

Diana Friedman

Disintegration

DIANA FRIEDMAN'S fiction and essays have appeared in many journals and magazines, including *Newsweek*, the *Baltimore Sun*, *Flyway: Journal of Writing and Environment*, the *Huffington Post*, *Sport Literate*, *Bethesda Magazine*, and *Whole Earth Review*. Her work has received multiple awards, including the Alexander Patterson Capped Fiction Prize, and has been shortlisted by *Glimmer Train*, *Hunger Mountain*, and Red Hen Press. This chapter is excerpted from her novel-in-progress, "All That You Can Leave Behind," a contemporary story of desire, dislocation, and U2 infatuation. Friedman lives in Maryland with her family. Her work is available online at www.dianafriedmanwriter.com.

S outhbound 270 from Germantown is still heavy, and toward the lane divide, the crash is to the far left. Yet Jake continues driving alarmingly fast, somehow oblivious when a truck sideswipes them, causing the car to swerve onto the shoulder, tip onto two wheels, and then pitch onto its side, smashing the door inward and trapping Jonah in the backseat. Jeannie climbs out her window, waving frantically for help as smoke pours from the hood. This must be Washington, D.C., because no one will pull over to help and she cannot get cell coverage, her voice hollow as she descends into hysteria until, pushed by the shrillness of her own voice, she is thrust into the morning.

Jeannie shuts off the clock radio, the remnants of the traffic report still mingling with the dream. It's been like this nonstop the last few weeks, the intensity of her dreams increasing exponentially, sleep scarcer than ever. On top of that, the second short story has taken on a life of its own, waking her up at all hours with full-steam dialogue. Of course, she's not helping matters by staying up past midnight to answer its call, nor does the fact that a few days ago, a third one hatched, this trio the beginning of something good, something cohesive—a collection of stories or, dare she even think it, the middle chapters of a novel.

In the early morning silence, torrents of embryonic phrases filter through her semi-consciousness as she reaches for her notebook. It's only five minutes, but five minutes it is, because aside from locking herself in the bathroom and the fifteen-minute Metro commute, there is no other time to steal, except at night, but that sleep deficit is growing dangerous. Last Wednesday, at Shoppers Food Warehouse, she'd almost hit a woman in the parking lot. It was dark, raining hard, and she had been driving Jake's car, bigger and slower than hers, so it wasn't totally due to exhaustion. Then again, she'd been driving his car because, two days earlier, she'd gotten halfway to CVS not realizing she'd left the emergency brake on, until she pressed hard to slow the car and it didn't respond. She'd pulled over, her hands trembling around the wheel. The Honda now awaits a new brake drum to the tune of three hundred dollars. Jake would be considerably irked if he knew why.

There is one other matter too, small but not insignificant, contributing to the distractibility. Five days after she sent the story, Killian emailed to say he had received it and looked forward to reading it. It's been over a month, though, and nothing. How long does it take to read a short story?

She uncaps the pen, but no more than three lines have made it to the paper when Megan appears at her bedside, as if she has beamed directly into the room.

"Mom! What time is it?" Her eyebrows press together so hard they almost meet at the top of her nose.

"Seven fifteen. We're fine."

"But Jonah's not up. And you haven't made my lunch. What are you still doing in bed?"

Jeannie drops the notebook on the night table, hoping to pick it up as soon as Megan is out of sight, but downstairs, Megan shadows her every move. Jeannie smears peanut butter onto the bread and tops the sandwiches with jam, wedging them into Baggies as Megan sighs loudly.

"Mom. You forgot to cut off the crusts."

Jeannie slices off the edges and throws the sandwiches into the lunch boxes.

"Mom." Megan jerks her hand forward. "You put mine in Jonah's lunchbox and his in mine. And where's Jonah? We're going to be late."

Upstairs, Jeannie finds him sitting calmly in his Superman underwear, maneuvering a stack of Legos between his legs.

“Why aren’t you dressed? It’s seven thirty.”

He clicks a dark blue triangle onto the top of his castle. “You didn’t give me my third warning.”

“This is it. Put your clothes on.”

But when he appears in the dining room in an orange monkey shirt and Nike gym shorts, Jeannie slaps her cheeks. “No, no, no. It’s March. Pants. Long-sleeve shirt.”

“Mom. It’s 7:43.” Megan rises into the first octave of despair while Jonah chews slowly, spooning his Cheerios around the bowl. They are only five minutes late out the door, but as soon as they reach the path along the creek, Megan sprints ahead.

“Mom. Do you know who the world’s third richest man is?” Jonah lumbers behind, Megan already out of sight.

“Mom. Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Do you know who the world’s third richest man is?”

“No.”

As they turn the corner, Megan comes back into view.

“Carlos Slim Helu. He has thirty billion dollars. Do you know how he made his money?”

“No.”

