

Jacob Appel

FALLOUT

After a long day manufacturing musical sex toys, Maggie's husband studies chemical warfare at the mahogany table in their dining room. He insists his expertise will transfer. Genius is genius. First he gathers up all of his experimental merchandise—panties that sing “God Bless America,” clarinet-shaped phalluses that play Benny Goodman's greatest hits—and stashes them under the sink. In their place he stacks volumes with the most menacing of titles: *Tomorrow's Chemical Holocaust; An Idiot's Guide to Bioterrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction*. He's checked out almost an entire section at the branch library and Maggie fears what the librarians must think. She is trying to be patient and giving—that's what pediatric nurses do, after all—but Frank's nightly lectures on paralytic gasses and blistering agents are wearing her down.

The acute fear Maggie senses behind his jittery humor surprises her. It is she—not he—who should be traumatized: *She* was downtown renewing her driver's license when the Trade Center crumbled; *she* was among the refugees who streamed aimlessly over the 59th Street Bridge. He was at his Jersey City office watching CNN. But three days into the tragedy, once they've checked that all of their friends are alive and she's switched her radio from news back to oldies, when she's thinking that tonight they should try for a baby again, Frank returns from his office lugging three milk crates of books. He smiles with his lips but not his eyes. He says, “I just want to look into some things.” She remembers this phrase from his final months of law school, when he brought home the books on starting up a business. He'd read ravenously for several weeks and then predicted: “Well, darling, we're going to be rich.” Now he slaps shut the last of his books and announces, with equal assurance, “We're all going to die.”

Maggie slides behind her husband's chair and massages his shoulders. She's ordered in *pad thai* with oysters, even lit a candle in the kitchen. “If that's the way it's going to be,” she says, raking her fingertips across his chest and under his tie, “let's die like rabbits.”

“I'm being serious,” says Frank. He shifts his weight; she removes her hand. “What are you going to do when they start spraying sarin on the subways?”

“Please, Frank,” she says. “I've been up since five a.m.”

“I know you don't want to hear this,” he persists. “But you're going to listen. I love you too much to let you die of anthrax or botulism.”

“Nobody's dying of anything,” she says.

“Not yet.”

Maggie takes hold of his big broad hand and presses his palm against the flesh of her abdomen. This is their code for “Let's go make a baby.”

Frank extricates himself. “That's something I've been thinking about too,” he says. “Do you really want to bring another life into a world like this one?”

She retreats to the kitchen and packs his untouched meal in foil. He follows her and tries to wrap his arm around her waist, but now she shakes herself free. “I want to have a baby,” she snaps. “Three weeks ago *we* wanted to have a baby. What's happening, Frank?”

“Maybe it's just something in the air,” he says. “I don't know.”

When Maggie sees him slumped in a kitchen chair, his shirtsleeves rolled up and his exposed hairy forearms resting on the table, she softens quickly. She asks, “Is there anything I can do?”

“It's just something I feel inside me,” says Frank. “When I told you five years ago that singing dildos were going to send our kids to college, you believed in me. Have some faith in me now.”

“I'm trying. You have to believe me.”

“Let's move to the country,” he says. “To the middle of nowhere.”

She doesn't say anything, at first. She hears the hum of the refrigerator, and at a distance the lonely mewing of the neighbor's cat.

“What’s really keeping us in New York?” he asks. “We could go out to the Canadian Rockies. We could do anything. We could start a dairy farm in Vermont.”

“We’re Jews,” says Maggie. “What do we know from dairy farming?”

“That’s exactly what my Uncle Mendel said in Grodno. ‘We’re Jews. What do we know from America?’”

They’ve been married six years and she still can’t keep his relatives straight. “Mendel’s the one who tried to assassinate the czar, right?”

“No,” he says. “That’s my *cousin*, Little Mendel. My Uncle Mendel’s the one who died at Treblinka.”

They compromise on three acres in Millbrook Heights. The converted carriage house was once attached to the estate of a Dutch patroon, but the quaint half doors and yellow brick exterior of the seventeenth-century structure are complimented by a new wing with an elevated veranda and an indoor Jacuzzi. A three-hundred-year-old oak—once a treaty oak—forms a canopy over the belly of the yard. Financially, of course, the place is a stretch. Maybe even a leap. It also adds another hour to Maggie’s commute. Yet the upside is that they’re an hour up the Hudson, that they’re well beyond what Frank calls *the strike zone*. If Times Square were assaulted with napalm, they might not even notice. And there are other advantages too: They will be able to send their children to the public schools and they will be able to grow their own vegetables and they will be able to visit Maggie’s father on the weekends. When spring rolls around, they’ll even be able to bring the old man home-grown zucchini and pattypan squash.

Maggie’s father is serving three years for art fraud: he’d doctored several seascapes purchased at an oyster bar and sold them to a software mogul as Winslow Homers. Since the jury acquitted him of the more serious offense—using the proceeds of the sale to take out a hit on his mistress—he is confined to the minimum security prison at Wardelsburg. Maggie and her sister, Carreen, have taken his side against their mother. Maggie brings him pickles from Riverdale and *maatjes* herring and back copies of *Equestrian Life*. Carreen, a librarian on a cruise ship, sends cigars from overseas. Then Carreen gets laid off unexpectedly and takes a job as a cocktail waitress. She comes to stay with Maggie and Frank until she can get back on her feet. It all happens fast. On their first Sunday in the new house, less than a month after the Trade Center disaster, all three of them drive up to Wardelsburg for the afternoon.

