

Be Mine

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Extract

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One

I stepped out the door this morning to a scarf of blood in the snowy driveway.

Like a bad omen, or a threat, or a gruesome valentine—a tire track, and the flattened fur of a small brown rabbit.

The florist must have run it over, delivering the roses, running late already by nine o'clock in the morning. When she handed me the long white box at the door she never mentioned having killed anything in my driveway. Maybe she never noticed. "It's our busiest day of the year," she said, breathless, "of course."

I was running late myself when I saw it. What could I do? The damage had already been done—utterly crushed, completely beyond hope—and cleaning it up seemed pointless. It was already snowing again. Soon, the evidence would be buried.

But I also felt such a pang of grief, seeing that bit of brown fur in the blood, that I had to steady myself at the door.

Was it one of the baby bunnies I'd startled from their hole in the garden last spring while planting morning-glory seeds?

I'd screamed when they scurried out of the soft dirt, and didn't go near that edge of the flower bed again all spring, into summer.

The mother rabbit abandons them, doesn't she, if she smells a human on them?

It would have been impossible to know if this dead one was one of those, but I felt sick with it. Guilt. My valentine roses had

brought this sad end to something that had only been, moments before, making its way back to its little den under the snow. If I were a better woman, I thought, in less of a hurry, I'd get Jon's shovel out of the garage and dig a grave—a proper burial, maybe a cross made of Popsicle sticks, the kind Chad, when he was seven, made for Trixie's grave.

But it was such a bitter cold morning—a harsh wind out of the east, and so cold that the snow, even in that wind, lingered before it fell, as if the air were heavier than the flakes. And I'd lost my gloves again. (Left them in the supermarket cart on Saturday?) Out there with my car keys and no gloves, I thought it would have been impossible to dig a grave, anyway, in the frozen ground. Already, a couple of crows were sitting in the branches of the oak, waiting for me to leave.

VALENTINES:

From Jon, the dozen roses, delivered half an hour after he'd left for work, timed to surprise me as I walked out the door, and a little card on which the florist had written for him in her girly cursive, "To my dear wife, the only valentine I'll ever need. I love you, and will always love you, Jon."

And from Chad, the first valentine ever to arrive from him by mail. From college. A strange sad moment at the mailbox as I recognized, slowly, the handwriting on the red envelope with a postmark from California:

Ma, you know I love you. Tell Dad I love him too — too weird to send him a valentine. But I miss you both. Am having a great time here. Love, Chad.

I couldn't help but think, then—predictably, sentimentally—of those crude cutout construction-paper hearts. His crayon scrawl. I still have one of them pinned to the bulletin board

above my desk at work, although the pink has begun to yellow and the edges have curled: I VEOL YU, CHAD.

And the year he licked away half of a heart-shaped lollipop before wrapping it in a tissue and giving it to me.

This year, even Brenda sent me a card (my nest empty now that Chad's off to college, a way of reminding me about it while pretending to try to make me feel better)—a black-and-white photograph of two little girls in fancy hats and *To my sister-in-law with love*.

Sue brought me some heart-shaped cookies the twins had made, and one of my students, a charming Korean girl, gave me a little box of chocolates, which I left for the secretaries in the English department. And even some secret admirer (or prankster?) left me a piece of paper, torn from a legal pad, folded into fourths, stuffed into a campus envelope, and put in my mailbox at school—red pen in an unfamiliar hand:

Be Mine.

ANOTHER accident on the freeway this morning. I keep telling Jon we need to get out of the suburbs now that Chad's gone, move closer to our jobs, quit this commute. But he just says, "Never."

To him, it's not the suburbs, it's the country, where, as a boy in an apartment in the city, he'd always dreamed of living. To him, it's not ten acres of scrubbrush, it's a farm, the "family farm," and he's never leaving his garage full of gadgets, his shooting range set up out back—target nailed to a pile of sandbags—his bird feeders, his riding mower. It's the little boy's dream left over from the days when he would watch *Lassie* on the black-and-white television in the cramped apartment he shared with two brothers, a sister, and his overworked mother. Someday,

he thought then, he'd have an old farmhouse in the country, a .22, a dog.