Megan stops suddenly, spinning around. “Mom, I forgot to tell you. Yesterday in art class we started a project using animal designs from Indonesia. Isn’t that cool?”

Jonah tugs on Jeannie’s arm. “She interrupted me. I was talking.”

Megan glares at him. “That’s because you never shut up.”

“Mom. She just told me to shut up.”

“No, I didn’t. I said you never shut up. No one wants to listen.”

“Mom, she just told me to shut up again.”

Jeannie flattens her hands over her ears. Jonah is indeed a walking Wikipedia, but Megan is no verbal small fry either. Last week, the two of them launched into physical combat over who got to walk on Jeannie’s right

side. She pulled them apart and explained she had two hands, plenty to go around. That battle now exhausted, they've moved into new squabbling territory—verbal space.

When they reach the school, she is more than happy to deposit them both, working off the leftover tension with a quick run before meeting Lila at Kerry's Kitchen. The tables are packed so closely, the couple next to her can probably hear her breathing. Lila arrives a few minutes later, and when she takes off her coat, Jeannie can't stop grinning.

"Have people started patting your stomach without asking?"

Lila grabs the menu. "Only Dave. But he's allowed."

"Can I?"

"Sure, but let's order first. I'm famished." Lila has clearly completed her first trimester, because the luster has returned to her face, and when the food arrives, she digs into her fish as if she's starved herself for weeks and suddenly rediscovered food.

"I can't believe how good everything tastes. I couldn't eat for months, now I can't stop."

Jeannie bites into the salmon, surprised to find it a little dry. Even Lila's trout looks cakey, but she seems unbothered by it.

"Are you back to the painting?"

Lila nods. "With acrylics. And I got a call from Mountain West. The pieces sold out before the show even opened. When Sam found out, he FedExed me the contract."

"So you signed?"

"I did. They're excellent with PR. That's the main thing. I know it's a sellout, but I've had enough of marketing myself. It truly is a pain in the ass."

"That's fantastic about the sale. Which ones were they?"

"I don't think you've seen them, a triptych of garden settings, but abstract. You know," adds Lila, her mouth full again, "I had this revelation the other day, after I heard the pieces sold. It's not that I don't think I'm good, but to create something that has intimate meaning to me—how can it say so much to someone else that they're willing to pay that kind of money for it? It's not like literature where there's an actual story you can follow, or music, where your ears literally tell you something. Anyway, with

the triptych, I think I was ovulating when I did it, I was worried with the pregnancy, but my hormones are so fucking out of whack, it's fine. Oh, and I got a call from the *Washingtonian*. They want to profile me."

"Jesus, Lila. And you're still having lunch with me."

She smiles. "If I like the writer, should I pass your name along?"

"Thanks, but I don't have time to be messing around with anything freelance."

"Speaking of which, did you ever post up the rejection letters, do an installation piece?"

"No. But I pulled an old story and finished it. And I've got two more percolating."

"I knew it." Lila shakes her finger at Jeannie. "Did you submit it?"

"Not yet. I gave it to someone to look at first."

"Oh," says Lila, mopping up her sauce with a piece of bread. "Anyone I know?"

"Not really. That guy."

Lila frowns. "Who?"

"You know, the guy in Ireland, the one who sent me his story."

Lila leans back, rubbing her stomach. "I'm always starved, but then I feel like I've eaten too much. Why did you give it to him?"

"I don't know. He sent me his."

"You guys are still emailing?"

"A little. He's interesting. Different."

"Just so long as he doesn't ask for a picture," says Lila, laughing.

Jeannie rolls her eyes. "Actually, he did."

Lila laughs again. "Please tell me you didn't send one."

Jeannie picks at a loose thread hanging from her sleeve, fiddling with it until it breaks loose. "Well, we had this email exchange about it, and it did seem kind of unfair, since I'd seen his."

"That's hardly the same thing." Lila squints across the table. "He had his on his website. Anyway, I assume he knows you're married, so it doesn't even matter."

"You know," responds Jeannie, "that hasn't even come up. It's just two people communicating about writing."

Lila smirks. “Then what does he need a picture for?”

“Trust me, Lila, it’s not like that. Besides, I sent it almost a month ago with the story and I haven’t heard a peep. I’m pretty sure he’s not jerking off over it.”

Lila signals the waiter for water, grinning widely now. “Well, here I thought you’d finished with Bono, but all you’ve done is trade in your obsession with one unattainable Irish guy for another.”

“Are you kidding? Who says I want to attain him?”

“Do you?”

Jeannie sips her wine slowly. How can she possibly answer that? He is sort of cute, in that one picture anyway, but she’s never smelled him, never stood next to him, never heard his voice. She cannot begin to imagine how he might feel to her touch.

“Honestly, Jeannie, what does he need a picture for? Did you read Dave’s series? After the pictures, it’s a short hop from emailing to efucking.”

“Jesus, Lila, we’ve never even talked.”

