

At the Zoo

Kevin McIntosh

"No, no Meggie. Put it down. That's not to touch." How could there be so many cigarette butts at a children's zoo? What were people thinking?
"Pin-guins, Daddy. Want to see pin-guins."

"Okay, sweetie." He swirled her into his arms and brushed back the blond curls that were matted to her forehead. The late-June humidity glued her to his side. Jesus, what heat. Had he remembered the sunscreen? Connie always took care of sunscreen. If Meggie came back red—no, that was a scene too nasty to contemplate. He put his squirming daughter down, sloughed off the green knapsack, and dug past diapers, a change of clothes and the remains of lunch. Finding the SPF45 at the bottom of the bag, he exhaled in relief and slathered the oily stuff on the unwilling child.

"Hold still, Meghan Ann . . ."

". . . 'stoo sticky, Daddy."

"All right, here. I'll put some in *your* hand and *you* can rub it in. Okay?"

"Okay." Those books of Connie's were right: give a two-year-old a little sense of control and she'll follow you anywhere. Meggie squinted as he dabbed sunscreen underneath her eyes; the sweet-smelling cream mingled with residual peanut butter-and-jelly. She definitely required some clean-up before they got home.

Narrowing his eyes, he saw past the waves of heat and took in the vast sea of parents, toddlers and strollers. Strange. So many fathers alone with their children. Divorced dads grabbing their custodial "quality time"? Or were their women, like Connie, downtown "catching up on paperwork" on a bright Sunday afternoon?

Not that he begrudged her the time. She was the bread-winner now, she had to put in the hours. And it made sense, really. Connie had the earning capacity. And the drive. Not many women could take two years off and still have their office waiting for them. She'd make partner some day, mommy-track or no.

It didn't bother him, her having the job that mattered, it really didn't. The adjunct gig at Mt. Ansley Junior College wasn't forever, he knew that going in. True, he'd felt blindsided when Steve told him he wasn't being renewed for *next* year. He hadn't expected that. But he'd been there before. Cut-backs. Politics. What could you do?

No, staying home with Meggie for a while would be all right. He looked down at his daughter, now wiping the last of the sunscreen on her shorts. But how could he meet Connie's standards? Her approach to motherhood was as exacting as her approach to tax law. Homemade Halloween costumes, healthful gourmet snacks. She was *die uber*-mom, no question. How could he compete?

A tug on his pants. "Daddy, where are the pin-guins? Did you lose them?" Jesus, she was her mother's daughter.

He knelt down. "No, sweetie, Daddy didn't lose them. They're straight ahead, next to the polar bears. You want to see the polar bears, too, right?" She nodded her sweaty head. The sun bonnet. He fished it out of the knapsack, plopped it on her head, tied it

under her chin.

Now, having promised arctic animals, where were they? He stood, trying to peer over the passing heads of the crowd. Had to be a zoo directory somewhere. Through a clearing in the crowd he saw a grandmother bouncing up and down, scratching underneath her arms, making her tiny grandson giggle. Beyond the grandmother he saw the directory, and next to the directory he saw . . . *her*.

His breath caught in his throat as he bit his lower lip. Reflexively, he removed his baseball cap and slicked back his hair. He observed her, motionless, for a long moment. Aware of the sweat gathering at his waist, he straightened to his full six-two and eased his grey T-shirt over his stomach and into his shorts. He squinted. Now she was over by the bird exhibit, whispering and laughing in a teenaged girl's ear. Her daughter? Could she have a daughter that age? It had been—what?—seventeen, eighteen years. He scratched his chin and squinted harder. *Damn*, it looked like Angela; a bit thicker in the middle and her black hair was going gray, but that *could* be Angela. He took a step forward, and hesitated. A sharp, tiny fingernail pierced his palm.

"Ow, Meghan, that hurts."

"Daddy, *c'mon*."

"What?"

"The pin-guins."

"Oh, yeah." The little girl pulled him toward the Polar Region as he looked back at the bird exhibit in distress.

* * *

"*What?*"

"You heard me."

"But this is the last review before the final."

