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Schroder

Written by Amity Gaige

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Schroder

a novel

AMITY GAIGE

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Schroder

here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart (i carry it in my heart)

—E. E. Cummings

What follows is a record of where Meadow and I have been since our disappearance.

My lawyer says I should tell the whole story. Where we went, what we did, who we met, etc. As you know, Laura, I'm not a reticent person. I'm talkative—you could even say chatty—for a man. But I haven't spoken a word for days. It's a vow I've taken. My mouth tastes old and damp, like a cave. It turns out I'm not very good at being silent. There are castles of things I want to tell you. Which might explain the enthusiasm of this document, despite what you could call its sad story.

My lawyer also says that this document could someday help me in court. So it's hard not to also think of this as a sort of plea, not just for your mercy, but also for that of a theoretical jury, should we go to trial. And in case the word *jury* sounds exciting to you (it did to me, for a second), I've since learned that a jury gets all kinds of things wrong, cleaving as it does to initial impressions, and in the end rarely offers the ringing exonerations or punishments that we deserve, but mostly functions as a bellwether for how the case is going to skew in the papers. It's hard not to think about them anyway, my potential listeners. Lawyers. Juries. Fairy-tale mobs. Historians. But most of all you. You—my whip, my nation, my wife.

Dear Laura. If it were just the two of us again, sitting together at the kitchen table late at night, I would probably just call this document an apology.

APOLOGIA PRO VITA SUA

Once upon a time, in 1984, I created another fateful document. On the surface, it was an application to a boys' camp on Ossipee Lake in New Hampshire. I was fourteen and had been living in the United States for only five years. During those five years, my father and I had occupied the same top-floor apartment of a tenement in Dorchester, Mass., which if you've never been there is a crowded multiracial neighborhood in Boston's southern hinterlands. Even though I had quieted my accent and cloaked myself in a Bruins hockey shirt, and tried to appear as tough and sulky as my Irish American counterparts who formed Dorchester's racial minority, I was still mentally fresh off the boat and was still discovering, on a daily basis, the phenomena of my new homeland. I remember the electronic swallowing sound of a quarter by the slot of my first video-game machine, as well as the sight of a vibrating electronic toothbrush, and how, one day while I was waiting for the bus, a boy not much older than me drove up to the curb in a Corvette convertible and hopped out without use of the door. I remember seeing many sights like this and more, because the feelings they brought up

were confusing. At first I'd feel a pop of childish wonder, but this wonder was followed by the urge to stuff it back, because if I were a real American I would not have been in the least impressed with any of it. Self-consciousness was my escort, a certain doubleness of mind that I relied upon to keep myself from asking stupid questions, such as when Dad and I drove across the border of Rhode Island one day on an errand, and I resisted asking why there was no checkpoint between state lines, for I had—if you can believe it—brought my German passport with me.

I first saw the brochure for Camp Ossipee in my pediatrician's office. I studied it every time I was sick until I slipped it in my jacket and took it home. I stared at this brochure for weeks—in bed, in the bath, hanging from my pull-up bar—until its pages started to stick together. The American boys in the photographs hung suspended in the air between cliffside and lake water. They walked in threes portaging canoes. I started to envision myself swimming with them. I imagined myself crawling through the wheat or whatever, learning to track and to mushroom. I would be the go-to man, the boy out in front, not so much the hero but an outrider. I was particularly interested in the Ossipeean rite of passage available only to the oldest boys in their final year—a solo overnight camping trip on a remote island in the middle of the lake. And here is where my future self was really born to me, in this image: myself, Erik Schroder, man alive, stoking a fire in the night, *solo*, self-sufficient, freed from the astrictions of society. I would fall asleep as one boy and wake up the next day a totally different one.

All I had to do to apply to the camp was to fill out a form and write a personal statement. What sort of statement were

they looking for? I wondered. What sort of boy? I sat at my father's card table, gazing out the window at the corner of Sagamore and Savin Hill Ave., where two classmates of mine were fighting over a broken hockey stick. I slipped a piece of paper into my father's typewriter. I began to write.