The Wardelsburg prison used to be an antebellum fort; Maggie brings a picnic lunch to eat on the parade ground. She has told her sister several times to dress modestly, but Carreen’s idea of modesty permits a bare midriff.

Frank drops the sisters at the gate but does not follow. There is no love lost between him and Jack Sheldrake. The old man vehemently disapproves of his son-in-law’s business (“You have to draw a line somewhere!” he bellows), while Frank calls Sheldrake “Old Fuss ’n’ Feathers” behind his back. If Maggie or Carreen knew how to drive, he would stay home. When he picks them up at the curbside six hours later, he can’t resist a barb. He asks, “Is the Boston Strangler cheating Old Fuss ’n’ Feathers at poker again?”

“You know it’s not that kind of prison,” Maggie says. “I told you Daddy rooms with two state senators and a former federal judge.”

“The Boston Strangler is dead,” says Carreen. “He was stabbed to death in prison.”

Frank grins. “Did Old Fuss ’n’ Feathers call the hit on that one too?”

“Knock it off, Frank,” says Carreen. “You’re playing the wrong crowd.”

“Please,” begs Maggie. “Let’s talk about something else.”

They drive silently through the reds and yellows of the valley. Cabins and bungalows speckle the wooded foothills that climb to the horizon. At intervals the foliage breaks to reveal a jaded farmhouse set in a clump of pasture, or a giant plywood apple and an exhortation to “Pick Your Own” at an upcoming exit. There are also goats and stupid-looking cattle. Maggie is relieved they haven’t moved this far into the country.

“Different topic,” says Carreen suddenly. “How are you two making out in the baby-hatching department? I’ve been stockpiling names all summer.”

Maggie throws Frank a searching glance. He looks about to speak when she says, “We’ve actually decided to hold off for a bit. Maybe next year.”

“That’s a change,” says Carreen, sounding put out. “I thought you were in quite a hurry.”

“With the move and all,” says Maggie, sharply, “we’ve decided to wait.”

“These are dangerous times,” says Frank. “Quite honestly, we weren’t sure if the world was ready for our child yet.”

Carreen frowns and bites her lip.

“That reminds me,” says Frank. “Take a look in there.”

He indicates a large brown paper bag resting on the floor beside the gear shift. Maggie opens it and removes a large rubber face resembling an elephant with an amputated trunk. She looks up, puzzled.

“Gas masks,” says Frank. “Three of them.”

“I thought we were over this,” says Maggie.

“Better safe than sorry. I also have cbr suits in the trunk.”

“cbr?”

“Chemical, biological, and radioactive.”

Maggie’s husband briefly explains that with regular practice, one can learn to don both suit and mask in less than forty-five seconds. His new theory is that the suburbs will be targeted; that’s where terrorists can provoke the most fear while facing the least resistance. “And if they do send a crop duster over the property or hit the nuclear reactor at Indian Point, forty-five seconds is about as much time as we’ll have. That’s why we chose Millbrook Heights. It’s the farthest in the area you can get from the reactor and still see the flash. If you’re in the meltdown zone but too far away to see the flash, you don’t get any warning. Then you’re dead.”

“Are you for real?” asks Carreen.

“You have to plan ahead,” says Frank. “Noah didn’t wait for raindrops.”

“He’s flipped,” Carreen says to her sister. “You do realize that, don’t you?”

Maggie’s eyes implore her sister to keep quiet; Carreen shrugs.

“Tell me, Frank, how far are you going to go with this logic?” Carreen asks. “The next time it clouds over, are you going to build an ark?”

“We don’t need an ark,” says Frank. “We need a fallout shelter.”

Frank finds the architects in the Yellow Pages. They’re a father and son team, J & J Rechter, and while they’ve never built a fallout shelter—*none* of the fifty-three firms in the phone book has any experience building fallout shelters—they have designed underground firing ranges for several local high schools. Jarvice Rechter’s shoulders are broad and stiff like the arms of a coat hanger; he sports a windbreaker and work boots. His son, Jarod, wears a blazer and carries blueprints. Pencil stubs protrude from behind both men’s ears.

Since Maggie refuses to expose the architects to the racy merchandise stacked ceiling-high in the living room, their initial meeting takes place on the veranda. The visit feels like a social call and Maggie wonders if her sister will hit it off with the junior architect. She serves pink lemonade all around; Carreen tops her own glass off with Tanqueray.

Jarvice Rechter surveys the property. “It’s a nice piece of land you have here.”

“It’s not the country,” says Frank. “But what can you do?”

“My second wife had a thing for the country. Not Jarod’s mamma; the one after. She was always on my case to open a bed & breakfast on the coast of Wales.”

“She was Welsh,” inserts the son.

The father scratches his scalp. “It wasn’t for me though,” he says. “I sent her out there sure enough and she ended up married to some retired botanist. A Dutchman, I think.”

“A Dane,” says the son. “From Denmark.”