"So . . . looks like you've got a decision to make." She crossed her arms under her breasts and her legs at the ankle, a mock-stern stance that she imagined looked fetching. She was right.

"We could go to class and get together tonight and study . . ."

A cocked eyebrow. "Studying is not what I had in mind."

He almost let out a soft *ohhh* but instead swallowed hard and gazed off at the science building in the distance, as if studying the ivy. Girls did not make offers this baldly where he came from. Was this an East Coast thing? Clearly, he was out of his league.

"Can't it be tomorrow afternoon, Angela?"

"Nope. This is a one-time-only offer."

"I could flunk this class."

"You have to decide: Doc Halberstein . . . or me?" She flicked her disheveled black curls over her right shoulder. "Besides, no way are you failing this class. Who should know better than me?"

Who, indeed. He had been taken off-guard by her since the morning she'd come up to him in class and asked to be his lab partner. He'd been dumbstruck then, too. There was no question he should say yes, just as there was no question now. But why was *she* asking *him*? She breezed into class late every day, flushed from her morning run, still dressed in her track team sweats. She never seemed to be carrying any notes. And yet, whenever there was an awkward pause in class, a question posed that no one could answer, Angela would always successfully fill the void. And she was a *philo* major!

Now she was hurling him off in another direction, suggesting they cut class and picnic in the Lilac Grove. The Lilac Grove! Legendary spot where you took your date when your roommate had already taken his date to your room. He, of course, had never actually *been* there, except in dreams. To invite a girl there was a rogue's request. But to be asked there by a girl was unheard of. His head was spinning with the possibilities.

He looked down at Angela: a pixie in a crimson warm-up suit, a mass of black curls, her arms still folded, tapping her sneaker as if late for a meeting. This was crazy! He'd never be approached by a girl like her again. What was there to decide? The letter: . . . *and repeated failure will result in the termination of your grant.* He couldn't tank this exam. A wave of nausea swept over him. He looked at Angela's face, expecting impatience but finding a puckish curve to her lips. She was enjoying his dilemma. He looked down at her sneakers.

"Angela, it's not that I wouldn't—"

"Christ, Michael. Do something spontaneous for once."

"Easy for you."

She placed a hand at the top of his chest and slid it down to his middle, smoothing an imaginary necktie. Their eyes met. "None but the brave deserve the fair."

More cleverness. Who was she quoting—Tennyson? Shakespeare? He was lost. A game he couldn't play. He spotted a pine cone on the ground, kicked it. Looking up, he felt the full weight of the early spring day. "Angela, I can't . . ."

Before he could move, before he could think she was out of the quad, onto the jogging path and up over the hill. He stood and watched until she was a speck of red, disappeared. He turned and walked in the direction of the science building. As he neared it, he noticed Dr. Halberstein, briefcase in hand, entering the Grimley Hall of Science.

He froze. Seconds passed, perhaps a minute. Whirling, he broke into a jog, then a gallop, across the quadrangle, to the path, and then up and over the hill.

* * *

He pushed open the door to the penguin house, blinking his eyes to adjust to the darkness. His entire frame slumped in relief as cool air clung to his damp T-shirt and shorts. He walked over to the glass barrier, behind which the penguins waddled and splashed. He pressed his hand, then his cheek, then his entire right side against the icy pane. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply.

Meghan, wilted, was draped on his left side, legs loosely belted around him, arms slipping from around his neck. He clutched at her bottom with his right arm, hoping to jolt her awake. Way too early for a nap. Last night had been a nightmare, Meghan screaming, Connie screaming "She napped too long, Michael." Yes, yes, she *had* napped too long. But what was he supposed to do, shake her awake in the middle of the day so she could sleep at night?

He shook his daughter. "Meggie, Meggie, look, the penguins. Look how they walk, honey. Aren't they silly?" Meghan lifted her head, lowered it, and wiped her drooly mouth on his shoulder. "Look," he lifted her head by the chin, "the daddy penguin is building a nest out of rocks."

The little girl wiped her eyes, fluttered them. "'sdark, Daddy."

"That's how penguins like it, honey."

A lazy yawn. "Why would that be true?"

