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Written by Laura Lippman

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The Innocents

Laura Lippman

AVON

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For Georgia Rae Simon

Alas for maiden, alas for Judge,
For rich repiner and household drudge!
God pity them both! and pity us all,
Who vainly the dreams of youth recall.

—John Greenleaf Whittier, "Maud Muller"

GO-GO

They throw him out when he falls off the barstool. Although it wasn't a fall, exactly, he only stumbled a bit coming back from the bathroom and lurched against the bar, yet they said he had to leave because he was drunk. He finds that hilarious. He's too drunk to be in a bar. He makes a joke about a fall from grace. At least, he thinks he does. Maybe the joke was one of those things that stays in his head, for his personal amusement. For a long time, for fucking forever, Gordon's mind has been split by a thick, dark line, a line that divides and defines his life as well. What stays in, what is allowed out. But when he drinks, the line gets a little fuzzy.

Which might be why he drinks. Drank. Drinks. No, drank. He's done. Again. One night, one slip. He didn't even enjoy it that much.

"You driving?" the bartender asks, piloting him to the door, his arm firm yet kind around Gordon's waist.

"No, I live nearby," he says. One lie, one truth. He does live in the area, but not so near that he hasn't driven here in his father's old Buick, good old Shitty Shitty Bang Bang they called it. Well, not this Buick, but the Buick before, or the Buick before that. The old man always drove Buicks, and they were always, always, crap cars, but he kept buying them. That was Timothy Halloran Sr., loyal to the end, even to the crap of the crap of the crap.

Gordon stumbles and the bartender keeps him steady. He realizes he doesn't want the bartender to let go of him. The contact feels good. Shit, did he say *that* out loud? He's not a faggot. "I'm not a faggot," he says. It's just been so long since his wife slipped her hand into the crook of his elbow, so long since his daughters put their sticky little hands around his neck and whispered their sticky little words into his ears, the list of the things they wanted that Mommy wouldn't let them have, but maybe Daddy would see it differently? The bartender's embrace ends abruptly, now that Gordon is out the door. "I love you, man!" he says, for a joke. Only maybe he didn't. Or maybe it isn't funny. At any rate, no one's laughing and Gordon "Go-Go" Halloran always leaves 'em laughing.

He sits on the curb. He really did intend to go to a meeting tonight. It all came down to one turn. If he had gone left—but instead he went straight. Ha! He literally went straight and look where that had gotten him.

It isn't his fault. He wants to be sober. He strung together two years this time, chastened by the incident at his younger daughter's first birthday party. And he managed to stay sober even after Lori kicked him out last month. But the fact is, he has been faking it for months, stalling out where he always stalls out on the twelve steps, undermined by all that poking, poking, poking, that insistence on truth, on coming clean. Making *amends.* Sobriety—real sobriety, as opposed to the collection of sober days Gordon sometimes manages to put together—wants too much from him. So-

briety is trying to breach the line in his head. But Gordon needs that division. Take it away and he'll fall apart, sausage with no casing, crumbling into the frying pan.

Sausage. He'd like some sausage. Is there still an IHOP up on Route 40?

Saturday morning. Sausage and pancakes, his mother never sitting down as she kept flipping and frying, frying and flipping, loving how they all ate, Gordon and his brothers and his father, stoking them like machines. Come Saturday morning, I'm going away. Hey, hey, hey, it's Fat Albert!

When he moved back home six weeks ago, he asked his mother to make him some pancakes and she'd said, "Bisquick's in the cabinet." She thought he was drinking or whoring again, assumed that was why Lori had thrown him out. It was easier to let her think that. Then it turned out it was easier to *be* that, to surrender to drink and bad habits.

When it comes down to it, drunk and sober are just two sides of the same coin, and no matter how you flip it, you are still your fucked-up own self. It sure didn't help that his current AA group meets in his old parish school, now a Korean church. It's too weird, sitting on the metal chairs in an old classroom. Drink and the line gets fuzzy. Get sober and the line comes back into sharp relief, but then everyone starts attacking the line, says he has to let it go, break it down. *Take down the line, Mr. Gorbachev.* Boy, he's all over the place tonight, tripping down memory lane in every sense of the word. Funny, he has a nice memory associated with Reagan, but it feels like he was really young at the time. How old was he when Reagan made that Berlin Wall speech? Sixteen? Seventeen? Still in high school and already a fuck-up.

