

# THE MOM OF BOLD ACTION

Again she found herself spending her precious morning writing time pacing her lovable sty of a kitchen making no progress *at all*. Why was she holding a can opener?

Hmm.

That could be something.

"The Trusty Little Opener." Gerard the Can Opener was a dreamer. He wanted to open BIG things. BIGGER things. The BIGGEST things! But all he ever got to open was, uh, beans? Corn? Tuna?

You had to give him something essential to open, to save the day. Medicine? Heart medicine? You did not open heart medicine with a can opener. Tomato paste? Some beloved person in the household really longed for spaghetti? Old Italian gal. Friend to all. On her last legs. The spaghetti brought her back to Florence or whatever? But the modern, high-tech can opener, Cliff, was out partying with a wicked colander and a cynical head of lettuce. Gerard saw his chance. Even though he dated back to the 1960s and didn't have a fancy rubber handle like Cliff, he could still open stuff. This was it! His chance to help dear sweet Mama Tinti get her final, pre-death bowl of—

Ugh.

Honestly.

Why was Mr. Potts going nuts behind the gate in the mud-room? She'd already given him three of those peanut-butter thingies.

"The Discontented Dog." The Discontented Dog was never happy. No matter how many peanut-butter thingies he was given. When he was in, he wanted out. When out—

She grabbed another peanut-butter thingie from the box.

"The Peanut-Butter Thingie Who Sacrificed Himself So the Other Peanut-Butter Thingies in the Box Could Live." Jim the Peanut-Butter Thingie pushed his peanut-shaped body higher and higher, toward the questing human hand. Jake and Polly watched, amazed. Was Jim *trying* to get eaten? "Go on, live your dreams, you two!" Jim shouted as a thumb and a finger grasped him around his, uh, slender place. The place that, for Peanut-Butter Thingies, served as a waist.

She moved the gate, gave Mr. Potts the peanut-butter thingie, leaned out the door, called for Derek to come put Mr. Potts on the tie-out.

No reply.

"The Son Who Failed to Reply." Once upon a time, there was a son who, when called, failed to reply. Was he deliberately ignoring her? Because pre-adolescent? Was he masturbating yet? Was that her business? The mother faithfully checked underwear/sheets for signs of masturbation, so that, as needed, she could let him know, in her quiet way, that everyone, even famous people, even our great, historical—

"A Time for Oneself." George Washington, twelve years of age, lay in his bed. A four-poster, which had been made, as all beds were back then, by hand. Was it weird? What he'd been

imagining? Their neighbor Mrs. Betsy Alcott, in that form-fitting bodice, reaching over to take off his tricorn hat? No: if a person felt something, it was, by definition, "normal." If he found himself touching himself while imagining the slender Mrs. Alcott bringing her quill pen absentmindedly to her full lips, no doubt other little boys in other times and places had felt inclined to touch themselves while imagining similar things. Therefore, it was fine, what he was doing! He suddenly felt so free and, feeling free, began to dream of a new land, a land where all could feel as free as—

Lord. Nearly noon.

Time to sit down and actually write something.

Where was Derek, though? Seriously? She worried. As a baby, he'd had a collapsed lung.

You good? she'd called out last night, from bed.

You're turning him into a nervous wreck, Keith had said.

I'm fine, Derek had called from his room. Also, not deaf.

Lungs still going? Keith said.

Far as I can tell, Derek said.

We just worry, she said. We love you so much.

Right back atcha, Derek said.

Then there'd been this sweet silence.

She adored it. Having a family. TV families were always fricked up, but hers was something else entirely. They liked one another. Had so much fun. Trusted one another and confided in one another and accepted one another just as they were, no matter what.

Not out front, not out back.

What the hell, seriously? He'd promised to stay in the yard. And this was a kid who never broke a promise.

"The Boy Whose Bad Lung Conked Out in the Woods."

"The Boy Who Lay Feebly Calling Out for His Mom."

"The Boy Who Died Utterly Alone and Became One with the Spirits of the Forest."

*And evermore the mother wandered the woods, seeking her lost boy.*  
Eek.

"The Mom Who Rushed into the Woods but Once There Forgot How to Do CPR but Then Suddenly Remembered."

Oh God, oh God. Her cheeks were so hot.

Derek was hurt somewhere. She just knew it. A mother knew these things.

She grabbed her cellphone and the first-aid kit and—

Wait, whoa, hold on.

This right here was what Keith was always talking about. She was freaking out. She had a tendency to get worked up. Sometimes a mother did *not* just know these things. Last month, she'd just known that he'd been abducted from the bus stop. She'd raced down there in her bathrobe and house slippers. He'd seen her coming. Started shaking his head, like, Ma, no, no, no. But too late. The older boys were already imitating her shuffling run.