Mine was a tale that, by certain lights, was the truest thing I had ever written. It involved the burdens of history, an early loss of the mother, a baseless sense of personal responsibility, and dauntless hope for the future. Of course, by other lights—the lights that everyone else uses, including courts of law—my story was pure canard. A fraudulent, distorted, spurious, crooked, desperate fiction, which, when I met you, I lay bound at your feet. But this was 1984. I hadn't met you yet. I wasn't lying *to you*—I was just a child, sitting at my father's typewriter, my legs trussed to the knee in white athletic socks, my hair still rabbit blond, not dark at the roots like it is now. I addressed the envelope. I filched a stamp. When it came time to sign the bottom of that crowded page, it was with some flair that I first signed the name by which you came to know me. The surname wasn't hard to choose. I wanted a hero's name, and there was only one man I'd ever heard called a hero in Dorchester. A local boy, a persecuted Irishman, a demigod. He was also a man who'd spoken to cheering throngs of depressed West Berliners circa 1963, leaving them with a shimmering feeling of self-regard that lasted long beyond his assassination, his hero status still in place when my father and I finally got there much later. In fact, you might say John F. Kennedy is the reason we showed up in this country at all.

I spent months intercepting the mail looking for my acceptance letter from Ossipee. The letter would offer me full acceptance to camp on scholarship, as well as sympathies for

my troubles. I dreamt of this letter so often that I had a hard time believing it when it actually arrived. *We at Ossipee believe that every boy deserves a summertime . . . We are dedicated to supporting boys from all circumstances . . . Come join us by the shores of our beloved lake . . . Ossipee, where good boys become better men.* Yes, yes, I thought. I accept! I've got plenty of circumstances! My excitement was tempered only by the sound of Dad's key in the downstairs foyer, and I realized I wasn't going to be able to show him the letter itself, which was addressed to a different boy. Instead, I showed him the disintegrated brochure. I told him of the man-to-man phone call from the camp director. I even made the scholarship merit based, rounding out the fantasy for both of us. We trotted around the apartment all evening. It was as close as my father ever got to joyful abandon.

No one ever checked my story. When the time came, I took a bus two hours north from Boston to a bus stop called Moultonville, where a camp representative was to greet me and another scholarship boy we picked up in Nashua. When we got off the bus, a stout woman in canvas pants came toward us. This was Ida, the camp cook and its only female. The other boy mumbled an introduction. Ida looked at me. "Then *you* must be Eric Kennedy."

Why did they buy my song and dance? God knows. All I can say is it was 1984. You could apply for a social security number *through the mail*. There were no databases. You had to be rich to get a credit card. You kept your will in a safety deposit box and your money in a big wad. There were no technologies for omniscience. Nobody *wanted* them. You were whoever you said you were. And I was Eric Kennedy.

For the next three summers, that's who I was. Steady-handed Eric Kennedy. Iron Forge Eric Kennedy. Eric

Kennedy of the surprisingly tuneful singing voice. My transformation was amazing. The first summer I spoke in a quavering voice that only I knew was meant to prevent any trace of an accent. I harbored a fear that some real German would come up to me and ask me, "*Wo geht's zum Bahnhof Zoo*?" and I would answer. But this never happened, and besides, nobody distrusted me or scrutinized me or seemed to wish me harm; at Ossipee, the boys were taught that trusting other people was something you did for yourself, for your own ennoblement, and this old-fashioned lesson, however perversely I received it, is a debt I still hold to the place. Over time, I left the periphery of the group and moved toward the center of things. I took off my shirt and joined in dances around the campfire. I led the chanting for food in the dining hall. By the end of my first summer, they couldn't shut me up. After that, I never really stopped talking.