Well, the dog is dead. And the old farmhouse is surrounded now by subdivisions with names like Willow Creek Estates and Country Meadows—McMansions erected overnight with billboards at the edge of the road proudly stating *STARTING AT \$499,000*. (Are we supposed to be impressed by the expense, or seduced by the bargain?) And so much traffic now that hardly a day goes by that the freeway isn't closed down for an hour or two while the debris of some accident is cleared away. Twice in the last year we've been contacted by developers offering to buy our house, knock it down, and build four nicer, newer houses on our property.

And I'd do it, myself, sell it, pack up, move into a condo—*good-bye to all that*—but Jon's not yet done living his boyhood dream.

"I don't think the neighbors in our condo in the city would appreciate hearing me shooting my .22," he says.

He doesn't care that he puts five hundred miles on his Explorer every week, and that the price of gas is going up every day, and that the earth has nearly been drained of its fossil fuels.

No one seems to care.

We're all driving wildly, blindly, out of our suburbs and into the future without giving it a second thought.

"Fine," I told Jon, "but if they keep building subdivisions, and the traffic gets even worse, I'm going to start staying in a motel in the city on the nights I have to teach."

He shrugged.

Poor, beautiful, blue-eyed Jon. I can still see, in those eyes, the child who never had the tire swing he wanted or the high grass to wade through with a Mason jar for catching crickets—and the true absence he will never get over—a father.

Oh, Jon, I'll live here forever for you if I have to.

But when I passed the flashing lights and the crumpled cars at the side of the road again this morning, I thought, *Jesus Christ.*

When I finally got to the college, I found MayBell in hysterics outside my office. She'd lost her verb-tense transparencies, and could she borrow mine?

Well, I'd been planning to use mine, too, but gave them to her anyway. I am, I believe, a whole lot better at winging it than MayBell is. And, indeed, my class went well. Habib read a whole paragraph of *As I Lay Dying* out loud in a southern drawl, and we all laughed so hard that a few of us ended up crying.

After work, Jon and I met in the city for our Valentine's dinner. I thanked him for the roses and told him about the anonymous note, the valentine left in my mailbox at school:

Be Mine.

"Wow," he said. He raised his eyebrows and looked at me as if *seeing* me for the first time in a long time.

His wife. A woman with a secret admirer.

He'd ordered his steak rare, and there was a doily of blood all over his white plate.

"Who do you think it is?" he asked.

Truly, I told him, I had no idea.

There's Robert Z, our department's poet, who complimented me this morning on my clothes (a white blouse and olive suede skirt) with what seemed like true exuberance. ("Wow, Sherry. Very sharp!")

He liked another outfit, too, last week—a black skirt and a crocheted black sweater—and even touched the sweater's sleeve, feeling the texture of the wool.

"I like your style," he said. "Like a classy country-western star."

But, surely, Robert Z is gay. He's never *told* anyone he's gay, but we've all assumed it since he first got hired. Thirty-five, no wife, no kids, no ex-wife, no girlfriend—and those green eyes, the great fashion sense, the gym-hard body. We've all—the women in the department, which is nearly all women—examined the poetry for evidence (two books, university presses, *Gray Thoughts* and *The Distance Between Here and There*). But it's so fragmented, elusive—hard little riddlish poems—if there's any reference to romance, or sexual preference, who could tell?

And whether or not he's gay, "Be Mine" seems unlikely, coming from such a poet. Too literal. Too sentimental. Also, I know his handwriting by now. I see it all the time on his corrected papers lying around the Xerox room. It's less fluid than the smooth and looping handwriting of my secret valentine. Robert's writing is stiff. Barbed wire cursive. To disguise his writing, a man might be able to make his *fluid* script appear *less* so, but how could he make such pained lettering *more* fluid? Impossible. It's not Robert Z.