He snorted. Jesus, where did she get that one? Connie was always going on about how precocious Meghan was, a claim he usually disputed. He was no expert, but he figured

she was just about average for her age. Then, in the middle of two-year-old prattle, out of her mouth would fly these phrases: *What time is it getting to be? I'm almost prepared for my bath.* "Listen," Connie would exclaim, "did you hear that syntax? She's using the progressive tense—didn't I tell you?" He would nod his head and smile and say nothing. As charmed as he was by his daughter, it puzzled him a little, why he didn't take more pride in these bursts of intellect.

"Why, Daddy?" She tapped his cheek with a finger.

Before he could conjure an answer, all hell broke loose. With ear-splitting guttural cries, two large males crashed into the barrier, inches from their noses, rattling the glass with their pudgy bodies. Beaks open and poised for attack, they circled each other like miniature sumo wrestlers. The match ended abruptly, a single ferocious peck sending the smaller combatant scuttling from the ring. The champion waddled about, declaring victory with a terrifying squawk, driving away all would-be challengers.

Meghan recoiled at the initial crash, but now she leaned forward, her nose to the glass.

"What's he doing?"

"I dunno. Let's watch."

The large penguin waddled behind a much smaller female, who made a hasty attempt at escape. His long sharp beak found her short thick neck and clamped down. He gave a little *hop*, and began pumping away at her furiously, violently, uttering that same terrible sound he had made in the heat of battle. Then it was over. He released her; she waddled forward, bristled her flipper-wings and made a smooth, splashless dive into the frigid water surrounding the rookery.

Father looked down at daughter. She was pop-eyed, riveted. How to explain *that*, Daddy? Where was Connie now? What would Brazelton say he should say? Something calm, reassuring—no evasive euphemisms—but not giving a small child more information than she could handle.

"What . . . what did the pin-guins do, Papa?" Papa. What he'd called *his* father. Meggie furrowed her brow. He cleared his throat.

"The penguins were . . . sort of playing, Meggie. Animals play rough, sometimes."

"The mommies and the daddies? They play rough?"

"Yes, Meghan Ann, even the mommies and daddies. Sometimes."

* * *

She lay on her bed, head propped up, staring at Rousseau's *Confessions*. He was still surprised, three months after that afternoon in the Lilac Grove, at how fragile she seemed naked. For a small person, she exuded a quality of bigness: large Italian gestures, broad facial expressions, long strides as she walked or ran. Her features, too, were large—strong straight nose, huge dark eyes, a generous Mediterranean mouth—uncomfortably large within the confines of a petite, finely-boned face.

And how casually naked she was! It still embarrassed him, how thoughtlessly she went about unclothed. He tried to hide it, his lack of sophistication, but once teased that she did everything naked but run. She claimed that she'd done that, too, in the woods behind the Lilac Grove.

But this freeness about nudity was not a sexual thing. Angela took great pleasure in her body. Pure child-pleasure. Her pleasure-seeking included sex, certainly, but he was surprised to find, after her startling overture that first afternoon, that her sexual experience

was as limited as his. Angela's come-ons were merely part of her playfulness, no different to her than the spoons she balanced on her nose during dull dinner talk.

He was attracted by this sense of fun, but it dismayed him in bed. Sex was serious for him: quiet, dramatic, intense. Angela would giggle during an orgasm. The first time she disappeared under her comforter and began sucking him—unexpected delight—then alarm as she reversed course and started making loud flatulent noises—blowing him, literally—a move that reduced him to a soft nub. Another time, after he withdrew, she slipped off the spent condom, held it up like a test tube containing one of their botched chemistry experiments, and exclaimed with a high-pitched cackle, *Could'a been a bay-bee!* He shuddered.

He looked down at *Gray's Anatomy*, rubbed his eyes, stretched. He had to have the digestive system down by first period tomorrow. The B- in Organic Chem last quarter, that had been Angela's doing.

