sat at the other. They were each supposed to be thinking of one special memory they could share, one moment they had spent together that they cherished. Pauline was to go first. She was to say it out loud, to Daryl, not to the therapist.

She looked at Daryl at the far end of the sofa, his hands in his lap. She reached toward him, across that void of upholstery and silence, and took one of his hands in hers. It was large and heavy and unwilling but she didn't let that stop her. She told him how she'd loved it that he'd never kissed her in the car that night on the outskirts of Chicago. She told him how much it had meant to her to simply sit together in that

parking lot, holding hands. It was as if he'd been offering them a second chance, she said, a chance to take it slow and make it right. She'd known then, she told him, that he was a man to build a life around.

He stared at her blankly.

"The Walmart," she said. "Remember?"

He picked at the back of his ear and finally grinned. "Oh, that night," he said, embarrassed. "Actually, you had a cold sore."

Pauline thought back hard, and remembered. The ministrations in front of the mirror in her hotel room. The layer of cover-up. The multiple applications of lipstick. How certain she'd been that she'd hidden it. How in her mind she'd been as flawless to him, that night, as he had been to her. **N**

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