Once she'd dreamed he'd started smoking. In the dream, he'd been smoking a cigar. At Cub Scouts. Sort of flaunting it. He had a man's voice and, in that voice, asked Mr. Belden if there was such a thing as a Smoking Merit Badge. Next morning, in real life, he'd busted her sniffing his clothes and started bawling the way he did when he was totally telling the truth but not being heard.

"Why would I *smoke*?" he'd said. "Ma, that's disgusting."

What you had to do was overrule your irrational fears. By learning the facts. She'd read about this in *Best Life*. One gal scared of flying had spent the month before her trip to China memorizing air-fatality statistics. A man afraid of snakes had

come up with a mantra about the majority of snakes being nonvenomous. In another article, parents, intending the best, had gone too far. One mom, super-focused on eating right, had turned her daughter anorexic. A dad had been too strict about violin practice and now his son hated music. Also, had panic attacks whenever near polished brown wood.

All over the world right now, thousands of boys were out farting around, having broken a promise they'd made to stay in the yard.

Most woods were not dangerous.

Generally, lungs did not just fail.

The world was not a scary or hostile place, and Derek was a smart little guy with a good head on his shoulders.

He was fine. What she was going to do was sit down and write something.

What she was not going to do was hover by the window.

Much.

"The Tree Who Longed to Come Inside." Once there was a tree who longed to come inside and sit by the woodstove. He knew this was weird. He knew that his fellow trees were being cruelly burned in there. But, gosh, the kitchen looked so inviting. Because of all the hard work the mother had done. Painting and whatnot. When she should have been writing. The smoke pouring out of the chimney smelled so nice. The flesh of his fellow trees, burning, smelled amazing.

Yikes.

Restart.

Once there was a tree who longed to come inside. Tim the Tree felt so drawn to people. Even as a sapling, he'd just loved hearing them talk. Gosh, what was a "transmission leak"? What did the daddy mean by "You obsess too much"? What did the mommy mean by saying that "obsessing" was her "super-

power," which she "used every day, in her work"? There were so many words to learn! What was "apology," what was "perturbed," what was "darling"? If the wind was blowing from the east, bending him slightly to the left, he could peer into the kitchen through the dirty little window over the sink, which hadn't been washed in ever so long, through which the mommy was now gazing out at him, a worried look on her—

Restart.

Tim the Tree loved his spot near the path into the woods, from which he could watch the comings and goings of the various forest denizens, large and small, such as bears, foxes, hikers, hunters, and, today—

*A strange tableau.*

That phrase just popped into her head. Derek walked into the yard. Stumbled. Blood on his face. Holy crap. Weaving like a little drunk.

She burst out of the house, followed by Mr. Potts, who, barking insanelly, plowed right through the garden. She plowed through the garden herself, picked Derek up, plowed back through the garden, dropped onto the porch steps with him in her arms.

What happened, baby? she said. Baby, what happened?

Old guy, he said.

Old guy? she said. What old guy?

He came up behind me, he said. Pushed me down.

Where? she said.

Derek didn't want to say.

Sweetie, where were you? she said.

Church Street, he said.

That was—oh, my God, that was nearly downtown. Way disallowed.

Now was not the time.

She got him inside. Nose not broken. No teeth chipped. She called Keith at work. Called the police. Cleaned up Derek's face. It looked like he'd been clawed.

He just . . . pushed you down? she said.

Into a bush, he said.

Must have been a rose or blackberry.

Jesus.

Ten minutes later, Keith walked in.

What's all this? he said.

Her phone rang.

The police had a guy. Already. Old guy. Kind of out of it. They'd found him wandering back and forth between Church and Bellefree. Would she come down, have a look? Bring the kid, if he was up for it?

Oh, he's up for it, she said.

Guy was old, all right.

Long hair, missing tooth, gross sandals, eyes roaming anxiously all over the place.

Of course he denied it. Why would he push a kid down? He was just going through a rough patch right now. But that didn't mean he'd push a kid down. This false accusation was *part* of it. Had Glenda started this? Glenda had a network, of which it seemed the police were part. Also Jimmy Carter was part of it.

She and Keith and Derek and the cop watched on the cop's laptop as the guy was questioned.

I can't be sure, Derek said.

The cop gave her and Keith a look, like: He's going to need to be sure.



Oh, come on, what were the odds? An old guy pushes a kid down, and half an hour later an old guy's found a block away, off his rocker?

Well, now was the time for some parenting.

Some subtle guidance.

If this guy walks out of here, sweetie, she said, don't you think it's possible that he'll push some other kid down? And that kid might end up with more than just a few scratches?

Someone who'd do something like that needs help, pal, Keith said. And the only way he's going to get it is for us to start that process here and now.

How will it help him to be in jail? Derek said.

The look on the cop's face said, Well, good point.

