

Tabloid News

Jeanette, Parker's sister-in-law, came through the jetway door dragging her two-year-old daughter, and he thought for a moment that he would have to carry them both to the car. Jeanette's face, normally olive complected, looked pasty, blotchy, as if she'd used the five hours of flight time to cry, while Bonnie, his niece, hung from her mother's hand like a doughy piece of carry-on baggage. She was parroting the same phrase over and over—"Bunny wet, Bunny wet, Bunny wet"—and making her best use of a two-year-old's passive resistance.

"Hey, sis. Over here," Parker said. He waved his hands above his head. Myrna, his wife, was at work—she was always at work—and he had been named chauffeur.

"Parker." Jeanette dropped her carry-on, and the passengers behind her began to bunch up in the narrow alley between the gate and the jetway. He hurried to get the bag and the baby, trying to move Jeanette over to the side next to the railing. "Sorry," she said. "It was a bad trip. Little Bun-Bun here did gymnastics in my lap the whole way, and I think I probably owe about six people for dry-cleaning bills." Parker caught the smell of gin when she spoke.

"An hour and we'll be home, you can put your feet up," Parker said, aware that he was using his father's voice. His father's trumped-up good humor had been his favorite device for mollifying irrational women such as Parker's stepmother and Parker's wife. Parker was only beginning to realize that there were certain things about his father that he didn't like. A recent revelation, it made him feel as though he were starting all over again as a son. "Anyway, it won't take long," he said, trying to make his voice sound less jolly, less rah-rah.

"Sure."

Together they moved through the terminal. Bonnie grabbed Parker's hand in her wet, warm ones as they stepped onto the escalator leading to the baggage claim. Jeanette leaned against his shoulder. He could feel her body begin to shake. He set the small bag on the next lower step of the escalator and held his sister-in-law around the shoulders. Her arm went around his waist, and he imagined that to anyone in the terminal they looked like a tired family just returned from a vacation to the Grand Canyon or Colorado Springs. Jeanette moved against him. "I'm sorry about your dad's mess," she said:

"Thanks. I'm sorry about Vic," he said in return.

"Fuck Vic."

At the bottom of the escalator, a few dozen people were already standing around the two baggage carousels. The silver wheels moved around and around. A couple of suitcases, refugees from previous flights, circled endlessly. Inside there would probably be someone's underwear, socks, dirty laundry, toiletries, maybe a souvenir for a loved one. Parker wondered what could have happened to the owners of the suitcases since the time that their belongings had been lost. He could imagine the carousels continuing to circle

in the dark even early the next morning with the two suitcases still unclaimed.

"I didn't mean that," Jeanette said. "I'd like to say 'Fuck Vic' and mean it, but I don't. I can't. Not yet anyway. I get mad at myself when I don't mean it, though."

"Give yourself some time, sis," he said. *And in an hour you'll have your feet up.* Sometimes Parker wished that there were a clamp he could buy for his lips so his father couldn't leap out. "I mean, you don't get over these things in a day or two," he finished lamely.

"Thank you, Brother Thom." Jeanette's mouth turned up at one corner. The color was beginning to come back to her face. "You are an inspiration, I'm sure."

He knew he'd sounded stupid, but what was he supposed to say? *Whyn't ya buy a sharp knife and cut your husband's balls and pecker off? Why'd ya marry the bastard in the first place?*

"I was just wondering," she said, "why your last name is a first name and your first name a last?"

Parker shrugged. "For the first three years of grade school I thought my name was Tom Parker."

Jeanette put her head on his shoulder. She was laughing or crying again. It was impossible to tell.

"Bunny wet."

Parker and Jeanette looked down at Bonnie, who was now dangling from Parker's arm. A thin brown trail descended one leg while a bloom of smell drifted upward. Jeanette sighed, pulled a disposable diaper from the bag, and led her daughter off in the direction of the restrooms. Parker watched the baggage carousels with their two orphan suitcases. He thought up lives for the owners of the suitcases while he waited, and although he imagined victims of espionage or crime, he couldn't think up predicaments bizarre enough to be satisfying. Leave that to the tabloids, which, in a strange search for comfort, he'd recently taken to reading. He thought of taking one of the bags as if it were his own, living from its contents for a day or two, trying on another's life, as it were, as a way of gauging whether or not his own life and expectations were simply fantasies.

