

THE COMEBACK

There was no sign of a baby yet, though that was different from no baby at all. In these two and a half weeks between trying and knowing, Mandy had vacillated wildly in mood and enthusiasm for the potential baby, some days drinking eight glasses of water and practicing its initials on Post-its; other days she recklessly ate soft cheeses and cold cuts, inviting listeria to make the call for her. She'd decided on Harold for a boy and Gertrude for a girl. These were ballad-proof names, impossible to croon over piano melodies or scream through power chords. An upstanding citizen with just enough creativity to appreciate public arts funding, that was the sort of life preordained for her zygotes. (*With the fertility drugs there could be two.*)

The baby, she hoped, would give Ned something to do.

The press office had been empty since lunch, and Mandy was finding it increasingly difficult not to call Ned at home and catch him in the act, on the couch, his Tetris thumbs recuperating on his rising and falling chest. She pulled her hair back in the rubber band from that morning's newspaper and began composing her second to-do list of the day—proofs for the banners, lavalier microphones, chair rentals—in a barcode of small, crowded capital letters. No one wanted to be the governor's Logistics Coordinator—the lonely rage of list-making—except Mandy, whose rage was best expressed constructively through tidy penmanship and obsessive filing systems.

In her marriage too, she was the serious one or, as she said, "Let's face it, the breadwinner." With the name Mandy, a woman needed stalwart ambitions, she felt, otherwise the manifest destiny of the song itself—*Oh, Mandy! You came and you gave without taking*—could pull her into pole dancing. Most days her job and its proximity to power helped neutralize the name, but there were still easy jokes to be made—politics *is* pole dancing!—and cynicism, she worried, might harm the baby.

Pete was calling from the day's event. It was a stock op: Veter-

ans in those funny little creased caps that only deli workers still wear would gather on the stage. Cue “The Star Spangled Banner,” the flurry of tiny flags. The speech. The empathetic nod. The enthusiastic wave. And everyone returns to the office smelling like mustard and pastrami. These events ran themselves, which meant that when something went awry, it went intractably awry. Mandy braced herself and answered the phone hoping to hear Pete say, “Mandy Pants!” in the winking way she liked at first because he was gay and now detested because he was gay. But this time he said, “Mandy?” in a desperate whisper. There was cheering in the background, and in the foreground, muttered cursing.

“Speak up, Pete.” She added the word *EXTERMINATOR* (a personal matter) to her list. The squirrels were Ned’s screw-up, but he acted as though the Yellow Pages were written in Farsi, so she had to deal with it.

“Who ordered the confetti canon?” Pete asked, his voice coming out loud and brusque, letting Mandy know that his boss was standing beside him.

“Veterans are big on confetti. He knows that.” She wrote down *LIGHT BULBS, P. TEST, OJ.*

“It’s purple confetti.” he added. “Violet, actually.”

“You mean the gay confetti? You got Vets *gay* confetti.”

“I didn’t! Not that anyone believes me.”

She told Pete it wouldn’t have been a problem if he had checked the props earlier. She checked props two, sometimes three hours in advance of an event. “What’s your plan B?” She could not resist an opportunity for withering resignation: “Of course. No plan B.”

“You’re right. You’re right!” he shrieked. Mandy pictured the splotchy rash on his neck blooming and felt freshly enraged. Ned never had a plan B either, and that thought brought a splash of acid to her throat. “I don’t have time for this,” she said. She could be gestating.

Given the choice between incompetence at work and incompetence at home, Mandy had only enough energy to confront one person. She called Ned. On the machine she heard herself, the forced, chirpy voice of a hostage, and hung up. That was the voice she used to talk about her husband: “He’s doing great. We’re just *great*.” When people at work asked her what Ned

did for a living, she found it impossible to maintain eye contact while saying, “Freelance web consultant.” Her hands went damp if anyone asked her what that meant. On a good day she could make light of it with metaphor: “Oh, a ship without a port.”

A dinghy without a slip.

A buoy, rusty and adrift.

Ned was treading failure, and that was a fact.

Mandy squeezed her forehead as if to strangle the thought before it made its way to the baby. *Failure is not genetic*, she reminded herself.

It didn’t matter to her that Ned had been a wild success before he became a failure. Success certainly wasn’t hereditary. (*Success comes from hard work!*) But failure was somehow different, it tended to run in families, like the Hapsburg chin. Mandy took a deep breath, patted her stomach—*little Harold*—and focused her thoughts on Ned’s achievement qualities: He had vision—he’d gotten in early with an online company swimming in venture capital. He had made lots of money, so much that they started to think there would always be more money, that it would suddenly appear, as it so often did back then, blinking on a screen. It was not his fault that the server crashed and people sued. (*A dream of vested stocks deferred . . .*) At twenty-eight they had been worth two million on paper. On screen. Whatever. When they had nothing left, Ned had said, “At least we have each other.”