The time eventually came for my solo camping trip. It was my third and final summer at Ossipee, a strikingly clement one. A steady wind swabbed the surface of the lake, forming darkly iridescent wavelets that tapped the bottom of the camp Chris-Craft. All the boys I'd lionized in previous summers were gone. The younger arrivals, their hair still bearing the ruts of combing, hung around on the dock watching me set off, and I realized that I had become the older boy, the one they'd remember once I was gone. The boathouse counselor motored me toward distant coordinates and left me there on a hard beach wearing a crown of gnats. The night was endless, but that isn't the point of my story. The part I want to tell you about is the morning, how when I heard the sound of the Chris-Craft approaching through the fog, I zipped out of my nylon tent as from a skin and knew that I had achieved

something truly monumental: I had chosen my own childhood. I had found a past that matched my present. And so, with the help of enthusiastic recommendations from the folks at Ossipee, as well as a series of forgeries I hesitate to detail here despite the fact that Xeroxes of them have been pushed across tables at me quite recently, I was accepted—as Eric Kennedy—to Mune College in Troy, New York. I was a work-study student at Mune, operating the tollbooth at a multistory parking garage, and the rest of my tuition was furnished via Pell Grant (which I paid back, by the way). I majored in communications. I was a B student. Smart in class, you know, but inconsistent when actual work on my own was required. My secret bilingualism led me to excel in the study of other languages—Spanish, even conversational Japanese. When I graduated, I got a job nearby as a medical translator at Albany's Center for Medical Research, and there I stayed for six uneventful years, as free as a bird.

Of course, birds aren't free. Birds do almost nothing freely. Birds are some of nature's most industrious creatures, spending every available hour searching and hoarding and avoiding competitive disadvantage, busy just having to be birds. Like a bird, I was constantly at work being Eric Kennedy, and like a bird, I did not think of it as work. I thought of it as *being*. The earliest and cruelest deceptions had already happened—meaning, my deceptions of my father. Whenever I was Eric Kennedy, I'd made myself hard for Dad to contact. Even at Ossipee, I had told him there were no telephones in the wilderness of New Hampshire, but that if he wanted me to call him, I would happily set out on foot to the nearest town, and of course he said *Nein, nein, Erik*. Then, in measured English, *I will see you when I see you*.

Right. He would see me when he saw me, which was seldom. During college, I was like any other young man, busy trying to appear more interesting than I was—you know, amassing a music collection, composing mental manifestos, once or twice appearing in a piece of student theater. I drove down to Dorchester only when absolutely necessary. I commenced alone, in my black gown and mortarboard, and then waited until July to bring Dad up for a campus tour, when the place was desolate except for the students at an adult tennis camp. I had befriended a childless professor during my time at Mune, and it was this man, not my father, who cosigned my lease on my first apartment, a sunny one-bedroom kitty-corner from Washington Park.

I was happy in Albany and rarely left it. I liked its protected horizons, its belligerent small-time politicians. And there was always a girl—some girl or another—and laughing, and making fun of tourists in the South Mall. These relationships were easy and promise-free. I had a talent for choosing women who were already temperamentally predisposed toward happiness and therefore wouldn't use me as a catchall for their disappointments. In my free time, I worked erratically on my research (see page 15) and played soccer with a bunch of foreign transplants on a hill we borrowed from the College of Saint Rose. And the thing after that, I supposed, would be the thing after that.

I did not know the thing after that would be you.

You. The first time I saw you, you were strapping a splint onto a child who had just fallen out of a tree. About a dozen other children were standing in a loose circle watching you. By

then the boy was screaming so loud that no one but you could get near him. It was my lunch hour, and the noise annoyed me, and so I stood to leave. But my gaze caught on you, and I paused.[1] What caused this snag? What was it about you, or about the moment in which you came to my attention? Was it the way you continued to wrap the boy's wrist so coolly, despite the fact that he was hysterical, kicking and screaming? It was August. Late, hot, rotten summer. I would later learn that you had been charged with leading twenty of Albany's neglected children through the poison ivy since July. You looked in need of a shower. But my attention snagged on you. My mind cleaned you off and put you in a sundress and placed a glass of Chardonnay in your hand and turned your face to mine. So I stood up and walked toward you, offering my help, wondering if the feeling would last, wondering if I could string together two or three more moments of this rapturous attention that was commanding me. Who knows why, Laura? Who knows why so-and-so falls in love with you-know-who

