



SALLY STEENLAND

## THE DEEPEST THING

Tonight in bed Daniel asked, “Are you happy?” He was so close I could feel his breath on my skin as the words floated over me. All of me had been falling into loose slumber, so I no longer felt the weight of his arm resting on me, nor his leg, nor any of the places we touched. His voice sounded like my own.

And the question. I shifted onto my back. How could a person be alive in this world and happy? “I mean with me,” he said.

I asked, “Are you?”

“When I’m with you.”

“And the rest of the time?”

He propped himself up on an elbow and traced a finger along my arm, down the slope of my thigh. My skin rose in shivery bumps, as if we hadn’t yet made love. *It’s no one’s fault. These things happen.* That’s what we’d been telling each other from the beginning.

The first time we met, his fingers had brushed mine as he was handing out papers at a meeting. I’d been watching him before that. The moment he’d walked into the room I sat up and swallowed hard because it seemed I already knew him, that his tangled brown curls and lanky body were familiar to me and had always been so—without my knowing—until then. And more than that. I could sense the curve of his inner life, and how closely it matched mine.

A few days after the meeting, we were nestled in the back booth of a bar, a place where no one we knew would go. Already we were talking like old friends, touching like eager new lovers. When he kissed me, I gasped, “I can’t do this.”



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“Me, either,” he murmured, and kissed me again.

Now he was telling me things that roused him from irritation and numbness, which was how he felt the rest of the time. For instance, Julia’s pet fly, Sam, who’d been living in her bedroom all summer—not the same fly, of course, but you couldn’t convince her. She’d trained him to walk up her arm. But when she insisted on bringing Sam to the beach in a cage she’d built from an old colander, they got worried. Flies were germ-ridden; she was eight. Old enough, Nancy said, for a dog.

I brushed away his wandering finger and pulled the sheet up to my neck. Above me, thin cracks crisscrossed my bedroom ceiling like rivers on a map. They were widening day by day.

I’d seen pictures of Nancy on his desk at work. She was delicate and plain, like a wren. Her family had money. She taught fourth grade. She always looked cheery, with her arms around a child. But she and Daniel didn’t touch, nor even lean close.

“Are you?” he persisted. His hand had crept back to mine, but I placed it on top of the sheet. “Happy’s a dwarf,” I said and veered off into a rant about books that promised fulfillment in ten steps. All you had to do was splash in puddles, buy flowers, fly a kite.

He chuckled and turned onto his back, so we were side by side, looking up at the cracked ceiling together. I raised my finger to trace a new shape—a head with large ears and a wide mouth. For some reason, I thought of my mother. My father and I called her the dictator of cheer. She sends me those books, I said. And annoying articles about how smiling improves your digestion.

“Marge and Mildred—what a pair.” His leg was touching mine, the hairs tickling me. “Can’t you see our mothers at dinner, arguing over whose husband gets worse heartburn?” His head turned to me on the pillow. “Once when we took them out, Julia and Kate ordered guacamole, and my father wanted to try some. Right when he was dipping his





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bread in the bowl, my mother yelled, ‘Onions!’ and slapped his hand. She literally hit him.”

“My mother grabs my father by the tie like it’s a leash,” I said. His parents were eerily like mine, except their quirks and intrusions didn’t annoy me.

He reached under the sheet and found my fingers. “You know, Claire, at some point they’ll have to meet.”

I slipped out of bed. Striped light from the parking lot cut into the room. Somewhere down there, my car was collecting pigeon droppings and leaves. Daniel’s Volvo was probably parked there too, hidden from the street.

I watched a flurry of leaves swirl upward in the darkening air. How crazily they flew, like nervous, jagged birds. They made me dizzy, and I had to balance my hands on the sill. On one end of the scale were his wife, children, house, parents, neighbors, friends. So many things with heft and weight and tradition. I hung on the other end, holding only feelings.

He crept out of bed and stood beside me. I could smell us on his skin, a warm, musky scent I loved. “What’s wrong?” he said. “Something’s troubling you, but you won’t tell me what.” Threads of cold air seeped through the loose frame. In my head was a thin swirling noise.

We were naked. Too close to the window. It seemed insane, how shaky I felt.