And though everyone waited, standing at attention, from the small door with the rubber flap, nothing appeared.

Life, Parker believed, was not supposed to be this way. His wife's family must be rubbing off in some mysterious, unpleasant way. He had grown accustomed to Myrna's ritual when dealing with letters from home—a water glass of wine, then the mail. Myrna's three sisters, all younger than Myrna, seemed to have married for misery. Grace's husband, a computer programmer, whom Parker remembered only for wearing thick, black-framed glasses, was diagnosed as schizophrenic three months after the wedding. Ingrid had eloped with an operator of heavy construction equipment, who died two years later when his earthmover turned over on him in an area of heavy mud. When his will was read, it was discovered that Bob had had a male lover in a highway town in Idaho. Now Jeanette, the youngest of the four, had discovered that Vic had fathered at least two illegitimate children previously and that number three was in the works, each by a different woman. Number three's mother was suing him for paternity, and while Vic did not deny his involvement, he could not afford to mortgage his franchised spa outlet any further than it already was. He had come to Jeanette on his knees, one letter reported, in a greasy sweat, swearing that it would never happen again, he would get counseling, he'd never loved anyone but Jeanette, etc., etc. When Jeanette seemed to be weakening, Myrna bought the plane ticket and ordered her sister to the airport.

Parker had liked to think that he was somehow the buffer between his wife and such soap opera. They had been married twelve years; he had always been faithful, he held a steady job—he was a high school social studies teacher—and he took pride in the fact that he and Myrna had, quite rationally, decided not to have children of their own. Children meant constant demands and threats to any couple's established peace. They were an invitation to disasters of all kinds. He was Myrna's single, still point in the midst of her chaotic family, and two days after they were married, they had moved to California from Oregon and away from the family's soup kettle of poor choices, bad luck, and intrafamilial gossip, rivalry, and alliances.

Parker had also liked to indulge the notion that such things happened only in Myrna's blue-collar family and not among his

tribe of pudgy, soft-fingered white-collar relatives, that her family's misfortunes were entirely the product of their class and a deficiency of virtue rather than circumstances beyond anyone's mortal control. But now that his own father could be counted among the names of the family's headlines, he was having to acquaint himself with the stew of compromised, melodramatic life.

His father, sixty-seven years old, had been charged by Parker's stepmother, Lydia, for spousal 'abuse. She'd recently been to a seminar on that very subject, and she had identified her experience. Evidently, jolly good humor was not enough. When the police came, following her phone call, Lydia told them that her husband had beaten her that very morning, that he had beaten her for twenty-two years, that she was through taking it, he was cheap and unforgiving and violent on top of everything else, it was no wonder that his first wife had run away. She did exhibit the makings of a very nasty bruise on her right cheek, evidence, according to Parker's father, of where she had fallen into the bathroom counter the day before, but in the end, he ducked his head into a squad car, beginning the long tunnel toward fingerprints and pictures and humiliation.

Parker bailed his father out that night sometime after midnight. His father had aged ten years, his stepmother had become a stranger, and he realized with an unpleasant jolt—for the first time since his mother had abandoned his father and him, for reasons his father would not or could not explain—that he too could become the victim of chaos and human unpredictability. *What was going on?* Either his stepmother's arteries were beyond reclamation or his father was a monster with Toastmasters' training. *And what could possibly be next?* He had visions of himself blurrily pictured in the back pages of the *Star*, and underneath the caption: "Man Performs Abdominal Surgery on Self." As if there were some vestigial organ, some appendix of moral ambiguity. He would operate with a butter knife. Let his expression of grief be the subject of supermarket scrutiny.

