

## Fiction

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# RACCOONS

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RUSSELL SMITH

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Mother's Day hung over the house like an appointment for surgery. It was not marked in the calendar of bright Rothkos that hung next to the fridge, but Leo had seen the smaller daybook that sat on her desk, the square of May 13 marked almost imperceptibly with a tiny *x* in the corner. The day he saw it he felt sick, as if the house was bathed in a childhood smell like granny's lamb or his dad's sports liniment, a warning of punishment.

He would be away on May 13, in Vancouver at a conference on education policy, most of which he would skip to walk on warm streets – dappled with European light and swelling with sunny bosom and calf – and have three beers before dinner, if he ate dinner at all, and watch BBC World in his toddler-free room, and she knew this, his wife did. The trip had already had, at its centre, a dark pit of guilt and now was overlaid by an almost certain failure and subsequent reproach.

He could, he thought, as he stepped into the earth scent of the garage, arrange a brunch on the Saturday before he left, impossible though because he had left all his marking for that day, and had committees all day the Friday. There was the option of a gift and a bunch of flowers – inadequate because too easy; the obligation was to spend time, lots of it, not just money, *commit oneself*, would a little *commitment* be impossible for a man like himself to imagine?

There was a man-sized space inside the garage in which to stand and blink in the gloom and then make out the tower of snow tires and early childhood toys – the yawning Diaper Genie, the training toilet, the never-used rocking horse – and think there, in private, about how the perception of sexual relations had now been forever altered by mommy blogs, and particularly by Kara's own blog, *40YearOldMom*, how one could not even think of Mother's Day now without a tone of indignation, of amused slight, imprinting itself on one's language; one could not even approach it without a filter of derision between oneself and the imagining of one's pathetic inadequate actions.

There was a deeper smell to the earth in there, and it was not good, a fecal smell, and this was why he had come in here, to face his suspicion.

At night, Leo dreamed of his house falling apart. He would be looking up at the newly plastered ceiling and see a dark

spot, then reach up to touch it and his hand would sink into damp plaster, and then he would notice how far the stain had spread, the rivulets of brown water running down the walls, the exposed beams, the pewter sky visible. Or it would be the foundation, holes in the floor, a whole wall missing. And he would turn and there would be his father, sitting in the kitchen, unable to help him because of course he had been dead for seven years.

And then he would wake up and hear the scrabbling, as if someone was playing with blocks on a wood floor, just underfoot or in the wall, and he would get up dizzy and realize he was not in his bed but in the daybed downstairs where he was usually exiled at about three in the morning when the Bean slapfooted down the corridor into the Big Bed, warm and whiny, and literally pushed him out. Then the noises would stop. And he would stand at the sliding door to the garden and see shapes in the dark, the striped tails, and be too cowed to open the door and shoo them.

Even when you did, even if you ran at them with your arms outstretched, screaming your best Monster – making the Bean laugh with the fantastic abandon only available to three-year olds – they would sit for a second, stare at you, bemused, and then as if rolling their eyes slowly turn and lumber away, just before you picked up the brick to chuck at them. (Leo had actually hit one with a brick, once, when the Bean wasn't around, from a distance of about three yards, but only half-heartedly, horrified at himself, the animal had flinched a little, then turned and snarled. The next morning there were piles of dung on both front and back doorsteps.)

And the day before, in broad daylight, an enormous one had lumbered across the upstairs deck right past him, so fat it could hardly haul itself up onto the railing and onto the abutting garage roof, utterly unafraid of Leo's barking and hissing. As he watched it waddle away, then force itself behind the garage (possibly into it?) Leo realized the swollen girth was unnatural. It was gravid.

So there he was, cellphone and fireplace poker in hand, in the clutter and dark and the spiky smell of foreign feces, looking for slimy babies to kill. They were definitely in there. He stood still.

There was no rustling. There was nothing.

His cellphone was also silent. If it rang in there it might echo and Kara, upstairs with her window open, might hear it. It had already rung twice that morning and she had asked and he had said it was telemarketers, but a third time would not be believable. Now was the time to fiddle with it to figure out the silent vibrate mode thing. He held it up, a little grey flashlight. He checked Kara's updates – she was blogging, up in her room. She had just posted on Facebook, "Weird mood." Five of her friends had asked her what was wrong and she hadn't answered. Then she tweeted, *Remember when you could do whatever you wanted on Saturdays? #endlesswork.* And: *Dr. Virpi Lummaa at Univ of Sheffield: research proves sons reduce a mother's life span by an average of 34 weeks. Says nothing about husbands. #sciencefail*

He had to find the vibrate mode, but it was too dark to see the keys, and he hadn't time to find the thing's settings. He just wrapped his fist around it to muffle its inevitable detonation.