There are students, of course. Community colleges are full of older, lonelier men. More than a few candidates for crushes, I suppose. One man in his early thirties, Gary Mueller, who's been laid off from his job at the auto parts plant and is back in school trying to "diversify my skills," has seemed particularly and pathetically grateful for extra help on his papers. (*There are seven reasons why the automobile industry should be changed in my opinion. I will now tell you the reasons why I think the auto industry should be changed . . .*) On occasion he's seemed to laugh so hard at my lame jokes and little asides that I've wondered if there was something "off" about Gary Mueller. Most likely, he's just nervous.

It could be a prank, of course.

A mistake. Wrong mailbox?

"It could be anyone," I said to Jon.

“Well,” Jon said, “you can’t blame a guy for trying.” His gaze lingered on me. And then, “I have to admit, Sherry, it’s a bit exciting to think of some poor schmuck wanting to do it with my wife.” He reached under the table and tapped the tips of his fingers on my knee.

I cleared my throat and smiled, and said, “For your information, Jon, I think there have been quite a few such schmucks in the past.”

He put down his knife and fork. He passed his napkin over his mouth. “Did you ever grant any favors to these schmucks?”

“No,” I said. (It was almost entirely true.) “But there’s a first time for everything.”

“Stop,” he said, holding up the hand with the napkin, leaning across the table, whispering, “You’re giving me a hard-on.” He nodded toward his lap.

It had been so long since we’d been down this road, I’d almost forgotten it was there. When we were first married, we would talk out this fantasy every few nights:

What would I do if a biker pulled up next to me at a stop sign and asked me to meet him in a sleazy motel and give him a blow job?

(We’d move through the details of what I’d do. . . .)

What would Jon do if a woman in a bikini at the beach lost her top and asked him to help her look for it in the dunes?

(He’d follow her—there would be a towel spread out in the beach grass, naturally.)

We’d point people out in restaurants—him, with the tattoo? Her, in the halter? In a hot tub? In the back of a car? And then we’d spin out the scenarios, and then we’d go home and make love all afternoon or all night.

We’d never acted on those fantasies, of course. And then, like the pair of novelty handcuffs and the bottle of strawberry-flavored

massage oil, they had been misplaced somewhere, sometime, between my second trimester and Chad's eighteenth birthday.

But, back at home, in bed, after our Valentine's dinner, Jon continued to talk.

"Do you think," he asked, "this is what your secret friend would want to do?" He slid my nightgown up over my hips.

"This?" He put his mouth to my breasts.

"Maybe this?" He spread my legs, holding one wrist over my head, pushing into me.

TWENTY years of making love to the same man—there may not be any surprises left, but there are no disappointments, either, no frustrations, no humiliations.

It was such a short time of my life, the years of sleeping with those other men and boys, but the wounds still seem somehow fresh—those bad mornings, the hangovers, the regrets, the bladder infections, the pregnancy terrors, the psychic injuries.

So brief, and so long ago, that it should all have faded in my memory, and yet it never has. I can still close my eyes and see myself in the full-length mirror of the apartment I lived in, looking at my body—bony and cold and blemished—as I made my way from the bathroom to the bed where some stranger waited, and wanting desperately to hide myself from him, and knowing it was too late.

And then there was Jon. Some wild friends from the bookstore where I worked introduced me to him, and I never needed to suffer that way again.

I was in my twenties, finishing my master's in English, seeing, among others, a man with a wife and two children, feeling old already. The apartment I lived in didn't have an oven that worked, but it didn't matter. Whatever I ate, I ate raw, or cold. I had a

string of Christmas lights above my bed—the only light in my room, but bright enough to read by in the dark—and all my clothes came from the same secondhand store, a place called Second Hand Rosie’s run by a transvestite with long, beautiful, braided red hair. I favored black dresses, with wild silk scarves. I was so thin that my shadow looked like the shadow of a broom.