But to hear everyone tell it, he has always been a fuck-up, came into the world a fuck-up, is going to leave as a fuck-up. Then again, whoever followed Sean was destined to be a disappointment. Sean-the-Perfect. You would think that with three kids in

the family, the two imperfect brothers would find a bond, gang up on that prissy middle fuck. But Tim has always taken Sean's side. Everyone gangs up against Go-Go, the nickname Gordon can't quite shake even at age forty. *Go, Go-Go. Go, Go-Go. Go, Go-Go.* That's what the others had chanted when he did his dance, a wild, spastic thing, steel guitar twanging. *Go, Go-Go. Go, Go-Go. Go, Go-Go. GoGoGoGoGoGo.*

Give Sean this: He's the one person who consistently uses Go-Go's full name. Gordon, not even Gordy. Maybe that's because he needs two full syllables to cram all the disappointment in. Actually, he needs four. "Jesus, Gordon, how many times can you move back home?" Or: "Jesus, Gordon, Lori is the best thing that ever happened to you and you've got kids now." Jesus, Gordon. Jesus, Gordon. Maybe he should have been Gee-Go instead of Go-Go.

He thinks about standing up but doesn't, although he could if he wanted to. He isn't that drunk. The beer and the shot hit him fast, after almost two years of sobriety. He was doing so good. He thought he had figured out a way to be in AA while respecting the line. They don't need to know *everything*, he reasoned. No one needs to know everything. There would be a way to tell the story that would allow him to make it through all twelve steps, finally, without breaching any loyalties, without breaking that long-ago promise, without hurting anyone.

He gets up, walks down the once-familiar avenue. As kids, they had been forbidden to ride their bikes on the busy street that essentially bounded their neighborhood, which should have made it impossible to find their way to this little business district, tempting to them because of its pizza parlor and the bakery and the High's Dairy Store. And there was a craft store with an unlikely name, a place owned by the family whose daughters had disappeared. He was little then, not even five, but he remembered a chill had gone through the neighborhood for a while, that all the parents had become strict and supervigilant.

Then they stopped. It was too hard, he guesses, being in their kids' shit all the time and the children slipped back into their free, unfettered ways. Nowadays . . . he doesn't even have the energy to finish the cliché in his head. He thinks of Lori, standing guard at the kitchen window of their "starter" home, a town house that cost $350,000 and to which he is now barred entry. Is that fair? Is anything fair? Sean is still perfect and even Tim does a good imitation of goodness, Mr. State's Attorney, with his three beautiful daughters and his plumpish wife, who was never that hot to begin with, yet Gordon can tell they still genuinely like each other. He's not sure he ever really liked Lori and he has a hunch Sean's in the same boat with his wife, Vivian, who's as frostily perfect as Sean. Tim and Sean, still married to their first wives, such good boys, forever and ever. Hey, he got an annulment, he's technically in the clear. Besides, fuck the church! Where was the church when he needed it? And now it's Korean Catholic, whatever the fuck that is, probably Kool-Aid and dog on a cracker for communion.

Where was he? Where is he? On Gwynn Oak Avenue, thinking about how Sean, of all people, had figured out that if they rolled their bikes across the bridge to Purnell Drive, they could technically obey the rule never to ride their bikes on Forest Park Avenue and still manage to get over to Woodlawn, where the shops are. Or was it Mickey who had figured it out? Mickey was the one who lived above Purnell Drive, after all. She would have known the route, too. Even when they were kids, Mickey had been smart that way. She should have become the lawyer, not Tim. She was the real brains.