There was also a box in there, somewhere behind the Diaper Genie, possibly protected by a sleeping raccoon, that he needed to get to, today, and he needed to find it, identify it among the other boxes, open it and get its contents out and through the house, not just past the raccoon but past Kara, and then into some unrecoverable inferno. He did not know how he was going to do this.

He kicked at some boxes, banged at the metal shelving to scare the animal out.

He listened for breathing.

He began to push at objects, moving them behind him as he worked his way towards the stack of boxes that had been untouched since their move. Behind a CD tower there was another space to stand. The fecal smell was stronger there. There was a dark space between the boxes and the wall that was undoubtedly both a bed and a latrine for unimaginable wriggling vermin. He didn't know which task was more urgent: the uncovering of the monster's lair or the toxic box.

He had not brought a flashlight. He used the phone's screen to look between the stacks.

There was possibly a hole in one wall, covered by boxes, through which they came and went, and with luck they would be out now – where? taking classes? shopping? – although they were supposed to sleep during the day.

He began to pull down boxes. There were cds, never to be used again, course notes, never to be used again, Christmas ornaments.

Kara's voice from the house. "Leo? Leo?"

She knew, she could tell, the second he wanted to be away from her, that he did. She had a sense.

He began ripping open the boxes more quickly. A heavy one, full of kitchen tiles, disintegrated. The tiles clattered.

A backpack containing moldy camping gear. A box of cassette tapes. Closer.

"Leo."

"Garage," he shouted. "Just checking."

"What?"

Bag of car wax buffers, plus congealed wax. Plywood, assorted shapes.

He put his phone down on a board and the second he did it rang like a siren.

He grabbed it, stifled it, tried to suffocate it.

From the house: "Who is calling you?"

He picked it up; he had to or it would never stop.

"You fucker," said the voice. "You fucking fucker."

"Jasmine," he said as evenly and quietly as he could. "Jasmine, I don't know what you want."

"I am going to firebomb your fucking house is what I want. I know people. You know that? I fucking know people you do not want—"

"Jasmine, please, please, I honestly don't know what it is I did. I really truly don't. And I told you, you can't call here, I live here with my wife and my—"

"Oh I can't? I can't? I can't call there?" There was a pause and a sucking sound, for she would have a joint of course going now, at eleven in the morning. "You think I won't find your other number? Your land line number? You watch me fucking call it, you watch me call your fucking wife."

"Okay. Okay. Listen. What do you need from me?"

From the house: "Leo?", then "Daddy!"

"Oh you have no idea. You have no fucking clue. You are a liar. You are a fucking liar."

"Is it about the tapes? If it's about the tapes I am looking for them right now, right this second."

"Oh now you're smart, now you remember. Because I am going to burn down your fucking house, now you remember."

"You know these tapes are useless, right, to anyone without the exact same camera which is now completely obsolete? To play them you need a VHS tape player and then you need a special adapter to put the little tape in and then put it in the machine, and nobody has that machine or that adapter, anywhere, ever. So this is a complete waste of everyone's time."

"How do I know you haven't copied them?"

"It's impossible to copy them. I would have to take them to a place, one of those places where you pay – and, Christ, this is ridiculous, I haven't looked at these tapes for two years, why would I do that?"

"Why do you have them then?"

Leo covered the phone and yelled, "One minute!" He kicked at a metal trunk to make it sound as if he was working in there. "Listen," he said to Jasmine, "I am finding them, now. And when I find them I am going to destroy them. I have no need for them at all, I promise you."

"Oh no. Oh no you won't destroy them."

"I won't?"

"I don't trust you for one second, you skunk."

"Jesus." Leo sat on a canister that looked like a case of grenades but that probably held Duplo Lego. "Jesus, Jas. What do you want?"

"You are going to bring them to me. Today." There was a noise of daytime TV, a giggly commercial.

"Today is not possible. It's Saturday. I am with my family."

"Today, like now. You are not going to have any time to copy them and put them on the internet or use them in any disgusting way."

"Jasmine, Jesus, I have absolutely no interest in doing that."

"You bring them to me in one hour or there are going to be fucking consequences."

The TV and her voice were gone. He put the phone in his pocket.