Jon had been, like me, at the periphery of this group of wild friends, which was made up of a thirtyish woman who’d been divorced twice, two gay men, two younger women with crushes on the gay men, and a few others who’d dropped out of the university or come to the city to be near lovers, and then been abandoned by the lovers, and then gotten jobs at the bookstore. A bit of cocaine was involved, and some serious drinking, both of which I wanted to participate in, but would consistently throw up instead, or fall asleep, or have trouble breathing long before the actual party started.

Still, I liked to dance, and there were many long, good nights at a place called the Red Room—a sticky floor beneath flashing red lights.

Jon was a bartender there.

“Sherry, have you met Jon?”

I can still see the ring on the finger of the friend who introduced us as she gestured in Jon’s direction—a star sapphire, gleaming like Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, shrunk down to the size of a thumbnail, captured in a stone, set in platinum gold.

My mother had worn a ring just like it.

We admitted to each other right away that we didn’t really fit into the crowd that had brought us together. We hadn’t, perhaps, come from solid middle-class families, but we’d always fantasized that we had. We’d done well in school. We liked to go to bed sober and read for an hour or two, in total silence, before going to sleep. We wanted to share an old house. Some land around it.

A child or two. Salaries with good benefits and cars that started on the first try.

I ended my relationship with the married man, and the others. Jon broke up with the poet he'd been dating. He bought me a diamond solitaire—the kind of engagement ring we both imagined an ordinary woman would wear. We got married in my hometown at the church where I'd been baptized.

During the ceremony, a sparrow that had gotten somehow trapped in the church (“It’s been here for days,” Pastor Heine said regretfully) threw itself into a stained glass window and plummeted dead to the floor.

“Let’s think of this as a good omen,” Jon had said, uneasily, afterward, as we looked together at the soft gray mess of it on the marble floor.

Someone nudged it with the toe of a shoe.

Someone laughed nervously.

“Yeah,” his sister, Brenda, said. “Isn’t there a saying—you know, if the bird dies on your wedding day, you will be blessed with great happiness?”

(Only years later did she tell me that at the reception, the plastic bride and groom had slid off the cake and onto the floor, the frosting having grown warm under the lights in the hall, but she’d managed to settle them back at the top by pushing their feet way down into the cake before we noticed.)

It was hard to read such a thing, the dead sparrow, as a positive omen, but luckily neither of us had ever been superstitious, and now we’ve been together for two decades—all these years mostly happy years, productive and meaningful and prosperous years.

The secure jobs. The healthy son. The old farmhouse.

Even the reliable cars—mine a bright and humming small white Honda, easy on gas, four-wheel drive, and his an enormous

barreling white Explorer, moving down the road seriously, masculinely, like the idea of gravity itself on wheels.

Two decades!

A long time, but, all along, there's been passion, and there still is—although not like those first months, of course, when we spent all our spare time in bed.

Then, I had a roommate, but Jon had a one-bedroom apartment to himself, so I spent my nights with him there. It was winter, but we slept with the window open because the radiator was right next to the bed, and all the dry dust that was sent up from it made sleeping, *breathing*, difficult.

We had sex in the morning, in the afternoon, at night—a layer of arctic air over us, a burning layer of heat and dust under us.

We made love in the bed, on the floor, in the shower, on the couch. We made love straight through my periods—blood on everything. We made love straight through the winter until it was spring and the green grass was crowded with fat, mechanical robins.

One morning, on my way out of his apartment to my job at the bookstore, I crushed a pale blue egg beneath my shoe, accidentally, and had to scrape the mucus mess of it off with a stick—and even that seemed sexual.

Even the smell of humidity rising from the grass seemed sexual.

The musk of it. The muck.