A year ago, he’d talked about leaving but hadn’t been able to do it. Six months later, I’d been the faltering one. Both times one of us was crying and apologizing, and the other felt wretched. We just weren’t ready, we’d said. But what would happen when I had what I longed for? What then?

“Did you get a dog?” I said.

He looked surprised. “A puppy,” he said, glancing at the clock radio. “Julia named him Dudley.”

“When?”

He hesitated. “A few weeks ago.”

It was a small secret, but still. *This is how it starts—with omissions too slight to mention. Already he feels guilty over*



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*a dog. Already I feel ashamed to be so suspicious and scared. He'll come home from visits and stare out the window. He'll lie to me, too.*

"It's getting late," I said. "You better go clean up." I tried to sound like a reasonable person, someone who'd move to an affordable townhouse in the suburbs and be a caring, patient stepmother to two resentful girls.

He went into the bathroom and I heard the rush of the shower, the curtain rings squeaking as he stepped inside. Then the water sounded different, hitting his body.

Though I'd never met his girls, I knew about their soccer games, sleepovers, birthday parties. I knew about blueberry pancakes on Sunday mornings and the songs they sang on car rides to the beach. It felt perverse—how eager I was to hear these things. I was an intruder who had to be stopped. The four of them were a family, and it felt wicked to rip them apart. But whenever I'd say this, Daniel would reply that people got divorced and remarried all the time, that these days it was a normal trauma and we'd all survive.

I leaned against the chilly windowpane. On the other side of the parking lot was the zoo. Bamboo grew wild along its edge, higher than the fence marking the border. From the fifth floor I could see the gleaming white birdcage. It was one of my favorite sights, soaring above old oak trees into the dark sky, its graceful arches bracing a mesh dome. At night it looked like a temple.

Down a slight hill lived the barking deer. In the evening and early morning, their sharp howls pierced my walls. They sounded like lonely wolves, right in the heart of the city. In reality they were drab creatures from South America—nothing to look at, really. Except they were my neighbors. So I'd go visit as they listlessly pawed the dirt.

Now I tugged at the paint-swollen window. Traffic noises rushed in—buses and horns and the sharp crunch of tires on gravel. How silly to be upset over a dog. A male puppy; a substitute son. I hoped it was ugly. A hairless Chihuahua or drooling basset hound. Not a golden retriever or black lab or collie. Nothing I would want for us.



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When I turned on the overhead light in the kitchen, I saw everything in a flash: the dish drain toppling with cups and bowls, photos stuck on the old rounded fridge, the blue kettle on the stove. *I live here. This is my home.* I loved my high ceilings and hardwood floors worn thin and smooth as silk. Where else could I find an ancient flour sifter built into the cupboard or a slatted front door that allowed hall breezes and privacy?

Flames licked the kettle as I turned on the gas, and for a second I shivered in the heat. I pried two mugs out of the dish drain and pressed the button on the coffee grinder. The sharp blades pulverized the beans with a roar.

Tucked into an alcove under the window was a small wrought-iron table with two chairs whose wire backs bent into hearts. I'd ordered them from a French-country catalogue—so romantic, I'd thought. But the hearts dug into your spine. Daniel couldn't believe I'd buy a chair without first sitting on it. I'd imagined him thinking, *Nancy would never do such a thing.* To her a chair was a piece of furniture, while for me it was an expressive ideal.

My whole apartment was a clash of opposites, a collection of splurges and sales. In the living room were cheap shelves heavy with books, alongside an expensive sofa and an antique flowered needlepoint rug. My ten-speed hung from a hook in the bedroom ceiling, its green frame dull from years of riding. But I loved it too much to replace it.

On my bed was a quilt I'd bought at a yard sale while on vacation in West Virginia. It was a wild splash of color, made from scraps of old housedresses, baby clothes, kitchen curtains. "Odds and ends," said a woman slumped on a rusty metal chair in the yard. Her grandmother had sewn the quilt by hand as a girl, twelve perfect stitches to the inch. She'd sell it to me for fifty dollars. When I didn't reply, she said, "Or forty."

My boyfriend was waiting in the car, the engine stirring up dust. Behind us, three kids jumped on a dirty mattress. I asked the woman to save the quilt for me. After we got to





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the resort, Rob went off to play tennis. I cashed a check, drove back, and gave her five hundred dollars. She said I was crazy. I told her the quilt was exquisite and would cost twice that in an antique shop. She shook her head, not believing me. Then she offered me a glass of iced tea. I dragged up a chair, and we spent the afternoon talking. That night Rob said I'd been foolishly naïve, that the woman would probably drink the money away. He said this even though he hadn't gotten out of the car to meet her, didn't know she worked in a factory and cleaned houses, or that her name was Rowanne Lewis.