Maybe he'll get some counseling in there, she said.

A grown man pushes a kid down for no reason, there's something wrong, Keith said.

Kind of irresponsible to just let that go, she said.

Derek asked for a couple minutes to think it over.

Dear little guy.

A landline rang in a suboffice and the cop went in there to answer it.

"The Tough Decision." The boy sat in a silver desk chair, nervously swiveling, tracing one of the scratches on his face with his little finger. His mother, pretending to read a bulletin board so she wouldn't seem to be pressuring the lad, felt badly that he'd been put in this position by—that fucking bastard. Toothless hippie bastard. She should have bolted into the interrogation room and pushed his old ass down. Seen how he liked it. Although he was big. And you could tell from his face he had a mean streak.

The cop stepped out of the suboffice faster than . . . well, faster than you'd expect a cop to step out of a suboffice. He

came out fast, went right past them, backed up. Like in a cartoon. You expected his rubbery tie to come zinging out of the suboffice a few seconds later.

Well, this takes the cake, he said.

What does? she said.

There's another, he said.

Another what? she said.

Old guy, he said. Over on Church. Wandering around. They're bringing him in.

The second old guy was nearly identical to the first. They could have been brothers. Old hippie, long hair, sandals, missing a tooth.

Different tooth.

But still.

She and Keith exchanged a look, like: Huh.

Second guy also claimed innocence. Seemed maybe slightly more lucid than the first. He had this wad of duct tape he was manhandling. Why didn't the cop take it away? Maybe it was considered a "possession"? Maybe he was "within his rights" to be tossing it distractedly from hand to hand?

Jesus.

This country.

They brought the first guy back and the two old hippies sat side by side, seemingly wary of each other. She felt that each, in his mind, was making the case for being the more intelligent and authentic washed-up former hippie.

Derek was about to cry. She could tell. It was too much pressure.

I honestly don't know, he whispered.

So she shut it down. And that was that. The two old freaks

were free to go. She watched them from the window. They hit the lawn and darted off in different directions, fast, like minnows when you put your hand in the water.

At least we didn't put the wrong person in jail, Derek said in the car on the way home.

Long silence.

Well, yes and no, she felt. One of them had done it. Pushed Derek down. Had actually done it. Stepped up, pushed him down. Then sandal-flapped away, all pleased with himself. That had, for sure, happened in this world. Put both in the slammer, you'd be fifty percent right. Now? One hundred percent wrong. And who was suffering? Her little guy. Who was not suffering? Whichever one of them had done it. He was out there right now, bopping around town, crazy thoughts ramped up by this little victory, proof (to him) that his worldview was, like, visionary or some such shit.

Unbelievable.

Damn it.

"The Mom of Bold Action." It was surprisingly easy to get the gun. She wore the yellow dress, hair in a ponytail. She looked pretty but regular. The guy at the store applauded her intention to take lessons. He handed the [insert name of type of gun] right over. Could he please show her how to load it? He could. He did. Now she was driving slowly up Church. Here was the guy. The old hippie. Whichever one had done it. Seeing the gun, he confessed. No. She drove up behind him. There he was, about to shove down another kid. A little girl. In her Communion dress. It was just his thing, pushing kids down. Who knew why? Maybe he'd been pushed down himself as a—

No, nope.

He was just a sicko.

She hopped out of the car, dropped to one knee, took aim. *Blam*. Direct hit. In the leg. Which, being compassionate, she'd intended. Amazing how good a shot she was. Never having shot before. Well, she'd always been athletic. Down he went. Wounded, he confessed. Begged for mercy. But didn't really seem all that sorry. Was he messing with her? Was there a trace of mockery in his eyes as he fake-apologized? She pressed the gun against his sweaty forehead.

Jeez, Jesus, what was she—

They were driving along the river. A kayaker was paddling against the current, shouting, either nuts or on his phone. Derek was in the back, slumped against the door, looking pensive and deflated, feeling bad, she could tell, for not being sure which guy it had been, for causing this weird silent tension in the car.

Which, she suddenly realized, was still going on.

I think you did perfect, she said. That was not easy, and you handled it beautifully.

Amen, Keith said.

I just wish I could remember, he said. I keep going over it in my mind.

And? Keith said.

Well, he was definitely wearing jeans, Derek said.

The car pulled up to their same old house. Which now seemed sad. The House of the Victims. The past year, they'd re-roofed it, put on a new porch. For what? What was the big thing they were striving to be part of? Was it good? Did it make any sense? They'd done all that for what? So their kid could get pushed down by some freak? This was, so far, the biggest thing that had ever happened to them as a family.

The other houses in the neighborhood blinked the eyes that were their windows.

Better you than us, they thought.

"The House That Found Itself Suddenly Ostracized."