Those first weeks of spring I could smell my own body all the time, and Jon's, while I worked behind the counter at Community Books. And men seemed able to smell it, too. They stuck around to chat long after our exchanges had taken place—their books in bags, their cash in the register. Men craned their necks to watch me walk down the street. A troupe of break-dancers on the corner stopped what they were doing—their naked

gleaming torsos in the sun—when I walked by. *Ooooh, baby. Look at that.*

The cottonwoods burst, and the fluff attached itself to the two of us as Jon and I walked through the park with our arms around each other.

At home, we had to pick the soft stars of it out of each other's hair.

We got married in July. We bought the farmhouse. Chad was born, and then—and then?

And then the next twenty years happened in the staccato flashing of some colored lights!

Where, I wonder sometimes, have those wild friends gone?

Jon and I stayed in the general area, but it's been fifteen years since I saw any of them around. Several would be older than I am, assuming they're still alive. But it's impossible to imagine any of them like this, like us, so much older, so much time having passed, so fast—and, yet, it seems as if it hasn't actually been so long that it wouldn't be possible to just call up, arrange a time to meet at the Red Room for a drink, to catch up, if the Red Room had not been closed for twelve years now, replaced by a Starbucks.

A few weeks ago, it feels like, since I last saw those friends. Or a couple of seasons. Have I changed? How much?

Sometimes I feel more like that younger woman now than I felt then, back when I felt already so old.

But whether or not those wild friends would recognize me now—maybe I'm better off not knowing. Maybe it's just as well that I didn't keep in touch, can't make that date for a drink to find out.

Besides, I never really was one of them, was I?

Of course they wouldn't recognize me now.

SAME handwriting, same yellow paper, and, again, in a red pen, today, in my box:

Sherry, I hope you have a great weekend. I'll be thinking of you. I'm always thinking of you . . .

A SLATE gray February day, Saturday, today. From my study I can see a hawk circling the bird feeder—Mr. Death, waiting for something smaller, and also feathered, to land there. Last night I woke up at least twice to the sound of something in the walls. Mice, or a squirrel, squirreling things away, making itself a nest out of the cold—nuts, pinecones, candy bar wrappers. Jon wants to shoot it, if it's a squirrel. He claims they'll chew the wiring in the walls and burn the whole house down, but I say how likely is that. The house is nearly two hundred years old, and the squirrels have been nesting in it longer than we have, and when the cold weather lifts, they'll find another place to live.

Oh, dear, the hawk just got what it was waiting for. Happened so fast it took me a minute to realize what had happened, looking up from this page to the bird feeder, and seeing something small and gray flustering there, and then the cold swiftness passing over it—a shadow with wings, and then in a heartbeat, both of them were gone.

Be Mine.

Who would send me that first valentine, and then the second, and why?

Have I ever said that to anyone, *Be mine?*

If I ever did, I can only imagine it would have been to Reggie Black, the summer I was seventeen.

But I never really wanted him to be *mine*. I wanted to be *his*.

To be claimed by him. It was the ambition we all had, we girls, back then. Some guy's enormous class ring on a chain around your neck. Some guy's letter jacket. To come to school wearing his T-shirt, his ball cap. To have a bracelet with your name and his name and a + sign engraved on it. To show it to all the other girls, gathered around in the hallway. *Look.*

With Reggie Black, I wanted desperately for him to stake such a claim, but he never did. Reggie was shy. Every day that summer he'd come over while my parents were at work and the house was a small, dark possibility behind us. We'd kiss on the porch. We'd sit on the swinging chair. Eventually we'd go behind the garage, and his hands might find their way to my breasts, but I waited all summer for him to say, *Let's go inside.* He didn't.

Has anyone ever said to me, anonymously or not, "Be mine"?

It took this long to be claimed, finally, and by a complete stranger!

