

## one

I found Mike passed out on the master bed, curled on his side, the covers down around the floor. Maybe he had kicked them off. Sometimes he and Jane slept that way. There was a tiny pool of moisture where the tip of his penis touched the bedding, a dimple at the base of his spine. He had a very long back. Spider veins just below his ankles. Mike was losing hair in a circle at the back of his head, in the same spot where a man of God shaves his skull.

To get to him, I had inched down the hall, past the clock room where their daughters, Livvy and Mona, slept. Locking the door behind me in case they got up, I stood by the blue dust ruffle. I was supposed to wake Mike and tell him that Jane, his wife, my oldest friend, had just left him. She had driven off in Franny's Jaguar.

I wondered how Mike would talk with Livvy and Mona. I wasn't sure what I'd say. Livvy, the older girl, was the one who worried me. No one would be awake for hours.

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Mike's voice bubbled up but made no sense. Refined alcohol came with each of his exhalations, the occasional choked snore. His face animated and relaxed. I wanted to be with Mike in that raw, unkempt state. But I knew how many cables there are in the elevator shafts of the Empire State Building and how long it takes for a body to hit the sidewalk if you jump from the roof. And I was aware, as I stood by the side of the bed, that I could screw up in so many ways, up or down. It was hard to know where Mike would land if he jumped.

To get my head on the pillow, I nudged him a little. He knew how to breathe from his diaphragm even in his sleep. I touched the spot over his missing appendix, surprised that he didn't wake, and curled into his back. Then froze. I heard a boat move through the water, close to the house.

I made a ring out of my left thumb and forefinger and fitted it around his penis. He stiffened and angled and his hips moved in what appeared to be deep REM sleep. His back twitched a little. I waited, as if a horn or bell would go off, signaling the start of my trade with Jane.

I slipped my hand away and put it under my ribs to feel my irregular heartbeat. I thought about basic survival, considered social membranes, tried to review one of those rules that keep people in check. The house sounded like an engine cooling. If I just shut my eyes for one minute, I'd be able to straighten things out. But it was too easy to siphon off his REM. I hadn't slept in days and I guess I'd exhausted all thoughts of survival.

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When Jane left Mike, she took her grandmother's Jaguar. A coffee-brown machine with a mocha interior and custom tortoiseshell trim along the dash and armrests. It was built in 1965 and I had spent summers from the time I was eight sticking to its leather seats, flipping the ashtray covers open and shut with Jane. Her grandmother, Franny, ground forty years of Chanel No. 5 into the ball of the stick shift. She was big on original ownership. But now Franny was dead and her family still hadn't decided what they'd do with the car.

Jane had come down to the kitchen at four that morning. I was up because I never slept at Franny's house. But Jane typically woke in the afternoon when she drank hard. So I didn't understand why she was standing there, fully dressed, as if she wanted to get an early start.

She had that rehashed Audrey Hepburn look: blue summer dress, thin belt, sandals fastened with leather straps. She filled the pot and scooped level measures of coffee into the machine, sat down at the table across from me. She looked as if she were going to say something, stopped, then told me Mike and the girls were still asleep, as if I needed reassurance about this. I listened to the Pacific as it hit the pilings, and I looked at Jane's lipstick, not sure why she'd bothered. Her eyelashes—they would have disappeared if it weren't for the mascara.

—You do something to your hair? I asked.

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It appeared to be hacked at, not cut. I didn't think it had been like that earlier in the evening.

—Sort of.

I began to glide the salt and pepper shakers across the table, waiting for her to continue. Figure eights, in and out of the light from the overhead spot. Jane had once been offered a job as an eye model with a good New York agency. You could magnify those eyes until you were looking down at Earth. They were that blue. It's a bad form of envy to want someone else's face. I tipped my head to one side to get the full effect of her butchered hair.

—You use Mona's scissors?

She stopped the movement of the salt but couldn't quite reach the hand with the pepper.

—In a fair world you'd have kids, Mattie.

Her daughters were asleep in the clock room. Mona was four then, Livvy fourteen.

—I'm too tired for the fair-world conversation, I said.

—You can't expect to . . . no, I don't mean that. I don't know how long you plan on . . .

I had that queasiness I get when a salesman leans against my buzzer.

—I'm only thirty-five and I didn't sleep last night, Jane.

—Humor me with a what-if.

—I should have gotten up to read.