"The House Made Lonely Through No Fault of Its—"

Crap. Blah. Stupid.

The three of them sat there a bit in the ticking car.

I know I wasn't supposed to be downtown, Derek said. I just wanted to try it.

Fair enough, Keith said.

Such a good dad. Reasonable man. Dear heart. Always fine with—well, everything. Even this, apparently. Fine with Derek breaking his promise. Fine with some random creep assaulting their kid and walking away scot-free.

She felt—if she was being totally honest?—that, back at the station, Keith had, well, not failed them, exactly. She wouldn't go that far. But hadn't there been a time, back in the old days, when Keith, the powerful man of the house, would've pulled aside the other powerful man, the cop, and, between them, a deal would have been struck, and the two freaks would've been quietly led outside for a little "talk" and, oops, while out there, had the living shit beat out of them?

Both of them?

Just to be sure?

Well, that wasn't the best.

That wasn't, you know, fair.

Or whatever.

But jeez. Neither one of those losers was exactly hitting the ball out of the park. For the sake of argument, let's say that Keith and the cop, choosing to err slightly on the side of pro-activity, had (lightly, performatively) roughed up those two dopes. The one who'd done it? Wouldn't do it again. The one

who hadn't done it—well, if, in the future, he ever considered doing something out of line, which he probably would, given the life he was leading, he'd think twice. Net result? A safer Church Street. Down which a nice kid like Derek could walk. Derek, in her mind, ambling down this old-timey Church Street, waved to an elderly couple drinking iced tea on their porch. Go around back, lad, use the tire swing on the old apple tree! the husband said. His wife was up there knitting. You remind us of our own son, now a successful doctor! she said, then dropped her yarn ball, which rolled off the porch, and the old guy made a joke about his back as he hobbled down the stairs to fetch it.

Good people.

Salt of the earth.

But Church Street did not belong to them. Or Derek. It belonged to those two freaks, who, because freaky, were somehow the most powerful players in the whole idiotic deal. Why were rejects running the show? Seriously? It was all backward, because nobody wanted to hurt anybody's feelings, nobody was willing to say what they really thought, nobody cared enough to take a stand for what was right.

And things kept spiraling downward.

They walked to the porch through a pile of leaves. Which was no fun. Not today. Today, it was one more thing they had to do to get to the next not-fun thing. Which was dinner.

This was real. This had happened. A guy had attacked her kid and suffered no consequences whatsoever and was probably off bragging about it to some other deadbeats around a campfire or whatnot.

And what was she doing about it?

Going inside to meekly boil pasta.

After dinner, she started writing some of this down. It was



easy. It just flowed. It came straight from the heart. An essay. "Justice," she called it. Goodbye, can openers with big dreams; goodbye, talking trees; goodbye, Henry the Dutiful Ice-Cream-Truck Tire, that piece of crap she'd worked on for most of last year; goodbye, forced optimism; goodbye, political correctness. This was the real shit. Wow. She knew just what to say. It was like walking across a creek and rocks kept appearing beneath her feet. It was like speaking out loud. But on paper. It was the most honest, original thing she'd ever written. It didn't sound like her, and yet it *was* her, for real.

*Bang*, yes, perfect.

She wrote late into the night.

In the morning, she came down to find Keith reading her pages. Her essay. Like, really reading it. She stood in the doorway watching. Well, this was new. This was different. Usually he read her work with this pained look on his face and afterward he'd say she had "a wild imagination" and had "clearly really been into it," although it was "probably just over his head," because he was "a dunce with no literary training."

Good? she said today.

Wow, he said.

His face was red and his leg was bouncing under the table.

Ha. That was nice. That was—flattering. She was totally wiped out this morning, but so what? She drifted into the kitchen, tidied up the little writing desk they'd bought at Target. So it would be ready. For the next burst. Keith yelled that he was going for a run. Wow. Keith hadn't gone running in years. It was as if reading her essay had made him want to be as good at something as she was at writing. Not to brag. But that was what good writing did, she realized: you said what you

really thought and it made a kind of energy, and that sincere energy flowed into the mind of the reader. It was amazing. She was an *essayist*.

All these years she'd just been working in the wrong genre.

It had taken this terrible thing happening to Derek to make that clear. She wouldn't have chosen it. But it had happened. And now she had to honor it.

She sat down to write.

Her phone rang.

Story of her life.

They'd caught the second guy, the cop said, the one with the duct-tape ball, breaking into a car, and he'd confessed to pushing Derek down. The cop read her the guy's statement: "Yeah, I pushed him down. He seemed like a smug little shit. I don't know why I did it, really. But he lived. And now maybe he's not so smug. I bet not. You're welcome."

It's actually kind of funny, the cop said. They're cousins.

Who? she said.