Lest he forget, his mother's letter that morning reminded him just how inflated were the expectations of the folks back home. She'd just run into Mrs. Ostendorf at the butcher's; Mrs. O. was still giddy that someone from *their* little town was attending Havermore College. Not that she was surprised that *Michael* had made it. In a town where everyone over fifty still spoke a little German, only Michael had grown up having his hair ruffled to an accompanying sigh of *wunderkind*. But everyone here had been the village genius back home; there was no way for him to stand out. Not everyone could be an Angela.

Ah, Angela.

He closed his book, leaned over and kissed her on the back of the neck, finding a sensitive spot just below a small oval birthmark. She flinched but kept on reading. "Given up on Gray?"

"For the moment." He continued working his way down her neck and spine, giving each vertebra a separate kiss and remembering, despite his best effort not to, the Latin name for each columnar part.

Mid-lumbar he felt her shiver and knew that he'd finally triumphed over Monsieur Rousseau. She let her head fall; her nose nestled into the spine of the *Confessions*. He raised himself up, allowing her to turn underneath him. She reached for the bottom of his sweatshirt, pulled it up his torso and over his face till it stuck on his chin. He grunted and twisted his head, freeing it. He looked down at Angela. Her eyes had that dreamy, unfocused look that was, he had discovered, partly astigmatic, but also signaled a lifting of the veil, an openness to whatever came next. She kissed him, enveloped his lower lip with her large soft mouth, tugged on it insistently. Her hand slithered down to his navel and began gently, too gently, to play with the curly hair that surrounded it. This was excruciating and didn't fail, now, or ever, to elicit the desired effect.

Wham! "Ann-geee! Ange! Your gran's on the phone. You wanna get it? Or should I tell her you're . . . *busy*." Soprano giggles echoed down the hall.

Angela kissed his shoulder and leaned back against the mattress. "Tell her I'll call her back," she poked his ribs and smirked, "in a minute."

"Angie, your gran's not at your house. She's down at Mancini's with your pops. You're supposed to be having dinner with them tonight. Your gran figures you forgot, they'll be by in a minute to pick you up."

At the mention of dinner, Angela's body stiffened in a way he'd never seen. When she heard that her grandparents were on their way, her short, muscular runner's legs tensed, then sprang as if reacting to the starter's pistol, sending him sprawling across the narrow floor and up hard against her desk.

"Jesus Christ, Angela."

"Your *stuff* is all over this room, Michael."

"My what?"

"Nona and Papa will be here any second." Nona and Papa. Her grandparents. Little old Italian folks from the North End of Boston. That was the second time he'd heard those names; the first had been when she mumbled them in her sleep. When asked, she told him that "they were the people who raised me and my sisters." He had understood not to inquire as to the whereabouts of her parents, or ask anything about her home life. This was college, a separate existence.

"Your stuff. It's gotta go—now!"

"Angela, what the fu—"

She turned and grasped offensive materials: pizza boxes, cigarette cartons, half-smoked joints went flying over her shoulder and out the window. He sat silent in the face of this whirlwind until she leapt to the closet and ripped his clothes from their hangers.

"Angela, not my clothes—"

"They've gotta go!" He stood and watched as his clothing fluttered to the ground. She elbowed him away from the window, her arms filled with the last of his possessions. He leaned back against her desk and watched her work. Out went his toothbrush, out went his razor, out went the shaving cream, the *Esquire* magazines, the condoms. As the last of these items took flight, a tremendous cheer went up from the quad. Peeking over the window's edge, he saw a sizeable mob below, clapping, whistling, waving fists.

He sat down on the bed and took in the object of the crowd's appreciation. Angela stood at the window, hands on hips, appraising her handiwork on the quad lawn. Oblivious of the noise of the mob, she wiped her brow with the back of her hand and gathered her hair off the back of her neck, then shook it loose.

I should be angry, he thought. I should, at least, be embarrassed. Yet, staring at the taut little figure glinting at the window, he could summon neither of these emotions. His heart was with the crowd's: she was magnificent. A stunning, feral creature. Admiration was what he felt. Admiration and, for the first time, a moment of panic.

"What're you lookin' at?"

"You."

"Well, get your butt off my bed and get dressed." She snatched his sweatshirt from the foot of the bed and launched it into his face. As he stood and pulled the sweatshirt over his head, she tugged him up by the waist of his unbuttoned jeans and yanked him towards the door.