—You want a whole life, don't you? she asked.

—Define whole life.

—Marriage . . .

I saw the strain, the need to talk. I knew it wasn't about

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my sense of family. Whatever it was, I couldn't respond. In that way you imagine you have influence over events, I've punished myself for that moment.

—You didn't sign me up for an on-line dating service, did you? Because I've looked at those men.

She began to fold and unfold one of the linen napkins left on the table.

—I know this is about Franny. . . . I open the towel cabinet and it's like she's standing there, waiting for me to make some right decision, I said.

—About the towels?

—Which ones should go to the women's shelter because the edges haven't frayed, which ones to the Salvation Army. . . .

—She'd appreciate what you're doing. I appreciate it. More than you know.

Periodically, Jane used to send me snaps taken at their home outside Boston. Mona wore reindeer antlers, or rabbit ears, sat by giant jack-o'-lanterns. Livvy was the one with her back to the camera, walking out of the frame, her hair blue or green, the back of her jacket pounded with studs that formed messages I couldn't read. I had a soft spot for Livvy. Mike was the lens. It was his job to catch and measure light, to wait for conditions. I watched what he did to get a picture. He tugged on something emotional, sometimes the thing he couldn't state. Maybe he'd frame a tiny gas station sign in one corner of an image that said exactly what he couldn't express with the large people in the foreground. But if your eye was sharp and you knew how

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to read backwards or thought to hold it up to a mirror, it was all there. I looked for Mike's face in those photographs—sometimes Jane would nail him. The dark moods and then a shot that would make me think *A Hard Day's Night*, the antic self. But it was mostly Jane, and sometimes I had the sense, looking at her, that she understood something I was going through at the time. Maybe it was a mind trick, but that was what I thought Jane did, made people feel no one else fully understood them. I said that to Mike one time, and he laughed. Later he said maybe I was right.

—You look like you're going to the store, I said to Jane.

Up the road, Von's grocery was open twenty-four hours. That was the place to order a sheet cake if you had to, the red frosting dyed your tongue red, the blue blue. You could get arugula at Von's, deodorant, hybrid chickens.

—I've never said this to you, maybe because we were both a little drunk at the time, but I told Mike once, if anything happened to me, he should marry you.

—You're upsetting my stomach, I said.

I got busy wiping down the edges of the sink, my face heated.

—He brought it up the next morning when we were perfectly sober. He asked me if I had been serious. I said: Yes. And he said . . . well, he said a lot of things.

I couldn't tell if she was trying to peel my layers or if she had done that already and was holding me up to the light. I watched her remove the coffee pot halfway into its drip. Coffee spit against the hot plate, a trickle slipped onto

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the counter and pooled. She threw her napkin down to soak it up.

At moments like that I pictured Franny smoking a cigarette close to the window so the fumes wouldn't fill the house, encouraging me to speak up. And when that didn't work, she would offer to play a round of Chinese Checkers with me.

I couldn't get what Jane was up to.

—I'm not sure why I deserve this conversation . . . but can we wait until my head clears? I didn't even close my eyes last night, no flying dreams, no psycho nightmares of my mother, just the clock room echoing through the floor. I hope you plan on selling the clocks.

—You're veering off, she said.

—Veering off what? I don't want to think about anything happening to you, okay?

—But that's irrational.

—Why don't we talk about the vases?

Jane turned on the radio. The way she leaned into the counter, the outfit, she was imitating Franny, that force of gravity that had me pinned.

A polka came on. When that was over, the day's headlines. An express truck had blown up in the Midwest. The driver's remains scattered hundreds of feet. And this side note: *Many letters had survived.*

—I bet they'll put them in plastic sleeves and Forensics will impound them, I said.

—What?

—The letters.

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—I wasn't listening, she said.

—They blew up an express truck.

I was picturing a team of FBI guys in an airplane hanger somewhere in the desert, reconstructing the truck, the man. . . .

But she was someplace else, going through the drawer now where Franny used to keep the cooking thermometer, the small strainers and matches. Jane took out some papers and set them down on the table. I looked at the girls' medical insurance cards, Livvy's was on top. Her middle name was my proper first name: Madeleine. There were airline tickets, numbers with the Boston 617 area code, a birth certificate that looked to be Mona's. I didn't know people carried their kids' birth records on trips.

Then she glanced around as if she had forgotten something, took a half gallon of milk out of the fridge, and left the kitchen.