As Rob talked, his face seemed to change from patrician to hideous. I despised him right then, and we broke up over the weekend. *No warning*, he told friends. For months he went around calling me Mother Teresa.

The bathroom pipes shuddered as Daniel turned off the water. At the stove, I glanced up. My bare arm was tipping the blue kettle and my head was tilted. In the window's dark rectangle, I was perfectly framed.

Daniel appeared in the doorway. Elbows bent, hands clasped behind his head, he was framed too. The sight of him calmed me. In his striped shirt and khaki pants, he was solid and familiar, and the unnerving anxiety I'd felt in the bedroom was gone. He wasn't leaving yet—we had time to talk, to figure things out.

"Hey," he said. "I thought you were going to hop in the shower with me." He came up behind me, smelling fresh and clean. His shirt had dark splotches where the towel had missed. *Don't go. Stay.* I poured him a full mug. "Decaf, right?" He waited for my nod, then took a hesitant swallow. "Hot," he said, grimacing. "Hey, isn't that my T-shirt?"

"I rescued it from the trash."

"But the hem's all ripped and the neck's stretched out. Look at the holes."

"So you only love perfect things?"

He grinned. "I love you." He lifted my hair and kissed the back of my neck. At the table, he filled his plate with bread, smoked salmon, and cheese. "Good news," he said





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with a smile and his mouth full. “We put *Catcher in the Rye* back in Sullivan High School. The parents’ group finally gave in. We convinced them they’d be in court for months and still lose.” He’d gotten a call from Mrs. Merrywell, the group’s leader, who said that the war for children’s souls was most definitely not over and, far from being defeated, her group was merely gathering strength for the next round.

Daniel held his fingers like a phone. “Put out your press release, Ms. Weidner. A big victory for free speech.”

“Yes sir, I’m on it.” I went to him and spread my fingers through his curls. In the warm air, they were drying like springs.

“Crusading lawyer and heroic P.R. flack. What a team.” His hand slid under my T-shirt, his familiar hand roaming over my skin. I leaned into him, my insides opening. He said I was his best advisor and teased me about all the free client hours he’d gotten when we’d spent evenings trying out arguments for the case.

“You just haven’t gotten the bill,” I said. Then I gave his hand back. Seriously, now. I told him how much I admired his passion and determination, that he was a rare soul who cared more about doing good than making money, someone whose daily, steady efforts made the world a more just place. My voice quavered at the end.

“Thanks, sweetie,” he said. “But what you just said about me is true for you, too. Every one of your clients is a worthy cause.” He stood up and raised his mug. “Let’s celebrate the win and us and everything. Forget carryout. Let’s go to dinner.”

I hurried to change, pulling his old T-shirt over my head. In the bathroom, I wiped a washcloth between my legs and ran a brush through my hair. The mirror was still foggy in patches, but I saw my face, smiling and flushed. *We can be lovers and friends*, I thought. *We can create a new family, and it will be all right.*

Animal smells floated on the chilly air as we walked through the parking lot toward the street. Cars were crammed into





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tiny spaces against the fence. He stopped to look up at the birdcage high above the trees. “I wonder if they ever forget and just take off,” he said. “I guess after a few bruises they learn and warn newcomers. But the new birds don’t listen, so they bump their heads and tell the next group . . .” He stopped. “Warnings never work.”

I slipped my hand into his pocket. His hip felt solid through the soft nubby felt. *Don’t*, I wanted to say. *Don’t make up a sad story and think it’s about us.*

The black iron gates to the zoo were locked. Bright-colored banners of monkeys and rhinos and snakes flapped in the wind. Daniel asked where we should eat. I shrugged. “There’s Italian, Thai, Mexican, Chinese . . . it’s your celebration, so you get to pick.”

“But you know which ones are good. It doesn’t matter.”

“They all are. Just pick.” He shrugged again, and a twinge of annoyance rose in my throat. Maybe Nancy ran his life more than I knew and we’d collapse without her. Or maybe I was just getting scared again. “Okay. Italian,” I said as we started across the bridge.