“What I’m trying to say,” the father continues, “is that there’s city mice and country mice. I’m always going to be a city mouse myself; there’s no two ways about it.”

A cardboard box under the table catches Maggie’s eye. Frank has brought the ridiculous suits and masks out onto the veranda. This is more mortifying than the musical underwear, somehow worse than even the fallout shelter. She quickly picks up the box and carries it into the house. When she returns, carrying an Entemann’s crumb cake and a stack of paper plates, her husband is pacing the deck like an expectant father. Sweat forms a bib on his shirt.

“But you’re sure you can do it?” he says. “You’re sure your heart will be in it?”

“I’m telling you I can do it,” says Jarvice Rechter. “I was merely expressing a personal, nonprofessional opinion. Speaking man to man, I think you’d be better off building a swimming pool. There’s no better exercise than a good dip in the morning. You’ll even live longer. Professionally speaking, of course, it’s a different matter. There the customer is always right.”

Frank nods. “I didn’t mean to snap at you, Rechter. It’s just that this is important to me. There’s a lot at stake.” He pours the rainwater off a chaise longue and seats himself on the dry edge. “Anyway, let’s do some business.”

Carreen takes that cue to stroll off onto the lawn.

Jarvice Rechter strikes a match on his boot and lights a cigarette. “There’s lots of ways we can do this,” he says. “You want cheap or expensive?”

Maggie’s husband does not look at her. She knows she should say something—she envisions a giant concrete shell sucking up their children’s college tuition—but thinks it best to wait until later. Frank is much easier to manage in private, she has learned.

Frank says, “We want state of the art.”

“It’ll take a month.”

“Three weeks,” says Frank.

“Three weeks,” echoes Jarvice. “You pay the overtime.”

The two men shake hands. Frank sees them to the door.

Maggie hears the architects’ car pull off while she’s gathering up the lemonade glasses. She thinks again of Carreen and the junior Rechter and feels her age with sudden intensity: The young architect is the first person she’s met who is both a full-fledged adult and conspicuously younger than she. She’d like to share this with her husband, but instead she says: “Do you really think we should give them carte blanche? Aren’t we strapped as it is?”

Frank examines her as though she’s walked off to a distant planet. “Sometimes I don’t understand you, Margaret,” he says. “Why in the world you’d want to bring our protective gear into the kitchen is truly beyond my comprehension. I’ve must have told you a thousand times: If you don’t have it with you at all times, it’s a death sentence. You don’t want to kill us, do you?”

Maggie is thankful Carreen isn’t present to hear this.

“I could barely concentrate after you did that,” says Frank. “I kept expecting to see one of those crop dusters shoot by at any moment. Or a flash of bright light beyond the ridge.”

Maggie follows Frank’s gaze to the ridge, where the hickories and oaks shimmer under the high afternoon sun, almost mocking her with their earthy innocence. Then she does the only thing she knows to do at a moment like this: she shuts her eyes and hugs her husband tight.

That evening Carreen knocks on the door of Maggie’s bedroom. Frank has gone out “to think” for the third consecutive night—he drives aimlessly for hours, sneaks cigarettes that stink up the upholstery—so the two women have the house to themselves. Maggie is standing in front of the mirror wearing a thin turquoise camisole when her sister enters; she has also been thinking.

“How do I look?” asks Maggie.

“Like shit. Like you’ve been crying.”

Carreen plops down on the bed and kicks off her heels.

“You know what I mean,” Maggie says. “Do you think I’m losing my looks?”

“No. I think Frank’s losing his marbles.”

Carreen thumbs through a magazine on the bedspread and tosses it onto the carpet. Maggie watches her reflection in the wall mirror. "I'm being serious," says Carreen. "I know you think I overanalyze everything, but this time I'm pretty sure most people would agree with me. What your husband's doing isn't normal."

Maggie isn't so sure. She reflects upon all the times in the past that Frank's weird prognostications have vindicated themselves—from the musical dildos to the warning that her father would end up in the slammer. The world is a dangerous place, after all. She has read a few of Frank's books; even the fbi predicts more terror is likely. Maggie tries to balance these facts against the possibility that her husband is psychologically decompensating. According to her Internet research, his symptoms are classic for an obsessive-compulsive display of post-traumatic stress. Of course Frank would never agree to see a therapist. What is there to do but to wait things out?

Maggie forces a smile. "Who's to say what's normal?" she asks.

"I know, I know," says Carreen. "If the Cold War had ended differently, we'd all be dead and those wackos hiding in their bomb shelters in West Virginia would be laughing their asses off. I've heard it all before. You believe what you need to believe. I just couldn't keep my opinion to myself any longer and my opinion is that Frank is in deep, deep trouble."

"Your opinion has been duly noted."

Carreen steps up beside Maggie and preens herself in the mirror. "In any case," she says, "I didn't come by to psychoanalyze Frank." Carreen pauses and takes a deep breath. "I'm leaving."

"It's because of Frank, isn't it?"

"Only partly. It's mostly this suburb thing. Five years on the maritime equivalent of Las Vegas has spoiled me for trees and raccoons and stuff. I want to buy truffles at three in the morning; I want to be surrounded by strangers." Carreen stretches her crow's feet with her fingers. "I'm wrinkling," she says. "I want to meet men."

