



The Talking Cure

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Their house was in the neighborhood of Tokenville that used to be inhabited by the families who got work in the quarries. Now most of the houses were divided into apartments rented to students at the liberal arts college. Theirs was the same house where they had grown up. Their father had been the only man on their block who went to work in a suit. He sold real estate. The house was two-floored. It was silent most of the

time, smelled of Lysol and potpourri and was decorated with ornamental plates and inoperative lamps and flowery wall hangings that the sister thought made it less depressing. The brother liked her taste because it gave him the impression that she was always hiding somewhere.

On the night before the anniversary of their father's stroke, Julie announced to her brother that she was going to the store. Normally, she would have showered and spread on the sofa with a *Birds and Blooms*, the pink bath towel wrapped around her head. Her slender, bony feet would have dangled over the armrest. Now, she stood before him in white jeans and a blouse top with poofy shoulders. She was dressed casually, but she looked pretty. She had combed down her summer-red hair.

When Eckman asked her why, she rolled her eyes and patted the lavender handbag at her waist. He wasn't sure what to make of this gesture. She was annoyed, though.

He was in light, silky pajamas and admiring a long

sheet of paper that was curled inward on either end. He balanced the paper atop a centerpiece Julie put together last winter: a miniature barrow of wooden apples and straw.

Tell me what store you're going to, said Eckman, and I'll guess what you're going to buy.

Is that so?

Sure. Like a game.

She adjusted the handbag on her shoulder and saluted him goodbye. She slammed the front door hard enough to make the aluminum star spin on the doornail.

She's not angry, Eckman thought. She only wants me to believe that she's angry. Regardless, she left him in a bad frame of mind. He had been going over a blueprint for the newest edition to the strip mall on 13, Linens 'n' Things. He had sold that space and was proud of himself. He was a community rejuvenator; he was bringing in profitable business. Now the blueprint struck him as cold and senseless, so he rolled it up

and pretended it was a musical instrument. He put it to his mouth and flatulated with his lips. Then he said: *Julie has a boyfriend* though the tube, in a deep, demonstrative voice.

He was a sturdy fellow, not particularly tall, but compact. He did some pacing which made the walls rattle. He slapped a sloppy drum roll on his belly and talked to himself. What is the big deal, he said. I have known Julie for thirty-two years (he was thirty-three) and I had never made her feel she was asking for too much. We have suffered together and healed one another. I just wanted to know where she was going. Even if she was honest – even if she said that she had a date – I would have congratulated her. I am not the kind of man who dates – I’m so focused, my life has already been outlined, there are very few ways to get what I want – but I can understand how others might want some company. Doesn’t she deserve to be happy? Of course. Of course Julie deserves to be happy.

She didn’t return home until well after midnight.

Eckman had lain awake in bed for several hours with a magazine beneath his pillow. Once every several minutes, his eyes flickered nervously because of a great light that must have exploded inside of his head and he lifted the pillow, pressed the cool, slippery paper to his dry lips then hid it beneath his pillow again. He mumbled to himself. I can’t believe it, he said. I must have some problem. Julie would never sneak into the house and surprise him by opening his door, yet he imagined the scenario with such detail he felt it must be a premonition, that she was going to surprise him anytime now and catch him with the magazine.

This wasn’t a premonition for tonight. She was loud about opening and closing the front door. He listened to her kick off her shoes, go into the kitchen and get a glass of water from the sink. She moped up the stairs, her steps were heavy and flat. Eckman pretended to be asleep. Once she closed her bedroom door, he got out of bed and took the magazine from beneath his pillow and hid it in an old moving box in his closet. Then he put on

his robe and stood in the hallway with his ear to the still air, like a man woken from sleep with a terrible urge, which, upon his getting out of bed, has escaped him.

Thursday was the anniversary. Eckman woke up early, at six-thirty, so he could fry the eggs and brew the coffee before Julie got out of bed. It was important that he prepared the kitchen before she was conscious. By the time he had set the table and flipped the eggs, he was exhausted. It was barely seven o'clock, yet he felt dizzy. He touched his neck, he was cool, no fever. It was going to be a low-energy day at work. Sanderson was out of the office.

He kept the photograph hidden from Julie, in his closet, behind the moving box. Now he set the photograph on the breakfast table. Father would eat with them for one more year. She had asked him on the last anniversary to no longer display the picture. Eckman understood, one must be forward thinking. He had meant to respect her request, until today, when

he could no longer resist the urge. Lately, his head had been so clear. Now his memories bubbled.