The, uh, two suspects, he said. You know Dimini's? The furniture store? Gus Dimini's their uncle.

Wow, Dimini's. They'd bought their TV there. Nice place. Fading place. Their big thing was, on St. Patrick's Day, they gave away green socks. Called themselves "O'Dimini's" for the week. It had been an Irish neighborhood when she was a kid. Now it was—who knew what it was? Everything down there was boarded up. You'd see a huddle of shopping carts on a lawn. A wading pool full of crankshafts. The occasional Confederate flag. But Gus Dimini was a sweetie. Big round man, full white beard. Roaming benevolently around the place like it was a restaurant. Like he was about to seat you at one of his outdoor patio suites.

She should march in, identify herself as a good customer,



who, over the years, had spent literally thousands of dollars in there. Demand that he do something. About his low-life nephews. Well, it hadn't literally been thousands. Just that one TV. On clearance. So, like, three hundred dollars. Point was, she was a *customer*. Maybe she should organize a boycott. Among who, though? Whenever she drove past, the delivery van was the only vehicle in the lot. And sometimes Gus would be out there, sitting on a parking bumper, head in hands.

Anyway, it wasn't his job to control his stupid nephews.

She thought of Ricky. Her cousin. Who, on the day he was supposed to get married, had gotten wasted and thrown a tire iron through the window of a sporting-goods store and gone *inside to sleep* it off. They'd found him next morning, a catcher's mitt on each hand. Ricky had gotten three girls pregnant in the same month and, in a fight with two of their dads at the same time, had broken one dad's nose and had his ribs broken by the other. He'd stolen a car—different time of life, many years later, when he was already the father of two (grown) kids—and driven to, or at least toward, California, but in Ohio had mouthed off to some bikers at a rest stop and been shipped back in a full-body cast, and then had assaulted a nurse in the hospital, after which, while in detention, he'd had a stroke and died.

Had they, had she, tried talking to Ricky? God, yes, over and over, every time she saw him. He'd be moved to tears, promise to change, then ask to borrow some money to start his auto-repair shop. His big idea was, he'd check the whole car over. How that was a big idea, she didn't get. When you declined to loan him the money, he'd say: So you're just like everybody else. A week later, you'd hear that he'd stolen a go-kart and driven it into a lake, or said some racist thing out loud at church, or overdosed, died, come back from the dead, over-

dosed again, raced out of the hospital, and tried to break into a parking meter.

In time, they'd all given up on him. Except Aunt Janet, who'd had her own struggles (brandy, night panics) but had never given up on Ricky, even after he was dead. She'd funded a little corner of the library, the Ricky Rodgers Memorial Reading Nook, and stocked it with books on substance abuse and Christianity and auto repair.

At least Ricky had never pushed a kid down. Well, that she knew of. Although he had punched an usher after saying that racist thing at church. And had, at one point, toward the end of his life, impregnated a seventeen-year-old. And burned down the grocery store the gal's father owned, after a cashier refused to let him go into the back room and pick through the stuff they were about to throw away. His plan was to take the stuff home for free, charge the store twenty bucks for his trouble.

That was Ricky.

Ah, Ricky, she thought. She'd been crazy about him when they were little. He was just a few years older than her. He'd been so fun. Not bad yet, not really, just energetic, tossing M-80s in the direction of the henhouse, putting spiders in Aunt Janet's slippers.

And now he was dead.

A dead, arrogant, loudmouthed, thoughtless, quasi-pedophilic, racist idiot.

Who, for a while, she'd thought was the greatest.

All these years, in her mind, she'd been defending Ricky, feeling sympathy for Ricky, or trying to, but you know what? Fuck Ricky. She thought about that pregnant seventeen-year-old's dad, that gut-punched usher, the owner of that sporting-goods store. Fuck Ricky. Someone should have dropped a rock on that idiot long ago.

I mean, yes, okay—some rocks had definitely been dropped on Ricky. Jail, foreclosure on that little dump on Webster he'd somehow cobbled together the money to buy, jail again, the bikers, that dad who'd broken his ribs, the group of parishioners at the church who'd knocked out his front teeth in the narthex, because, it turned out, the usher he'd punched had cancer and was the nicest guy in the world and had given a kidney to the pastor a few years earlier and they all loved him.

But it hadn't been enough, none of it had been enough, to get Ricky to pull head out of ass.

An image came into her mind: Ricky, in Hell, in those filthy coveralls he used to wear (which he'd stolen from the one auto shop where he'd managed to hold a job for more than a month), on fire, tears running down his face.

And he was small. So small. She could fit him in the palm of her hand.

Are you sorry? she said. For all that you did? Truly sorry?

Ginnie, it's so hot down here, he said.

But are you sorry? she said.

For what? he said.

Still stupid, still stubborn. Of course, that's why he was in Hell.