“OK. But keep in mind, you are married. To one of the nicest men on the face of the planet.”

“Easy for you to say. We’ve barely spoken the last three weeks and the only thing we can agree on is a trip to Spain—he finally caved on that.” She shoves her plate to the middle of the table. “I don’t mean to be harping on this, but I feel like I’ve barely seen him in months. And the lack of sex? I am talking complete climate change—out of nowhere. If a woman did that, don’t think for a second the husband wouldn’t be complaining or running out to find someone else.” She leans back, drumming her fingers on the table. “I know, it seems completely impossible, but I don’t know what to think.”

Lila nods. “It doesn’t sound like Jake. Have you found any odd credit card receipts, anything like that?”

“No, but he’s smart enough, he’d use cash.”

“True. But I don’t see it. Not Jake.”

“Can men even physically go that long? Don’t they have that weird biology where they have to discharge it every so often?”

“Have you checked for a man stash, you know, Victoria’s Secret catalogues, lubricants, a pile of magazines?”

Jeannie drops her head in her hands. “No. And I don’t want to.”

Lila grins. “Maybe our next outing should be a field trip to Sugar’s Toy Shop in Baltimore.”

Jeannie rolls her eyes. “For me or for him?”

“Look,” says Lila, her expression serious now. “I know you’re worried about Jake. But it’s better to work that out than be messing around under the guise of an artistic friendship. That’s just asking for trouble.”

Heading home on the Metro, Jeannie does not pull out her story; her eyes instead are glued to the carpet. Lila may be her best friend, but how can someone who has always had her pick of men—the sexy English painter they met in London, her professor at Pratt, the lead singer from Damascus Blast, the hottest indie band in Baltimore, then finally settling down with the love of her life—even begin to understand how this works? Has Lila forgotten about that awful night in Amsterdam when they went to the Paradiso Club, both of them stoned out of their minds on hash cakes? Lila sought out the lead guitarist of one of the bands and they’d all gone drinking, none of the musicians paying attention to Jeannie until everyone paired off and she wound up with the drummer, ugly as a skunk. He pushed his tongue so hard into her ear, it sounded like a bomb. She had not wanted to go to bed with him, but they’d all gone back to the houseboat and it had been expected, so she did it, once again in Lila’s shadow, sleeping with unappealing men to slake her hunger for affection. No, when you’ve lived as Lila has, men dripping with desire and falling at your feet, this is not something you understand.

And honestly, this time, there was nothing to get; the flirtation, if it could be called that, was mild, the whole interaction nothing more than a simple engagement with someone who shared a passion. How is that asking for trouble? He lives three thousand miles away; she’s never met him and, from the looks of it when she opens her email later that afternoon and sees no response, knows she never will.

Why the complete silence? Maybe the story was awful and he was so embarrassed he couldn’t bring himself to email her. Jeannie reaches for the story, and fingers through the pages. No. She’s written enough over the years to know when something’s good. The answer is right in front of

her, and completely disheartening even if not at all surprising. In college she'd dated a nice guy, Brad, who was not all that attractive—a large nose and fish eyes—but he was quite funny, even a bit charming. Jeannie had appreciated his patience, assuming he wanted to be sure before taking things to the next level. The day after they started fooling around, he broke it off, saying he'd been hoping for a skinny girlfriend on his next round, the skin lifting off her arms at the memory of that one.

OK, fine, she found Killian attractive, yes, but where was the crime in that? Nowhere, really, just in her own stupidity. As usual, Lila is absolutely right. He got what he wanted for his story and the rest was some stupid flirtation for him, his primitive male mind imagining her one way. He didn't even ask for a picture, that last email nothing more than a silly joke, and then she sent three. Probably scared him all the way to Slovenia.

So what might he have done with the photos? Maybe he had a betting pool with his groovy tattooed record store coworkers and he, having imagined her a Dallas cheerleader, lost, and then, embarrassed, tossed the whole package.

Really, sometimes her own foolishness amazes her, as if nothing is clear until after the fact. The following Monday morning is no exception when she is thrust awake by a sharp buzzing, smack in the middle of a dream that is both terrifying and glorious, as if something hard has been cracked open from deep inside. But when she sits up, she can't figure out where the sound is coming from. It's not the alarm, the radio, the phone, and not until she jumps out of bed does she realize it's Jake's cell. By the time she finds it, buried under some papers on his night table, the caller has hung up. It's only six forty-five, but Jake's car is already gone, and now, slightly more awake, she remembers him saying something about an early meeting. She flips the phone open, but no name is attached to the number.

With spring a few weeks off, the light filters softly into the room, and she reaches for her pen; just a few seconds to jot down the dream. When she checks the time a few minutes later, though, it's seven twenty! Megan will be apoplectic.