BOUGHT a new dress today at the mall. Silk, with pink flowers, a plunging neckline, very sheer. I'll have to wear, always, a slip under it, and a sweater over it for the next five months. But I love it. At the department store I stood in front of the three-way mirror for a long time and looked at myself in it, and thought, *Well, not bad for her age.*

I owe it all, I suppose, to the elliptical machine at the gym. I swear, it is the fountain of youth. It's restored to me the figure of my girlhood. Or better. Back then, I ate too much. Especially in college, as an undergrad in the dorms. All the pizza, and the popcorn, the cafeteria—the meat and potatoes heaped on my plate. And I can still remember the cheese soufflé, exactly the kind of thing my mother would never have made, so rich that it made the air inside it seem heavy.

And the heft of those white plates, and standing hungrily in a line at the steamed glass windows, and how even the wan green beans, the sliced carrots, pooled and slippery with melted butter in a silver trough, called out to me. These things which, at home, I would have refused to eat—suddenly, now that I had nothing but choices, became what I wanted. Now, when I see myself in photographs from those days, I realize that, although I felt incredibly sexy every minute of every day—braless, in short skirts, no makeup, my dark hair so long it was a hazard around candles and revolving doors—I was, frankly, fat.

Then, graduate school, I learned to smoke, lost it all, and looked no better for it.

And then I got pregnant, and never touched a cigarette again.

Now, I wouldn't touch those green beans if they'd even been *near* butter.

(All this self-control! Where did *that* come from?)

Looking at myself in that three-way mirror this afternoon at the mall, I thought I actually look *chiseled*. All this muscle definition in my arms.

And my waist! The other day I took a tape measure to it, twenty-eight.

And my breasts, 36C—exactly what I always longed for and never managed, even when I was fat. Don't ask me how my breasts got larger as the rest of me slimmed down, but the evidence fills the cups right here on my chest. My diet—no refined flour, no white sugar, no added fats—has done away with even that lip of flesh I carried below my belly button for years after Chad was born—the evidence of my maternity, which I thought would stay with me forever, gone.

Jon says that if he could have my body of twenty years ago again, or my body now, he'd take my body now.

My body, which just keeps getting better, and better, until . . .

A sobering thought:

Once you've entered your forties, how much longer can this go on?

Even the celebrities in *People*, cited as sexier now at fifty than they were at twenty—the photos of those women all look as if they were taken underwater. Something happens to the face. (*The neck, the hands, the knees.*) No amount of surgery can fix that, and no one really wants to see it. Better this blur, the photographers must think—this buttery light, this distant hint at the beauty that was once there—than to look dead-on into what's actually left.

Still, this dress is gorgeous, with or without my body in it. A sensuous memory, a slow song, a beautiful immoral thought turned into something wearable, buyable (\$198!). Something you can bring home on a hanger, gather in your arms, accessorize with heels and a handbag—weightless, feminine, eternal, mine.

NOTHING like spring yet, but only one more week until Chad comes home for his spring break. This morning we woke to more snow—a long cold carpet of it on the lawn, curtains of it blowing in fat flakes sideways in a hard wind. While Jon was still sleeping in the bed behind me, I stood at the window for a while, and watched it, and I started to cry.

Why?

The snow?

Or maybe the realization that it was only one more week until Chad would be home, and how excited I've been now, since he went back to California after New Year's, for my boy to come back. And, because I couldn't help but wonder—is this what it will be like from now on?

From now on will I count off the days of my life in black check marks between Chad's vacations?

Season to season. Holiday to holiday.

I could, I suppose, move through them just as I always have—buying the appropriate cards, sending them out at the usual times, putting up the Christmas wreath, taking it down, planting bulbs in the fall, seeds in the spring. But will I do all of it emptily, waiting for Chad?

And, after a few more years off at college, how often will he even come home?

There will be, I suppose, some summer backpacking through Europe. A spring break with his friends in Mexico. Soon, he'll start calling in November to tell me, "Mom, I'll only be staying a few days this year around Christmas, because—"

Then what?

Is *this* the empty nest?

Is that what I was crying about at the window, watching the snow?