1. What is a pause? For the purposes of this document I will restrict my answer to conversational interaction only, in which a pause is a cessation of speech between two or more participants (not, for example, a moment of counterargument during one's solitary existential inner monologue in the bathtub). Compared to a silence, a pause is briefer, a kind of baby silence—the sort of hesitation that occurs while one is fishing for the proper way to put a thing, for example. Or when one is reflecting upon what one just said with a measure of criticism or regret. Or when one is distracted by a second subject or a loud noise but wants to appear thoughtful. Nobody asked me, but I would personally time a pause at two to three seconds in duration. It may be true that pauses are, at least historically, second-rate silences, whereas silences—those yawning spans of time in which the heart sinks, the mouth dries, the truth dawns—are infinitely more consequential and worthy of study. However, this writer maintains that both pauses and silences may be what the theorist and mother of pausology Zofia Dudek calls *functionally deficient* (i.e., a nothing that is a something). Both are worthy of study and attention.

instead of what's-his-name? Reams of poetry have languished in the guessing. I mean, I'm sorry for you, that I chose you. But I guess part of my motivation here, with this document, is to remind you that it wasn't entirely a waste. Listen:

Were we compatible? I believe yes, we were, very compatible, for a while. Although you made a pretty brittle first impression, you turned into one big marshmallow as soon as you decided I was a decent guy. You couldn't stop yourself. Soon you were bringing me books, loose tea, candied apricots. Your flirtations were sweet, a little fussy. It was as if you'd been sequestered from men your entire life and therefore could only seduce me as if I myself were a young girl.

Although you were the real American, I was by far more American*ish*. I was more spontaneous. I was more relaxed. I was still, in many ways, Eric Kennedy of Camp Ossipee, a persona for which I'd been richly rewarded at Mune College, but who, as I climbed toward thirty, was in need of an update. With you, Eric Kennedy matured. You were four years his junior, but no one would have guessed. You were prompt. You were responsible. You were deliberate. You were health conscious. You often traveled with your own baggies of gorp. You were easily offended. There was a whole list of social issues over which you took quick offense (e.g., the lack of handicap accessibility in public buildings). The mere mention of such issues made your cheeks red. You were always ready for polite but tense debate. It was as if throughout the course of your life, you had been traumatized by chronic misunderstandings.

How quickly I dropped all other commitments, all other friendships, clubs, and interests. I had a sense of loving you, despite your youth, as if I were your student, and therefore whatever you did—however obscure, however specific—was,

to me, the right thing. You had such a careful way with the truth. You wanted everything you said to be true on several different levels. It took you a long time to fill out simple forms in a doctor's office, tapping the pen to your lips. Did you exercise daily or weekly? Well, you exercised several days a week but not *daily*. I leaned over your shoulder to help you scrutinize whatever bit of inconsequentia was capturing your attention. I was happy to study bar codes and ingredients and all genres of fine print with you. The grocery store, the DMV. In America, the opportunities to be accurate are endless. And nothing escaped your eye. Nothing, of course, except me.

Marriage. The clashing of expectations produces a new chord. We had a small civil ceremony. A honeymoon in Virginia Beach. And after these rituals, there was the renting of the apartment, and the rearranging of furniture, and then an idleness descended upon us, and we were like any newly married pair, nervously wondering, OK, what next? How should we go forward? For a while, there seemed to be someone missing—someone *else*, like a leader, or a chief. An urgently needed third party whose role it was to direct traffic between us, to negotiate conflicting plans, forge compromises, translate cultural or religious differences. Or were we really supposed to go it alone? *Us*? The bride—you—struggling to outstretch her parochial upbringing, born as she was to slightly ignorant but good-hearted Catholics from Delmar, New York. And the groom—me—raised in a (completely fictional) town on Cape Cod he called Twelve Hills, a "stone's throw from Hyannis Port," a treasured only child, endowed with a last name that could only be uttered in rapture.