When he complained to Myrna, she outwardly sympathized, but he suspected that in her eyes he saw a glimmer of satisfaction and triumph: *So now you know what it's like, kiddo. Join the rest of us.* They had often fought on something like this very ground.

She held the view that her family, in all its extremes, was very much the social norm; it was his own expectation that was wacko, according to definition. She had told him on more than one occasion that he couldn't demand the world to march to his own drumbeat of propriety, and she seemed to see Parker's father in their spare bedroom as a small price to pay for the proof of that lesson.

When Parker brought Jeanette and Bonnie home, the dogs across the street, Alaskan huskies, were howling even though it was only eleven-thirty in the morning, and Parker's father was standing on the front lawn howling back. The dogs had been howling for two weeks, ever since their owners had separated and filed for divorce. Even after Parker had unloaded their luggage and they were inside the house eating lunch, the howling—as if the San Joaquin Valley were winter tundra and the sun a full moon—was audible.

"Doggies," Bonnie said, "doggies cry."

"Someone should shoot those miserable animals," Parker's father said, "and put them out of their goddamn misery."

"They're just unhappy," Jeanette said. She seemed to understand the wellspring of Parker's father's anger, and she laid one hand on his arm.

"All the more reason," his father said. "I never did anything to that woman, but because she's unhappy with herself, I wind up going to jail. Is that fair?"

"Cut it out, Pop," Parker said. He had hoped to keep the conversation out of this particular groove, to distract his father by means of lunch meat and bread and mayonnaise. "Don't start, okay?"

"Twenty-two years, and suddenly I'm a sadist. She's that unhappy, she should kill herself. Leave me out of it. My first wife, maybe she was unhappy too, who knows? At least she had the decency to disappear. No fuss, no scenes."

"Time doesn't mean a thing," Jeanette said. "If there's one thing I've learned it's that people invent themselves every day."

"I don't believe that," Parker's father said.

"Vic thinks I've abandoned him and stolen his daughter. Can you believe that?"

"Vic's a special case," Parker said, bringing out a plate of sliced tomatoes. "He ought to be castrated, then institutionalized."

Tears squeezed themselves from Jeanette's eyes. He could tell he'd said the wrong thing. Again. Shit. His father was looking at him now with an expression that could only be labeled Reproach.

"Cry all you want," Parker's father said, patting Jeanette's back, moving his chair next to hers. "Number-one son here is a bit of a clod sometimes. Let it out, you'll feel better."

Parker remembered such advice from when he was in grade school and had not been included in some activity, a friend's birthday party, perhaps, or a trip to the public pool. After his mother's flight to nowhere and before Lydia's arrival, he had turned to his father for comfort and consolation; he'd always felt better afterward, but he also remembered feeling that it had been at the expense of his own honesty, that he'd needed to make the situation much worse, more dramatic than it really had been, that in order to warrant such paternal attention, such fatherly solicitude, he'd diminished his own life in proportion to the fantasy of trauma he'd constructed.

Jeanette's shoulders were heaving now, and Parker wondered to what extent they were heaving for Vic or for Jeanette herself, for her marriage or for Bonnie. Or whether she was merely crying to keep her own need for sympathy fresh.

The dogs continued to howl. Bonnie beat on her plate with a spoon.

"You might not believe this, Jeanette," Parker's father was saying over the din, "but he was nice when he was a boy."

"I was not," Parker said. "I was rotten. It was you; you were so rotten, I seemed nice by comparison."

"But I never beat you, not even when you were a lousy teenager," Parker's father said.

"I can't believe this is happening to me." Jeanette's voice was a low moan.

"There, there, girlie. It happens to everybody. Sooner or later." Parker's father continued to pat Jeanette's back, as practiced as a mother.

Myrna slid into bed about one o'clock, and Parker, feeling the bed shift, rolled over to her.

"Sleep," Myrna said. "I need to sleep."

She had come home at eight-thirty, long after dinner was over, with apologies long and sincere. The computers had gone down at midday. A report, absolutely essential, had to be prepared. Her boss had practically threatened the entire staff.