Sarcasm and sincerity sounded the same at that age.

At the wedding Mandy wore a white sundress with daisies in her hair, Ned wore a khaki linen suit, and they whispered their vows in a warm rain under a small tent on a hilltop in Delaware, which was further away from Palo Alto than either of them had remembered. The best man drunkenly sang “Mandy” and she pretended to find it hilarious. Instead of rice, guests tossed handfuls of paper chiffonade, three shredders full of incorporation documents from the company that was and then wasn’t. She did not know then how easy it was to rent a confetti canon.

She called home again. On the third ring Ned picked up using his “work” voice.

Ned's squirrels could run vertically and horizontally, and this is what made it impossible for him to find their entry point. Three-dimensional capability—excellent in games, maddening in life. He'd been all over the upstairs, tracking the scuttles through the house, sounds so deep within the walls he'd wondered, for a nanosecond, if there could be a house within his house, a house for squirrels where he was the pest. That was the fatigue talking, he told himself, or the rice cakes. Or the boredom. Still, a good idea for a game: *Once inside the squirrel matrix, how do you exit the matrix?*

Games and squirrels were sore subjects with Mandy; he knew together they would be catastrophic.

His squirrels kept a human schedule, at least—quiet at night, they kicked it up around six a.m. It was on and off all day after that. Mandy missed it. She was in the shower during the morning rush, and she usually didn't get home until after their evening bunkdown. She slept with these specially designed orange earplugs, so she didn't hear a thing even on nights when the squirrels were hyper. That's why it had taken him almost two weeks to convince her something was living in their walls, a triumph he'd come to regret since now she was on his case to do something about it.

At first he could ignore the squirrels, but lately he found himself obsessing, going room to room, playing Whac-A-Mole on the walls. Bang on the ceiling and they scattered to the upstairs bedroom; from the bedroom it was a straight shot to the bathroom pipes, which they shimmied down to access the kitchen, where they attacked the walls from all directions, gnawing the house's tissues layer by layer. Standing in the kitchen on a rainy morning was like being in the belly of an antelope seized by hyenas. A flame thrower or an M16 would make things so much simpler, he thought.

It had gotten so bad he had to nap downstairs on the couch, and now his neck muscles and digestion were screwed up. He was off-kilter. Eating, sleeping, nothing felt right. He couldn't even find comfort in his daily routine—his Job, as he liked to think of it. As soon as Mandy left for work, he got back into bed for an hour or so, until he felt rested enough for his five-mile run. He liked to run on an empty stomach because he was

quicker and the endorphin rush came on faster. Toward the end of the run he'd start to feel faint, and the last quarter mile was always a glorious near-death-twinkling-lights sprint to the refrigerator, where he cooled himself in the open door, popping seedless grapes until his blood sugar stabilized. That set him right, so he could continue with his complicated routine of crunches and pushups until his fishing show started. *Those fishing guys were insane!* He ate pumpkin seeds (zinc for his sperm) and PowerBars (protein for muscle mass) in front of the television until he drifted off to sleep. At some point there was a blueberry (antioxidants) and flaxseed (artery cleaner) smoothie with raw eggs (great for skin elasticity and follicle stimulation, he'd read). Later, he would shower, continue whatever game he was on, do a little light housework, and try to resist the late afternoon nap, which, since the squirrels arrived, had to be carefully timed.

The squirrels had him on edge, but he liked that; it gave his days a satisfying tension. Besides, he was used to them now, just as he was once used to a paycheck, driving to an office, downing so much coffee his pee looked like maple syrup. He could drop a C-note on steak *frites* and a Caesar salad at eleven o'clock at night, drink until two a.m. Four hours of sleep and back at it. All that, which was once normal and boring in its own way, was now foreign, and he had to admit, in memory at least, that he missed those days, feeling like nothing could happen—nothing *would* happen—without his approval. The problem—the *eternal problem*—was that familiarity, in his experience, bred complacency, laziness in fact, never contempt. He'd take contempt any day. If only he had some real contempt for his life, then maybe he could do something about it. Turn things around. That's what was on his mind when the ringing phone startled him out of half sleep.