He opened boxes quickly then, boxes of school binders and medical records, boxes of tax. He moved an umbrella stand and a plastic wading pool. There were no more boxes. It had possibly been thrown out in the move. That would be bad.

It occurred to him that if he could not find the box, it might be time to think about calling the police. But this would entail a frank discussion with Kara that would be unimaginable at any time, let alone in the full flooding anticipation of Mother's Day.

He moved a bag of charcoal briquettes. They had not had a charcoal barbecue for three years. He put the bag of charcoal beside the bags of topsoil and grass seed. It was at least more coherent there, a bag among bags.

He kicked the topsoil bag and it broke and its black powder ejaculated. He said "cockpoop shit." When he bent to sweep earth with his bare hand he saw it, the blue hat box with the white strap, under the weight bench. He had to lay himself flat on the dusty floor to reach under.

He sat on the weight bench to open it. There was the clunky black camera, the battery the size of a juice box. It would probably be dead. And under it the blocky little Hi-8 cassettes, all labelled innocuous things like "Davenport's cottage" or "Hockey Brampton." Under each title he had marked in pencil his tiny x's. Sometimes an almost invisible J.

The camera opened like a book, the viewing screen folding outwards. He picked a tape - "City parade 2002" - that had two pencil x's. It slid into its cage, and amazingly the red power light came on. He pressed play.

There was the green room, her basement room, and there she was, pale and smiling and delicious, bare-legged, on her stained bed, running her hands through her hair, smoking a joint. He knew every second of this tape, knew exactly when the voice off camera, his voice, embarrassingly squeaky, would say, "Take your top off," and her smile then, the sunniest, most open smile, a smile of love and abandon, as she crossed her arms to pull the fabric upwards. He had watched this tape at first to see her body emerge, over and again, in its pallor and its vulnerability, to see the coin-sized yellow bruise on her ribcage, the quiver of her belly, and the sheer joy she had at exposing herself for him.

And then after a while he had only watched the beginning, to see that smile, a smile indicating a pleasure he had never caused anyone else to experience.

"Daddy," said a voice close to him, "what you doing?"

"I'm cleaning, sweetie. I'm cleaning up. Tell your mother I'm cleaning up." He had snapped the screen shut and dropped the camera back into the box in one motion.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Old toys I'm throwing out."

"I want them. Let me see."

"No, you don't. They're not yours."

"All the toys are mine."

The Bean had a point here.

"I'm going to clean this up and then I'm going to go in the car to give them away to the Salvation Army."

"To the poor people?"

"Yes. So go inside and—"

"No. I want my toys."

"They're baby things. You're not a baby, are you? Now go inside and tell mummy that's what I'm doing."

"It's a camewa," said the Bean, pointing at the hatbox. "Let me see it."

"No." Leo pushed it away with his foot. "Now go tell mummy—"

"It's a camewa!" the boy squealed. "Let me make a movie!"

"No, it doesn't work. Listen, I'm looking for raccoons. Do you think there are raccoons in here?"

The boy stepped back, into the sunlight. "No. No."

"They are a little scary. I think I'd better look for them on my own."

"I want to see them." But he was backing away.

"No, you don't. Go inside and tell mummy I haven't found them yet."

"When you find them, will you kill them?"

"No, no, of course not."

"Do we eat them?"

"No."

"And if you kill them they will be in the sky."

"No, they won't. I won't kill them."

"Will they come inside?"

"No, they won't."

"What will they do?"

"They will. Ah. I'm not sure yet."

"Daddy, what will you do? What will you do?"

"Leo." And there was the tall shadow of Kara. "I've been calling you for ages."

He stepped into the light to block her way. "I haven't found them yet," he said, "but I know they're in here."

"He's not going to kill them," said the Bean.

"So I'm off now," said Kara.

"What I'm going to have to do," said Leo, "is clean this thing out a bit. There are a bunch of things I'm going to take to the Salvation Army. All these old baby things. I can go right now."

"Daddy," said the Bean, "what is called crack cocaine?"

Leo and Kara were quite still for a moment. Then he cleared his throat. "What is what?"

"Crack cocaine."

He kneeled and looked in the boy's eyes. "Where did you hear that word?"

"The report man said the mayor was smoking crack cocaine."

"Yes that is right. He said that."

“What is crack cocaine?”

The sun was in Leo’s eyes and his knees burned. Kara was moving into the shed. “Where are they?” she said.

“Crack cocaine is poison,” said Leo. “Right mummy? It’s a poison and it’s very bad for you.”

“And you smoke it?”