He walks for ten, twenty, thirty minutes, willing his head to clear. He walks down to the stream, where there once were swans and ducks, then to the public park, the site of an amusement park that closed before Go-Go was old enough to go there. It survived integration, his father always said, but it couldn't beat back Hurricane Agnes. Still, one roller coaster remained standing for years,

long enough for Go-Go to feel thwarted, denied. Sean and Tim claimed to have gone many, many times, but they weren't that much older. Sean would have been seven or eight when the park closed. Maybe they had lied? It makes Gordon feel better, catching perfect Sean in a potential lie.

Soon enough, the hypothetical becomes real to him, and he has worked up a nice fury. He gets out his cell phone and punches his brother's name on his contact list, ready to fight with him. But his hands aren't steady and he fumbles the phone as Sean's voice comes on, cool and reserved. The phone ends up on the ground, where the black turtle shape is hard to find in the dark. As Go-Go crawls around on his hands and knees, he hears Sean's voice, disgust evident. "Gordon? Gordon? Jesus, Gordon—"

I shoulda been Gee-Go. Does he say that out loud? His hand closes over the cell phone, but Sean has hung up. Okay, it isn't exactly the first time he has drunk-dialed his brother. But he's had a good run of sobriety, so Sean shouldn't have been all pissy and judgmental. Sean has no way of knowing he took a drink. No, Sean expects him to fail. That's unfair. And what kind of brother is that, anyway, expecting—rooting—for his younger sibling to fail? But that's Sean's dirty little secret. His perfection is relative, dependent upon the fuck-ups of Go-Go and Tim, and Tim isn't giving him much breathing room these days. In another family, Sean wouldn't even be all that. In another family, Sean might be the problem child, the loser. Especially if he had been treated like a loser from jump, the way Gordon was. They set him up. Of course he did whatever he was asked. He was just a little boy. Any little boy would have done what he did. Right?

His head clearer, he walks to the convenience store, buys a cup of scorched coffee, and drinks it in his car, his father's old Buick, the last iteration of Shitty Shitty Bang Bang, which has survived his father by almost fifteen years now. He is less than two miles from his mother's house. He has to make exactly four turns—two

lefts, two rights. There are—he counts—one, two, three lights? The first one is there, right in front of him, complicated because there are actually five points at this intersection—five points, like a star. He sees Mickey making the drawing in the dirt, the stick slashing down and up, across and down, then up.

He makes it through, heads up the long steep hill. *I think I can I think I can I think I can.* Past the cemetery, through the second light. Almost home. Almost home. Only it isn't his home.

At the next light, he turns right instead of left. *Go, Go-Go, Go, Go-Go. Go, Go-Go.* Climbs the freeway entrance ramp just before the Strawberry Hill apartments. Mickey's family had moved here right before high school and Mickey's mother was hot. Sean and Tim swore they saw her sunbathing topless once, but they probably lied about that, too. Roller coasters, topless girls—they lied about everything.

Gordon heads west on the highway, then makes a U-turn before the Beltway cloverleaf, aiming his car back home along the infamous highway that ends, stops dead. As teenagers, they treated this two-mile stretch as their own little drag strip, but now the secret is out and others race here. He wonders how fast his father's old Buick can go. Ninety, one hundred? *Go, Go-Go. Go, Go-Go. Go-Go.* The steel guitar twangs in his ears, in his memory, sharp and awful. Guy could not play for shit, much as he loved that damn stupid guitar. *Go, Go-Go. Go, Go-Go. Go, Go-Go.* He is dancing, wild and free, his little arms moving so quickly it's almost like he's lashing himself, self-flagellation, and everyone loves him and everyone is laughing and everyone loves him and everyone is laughing and he is splashing through the stream, heedless of the poisonous water, no matter what Gwen's father says about tetanus and lockjaw, desperate to get away, to escape what he's done. *Go, Go-Go. Go, Go-Go.*

By the time he hits the Jersey wall, even the needle on the old Buick's speedometer has abandoned him.