It was Mandy saying, "I've called twice already." She asked him about the squirrels, and he lied and said that he'd left messages for a few exterminators. She wanted to know how many. She wanted him to get estimates before agreeing to anything. She wanted to be there for the estimates. She wanted to talk to the guy first. Actually, she wanted to handle the whole thing.

She hung up and called right back.

She said she didn't want to handle it after all. She worked ten-

hour days, she said, in case he had forgotten. He said squirrels were harmless. She said they were rodents that spread disease through their feces. “Are you going to take care of this?” she wanted to know. “I mean, tell me if you’re not going to do it. I’ll do it. I just need to know.” He said he would do it. Later, he heard them congregating in the ceiling and felt a pang of regret. He had lured them in and now he was having them killed. Nice. Just the kind of guy who should be a father.

Mandy kept a picture of Ned on her desk, a photograph from the trip they took when he proposed. The morning the photograph was taken, Ned had called her at work and told her to be out front at one o’clock. He’d cleared it with her boss and packed the bags. By eight o’clock that night they were in a speedboat, spearing every wave between their rum punches and the villa rental where they would never get around to having sex by their private Infinity pool, but that hardly mattered. All the nervous, excited energy killed the mood.

She couldn’t think what their excuse was these days.

He was pudgy back then with floppy licks of wavy hair that gave him a bloated, late Jim Morrison look, but from a certain angle and in the ocean light, Mandy could see him as he would be someday, just as Michelangelo looked at that block of marble and saw David: Ned had been there all along, just waiting to be chiseled free. Why, she wondered, did she still have this old picture out instead of showing off her new and improved Ned? True, muscles weren’t really her thing—they reminded her of supermarket meat, top blade, rump roast, chuck bulging beneath the smooth plastic wrap. Brazen vanity was a big turnoff, too. And it had long been her opinion that conventional beauty was really just a matter of proper diet and exercise anyway. Still, there was something else about this handsome unemployed husband of hers that made her uneasy, something she didn’t want to be reminded of at work, or anywhere, really. It was simply a fact of social Darwinism: She was not nearly pretty enough or successful enough to attract a man as beautiful as Ned was now. She suspected women looked at him in the grocery store, the V of his broad shoulders and tight ass, his big hands, and thought, “I bet he even knows how to fold fitted sheets.” Ned wouldn’t need a job to get a trophy wife. He

could be a pool boy, a doyenne's shirtless gardener. Not that he would ever know this, and she wasn't going to tell him. It was her bittersweet consolation that Ned's love of computer games kept him in the house, hidden from the greedy eyes of better women.

Later that afternoon, instead of finding an exterminator, Ned had read an article on andropause and now he suspected his testosterone was low. He was young, but the symptoms matched—depression, fatigue, apathy, no sex drive. He knew this should probably be disturbing news, but he was elated. This problem, indeed *all* his problems, could be fixed with a shot or a patch. He was practically giddy, as giddy as a man with low testosterone could be, thinking about it.

When Mandy got home that evening he made skinless chicken breasts, fennel and orange salad, and five small boiled potatoes, two for himself and three for her. She talked about a movie she wanted to see that weekend and said they should make a night of it, go out “somewhere with atmosphere. Belly dancers, I don't care.” She was asking him questions, touching his hand on the table. She was wearing lip gloss. It was unmistakable: His wife was *into* him. *Careful*, he told himself. Any little thing could mess it up. The likelihood of sex was good, less good if he told her about his testosterone problem, so he kept that to himself and followed her around the house even though his favorite show was on TV. She didn't say a word about the squirrels.

Sitting on the kitchen stool, he watched her fill the sink with soapy water, brush a few rogue bubbles from her blouse, all the while humming to herself—the picture of domestic harmony—and he felt so good in that moment that he blurted out he might apply for one of those reality shows.

Her shoulders twitched and squared themselves. “You've had lunch with Bill Gates,” she said.

There was a time and a place when that didn't mean anything—Who *hadn't* had lunch with Bill Gates? Mandy, of all people, knew that, and so the fact that she now tossed out the name as the pinnacle of his success made him feel pathetic.

“I know. I know,” he said, trying to maintain some enthusiasm. “But I can be the *smart* one. That'll be my secret weapon. See? The good guy, the smart one.”

“That guy always loses,” she said.

Mandy went to bed early. Ned had fallen asleep in front of the TV and she didn't want to wake him for fear he might want to talk about the baby. To ensure that didn't happen, she turned out the lights, tiptoed upstairs, jabbed in her earplugs, and burrowed inside herself, listening to the white noise of her own body, her blood pumping, the easy rhythm of her lungs, the soft swishing sound she imagined to be her cells dividing. These last few months she'd been waiting for a second set of sounds, a primordial flutter, but there was nothing new yet. She pictured cells expanding and splitting, until a neo-Impressionist picture of the baby formed in her mind. Asleep, she could see that the baby was only one small part of a larger scene, like the Seurat painting of ladies holding parasols and tall, thin men watching a lake.

