American Women

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No one offers me a drink. Eliot and Sara come and go through the screen door to their kitchen maybe half a dozen times, bringing towels for the children, pitchers of Kool-Aid, bowls full of potato chips, Cheetos, and pretzels soon to be soggy from wet, busy hands. They get themselves glasses of iced tea but don't offer me one.

I'm standing off to the side, statuesque in the sun, sweating. There's no shade anywhere on this godforsaken patio, as I watch children dunking each other in the pool, envying them the water, their lack of inhibition. For a second I imagine how Eliot would react, what he would say if he saw me, his ex-wife, peel off my street clothing and walk to the edge of his pool and dive in. The only thing that keeps me from doing something so reckless is I'm not wearing a bathing suit underneath my clothes, and besides, the person who would be truly mortified, if only for fear of his father's mortification, would be my eight-year-old Damien, whose birthday party this is.

I move to the edge of the pool, hoping to catch the spray from a random child cannon-balling into the water, except Eliot has told them they can't splash, eight-year-olds at a birthday party and they can't

splash. Most amazing of all is that they listen to him, finding "ways to have fun," as he puts it, "without splashing." My job, I guess, is to make sure they don't drown each other. Standing poolside in the heat, watching the children in the water, I picture myself stripping and diving into the pool, explaining afterward how I thought one of the children had swallowed too much water. What could Eliot say to that?

Eliot is my ex of five years and he still can't talk to me. He is not even aware, I think, of the fact that he can't stand still long enough to say more than two words to me. Even on the phone his voice flutters, betraying beneath-the-surface rage. It's much easier in the end to make our childcare arrangements, to orchestrate swaps and responsibilities for shuffling the boys to extracurricular activities, by way of e-mail. I doubt Eliot could say why I upset him so. Except he always feared I didn't want any of this, and now he is punishing me because by leaving him I finally said it flat out, not in words but in actions: *I don't want any of this. I don't want this house, at least not in this development, not all this middle-aged quiescence, not all this distracting yourself from your own life by endlessly speculating on the lives of our children* (always a collective plural in suburbia)*; no I can't want any of it, can't want you.*

I stare at the children. Do my boys understand me as someone who said all that? My older son Cody is standing in the middle of the pool, playing lifeguard, making my watchfulness redundant. I am as useless as can be, waiting for the afternoon to pass, for Damien's birthday to be over and my part as extra in this day of his life to be played out. Whenever the children are with Eliot they move back into his house completely, and it's as though I'm their mother in name only. Eliot wants it that way. He's reconstituted his life perfectly: within two years he'd plugged Sara into my place and impregnated her, proclaiming to the world exactly which one of us wanted out of a marriage with two small children in the heart of suburbia.

I didn't leave my boys. I moved blocks away, out of the development, into a somewhat modern apartment complex. We have joint custody of the children. Eliot is a good father, we have completely different styles of parenting, and that's probably the most difficult adjustment for the boys, switching back and forth between his authoritarian model and my style of relative camaraderie. It's probably

good they're with their father half the time because I can never remember to treat them like children. They ask me questions and I tell them what I think. Eliot used to say, "How can you tell a five-year-old about death and not mention heaven?" I'd say, "I don't want to lie to him. I can't tell my son something I'm not sure about." Cody had asked if God was real and I said, quite democratically I might add, "A lot of people seem to think so." Eliot found my reply sarcastic, but it wasn't. Children at that age don't understand sarcasm.

Sometimes when I pull into Eliot's housing development I mutter under my breath, "McMansions." A woman from a neighboring, prestigious suburb once used that word to me while I was still living in the development. "I just couldn't do the McMansion thing. It's all so the same, one house like the other, no character or individuality. Where do you live?" "With Ronald," I'd said. The boys sometimes hear me whisper "McMansion" when I pull into their father's development and they think it's a dig on the fact that their father takes them for fast food, which they know I disapprove of. They pretend secretly to agree with me, nodding conspiratorially, assuring me that they always order side salads, my younger one at the age of six having sworn off beef and kept to it for almost two years now, won't even eat a hamburger. It's to the point where Sara, a real Midwestern beefeater, teases him about it mercilessly.