US

Chapter One

Clement Robison's house is wildly impractical for almost anyone, but especially so for an eighty-eight-year-old man living alone, even if he happens to be the one who designed it. Forty years ago, when Clem began the drawings for his dream house, he could not imagine being eighty-eight. Who can? Eighty-eight is hard to imagine even at eighty-seven. His youngest daughter, now forty-five, summoned home—or so she's telling everyone—by her father's accident, doesn't really believe she'll ever be as old as he is. Oh, she expects, hopes, to enjoy the genetic advantage of his longevity. But the number itself, eighty-eight, is like some monstrous old coat discovered in the hall closet, scratchy and smelling of mothballs. *Who left this here? Is this yours? Not mine! I've never seen it before.*

The Robison house was modern once and people still describe

it that way, although its appliances and fixtures are frozen like the clocks in a fairy tale, set circa 1985, the last remodel. A mix of milled stone, lumber and glass, it nestles into the side of the hill on a stone base, a door leading into the aboveground basement, but the family custom was to use that door only in the most inclement weather, and Clem is not one to break long-standing habits. He has continued to mount the long stone staircase, which creates the illusion that one is climbing a natural path up the hillside. The steps are charming, but there is something off about them. Too low or too high, they fool the foot, and over the years almost everyone in the family has taken a tumble or near-tumble down. Gwen's turn came when she was thirteen, rushing outside and neglecting to consider that the sheen on the steps might be ice, not mere moisture. She traveled the entire flight on her butt, boom, boom, boom, her friends laughing at the bottom. At thirteen, the end result was a bruised coccyx and ego, nothing more.

Her father, coming outside to get the paper on a cool but dry March morning, missed a step, tumbled almost to the street and broke his left hip.

"Do you know how many people die within a year of breaking a hip?" Gwen asks her father, still in University Hospital.

"Gwen, I taught geriatric medicine for years. I think I'm up on the facts. *Most* people don't die."

"But a lot do. Almost a third."

"Still, most don't. And I'm in good health otherwise. I just have to be disciplined about recovery and therapy."

"Miller and Fee want you to sell the house, move into assisted living."

"*That* again. And you?"

"I'm holding them off. For now. I told them I would assess your situation."

They smile at each other, coconspirators. Gwen believes herself to be her father's favorite, although he would never say

such a thing. His denials are sincere when her much older siblings, Miller and Fiona, bring up the contentious matter. "I was just more available when Gwen was little," their father says. "Less career obsessed." "Daddy doesn't have favorites," Gwen says. But she knows the seven-year gap between Fiona and Gwen is not enough to explain their father's clear preference for her. There is her remarkable resemblance to their mother, dead for almost twenty-five years. And there is the bond of the house and the neighborhood, Dickeyville, which Gwen and her father love more fiercely than anyone else in the family. As a child, she used to take long walks with him in the hills behind the house, never letting on that she traveled farther and deeper into them when she was with her friends. Miller and Fee, living thousands of miles away, have been trying to get their father out of the house for years, decades, ever since their mother's death. Gwen, who remains in Baltimore, has done whatever she can to allow her father to stay in the family home. Should the day come that he really can't live there, it has always been their unspoken understanding that Gwen will take over the house for her own family.

"How are things at home?" her father asks.

It's an open question, applicable to the physical status of her house and a much larger, if vaguer problem. Gwen chooses to address the physical.

"Not great. The county came out and pushed the ruins of the retaining wall back on our property, but says it's our job to rebuild it. And even when we do, it won't necessarily address our foundation issues. The ground could shift again."

"Why—never mind."

"Why did we buy out there when our inspector warned us of this very problem? I ask myself that every day. For me, I think it was because Relay reminded me of Dickeyville. Isolated, yet not. A little slice of country so close to the city, the idiosyncratic houses. And for Karl, it was all about convenience—the commuter train

station within walking distance, BWI and Amtrak ten minutes away. Go figure—for once, my dreamy nostalgia and his pragmatism aligned and the result is utter disaster. There's probably a lesson to be learned there."

"The lesson," her father says, "is that you have a five-year-old daughter."

"Don't worry," Gwen says, pretending not to understand. "We've figured out how to make it work once you come home. I'm going to get up at six A.M. and drive over there, do the breakfast and getting-her-off-to-school thing. And I'll reverse it at day's end, be there for dinner and bedtime. But I'm going to spend the nights at your house, so we don't have to have a nighttime aide."