At Christmas, Brenda went on and on about it:

So, how is it having Chad off at school? What do you do with yourself? Is it like getting to know yourself and Jon all over again, after eighteen years of motherhood?

She and her partner eyed me smugly from their superior positions on the love seat, childless lesbians with books and Welsh corgis and endowed chairs at a fancy college as I followed Chad around their town house with my eyes. They'd been waiting for years, I thought, to see me crash and burn when my "career" of being Chad's mother came to an end.

Was *this*—the snow and the tears at the window—what they had in mind for me?

Sue predicted it, too. From *her* secure position as the harried mother of nine-year-old twins, she kept making sad eyes at me in the hallways when school started again in August. But I kept saying, believing it to be true, "Of course I'm going to miss him, but

all I ever wanted was for my child to be healthy and to grow up, to be a happy young man, so how can I begrudge it now that it's happened by being sad?"

"Because," Sue said. "Because it's so fucking sad."

"Maybe a little," I said. Something like a button or a cotton ball—one of those things you always fear your child will swallow—felt lodged in my throat then, and I wanted to sob it up. But, instead, I smiled.

ICE ON everything this morning. Jon chipped it off my windshield before he left for work. I watched him from the bedroom window as he did it. Beyond him, in the backyard, the neighbor's spaniel (named Kujo by their grandson) was dragging something dead around in the scrubbrush. A raccoon, I think—although he once brought the long slender leg of a deer into the yard and spent hours gnawing it, wild with it, giddy with it, dragging the bloody thing around in the snow as if he were in love before losing interest and leaving it there for Jon to take away.

But this morning Kujo was going about his work, whatever it was, with grim determination, it seemed, rather than joy.

I left about an hour later, and drove slowly. Black ice. I don't even know what black ice *is*, exactly, except that you can't see it, and before you know it you're spinning off the road.

I wore the new dress. Ridiculous in this weather, but I couldn't resist. I wore it with a black sweater, black tights, and boots, and still the wind in the parking lot cut straight through it. I felt silly, but when I stepped into the office, Robert Z looked up from some papers he was grading and shouted, "Now there's a woman knocking hard on the door of spring. Good for you, Sherry Seymour. Brava for you in your beautiful dress!"

I checked and double-checked my mailbox for anonymous notes:

Nothing.

Surprised to find myself so disappointed.

TODAY in the hallway between classes, I ran into Chad's best third-grade friend, Garrett Thompson.

I hadn't seen Garrett except from a distance (graduation) for—how long?

After middle school he was never one of the boys sitting around our kitchen table on summer afternoons eating cereal (Trix, Lucky Charms, Cocoa Puffs—all that starry-dry and empty sweetness) straight out of the box by the handful while the sun turned the air over their heads to dusty halos.

Still, Chad mentioned Garrett now and then. Something he'd said or done in the cafeteria line or on the bus on the way home from school. Garrett, who'd been so much a part of our lives for years, still seemed like family, still seemed like a distant part of our lives.

He recognized me before I recognized him—and when I finally did realize who he was, it was because he looked so much like his father, Bill, who's now been dead for a decade.

Bill Thompson used to change the oil in my car at the Standard station, and we always talked, laughed together, because we had the boys in common. He was handsome—dark, dimpled, the kind of mechanic you'd find on a beefcake calendar: Mr. February. Shirtless, shining with muscle, provocatively holding a wrench in one hand.

And we'd had plenty of time to get to know each other at Cub Scouts, hovering over some project made of marshmallows

and pipe cleaners. We'd wound up together at Camp Williwama a couple of times, too, when Jon couldn't get out of work to go with Chad. It fell upon Bill to teach Chad, then, how to shoot a bow and arrow. I was clueless, hopeless, couldn't even string the arrow in the bow. One night around a campfire while the Wolf Pack whooped and howled in the dark, he'd passed a little flask of whiskey to me, and, sipping at it, I felt almost as if we'd shared some kind of illicit kiss—the whiskey tracing a warm sash of Bill Thompson down my throat, spreading across my chest.