Downstairs, thunder woke Ned in the night. He tucked himself around Mandy, her hair against his chin, a hand on her hip, careful not to squash the tiny baby inside. It was a relief to think about the baby, if there was a baby.

After his morning run, Ned paged through Mandy's cooking magazines, trying to find something to eat mentally. He was getting binge cravings again, but as long as he had food porn he could keep his weight down and his urges in check. He studied the six-page pictorial of “Southern Delights”—fried chicken, mashed potatoes, cheese biscuits, and coconut layer cake—and then skimmed the articles. There was one about why a piece-of-crap fish like Arctic char cost thirty bucks at trendy restaurants. Apparently, somewhere between the imported butter and the electric bill and the linen service and the management and the line cooks and the publicist, that \$1.75 piece of fish turned into gold. That's how it was with his company: Such a small idea; nothing—literally—just space, empty digital space. But once all the investors got involved, that space became expensive and then everyone decided it was good—hell, it was great!—it was the place to be. *Sink your money into this big empty space hole!* Fill this big empty space hole with crap from your hard drive. All the crap you don't really need but can't part with. It was a genius idea, storing all the data people didn't use but couldn't trash. He'd read that the best business models exploit basic hu-

man impulses, and theirs was that people can't let go of stuff, even stuff that doesn't really exist.

Mandy had left him a one-item to-do list on the kitchen counter: SQUIRRELS!!! There were twelve extermination companies in the phone book. She would want him to call them all, set up appointments, take notes, report back. He called one, Catch and Release, and he imagined his squirrels would go to live on a farm with all the moles and raccoons and mice and blue jays and rabbits that nobody wanted around anymore. He set up an appointment with a guy named Dirk for the next morning, purposefully early so he'd have to shave and get dressed before Mandy left for work. He could go for his run at dawn, while Mandy was in the shower, and then, after the squirrel guy, he'd make some of those work calls he'd been putting off. He'd do an extra set of pushups and lat presses. Order some testosterone patches online from Canada. And he'd clean the bathtub.

The fishing guys were on, reeling in a tarpon with breakfast beers tucked between their legs. As he watched the fish writhe on the boat deck, the camera closing in on its frantic eye, he felt an inexplicable surge of optimism. He lived in a time when nobodies got paid to do basically nothing—these guys fishing, *on TV*, not even for food. That's when he decided the next day would be the first day of his comeback.

By Mandy's recollection she was late, but she couldn't be sure because she wasn't allowed to look at her personal calendar, which she had hidden in the copy room after her last fertility treatment. She had told herself that this time she would not count the days.

She was thirty-three and in excellent health. In fact, on the very first visit to the clinic the doctor had said she shouldn't have a problem conceiving. He had flipped through her chart, clicking his pen distractedly and, looking them both over, said, "Golly, do you have sex?"

It was Ned who piped up, "Twice a week," and that was their new reality, the reality of a couple who had sex twice a week and yet could not conceive a child. It *was* twice a week, Mandy had decided later, if you averaged it out all seven years.

The doctor had suggested the Clomid Challenge, to which Mandy smiled knowingly; she thought he was making a doc-

tor joke—Challenge! like the competition in middle school for who could read the most books in a month. But no, that’s exactly what they called this particular science experiment. (The nurses, she would later find out, just called it “the crazy pills.”) It came as no surprise to Mandy that fertility specialists, like everyone else, had given up on Latin, preferring instead a kind of plainspoken English that made everything sound like an insult: When they said, “blighted ovum” or “incompetent cervix” or “hostile mucus” or “luteal phase defect” or “premature ovarian failure,” it was personal, tough love.

Their second visit to the fertility clinic, Mandy had paged through these and other shockingly literal medical terms while, in another room, Ned gathered his “sample.”

Fecundability: the ability to become pregnant.

The waiting room was a study in failure and Mandy wanted no part of it. Anxious couples sucked on mints and whispered reassurances to one another. One poor woman silently wept into her purse. A young man and an older woman read the same Michael Crichton novel, his in hardcover, hers paperback. Mandy sat still and rigid, as if trying not to breathe the contaminated air. Her story was different. A baby wasn’t going to make or break them. In a few hours they would know whose fault it was, then it would be over. She’d already accepted her dubious fecundability. Ned suffered premature career failure. She considered him incompetent at most things, which made her seem hostile. Their dilapidated Victorian was in a nearly blighted neighborhood. And one of them—or maybe both of them—was surely defective.