"Gwen, I can easily afford—"

"It's not about affording. And it's just for a few weeks. Anyone can tolerate anything for a few weeks." Months, years, her mind amends. It is amazing what one can tolerate, what she has tolerated. "Also, it's not the worst thing in the world, making Karl curtail his travel, to learn that he's part of a household, not a guest star who jets in and out as it suits him."

"He is who he is, Gwen. You went into this with eyes wide open. I told you all about cardiac surgeons. And Karl was already a star. It's not like this sneaked up on you. Not like the chicken."

"What?"

"The chicken. That's why I fell. There was a chicken on the steps, trying to peck at my ankles, and all I wanted to do was avoid stepping on it. I twisted my ankle and went over."

Gwen tries not to show how alarming she finds this. *A chicken?* There haven't been chickens in their neighborhood, ever. Except for—but those birds were far away and far in the past. No, that couldn't be. Her father must have imagined the chicken. But if her father was imagining chickens, what else was breaking down inside his mind? She would almost prefer there was a chicken. Maybe there was. The past few years have seen a flurry of sto-

ries about animals showing up in places where they shouldn't be—wildcats in suburbs, a deer crashing through the window of a dental practice, and, come to think of it, a chicken in one of the New York boroughs. And Dickeyville is the kind of place that has always attracted crunchy granola types. It is easy to imagine some earnest, incompetent locavore trying to raise chickens only to have them escape from his ineptly constructed coop. Gwen will ask around when she goes by the house this afternoon, to begin preparing for her father's return.

The Robison house is isolated, even by Dickeyville's standards, which in turn feels cut off from much of Baltimore. It is officially the last house on Wetheredsville Road, only a few feet from where the Jersey wall now blocks the street, marking the start of a "nature trail" that one can follow all the way to downtown. The blocked street means Gwen can't use the old shortcut, through what is properly called a park, but which she and her childhood friends always referred to as the woods. Their term was more accurate. Leakin Park is a forest, vast and dense, difficult to navigate. Gwen and her friends covered more of it than almost anyone, and even they missed large swaths.

Traffic is surprisingly heavy, the journey longer than anticipated, giving the lie to her blithe words about dashing back and forth between here and the house in Relay. Still, the chance to move to Dickeyville, even temporarily, is providential. Maryland law requires a separation of at least one year to file for an uncontested divorce. She learned this during her first divorce, a sad bit of knowledge she had never planned to use again. Does anyone plan to divorce twice? Then again, after that first failed marriage, the fact is always there, incontrovertible. You're not going to go the distance with one person, your chance at perfection is lost.

For someone like Gwen, who is professionally perfect—she edits a city magazine that instructs others how to have the perfect house, children, wardrobe—this is particularly irksome.

Yet even if she can manage to extend her time in her father's house for a year, it won't be enough. It is the spouse who *stays* who can file after one year, on the grounds of abandonment. As the spouse who is leaving, Gwen will have to wait two years if Karl doesn't agree, and he has made it clear that he won't, ever. She can't spend that much time away from Annabelle, but nor can she afford her own place in their current school district. They aren't upside down in their mortgage, but they have virtually no equity, and home equity loans are hard to get now, anyway. Karl has lots of money, but, again, he isn't going to use it to let her leave him. And if she spends even a single night back in the Relay house, the clock resets on the separation. Maybe Annabelle will move into the Dickeyville house and they can keep this information from the school?

But the Dickeyville house will be chaotic, once her father returns. A geriatric specialist should have designed a home that would be friendlier to old age, but his house is downright hostile to the idea. There is the first level, the stonewalled basement, with the laundry room and various systems. Then the large glass-and-timber first floor, built to take advantage of the site, but with only a powder room. Yet the top two floors, with its full baths, have narrow halls and tight corners. Their father, appalled at the spiraling costs and delays, skimped on his dream house's bedrooms. She will have to set him up in the first-floor "great room," where he will have nice views and space in which to move, if no bath. But then her father will dominate the first floor, and privacy will be found only in the cramped, dark bedrooms above. And how will he bathe? Besides, Annabelle would be lonely, as Gwen once was, and she won't even have the freedom to roam the woods. What

was considered safe in Gwen's childhood is unthinkable for Annabelle's.