“No, you don’t. If you touch it, you have to go to hospital. And the police will come and take you to jail. That’s why everybody is very very mad at the mayor.”

“Why did he smoke it?”

“Well, we don’t know if—”

“The report man said the mayor smoked crack cocaine. And but, but, but, but, but, but, but, but.”

“Okay,” said Leo.

“But the mayor said he didn’t smoked it. Doesn’t smoked it. And, and, and, and, and, and, and, and.”

“Yes.”

“And I think he’s lying.”

“Yes,” said Kara, “he is lying. Sometimes grown up men lie.”

“Okay buddy,” said Leo. He stood up, cracking. “I’m going to get ready to go now. Kara—”

“Leo,” she said, standing in the dankness and shading her eyes, “Sweetie, you know when you tidied up all the sunglasses that were on the chest, that now I can’t find mine, the prescription ones?”

He could smell calendula moisturizer on her, as if she had washed her hair in it. “I just moved them, my love, I put them all inside the bicycle helmet that’s in the trunk.”

“But you didn’t, they’re not there.”

“Daddy,” said the Bean, “Let’s pretend let’s pretend we’re Mounties.” He had grabbed a club, a piece of the old fencing that Leo had yet to remove, and was waving it.

“Okay sweetie.”

“And we’re looking for dragons. On the racetrack. And they’re Hondas.”

Leo said, “I assure you I didn’t move any sunglasses away from there, I promise you that. I would have no reason to move your sunglasses.”

“But you did, you just said, you moved them.”

Leo let out a burst of air. “I kept them all together. I promise you I would have no reason to move your sunglasses. What would my reason be for doing that?”

“I don’t know, but I know that I left them there and they’re not there now.”

With her back to him, he nudged the hat box further under the weight bench with his foot. He said, “I see. I see. What is your theory, exactly, as to what I did with them, or have reason to do with them?”

“What?”

“Your theory. What is your theory. That I took them, removed them from where they were sitting and hid them from you? There would have to be some malice involved in that. Quite a lot of malice.”

“Daddy, let’s pretend we’re in Chicago.”

“What are you so angry about?” said Kara.

“I’m not angry. I’m not angry. Listen, I’m going to load a bunch of things into the car. I’m going to scoot them down to the Salvation Army.”

“Now?”

“Yes, why not? I’ll get it done before lunch and then I can take this fellow for the afternoon and you can do your mindfulness.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Daddy,” said the Bean, “can a Honda fight a bear?” He slammed his stick into the side of the metal shed. This was very loud.

“Are you absolutely crazy?”

“Daddy’s not crazy.”

“I have told you three times I’m out with Julianne this afternoon.”

“That’s this afternoon? Beanie, stop that.”

“What is distracting you today?”

“Beanie, stop it right now.”

“Daddy, are you crazy?”

“I’m doing my mindfulness right now, and then you have him all afternoon.”

“Oh, good. Fine.”

“Don’t bore him by taking him to the stupid Salvation Army. You have to entertain him, you have to be—”

“Daddy! Daddy!”

“Not now, Beanie, mummy’s talking.”

“Daddy! Mummy said stupid!” The boy was jumping and pointing.

“Yes, she did, and she shouldn’t.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” said Kara.

“Everything’s fine,” said Leo. “You go now and do your thing. We’ll play out here.”

“I’m not going to tell Marianna,” said the Bean.

“What’s that?” said Leo, bending again.

“I’m not going to tell Marianna mummy said stupid.”

“No, you don’t have to. Sometimes grownups can say stupid.”

“It stinks in here,” said Kara.

“I think that’s the raccoons.”

“Daddy, can you say hate?”

“Who says hate?”

“Mummy.”

Leo exhaled again. “Listen,” he said to her, “you’re right about not taking him to the Salvation Army. So I’ll just go on my own now, really fast, I’ll be there and back in an hour, and you can start your—”

“Are you completely smoking crack? We planned all this yesterday. I am on my way out now.”

“Daddy, are you smoking crack? Is Daddy smoking crack?”

“Beanie,” said Leo, “if you don’t stop banging that thing right this second I am taking away your blue tow truck, the big one.”

There was a second of silence before the Bean’s face folded up into its mask of misery and he began to wail. Kara put her hands over her ears and walked towards the house.

Leo called after her: “That’s a nice shirt.”

She shouted back: “*Nothing!*”

“What?” he said with genuine puzzlement.

She stopped on the path. “Oh,” she said. “I thought you were accusing me of something.”