When the boys and I arrived this afternoon (somehow this party got scheduled on one of my days), Damien pointed to the apron of the driveway as we were exiting the car and said, "Can you see where the vandalism was?"

"What did it say again?"

He'd told me the story yesterday, in his high-spirited, breathless voice, full of the dread of brotherly interruptions, of Cody's warnings at every turn about forgotten details. When Damien begged for his right to speak, "No, Cody, let me tell it," his older brother agreed to keep quiet so long as Damien kept all the details straight and gave permission ahead of time for Cody to help keep the story in the right order. The vandalism, as I understand it, involved local teen-agers painting a mild obscenity, complete with drawing, on the driveway.

"It was a picture of a thing," Damien reminded me.

"You can say penis, Damien, it's not a dirty word."

"And then it said, 'You've been . . . ,'" he stopped. "Is it okay to say it?"

"Only if you're telling me about it," I said evenly, relieving him of his embarrassment.

"Dicked," he said. "You've been dicked."

"What does that even mean?" I said with light exasperation and Damien looked up at me in that half-embarrassed, shoulder-shrugging way young boys have when they're talking about anything having to do with sexuality.

"I'll bet your dad was happy about the drawing."

"No, Dad was really mad. He was going to make Cody and me scrub it off, but then Sara thought we'd be looking too long at the dirty picture and so he did it himself."

On the driveway I could see the faint black outline of the balloon-like penis and the two round testicles, like cartoonish bicycle wheels, beneath it. Eliot had been unable to erase all traces of obscenity from the white concrete.

"Because we've never seen one of those before," I said.

"Not on the sidewalk," Damien said reasonably, and I conceded the point. "Well, that's true."

Eliot came out of the house and only then did I register his waiting, for several moments, behind the glass storm door. "What are you doing, Damien?" Eliot demanded, and I said, "He was just explaining the recent plague of graffiti."

"Well, can you move your car into the driveway?" Eliot asked, and there was something so peremptory in his voice, I thought to myself, Can it be that I hardly know this man?

"What's wrong with where I am?"

"Nothing," he said. "Can you park here?"

And then I understood: he wanted my car parked over the shadowy penis.

"I think I've been dripping transmission fluid," I said.

"I'll take my chances."

Those were the only words Eliot spoke to me, and other than a quick greeting from Sara my only piece of adult conversation this afternoon. It's just the three of us now. Other parents dropped their kids

off, speaking mostly to Eliot and Sara, nodding at me, planning to return in a few hours, doubtless grateful for this brief reprieve in their overly scheduled lives.

Of late my two boys have switched roles, ever so slightly. Cody, once responsive to my every mood, now feels the social obligation to neglect me. He still calls me in stealth late at night, wants me to know he's paying attention, but he's got to be careful around his father. Whereas Damien, heretofore the oblivious one, has started to remember me at odd junctures of his day. All this morning he worried that I'd feel out of place in a house I moved away from five years ago, assuring me I didn't have to come unless I wanted to. When I said of course I wanted to be at his birthday party, he looked at me skeptically.

"Are you okay, Mom?" he asks now, the pool water dripping from him.

"You look refreshed," I say, envying him his soaked state of being. I'm positively baking in the heat, and I suppose I could fetch myself a drink, except it's not my house anymore and I'm trying to be considerate, so I ask my eight-year-old, "Could you just run into the kitchen and get me a glass of water?"

When he returns he walks right past Eliot, who watches (apparently without a pang of neglect) as his son hands over the glass of water. "Here you go, Mom," Damien says.

A short while later the cat slinks up to me, lingering a few feet away, as if deciding whether to brush against me or shun me. When I first moved out, Cleo would follow me to my apartment and purr outside my window, refusing to come in but imploring me to come to the door and scratch her neck. Then she'd walk home, returning unpredictably, at different hours on different days. I used to imagine her while I was at work, purring outside my window without result. I rescued her from an alley behind my old apartment when I was living in Memphis, fed her daily for five years. She couldn't just forget all of that overnight, so she bridged the separation, negotiating its effect on her, riding out the long weeks of ambiguity by visiting me and sleeping at her home. Then one day she gave me up, never again wandered to my apartment. She almost never says hello when I visit. When I drop off or pick up the boys she is lurking in the bushes near the doorstep, but she won't come forward for

a greeting. This is the closest contact we've had in months.