Which she is. Today there will be no shower; her boss, Allen, is at an all-day conference and who cares if she stinks on the Metro? But when

she enters the alcove to leave her notes by the computer, a connector erupts between the last two stories. This is how she's going to build them into a novel. Right there. Jeannie grabs a pen. Three minutes, that's all she needs.

Except now Megan is screaming at Jonah so loudly that Jeannie returns to the hallway to investigate, dodging as Sir Stripes, a little brown tiger, comes flying out of Megan's room straight at Jonah.

"What's going on?"

"Jonah ate my science project."

"What?"

"Mom. It's not funny."

"I know, honey. I'm sorry." But the image of Jonah chewing on Megan's papers like a goat is indeed humorous and Jeannie has to force her lips out of a smile.

"I got Mike and Ikes and Fruit Roll-Ups to build a cell and I needed them for the Golgi bodies and the mitochondria and he ate a Fruit Roll-Up."

"Daddy said I could have one."

"Aren't there ten in a pack?"

"Yes, but I need all of them."

"How can you need so many? How many cells are you making?"

"He shouldn't have eaten it. It was mine."

"Daddy said I could," repeats Jonah.

"You're such a liar."

"Stop," says Jeannie. "I want you both dressed in five minutes, and Megan, you can get your own breakfast this morning."

She retreats into her bedroom, trying to recall the connector. But Jonah stands just outside Megan's doorway taunting her. Jeannie drags him across the hall and deposits him in his room.

"Do not move from there until you are dressed and ready to come downstairs."

In the kitchen, she fixes the lunches quickly, then reaches again for her pen just as the screaming resumes, this time both of them. What could Jonah have possibly done now? One more sentence and then she'll go.

Jeannie has just lowered the pen when she hears a screechy terror scream from upstairs that sends her stomach straight into her throat. She's had

nightmares about this, forced herself to close her mind to the possibility of it, but now that she's actually hearing the sound and suspects what it is before she turns the corner, it still seems impossible. But there it is: Jonah, flying off the top step, head first. His body is angled as if entering a back dive, but there is no water to cushion his fragile body below, just hard, hard wood, his head slamming into the banister, the force sending him ricocheting like a rag doll across the stairway, where he lands straight on his neck, and then rolls into a series of backward somersaults. He doesn't even know how to do a backward somersault; surely his neck has broken, because no one can survive a flip at that angle, and indeed, when he lands at the bottom of the steps, it is into a crumpled heap, his body motionless. Megan stands at the top of the stairs, mouth frozen open, hands still outstretched from where she pushed him out of her room and he tripped over her backpack in the hallway.

That's it. Five seconds, a lifetime erased. Game over.

Jeannie crumples to her knees and pulls him onto her lap. "Jonah. Jonah. Are you OK? Jonah!"

He remains absolutely still, his eyes frozen open, no air moving in or out of his chest.

"Megan," she yells. "Bring me the phone. Now."

Megan screams as she stumbles down the stairs, heading straight for Jeannie. She squeezes Jonah to her chest, desperately trying to recall CPR, but what if he's punctured a lung? Would that make it worse? She pushes on his chest anyway, trying to will the air back into his lungs, but if he has broken his neck then it's all futile, his respiratory system's completely down. She hugs him to her chest, praying now, for lack of any other recourse. Miraculously then, Megan somehow hands her the phone, and Jeannie punches in 911.

As soon as she connects, the dispatcher says, "I'm sorry, ma'am, I can't hear you."

"Megan, please," cries Jeannie. "I need you to be quiet."

Megan's mouth is closed, though, just little sobs escaping, and it is, thank God of all Gods, Jonah screeching. You need air to scream, so he must be breathing. And his eyes are flickering around the room now too,

so he is conscious. But his screech is like a banshee's, the pitch higher than anything she's ever heard from either of her children in their combined sixteen years of existence. And after hanging up, she sees why: a white and pointy shard pushes through the skin midway down his left arm.

Jonah's breaths are uneven between his shrieks, but the air is going in and out without complications, it seems, and then, he sits up, neck intact, head straight, legs moving, no blood anywhere. Jeannie draws in what must be her first breath in minutes now, while Megan, panting hard, tries to burrow into the other side of her lap.

"Mommy, I can't breathe. Mommy, I think I'm going to die."

"You're OK honey, count to ten."

"Mommy, did I kill him? Oh my God."

"No, honey, Jonah's OK, he's going to be OK."

Megan collapses into her shoulder, as with one finger Jeannie manages to call her neighbor Peggy, who arrives two minutes later and helps Megan calm herself; by the time the paramedics arrive, the only noises filling the room are Jonah's intermittent high-pitched shrieks.

"All right, what do we have here?" says the head paramedic, a burly Hispanic man with a full head of dark hair and neatly clipped goatee. He motions for his companions to get the stretcher as he sets a large black box on the floor and then kneels down next to Jonah. "What happened?"

"He fell down the stairs."