The photograph was not spectacular, which is why it was respectful. It didn't feature their father on his birthday or during a moment of brilliance, shaking hands with sturdy men in beige suits (he also sold corporate office and retail space); the photograph was of father being father, before Eckman was old enough to remember. Father is in the backyard. He wears blue athletic shorts and high socks and sits cross-legged on the grass with a football between his knees. He wears his glasses, which were now dated, and his bushy, masculine mustache, which was also now dated, and half-smiles at the camera, as if he has been saying that he doesn't want his picture taken then realizes that he has no choice. Mother must take his picture because she wants what she wants. There is a sly smile on his face that foreshadows naughtiness. The smile says: *Alright, I'm ready for the picture, but I'm not happy. And also: You will get it later.*

Julie was moving around upstairs with the same heavy, flat footsteps from the dark early morning. When the shower began to run, he spooned eggs onto their plates and stacked four halves of toast for each of them and disappeared into his bedroom, where he changed out of his robe and into his button-down, tie and sand-colored khakis. Eckman didn't want to be in the dining room when Julie came down because he couldn't handle a fight over the photograph this morning. He was done dressing before she came out of the bathroom, but he wanted to hear her reaction first.

He knew she saw the photograph when a door slammed. Perhaps it was the bathroom behind the kitchen. Then she paced. She opened and closed cabinets, more cabinets than they had in their house. After a while, he wondered if she was not being musical in her anger. She was only showing off. It was at times like this, he thought, kneeling with his ear pressed to the door, that Julie behaved so much like their mother. Being a woman, Julie took mother's madness in so

largely and quietly that she didn't recognize it.

She came stomping up the stairs. Eckman felt confident in facing her because he was dressed for work. He opened the bedroom door before she could get to it. Julie was also dressed for work. She was a clerk at a locally owned flower shop. She wore a garden-patterned skirt and white blouse with poofy shoulders. Her hair was long and straight and strawberry. Their uncles, their father's brothers, used to call her summer girl because of her hair. She was pretty, but since she was his sister, Eckman thought of her as being as plain as him; except she was not round like mother, nor was she compact like Eckman and his father. She was the opposite. Julie was a long woman, stretched, a clear, vaporous image that had arisen from a magic bottle.

Now she was ugly, due to the scowl on her face and her folded arms. As long, as stretched as she was, Julie was still a woman like her mother. Eckman couldn't remember the dead woman anymore, all of her maddening actions, they belonged to an invisible head that rolled across

plains, down and up the dips of his past.

Julie said: Go downstairs and take the picture off the table.

Today is the day, he said.

We've talked about this, she said. You know I don't think it's right.

He asked her why. He tugged at his tie then lifted his hands. Tell me why, he said, when only once a year we should remember this day. This day could be more important than when he died. This is the day he began to die, after all. This is the day he was humiliated. We couldn't understand him anymore. Don't you feel humiliated by the way we treated him?

Follow me. Watch me take the picture off the table.

I won't do it, he said. I don't agree with you.

Julie went back into her bedroom. She slammed the door, of course.

If Eckman dilly-dallied much longer, he was going to be late for work. He cracked his knuckles and gave himself a last close look in the mirror. Today was going

to be low energy, but it was important that he appeared polished, cool, ready for Sanderson to make a surprise entrance. Father used to tell him, *Boss's vacation is an excuse for him to surprise you, Eckman. Never be caught looking like a monkey.*

At the breakfast table he squeezed ketchup onto his eggs, buttered his toast. The tone of his sister's voice made lines in his head. He was doing alright not hearing the words, but her voice, he knew it so well, it affected him like a haunting music. The key of the music trailed through his soft brain mud. Julie has a boyfriend, he thought. He imagined her saying it to him while unwrapping the towel from around her head: *I have a boyfriend now.* He tried to concentrate on the photograph. I'm sorry father, he said. She doesn't mean it. She is like your wife. She suffers the same exact pain. The same exact pain that is caused by no one, that has existed inside of her since the day she was born.

I didn't go to the store last night, said Julie. She had come back to the kitchen and pulled out her chair. She

brushed a few crumbs off the seat.

Eckman pretended to be so involved with the photograph that he couldn't be interrupted.