"Hi Cleo," I say gently, and hearing her name she twists her neck and unfurls her tail. "It's okay, Cleo, you don't have to talk to me."

"That cat doesn't talk to nobody," a little girl announces. Her name is Janice. She is in Cody's class and has a crush on him. Once last year I showed Janice a picture of Cody at three and he felt this to be a tremendous violation and wouldn't talk to me for the rest of that day. I'm now under strict orders to tell Janice nothing about my own son.

"She used to talk to me all the time, didn't you, Cleo?"

"Hi Cody's real mom," Janice says to me. She can never remember how to pronounce my last name, and when she first met me she did not understand how I also could be Cody's mom when she'd just been playing at his house the day before and met a different mom. Three months later her parents separated and have since divorced, and now she always calls me "Cody's real mom," in honor of my having given birth to her favorite male classmate.

"My grandparents have a cat, and it sits at your feet and talks to you so loudly that you start to let it outside, except you're not supposed to," she tells me, "because it kills baby rabbits for sports."

"Some cats do that. They used to be hunters and it's hard for them to forget their ways. Cleo is very gentle, though."

At those words Cleo wanders off, and I notice over my shoulder I'm being watched from the top of the slide by Cody. I tell Janice she should run off and play with the other kids and we'll talk later.

"So I'll see you later?" she says.

"Of course."

Again I become entirely unnecessary. After a long while Sara, who has been busying herself clearing cups, refilling pitchers, and replenishing bowls of snacks, stops to say a word to me. She is six months pregnant, showing in that full but not yet burdensome way. I envy her this little window of privilege—the kindness of the world while you're pregnant, and the space (still early in the third trimester) when you're comfortable enough to enjoy it.

I ask Sara about her job and if she'll work all the way up to the last month.

"As long as I can," she says. "Mine's been easy so far."

Sara has a vague knowledge that my pregnancies were not easy, each ending in bedrest. The topic makes her nervous because she believes I blame Eliot for not being more supportive, and she takes care to remind me that he is making amends this time around. Not that he was ever awful with me, just clumsy in predictable ways, expecting he could not please me and so not trying much.

Eliot still holds it against me that I was ultimately unhappy with him as a husband. He used to say to me in the last two years of our marriage, "I was like this when you married me, you know."

"People change," I'd say. "They grow, their expectations grow."

"I haven't changed," he'd say, as if it were a sign of pure irrationality in me to have expanded my expectations. "Why do you have to do this *now*?" Those were the first words from his mouth when I brought up the possibility of divorce, as though he'd always known it would come and had only hoped to put it off a bit longer because at that point in his life it was rather inconvenient: he was trying to start a new business, he wanted a third child. Well, I think, as I look at Sara, here comes your third child and from what I hear your new business is taking off. You should be happy, Eliot. And when he walks out of the house, hoisting Damien on his head, offering to throw him into the pool, I see that he really is happy, much happier than he ever was with me. This is his domain, finally, his body language says. If you live in the suburbs in your own house, it's like living in a big box or a habitat. Everything about you is supposed to be yours. I am an intruder here, but he shouldn't hold it against me. I've done him a great favor, if you ask me.

Sara smiles at him as he passes but he doesn't see. Her smile is for no one, just a sign of her pleasure in him, a token of the grace people possess in and of themselves, in their idea of themselves.

"Camille, I hate to ask a favor," she says to me, "but do you think it'd be a terrible burden if I asked you to dash to the Piggly Wiggly for me? I don't think I have enough ice cream. I've never hosted a party for this many children before and I just looked into the refrigerator, there's no way I have enough."