ERRATUM

For the record: The groom *never* told the bride that he was related to the Kennedys of presidential fame. This has been reported in the papers, and the groom categorically denies it. No, it was simply the word "Kennedy" plus the words "near Hyannis Port," and everyone started rushing to conclusions. The groom will admit that once or twice late at night with his female peers at Mune College, he *did not sufficiently debunk the rumor of himself as a second cousin twice removed* to the Hyannis Port Kennedys. And he does not deny that the name often greased the gears of bureaucracy, making what would otherwise have been dull encounters with bank loan officers, traffic cops, etc., slightly *charged*, even when he denied any family connection.

The bride, however, never seemed much interested in the groom as a "Kennedy." If the bride was impressed by the name, that day they met in Washington Park and all the days thereafter, she never talked about it. The bride was a serious and moral woman, not easily wowed. She was also a woman who acquired (by the way), in the period of years in which the groom loved her, an incredible, inflationary beauty, and

the groom just wants to mention that here and to put it here in words in case either of them forgets it. The truth is, she stunned the groom whenever he saw her. I mean *whenever* he saw her. Just the simple fact of her. Whenever she came into one room from another room. For example, stepping out of the kitchenette in Pine Hills with a plate of scrambled eggs. The groom was in love with her. That was no lie. And when he was in love with her, a minute no longer seemed like the means to an hour. Rather, each minute was an end in itself, a stillness with vague circularity, a gently suggested territory in which to be alive. This trick that love did with minutes endowed hours and days with a kind of transcendent wishy-washiness that encouraged an utter lack of ambition in the groom and was the closest thing he had ever felt to true joy, to true relief, and he still wonders what would have happened if they could have kept up with it, if they could have stayed in love like that, if maybe they could have crawled through a wormhole to a place where their love could find permanence. Because in the end, the great warring forces of our existence are not *life* versus *death* (the groom has come to believe), but rather *love* versus *time*. In the majority, love does not survive time's passage. But sometimes it does. It must, sometimes.

APOLOGIA CONT'D.

Anyway. Soon after his wedding, the groom became a real estate agent, but not by his own choice. It wasn't a bad choice. It just wasn't his. The bride's father had started to bug the couple about the groom's future plans. He suspected that the groom made little money as a medical translator and even less on his "independent research" (see page 35). The bride resented this intrusion on the part of her father. She did not think the groom needed to *conventionalize* his lifestyle. She liked the idea of him at home, deep in thought, and she liked finding him sitting in the same place she'd left him when she returned from her teacher training. In fact, the bride maintained that if the groom abandoned his research, he would be *selling out*. He would be selling out his dreams, which deserved a chance. In retrospect, it seems that the groom was an exemplar of the kind of suicidal integrity toward which the bride liked to encourage her middle schoolers.

So the bride told her father to *back off*. She told her father that the groom's independent research would come together. The bride told her father that her groom was working very hard, that he might even be a *visionary*, a term that must

have alarmed her father, *visions* sounding an awful lot like *hallucinations*.

Still, the man was her father. He remained concerned. Soon after the pair returned from their honeymoon, the father-in-law came over for a tête-à-tête. The groom remembers this interview very well. The father-in-law—let's call him Hank, because that's his name—sat across from the groom on their used sofa in Pine Hills, knees cracking arthritically, and the two of them spoke at length about the number of automotive accidents occurring on a low salt stretch of Hackett Boulevard, before they fell into an awkward and loaded silence.[2]

"Eric," Hank finally said. "I'm not sure how to say what I want to say, so instead I'm going to tell you a story."

The story was about Hank as a young man of twenty. The story was about how, back in Troy, New York, when Hank

2. How comfortable one is with conversational pauses depends largely on cultural norms, and which his society values more, taciturnity or volubility. Take the Finns, for example. A notoriously silent and somewhat depressing people. Contrast the Finn to the archetypal American and suddenly the Finn appears to be suffering from selective mutism. The American goes to the other extreme. For him, no matter his socioeconomic background, talking for the sake of talking is viewed as an evolved social skill. An American who can banter for a reasonable length of time is seen as a social savior, a dispeller of tensions, the person who might tell a joke to other persons trapped in the same darkened elevator, for example. An extra beat of silence—what we might call an *awkward pause*—is, in many cultures, a thing to be avoided. Often such pauses divulge feelings that much of our speech has been attempting to suppress. Dudek, in her seminal work *Pausologies* (1972), would call this *communicative silence*.