"What was wrong with boy wonder architect?"

"He's too put together," says Carreen. "I only date shipwrecks. Anyway, it would screw up your chances with his father."

Maggie is caught off guard. "Jesus, Carreen! He must be fifty."

"And you're married."

"Yes, Carreen," Maggie says sharply. "I'm married."

Maggie throws herself onto the bed. Several of Frank's new products are hiding under the bedspread—feathers that play "Pop Goes the Weasel" if stimulated—and when the music starts, forming a taunting round, she pulls the toys from under the covers on impulse. She tries to hold her face stiff, but Carreen's laughter is contagious. It takes her several attempts to catch her wind.

"Would you rather be with a man who makes these," she finally asks, holding out the feathers, "or a man who builds fallout shelters?"

"Well, he has a thing for you, just the same. His eyeballs were talking to your thighs all afternoon. And did you notice how many times he emphasized that he was single?"

"How many?"

"Enough." Carreen grins. "You're blushing."

"I'm not blushing," says Maggie.

Maggie catches sight of herself in the mirror; it's not just her face that's turned red, but her neck and the skin above her collarbone. She has given no thought to the architect until this moment. Now she remembers the broad flat swath of his chest. Of course, it's just a passing fancy. She *is* married, after all. *Happily*. The thought of having an affair is as alien to her as the thought of showing up to work not wearing clothes.

The electronic garage door opens. From below comes the sound of furniture toppling and then a salvo of indiscriminate invective. Frank is home.

"When are you leaving?" Maggie asks.

"Tomorrow. Early."

Maggie rubs her sister affectionately on the shoulder.

Later she takes a long warm shower, during which she thinks about how ridiculous it would be to have an extramarital affair, as ridiculous as her mother refusing her father a divorce, and yet at the same time she is pleased to have considered the idea and dismissed it. The architect's interest is flattering, she admits. But she's not really interested. She'd like to tell Frank how she's decided not to cheat on him, but this is not the sort of intimacy he appreciates. Besides, when she steps out of the shower and drops her damp towel on the bedroom carpet, her husband is fast asleep.

The various contractors and their building teams appear at daybreak the following morning. Since Maggie works shifts—five days on, three days off—she can sit at the French windows in the library and watch them unloading their vehicles. The variety of conscripts amazes her: surveyors, electricians, day-laborers delivered on a flatbed truck. Some of the men lounge on the curbside, sharing cigarettes and copies of the *New York Post*. Others poke about the lawn. The young architect arrives on the scene with a clipboard and is soon engaged in a shouting match with the skeletal, crag-faced Irishman who will manage the excavation. Maggie finds herself engrossed in the spectacle and awed that Frank has launched such an avalanche with merely a phone call.

Around ten o'clock Maggie realizes that nobody's doing anything. A handful of black men built like stevedores are tossing around a tennis ball; some of the day-laborers are dozing nearby in the grass. The young architect, the Irish excavator, and another man are engaged in a heated conference in the driveway. The Irishman periodically vents his frustration by whacking the azalea hedge with a stick. Maggie—more curious than annoyed at the delay—approaches the group with a pitcher of orange juice.

"Mrs. Feingold," Jarod Rechter introduces her. "Mr. O'Connor. Mr. DiPenza."

DiPenza is a little grunt of an Italian; he tips the brim of his cap.

"What's all the shouting about?" Maggie asks.

"We're waiting on the building permit," says the young architect. "My father should be here any minute now with the village inspector."

"He gets here," says O'Connor, "I leave."

Jarod smiles benignly at Maggie. "Mr. O'Connor is upset because some of the foundation men aren't union. We'll work it all out."

"Who's upset?" asks O'Connor. "I'm not upset."

DiPenza fingers his mustache. "About that tree . . ."

"Is your husband around?" Jarod asks her. "Or is there a way we can reach him?"

"He's at his office," says Maggie. She's grateful the contractors haven't asked about his line of work. "Is it something I can help you with?"

"It's about a tree," DiPenza says uncomfortably.

"He wants to cut down the oak in back," says Jarod.

Maggie doesn't know how to object. She's always intended to hang a tire from the tree for their children to swing on. "Are you sure you can't save it?" she asks.

DiPenza shakes his head sadly; he appears genuinely grieved.

"Of course you can save it!" The voice belongs to the senior architect; he's approached her from behind with the sallow building inspector in tow. "Don't you even think about chopping down any of Mrs. Feingold's trees, DiPenza."

"The groundwork is going to crack."

"No, it won't," says Jarod Rechter. "Not if you dig underneath."

The senior architect wishes Maggie a good morning and quickly takes control of the scene. Within minutes the day-laborers are back on their truck and gone for good. The black men ditch their game of catch; soon they're shouting at each other over the boom of the backhoe. By midday, a well-worn dirt trace curls around the side of the house and the mound of soil in the back yard casts a shadow across the veranda. It is all so well choreographed: a regular blue-collar ballet.