Before he could respond, she grabbed him by the collar and pulled his mouth to hers, giving his lower lip a final tug. "See ya' at breakfast," she chirped, closing the door loudly enough to make his head snap back.

He retreated down the hallway, zipping his jeans to the sound of girlish snickers emanating from behind closed doors. He felt an odd sense of elation as he bounded down the stairway towards the quad, blissfully unaware of the nature of his dismissal.

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His arms ached. He looked down at Meggie, curled shrimp-like on his chest. Damn, why wouldn't she just sit in her stroller? The day had started out so well. She loved being with the animals; he had to drag her away from the polar bears so he could give her a snack. He peered down into the knapsack hanging from the stroller. The kiwi remained uneaten, the guava-mango juice untried. Couldn't Connie just stick in some Fig Newtons and Hi-C

and have done with it?

Meggie stretched and gave out a whining yawn. Her early-warning system: ten minutes 'til meltdown. He hoisted the slippery girl and felt his lower back giving way. Lacking the maternal hip-shelf, only his aching forearms stood between relative calm and a full-scale tantrum.

He glared at the back of the young man at the pay phone, whose conspiratorial tone and silly expression indicated a love affair in progress. What ever happened to using public phones for brief messages? When did people start having complete conversations? Why had he left his cell phone on the kitchen counter?

Stupid. *Stupid*. So distracted by that woman. He had mis-timed the snack. And the nap. Now Meggie was too tired to eat or cooperate. Couldn't be Angela, anyway. Angela was on the West Coast, Seattle or San Francisco . . . a District Attorney or something. Hadn't Ben told him that? No one else from his two years at Havermore he bothered to talk to. Sure Ben said that. Long time ago, though. And always an unreliable source. Still, he certainly traveled in those circles. A real big deal now, Ben. Graduated *summa*. Cinched the job at Mt. Ansley for him with a single phone call. That's the kind of pull the Havermore imprimatur conferred.

The young man slid the receiver down on its hook and turned around, still wearing that look of sweet oblivion. He nodded at father and daughter, then ambled off as Michael slipped a quarter into the slot and tapped the familiar numbers.

Four rings and a click. A voice, officious yet polite, came on the line. A clear, crisp, woman's voice. His wife's. "You have reached the office of Constance Thorndike. Please leave a brief message and I will return your call as soon as possible." A few seconds pause, a beep. Brief? Yes, he would try to be brief. He knew all too well, fifteen seconds, no more.

"Connie . . . I'm just outside the zoo. Meggie's beginning to lose it." He immediately thought better of this line of exposition. "I mean, everything went fine. Meggie's fine. We had lunch." He glanced down at the knapsack. "And our snack." He was babbling now, and the clock was ticking. "I can't remember what we decided on for dinner . . ." He could, however, remember their bickering on this subject as Connie had fled to the office. Some sharp barb regarding his decision-making skills came to mind. ". . . maybe we should . . ." A beep, a click, a dial tone.

Hitching Meggie up another notch, her arms thrown over his shoulders, he fumbled past his keys, found the last of his change, and jammed it into the slot. He punched the numbers again. Ms. Thorndike reintroduced herself.

"Connie, I . . . I guess we'll just come straight home from the zoo. Meggie can nap in the car, but I think she'll be too tired to go out." Parents, children and strollers were beginning to stream in ever-greater numbers past the phone booth. He squinted as he followed the crowd leaving the zoo in the late-afternoon sun. The parking lot was going to be a disaster. "She's pooped, we're pooped. I guess I just lost track of time . . ."

He did not hear the final *beep* cut him off, for his eye, his mind, and his mind's-eye were all captured by the sight, not twenty feet away, of a small, attractive, fortyish woman in crimson T-shirt and khaki shorts bending down to tie the laces of her sneakers. The mop of black curls, more salt than pepper now, had been tamed in a stylish cut. The trim muscular legs were still those of a girl-athlete. *Angela!* Without-a-doubt, Angela.