As soon as the litany concluded, the two sisters closed themselves into the spare bedroom, leaving Parker and his father alone in the den. Bonnie slept in a Port-a-crib in the living room, and everyone crept from room to room in a pantomime of quietness and stealth. Parker put sheets on the sofa bed while his father alternately dozed and watched a too-quiet television. At ten he turned off the television and handed his father a pair of pajamas. The indistinct sounds from the spare bedroom had not abated. There was nothing to wait up for. He was suddenly, irredeemably tired. Exhausted by the number of people now inhabiting his house.

But then Myrna had come to bed and some internal alarm had sounded, his mind and heart a speeding collage of fear and potential horror. He rose to check doors and windows, and hearing a sound from the darkened guest bathroom, he snapped on the light expecting an intruder with a cartoon robber's black mask but finding instead Jeanette, naked, sitting on the edge of the bathtub, hugging herself, her breasts pinched by her arms, her legs crossed around the black triangle of her pubic hair, her body rocking to some ancient rhythm of grief.

"Sorry," he whispered, fumbling, not fast enough with the light switch, a burlesque of speed and dexterity. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." Her voice was as dry as sand. "I should have closed the door."

"Can I do anything?"

He detected movement in the darkness, movement that he interpreted as negative.

"You're a good guy, Parker," she said. "Myrna doesn't know how lucky."

"I'm no bargain," he said. "Just ask Myrna." He was embarrassed by the sound of his own thoughts expressed by someone who barely knew him. A surprise to know that the disguise had

worked. "I'm glad that you could come; I'm just sorry about everything else."

"Thanks. I'll make it. I always do."

"Get some rest."

"Sure."

He felt his way through the dark hallway, listening for any further disturbances, though his heartbeat of alarm was now stilled. He slipped under the covers beside his wife, as deft now as any cat burglar could hope. Eyes closed, he ambivalently wished for sleep, the earlier dim collage now replaced by a single snapshot: the flash of his sister-in-law's skin against the white porcelain of the tub, an image, he discovered, that he did not wish to remove. Although to dwell on it for long would be to lose some truth of that image of himself—a *good guy!*—so carefully constructed for public view.

July fourth: Parker promised Bonnie that the family would go to the park, to see fireworks and eat hot dogs, this in spite of Jeanette's reservations concerning two-year-old girls and stomach-aches and the fear of loud noises. Myrna rolled her eyes when Parker made his announcement, but to his surprise she packed the picnic basket and organized everything that they were to take. "Colonel Fun has spoken," she said.

At the park, they found a spot near the lake in the tentative shade of three pine trees. Myrna and Jeanette set the table and unloaded the Tupperware containers of potato salad and coleslaw while Bonnie ran after the paper plates and napkins when a breeze kicked up. Parker grilled the hot dogs and hamburgers, supervised by his father, who reminded him to keep the fire low; otherwise the only thing left would be the rat toes and the other beef by-products. Parker's father said that Lydia had become a vegetarian ten years ago, and he still couldn't rid himself of her descriptions of how hot dogs were made.

After a dinner consumed quickly and in a silence punctuated only by the table etiquette of those unused to eating together, Parker's father took Bonnie down by the lake to feed the ducks with leftover hot dog buns. Jeanette and Myrna turned over onto

their stomachs and began to talk in adolescent whispers and giggles, two sisters who had discovered, after the fact, that they had always liked each other. They reminded him suspiciously of those fragrant girls in high school who had never spoken to him except in mockery, so secure were they by comparison with himself.

Alone, Parker suddenly couldn't remember why they'd come; it was the Fourth of July, but beyond that the motive now seemed blurred. They were in this park, he decided, because it was the Fourth of July, and eating hot dogs and watching fireworks seemed like the things one was supposed to do if memories of family were to be made. He could pretend that the surface of their presence here was the truth: a father, a wife, a sister-in-law, a niece, himself—each person with clear head and pure heart, genuinely pleased to be with one another. Not thrown together by some third-best accommodation to pain and injury.