After she left he made the Bean a grilled cheese sandwich and sliced red peppers, then melon balls and sliced pears, none of which the boy ate. The peppers he threw with some force onto the carpet. The sandwich he took with him for a run around the ground floor and half-way up the stairs; Leo found it later stuffed under the sofa. He made a train track out of the pear slices and then cried when he was told not to. He drank two glasses of milk and demanded gummie-bears and apple juice, and cried hysterically when denied them.

When Leo was cleaning up after this, his phone rang again.

Her voice, raspy, as if on the edge of shouting. “When are you getting here?”

“I told you, I can’t today. It’s impossible.”

“You are getting here today. You are getting here right now.”

“Or what?”

He heard her breathing. Too fast. The television snarling as if in pain. She disconnected with a bang.

“Christ,” said Leo.

“Daddy, was that the police?”

“The police? Why would it be the police? No, sweetie. It wasn’t the police. Listen, we’re going to go for a drive in the car now.”

In the car the Bean sang the morning song, which went, “The good morning train is coming choo choo. We say good morning to Bernard choo choo. We say good morning to Jamal choo choo. We say good morning to Tsao choo choo. We say good morning to Asha choo choo. We say good morning to Aqif choo choo. We say good morning to Yumiko choo choo.” This song had to be completed in its entirety according to ritual.

But the moment the news came on the radio and Leo instinctively turned it up, the Bean went silent, for of course it was all about the mayor and crack cocaine. Leo could feel the stories imprinting on the little brain as if on wet concrete. The idea that the mayor smoked crack cocaine, whatever that was, was like a first series of commands that were going to become part of the boy’s operating system; they would be hard-wired like the idea that you can’t say stupid or that boys can’t wear pink or that you say grace before every meal (which must have come from Marianna, at daycare, against all regulations no doubt, but what could you do when you entrusted your child’s socialization to peasants?).

“Daddy, is he lying?”

“Well, we don’t know, Beanie. We don’t have any proof.”

“What is called proof?”

“Proof is evidence. Evidence is when you know something. They have no video evidence.” As he said this he put his hand over the hatbox in the front seat, as if to restrain it

from flying out the window. He didn’t know why he did this. He was eager to get it out of the car and away from the boy. “Look, a Jeep.”

“Thass not a Jeep. Thass a Subaru.”

“So it is. Good for you.”

“What is called proof.”

“I just told you.”

“Why.”

“Okay.”

“Daddy why.”

“Okay then.”

“Daddy, are the police going to come?”

“Why do you – listen, the police aren’t going to come for anyone, all right? Nobody is in any trouble. Not even the mayor.”

Her door was in an alley, at the side of a house; it led to a basement. So he could nose down the alley and park the car right there, leaving, he hoped the narrowest of gaps for passing, and leave the Bean strapped in his seat and just do the exchange at the door. He wouldn’t even have to go in. He could possibly even leave it running.

But when he arrived, there was a car in the spot. He parked behind it. But then he wouldn’t be able to leave the Bean in the car because he wouldn’t be able to see him from the door. He sat there for a minute thinking about this.

He checked his phone. 40yearoldmom had just tweeted, *When husbands move around a couple of boxes in the garage, do they expect the rest of the day off? #mommytime #entitlement*

“Daddy, what are we doing.”

“I’m just going to drop these things for poor people, like I said.”

“Where are the poor people.”

“In this house here. This is the Salvation Army. The door is where you leave things.”

“What’s the ssavayshinuhmee.”

“It’s a church, and they give things to poor people.”

“Where’s the church?”

“There’s a lady – there’s someone here. I’ll be right back, okay?”

Quickly, he grabbed the hat box on the front seat, and slipped out. He looked behind him and saw the Bean’s eyes wide and sad.

“Daddy!”

“I’m going to be right back. I’m going to be one minute.”

“Daddy. Daddy!”

“Yes.”

“My name is Instagram.”

“Okay sweetie.”

“No, no, no, my name is fire escape.”

“Yes it is. Now sit tight here, and I’ll be –”

“Daddy, what’s a copybara?”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.”

He slammed the door without looking at those guilt-squeezing big eyes and walked to the door. It was only about ten yards from the car to the front door but still he couldn’t



keep a close eye on the Bean. He could see the side of the car but not the Bean's face. He rapped hard on the door.

Inside, the television roared murder.

Leo knocked twice before it opened. She opened it and stepped away. He said, "Here," and held out the box. "I can't stay. My kid's in the car."