I choose to interpret her request as an attempt to make me feel useful here in my old house because her husband is so committed to conveying the opposite message. There is a serenity to her, she refuses to

be graceless. She is my age, never having married before. She wasn't especially eager to have children. She gives the impression she could have done with or without a life partner and she'd be roughly the same person. Many of the divorced women I know are struggling for this kind of self-possession. They sometimes ask me how long one needs to stay single. Most divorced women believe in autonomy, and it's hardest for the ones who don't have it in them naturally. It's different for men. In a way they're far less certain of themselves. For example, Eliot was afraid to be single. So many men are afraid to be alone. I think it's a primitive instinct, some leftover hang-up from initiation rites, when adolescents were left overnight in the forest and had to survive the night without getting eaten by wild animals.

Walking to the car, thinking of a young Eliot, at an age before I knew him, stranded in a forest, scared for his life, I spot the little girl Janice alone by the front bushes. Not alone exactly. She is talking to Cleo whom she has cornered behind a bush, and Cleo is hissing back at her.

"Janice, Janice," I say, running up to her. "Don't do that. Never corner an animal. When a cat hisses like that, it will scratch you."

"I wanted her to make friends with me."

"Cats do everything on their own time. You can't force friendship on a cat."

Janice looks positively dejected and I sense that something else is bothering her, possibly the fact that my son, with whom she regularly plays at my apartment, won't give her the time of day in front of all these other children. My heart bleeds for her, for her little girl longing, still just young enough to be relatively sexless.

"Where are you going?" she asks when she spots the keys in my hand. "Are you leaving the party? We were going to have a talk."

"I'm coming back. Sara, I mean Mrs. Nedwed, doesn't think she has enough ice cream."

"Oh," she says. "I could come with you. I could help you carry the ice cream."

I tell her that I'd enjoy her company and my remark wins a smile. First, I remind her, she must run and tell her mother (who lives three houses away) so she won't be missed, and Sara tells me her mother expects her to be at the party all afternoon. "Well, then," I say, "run and

tell Mrs. Nedwed you're helping me on my errand and I'll wait for you. And get your shoes and a t-shirt."

She runs into the house and is back quicker than I expected, her t-shirt worn like a rope around her neck, her sandals in hand. I open the back door for her, putting her in the seat transverse from mine, as she stares back at me sharply, perhaps having expected to ride up front.

As I start to pull out of the driveway, I'm suddenly aware of exposing Eliot's faint charcoal penis to arriving guests. Phrasing it that way makes me think, briefly, of his genitalia—for the first time in well over two years. Not sexually. I was always surprised by how soon I stopped missing him sexually, it took less than a few months. No, what I'm thinking now—and in this there is a pang of regret—is what I used to know about his genitalia that no one else did, specifically, how he suffered from bouts of excruciating urethritis. It would flame up suddenly, when he was stressed and overtired and possibly dehydrated, whenever he drank alcohol on an empty stomach or ate the wrong foods, although he could never determine which ones were the wrong foods. He'd eat a certain kind of Indian food and suffer a flare-up, only then remembering that once before he'd suffered such a flare-up after eating this same dish, although on other occasions he'd been fine. Sometimes I'd see it come over him at a party, a stiffness in his mouth and body and I'd wait for him to whisper to me, "Maybe we should be going now," and I'd make our excuses, claiming to have a headache myself or to be getting up early the next morning. In the car on the ride home he'd clench his hand over his groin and I'd ask how long it had been acting up.

On this day in 1970, "American Woman" was the number one song in the country.

"I remember that song," a voice says from the backseat.

"Really, you were alive in 1970?"

"No," Janice says solemnly, "only since 1997, but I like the oldies."

A mother from Mexico was recently arrested for attempting to sell her three-month-old baby for 60,000 American dollars over the internet. The disc-jockey is speaking with sonorous piety, reporting a news item, then comes the mild tonal shift: *Guess she won't be getting a mother's day card next week. Apparently, a man from the good state of Arkansas saw the notice on his eBay account and turned her into the feds. The mother was*

devastated—not because she got caught, but because they shut down her eBay account.

How do you classify humor of that sort? It's so familiar, so radio.

"She must have been very poor," Janice says sympathetically from the backseat, and I decide again that I really like this young girl.

"Unimaginably poor," I say.