He'd been born stupid and stubborn and stayed stubborn and stupid because he was so stupid and stubborn.

Kind of unfair.

She lifted him out of Hell and put him in Heaven. Everything was pure and white up there. Right away he started angrily pacing around, leaving greasy footprints all over the place. The angels looked at her like, You want to get this character out of here?

She closed both hands around Ricky like he was a little mouse, and really focused, and burned all his greasiness away

and was able to see, by reading his mind, that he was now, because of her loving focus, a different person. No trace of the old Ricky remained. No trace of the real, original Ricky.

She put him back in Heaven and he stood there, stunned, whoever he was.

She heard Keith galumph up onto the porch.

So much for writing time.

He burst in, flushed and sweaty, bandanna over one shoulder.

Good run? she said.

I didn't go on a run, he said.

True, weird, he was wearing khakis.

He'd found the guy, the first guy, he said, the one averse to Jimmy Carter, and had given him one in the knee. With Derek's autographed bat. It hadn't—it hadn't gone that well. The guy had nearly taken the bat away from him. He'd managed to nail him, but just that once. Sort of a, you know—glancing blow? And the thing was, during it? His bandanna had slipped down. And the guy had recognized him. Hey, you're that dad dude, he'd said, in a tone of wonder, holding his knee. So. There was that. The plan was, had been, you know—take down both guys. Like in her essay? Teach them a lesson. About rules. About order. About "reverencing justice." But after that first hit? The sound it made? The wind had sort of gone out of his sails. The bat was in the river. He'd dropped it off the bridge. They'd have to get Derek a new one. And get it signed. By who, though? Did she—did she remember who'd signed it?

Then he collapsed on the couch, burst into tears. His face went all shriveled-apple and he started soundlessly, in slow motion, pounding his fist into the arm of the couch.

Like in her essay?

What the hell?

Wait, she said. Which guy? Did you hit?

The first one, he said. The one they brought in first.

She told him about the confession. That the second one had confessed. That he'd essentially, uh, kneecapped the wrong guy.

Oh, great, he said, as if the unfair thing had been done to him. Derek came down.

Why is Dad crying? he said.

His aunt died, she said.

Which aunt? Derek said.

One you don't know, she said.

How would I not know an aunt of Dad's? he said.

Keith got up, went into the basement. What was he going to do down there? There was nothing down there but the washer and the dryer and a broken treadmill. Was he planning to do laundry? Probably. Sometimes he did that. When upset.

Pretty soon, she heard both washer and dryer going.

God.

Unusual man.

Can I send a note to Dad's uncle? Derek said.

She could tell he knew she was lying.

He's dead, too, she said. He died in a tragic hot-air-balloon accident.

Oh, that uncle, Derek said.

Look, she said. How about go up to your room?

Did Dad hit someone with a bat? Derek said.

Well, she said.

The guy who pushed me down? he said.

She thought about it a second.

Yes, she said.

He seemed pleased, slid across the floor in his socks, mimed a baseball swing.

Over on the Target desk was her essay.

Sitting there all proud of itself.

She sat down, started reading. It was—God. It was so bad. So harsh. It made no sense. Today. She was good—she was a good writer and all that, so, yes, it sort of flowed, but when you really broke it down, saw what it was actually saying—

Wow, Jesus.

She tore the pages in half, dropped them into the garbage, took the bag out of the can, took the bag to the can around the side of the house.

No more essays.

No more writing at all.

She could do more good in the world by, like, baking.

She sat on the porch swing. Imagined the guy Keith had hit, the innocent guy, jogging up the block, dropping down on the porch steps.

Look, she said, it's not that big a deal, right? You seem totally fine. It was, uh, a glancing blow. And wouldn't you have done the same? If it was your kid?

No, he said. I would not have hit a totally unrelated guy with a bat just because he looked like the guy who did it.

Well, yes, she said. Very admirable. But it's easy to say that, when you weren't actually in that—

That's called character, he said.

I didn't do it, she said. Keith did it.

The guy raised his eyebrows. Somehow he knew about that stupid essay.

Words matter, he said.

Oh, shut up, she said.

Now the shit was going to hit the fan. The system was about to come crashing down on them. On the good people. Who'd always, up until now, done everything right. Or at least had tried to.



From inside, her phone rang.

Perfect.

Same cop.

Little issue, he said. Leo Dimini came in here just now. Said he got attacked. With a bat. By someone he claimed was your husband. Would you know anything about that?

Attacked? she said. With a bat?

The falseness in her voice hung there, being mutually considered by the two of them.

I'm going to take that for a no, the cop said.

Keith is a good guy, she said.

He seemed like it, the cop said. But tell him—you know. No more baseball.

No more baseball, she said.

And if I could suggest something? he said.

Okay, she said.