She left the door ajar and walked away, the dog attached to her hand, twisting to get at him. The flat smelled of weed smoke and litter box.

"I can't stay," he said. He saw her flop onto her sofa in the dimness, light another joint. The scrawny cat jumped on her lap. She was wearing a flimsy tank top and grey sweatpants, and bare feet. Her eyes were red. But her hair was its usual glossy massive clean spray. He wanted to put his nose in it. "Here." He opened the top of the box and pulled out the camera. "You can have the camera too."

"All right. Let's see them."

The place stank of catshit.

"You have to get up and come over here." He looked over his shoulder at the car. He could see its side but couldn't see or hear the Bean. "I have to watch my kid. In the car."

"I can't get up or Zero will run out the front door," she said, stroking the cat. "She'll run outside. Bring your kid in here."

He almost laughed. "No."

"Oh, what, it's not his class, kind of thing?"

"Jesus. Look. Take them. They're all here."

Slowly, she got up, the joint between her teeth, holding Zero, dumped him in the bathroom and closed the door. Then she took a long suck of her joint, put it down and stretched, her arms above her head. This caused her nipples to be displayed through her stretchy top and her shaved underarms to be revealed. Then she began gathering her hair in her hands and working it into a ponytail. She took her time about this. Finally she moved to him and began to pick through the tapes in the box he held out to her. She did this at arm's length, with her fingertips, as if they were both getting too close to something radioactive.

"They're all here," he said. "I have to go."

"Let me count them."

"Why do you want them so badly?" he said. "They're my memories too."

"If you have them, then you have me," she said. "You can use me, my body, any time you want. And I don't want you to have me."

"But of course I have you. I will always have you."

"That's disgusting."

He thought he perhaps heard the boy shout, so he was silent, craning his head around again. The car was motionless. "What about postcards, I have to destroy those too?" he said. "Or notes? Or photos of the two of us in the Walmart parking lot? Is it disgusting for me to keep those too?"

"And you," she said, "said you don't want me. So you can't have me."

"Okay," he said, "fine. By the way, you can't have them either."

"What?" She was close enough he could smell her hair

now, a green apple smell from the stuff she used.

"You're not going to just keep them," he said. "Then you could use them against me."

"What?"

"Yup. If I can't have them then you can't either."

"What do you want me to do?"

There was a car coming down the alleyway, he could hear it. He stepped back and twisted to look: a big SUV pushing its way through, slowing to slide by his parked car with the Bean sitting there. He said, "You're going to destroy them right now, and I'm going to watch you."

"How?"

He put his head into the dim room, looked around. The sink was full of dirty pots and plates of caked cat food, and soapy water. "Throw them in there, in the sink, then pull the tape out. Get them wet."

"Wow, you are really crazy, you know that?"

He laughed again. "I'll leave that alone," he said. "Just do it. Or I'm taking these back."

"Fuck," she said, viciously, "fuck's sake," and he could feel her rage rising again.

"Just do it. Now."

She grabbed the box roughly and dumped all the contents, including the camera, into the soapy water. The water slopped onto the floor. The tapes floated.

"Destroy them," he said.

She sighed and, swearing, began to rip at the cassettes, pulling out the copper strands. Soon the sink was a tangle of wet filament and cat food. In all of those ribbons were the taste of her, all the high afternoons and the weepy mornings with his mouth full of her. All the rainbow of her undergarments was turning to mud in the sink.

She said nothing.

He said, "All right? Happy? Are we done now?"

"Get out of here."

"Oh, you're welcome. You're very welcome."

"Go."

"Is there anything else you want from me?"

"You leave me the fuck alone."

He laughed for real then. "Okay. Okay. That's funny. I'll leave you alone." He stepped back into the alley, the light.

She came to the door. She leaned against the frame, her hands behind her back, her chest pushed out. She said, "What's your boy's name?"

He said, "Bernard."

"That's a nice name," she said, and her voice quivered. He saw her mouth tense as if she was about to cry and he turned quickly so as not to see it. He ran to the car without looking back.

When he pulled out and past her door it was shut.

"Now," he said to the Bean when they were on the street, "now we're going to go to the other Salvation Army, and drop these things off. And you can tell mummy we just went to the Salvation Army, that's all."

"And there was a lady there?"

"You can tell her there was a lady at the Salvation Army,

sure. There are often ladies there. Ladies to take the things you give.”

“Who was that lady?”

“Did you see a lady?”

“No.”

“Ah. Did you finish the morning song?”

“Daddy, what is ingredients?”