Her head hurts. It's all too complicated. *Dial it back,* as she tells her writers when they are in over their heads on a story. Concentrate on one thing, one task. Get to the house, make sure it's clean, do laundry, call a nursing service, let the nursing service figure out the best place for her father to convalesce.

Once there, she finds three newspapers in yellow wrappers, several catalogs, but almost no real mail. Her father doesn't recycle—on principle, he believes it's a ruse, an empty, feel-good gesture—so she tosses everything, leaving only the bills on the kitchen counter. The kitchen is small, another victim of the house's cost overruns, but her mother made it a marvel of efficiency. The light at this time of the day, year, is breathtaking, gold and rose streaks above the hill. Even with the old appliances, the yellowing Formica counters and white metal cabinets, it is a warm, welcoming room.

Gwen goes upstairs. Everything is in order, there is no evidence of a man in decline. Widowed at sixty-three, her father quickly learned to take excellent care of himself. His closet and drawers are neater than Gwen's, there is an admirable lack of clutter. A single page from the *Times,* dated the day before his fall, is on his nightstand—the Wednesday crossword puzzle, filled out in ink, without a single error. The puzzle, the tidy house, it all indicates he's of sound mind and should back up his version of events. So why does she keep thinking of it that way, as a *version*? She's still troubled about that chicken.

Glancing out the narrow casement window toward the street, Gwen sees a black-haired man walking two dogs as black as his hair. She knows him instantly by the part in his hair, impossibly straight and perfect, visible even from this distance.

"Sean," Gwen calls out through the window. Seconds later,

she is running heedlessly down the stone steps that undid her father.

"Gwennie," he says. Then: "I'm sorry. Old habits. *Gwen*."

"What are you doing here?"

"Well—my brother, of course."

"Tim? Or Go-Go?"

"Gordon," he says. Perhaps Sean has sworn off nicknames. Funny, Gwen liked hearing Gwennie, even if it always carries the reminder that she was once fat. Gwennie the Whale. She was only fat until age thirteen. They say people are forever fat inside, but Gwen's not. Inside, she's the sylph she became. If anything, she has trouble remembering that she's growing older, that she can no longer rely on being the prettiest girl in the room.

"What's the incorrigible Go-Go—excuse me, *Gordon*—done now?"

Sean looks offended, then confused. "I'm sorry, I assumed you knew."

"My father fell three days ago, broke his hip. I don't know much of anything."

"Three days ago?"

"In the morning. Coming down the steps to fetch his paper."

"Three days ago—that's when Go-Go . . ." His voice catches. Sean is the middle brother, the handsomest, the smartest, the best all-around. Gwen's mother used to say that Tim was the practice son, Sean the platonic ideal, and Go-Go a bridge too far. Gwen's mother could be cutting in her observations, yet there was no real meanness in her. And her voice was so delicate, her manner so light, that no one took offense.

"What, Sean?"

"He crashed his car into the concrete barrier where the highway ends. Probably going eighty, ninety miles per hour. We think the accelerator got stuck, or he miscalculated where it ended. I mean, we've all played with our speedometers up there."

Yes, when they were teenagers, learning to drive. But Go-Go was—she calculates, subtracting four, no, five years from her age—forty, much too old to be testing his car's power.

"He's—"

"Dead, Gwen. At the scene, instantly."

"I'm so sorry, Sean."

Go-Go, dead. Although she has seen him periodically over the years, he remained forever eight or nine in her mind, wild and uninhibited. The risk taker in the group, although it was possible that Go-Go simply didn't understand the concept of danger, didn't know he was taking risks. She flashes back to an image of him on this very street, dashing across the road in pursuit of a ball, indifferent to the large truck bearing down on him, the others screaming for him to stop.

"Thank you."

"How's your mom holding up?" She remembers that Mr. Halloran died years ago, although she didn't go to the funeral, just wrote proper notes to the boys and their mother. It was a busy time in her life, as she recalls.