A watery feeling of inevitability washed over her. The room with its Pap smear artwork, mauve chairs, and strategically placed Kleenex boxes reminded her of the clinic she went to in college, when her best friend got pregnant. She had waited for hours, reading *The Economics of Social Change*, until a nurse led her to the recovery room. There, under fluorescent lights, eight woozy women reclined in pink Lay-Z-boys, with heating pads on their bellies and Sprite in their cup holders. Her friend’s lips were paler than the rest of her face, and all she said was, “Nobody tells you it hurts.”

Ned came out to the waiting room, and before Mandy could say something encouraging he’d already grabbed a magazine.

It was *Parenting* magazine with an eerily soulful baby on the cover, a worldly-wise baby, a baby whose baby pose was either humoring or mocking the readers' parent pose. Ned shoved the baby under the other magazines on the table and crossed and uncrossed his legs. Mandy put her cheek on his shoulder. His head balanced against hers and their muscles unfurled together. His neck smelled like the bright yellow soap she remembered from elementary school, and she planted a kiss there that made him sigh.

Mandy noticed they were the only ones in the room touching each other and that, she decided, was because they were the only ones who really understood what was going on: Getting pregnant had always been this difficult, but until someone realized there was money to be made in it, no one talked about it. Sometimes she thought she should have lived in the years before the Hoover administration, when women with tipped uteruses and blocked tubes and eggs of questionable quality were simply told that they couldn't have children, and so those women drank sherry and wrote political essays and cultivated the adoration of small, well-bred dogs. Being barren wasn't so bad back then. Expectations were managed accordingly. Women found new hobbies. Some men didn't want children anyway. Some women didn't want men. But sometime between Eisenhower and Carter, defective plumbing went from a fact of life to a social problem, and social problems cried out to be fixed. Then, along came Reagan and there were reports that getting pregnant was as easy as buying a Cadillac with food stamps, which happened all the time, apparently. The problem was, *too many* women were pregnant. Too many babies! The babies were bankrupting the nation. Barren women must have hidden in shame because Mandy didn't remember hearing a peep from them.

Ned had heard most of this before, usually between first and third cocktails back when they were only half trying to have a baby.

The low groan of the air conditioner switched off, exposing and then amplifying the timid sounds of the room. All movement seemed to freeze for an excruciating second. Then, a magazine page fluttered and fell. A shoe tapped the carpet. Denim rubbed against upholstery. Mandy whispered in Ned's ear,

“This is how the dinosaurs died out.” He squeezed her hand and continued reading an article on middle-aged surfers.

There was a snuffle from the ficus tree, and a noisy wrapper by the exit. Mandy could not tolerate the paralytic silence that followed. “What bothers me is that we were told *anybody* could get pregnant—it only takes one time,” she said. “The thing to know was how *not* to get pregnant.”

“That’s public school for you,” Ned said.

“Seriously.” Across the coffee table a man pressed his hand against his wife’s stomach, protectively or territorially, Mandy could not decide. “You know who I blame?” she said.

“DEET?” Ned said. “I know, red M&M’s.” He noticed the husbands giving each other the should-we-storm-the-cockpit look, so he reached for Mandy’s hand. She was already standing, hitching her purse on her shoulder.

“I blame *this* place,” she announced.

Gasps exploded around them like tiny synchronized land mines. In the lobby Mandy gathered a handful of infertility brochures—*evidence!*—and shoved them into her purse. It was clear to her then: She had not wanted a baby until she started reading the propaganda, and even then it was not so much the baby she wanted as the pregnancy. Once it was something to be earned, she had set her mind on earning it, the progeny of struggle, a prize. Yes! That’s how these places lured women like her, once content with their sherry and small dogs and great causes. Given a personal failure to overcome, a social problem to fix, all of them were loathe to turn from such a spectacular challenge.

Challenge!

Six months ago that was how Mandy felt, but after a Clomid Challenge, three IUIs, and the looming prospect of IVF, she was desperate for the baby. The doctor had said there was no one to blame, no reason to doubt it would happen for them. Except the doctor didn’t really know her, didn’t know her ambivalence about motherhood, didn’t know about all those years of trying *not* to get pregnant. She didn’t deserve a baby, and so, as absurd as it was, she tried to counter her bad baby karma with complete detachment. She would pretend not to care. And to prove it, she had hidden her personal calendar on the top shelf in the

copy room under the blue memo paper that nobody used. She would not count the days. She did not take the early test.