Julie repeated herself. I didn't go to the store last night. Do you want to know where I went?

I know you didn't go to the store. You were out past midnight. You have a boyfriend. Do you think I'm not perceptive enough to see that?

She laughed, not because she was amused. It was deliberate and meant to punch him. I have a boyfriend, she said. Okay, sure. If you want to bring it to that, then go ahead.

Eckman asked what she meant by *bring it to that*. Wasn't that the truth? Where else could she have been? Are you going to tell me you were really at the store now? You're going to say you were out shopping for some mysterious object past midnight?

She laughed again. Eckman flinched. This laughter said that he had gotten too close to her, that he had touched her in the wrong way. It said that he was being

intrusive. So you were up waiting for me, she said. Alright, that's fine if you want to do that. But I have to tell you. I think it's pathetic.

He spooned up the last of his eggs and spattered some ketchup on his tie. He normally didn't eat breakfast in his work clothes for this reason. One time, he had gotten some mayo on his tie, and Julie had reached across the table and dabbed the spot with a napkin.

Well, I worry about you. I guess that's pathetic. To worry about you. Julie's the big girl. She doesn't need to be cared for. He pointed to the picture of father. That's why you don't like it here, he said. All of this feeling, it's the expression of emotion that bothers you. I won't tell you who you take after. You already know.

I don't have a boyfriend, she said. I don't have a boyfriend. I have friends. I have friends, and I'm moving out of this house. I'm moving away from you, brother, and I'm moving in with them. I'm going to be an adult. I'm moving in with other adults.

Eckman frantically wiped his tie, but there remained

a black, amoeba-shaped stain. He would have to put on another tie. Okay, he said. That's fine. You can leave this house. I still live here, though. I live here. I'll have to get a roommate, you understand.

Next month, she said. We have a place. We were out celebrating last night. Me and Katie. We have a great place in Tokenville. It's two floors. Just like this one. And she's a friend. I don't get angry at her. I don't feel any pain with her. I feel healthy. Do you understand what it means to be feel healthy?

Of course he understood what it meant to feel healthy. To prove to her that he knew, he held up the photograph that he imagined caused all of this trouble. He said: It's healthy to be respectful. There is nothing wrong with pain. You're like our mother. She couldn't stand pain.

No, she said. That's where you're wrong. You deny yourself happiness. Happiness is moving on without pain. That's healthy. You are not healthy.

Eckman was thirteen when his father collapsed in this same kitchen. His earliest memories were from this time. Sometimes his head felt flooded with them. Sometimes at work, out on a sale, he would suddenly lose his confidence – the sensation was of being yelled at. He told himself that he had been a child, he could not have been responsible, he was being violated by his own thoughts. But the memories had their own musculature, they exercised to prove to him that they existed. They were stronger than him. Why couldn't he be indifferent?

There was Julie on the floor in a pair of corduroy trousers, chewing on the kinky hair of a Diaper Baby. He lay upside down on the stairs with his arms spread at his sides. For one reason or another, perhaps he had been inspired by a popular movie, he imagined he was a missionary for Christ, and that he had been tied to a wooden crucifix and was floating downstream, into death, though at the time he was unfamiliar with death. So he imagined he was floating into the great nothing

of purple sky, populated with yellow trees and hairy, long-armed animals that cawed in the night because they had forsaken the Lord. (Their parents used to often speak about the Lord. Eckman still heard their voices, not always the words, only vague messages.) The hairy animals were actually the merchants of death, ashamed and fallen creatures, who populated this space between the living and the dead, he thought. Father was in the recliner. Eckman wasn't old enough to understand that he was no longer the same. So he let himself fall all of the way down the stairs, which was a way of floating downstream. And his father, who had taught him to splay his fingers in the curveball position, and to get assistance from clerks at the service desks by being forceful and present, was sticking out his tongue. Eckman thought this was funny. He said: *Father is pretending to be retarded.* Julie heard. She sat beside her brother on his lap. They bounced on him, since he wouldn't bounce them himself. Julie and Eckman chanted: *Daddy is retarded, daddy is retarded.* Then

their mother appeared from the kitchen. He couldn't imagine how she must have moved, but she was quick, a round, fleshy ball, a human head, tumbling from the linoleum to the carpet. She said that they were evil children and swatted something at them: a magazine? A newspaper? A blueprint? But what could that woman have done with a blueprint?