But of course it was nothing illicit. We were parents, surrounded by parents, and by ten o'clock our boys were exhausted and we'd all retreated to our separate tents, and then he died.

For a year or two after his death, I'd overhear Garrett say to Chad in the living room, on their knees, moving little men around on the rugs, "My dad's got a motorcycle in heaven now." Or, when Jon came home from work and said hello to the boys before going upstairs to take off his suit, Garrett would say, "You're lucky that your dad is here instead of in heaven." I'd go downstairs and cry a little into a laundered towel, or step outside on the front porch until I'd managed to swallow the sadness down.

"Mrs. Seymour!" Garrett called out.

"Garrett. My goodness. *Garrett.*"

I touched his shoulder. He smiled.

He asked about Chad. About Berkeley. About Mr. Seymour. He said he was taking auto mechanics at the college, and wondered if he could take an English class with me, knock off a requirement, but it wasn't his best subject.

"Of course," I said. "I'd love to have you in class. Sign up for fall."

But then he said he didn't know if he'd still be in school in the fall. He was thinking about the Marines.

I said, "Oh, no, Garrett, you should stay in school. You don't want to —"

"I feel like I owe my country," Garrett said.

"What does your mother say about it?" I asked.

He said, "Mrs. Seymour, my mother's dead."

Dead?

I took a step backward.

We live in a small town. How could his mother have died, and I didn't know it? "Garrett, when?"

"At Christmas," he said. "She'd gone down to Florida with my stepdad for the winter. The trailer they were staying in had some kind of problem. Carbon monoxide. They went to sleep and never woke up."

"Garrett," I said. "Oh my god. I'm so — sorry. Did you — was there a funeral?"

"No," he said. "My aunt went down there and had her cremated. I've got the ashes."

The ashes.

Garrett had his mother's ashes.

He had, I remembered, like Chad, no brothers or sisters. Now, it was just Garrett, I guessed, home alone with his mother's ashes.

Marie?

I couldn't recall her face. We'd only spoken maybe a dozen times, and always in passing, in parking lots, driveways, hallways, maybe once or twice at the grocery store. I suspected she drank. Now, I can't remember why I thought it, but I usually insisted that Garrett come to our house when he and Chad wanted to play. I was afraid she'd drive the boys around in her banged-up

car. Maybe I thought I smelled it on her one afternoon waiting for the boys after school. His father drank, we all knew that, because it had caused the accident that killed him.

I put my hand on Garrett's arm. I kept it there until I could find a voice to speak in again, and then I told him that Chad was coming home on Sunday, and would he come to dinner if he wasn't busy?

Garrett smiled and nodded as if he were already planning on it, and I remembered that his mother didn't cook. The few times Chad spent an evening at Garrett's house he'd say they'd had Pop-Tarts for dinner. Sometimes he didn't remember eating anything at all. "I'll tell Chad to call you," I said. "Maybe Thursday?"

"Thursday sounds great," Garrett said.

I watched him walk away down the hallway.

Poor little boy, I'd always thought—even before his father died. There was something so tenderly simple about Garrett—a credulousness about the world that Chad had gotten over early. Chad, ironic, already, at four, watching a fat Uncle Sam dance on stilts at a Fourth of July parade, had said, "That's pathetic." It was, I thought now—this fat Uncle Sam—the kind of thing a four-year-old Garrett would have liked.

Little Garrett.

I was surprised how happy I was to have seen him in the hallway. It had seemed to me since Chad left for college, I realized, that the whole part of my life that had really been *Chad's* life—his high school, his friends, his extracurricular activities—had been scissored out of the world. For the most part, his friends had left, too, in the fall. Pete to the University of Iowa. Joe and Kevin to Michigan State. Mike to Colby. Tyler to Northwestern. And the girls he'd known had scattered all over the country, too. Now, when I drove by the high school it was as if a ghostly fence had been erected around it.