* * *

But she did not meet him for breakfast the next morning. Nor for lunch, nor dinner,

nor any other meal that week. Whenever he came by her room, a room he had come to think of as *their* room, she was gone or "too busy to talk." None of his possessions remained there, giving no practical excuse for demanding entry. They had no classes in common now, no scheduled reason to meet. When he made an effort to casually pass by her favorite haunts—her secret corner of the library basement, the chapel belfry, the little-known paths behind the Lilac Grove—he found himself alone, and ridiculous.

And so it was with great anxiety and anticipation that he played with his scrambled eggs that morning. After cramming all night for his Physics and Bio Chem finals, he'd come back to his room to find a note stuck on his door. The note—*Meet me at The Caf for breakfast. We need to talk. A.*—was vague enough to inspire thoughts both seductive and dreadful, leaving him sleepless in contemplation of each possible outcome. His imagination was still entertaining the emotional and sensual connotations of "meet" and "need" when Angela appeared in the cafeteria doorway.

She caught his gaze, then looked away. She got her usual fruit salad and coffee and sat. Her eyes were red-rimmed. She had been crying? Angela had been crying?

"So," she said. Her eyes went back to her fruit salad.

"So." He watched her stab a wedge of pineapple.

"You've been wondering what I've been up to."

"I was concerned."

"I've been re-evaluating my life." She looked up, a blank expression on her face. "I think we should stop seeing each other."

He would not panic; he was prepared for this. Half of last night had been spent composing a counter-argument. He tried to summon his script. It was gone.

"We've stopped, haven't we?" he said. Angela beat a soft, jagged rhythm on the salt shaker with her spoon. "Is there a reason? A reason you want to stop seeing each other?"

She put her spoon down and looked at him, raising her fingers to her lips in an attitude of thoughtfulness he had often seen before she answered a difficult question in class.

"I think . . . I think we were becoming too . . . too *in-grown*."

"Too *in-what*? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You're going to make this difficult, aren't you?"

"It *is* difficult."

"Do you remember about six weeks ago? When I had the flu?" He nodded. "I thought I was pregnant." He took her hands. "It's all right, Michael. I wasn't . . . I'm not."

"You could've told me."

A long pause. "What good would it have done?"

"I would have helped you with it."

She shook her head. "It's not the pregnancy I was scared about."

"No?"

"Lots of girls from my neighborhood already have kids."

Understanding enveloped him like a damp, dirty shroud. My kid. She didn't want to have *my* kid. He leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling, nodding involuntarily, expelling all the air in his lungs.

Angela looked at her plate. "Whatever we did, it would have tied us together, Michael."

"I thought we *were* tied together."

"No, not that. Not that way, Michael." She paused, pursed her lips. "We were sort of . . . hanging out together. It was fun. But I came to realize that we were into something that could get *serious*."

"What were we doing together, Angela? Why did you approach me in the first place?" He screamed it. For him, a scream. Enough to make a few students look up from their coffee.

"You always seemed so lost in class. Always so *passive*. You looked like you could use a little . . . shaking up."

"Mission accomplished."

She looked down at her plate, wiped her mouth. "I'm sorry, Michael. I'm really sorry."

"Angela Trevellini, you are one cold-hearted *bitch*."

She dropped her crumpled napkin onto her fruit salad and stood. "Goodbye, Michael. And good luck."

Michael sat, back rigid, palms flat on the dining table, staring at the doorway. He dared not move. As he looked hesitantly about him, all the sights and sounds—bleary-eyed nightpersons finishing that sixth cup of coffee, student-workers grouching as they cleared the morning's detritus—blended together. Someone had thrown cold water on this canvas and the colors ran and dripped around him.

The hard lump in his chest was liquefying. He felt it rise to his shoulders, then ooze down his biceps, down his forearms, slither through his hands and fingers, onto the table, down to the floor; it followed Angela out the doorway. He slumped in his chair. He could not move. No final exams would be taken today.

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In one swift motion he whirled his daughter down from his shoulders and slid her into the stroller. He messed with the buckle of the stroller-belt. Damn thing never fastened. He listened for the click of the buckle. Click, dammit, *click*. He looked out, searching the crowd, peering through the thicket of knees. Where was she now? Back to the belt. Click. Pivoting the stroller on a single wheel, he took off for the large exit sign. It was shoulder to shoulder, wheel to wheel, from there to the parking lot. But where was *she*? Such a short thing. Never find her again in this crowd. Always a talent for disappearing.