Julie knew Katie from the flower shop. They were both clerks and had overlapping shifts. Eckman had met Katie twice before.

The first occasion was a month and a half earlier when she stopped by the house. Eckman was on the sofa, paging through an early draft of the plans for Linens 'n' Things, when Julie came down the stairs, having just changed out of her work clothes. She wore a long flowery skirt and white tank-top that showed her long freckled arms. She was already on edge then, but she could still be sweet. There was still remnant of the sister who used to cower in the closet with him when

mother used a frying pan to beat the walls. She sat on the armrest and looked over his shoulder.

You bring your work home, she said. I think that's depressing.

Maybe I'll develop a magazine habit.

She thought this was funny. One of her preoccupations was garden magazines. She didn't even read the articles, only looked at the pictures of the flowers and pointed them out to him. She named the different species and described how they smelled, what kinds of gifts they made, how hard they were to cultivate. *A sprinkling beauty, she once said. It looks dead at first. It's very hard to grow. If it gets just the right amount of sun and water, and no vermin tries to eat it, it has a three day bloom when it turns beautiful and yellow and the petals fall off. Back in the old days, the women would carry the petals around with them to sprinkle at the feet of the men who tried to court them.*

Just so you know, I have a friend coming over tonight, she said. We're going to hang out. A fair warning.

The first thought to occur to Eckman was that her friend would be a man. He wanted Julie to have a boyfriend. A partner was not the best thing for him, his life had already been outlined. He wanted Julie to be healthy, but he was nervous because of who this man could be, how he might behave once he was inside of their house. So he asked her for the friend's name.

Why should I tell you my friend's name?

Because I asked.

What if I don't want to say?

I'll find out sooner or later. Isn't that right?

He understood that she was having fun with him. They liked to play guessing games. Eckman went back to the ground plans, except he couldn't comprehend. He began to suffer wildly in his head as the doorbell rang when the house was silent. He saw Julie go to the door when she was still on the arm rest at his side. He imagined she let in a professional man, like him, except he was barrel-chested and wore the cocky grin and called Eckman buddy. *So this is big brother,* said the mouth.

How are you, buddy? You can rest now that I'm taking some of this weight off your shoulders. Your Julie here, she's my responsibility now. How's that sound, buddy? I bet you like that idea.

Except when the doorbell rang, and Julie jumped off the sofa and skipped to the door, it was not a man she let in. There was a woman. Brother, she said. I want you to meet Katie.

Eckman was relieved. He set his paperwork on the centerpiece and stood up to greet Katie, a little taken aback. Not only because she was noticeably overweight, or what we call obese, but because she was a warped version of his sister. They had the same kind of hair. It was straight and thin summer girl hair. And they each wore garden-patterned skirts. For a moment, they stood side by side, each with her arms crossed, waiting for Eckman to introduce himself.

It's very nice to meet you, he said. He shook her hand. Her palm was warm and sweaty. When they were done shaking, he rubbed his hand on the side of his pants.

The large woman noticed; she put her pinky in her mouth and nibbled on her fingernail. Eckman worried that Julie also noticed, because she tugged back her hair and announced that she and her friend should go to her room and talk for a while.

It was very nice to meet you, said Katie. Her voice was high-pitched and sweet. Her cheeks were pink with blush, which may or may not have been make-up. Eckman placed her as a particular kind of overweight woman, who made up for her appearance with a saccharine, childlike personality.

As the girls moved up the stairs, the friend looked at him one last time and offered a smile and blinked her eyes. He concluded that she was an alright friend for his sister to have. She meant well. And since Julie was so much prettier, they would not grow competitive with one another.

His second encounter with Katie happened a week later. He had stopped after work at a convenience store that was attached to a gas station, for some band-aids;

Eckman had recently sliced his finger on the hand-blender while scrubbing the dishes. He bought some cough syrup, because he'd been experiencing brief spells of dizziness and chills and could not afford to be ill. He also wanted to pick up a magazine. He did this once a week after work, one magazine at a time. He never felt good about it. His body left him when he bought the magazine, he felt like a man wandering a black stage where all of the scenery had been taken away.

He had not seen a woman without her clothing since he was twenty-five and had picked up a doughy, freckle-faced college student in a sports bar. The experience had been a terrible mistake, and the next morning he was so ashamed of himself that he wouldn't even leave his house for lunch when the refrigerator was empty. He had spent the afternoon in bed, listening to his stomach gurgle.