On the other side, little shops lined the sidewalk. Most had been there forever, like the beauty parlor whose windows showed faded pictures of bouffant hairdos. Next door, a jewelry store displayed a porcelain girl in a pinafore walking her duck and a boy perched in the crook of an apple tree. But the next store was empty, with a *Starbucks Opening Soon* sign in the window.

“I hate to see the old vacuum cleaner place go,” Daniel joked.

“Cab drivers were always hanging out there. They’d go inside and come out and argue like crazy. It was a front.”

“That’s what you said about the 7-Eleven—that the cab drivers were exiled freedom fighters.”

“The place did have a fire,” I argued.

“Claire, the Slurpee machine burned out.”

The Italian café had recently been a lamp store. Now its walls were washed pale melon, and amber sconces glowed.





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Piano music mingled with voices as the hostess showed us to a corner table. Perfect.

Daniel glanced around. "Sorry. I'm not used to us being out in the world. I'm afraid I'll get caught." He shook his head, blushing. "That didn't come out right. It's just that your apartment's so safe."

"My apartment's cramped," I said without thinking.

He gave me a curious smile. "You mean that?"

A waiter with a water pitcher filled our glasses. As he poured, I noticed an eel tattoo circling his left bicep and a silver fish skeleton dangling from his ear. Maybe the restaurant made its staff accessorize with food motifs. I smiled, imagining Daniel coming up with a week's worth of culinary fashion themes. He ordered an expensive bottle of champagne.

"Special occasion?" the waiter asked, pen poised.

"Anniversary," Daniel told him.

"Congratulations, you two." He jotted something down and went off.

"What anniversary?" I asked.

Daniel shrugged. "Who knows? The hundredth week after we met, the twentieth month since we slept together. I imagine any day's significant if you have a good enough memory."

I broke a skinny breadstick in half. "Somewhere people are celebrating holidays we've never heard of—goddess birthdays and harvest festivals . . ."

"Speaking of which—did I tell you we're hosting the Halloween block party this year?"

I nodded calmly and said, "How nice." He swirled his breadstick in olive oil and said they were going to turn the garage into a haunted house. A neighbor's robot was going to greet everyone at the door. Julia wanted to be Lisa Simpson; Kate wanted to be a princess. He and Nancy might be Homer and Marge, though she'd suggested Rhett and Scarlett.

"You're kidding," I said sharply. "She's Melanie."

Before I even looked at him, I knew I'd gone too far. Criticizing Nancy was a betrayal worse than sex. I'd always been





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carefully neutral, or even taken her side. He frowned and leaned forward to say something when our waiter put two fluted glasses on the table. Coming toward us were more waiters holding aloft an ice bucket on a platter rimmed with fizzing sparklers. People at other tables turned to look. Daniel put his head between his hands. “Don’t sing,” he whispered to the waiter. “Just put it down and go.”

“No fuss,” the waiter urged the others. He popped the cork and filled our glasses. The little candles hissed and crackled. Daniel told him to take away the light show, and we quickly ordered. The evening was turning sour, our celebration disintegrating as if we’d brought ruin with us. Even the walls no longer seemed warm and inviting. Their actual shade was orange—a sallow, unflattering color that made things look tired. *I see what I want instead of what is real, I thought. I make things up and pretend they’re true, and that is how I live.*

Daniel was gripping my hand. “This is no way to live,” he said, as if he’d just read my mind. He said he couldn’t go on, he had to leave. I held my face steady, though part of me was collapsing. This was the awakening I’d dreaded, the moment when he saw how foolish and insubstantial we were and realized he had to leave me. “By the end of the year,” he continued. “I’ll tell her then.”

Oh.

The candle on the table flickered. It was squat and white, the kind of candle you pray to. The skin under his eyes was puffy. He rubbed his eyes. Then he put his glass down and talked about what we’d do after. After he found a place, he’d talk to Nancy. They’d both tell the girls. He’d live alone for a while. We’d go shopping and buy a bed and pull-out sofa, a table and chairs, and bunk beds. Too bad my couch wasn’t a pull-out—there probably wouldn’t be room for it in a two-bedroom; but my rugs, and of course, my books . . . Eventually I’d move in, after the girls had adjusted.