Inside the Piggly Wiggly Janice and I find the ice cream and I let her pick out one of the flavors. Unimaginatively, feeling the burden of selecting on behalf of so many children, she chooses strawberry.

We get into the shortest check-out line, the express, only four customers ahead of us. Janice is looking at the magazines on the shelf, asking what I think of Ashley Simpson, telling me that in her opinion Ashley Simpson is very fake: "She had plastic surgery and sometimes she doesn't even sing her own songs." The young man standing immediately in front of us exudes an erratic, kinetic energy. He is in his early twenties maybe, well over a decade younger than I am, and has been eavesdropping on Janice's conversation, looking directly at her, then up at me, obviously charmed. He compliments me on this child he assumes to be mine. He is dressed loose and slovenly, wearing too much for a warm late spring day, including an army jacket decorated with the logos of rock bands—Metallica, Megadeth, Green Day, and a host of others whose names I don't recognize. The three of us stand in a triangle, Janice thumbing through the magazines to my left on the rack over the conveyor belt, the young man rifling through items on the candy shelf to my right. He holds two candy bars and a magazine in his hand, picks up some other items (gum, Tootsie Rolls, Altoids) before replacing them in the rack, and next removes several packs of batteries before, apparently thinking better of his choice, replacing one pack. I'm not sure what all the indecision is about, except I have the impression I'm watching one of those old connoisseurs of the shell game: *keep your eye on my hand, which one has the pea under it*. The right side of his body is turned from me, his right hand still holding several items.

Is he aware of my watching?

He says aloud to no one in particular that he doesn't want the magazine and now reaches toward Janice, asking if she'll put it back for him. Janice looks at him distrustfully, then up at me. I nod to her and

she takes the magazine from his hands, a copy of *People*. As she replaces it she keeps her eye on the man the entire time, and then I observe his right hand in his coat pocket and Janice's mouth open in alarm. When he pulls the hand out of his pocket, only the candybars are still in it and Janice is gazing at him as if she's about to say something. Has she seen more than I have? I notice the lewd outline of a big-breasted, nippled, mud-flap-styled girl on the front of his jacket, and I wonder if the image alarms her.

Convinced that there are unpaid-for items in his pocket, I run through possible courses of action in my mind, imagine myself saying to him gently, "I think you forgot to pay for those items in your pocket." Then I look him over again. He seems decidedly more impoverished to me on second glance, but maybe I'm just rationalizing. For all I know he's some kid raised nearby who just doesn't like to pay for things. I imagine myself whispering to the clerk after he leaves, "I think that boy may have stolen a few things," but he's hardly a boy and I hate it when women hide behind maternally connoted language. I look back to Janice and she is staring at me, perhaps wondering if I've also seen the transgression she has observed.

The young man hands over two candy bars to the clerk, as my mind seizes on the reality of modern security systems, on how all items must be systematically coded and decoded. Surely, the store's scanning systems will detect the unpaid-for items in his coat, if there are any. I stare into my purse, searching for my wallet, avoiding Janice's stare. If she says anything I'll step between her and the man, protect her from his sudden wrath. Otherwise it seems best to leave well enough alone. I just can't see the point in accusing a somewhat disheveled young man of petty crime in a grocery store in an affluent suburb. If Janice were my own child I wouldn't want her to get that message, I wouldn't want her to think that morality consists of criminalizing the poor. Besides, this all may be scripted, beyond the young man's intentions. How can he be so reckless, I wonder, as to have forgotten the store's security system? For half a second I have the urge to warn him.

The teen-aged girl behind the counter hands him his change and says, "Have a nice day, sir." He is not a boy in her eyes.

Then it is our turn and I notice I've been holding the ice cream the

entire time. When I put the cartons down on the conveyer belt, my cold-numbed fingers start to breathe and sting in the temperate air. The girl behind the register scans the items and announces the total. "That's $14.45, ma'am." I hate when teen-aged girls call me "ma'am." I can't remember when it started. They say it mostly when I'm in the company of children, but it makes me feel old and I think that's what they mean by it, not respect but a taunt: *you're not young anymore, you could be my mom, remember that*.