As a child, Eckman had found a magazine in his father's drawer while looking for a pair of socks. The magazine was called *She's So Normal*, and featured

pictures of normal naked women. When he asked father to explain what it was for, father said that it wasn't his. And when Eckman asked him whose magazine it was and why it was in their house, he gave the boy's mouth a slap. His lip bled. He realized then that even the lightest curiosities come with sharp momentary pains. He couldn't help himself.

Eckman bought two other magazines to cover up the special one: *Newsweek* and *National Review*. He was going to the register when he heard that sweet voice say his name, though at the time he couldn't place it. He saw himself moving across the black stage with his magazine. All was darkness. Surely, there could be no woman hiding behind the cut-out of a pine, waiting to catch him. There was no scenery, yet he was so conscious of himself.

When Eckman turned around, Julie's friend Katie was there with twelve rolls of plastic-wrapped toilet paper covering most of her upper half. Only her nose and eyes peeked out from above.

They said hello to one another. Eckman asked what she was doing when it was obvious. She was so sweet that she went out of her way to not make him feel like an idiot. She had been at the flower shop late, she said, closing up, counting the drawers and all of that. He had been at work too. He was just stopping to get some things.

The cashier began ringing up his purchase, and he told himself not to get nervous. An enormous light exploded in his head. His eyes blinked. Julie would find out about the magazines. Don't worry, he told himself. Katie said how neat it was that he kept up with the issues. She was one who always wished she could be more engaged, but her life was scattered enough without all the world's problems mixed in.

I love to read, said Eckman.

The cashier, a high school girl in an orange smock, picked up the *Newsweek* and scanned it. Then the *National Review*.

Julie and I both, he said, we love magazines.

When Katie saw the special magazine, she didn't laugh and she didn't look at him accusingly. At first Eckman stared at the floor, but he realized that he must look guilty. Something he learned selling real estate was that even when lying, and especially if you're lying, it's best to make eye contact. He looked Katie in the eyes as the cashier rung up the magazine. It was called *Lolita Heaven* and featured pretty young girls in white dresses, swinging on swings and the like, except they didn't wear tops, and sometimes they didn't wear anything at all. Mostly, the magazine was tasteful and the girls wore some clothing. What Katie did, she blinked her eyes and offered Eckman a naughty smile. She set her twelve rolls of toilet paper on the counter and said to the cashier: He has good taste, doesn't he?

The cashier was a high school student. She snorted and glared at Eckman as if she couldn't believe he existed.

I'll see you around, said Katie.

Eckman would see her around, too. He felt her gaze

swallow him up as he left the store.

On the way back home, he stopped at Feinstein Park. A wet haze laced the air, and he held himself as he ran from his car to the garbage can. He threw out the *Lolita Heaven*. Let some kids find it, he thought. If Katie ever told his sister about his taste for certain magazines, and she wanted to check his bedroom for them when he was gone, she would find nothing. Eckman threw out an issue every week, right before he bought another. Even if Julie found one, she would understand that it was not a habit, but an experience, maybe even an experiment.

While looking through a magazine, Julie once pointed out a rare flower called the Ink Stain. This was its nickname, of course, American slang. She wasn't even sure if that flower could still grow, if the heirloom seeds could produce the original. It's so neat, she said, because it's ugly. It looks like a weed. Except if you were to kill it, to pull it out of the soil and crush its green stem between your fingers, you'd be left with a beautiful, exotic, bright

purple ink that does not look natural. And it wasn't really an ink, you couldn't write with it. If you put it to paper, it would spread and smear and look like a spill of some watery liquid. Though its history is that back in the old days, you might give it to an enemy with whom you wanted to make amends. The thinking was that it looked like a weed. Out of anger that enemy would crush it in his hands and would be left with the bright purple ink that was not an ink all over his skin. And since it was not an ink, it washed out so easily. You gave your enemy a momentary spell of beauty, a brilliant color.