He quickened his pace, zigzagging between double-strollers, splitting a clutch of nannies, who pulled their pale charges out of harm's way. He pushed on through. Good thing he didn't know Creole. Where was she? Fifty feet to the exit, another fifty to the parking lot. She was slipping away. She always slipped away. *Wait*. The teenaged girl. Her young friend. Her lovely, curly-haired daughter. And next to her, with the same brisk stride, closing in on the exit, Angela.

His trot broke to a canter; in and out of family clusters he slipped. The veins at his temples throbbed. Sweat steamed on his forehead, his eyes stung. He was getting closer: twenty feet, fifteen. Close enough to call out, close enough to speak her name. "Angela." A stage whisper. "Angela." A small shout. "*Angela!*" He must be screaming her name. Ten feet away—surely she was hearing him. The people around him, were they staring? Let them stare. He had to reach her. The teenaged girl was glancing over her shoulder with a troubled look. She jogged to keep up with the older woman, tapped her on the back. The older woman strode on through the exit.

He was panting, chest aching. Angela was tearing off for the parking lot, getting lost in the crowd again. Couldn't lose her. Had to talk to her. Had to ask her—what? Had to ask her *why*: why he had failed, why he had let so many people down, why he was so second-rate, why his life had fallen so short of his dreams . . .

A shriek. Meghan. My God, Meghan. He fell to his knees. Jesus, her face was all red. She was terrified. She was in hysterics. She was giggling uncontrollably.

"*Wheee*, Daddy, go faster. Go faster again!"

"Meghan, are you all right?"

"That's fun, Daddy! Go faster again!"

He held her cheeks in his hands. "Oh Meggie. Oh, I'm so sorry."

Her brow furrowed. "Why do you cry, Daddy?" His hands went to his own cheeks, wet and crusted from commingled sweat and tears. He was surprised to find himself sobbing, sucking up intermittent breaths, a sensation so distant that he immediately flashed on the last time he'd gasped this way, his mother stroking his hair, reminding him not to let his next dog play so close to the highway.

"Oh, I don't know, Meghan. I really don't." He swabbed his face with the bottom of his T-shirt. What a fool. He'd been so sure it was her. So *certain*. He tried to gather himself together. His breathing came closer to normal. A weak attempt at a smile, a tug on the sun bonnet. "Shall we go home, Meghan Ann?" She nodded.

Beer. Hadn't there been one left, in the back, behind the peanut butter? Should be good and cold by now. He shifted Meghan from right side to left, twirling the keys on his ring till he came to their apartment key. Slide it in gently, turn it slowly, open the door silently, slip the girl into bed, flip on the AC, pop open that Molson. Don't rush it, that's the thing. She won't wake up if you just don't rush it. Damn. The key wouldn't turn, no matter his quiet insistence. He pulled it out, inspected it: the key to his classroom at school, as yet unreturned.

Meghan stirred. Shhhh. Find the right key. This can still work. Still time to pull it together before she gets home. He remembered the toys left in the living room, the chicken defrosting in the fridge. Those could be taken care of if Meggie slept. He couldn't face Connie yet. Too weary to do that dance. A dull golden key went into the lock and turned noiselessly. He urged the knob around as if he planned to rob the joint. Placing the fingertips of his free hand on the door, he nudged it open.

He inserted his head and was surprised by a wave of cool air. Had he left the air conditioner on all this time? His shoulder bumped the door wide open. His sunburnt eyes were bathed by the muted hues he'd recently come to know as mauve and taupe and dusty rose. This morning's toys were nowhere to be seen; the neatly-fringed pillows were once again stationed at the corners of the living room sofa. Flowers were arranged in the Victorian wedding-present vase. The vacuum cleaner had worked its magic. Connie was home.