Bonnie and his father were running up the hill from the lake, his father jogging just behind Bonnie in that pretense of not quite catching her that Parker remembered from his own childhood.

"Doggie bite," Bonnie announced. "Doggie bite Bunny."

Jeanette rolled over on the blanket. "What?"

Bonnie raised one hand, which showed no visible wounds. She started to sniffle, then to cry, then to wail with total abandon.

"Baby," Jeanette said, "show me. I can't see anything."

"Dad," Parker said, "what did you do?"

A flicker of embarrassment crossed Parker's father's face. "Nothing," he said. "It was just a dog. Just a hungry old poodle on some old biddy's leash. Bonnie stuffed some bread in its mouth and her finger got in the way a little, that's all."

"Finger hurt," Bonnie said.

"The skin's not even broken," Jeanette said.

"She'll be okay," Myrna said, patting her niece's back. "She's a big girl, isn't she?"

"Sure she is," Parker's father said. "She's a little trooper."

"Dad," Parker said, unwilling to let the old man off the hook so easily, "can't you be more careful? She's only two years old, for Chrissake. You don't let a two-year-old do something by herself when she might get hurt. There's all kinds of things, rabies and distemper and . . . You know that."

He was being unreasonable, he knew. There had been no bite,

no tragedy. Only a parody of accident and injury and pain. He was just tired. No longer able to differentiate between the real and the imagined. Tired of listening to his father's false humor and its pretense of order and authority. Tired of being embroiled in the failures of others, no matter how slight or trivial.

His father had visibly become an inch taller. "Contrary to popular opinion, I seem to remember raising one son who survived, and I'm not senile yet. She ran all the way back here, and she didn't even think about it until she saw she had an audience. And who made you the expert on child care, Mr. I-don't-want-to-have-kids-because-I-don't-want-to-be-bothered?"

"That's not it," he said, suddenly unsure. *Why was it that he and Myrna had never . . . ?* He couldn't remember a single coherent argument among the dozens they'd discussed.

He could imagine with equanimity any conceivable demise—flood, earthquake, fire, dismemberment, drowning, disease—so long as it had to do with his own person. Such things were the cost of living, such things were to be expected; to expect them was, in some way, to control them. But as he watched Jeanette impassively comfort Bonnie, he knew that the dream of controlling such pains was an outrage—that there was an entire world of natural disaster and human calamity and chaos lying in wait. Much more serious than the gumming nibble of an ancient poodle. A dry-cleaner's bag. A wading pool. A can of Drano. A hot dog. Another person. There was a story of disaster and self-recrimination inside everybody and every object, and there was no control for such things. You could go crazy trying to find it or make it. And the best reminder he could offer himself was of Keith Myers's mother and his own role as the agent of grief.

The memory thirty years distant was still fresh. Even now, it had the capacity to make him squirm. After his mother left, particularly sensitized to the possibilities of pain and loss, he had come with his father to this town of dust and cotton fields and vineyards, and as the new boy in the third grade, he had been anxious to please, to establish himself, to impress the dumb, gullible farmers' children. Another boy, even newer than himself and a year younger perhaps, came to the school a week later. Parker had watched with delight. Frail, holding his mother's hand as he ascended the concrete steps, this newer boy seemed an easy

target: he wore stiff blue jeans that cracked at the knees, a red and white striped shirt with a button-down collar. A tartan plaid beret covered his head. Ridiculous. Parker had waited until the mother turned reluctantly away, descended the concrete steps to her car, blown a kiss to her stolid son. Then, he swooped down, screaming something wild and inarticulate, and tore the tartan beret from the boy's head. He had run, still screaming, hearing in his own mind his audience's laughter and approbation, but instead, whirling around to find that yokel audience standing stock-still, frozen, slack-mouthed in some bovine expression of horror. The boy's head, so pale as to look blue, had been shaved some time before; it was now covered with fuzz, only a wispy imitation of hair. A pink line of scar parted the right side of his skull. Parker had nearly fallen to the sidewalk under the weight of his own shame. The boy licked his lips with a nervous tongue.