“Ingredients are –“

“What is fascinating?”

“Fascinating is very, very—”

“Ingredients!” shouted the Bean in the back of the car. “Fascinating!” And Leo drove on to the Salvation Army, where they dumped the Diaper Genie and the portable toilet and the rocking horse, a process that made them both cry.

That evening he was a great husband. He loaded and unloaded the dishwasher, he scrubbed the pots, he carried loads of the Bean’s laundry from the basement and got the Bean to help him fold and stack the tiny underpants and socks and the shirts covered in dinosaurs that made him so emotional in a hysterical, non-euphoric way. They did this while singing chain-gang work songs of Leo’s invention, which the Bean found hilarious. And then he volunteered to give the boy a bath and read him stories. He did this very cheerily, telling Kara that he didn’t mind because she must be exhausted after her long day with the mindfulness and then Julianne. And didn’t the mindfulness make her sleepy?

She was on her tablet most of the evening. Leo checked his phone periodically to read her posts. There was a long entry on trust in marriage and why access to each other’s email accounts was evidence of trust. Then there was a funny story about trying on new bras. There were a couple of tweets: *You may see a messy house, but I see an artistic expression of the chaotic nature of modern society #acceptance #housework*. And: *How many calories does telling people you’re on a diet burn? #glutenfreeforever*. And: *If I get really skinny, will my sex drive come back? #cureformotherhood #nolibido*

When it was time to kiss the boy goodnight she said, “What did you guys do all afternoon?”

Leo said, “Didn’t you see? We took all that stuff to the Salvation Army.”

“Was that fun for you, Beanie?”

“We had great fun, didn’t we Bean? Let’s go, up to bed now.”

“And to the lady,” said the Bean.

“Aren’t you pleased?” said Leo. “The shed is all emptied out now. I feel a great relief, I feel lighter.”

“A lady?” said Kara, kneeling.

“There was a lady who took the stuff, at the Salvation Army,” said Leo, tugging on the boy’s hand. “Let’s do your teeth.” He looked down at him with a firm smile on his face, and the Bean looked up at him with cool eyes. He gave a little smile and almost imperceptibly nodded. “Good boy,” said Leo. “Good boy. I love you.”

He actually had him half way up the stairs when the Bean stopped and said, “Daddy, what is called when you look in someone’s eyes?”

“Come on, sweetie, no stopping on the stairs.”

“What’s it called, Daddy?” said the Bean, motionless, “When you look inside someone’s eyes.”

“Bernard, I’m going to count to three.”

“What is it, sweetie?” Kara called from the kitchen.

“It’s called luff,” said Bernard. “Daddy, let’s do luff. Look inside my eyes.”

“Okay baby,” said Leo, almost floating with relief. “We’ll do luff in bed.”

When he came down Kara was watching a model competition show. He thought he would try to watch it for once. He sat and said, “Who’s winning?”

She switched off the TV in answer.

“Okay,” he said.

“Do you want to chat?”

“About what?”

She turned her face to the black screen and was quiet.

He gave this a minute. Then he said, “What is it?”

“Leo,” she said quietly, “do you ever lie to me?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“You don’t answer my question.”

“The phone calls today,” he said. “It was her. You are right.”

“Why didn’t you talk to her?”

“I did, actually.”

She stiffened beside him. “I see.”

“I had to. She kept calling. She wanted help.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake. When does she not want help.”

“I know. And I was very firm today. I was very tough. I told her I couldn’t help her any more and she would have to find someone else.”

“What was it this time?”

“Oh,” he said, leaning his head back and shifting his body towards the television. “Her computer again. It’s always broken. Turn it back on. I would watch this one.”

“And she knows no other men, no other people to help her with her computer.”

“Well, that’s what I said. Anyway, it’s done. I was firm. And I think this time . . . I am quite confident, anyway, that she won’t be calling here again. I told her you didn’t like it and that seemed to convince her.” He breathed out, waited.

“If she calls here one more time,” said Kara, “I’m going to call her back, and tell her to leave us alone.”

“Okay,” said Leo. “That’s fine. I am quite confident that won’t happen.”

She sat for a second, and then picked up the remote. When the TV went back on, Leo settled back with the beginnings of what could have been actual relief. And by the time they had both commented on a girl who looked a little horsey and one who might be a little masculine and one who had what could possibly have been a scar under her eye, it was relief like aspirin to a headache.