Let's take an example from the Brits. Pause #33: Margaret Thatcher's when asked if her successor, John Major, had yet become a great prime minister. The question was followed by resounding communicative silence. "I think he has carried out his duties," Thatcher replied, but not before her awkward pause had already lodged itself the annals of British politics.

first married his then-slender wife, he had been lectured by his own father-in-law in an apartment not unlike this one. In the story, Hank had to sit and listen to *his* father-in-law drone on about responsibility and the future and savings and the importance of being heavily insured, adding such stress into the mind of young Hank that he almost wanted to take the whole thing back, the whole marriage. He swore to God that he would *never* be like that. He would never pressure his own future son-in-law. Because a newly married man, Hank said, was like the captain of a rudderless ship. Out there, at sea, with no compass, no stars, no crew, no sight of land. But in the end—and this was the story's moral—young Hank had followed his father-in-law's instructions, albeit with a lot of resentment, and only after the old man passed away did Hank understand that he had been right about things, and that maybe he'd even loved Hank. Hank missed him sometimes, this unasked-for father, on certain bracing winter mornings.

The groom had listened, laughing gratefully, wincing with sympathy, his bride blending ice angrily in the kitchen, but all the while the groom kept thinking: What stress? What rudderless ship? The groom had never felt happier in his life. Never more carefree. In that modest hotel on Virginia Beach, both of them hilariously pale with northern winter, they had honeymooned for five days. Every night, they ate mounds of food garnished with pineapple, and every morning, they arrived at the beach early, when the tide was still out, and they placed their two chairs straight on the sandbars, which they called the *cheap seats*. Those honeymoon mornings seemed to be suggesting something to the groom. The suggestion was this: Be happy. *Decide* to be happy. If you want to be happy, be happy! No one cares if you're happy or not, so

why wait for permission? And did it really matter if you had been deeply unhappy in your past? Who but you remembered that? It was really one of the groom's most standout moments, and it liberated him. After realizing that he could be happy, that he could thrive, it seemed to him that there was no one powerful enough to make him unhappy again, and thereafter his happiness would always belong to him, even if he lost everything else. His body braced, his heart roused, he finally got it—the American secret—that the only person who could obstruct a man was himself.

So there is no other reason for why he would continue his elaborate and ultimately disastrous deceit re: his bogus identity except that he was just firmly and sentimentally committed to it. His decision to be happy seemed only to invite him to rededicate himself to his made-up past. On the final morning of their honeymoon, he watched the children on the beach, and he watched his bride watch the children, and he thought, No, I will not tell you. I will never tell you. I'll cut out my tongue first.

Then he pointed into the distance. "Hey, Laura," he said. "Look over there, at that old lighthouse. There was one just like that outside of Twelve Hills. Total déjà vu. Huhn."

The bride smiled. "Tell me about it."

"About the lighthouse?" He lifted his sunglasses and smiled. "Well, you could climb all the way to the top of it. Up these old stone steps. No rail. All very spooky and dangerous. Once you got to the top, you could see for miles. And there were those viewfinders that open up when you put a quarter inside. You could see all the way to Boston. Tiny Boston. Tiny mother, waiting below in the shade. Huhn. It's funny what you remember."

The bride closed her eyes. "That's beautiful, Eric," she said. "You're lucky. You're lucky to have memories like that. What a sweet childhood."

"It was," the groom said. "I am."

Her eyes widened. "We should go there sometime," she said. "To your lighthouse on the Cape. Do you think it's still open? Could we go? I want to see what you saw. I want to see where you grew up. Twelve Hills, and everything."

The groom's eyes lit up, he was so touched.