At first Maggie tries to keep her eyes off the architect. If she gives herself an inch, she fears, she'll take a mile. But fairly soon she gives up all pretense of indifference—she's relocated from the library to the bay window in the living room for a better view—and she tells herself there's nothing wrong with looking. In fact, she finds herself criticizing Rechter's appearance. His brow sticks out; his neck is too thick. An unsightly growth protrudes from one of his cheeks. The architect's own body gives no hint of whether he's forty-five or sixty and she relies upon the son's to date the age of the father. She wonders in spite of herself if Carreen is right about his interest.

Jarvice has his opportunities, that's for sure. The workmen make use of the toilet tucked behind the kitchen, so if the architect wished to visit the house, he'd have the pretext. Most of the men make several trips inside during the afternoon; she suspects O'Connor has the runs. Rechter never leaves the yard. Maggie watches him down aluminum can after aluminum can of Diet Coke and she senses herself fighting a losing battle against an iron bladder. At some point she sheds all modesty and steps out on the veranda to read a book. The architect waves at her from across the yard and goes back to work.

Maggie is defrosting chopped meat in the kitchen when Rechter taps on the screen door; he's been watching her attempt to separate two frozen hamburger patties with a mallet and chisel. She catches her reflection in the toaster and winces; her white blouse is streaked red. He taps again.

"Do you have a moment?"

"Yes," she stammers. "Sure."

She turns around with her back to the countertop. The chopped meat—maybe because it is Frank's dinner—embarrasses her. She tries to hide it behind her body.

"The work is going fine," says Rechter. "We had to pay those fellows from Ecuador even though we couldn't use them—but that's the cost of business."

"Sure. Don't think twice."

The architect looks around the kitchen. "I'm not here about the work," he says. "Not exactly."

"Oh," says Maggie. She leans farther back against the countertop and feels the perspiration where her palms are resting on the Formica. *If only I'd thought through my rejection speech beforehand*, she thinks.

"I don't know how to say this," says Rechter. "But I'm a pretty straight-shooting guy, so I'll just throw it out there. I want to show you something in the bathroom."

It's less than a second before she knows what he's talking about. Frank's experimental merchandise! Maggie senses the blood leaving her face and she says, "They're my husband's."

"Well, the guys have been talking. I just thought you should know."

"It's my husband's business—he manufactures them, I mean."

The architect stares at Maggie, as though mulling over her answer; she is not certain whether or not he believes her. Somehow Rechter has seated himself backward on one of the kitchen chairs. "I generally try to keep out of other people's marriages," he says. "As far as I'm concerned, whatever your husband does with those toys—personally, professionally—is *his* business. And your business. Not mine. But I didn't come up here to talk about what's in the bathroom, not really. It's something else I've got lodged in my craw."

The architect leans forward—almost intimately—over the back of his seat.

"I have a story I thought you might want to hear," he continues. "Are you interested?"

Maggie says nothing. She clenches her fingers around the mallet.

"Between my first and second wives," Rechter says, "I dated this bank teller from the Bronx. I thought I was going to marry her too. And then one day she takes me to this surprise birthday party for her sister's kid. Streamers, presents—you name it. There's even a cake with twelve candles and the name Isabel carved in icing. Are you with me?"

"Isabel in icing," echoes Maggie.

"There must be two dozen relatives at this thing. We're all hiding behind couches with the lights off and then the sister flicks the switch and the lights go on—and there's no kid. But

everybody pretends like there is a kid. You know: singing happy birthday, making wishes. I swear I thought I was on *Candid Camera*. Lysette—that's the name of the woman I was dating, Lysette—even starts telling her sister how pretty the girl looks.”

“But there wasn't any kid,” says Maggie.

“They were humoring the nutty sister,” says Rechter. “The kid had been killed six years before in a school bus accident.”

Maggie drops the chisel and it clatters to the floor. She prods her brain to sift through the story. “And you think Frank . . .”

Rechter stands up. “Don't get me wrong,” he says. “I'm happy for the work. God knows I need it in this economy. But the other day I couldn't help picking up that you and your husband weren't exactly on the same page with regard to this thing—and speaking completely nonprofessionally, man to woman, I just thought you should know that I think it's insane.”

Maggie feels suddenly defensive. For the first time she's confident that Frank's having some sort of breakdown, but she doesn't want to hear it from a stranger. “Well, it makes perfect sense to me,” she snaps.

Rechter steps out onto the porch and lights a cigarette. He says through the screen door, “No, it doesn't. It doesn't make sense to you one bit.”

The architect's five o'clock visits become a fixture of Maggie's days off. Although they usually only chat for a few minutes, she pieces together a mental scrapbook of his past. Rechter has served in the Peace Corps, building houses in Cameroon; that's where he learned he was a city mouse the hard way. He's also been aboard an airliner hijacked to Cuba. Maggie has prepared a long, passionate speech on the sanctity of marriage that she will deliver when he tries to kiss her—but he does nothing of the sort. He keeps the conversation light; after that first day, he never mentions Frank at all. The closest Rechter ever comes to doing something suggestive is when he returns from the bathroom and says, “I'll be damned. They *do* sing ‘Oh! Susanna’!”