The man looks up to the second floor. "That's quite a tumble." He reaches gently for Jonah's arm. "All right, champ, I know this is going to hurt, but can you wiggle your fingers for me? Yeah, that's good, now let me see you do that on your other hand, the left one, yeah, just like that, great. Here, can you tell what finger I'm squeezing?"

He stands as the other two men deposit the stretcher. "Let's get the arm first and then we'll load him up."

He turns to Jeannie. "Did he hit his head?"

She nods.

"Lose consciousness?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Hey, champ. Do you know where you are?"

Jonah, suddenly aware he is surrounded by three strange men, starts wailing loudly again, and when they gently lift his arm to immobilize it with a makeshift splint, he lets out another shriek, sending Jeannie's heart straight back up her throat. He is dressed only in his T-shirt and underwear and she covers the bottom half of his body protectively.

"Megan, please go get his socks and pants."

But Megan remains paralyzed by the couch. Peggy nods toward the stairs. "Which room?"

In the ambulance, Jeannie dials Jake's number as one of the other medics climbs in across from her and radios to the hospital. "I've got a compound fracture, possible radius ulna with displacement, good distal pulse and grip, after a fall down fifteen steps. Patient is alert and oriented times three, acting age appropriate, we're about fifteen minutes out, would like orders for morphine, patient's approximately..." He lifts the blanket. "Twenty kilos."

Jeannie shuts the phone. "Morphine? You're giving him morphine?"

"What's morphine? Is it going to hurt me? I don't want morphine." Jonah's lower lip quivers furiously.

"OK, Jonah," says the paramedic, squeezing his good arm gently. "I have to put this in, you're gonna feel a little pinch, so just hang on."

"Do I get a say in this? Do you have to give him morphine? He's only six."

"It's just a little, until they can set that bone properly and talk to you about other options for pain management." As the man slips the needle into Jonah's arm, he screeches again, and Jeannie grabs his hand.

"Here, honey, squeeze me hard."

"Ow, ow, ow, Mommy, ow that really hurts." Jonah's hair is matted to his forehead as if he has been stranded in a downpour for hours.

"I know that didn't feel good," says the medic, "but very shortly you're both going to thank me."

Jeannie squeezes his hand hard as she lowers her head, unable to look at the fat needle penetrating Jonah's tiny arm.

But the medic is right; less than a minute later, Jonah's eyes roll back up into his head, and then, after surveying all of the equipment around him, he rolls his head away from Jeannie toward to the man and says, "You know, I didn't fall. I really didn't." His words emerge slurred, as if he's half asleep.

“No?” says the man, winking. “How’d you wind up like this, then? Did you jump?”

“She pushed me.”

The man closes the medical box slowly. “You were pushed?”

“Yeah, I didn’t fall, her, my, I ate her science project even though my dad said I could, it was a Fruit Roll-Up, so she pushed me.”

The medic glances at Jeannie briefly, and then averts his eyes, reaching for the chart.

“His sister. They were fighting and she pushed him into the hallway and he tripped.”

He nods, making a few notes in the chart just as they reach the emergency turn-about, where the hospital staff pull Jonah onto a gurney and straight into the ER.

“We’re going to need a CT scan and an X-ray. Possible concussion, he looks pretty confused to me,” says the attending doctor, a lightly built man who seems barely old enough to shave.

“He’s doped up on morphine, for God’s sake,” says Jeannie.

“Oh.” The doctor opens the chart. “We will need to get that arm set ASAP. Don’t want it going septic. When did he eat last?”

“I’m not sure,” says Jeannie. “Jonah, did you have breakfast?”

“I ate Megan’s science project.”

“No, I mean this morning.”

“I ate her science project and that’s why she pushed me. But Dad said I could. Mom, am I going to be late to school?”

Jeannie turns to the doctor. “I don’t know, I don’t think he had breakfast, but he may have had some candy.”

“OK, let’s start with the pictures.” Jeannie follows alongside as they wheel him to X-ray. As she waits outside, another doctor—the surgeon—introduces himself. His voice is cold and curt, but his hands are firm and steady, and unlike the youthful residents circling the hallways, his temples are gray, a reassuring sign.

“So, we don’t know if he’s eaten?” He gives her a reproachful look.

Jeannie shakes her head. She must be the only mother in the world who doesn’t keep track of every morsel of food going into her children’s mouths.

"I'd like to give him anesthesia, but I can't take a chance if he's got anything in his stomach. We'll give him a block and up the morphine. I'll be back as soon as we have the pictures."

Jeannie tries Jake again on his cell, and then his direct line, but his work voicemail seems to be down, redirecting her to another box, and just as they wheel Jonah from the X-ray room back into the hallway, another man, plump and short, taps Jeannie on the shoulder.

"Sorry to bother you. I'm the social worker. I just need to ask you a few things. Can you tell me what happened?"

"He fell."

The man scans the chart over the top of his glasses. "It says he was pushed."