It will work, she told herself, and then, just as quickly, she corrected the thought: *Not that it matters*.

The following morning Ned awoke to aggressive knocking. He had only intended to close his eyes for a few minutes while Mandy got ready for work. He grabbed a T-shirt and sweatpants from the floor and pulled them on, stumbling down the hallway to the stairs. There was a man at the front door, burly and bald with a big gold loop earring, a dark mustache, and a fading green tattoo on the side of his neck. The guy pointed to the name on his shirt, and Ned opened the door with a thousand apologies. “Dirk, man. I’m so sorry!” Too late Ned realized he was wearing his wife’s fuchsia sorority T-shirt, which rode up to his belly button, and that he had bed hair and a film on his teeth and it was nearly ten o’clock in the morning, so he added, “Keep your distance. I’ve got a flu bug.”

This explanation put Dirk at ease, and he smiled as he walked past Ned into the living room. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “The wife and kids had it last week. I’m immune. Cool space.” He made a sharp whistling sound through his teeth. “1890s. The real deal. So, where they hiding out?”

Ned coughed feebly and pointed to the ceiling. “Upstairs bedroom, the hallway next to the bathroom, down here in the living room. All over, really. We’re infested.” Ned coughed again.

“Got to get that stuff up, brother. I’ll look around.” Ned hid in the downstairs bathroom until he heard Dirk outside unloading traps from his truck. When he saw Dirk lean a ladder against the house, he changed clothes and ran outside; he’d always wanted to take a walk on his roof.

“Hey,” he called out. “Need some help?” He remembered he was supposed to be sick, so he coughed, rubbed his hand across his nose, and sniffled.

“Hand me one of those cages.” Dirk was straddling a dormer.

Ned stacked two traps on his shoulder and climbed the ladder two rungs at a time. “What’s the bait?” he asked.

Dirk pulled out a putty knife and a jar of peanut butter. “Peanut butter’s a perfect food. It’s got fats, carbs, protein. If it eats, it eats peanut butter.” He had already secured a trap under the

south eave and was spreading a big glob of peanut butter on the little metal tray inside.

Mandy was the exception to this universal peanut butter rule—she hated the smell—but thinking about it now, he knew Dirk was right: *What kind of monster didn't eat peanut butter?* He handed the other trap to Dirk, who was balancing majestically on the mossy roof like one of those Austrian mountaineers.

"I'll set a few more today. Come back tomorrow, see what we've got."

"How many days do you think it will take?" Ned asked, wiping his nose on his sleeve. Mandy would want to know. Mandy would have wanted to know all the specifics before any traps were set. He hadn't even asked how much it would cost.

Dirk raked his bottom teeth over his mustache. "Hard to say."

Ned brought up more traps from the truck and with each Dirk disappeared over the ridge line until six were set along the perimeter of the roof. Dirk started down the ladder. There was a twinge of panic in Ned's voice as he said, "Thanks for coming on such short notice." He was thinking of Mandy.

"That's my job." Dirk said he was a chimney sweep in the fall, did pool maintenance in the summer, volunteered at the botanical garden in the spring to help out their arborist. "I prune the topiary. I'd like to learn ice carving, but there's no market for it."

Ned had tried to lie to Mandy about estimates before—the episode with the electrician still haunted him.

"Chain saws," said Ned, trying to keep the conversation going. "Chain saws are good." His brain was locked up. *Monkey. Mandy.* Dirk stuck out his hand, a hand Ned noticed was creased and calloused. Hiding his own smooth keyboard hands in his pockets, he stammered, "Germs," then coughed. "So, what's the damage?"

"You got a shitload of squirrels in there. If they haven't eaten your insulation or died in your walls, I'd say we can wrap up in a week or so. That is, if we can figure out how they're getting in."

Ned wanted to know what he planned to do if the squirrels had, indeed, eaten the insulation or, God forbid, died in there, inside the inside of his house.

"Open the walls! Enjoy your day off, brother. Feel better."

As Dirk's truck pulled away, Ned realized that besides not

having an estimate for Mandy, he'd need to come up with some pretend work to go with his pretend flu as long as Dirk was around. He couldn't tell a man with four jobs that he didn't have one, or that the one he used to have was pretty much fake. Dirk seemed like the kind of guy who could see through a racket. He brokered in the real, the living, not some chickenshit space hole.