Progress on the fallout shelter is rapid. The mound of dirt climbs to the height of the catwalk on the carriage house roof and then vanishes one morning on a dumptruck; the backhoes give way to a pile driver and a cement mixer. There are a few delays—one of the ventilation men suffers chest pains and is carted away by ambulance—but within two weeks the hulking concrete roof of the fallout shelter appears deep in the bowels of the pit. Maggie cannot fathom the dimensions of the structure. She had initially imagined a claustrophobic tunnel; the quantity of extracted soil suggests something palatial. Not that Maggie has any idea what is actually going on beneath the yard. Frank has offered her a tour of the underground portions of the shelter on several occasions—at least the sections that are complete—but she resists. Deep down, she fears what she may find there.

Frank begins ordering supplies: three hundred cans of tomato soup, six fire extinguishers, twenty-five pairs of latex surgical gloves. He's purchased a book called *How to Stock Your Bomb Shelter without Going Broke* and he follows its instructions to the letter. Yet they are going broke. Maggie manages to carry most of the debt on their credit cards, but she dreads what will happen in six months when the mortgage payments come due. It's like building a palace of playing cards and waiting for a windstorm. She expresses her concern to Frank. He tells her not to worry. To prioritize. Who knows if the bank will even be around in six months?

Frank's top priority, it appears, is getting into his cbr suit in under forty-five seconds. He spends most of his free moments on the veranda dressing and undressing to a stopwatch. The stopwatch, specially designed for the vision impaired, announces the time aloud at five-second intervals. *Thirty. Thirty-five. Forty.* Maggie finds this countdown ominous. When Frank pleads with her to practice suiting up, she usually gives in. It is better than watching, listening. Sometimes the two of them spend four or five hours engaged in the futile monotonous drill, and then the stench of treated rubber clings to Maggie's hair for days. Frank manages to reduce his time to thirty-nine seconds. Maggie's remains well over a minute. Whenever she scrambles into

the stiff, resistant smock, she thinks of Jarvice's ex-girlfriend and the birthday party for the dead girl.

At first Maggie hopes that the fallout shelter will soothe Frank's nerves, but each passing day seems to make matters worse. His "thinking" drives last into the wee hours of the morning and he carelessly burns cigarette holes into the leather upholstery; she fears he may doze off at a rest stop and set himself on fire. Anxiety takes its toll on his appearance: he shaves three times a day and crops his hair short—this facilitates donning the gas mask—but often he forgets to shower and to change his clothes. His eyes sink further into his head; they are permanently bloodshot. She witnesses these symptoms every day, in the parents of children dying from cancer, but this is worse than anything she's ever seen at the hospital. At least in the pediatric wards the children die and the parents tussle on with their lives.

One day Frank asks her to close out their safe-deposit box and to gather together all of their personal valuables—jewelry, heirlooms, their wills—for transportation to the safe in the fallout shelter. Maggie carries the photo albums from their honeymoon onto the deck, where her husband is struggling with the zipper on his protective hood. "Three hundred dollars on these damn things and the zippers stick," he snarls, when he sees her. "Can you remind me to grease them?"

"I'll leave you a note," says Maggie. "In the bag with your lunch."

Frank gives another tug and the zipper pulls shut. "The important thing to keep in mind," he says, "is to put on your suit first and *then* run for the shelter. It takes over two minutes to make it through the shelter's air seal. If you don't put on your suit and mask *first*, you're dead. Can you remember that?"

"How could I forget?" asks Maggie.

She settles into a lounge chair and opens the photo albums on her lap. The handsome, toned playboy staring back at her from the pictures sends a chill up her spine. Here's Frank outside Westminster Abbey; Frank feeding the pigeons in Trafalgar Square. Her favorite is of Frank dodging cars in de Gaulle Circle on his way to the Arc de Triomphe. He'd insisted that was the only way out to the traffic island; she'd snapped the photo and then asked for directions to an underpass. It's hard to imagine the drawn creature cursing at his zipper doing anything so daring. He has the same obstinacy, she thinks, just redirected.

"You have to see these, Frank," she calls out.

"I'm busy."

"Please, dear. For a minute."

Frank lets the sides of the suit fall loose around his waist; the shoulder straps dangle helplessly at his knees. He slides onto the lounge chair beside her and vacantly caresses her far shoulder with his hand. "Wow! We were young then," he says.

"Take a look at that," she says. "That's the rental car that got washed away at high tide."

"There was no sign. How was I supposed to know not to park there?"

"There *was* a sign. It was in Gaelic. Do you remember how scared we were that we were going to have to make good the loss?"

They both laugh.

Every photograph animates another memory; each memory steers them through a long-blocked channel. It's been months—possibly years—since Maggie's had so much fun. She's acutely conscious, of course, that one wrong phrase or glance may break the moment. She prays against all odds that the telephone won't ring, that a delivery truck won't show up. But nothing mars their pleasure. They make it through fourteen albums and eight years of marriage. The sun has fallen behind their treaty oak when she shuts the last volume.

"All done," says Maggie.

She turns to Frank and kisses him; he kisses her back.

"I'm glad you're bringing those into the shelter," Frank says.

"Me too," says Maggie; then she starts sobbing.

"What's wrong?" Frank asks gently.

She shakes her head; the tears won't stop. "I'm so sorry, Frank," she says. "I don't know what to do. Carreen says that we need counseling. She thinks we're both coming unhinged. And I don't know anymore. Can we go together to see someone? Please?"