I thought of the hours I’d spent imagining exactly this—what I’d say to his girls, where we’d live, how our days would





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be. I lined up the idea and reality to see which was stronger. And then the strangest thing happened. All emotion left me. I wasn't panicked or joyful; I didn't feel hope or dread. I felt strangely free, as if a rope around my neck had been cut and nothing mattered.

He was describing a townhouse development near a Metro stop. "We don't have to move to that particular complex," he was saying. "But it's on the Red Line, so you wouldn't have to transfer to get to work, and less than a mile from my house so the girls could bike over." His eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Why will you be happier with me?" My voice was flat and calm.

He dropped his head into his hands. "Please, Claire. Don't do this. I know every single one of your arguments. I shouldn't leave an entire life for just one person. It's impossible to build happiness on the misery of others. You want a baby and I don't. Listen to me. At some point, you've got to take the risk. I'm not minimizing what we're doing. But guilt and fear aren't the essence of us—they're not the deepest thing."

"What is?"

He was silent. "Do I have to tell you? Don't you know?"

"Love," I said. It sounded flimsy. It wasn't enough. I watched him flip his spoon over and over, heard it clank against the knife. His voice was so quiet. "What is it you want? A baby? Is that it?" He held out his hands. "You're thirty-four, I'm forty. My girls are eight and ten. I don't think I can do it. I'm being honest, that's all."

I was aware of things nearby—the dull gleam of silverware, drops glistening on the ice bucket, the pale orange walls.

And I thought: *How small we are. How infinitely small. Two people out of three billion. A breath, really. And yet we're so involved in ourselves, there's no room for anything else.* But there was so much beyond us, needing love and attention. An entire world.

"This isn't about a baby." I put my hand over his to still the spoon. "What will we do without Nancy?"



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“Don’t drag her into this. This is about you feeling scared.”

“We need her,” I said and held up my hand to stop his interrupting. Nancy was the scaffolding; she was the sturdy all-purpose shoe. I contrasted well against her. So did he. Poor, dull Nancy. She was reliable and patient, boringly conventional. We pitied her even as she paid bills, supervised repairs, and kept the family reasonably affluent with her trust fund so Daniel could be a lawyer who did good rather than well.

No, really, poor us. I lived on gourmet carryout and hadn’t balanced my checkbook in years. What would happen when the car broke down and the girls were screaming and we hadn’t had sex or a meaningful conversation in weeks—what then?

“We’ll divvy up chores,” he said impatiently. “Take turns, do things together. Here’s what matters: I’ve been married fifteen years and whatever connection we once had vanished long ago. There’s no spark, no recognition. Nancy’s decent and kind and she loves me, but it’s not enough. In fact, it’s lethal.” He flipped the spoon again. “Tell you what. I’ll cook, you clean.”

The waiter put down our plates. “Careful—hot,” he said. It seemed we’d ordered salmon. The glistening pink flesh was nestled amid thin green beans and roasted potatoes. Daniel speared some beans and put them in his mouth. I looked beyond him to the shadowed faces of people at their tables, eating in silence or talking, drinking wine, laughing. No one was alone.

I said, “I think love between two people is a small, insufficient thing. It’s a kind of squandering.” I was remembering how much larger my hopes had once been. Before I met Daniel, years before, I’d longed to move to a troubled place in the world where my own frustrations would seem small—where I’d live and work among people whose needs were more essential and worthwhile than mine.

Daniel pushed aside his plate and looked straight at me. “I know your tricks. You set up fake opposites, then knock them down. An hour ago you were congratulating me for





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the free-speech win, and now I'm some provincial dad? Sorry, I don't buy it. You're like Julia, you know. She's very clever, distracting you with one thing when underneath she's scared about something else."

He laughed. "Remember 'Barbies from Outer Space'? The other night she did a show called 'Barbies in Cages.' All her animals were roaming free, while the Barbies had to live in a zoo. She made paper bars and drew signs in animal language that said, *Please Don't Feed the People.*"

"What happened?"

"The Barbies broke free," he paused, "and found their mothers."

"Who were . . ."

"Barbies, too. They swooped down on motorcycles to save their girls."

"She knows something's wrong between you and Nancy. She's scared."

He shook his head. "They fight all the time. She feels trapped in that house like me."

"You said she was like me."

He shrugged. "Same difference."