At the counter I do not look at the girl, only inside my purse, fumbling for my wallet from which I extract a twenty-dollar bill. I've also been avoiding eye contact with Janice, so I look up now to see her staring at me, as if she's waiting for me to say something portentous, something that will bring her world back into perspective.

My neck and shoulders are tensed in anticipation. If the store's security system were going to go off, triggered by the young man, it should have done so by now. Whatever it was he stole, he's gotten away with it, and this is the reason Janice is looking at me. She can't believe I'm not telling on the thieving boy. She expects me to say something and relieve her of what she's witnessed, to extract responsibility for what she's seen from that place in her where it has lodged as private, confused judgment. That's what adults do for children, they simplify the world.

The girl behind the counter gives me my change and I thank her.

Janice is sullenly silent at my side, disappointed without knowing why, and I can feel my hold on her slipping away. It shouldn't matter. Why do I care so much about the opinion of a young girl who has a crush on my older son, who wants—she does not even know that she wants this—her well-ordered world of right and wrong to be restored?

"Did you think that man in front of us stole something, Janice?"

She looks up at me and I can see the relief in her eyes.

"I think so," she says. "I mean yes, I'm pretty sure he took some batteries."

"Oh, is that all?" I say nonchalantly.

"I can't be sure. He may also have taken some other things. But I saw the batteries."

"Why do you think he would do something like that?" I ask her once we're in the car, headed home.

"I imagine he didn't have any money."

"I agree. Maybe he doesn't make very much money, or maybe he lost his job."

Sure, I know, there are people who steal for the thrill. I've read about kleptomania, about rich ladies who go into a Macy's department store and steal expensive perfumes and purses, but I've never quite gotten over my basic belief that people steal not because they have poor morals but because they're poor, plain and simple.

"He should get a job," Janice says.

"Maybe he tried and couldn't," I say.

"Do you think it's okay to steal?" Janice asks defiantly.

"No, I think it's wrong," I tell her. "I just think that it's also wrong to have a society in which so many people can't afford basic things."

"Like batteries."

Why couldn't we have witnessed a thief who stole basic necessities—milk and bread, not batteries for some Walkman?

"Sure, like batteries," I say.

Janice has returned to me. This is all very perplexing to her, but she likes the fact that I talk to her honestly. She likes the fact that I treat her as an adult.

When we pull into the driveway Eliot is standing on the front porch next to a woman whose back is turned to me.

As soon as we're out of the car Eliot addresses me. "Camille, where were you?" He speaks hastily, in that chastening tone he held in check for most of our marriage but found himself unable to resist once the contract between us was broken. His voice signals displeasure but also more than that, a basic conviction that I am irresponsible about duties he considers non-negotiable. Eliot has an MBA in finance from Duke. He is one of those people who lives life as though his every act were anticipated by his having already signed papers and agreed to behave in a certain way. He raises kids with the same regularity, evenness, and planning for every circumstance involved in taking out a mortgage on a piece of property and paying it regularly so as to buy back from the bank one's place in the world.

"At the Piggly Wiggly," I say nonchalantly, half-hoping to dodge his anger, and yet aware that my breezy air will only irritate him further.

Janice's mom does not acknowledge me. Instead she says to her child, "Janice, you didn't have permission to run to the store with Cody's mom!"

Janice does not speak up for herself to say that she told Mrs. Nedwed she was going to the store with me, and instantly I understand why. She disobeyed me, she never told Sara she was going to the store. I look at Janice, who is waiting for me to rat her out, to betray her after we've just bonded over another secret.

"Camille, how could you take a neighbor's child to the store without telling us?" Eliot says, refusing to let the confrontation pass.

And how dare you speak to me in front of the child's mother in that scoldy, anal voice of yours, like I'm a mere child. Of course I only think such words, I don't say them, because one of us at least has the good grace and composure not to utter secret furies aloud.

"I was sure she wouldn't mind," I say with mild indifference. Eliot is standing aggressively forward, one foot on the yard, one in the driveway, legs apart like a soldier, the way he stands (I imagine) when he disciplines my boys. I am not two feet from my car, in the vicinity now that I think about it of one of the chalked testicles he unsuccessfully tried to scrub from his driveway. Sara, I notice, has come out of the house onto the porch, and she hesitates before starting forward.