Ned was showered and dressed by the time Mandy left for work the next day. It was drizzling outside, and inside the humid and shadowy house Ned felt trapped like a specimen in a terrarium. As he sipped his smoothie, the squirrels raced along the ceiling joists. Really, they were more like kids every day, the way they ran through the house, the way you could tell them a thousand times not to run through the house but they'd do it anyway. The beleaguered kinship parents felt with their misbehaving children had never made sense to him until right then.

Dirk was at the door. "Got three," he shouted through the glass. Ned let him in. "Another good thing about peanut butter," he said, his bald head glistening with rain. "It's weather-proof." That morning Ned helped Dirk set four more traps on the roof and six others around the yard. Dirk said with good weather they should catch them all in a few days.

Ned tapped the top of a cage. "You're off to the squirrel farm. The Playboy mansion for squirrels." He pointed to the cage Dirk was loading into his truck. "That one never did learn to eat out of my hand."

Dirk tossed the cage on top of the others and the squirrels tumbled inside. "Brother, you shouldn't feed squirrels," he said. "They're disease carriers. No wonder you're sick."

"Oh, I didn't," Ned said, defensively. "Just once." He couldn't remember whether the farm was something he had made up or something Dirk had told him on the phone. He had such a clear picture of this farm in his mind. There was a pond and a grove of tall oaks and a field of lettuce just for the rabbits. He said, "Where do you take them, anyway?"

"To the park," Dirk said, letting one simian arm swing out his truck window. "Sometimes, if I'm pissed at someone, I'll let a few go in their yard. I did that with field mice. My ex-girl-friend. I let them out near this hole in her basement window.

She has a cat, so it worked out.” He peeled back his lips in a smile that showed for the first time long, yellow teeth and a double-studded tongue. “What you need,” he said, revving the engine, “is a big fucking dog. I got two. A pit bull—”

At the word dog Ned perked up. “What’s his name?”

“Toots. And we’ve got a Schnauzer Doberman mix—”

“Ah, nice!” said Ned. “What’s his name?”

“Marie.”

Anyone with two dogs couldn’t be all bad. “Good names!” And he meant it. All dogs had good names.

“My wife’s name is Marie, but I had the dog first.”

Ned imagined what kind of dog would be named Mandy—a furry little mop that pissed on people’s feet. He wanted a Lab or Newfoundland named Burt. He told Dirk this.

“You want girls,” Dirk said, slapping the side of his truck. “They’re more loyal, fierce. They’re territorial, my ladies. A squirrel wouldn’t stand a chance in my yard.”

Mandy ordered a spinach salad and an orange juice for lunch. She bought two pregnancy tests and put them in her purse for later. She did not call home. She did not have her afternoon coffee. She went to the bathroom six times—nothing. She felt queasy and her temples throbbed. All of it was happening just as the books said it would. Even the part about not wanting the baby—that was from the hormones, normal pregnancy hormones.

All this inner certainty before she took the test was dangerous, so she tried to allow herself only the tiniest bit of happiness, while the other 95 percent of her needed to think she was coming down with the flu. She imagined Ned at his computer, blowing up prostitutes with Molotov cocktails, his obsessive exercise, his scavenger diet of nuts and twigs, the minty hair gel, and in no time she had made herself feel worse about her marriage and that, in turn, made her feel much better about her chances of being pregnant. (*Single women got pregnant all the time!*)

When she walked in the door at home that night, she was ready to take the test—there was even a dusty bottle of champagne in the hall closet—but the plan quickly went to hell. Ned was in the study playing a game with the volume turned up, and

the synthetic din of squealing rubber and gunfire obliterated all evidence of her arrival, the front door slamming shut, her heels on the wood floor, her bag dropping on a chair with a jingle. He had ordered Indian for dinner, and she picked at a plate of cold vindaloo, watching the clock until an hour had passed. Ned did not come out of the study and she did not go in. She left her plate on the counter for him to find later and walked up the stairs holding her shoes loosely in one hand, letting them batter the banister rails. She would not take the test. Instead, she would take a very long, very hot bath with his eucalyptus salts. Pregnant women, she had read, should not take long hot baths.

That night Mandy slept curled like a snail on her side of the bed; on his, Ned sprawled out like a hit-and-run victim from the demo he'd downloaded that afternoon.

Mandy kicked the front door and waited. The groceries were heavy, but she didn't want to lean over to put them down. Her back was aching, her blouse clung to her with sweat, and a neon pain had spread to the backs of her eyeballs so that when she looked anywhere but straight ahead she winced. If this was pregnancy—*what else could it be?*—she already hated it. She had come home early from work to try, one more time, to talk to Ned and take the test, though she already knew the result would be positive.