Hell to pay, he thought, as Meghan stretched and batted her eyelids. She'd gotten his frantic message, come home to find the apartment a wreck, dinner uncooked. His first week of house-husbandry, ending in disaster. This was going to be ugly.

He tip-toed into the dining room, checking for land mines. Silverware was out on the table, though not yet set for dinner. He sniffed the air; none of his wife's famous recipes touched his nose. He ventured into the hallway.

"Con?"

"Michael, is that you?" she called from their back bedroom. Impossible to interpret her tone.

"It's us. We're back. We're awake." Meggie struggled in his arms. Too early to tell if she would come in for a gentle landing.

"I'll be there in a sec."

He untied the sun bonnet, smoothed back her damp bangs. She was a little red, maybe, not too bad. Thank you, Lord. "You wanna sit in Daddy's lap for a bit, till you wake up?" She was too groggy to nod, but she ceased struggling, which he took as assent. They sat together at the dinner table, her head on his chest. He stroked her hair, rearranging her curls, trying to recall what they'd looked like that morning.

"Just look at you two." Connie stood in the kitchen doorway, hands on hips, shaking her head. There was his wife, tall and willowy in the sky-blue summer dress he'd gotten her for their anniversary the year before Meghan was conceived. With her blond hair pulled back in that girlish ponytail, the resemblance between mother and daughter struck him even more than usual. "You poor things." She bent and patted Meghan's cheek, then his. "How's my pumpkin? Was it special being alone with Daddy? Won't it be fun having him stay home with you?" Her mommy voice, particularly irritating at this moment. She evaluated the foodstuffs on her daughter's clothes. "Looks like you brought some of the zoo home with you."

"I know, I'm sorry. I forgot the bib . . ."

"Michael, relax. She always looks like this when I get her back from the zoo." He very much doubted that, and her inexplicable generosity unnerved him. "You look a little worse for wear yourself, dear. Why don't you wash up and I'll change Meggie. Oh, and I figured you guys would be hungry so I made a snack." She swept Meghan out of his arms and walked away, cooing to their daughter about her favorite animals.

He trudged down the hall, into the bathroom. There the mirror confirmed the worst: he looked as bad as he felt. He ran the cold water until it was icy and threw several handfuls into his face. Toweling his head, he made for the bedroom, stripping as he went. Naked except for briefs, he sat on their bed, confronted once again by his image, now staring at him from the full-length mirror on the closet door. Never particularly vain about his appearance, he had nevertheless always taken for granted a general attractiveness, and it pained him to note the softening of his belly, the retreat of his hairline at the corners of his forehead.

He went to the closet, found the khaki pants and matching short-sleeved shirt she had picked up for him the other day. Slipping them on, he headed down the hall, poked his head in the kitchen. Connie's "snack" greeted him: nachos and guacamole and a pitcher of frozen margaritas, all beautifully arranged on a tray with salt-rimmed glasses. After last night's scream-fest, a major peace offering. He pulled a chip free from the cheesy mass, immersed it in guacamole, savored the fresh garlic and cilantro that made Connie's guac sing. He filled a glass, took a large mouthful of limey slush, shivered as it melted on its way down.

The chicken was also on the counter, next to his cell phone, with the *International Favorites* cookbook open to "Fabulous Fajitas." His plan had been simpler: "Chicken, Baked." But the challenge was unavoidable; he glanced through the recipe and started slicing. He wiped his hands and popped in a cassette of "Ella's Greatest Hits." She crooned Kern as he cut the chicken into thin strips.

*You are
the promised kiss of springtime,
that makes the lonely winter
seem long . . .*

Chipotle peppers . . . where were they, and what would they look like? No, he would not ask Connie. As he dug through the spice drawer, he sang with Ella:

*Some day
my happy arms will hold you,
and some day
I'll know that moment divine,
when All the Things You Are,
are mine*

He looked through the kitchen doorway and saw Connie in the rocker, reading to Meghan. He laughed to himself as Connie puffed out her slender face, impersonating the beefy Irish cop who was going to make Boston safe for ducklings. She caught him watching out of the corner of her eye, and winked. Meghan nestled under Connie's arm. He stood there for some time, watching. He stood there, considering all the things that were his. And weren't.