Jeannie feels her hand clench around the cell phone in her pocket. "He and his sister had a fight—he was taunting her from the hallway because her door was off its hinges. It was a complete accident. She pushed him out of her room and he tripped over her backpack and fell down the stairs."

"Why was her door off the hinges?"

"Because she slams it too much."

"Do they fight a lot?"

"Yes."

"Have they ever hurt each other before?"

"No."

"Actually, Mom." Jonah's eyes circle the room slowly. "She does kick me a lot when you're not looking, and one time she hit me really hard on the back."

The social worker scribbles a note. "Has he ever been seriously injured before?"

"No."

"Actually, Mom, one time I got hit by a soccer ball and my nose bled. And another time I slammed my hand in the car door."

"Where were you when it happened?"

"Home."

"Did you see it?"

"No, I was in the kitchen. Making breakfast."

“And what about the father, where is he?”

“I have no idea. At work, probably doing the same thing as you, because he’s not picking up his cell phone and the county voicemail seems to be down.”

“He works for the county?”

“For the schools, he’s a school counselor and I don’t know, maybe he’s in a meeting today, I don’t know, I was asleep when he left.”

“So you were asleep when this happened?”

Just then, her cell buzzes. Finally. That must be Jake. Relieved for the opportunity to excuse herself, Jeannie flips it open. But it’s Peggy, inquiring about Jonah and calling to let her know that when she dropped Megan at school the tears were again flowing. As soon as Jonah’s eyes close, Jeannie calls the school. Sure enough, Megan is in the front office, crying that she wants to come home.

“I know honey, I’ll be there as soon as I can. I can’t come now. I’m at the hospital.”

“Mommy, is Jonah going to die?”

“No, sweetie, he’s going to be fine.”

Megan snuffles loudly into the phone. “Mommy, why can’t Daddy pick me up?”

“I’m trying to find him, OK?” She calls Jake, but again, no answer, and this time she is blocked from his voicemail entirely. She tries Lila, too, and then hangs up, remembering she and Dave are in West Virginia for a long weekend.

The surgery seems to drag on for hours, but at least the interrogations have ceased, and while Jonah is having his arm set in the cast, she calls Jake again. Not until they’re heading home in the taxi, Jonah heavily sedated beside her, does she remember that Jake’s cell is at home. She calls his school directly, but the secretary doesn’t know where he is either, and puts Jeannie through to his voicemail, which again bounces her into another message box.

At home, Jonah falls into a profound sleep in his bed, and Jeannie jumps in the car and races the ten blocks to get Megan. She is uncharacteristically silent and as they open the door, she says, in a very small voice: “Mommy, are you going to punish me?”

“Megan, honey. No.” Jeannie pulls her onto her lap, folding her arms around her tightly.

“Mommy.” Megan rubs her eyes. “Did Jonah almost die? Could he have died? Because I really don’t want him to die.”

“I know, sweetie. And no, he didn’t almost die. Accidents happen. And we were all lucky today it wasn’t worse. But the stairs are dangerous. You two need to be more careful. OK?”

Megan nods as Jake pushes open the front door. His shoulders are already raised in a query, the annoyance in his voice impossible to miss as he drops his briefcase by the front door.

“Why didn’t you call me? I went all the way to the school and they told me you’d picked them up.”

“Where were you? I’ve been trying to find you all day.” Jeannie does not intend to fire this as an accusation, but after the weight of the day, it is impossible to release gently.

“I had to go to court,” says Jake, his tone shifting into defensive mode. “The social worker was out and the assistant principal asked me to handle a case last minute. It took all day, I had to file a petition for educational neglect, the kid is out of control, the mother...”

Jake continues speaking, but his words float like air bubbles above his head, no substance to them at all. Their child came within millimeters of dying and Jake is going on about the tribulations of some other kid. And yet, in this bizarre universe she seems to have rocketed into, layered on top of all of the stress of the day is the undeniable fact of how handsome he looks today, his hair curled roughly around his face, his skin set off nicely against a crisp white Oxford shirt she’s never seen before.

Jeannie looks up. “Is that why you left early? To go to court?”

“No, I just told you, they asked me to go last minute. This morning I had to meet a parent before school—”

Jeannie interrupts. “That’s why no one could find you.”

He sits down across from her, the awareness slowly seeping in that something is off kilter. “Everyone OK?”

Megan buries her head against Jeannie’s shoulder, sniffing again.

Jake glances around the room, his voice deepening with worry. “Where’s Jonah?”

“Upstairs. Sleeping.”

“Is he all right?”

Megan wipes her nose, and shuffles off to the kitchen.

“More or less.” Jeannie presses her fingers into her cheekbones, hoping to staunch the imminent flood, at least momentarily.

“What do you mean? What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head, closing her eyes. If she looks at Jake now, she really will lose it.