"Again with your family," says Frank. "Don't pay any attention to Carreen. You're the one who says she overanalyzes everything."

Maggie gropes for her husband and presses her face into his chest. "It's not just Carreen. It's everybody. They all think that you're going crazy." She wants to add, "Even the architects," but something restrains her.

Frank pushes her away and stands up. "Safety isn't governed by democracy," he says. "What people think has no bearing on what's actually going to happen. If they fly a 747 into the nuclear reactor at Indian Point, your sister's vote won't mean squat. Someday you'll see the flash behind that ridge, Margaret, and then you'll thank me."

Maggie cries herself to sleep on the deck; when she wakes up, her limbs are stiff and her clothes are damp with dew.

The following week Frank stops going to work. He can run the show just as well from home, he insists. By cell phone. By fax. He also admits that the commute to Jersey City terrifies him. All those bridges, all those tunnels. "If I'm going to die, I'm going to die," he says, "but I don't want to be buried alive in my car somewhere underneath the Hudson River choking to death on anthrax." Since the fallout shelter is virtually finished—they've covered it over and now it's just a matter of tossing some seeding on the raw patch of earth, also a tweak or two to the electricity and the plumbing—Frank doesn't see the sense of leaving it unnecessarily. "It's a crazy world," he says. "Why take risks?" He sits on the deck from dawn to dusk with his eyes on the skyline.

When Frank refuses to drive her to Wardelsburg to see her father—he'd prefer she didn't go at all; he'll worry himself sick until she returns—Carreen suggests she ask the architect for a ride. This doesn't seem unreasonable anymore. If she's not his lover, she's also not his boss. They've actually become something like friends. At least that's what she tells her sister when at first Carreen begs off joining them. "You have to come," Maggie insists. "I've asked him to bring his son. Otherwise it *will* feel like we're up to no good." When Frank hears that she's got a lift with Rechter, he insists on speaking to the architect directly. Maggie fears the worst. Her husband merely implores Rechter to drive north over the "safer" Bear Mountain Bridge rather than south over the more-traveled Tappan Zee.

Sunday arrives and the Rechters pick up Maggie in their Oldsmobile. She sits up front with Jarvice; they stop by Carreen's place in the city and her sister and Jarod share the back seat. The ride up to the prison is mainly uneventful. Her sister and the younger architect do most of the talking. They both know everything. They become embroiled in a heated dispute as to whether Maine or Minnesota contains the northernmost point in the contiguous United States, and Jarvice is forced to pull over to check the road atlas in the trunk. After that, neither of them says much. At some point Maggie becomes aware that the two of them are holding hands.

All four of them visit Maggie's father. Although this seems like an obvious arrangement (what else would the Rechters do for five hours in Wardelsburg, New York?), Maggie hadn't anticipated the company. Her subconscious had assumed they would vanish and reappear—maybe drive home and back like Frank does. She dreads introducing Jarvice to her father. Jack Sheldrake has a knack for piquing strangers. He compels them to arm wrestle; he tells Holocaust jokes. But the Rechters and the old man get along surprisingly well. They share a good laugh behind the back of the ex-congressman in the next bunk for whom Jarvice once built two adjacent swimming pools shaped like breasts. Even when Sheldrake congratulates Maggie on finding Rechter—on "trading in the motherfucking pervert" as he repeatedly puts it—the architect laughs off the jest. She suffers only one difficult moment: Jarvice isn't *that* much younger than her father.

Jarvice drops off both Jarod and Carreen in the city. Then he and Maggie are alone. They've been alone three afternoons a week for nearly a month, of course, but Maggie is intensely aware

that this may be their last moment together. She watches Jarvice, the coarse skin hugging his cheekbones, the sprouts of hair on the backs of his hands. A tired drizzle begins to fall and Jarvice shifts the wipers onto low.

“I got a kick out of your dad,” says Jarvice. “He’s a riot.”

“He can’t stand Frank,” says Maggie. “That’s what you like about him.”

“He’s fifty-four years old and he’s got hormones like a teenager,” answers Jarvice. “*That’s* what I like about him.”

“Did he tell you he’s *fifty-four*?” asks Maggie. “He’s sixty-seven.”

“I figured he was lying. In either case, he’s older than I am. You’re never going to ask; I know you too well. You’re just going to keep wondering, so I might as well tell you. I’ll be fifty-two in December.”

“I’m thirty-one,” says Maggie. “Frank’s thirty-six.”

Maggie curses herself for saying something so stupid. Why does the architect care how old her husband is? Or—for that matter—how old she is? She thinks of things she might ask him to change the subject: What will his next project be? Does he like being an architect? Each question sounds more asinine than the last.

“Are you afraid of anything?” she asks.

Jarvice chuckles. “Me? Afraid?”

“I’m asking you seriously.”

“Growing old,” he says. “Growing old and being alone. The usual things. Honestly—and don’t take this the wrong way—I’m afraid of growing old and losing it.” He switches the windshield wipers off and turns his head toward her. “I don’t want to end up like Lysette’s sister,” he says. “Like your husband. That’s my worst fear.”

Maggie doesn’t have an answer for this.