Eckman would have liked to give this flower to Julie. She could move out of the house. He would find a roommate. He imagined the roommate, a guy like himself, except he would hang out in the living room with a laptop. *Hey, Eckman, would you mind beer-ing me here. I've got a drought in my throat. Thanks, bud. Just working on this spreadsheet.*

Since the morning of the anniversary, she was always

downstairs, opening and closing cabinets. She was only looking for a snack. But she had begun slamming the cabinet doors harder. Early one evening, he had attempted to talk to her. He asked about work and how Katie was doing. She was sorry, but she couldn't answer. She was like mother, after all, so she wouldn't slap him, even though she wanted to. She was going to punish him passive-aggressively. Eckman, on the other hand, took after father and hit her hard.

You're a liar, he said. I would never dream of hitting you.

No. You have. You hit me so hard. I can still feel it.

She said that Eckman made her afraid to move out of the house. His eyes blinked wildly. No, he told her. You have it all wrong. I want you to move out of the house. You should be an adult.

But it wasn't true. He was a liar. When Julie told him she was moving and that she couldn't look at the picture of father any longer, he boiled over. He couldn't

concentrate on work and ended up flubbing a sale to a small jewelry chain that he shouldn't have lost. He found himself praying at night because he no longer purchased the magazines and needed to empty his mind. He imagined himself as a child, strapped to a wooden crucifix, floating downstream, a missionary. He experienced pain for the Lord. But praying became difficult because he couldn't understand the use. He wanted to hear a voice in return for his prayers, but there was only silence and a series of dancing white lights. His eyes blinked. He was frustrated.

Eckman had not premeditated meeting Katie again. It became a habit that after work he would drive into the parking lot of the same convenience store where they had met and look through the windows to see if she was there. Julie was to move in with her in less than a month. He told himself that he did not want to make his sister unhappy. She deserved her happiness. He wanted to speak to Katie. She had to be warned, after all. After

several weeknights of driving by the convenience store, what he had not premeditated finally happened. He saw her through a window, bending over the toilet paper so she could pick up a pack of twelve rolls. He parked his car, remembering to turn off the lights. His hands went numb. There were tingles all throughout his body. Nevertheless, Eckman got out of the car and went inside.

Katie was checking out. He pretended not to see her. He hoped that she would see him first and say his name, but no such luck. She was busy digging through her purse. So Eckman went to the newsstand and picked out a *Newsweek*. The cover story was about women and the church. The picture was a row of several women, all of different races, kneeling with their hands folded. This embarrassed him. He brought the magazine up to the register and stood right behind her. He stood closer than he would have to a perfect stranger and could smell her perfume. It was overly sweet and cheap. She must have purchased it, he thought, at one of the low-end

department stores. These were the companies that were concerned with space, and not so much the location, as long as they were located on a strip with heavy car traffic.

Then Eckman said her name. His voice was weak and came out accidentally. He wasn't accustomed to speaking to women. Katie, he said. Is that you?

She turned around and, after a moment of recognition, made the naughty smile. Her cheeks were rosy, she used make-up. So, she said, we meet again. She looked down at the magazine. Only one this time, she said.

Only one, he assured her and held it up so she could see.

The cashier tonight was not the high school girl. It was an older gentleman who wore the orange smock and did not pay attention to the people coming through his line. His approach, it seemed, was the ostrich approach, to hide his face and assume no one could see him.

I don't like those things so much, he said. That magazine I bought before. That's only for now and

then.

Sure, she said. I understand that. Say, now. You're not embarrassed.

A little. If it were anyone else, then no, I wouldn't be. But I wouldn't want you to think I was one of these dirty old men.

She listened to this closely, as if she wasn't sure about the meaning. Her mouth, too small for the fleshiness of her face, morphed into an *O*. She seemed to want to ask what was so different about her, but the question never came out.

The cashier handed her the receipt and began to open a plastic bag for the rolls of toilet paper. Oh, no, she said. No thank you. I can just carry these. Thanks.

The old man in the smock nodded without looking up. Katie smiled. She blinked and said that she would see him around.

Eckman threw the magazine on the counter. He said thanks to the cashier, and the sound of his own voice frightened him. It was his voice on the stage now,

his body was nowhere in sight. There was his voice trailing a grand space of black. A light exploded. The moment was happening, the moment was about to pass. Excuse me, he said to the old clerk and dashed out of the store.

He had no idea what kind of car Katie drove; perhaps she had already driven away. No, there had not been enough time for that. So he stood on the blacktop, illuminated by the buzzing yellow lamps above. He looked like a nervous child who had suddenly realized he'd been left. His eyes blinked uncontrollably. Katie must have seen him and realized that something was wrong, because she called his name. She was parked around the corner of the building, half-hidden by a few tire pumps. She lifted herself up out of her car, a dark-colored sedan. Hey there, she said. Is everything alright?