—We're running low on Kleenex, I called.

I followed her into the garage with my cup, trying to think of other items we needed.

Jane propped the milk carton on the front seat. I saw a couple of Franny's old blue suitcases in the back. Jane yanked on the rope attached to the bottom of the garage door and released it upward along its track. Then she got in on the driver's side.

—Where the hell are you going?

Outside, a thick marine layer. From up in the foothills the kind of condensation that looks like cream sitting in a dish.

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—I'll get money to you, she said.

—I'm not charging a fee. I told you that.

She turned the engine over. I stood by the driver's side, looking at her face. I thought of those movies set to Philip Glass music: clouds in time lapse, traffic sped up, flowers that open faster than I can sneeze.

—Okay, what if. What if you go crazy and don't come back? I said, trying to be funny.

She took a long draw of the milk and wedged the carton between her legs. The hibiscus around the garage hadn't opened yet. The petals were twisted round their stamens like pink tissue paper. Maybe if I stood there long enough they'd uncoil.

—But that's the point. I could live as free and easy as . . . as you.

—Why are you so pissed at me? Look, my old boss might have a job coming up. I told you that. I need to get back to Chicago.

She drank some more. Her eyes welled.

—Is Mike planning to watch the girls? So I can sort through things . . .

—You don't get it, she said.

—He doesn't know?

Jane had me standing out in the alley behind Franny's house, freezing to death in a shortie nightgown because someone had to be her audience and she wanted to hit the road early. She sat there idling in first, and was, I think, prepared to drive to God-knows-where.

—You tell him.

—Get out of the car and talk.

—You're getting a good trade. . . . What's the name of that TV show? she asked.

—What TV show?

—Where the two friends switch places, she said.

—You mean, houses?

—Us. I mean us, everything. Mike, the girls. You know, like a kit-home. Easy to assemble.

—Easy to what?

—You'll be more efficient than me.

—More efficient at *your* life? That's bizarre. . . .

She put the car in reverse and I reached for her door handle. But she suddenly pulled out of the garage and backed straight into a hedge. The engine cut out and she pushed her chopped hair away from her face, leaned her forehead into her palm, on a backwards reel.

—At least turn your lights on.

Jane straightened up and started the car again.

—Go back inside, she said.

—You want me to drive? I just have to run in and get a couple of things.

Her face made me think of an underground nuclear test. The car jerked forward and the rear bumper stripped a thousand tiny leaves from the shrubs. I should have grabbed my lavender sweater the minute I saw the suitcases.

Jane began to navigate the narrow lane. She swerved to avoid the garbage cans. There were liquor bottles by the

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cans, boxes from new household appliances, and broken Styrofoam beach items. I hoped she'd hit a garbage can. I needed time to stall her. I looked at her outfit again.

—Are you going to meet some guy?

I had shouted it to be heard above the waves. I think her foot slipped off the clutch at that point, which killed the engine again. She turned around, briefly. I noticed her lipstick. She yelled:

—Full Stop!

I watched her accelerate as if she was kicking off from the side of a pool, but she didn't circle at the other end. She had gotten her impulse thing from her father and it hit in cycles like El Niño. I felt certain she wouldn't abandon the girls, that she'd quickly send for them, get Mike to drive them to her. She had to. I tried to follow the car but my feet were being eaten up by the gravel in the alley. I'm not sure if she could hear me anymore. I knew the carton of milk was sweating into her dress. I worried that it might tip forward, that the distraction could cause an accident.

Finally Jane switched her lights on, but all I could see were two red circles floating in white air. I imagined the car was lined up with the gate's sensors. The security gate opened and the taillights moved across the tar road. She turned right, away from the beach.

I pictured a sudden collision, her legs squeezing together spasmodically. Milk like sex, soaking her skirt, the leather bench seat, working its way into crevices, plans.

—Come on, I said, as if Jane were still there, standing next to me, thinking of the girls' breakfast, wondering if she had enough cereal in the house.

The fog failed to put out my anger. If she wanted to trade, I had very different things to put on the table. She lived in a six-bedroom home outside Boston with a studio above the garage. I lived in a remodeled and largely reduced loft space in Chicago, two bedrooms, one of them only ten by ten, one bath, the porches had been an add-on, making use of the framework of the old elevator shafts. A courtyard in the center of the building. Jane was a set designer for large regional theaters. I appraised fine arts and antiques. She worked part time. I worked chronically. But she had returned to the same guy each night, the same conversations, the habit of sleeping on one side of the bed or the other, listening for their girls in the dark. Forms of possession I didn't know.