Outside the leaves are brown and wet. She registers the familiar landmarks—the turn-offs, the crossroads, the house that keeps its Christmas lights up year-round—and she dreads the approach of home. It’s five o’clock on a Sunday afternoon; she should be preparing for a night on the town. Instead they pull up in front of her mailbox. Beyond the thicket of shedding maples, she can make out the lights from the house.

“Here we are,” says Jarvice. “Door-to-door service.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Will I see you again?” asks the architect.

She releases the car door and turns to face him.

“I’m not working for you anymore, Maggie. I have absolutely no good reason to hang around your kitchen. *Not. A. One.*” The last three words are barely out of his mouth when she feels his lips press hers, the soft thrill of his tongue against her teeth.

She pulls away, confused.

“You’re not offended?” he asks.

She shakes her head. “But I do have to go.”

“You know where to find me,” he says.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t do that.”

“I thought it might be this way,” he says cheerlessly. “I hope it’s all right that I snagged a souvenir to remember you by.

He holds up a small rubber object and squeezes it.

“*Oh! Susanna,*” it sings, “*don’t you cry for me . . .*”

The house that Maggie enters feels big and silent. The chandelier in the entryway is dark and the gray light of dusk filters through the long, thin windows. Maggie drops her purse on the carpet and leans her back against the front door, the blood pulsing through her temples, her entire body quaking with emotion. She is her mother’s daughter, she thinks. Only her mother’s daughter could stick to a husband like hers.

“Frank!” she calls. “Frank! I’m home!”

He does not answer.

Maggie wanders aimlessly from room to room, searching for Frank, until she catches sight of him through the living room window. He’s out on the lawn. Under the oak. When she approaches him through the twilight, she sees he is carrying several large boxes. He breathes heavily and pauses periodically for rest.

“Jesus, Frank! What are you doing out here?”

“Supplies for the shelter,” he says. “I hope you like sardines.” He waits for her to wade through the damp grass and says, “I’m so glad you’re home. I was afraid something might have happened.”

Maggie feels sick, dizzy. “Nothing happened.”

“Not this time,” says Frank. “Follow me.”

Maggie steps forward and steels herself for the worst.

He guides her down a steep concrete staircase at the foot of the treaty oak. The steps lead to a narrow tunnel lit by fluorescent panels; the tunnel stops abruptly at a large iron wall. Frank punches an access code into a wall console and an iron gate pulls shut behind them; exactly two minutes elapse (a digital clock embedded in the floor announces the time aloud) and the front door opens into the shelter. Maggie advances into the glaring light.

“Here we are,” says Frank. “What do you think?”

The room resembles a low-budget efficiency apartment. Assorted boxes are stacked from floor to ceiling along three of the walls, also across the countertop in the kitchenette. The fourth wall is composed of exposed cinder block. Some loose items are also stacked haphazardly on the office carpeting: sacks of brown rice, coat hangers, cartons of baking soda. Frank leads her through the complex and she notes that one of the rooms contains a bed and another a billiard table; they are otherwise equally cluttered and equally indistinguishable. The air smells pungently of mildew. Maggie’s first thought is that Jarvice has constructed all this; she tries to be impressed.

“It’s pretty amazing,” Frank says, beaming. “If it proved necessary, we could live down here for six weeks. Maybe eight.”

“Eight weeks,” echoes Maggie.

“That’s how long the generators run without recharging.”

“Oh,” says Maggie.

Frank seems so calm; he’s more relaxed than she’s seen him in weeks.

“Let’s get some more boxes,” he says.

They return to the lawn. The boxes earmarked for transport are lined up along the floor of the veranda and Frank slides one of them out of the way with his foot. Maggie notices the bottoms of some of the cartons are soggy with water. Frank stoops over to pick up what looks like a case of bottled beverages—when his back stiffens and his entire head jolts back.

He shouts: “A flash on the ridge! A flash on the ridge!”

Maggie turns to see several bursts of light on the horizon. They are softer than she has been led to expect—more like trucks driving off the interstate than a nuclear meltdown—and the stopwatch has announced the passage of ten seconds before she starts putting on her suit. She pokes her arms through the smock, slides her feet through the legs. The timer speaks: “Twenty-five . . . Thirty . . .” She finally tucks everything in place when the zipper jams on the hood.

“Goddammit!” she shouts. “It’s stuck!”

“I told you to practice!” shouts Frank.

“Thirty-five . . . Forty . . .”

Frank is already fully garbed. He swats her arms away and takes hold of the zipper; when he tugs, it pulls shut around her mask. She is safe.

“Forty-five . . .”

“Hurry up,” says Frank. “Follow me.”

Maggie doesn't move. Frank's confident smile rapidly fades to wonder and then terror; he starts shouting at her, but she can't make out the words. It is like watching someone on the other side of the glass walls of an aquarium. Her husband is shouting, waving his gloved arms. He attempts to grab hold of her, but she dodges his fingers. She wonders how long he will wait before abandoning her on the deck.

There is a soft glow over the ridge: it is either a nuclear meltdown or a freeway fire or something entirely unforeseen and inexplicable. And somewhere out there is a woman throwing birthday parties for a dead child. And somewhere else out there is her father and her sister and Jarvice Rechter, especially Jarvice Rechter.

"Fifty . . . Fifty-five . . ."

She throws open the mask and breathes deep.