Maybe we let it drop, he said. The, uh, pushing allegation. Might simplify things. The family's been talking among themselves. The idea is, you drop it about the pushing, they drop it about the bat attack. And Babe Ruth over there can, you know, sleep. Easy. Easier. And you, too.

In that instant, she saw it: God, she loved her life so much. The family of ducks that sometimes came waddling across the yard like they owned the place. The way Derek had recently started eating dinner with his winter hat on, elbows on the table, like a little trucker. Last week, Keith had arranged the plastic mini-animals on the windowsill (giraffe, cow, stork, penguin, elk) in a circle around a corn kernel and, in the elk's antlers, had stuck a Post-it note: "Worshipping some mysterious object."

How do we do that? she said. Drop it?

You just tell me to drop it, he said.

Now? she said.

Now works, he said.

After she hung up, she went down to the basement. Keith was sitting in an old lawn chair. There was a big pile of clean laundry on the deck of the treadmill.

So, asshole just walks, he said.

Unless you buy a new bat and find him and hit him with it, she said.

It was supposed to be funny, but she could see he wasn't ready.

She reached for his hand. He took it, gave it a squeeze.

Give me a minute, he said.

Sure, she said.

In a way, they were lucky. Derek's face would heal. It would. The scratches were light. That guy could have taken the bat away from Keith and nailed him with it. Keith could have swung at the guy's head and killed him. Now, with this one concession, everything could go back to normal.

And it did.

A week passed, another week, a month.

Then, just before Christmas, she found herself stopped at a light downtown.

Over on the sidewalk, near the war monument, was the guy. One of the guys. She couldn't tell which.

Those two fuckers really were pretty much identical.

Then the other one came out from behind a maintenance shed, yapping away, dragging, on a leash of Christmas lights, a plastic reindeer he'd likely nabbed off somebody's lawn.

That was—wow. That was quite a limp. Quite a limp he had.

Quite a limp he had somehow gotten.

The two of them went off into the woods, having a good old time, arms around each other's shoulders, the two-person unit itself now seeming to have a limp, reindeer bouncing along in pursuit.

Someone behind her blasted his horn. She hit the gas, surged across the bridge.

Her face was suddenly hot. With shame. Oh God, oh shit. She'd done that. They had. Crippled an old fellow. Innocent old fellow. She'd made—well, she'd made an already unfortunate person's crappy life that much harder.

She had.

For real.

God, the hours of her life she'd spent trying to be good. Standing at the sink, deciding if some plastic tofu tub was recyclable. That time she'd hit a squirrel and circled back to see if she could rush it to the vet. No squirrel. But that didn't prove anything. It might have crawled off to die under a bush. She'd parked the car and looked under bush after bush until a lady came out of a hair salon to ask if she was okay.

Walking through the mall, trying to offer a little positive vibe to everyone she passed. Refilling the dog's water because there were floaters in it. As if he cared. But maybe, on some level, he did. Maybe clean water made his life better? Incrementally? Sometimes she'd refold Derek's little shirts two or three times, wondering which way he'd find easiest to unfold. It mattered. Didn't it? When a shirt unfolded nicely and went right on, didn't that maybe give a kid an extra little burst of confidence?

How many shirts did you have to thoughtfully refold and how many staples did you have to pick up off the floor so nobody would get a staple in the foot and how many hours did

you have to spend in the store trying to decide which fruit punch had the least high-fructose corn syrup and how many frazzled young moms with babies did you have to let cut in front of you at the post office and how many rude rejection letters did you have to decline to respond to just as rudely and how many nice familial meals did you have to put together while a great story idea sat dying in your mind, to offset one case of hobbling a hapless old—

The world was harsh. Too harsh. Make one mistake, pay for it the rest of your life. She thought of Mary Tillis, who'd rear-ended that minivan and two kids had died. Of Mr. Somers, who'd done something weird with the heater and gassed his elderly parents. Of that guy with the eye patch at Boy Scouts, who'd sloppily secured a load of firewood and then a chunk flew through this lady's windshield and she'd driven off the bridge into the river and drowned while trapped in her car.

What was that guy's sin, the sin that had ruined his life, so that now, at Scouts, he was nearly always drunk and during Pinewood Derby he'd gone charging out the exit door when one of the little cars flipped, leaving his kid, Maury, standing there like, That's just my dad, sorry, he once killed a lady?

One bad knot.

Nine stupid pages.

Fuck.

She hated this feeling. This guilty feeling. She couldn't live with it.

The parkway was curving west, looping her away from the river into a region of failing strip malls and three lavish mega-churches in a row.