I thought of Kate, who supposedly resembled Nancy. I imagined a child of my own—a boy or girl who'd devour my love and devotion. I'd go down willingly, unable to resist. "Tell me about the dog."

He sighed. "We got him from the pound. He's a mutt."

"How's he fitting in?"

Daniel rubbed his thumb along his knife. "He's just a dog, Claire. Just a goddamn dog." He dropped his napkin into the salmon sauce, and a brown stain soaked into the white linen. "I can't do this," he said. "Not here with all these people. Let's go home."

We walked back over the bridge. Far below, car headlights blinked through the trees. Daniel leaned over the railing. A crumpled piece of paper flew into the air, bursting from his hand like a wounded bird. Out over the edge it fluttered,



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tumbled, and caught in the branches of a tree. I wanted to cup the poor thing in my hand. “It’s the receipt,” he said, and walked away.

Right then my calm, empty feeling vanished. The old panic rose and stretched, filling the vacant places in me. Fear and discontent and sadness had been there all along, just hiding. I longed to be empty again. Clear and blank. Hollow as a cup.

A circle of yellow mums bloomed in front of the zoo, surrounded by a ring of lights. Daniel was hurrying, the wind picking up. “Let’s go in,” I called. “Let’s go inside.” He turned without looking. In a quick leap he hoisted himself over the fence and started down a path.

“Wait!” I called. I grabbed the top spikes and yanked myself up. For a moment I held myself there, straddling both sides. I could see him far along the path, going off without me.

I knew where he was headed. After making love, he’d sometimes lean out the window and call to the barking deer. “Just think,” he’d say. “Beasts, right in the heart of the city.” He’d sniff their rank, musty odor and say they smelled like sadness.

I ran silently, afraid of alerting the guards. When I got to the hut, he was at the fence, fingers wrapped around the metal coils. A deer lying in the dirt lifted her head. I stood beside Daniel and poked my fingers through the fence, motioning, *Come. I want to talk.*

“Remember us?” I said softly. “We call back and forth at night. We hear each other.”

The deer rose on her skinny legs and wobbled over. She stood near the fence and gazed at us. Her eyes were dark liquid, her brown fur matted with leaves and twigs.

“On a bed, in the dirt—it’s all the same, isn’t it,” he said. She tilted her head and sniffed. And then her long delicate face pointed to my building, up to the fifth floor where my windows were lit. “She *knows*,” he said. “That’s how primal we are. Whether you fight it or not . . . this animal recognizes us.”

We went back and talked at the kitchen table. We leaned toward each other, away from the sharp heart-curved backs



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of the chairs. He said I had to decide. I agreed. I spoke slowly, as if each word had to break through a hard surface and help me find my way.

Yes.

I opened my eyes and saw him smiling. I heard him say yes, too, in a husky voice.

We talked about suburbs and shared custody, commuting and marriage. My voice sounded as if someone else were speaking—a stranger who'd taken me by the hand. Daniel didn't press for details. He didn't ask was I sure this time and could we talk things through tomorrow. It was nearly midnight.

He gathered up his trench coat and briefcase and a Burberry's box with a scarf inside, a birthday present for Nancy. Next week she'd be thirty-nine. I took his tie from the rocking chair, and we walked to the elevator. Mrs. Devine, the widow who lived down the hall, peered out her door. She squinted at us and tightened the sash of her pink bathrobe. Her white hair formed a thin hazy cloud. When the elevator door closed, Daniel flipped off the light and we went down in darkness, wrapped around each other, holding on. "We'll be all right, we'll be fine," he whispered. I smelled him faintly through the soap. When the doors opened, he kissed me again. Then he hurried away.

I rode up in the dark, arms outstretched, trying to touch the walls. Mrs. Devine was straightening her welcome mat when I walked by. She stood up and pointed to his tie, still dangling from my arm like a purse. "In my day we collected them," she said. "Nowadays girls wear them. Either way . . ." She rubbed her eyes as if suddenly wondering what she was doing in her doorway. "I have a hairdresser's appointment in the morning, so I must go in now. Sleep always comes, you know."

In my bedroom, I leaned on the sill and looked out the window. A few stars hung in the sky, faint and dim in the parking lot's glare. For all I knew, they had burst and died millions of years ago. For all I knew, I was mistaking a beam of light for the true thing.