No. It's not. I'm fine. Do you have a few minutes? Do you want to get a couple of drinks?

She looked at him silently, waiting for him to admit

he'd been mistaken. She wanted him to say never mind, smile and go back to his own car.

Eckman approached her and asked if they could travel in her car, since he was too shaken to drive. She fixed her hair, a gesture of discomfort, and said okay, sure. The odor of her perfume was strong. Eckman cracked the window. He was going to get a headache.

Where do you want to go, she said. I don't normally drink. On some occasions, but not normally. If you want to get a cup of tea some place, I can do that. Does tea sound alright to you?

Yes. Tea sounds wonderful. I don't normally drink either. Let's go to where you like to get tea. I'd like that.

Katie was not comfortable. Eckman was also uncomfortable. He asked himself why he did this. He knew, but he could not say it to himself. He wanted to ask her: *Are you Julie's boyfriend?* But this question did not make sense. It was not the correct one.

She didn't say anything as she drove. She looked at him a few times. She believed he was suicidal. Eckman

was sure. He had attached himself to her because she happened to be there at the right moment.

I'm taking us to a place called Cindy's, she said. Have you ever been there?

No. I don't go out very much. I work a lot. That's what Julie says. That I should go out more often. I should read more magazines. Get a hobby.

She clicked her tongue. Had he said something to offend her? He went over the words and couldn't find the culprit. Her car smelled so strongly of that perfume, he didn't know how she could stand it. She was obviously a messy woman. Julie was so neat. If flowers were her first interest, then keeping their house clean was her second. Even when she was angry at him she did his laundry and vacuumed the carpet in his bedroom. The toilet paper was in the back seat, along with some stuffed animals that were beaten and stained and brightly colored. They were from one of those claw machines, he thought. You put a quarter in the machine and see if you can't rescue one of those Diaper Babies.

He kept looking into her backseat, using the passing lights to take in as much as possible. She saw what he was doing, that he was trying to make out her character, perhaps, and she apologized for her car being so messy. I'm just so busy, she said.

There's no reason to be sorry. I only get curious about my surroundings. I need to know what kind of space I'm in at all times.

Sure. I know what that's like. I'm the same exact way.

Eckman didn't believe her. She was lying to relax him. He didn't really seem so nervous. He didn't feel as nervous, now that they were moving. He resented her kindness.

Then he saw it taped to her glove compartment. It wasn't there before, he thought, but it had to have been. He would have known had she reached over and put it there. A cross made of palm. Palm Sunday had passed some time ago, yet she had hung onto this sign.

You're a believer, he said.

I am. Yes. I don't talk so much about it. I don't know.

I'm not a holy-roller. I go to church. She stopped herself. She was about to speak, but didn't.

Go on.

I'm sorry.

Go on, he repeated. You were going to say something just then and you stopped.

No, I really wasn't.

Yes. I saw you. Julie does the same thing to me. She pretends that I don't see, that I'm not observant.

He stopped himself. He was being aggressive. He was talking to her like she was his sister when he had no right. This sweet woman was doing him a favor, he thought, and here he was talking angrily at her. I'm sorry, he said. I've been on edge.

No, she said. You're right. I was going to say something. I didn't feel that it was right. I really don't know you. But – I'm sorry. I'm being rude. It's just that Julie talks to me about you. Not a lot. I don't want to make you paranoid or anything. She nervously snorted and giggled. She tells me that you're a believer too, but

that you never go to church. Do you mind if I ask you why that is?

Julie thought he was a believer. But he was. He did suffer, after all. Do I suffer more than most people, he wondered, enough to be a believer? A wooden crucifix. Because I'm busy, he said.

Cindy's was a little diner with pink drapes in the windows and a picture of steaming pie on the *Open* sign. He had passed this place a thousand times and thought it was poorly used space. These privately owned businesses, they made such little money. The patrons came here for purely sentimental reasons. He had always thought a Perkins, which Tokenville did not have, would have fared much better. It would be larger, for one. A Perkins would bring more money into the community.

Eckman didn't make a move to get out of the car. For one reason or another, it struck him as distasteful, the idea of going into this place, of giving it his money. You and Julie come here all of the time, don't you?