"Let's!" he agreed.

Her smile was so loving, and the beach so breezy, his happiness so incontrovertible, that for a moment the groom believed that he actually *would* take the bride to the lighthouse, and that he actually *had* climbed it as a boy, and that there actually *was* such a place as Twelve Hills, and his mother really *did* stand waiting in the shade. Closing his eyes, he even saw distant Boston as if through two little portals of memory, sitting in petticoats of mist.

By the time the groom had returned from his daydream and back to his father-in-law on the sofa, the moment to make objections had passed. In fact, explicit plans had been laid for his future. Plans had been made, and the groom took no objection. *Good.* His father-in-law was nodding at him. *Then I'll have a talk with Chip Clebus, and he'll show you the ropes. I'm glad we understand each other.* By sheer coincidence, the men did understand each other. Apart from his research, and loving his wife, the groom had few ideas for how to organize his time on earth. And so within days he was sitting in a classroom with a bunch of other unfocused extroverts, preparing for his

real estate certification by studying the contractual nuances of sale-leasebacks.

Turns out the groom had a talent for making money in real estate, and for the three or four years in which his larger dreams were totally and effectively repressed, the groom made a shiny pile of commissions. These commissions took the young couple through the birthing and infancy of their daughter, Meadow. The money bought the baby a cradle that swung via a mechanical arm, and it bought calendula oil for her bottom and pretty music and as many spins on the carousel as someone who would never remember any of it could wish for. And they were happy years. Seriously. If the groom could have wrung all the necks of his lies and eccentricities, he would have done it. There is no explaining—and it pains me to think he will never be believed now—how much the groom loved his life then. How grateful he was. Once, looking out over Poestenkill Gorge in winter, the baby asleep in her sling against her mother's chest, he watched the new-fallen snow glitter at the base of the trees, and he watched the naked branches form an overlapping lace through which he could see down onto the church spires and chimney smoke of the valley, and he felt as if he'd been walking for a long time—years—and had finally arrived at his intended destination.

Oh, Laura. If I had lived my life as one man, one consolidated man, would I have been able to see what was coming? Would I have guessed that it was all bound to fail, and that within five years, we would separate? Would I have been able to

prevent it—I mean that night when, your face streaked with tears, you asked me to get out? You'd had it with me. You'd felt for years—you'd explain this later—like you were living in a house with tilted floors. We'd gone wrong.

Pine Hills. We were in the kitchenette. You were facing away from me, leaning with both hands against the sink basin. We'd been arguing for some time. Arguing and washing dishes. Meadow was asleep. She was four by then, old enough to hear raised voices, and so we tried to keep disagreements strictly late night. What were we fighting about? You name it: your increasingly fervent Catholicism, my laziness, your need for order and structure, my lack of discipline, your martyred reticence, my tendency to talk too much. We had a mouse infestation. I'd caught one of the rodents and, without the heart to kill it, had given it to Meadow for a pet. As we argued, I watched this mouse tunnel in the infinite corner of its plastic box.

"Is this about school?" I was saying. "Fine. I'll be better about school. I'll get her there on time, and it's a negative on the spontaneous field trips, OK? Effective immediately. I don't love the school—you know all this, hon—the bloody Jesuses hanging all over the place. It's just not my idea of a place for children. You know, 'sweet childish days, as long as twenty are now'?"

You said nothing.

"But OK, OK," I said. "I'll be better. I'll work on my attitude. You know, you told me you were Catholic when we got married, but I didn't think you were *serious*."

Finally, you turned around. I could see now you'd been crying. This astonished me. I'd been trying for a joke.

"Oh, Eric," you said, crying. "We're so far apart."

My hands were still poised to dry the dish you'd been washing. Palms up, a damp cloth draped over one forearm.

One thing I'm sure of is that despite the late-night arguments, despite our differences, despite the way the light in our marriage had dimmed, even to my blind eyes, I never thought of leaving you. Not once. But there was a gap between how bad I thought things were and how bad you thought things were, and our life fell into that gap.

"We are?" I said.