“Megan pushed him and he tripped over her backpack and fell down the stairs. His head hit the banister, he had the wind knocked out of him, almost broke his neck. They don’t think he has a concussion but we have to check on him every four hours for the next two days, and he did break his arm—his bone pushed through his skin, so we spent the day at Children’s Hospital where they doped him up on morphine, and then took him into a three-hour surgery for a radius ulna fracture. They’re worried it might get infected so he’s on a heavy dose of antibiotics. He’s also still got morphine in his system, our six-year-old, doped up on morphine.”

“Jesus.” Jake blinks rapidly. “Should I check on him?”

“I just did.”

“Unreal. The one day I was in court, I never go to court. And there’s no way to reach me there. On top of it, I just happened to leave my cell home to charge.”

Megan reappears holding a plate with a smiley face of apples, raisins, and Goldfish.

“I made Jonah a snack. Do you think he’ll like it?”

“Yes, sweetie, that’s very nice of you. But please don’t wake him, OK?”

“Jesus,” repeats Jake, as Megan heads upstairs. “Did you see it?”

“You have no idea. I watched him come within a fraction of losing his life and I was unable to do a thing.” The tears burst full strength now with the vision of Jonah’s head smashing into the banister, his neck bending at that terrifying angle.

Jake squeezes her hand gently. “Hang on. I’ll be right back.”

From the couch, Jeannie can hear Jake and Megan moving around Jonah's room, and when Jake returns a few moments later he slides in next to Jeannie, folding his arms around her. "I'm sorry you couldn't find me. Literally, it's the one day I was unreachable."

"You can't imagine. He was in surgery for three hours, awake, without me, I can't even... the ambulance guy, the hospital social worker, all of them interrogating me. I'm surprised they didn't lock me up."

"Don't take that personally," says Jake. "It's just their job, but my God, what a nightmare."

His heart beats fast against her arm. "I probably should have put the door back on the hinges, huh?" And then suddenly, he lowers his head onto her shoulder. "Jeannie, I really don't know what to say. I'm sorry."

"It's OK." She wipes her face with the back of her hand. "There's nothing you could have done."

Jake pushes his glasses to the top of his head and begins tugging on his fingers, as if trying to loosen them from their sockets.

"No, I'm sorry. I feel like we live on the edge and one more thing will push us over and I don't know what to do. I feel pressure from all sides. I can't seem to do anything right. I can't make enough money to keep our heads above water, I can't make you happy. I feel like a complete failure. And now this. Because I left the door off the hinges."

She shakes her head. "Jake, you're not a failure, not in the least."

He stands abruptly, crossing to the other side of the room. "It's never enough, not at work, and then I come home and it's the same thing. It's relentless. I'm sorry, I really am. For everything."

Jake leans into the window, pushing his fingers into his eyes as if to staunch his own impending flood. That's a lot of apologies for anyone; for Jake, a monumental quantity. They did emerge sincere, yet it's hard not to wonder if all that contrition was rooted in repentance, or if there was some guilt woven in there as well.

Jake slips his glasses back on then, and motions toward the stairs.

"I'm going to check on Megan. I'm assuming she didn't take this very well?"

Jeannie nods. He returns with Megan under his arm a few moments later and motions toward the door. "It's been a rough day all around, for

everyone, so we're going to pick up some burritos and cupcake mix and come home and do some baking. A little bit of comfort food would do us all well this afternoon."

He kisses Jeannie on the mouth, his hands gripping her arms as if he's back from a six-month tour of duty overseas. But as he slips his coat on, she can't stop staring.

"What?"

"I like that shirt. Is it new?"

Jake nods.

"It looks good on you."

"Thanks." He motions to Megan. "Come on, let's go before the lines get bad."

Upstairs, Jonah dozes lightly, the snack plate tipped over on his bed. She picks up the Goldfish crumbs, just as her cell buzzes in the other room. But when she goes to answer it, she realizes it is Jake's, not hers, signaling missed calls. More parents, at this hour? She opens it, relieved to see the notification is from her missed calls today. But when she scrolls down, there are seven from that same number that called this morning, as if someone else had been desperate to find him.

Well, why not? If he had a meeting, why wouldn't the parent call?

As Jeannie scrolls up to delete her calls, she accidentally hits call return on the number from the morning, and disconnects quickly. But a few seconds later, the caller phones right back, and Jeannie answers to apologize. There is silence on the other end, though, even when she repeats hello four times.

She squeezes Jake's phone hard. Even if she did call back, what would she say? *Who are you? Are you screwing my husband?* As if someone would even respond to that. And surely, if there was something going on, there would be something to find.

But where to start? She yanks open Jake's bottom drawer, but it is stuffed with clothing, same as the others, jammed with his sweaters, T-shirts, bottom to top, as expected.

Until she reaches the top drawer. It's filled with socks and underwear, but the clothing is pushed forward as if something's taking up space in

the back. And sure enough, tucked into the rear corner, is a tightly closed white paper bag.