That time with the squirrel, she'd gone home, confessed to Keith. They had a habit of mutual confession. Keith always

forgave her, then contextualized her sin. Squirrels died all the time, he'd said. We're constantly killing thousands of living things (bugs), every time we drive. But what are we supposed to do? Not drive? Once Keith forgave her, it was only a matter of time before her guilt would start to fade. Even when she'd been crushing so bad on Ed Temley from church, she'd confessed to Keith. Well, Ed's hot, Keith had said, even I can see that, and the day we stop noticing hot people we're pretty much corpses, right?

She imagined sitting across from Keith at the kitchen table.

Oh, hon, by the way? she'd say. Turns out? We gave that innocent old guy a limp. Which he'll take to his grave. So.

Keith would just sit there, stunned.

Maybe we offer to pay his hospital bill, he'd finally say. Or set him up with, you know, an orthopedic surgeon? Something like that?

Well, that opened some doors you didn't want opened. This was not a hippie with insurance. They'd be paying out of pocket. For his surgery. And there would go Derek's college money. That they'd worked so hard to save. And which wasn't going to be enough, anyway. If they kept saving at the current rate, they'd be good for freshman year, maybe. If the school wasn't great. There were limits. To what one could do. She'd fucked up, they'd fucked up, but they weren't gods, they were people, limited, emotional people who sometimes made ill-advised—

That guy was—you know what?

He was not getting their money.

That was one step too far. That was unreasonable. Kind of weird.

Neurotic.

Overinvolved.

She pulled up to the house. It looked crisp. Clean. All the work they'd done really had made it nicer.

A flock of geese came out of a low cloud, emitting this weird, non-goose sound. A second group joined from the left and a third from the right and the greater flock flew off imperfectly in the direction of the high school.

She imagined a beam of white light shooting out of her forehead, an apology beam, charged with the notion *I am so sorry*, that traveled across town and crossed the river and roamed through the woods until it found the two guys and, having briefly paused above them because they looked so damned similar, entered the innocent one. Instantly he knew her. Knew her pain. Knew about Derek's lung thing and how out of step he was with his classmates, how he sometimes went to school with a stuffed bear in his shirt pocket, as if he thought that was a good look, poor dear, and the thing was, knowing her this completely, it all made sense to the guy. And there it was: forgiveness. That's what forgiveness *was*. He was her. Being her, he got it all, saw just how the whole thing had happened.

How could he be mad at her when he *was* her?

A green forgiveness beam shot out of his forehead and flew back over the town, charged with the notion *To tell the truth, I never expected much from life anyway, and, given all the crap that's happened to me, most of which I caused, a slight limp is, believe me, the least of my worries. Plus, the pain is making me really attentive to every moment.*

The beam entered the car, hung there near the glove compartment.

*Although I do have one request*, it said.

Go ahead, she thought kindly.

*Forgive my cousin*, the beam said. *As I have forgiven you.*

Oh, brother. In a pig's ass.



Like that was happening.

Someday, maybe. Although probably not. She didn't have that in her. Just didn't. She hated that jerk. And always would.

*You forgave Ricky*, the beam said.

Your guy's no Ricky, she said.

*Ricky was worse*, the beam said.

Well, she said. If you knew Ricky.

*If you knew my cousin*, the beam said.

Anyway, it was all bullshit. There was no beam. She was just making it up with her mind.

*You are trapped in you*, the beam said.

Yeah, well, who isn't? she thought.

For some reason, the flock of geese was now passing back overhead, headed in the opposite direction.

That's really the problem, though, isn't it? she thought.

Yes, the beam said.

She could see Keith moving around in the kitchen.

Good old Keith. Since the incident, he had—he had not been doing well. At night, sometimes she'd hear him crying in the pantry. And this week he'd been passed over at work again. People just—they didn't respect him. At the office Christmas party, everyone kept talking over him. There'd been some kind of running joke about everyone funneling the least desirable projects to Keith and Keith cluelessly accepting. He'd just sat there, fingering a poinsettia leaf that had fallen off the centerpiece. No one even seemed to notice that they were hurting his feelings.

Sweet guy. Weak guy.

Her weak, sweet guy.

This limping info?

Was dying with her, here and now.

She was going to have to be kind of a sin-eater on this one.

What she had to do was go in there, say nothing. About the limp. Be cheerful, be happy. Make the Christmas cookies. As planned. At every turn, all evening, fight the urge to tell him. Tomorrow, when, again, she felt the urge, remind herself that she had decided, here in the car, for the good of the family, not to tell him. Ever. Next day, same thing. With each passing day, the desire to tell him would diminish. And one day soon, she'd get through the whole day without even thinking of telling him.

And that would be that.

She just had to start the process.

On the passenger seat was a plastic bag. In the bag: a roll of parchment paper, a thing of sprinkles, three new cookie cutters. What she had to do now was reach over, pick up the bag, open the car door, drop one foot into the gray slush.

That, she could do.

That was something good she could actually do.