I did have good friends in Chicago. I went to a fitness center and had started a kickboxing class. I liked to shoot pool, joined a team once, which nudged me to get a monogrammed cue and a special pair of gloves for a decent grip, small cubes of blue chalk. I tried a birding group. I was a collector. I had an investment in antique neon signs and the works of small-scale tube-benders. Sometimes old neon came through the auction house. Sometimes I went out on the road to find it. One of my signs read: *Watch for Signs*. I had them mounted on the walls of the loft and they advertised *The Alpine Motel* and *Texa gas* and *Night Stop*, which probably had something to do with trains or buses

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or stopping something you were up to in the middle of the night. I never imagined I'd have large holdings. But how can you know?

I believe Lois, my mother, had communicated to me largely through signs when I was a child. She had a beautiful hand and sometimes she doodled a picture of my face and then tacked it on the bathroom mirror along with many reminders, aphorisms, and general warnings. She left one kind of note if she were up drinking in the middle of the night: the scrawl tighter, loopier, many words underlined and capitalized. And another kind of message if she came in fresh from sailing and the boat had placed well in a race. Sometimes she had an expansiveness that brought her into the moment. She bought fresh shelving paper for the kitchen or stopped at the drugstore for cigarettes, found me new dot-to-dot books, and these things she communicated directly, though the shelves went unlined.

But for all that education, I couldn't decipher Jane's signs that morning. I left the garage door up, afraid the automatic opener would stir the house.

I imagined she had reached Highway 101 by then and was traveling north. Like Franny, Jane didn't like the congestion of LA, the heat of San Diego, the enterprise of Mexico. North would take her past Von's, the bird refuge, the zoo, and then, I imagined, she'd hit the switch to put the top up on the Jaguar, determined to make it to the Bay Area without a stop. Of course she'd remember you can't put the top up at freeway speeds. So she'd pull onto the shoulder and discover that the mechanism was broken, the

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top frozen in its housing: one of those repairs Franny had left undone.

If the marine layer burned off, we had planned to spend the morning tracking the girls from the lower deck of the house. Mona had talked about using an inner tube, which would mean one of us joining her. In the afternoon Jane and I would have chipped away at Franny's things, probably the vases, while the girls entertained themselves. Instead she had driven into a place where the signs seemed to be directing her to unlimited freedom, the tubing on the neon in good shape, no krypton leaks.

I walked through the oil stains on the concrete slab of the garage and left prints on the white linoleum. Heading upstairs, I was aware of the ocean caught in the panes of the French doors, the light. I went into Franny's bedroom, and that was when I got into bed with Mike, and wrapped into sleep with him.

Before that morning, I had thought that certain feelings were invisible and stayed that way, that I could tunnel under and live off bomb-shelter air indefinitely. I hadn't told anyone that I was in love with Mike. Jane and I had met him when we were in college. And then of course they became a couple and so on.

Over the years, I had sometimes found myself sleeping with men who reminded me of Mike. Maybe they loved horse racing, or felt uncomfortable in small rooms, or liked to fix things, or empathized too much, or maybe they just

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didn't mind my storytelling, and even encouraged it. But I never held on to those men, never introduced them around or took them to familiar restaurants. Mostly they came through my loft in Chicago, looking for towels, razor blades, toast with preserves, and they didn't understand that I was sleeping with someone else, sleeping right through them. They were small acts. Their bodies changed, they softened, and then a round of intense muscle building. The way they fixed on me, that changed too. And when I put my reading glasses on, they distorted entirely and became guys with names I couldn't always remember.

Except for this man a couple of years ago, who pried open one of my eyelids, midact, and asked: *Who am I?* I thought that sex was jarring a metaphysical pin loose. I untangled myself and threw the lubricant back into the bedside table drawer. He accused me of having someone else on my brain, he could feel it. His old girlfriend: she had had someone else on the brain. *I'm disappointed*, he said. It was one of those moments when a man thinks he can put on your father's jacket and parade around. *I'm disappointed in you*. He got up and found his clothes in a heap and left. It was raining, which almost added a note of tragedy to his departure. I watched him from my window. He was drenched when he hailed a taxi.