In the corner of the yard she noticed a dead squirrel just outside one of the cages. A swarm of large green flies rammed each other above it. She kicked the door again until Ned appeared, a crease of sleep slashed his cheek and his eyes were gluey and pink.

"Are you sick?" she asked. It was not the tone she had meant to set.

"I missed you, too," he said, taking the bags from her. "You're early."

She followed him to the kitchen. "You look like you've been asleep."

"Nope. Working all day. Just staring at the computer screen too long."

This was such an obvious lie, she couldn't let it stand. "Did

you break your high score?” She sat on a stool and put her chin in her hands.

“Games are no longer about keeping score, they’re about completing missions.” He took the orange juice out of the bag and drank straight from the carton.

“Just let me know if I can help.” She watched him ferry groceries to the wrong cabinets. “There’s a dead squirrel out front,” she said.

He stopped unpacking the bags and like a little kid he raced to the window. “Dirk didn’t come today. Poor little guy.”

Mandy had noticed that animals were always *guys* or *fellas* even when, with dogs anyway, they were technically *bitches*. “I think he was attacked trying to get into the cage,” she said.

“Shit.” He slapped the windowsill. His face was red, bunched. “Oh, shit.” He turned to the window and then back to Mandy. “We killed him.”

He stood there waiting, she knew, for her to say something—but what? What could she say about a filthy rodent they had wanted to get rid of anyway? Her face had no expression aside from slight bewilderment. Ned took off outside. He circled the squirrel and pushed it into the cage with his foot.

“Mandy!” he hollered. She came out casually, as though she didn’t know what all the fuss was about. The flies were as big as pennies with green metallic bodies. The squirrel was on its side, its hind legs had been chewed off and its fur was clumped with dried blood. From its belly a deep purple organ stuck out like a tongue.

Ned kept saying, “Look at him!”

“Nice gibs,” Mandy said, peering into the cage. It was a word she’d picked up from him, shorthand for *giblets*, which was gamespeak for the viscera in these kill-or-be-killed computer games. A fake word for fake guts in fake people, dying, one pixel at a time, in a fake world. Ned had told her: The more realistic the game, the better the gibs.

Pronounced with a hard “g,” *gib* also meant “castrated male cat,” but Mandy had not told Ned this.

“The one day Dirk doesn’t come,” Ned said, rubbing his head and looking up at the sky.

Mandy went back inside. Her lower back throbbed, and she

was tired enough to go to bed. It shouldn't have surprised her then when she went to the bathroom and saw the rusty streak in her underwear. As soon as she saw it, she recognized the fluttery, cascading feeling deep in her abdomen, like a piggy bank upturned, emptying its thousand dimes. She called out to her husband, "Sweetie," and then louder, "Ned?"

He didn't answer. She went to the window and saw him in the yard with a towel, picking up the cage as though it was a bomb, and running with it to the garbage can. He set it on top and left the towel over it. The flies were not fooled and continued to beat their bodies against the terry cloth that had already absorbed the sour smell of blood.

"What got it?" she asked, poking her head out the screened door.

"Raccoons. A dog."

"A dingo ate my baby!" she yelled. Ned had brought that movie to her apartment one night when she had food poisoning, just before they moved in together.

"You never did like animals," he said, glaring at her. "That's an awful way to go."

"Yes," she said, her laughter lurched to a stop. Her eyes stung. Her nose was running, too. "It is."

She wiped her marshy face; all that loose water, her reservoir draining, fluid no longer needed in her ankles, belly, breasts. Soon she would dry up, shrink, and harden, like the petrified orange she recently found behind the TV. Now nothing seemed funny and she wanted more than anything to say something cruel, something to shake his self-righteous sentimentality from that cage, his concerned eyes from that rodent and onto her.

But she couldn't say it. She couldn't say it to him. Where were those heartbroken eyes when she needed them?

He skulked inside, letting the screen door slap in its frame. Maybe, she thought, he's already forgotten about the baby. She wouldn't have to mention it. They could just go on as they did before. *And how was that again?* She reached back through the recent memories into the distant ones until something recognizable darted from shadow into light and back, like a cockroach skittering under a couch.

From the top of the stairs Ned called out to her in an excited whisper. She found him in the doorway of their bedroom, look-

ing pleased. He put a finger to his lips and motioned for her to come over, but quietly. She did. Gently, he pressed her ear to the wall. "Listen," he mouthed. "They're still here."

What she heard first was the claws, nasty little hooks, scraping the insides raw. Ned stood by looking proud, relieved, taunting her failure, it seemed to her at the time, with his success. He stood there until her fists on the wall scattered them up and down, everywhere at once.