Janice's mom, Elaine Michaels (I know her loosely), speaks up in my defense. "Eliot, Janice probably told Camille she had my permission. Isn't that what happened, Janice?"

Janice will not answer. She is afraid of being caught in her lie, afraid I will think less of her.

Then Sara intervenes. I can tell she is reluctant to do so. I must have done something awful to this man, her husband, to make him feel as he does about me.

"Eliot," she says, "calm down. What is this about anyway?"

"If that child is our guest, she's our responsibility. Camille can't take her off to the store without telling anyone. She just can't keep doing this sort of thing."

His anger toward me is surprising, to all of us. Shouldn't he be over it by now, Sara must be saying to herself. Shouldn't he be done with feeling hurt by his ex-wife's every whimsical act? How is it that I wound him so, inspiring him with inarticulate outrage?

I make no effort to defend myself. He is trying to humiliate me but only embarrassing himself.

"Eliot," Sara says, "you're overreacting. You don't know the whole situation . . ."

"I know all I need to know . . ."

"Eliot, I gave Janice permission to go to the store with Camille."

As soon as she says the words I know she's lying, and when I steal a look at Janice my intuition is confirmed.

"What are you talking about?" Eliot is furious with Sara, and I can't decide whether it's because he believes she should have had his back no matter what or because he knows she's lying to defend me. "Why didn't you say something?"

"No one asked me. I'm sorry, Elaine," she says. "I didn't know you were looking for her."

"Oh, just for a few minutes," Elaine concedes. "It was silly, that one minute of panic, when you feel something awful might have happened to your child, as though a crime were being committed somewhere at that very moment and you have to protect her from it." Her confession is too much and she intuits her own excess: those are not fears you admit to other people. "I overreacted, we all overreacted, I'm afraid. Janice, why don't you run home now."

"But I wanted to swim some more."

"Another day."

"But the presents and cake. I went and helped pick out the ice cream."

Elaine begins to repent the arbitrariness of her parental edict, and she looks up at Sara, who says, "We'll send her right home after cake, will that be okay?" So Elaine gives her daughter permission to rejoin the party and Janice escapes into Eliot's house. Then Elaine makes her excuses and walks back to her own house, grasping my forearm apologetically before she leaves.

"Here's the ice cream, Sara," I say, handing her the cartons.

"Oh, sorry to put you to all this trouble. What do I owe you?"

"Don't be silly."

"I insist," she says.

"No, I do."

"Well, let's go serve cake and ice cream."

"I think I'll pass," I say.

This catches them by surprise, my own version of stubborn memory. Eliot finally breaks his silence. "Camille, don't be ridiculous. It was an honest mistake. What will I tell the boys?"

"Tell them I'll be back for them in a couple of hours."

He wants to say something else but understands he's overstepped his bounds. Sara feels bad but can think of nothing to say. Objectively she must see how much Eliot is in the wrong, but any further exertion is beyond her, she's already done well by me once this afternoon. And even that kindness was girded, I suspect, by a low-grade hostility—not because I stopped desiring a man she desires, never showed one sign of wanting him back after I left, but because my effect on her husband inspires a suspicion she can't quite overcome.

As I back my car out of their driveway, I stare through the windshield at the two of them and it's as if I am looking back at my husband and his new wife after many years, at this pair of odd beings who are stuck in time and alien to me. One of them is someone I used to love, and yet I cannot see him anymore, cannot remember what he is like except as this person who can barely tolerate my presence in his life.

One day, I tell myself, I am going to stop coming here altogether. It is a simple fact, and only a small part of me regrets it. I say the words to remind myself of a fortunate inevitability, but somewhere back inside of me there is also a voice, that small part of me that gives itself to regret, murmurous and quiet. And it is as though I were looking back through time at the young boy Eliot was before I met him, at a girl I was who would some day fall in love with this man, and it is as if I could speak to her not so much to warn but to ask her what she was thinking, what she saw in him, not disdainfully but because I'd really like to know.