"Not well. I came home for the funeral—I live in St. Petersburg now."

"Russia?"

A tight smile. "Florida."

Gwen tries not to make a face. Not because of Florida, but because the Sean she remembers would have been in Russia, a dashing foreign correspondent or diplomat. He's still pretty dashing. Close up, she can see a few flecks of white in his hair, but the very dignity that bordered on priggish in a teenage boy suits him now. He has finally grown into his gravitas.

"I feel awful that I didn't know. When is the funeral?"

"Tomorrow. Visitation is tonight."

Gwen calculates, even as she knows she must find a way to attend both. She will have to ask for another half day at work,

make arrangements for Annabelle tonight. There is already so much to be done. But this is Go-Go—and Sean, her first boyfriend, even if she seldom thinks of him in that context. Gwen is not the kind of woman who thinks longingly of her past, who tracks down old boyfriends on the Internet. The Hallorans, along with Mickey Wyckoff, are more like the old foundations and footings they sometimes found in the woods, abandoned and overgrown, impossible to reclaim. They had been a tight-knit group of five for a summer or two, but it couldn't be sustained. Such coed groups didn't last long, probably. Funny, it has never occurred to Gwen until now that she and Mickey could disengage thoroughly from the group, but the Halloran brothers had to remain a set, mismatched as they were. Crass Tim, Serious Sean, Wild Go-Go.

"I'll be there." She considers placing a hand on Sean's forearm, but worries it will seem flirtatious. Instead, she strokes the dogs, who are old, with grizzled jowls and labored breathing, so ancient and tired that they don't object to this long interlude in the middle of their walk. Yet old as they obviously are, they can't be more than, what? Fifteen? Sixteen? Which is still older than her marriage to Karl.

"Mom will appreciate that," Sean says and heads back up the hill. She knows the route, knows the house at which he will arrive after going up Wetheredsville, then turning left on "New" Pickwick, a street of what once seemed like modern houses, small and symmetrical relative to the shambling antiquities for which Dickeyville was known, following it to the shortest street in the neighborhood, Sekots, just four houses. The Halloran house always smelled of strong foods—onions, cabbage, hamburger—and it was always a mess. Sometimes the chaos could be comforting; no child need worry about disturbing or breaking anything in such a household. It could be terrifying, too, though, a place where the adults yelled horrible things at one another and Mrs. Halloran was often heard sobbing, off in the distance. The boys

never seemed to notice, and even Mickey was nonchalant about it. But the Halloran house scared Gwen, and she made sure their activities centered on her house or the woods beyond.

Go-Go, dead. The only surprise was that she was surprised at all.

Most thought he was called Go-Go because it was a bastardization of Gordon, but it really derived from his manic nature, evident from toddlerhood, his insistence on following his brothers wherever they went. "I go-go," he would say, as if the second syllable, the repetition, would clinch the argument. "I go-go." And he did. He ran into walls, splashed into the polluted waters of the stream, jumped from branches and balconies. Once Go-Go spent much of an afternoon running head-on into an old mattress they had found in the woods, laughing all the while.

Now he has run head-on into the barrier at the end of the highway. Gwen can't help wondering if he was drunk. Although she hasn't seen the Halloran boys for years, she knows, the way that everyone knows things in Dickeyville, that Go-Go has a problem. It is implied, if never stated outright, in the lost jobs, the broken first marriage, the rocky second one, the fact that he returns to the roost for open-ended stays.

Then again, who is she to judge Go-Go? Isn't she pulling the same trick, running home, a two-time loser in matrimony, taking comfort in a parent's unconditional love? Mr. Halloran may have been hard as nails, but Mrs. Halloran, when she wasn't screaming at her sons and wondering why they had been born, spoiled them to the best of her ability, especially Go-Go. And while most people will assume Gwen is nothing more than a devoted daughter, some will see through her. Her brother and sister, certainly. And Karl.

That is, Karl would see through her if it ever occurred to him to look, really look at her. But if Karl looked at her that way, they wouldn't be in this fix. At least that's how she likes to see it.