And when the show ended and he suggested they not watch the news because they had all been hearing the news all day and they knew it would be just the same accusations and denials about the mayor, she surprisingly said yes and she snapped off the set and stretched and yawned, he knew that they were through the crisis; his boy was sleeping and healthy, if mad, happily mad, upstairs, and they were safe in their home. And it was he, Leo, strong protector, who had shielded his family from the threat. He almost wanted to tell Kara, so proud he was of himself, but Kara might not be so proud.

She went up and he said he would be right behind her.

Once he heard her brushing her teeth he switched on his tablet, in the darkness of the living room, for actually he couldn't resist checking to see if there were any new developments in the drug-taking mayor story. There weren't, and he found himself hoping that actually the drug tape would never be found, for he felt sorry for the guy, an obese guy with enough stress in his life who had just wanted to do something fun in his life for once, who had just wanted to be with some cool tough guys in a place far away from his suburban house and his family, a place with no decisions and no women, and who could be harmed by this? If all of us had the video of our addictions exposed then there would be no more comfortable houses littered with soap-bubble guns and markers, no more children sleeping in beds under steam-engine wallpaper.

He was stretching himself when he heard a tapping, as if someone was at the window. He looked out the window at the narrow alley between the houses and saw nothing. He went to the sliding doors to the back yard and looked there too. There was a thump and more tapping from somewhere close and he stood still to listen.

As he listened the kitchen seemed darker than before. It was a scratching, and some rustling, extremely close, possibly from inside the kitchen cupboards. His heart was beating quite fast now, and he opened the cupboard doors and sprang back, as if something might squirt out at him from in there, but there was nothing.

The slithering was from the wall, from inside the wall. And an insistent crackling, the sound of insulation being removed, clawed or chewed, the sound of his house's guts being devoured.

His phone bleated in his back pocket.

He brought it quickly to his ear, without thinking. "Hello," he said, and regretted it.

"Fuck you," she said.

"Fuck me. Jasmine, why? Why fuck me."

"You know why."

"I do not. Jasmine, I do not. I did everything I could for you today, and now we are—"

"No you did not. You tricked me, again, you snake, you fucking ghoul."

"I honestly have no idea what you are talking about. I did the last thing I can do for you today."

"I found you out. I know what you did."

He did not answer this because he wanted silence so that he could hear where they were, exactly, in the walls. Perhaps

they had come down from the attic. Perhaps they were in the heating ducts.

"I looked at the tapes after I let the water out. Of the sink. And I saw the labels. Those weren't the tapes of us. You gave me bullshit tapes."

"Oh, shit. Jasmine. Of course the labels were different. They were fakes. I called them different things. To disguise them. Don't you understand? Everyone does that."

"Why should I believe anything that comes out of your mouth? Everything you say is a lie. It always has been."

"Look more closely at the labels, Jas." He was whispering as loudly as he could. Overhead, more dark footsteps: those were of his wife. "Look at them, you'll see little x's I put in pencil. That's my code. The other things are just to throw people off."

"See?" she said, inhaling simultaneously. He waited for her to expel the weed smoke. "See? Everything's a fake. Everything you touch is a lie."

"Jasmine. I don't know what to tell you. Except that not everybody wants to hurt you. Not everybody is lying to you. Why would they do that? What would be in it for them?"

"I'm looking at one right now," she said. He could hear the music and shouting of a television. "It says Professional Development Day. This one says Market. So where are our tapes?"

"You see, Jas? You see? Those titles are so boring. That's why I wrote them. Listen to me. Those are bullshit titles. Look for the x's."

"It's too late for that."

"Too late?" Overhead, still footsteps, his wife still awake, and now a thumping underfoot. Under the floorboards? He said, "Why is it too late?"

"I burned them. I burned them all. I dried them off, I soaked them in lighter fluid, and I melted them all. Your fucking family tapes."

"Okay, good, I'm glad to hear that. Now there is no trace, no trace whatever of our relationship."

"Oh yes there is. You have them, and I'm coming to get them."

He tried saying her name several times but she had disconnected.

Kara was behind him, ghostly in a white nightie. "Were you on the phone?"

"No. Quiet."

"What?"

"Listen."

They stood facing each other in darkness. She said "What is it?" and he shushed her again. There was the shuffling, and the cracking of something plastic. In the walls.

Together they moved to the sliding glass doors. He double-checked the locking handle. He snapped down the locks on the windows to either side. Then the two of them stood in the windows, looking into the black garden, trying to make out which moving shadows might have been fur, and whether there were any masks in the darkness, looking in at them. He reached for her hand, and she took it. •