As a matter of fact, we do.

I don't think it's right. I don't think I can do it. What I wanted to talk to you about, it's my sister. Is it alright if we just sit here and talk?

She reached into her purse that was in the space between the seats and pulled out some chewing gum. She offered him a stick. Eckman declined. Chewing gum was obnoxious. It was loud and an obvious sign of discomfort. There was no way he could tell her what he wanted to tell her and chew gum at the same time. He didn't know what, only that it was urgent. Sitting in her car, once the dome light faded, he had the feeling that a phrase had been building up inside. There were ideas he needed to express. If she was going to take Julie away then she needed to hear the truth of their situation.

He was stalling for too long. Katie was getting antsy, snapping her gum, adjusting her hair. He did not premeditate, not in the least. He talked. There had to be a reason. He would make one up. The lights danced, they swirled and danced and echoed, just like a sound,

a musical siren.

There are some things I'm sure Julie didn't tell you. They're all coming to the surface now. That's why we need to talk. Because when I saw you it occurred to me that you're making a great mistake, Katie. Do you understand what I'm saying?

No, she said as plainly as if he had asked her if she would ever consider wearing another perfume.

You can't move in with Julie. She's not ready. She's a sweet girl, she's too sweet. She doesn't understand. My God. I'm sorry to bring you into this. I can't help it, though. These things ... the Lord seems to orchestrate our lives so that what needs to be acknowledged is acknowledged in due time. I'm sorry. You don't want to hear this. But our mother used to beat us, Katie. I can't go into detail. It hurts to say. She beat us every day after our father passed. Did you know that our father passed away when we were very young?

No.

Julie still doesn't know this. I mean, she knows.

But she pretends like it's not true. Whenever I speak of dad, she says that she has just spoken to him, like he lives down the street and still calls our house. She's traumatized, I think. She never got over it. She's just like our mother. She's delicate. I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting this to happen.

Eckman doubled over and rested his head on the dash. His head exploded with all of its liquids, they all went running down his face, the saltiness tingled on his lips and tongue. He sobbed and snorted. It was amazing, terrific. Never before had he acted this way. He was finally delivering the sadness he deserved. He was unclear as to if he would have gone home and cried, or if this was for Katie's benefit. It didn't matter.

I'm so sorry. I don't know what this is. But I can feel her. I can feel her hitting me, I can feel her hitting Julie, too. I know you care about her. I know you do, that's why I'm telling you. She's not fit, Katie. She shouldn't have pretended. She didn't pretend, she didn't know.

Katie was still. He felt all of her weight in the seat

beside him. She was folding her hands, and though he couldn't understand her words, he understood that she was praying. She whispered Julie's name, she whispered Eckman. Then aloud, so that he could know she was speaking to him and God at the same time, she said: We have to embrace our pain. To embrace our pain, to carry it, is to bear the cross and wear the crown. This is the only way we can walk with the Lord.

Thank you.

It may not be my place to say this, but this weekend you should go to His house. I know you're a good person. I can feel it. You have shame, you carry so much weight. For your own good. Please. Let Him help you to carry that weight. You and the Lord can carry the weight together.

Eckman looked up, suddenly aware of himself. He was walking the black stage, but there was scenery. A cut-out pine. Julie hid behind it. She jumped out from behind the prop to surprise him. *Oogadaboogada, brother. Oogadabooda. I scared you, didn't I?* He

reached across to Katie in the darkness and touched her face that was warm, powdered with make-up and specked with cool perspiration.

You too, he said. You help me to carry it. You're too good of a person.

We all have duties, she said, when we're called upon.

When Eckman got home that night, it was well after ten. Julie was already in her bedroom and the light was out. He could tell from looking under the door. He dressed into his silky pajamas and closed his eyes. He was exhausted and shaky, but he felt good. He had done something wrong and he wasn't going to get in trouble.

Sometime during the night, Julie's bedroom door opened. She stood in the hallway for a moment. Eckman imagined that his conversation with Katie had traveled on the air, like pollen. It blew through her window and sprinkled across her face, leaving a trail, a long echo like a siren that pulled her from sleep. She stood in the

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hallway, he thought, wondering what she heard, why she still felt it ringing on her skin. She decided it was a figment of her imagination, went back into her room, and softly closed the door behind her.