Christ. How does Lila know this stuff? She's like a fucking psychic. Jeannie sits on the bed, holding the bag quietly. She needs this today like a hole in the head. Honestly, wouldn't ignorance be better? She peels back the edges, anyway, her teeth gritted.

Inside, there are no lotions, creams, porno magazines, or expensive jewelry. None of that.

Just underwear.

Jake has never bought himself underwear. Ever. But inside this bag are six packages of brand-new Jockey shorts.

She returns the bag to the back of the drawer and sits down on the bed.

What exactly do you do with information like that?

From across the hall, Jonah lets out a cry and Jeannie rushes to his room, cooling his forehead with a wet towel as he whimpers back into sleep.

When he finally stills, his breathing regular, she tiptoes into the alcove, her butcher block storyboards still papering the walls and bookshelves. How exactly, then, is this done?

In all of her years, her own mother Annie never looked back. But here, in suburban D.C., years away from the bright lights of New York, one story done, a second blossoming, a third incubating, clearly this writing life she's tried to reclaim is not meant to be. Because the very space of germination and incubation into which she has allowed herself to descend requires a complete retreat. How do you manage a family amid the mental chaos required to cultivate a story?

You don't. Obviously. Could she have been handed any more of a wake-up call than today?

She tugs the large sheets down from the bookshelves, Jake's collection emerging first. It would have left her father salivating, and it would not have been an impossible sight—the two of them enjoying his compilation as peers. Melville, Joyce, Updike, Faulkner. On the other shelves sit Jeannie's books—her father would have approved of these too. Except he can't see them, see her, will never know her children, will never be there to answer

a call about Megan's anxiety or Jonah's accident, or help her navigate this troubled spot in her marriage that seems to be growing each day.

She tucks the sheets under her desk, the books exposed now. All this literature, it's supposed to inspire, move others to greatness, but really, all these books do is traverse the same themes of love, loss, abandonment, desire. And so many of them—written not because the world needs them, but because there are so many people who need to write. Sadly, for some, even that isn't enough; Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, both spilling their personal anguish, receiving acclaim, their inner lives validated, and yet both still walked out, leaving behind small children to forever deal with the ultimate rejection.

Certainly, that's not an option, but maybe she too could swallow a magic pill, same as Annie and the rest of America, find contentment in a legal and socially acceptable drug-induced stupor.

Because, really, Jake didn't have to even say it, the first sign was there weeks ago: missing Megan's class presentation. Forget the lack of time. No, the real issue is how to sit with an inner vision while staying present in the maternal moment. Not even present, but active. Attentive. Unflinching. Vigilant. She may not be locking her children out like Annie did to her, but this morning one of them almost died.

Jeannie presses her palms hard into the edge of the desk.

So why on earth did she even try?

Because there is nothing like the bliss of letting stories explode and take you where they will.

And unlike others, she didn't keep that story under lock and key; rather, she hurled it into the world. Of course, she hurled it to the wrong person, although that's another matter. Before sending it, she confessed she felt naked debuting the story, but that's not quite right. It's bad enough the pictures turned him off—really, that was pure juvenile stupidity on her part—but to be dismissed as a writer—that feels more akin to having her skin torn off.

Honestly though, why should she even care what that stupid man thinks? Just because her child lies sedated with an ulna fracture in the next room and her husband is buying underwear for the first time while receiving calls from

someone who hangs up when his wife answers? No, that's absurd. These two universes are completely discrete. All right, maybe Lila had a point, maybe she did turn him into a fantasy man, just a little. That's done now.

But the story? It's bad form to hang onto someone's work with no word. Sure, it was an email relationship, and without voice and vision, all rules of accountability vanish. Humiliating as it is, she will send him an email, because she wants that story back. Even if it's just assurance that he tossed it. She does not want it marooned out there—it was a good story and it deserves a home.

After that? There are a lot of things you need to make this work, and as much as she didn't want to hear it when Jake said it, they have made their choices. After today, there should be no remaining doubt: same way she ran out of room on the floor a few weeks ago when storyboarding her work, there's no room for this either.

Jeannie jerks the remaining sheets down from the dormers, the alcove returned to its original sterility. She reaches for the drudge pile, spreading a Scholastic order, termite inspection contract, and 1040 booklet across her desk, making sure there is no empty space, no temptation, no room for anything else. Same as she should be working harder on her marriage, because clearly something has fallen to pieces. Maybe she does press too hard and needs to cut Jake more slack. Maybe she's pushing him away in some way she can't even see.

With the last sheet down, her desk surface once again covered, the alcove looks exactly as it did before she let herself get swept up this useless endeavor. And then, just to be sure, Jeannie reshuffles the rest of the household papers, spreading them out across her desk so it is once again a patchwork of other people's needs, precisely the way they set everything up—precisely the way everything is supposed to be.