"You asshole," Keith Myers said. "Asshole."

Parker would always be grateful for that—that Keith Myers had cursed him, had not damned him further to that shame by some inhuman expression of forgiveness. No . . . that job was done when he saw the car still standing at the edge of the curb with Keith Myers's mother in it—obviously she had seen the whole thing—her head buried in her arms above the steering wheel, Parker watching the dumb show of her tears, realizing that she had chosen to let her son brave the perils of a cruel world alone.

It had been the closest thing to an out-of-body experience he had ever known. Not only had he sworn in that instant that he would never place himself in such a compromised position ever again, but he had also seen Keith Myers from his mother's eyes, recognizing the incalculable cost of loving a child. And from some nameless organ of outrage, he had felt his own anger that no one, not even his father, would ever suffer so for *his* pain, anger that his mother could have betrayed him like this.

And now, he imagined Bonnie, on her back, choking on a piece of hot dog, a hot dog that he, Parker Thom, had cooked and encouraged because it fit in with his own vision of family memory, and hovering nearby some woman wearing all white, a specter that seemed to have taken its shape from the nurse of his grade school, a woman who had scolded and lectured about the dangers of sneezing without a handkerchief at the ready; she was clucking

her tongue about what fool would feed a two-year-old a whole, windpipe-stuffing hot dog. Didn't he know the horrible statistics?

And too, he saw himself, recognizing his kinship with Vic—that he wasn't somehow immune to the tugs of sexual desire and conquest; if he had been faithful, it was due more to his own aversion to the entanglements and deceptions of infidelity rather than any devotion to virtue. Jeanette's brown legs had appeared in more than one twilight fantasy in that world between wakefulness and sleep. The thought of being even less adept with the light switch fogged his mind at odd hours. *What about Myrna?* The question was sudden and insistent. The hours she had chosen to spend at work when it wasn't necessary, in a job for which she had never concealed her loathing. Why, when she could be home with him, did she choose to stay away? Was it out of need of independence? Some other reason? *Of whom did she dream?*

He was dreaming this with his eyes open, sweating not from the July heat but from some nameless ache that was emanating from somewhere deep in his bowels, wishing that he could gather his loved ones in, protect them all from accident and trouble and tragedy, which was when the fireworks began, rising into the deep blue of the summer sky, rising with their dangerous and deadly and gloriously beautiful sparks.

He was lying on his back staring at the ceiling, Myrna on her side with her back next to him. The windows above the bed emitted a faint drift of warm air, the clear, writhing sound of husky heartache, and from other backyards, the muffled explosions of illegally obtained firecrackers. A full moon sailed across the sky with its pulse of white light. Grace poured into the room. From the next room, he could hear the sound of the rocking chair and Jeanette's low singing. Bonnie, awake to the low hum of darkness, was protecting every second saved from sleep. From the den came Parker's father's predictable snore. Parker reached for Myrna. She brushed his hand away from her breasts, then her belly, allowing him to settle for her hip.

He would settle gladly. He would play nurse and counselor and foil for his father and sister-in-law and niece, and he would do

what he could to keep his wife happy. Even a child if she wanted that—if he had somehow bulldozed her, using her family's history as well as his for his own purposes—if they weren't now too old to make such a change. If she hadn't, without telling him, already left. He would accept the risk that accompanied the choice, the risk that in making room for tragedy and error, he might lose his own manicured self, become a victim of compromise, ambivalence, and pain. *Those brown thighs!* He felt himself floating above the bed, seeing himself and Myrna as his mother might see them, two aging children resigned to making accommodations for each other, seeing also Jeanette and Bonnie and his father, his benevolence toward them buoying him up as if he were riding on top of a balloon, and he held his breath—fearful of this moment and all its attendant risks—praying that his love would hold.