

# See You in Paradise

Stories

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J. Robert Lennon

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*See You in Paradise*



ALSO BY J. ROBERT LENNON

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# *See You in Paradise*

STORIES

**J. Robert Lennon**

Graywolf Press

These stories previously appeared, sometimes in a different form, in the following publications: *Electric Literature*: “Hibach”; *Epoch*: “Farewell, Bounder,” “Total Humiliation in 1987”; *Granta*: “Ecstasy”; *Harper’s*: “The Future Journal”; *McSweeney’s*: “The Accursed Items”; the *New Yorker*: “Flight,” “No Life”; *Playboy*: “See You in Paradise,” “The Wraith,” “Zombie Dan”; *Public Space*: “A Stormy Evening at the Buck Snort Restaurant”; *Salamander*: “Weber’s Head”; *Weird Tales*: “Portal.”

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***See You in Paradise***

# Portal

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It's been a few years since we last used the magic portal in our back garden, and it has fallen into disrepair. To be perfectly honest, when we bought this place, we had no idea what kind of work would be involved, and tasks like keeping the garden weeded, repairing the fence, maintaining the portal, etc., quickly fell to the bottom of the priority list while we got busy dealing with the roof and the floor joists. I guess there are probably people with full-time jobs out there who can keep an old house in great shape without breaking their backs, but there are, I've never met them.

My point is, we've developed kind of a blind spot about that whole back acre. The kids are older now and don't spend so much time wandering around in the woods and the clearing the way they used to—Luann is all about the boys these days, and you can't get Chester's mirror away from the Xbox for more than five minutes—and Gretchen and I hardly ever even look in that direction. I think one time last summer we got a little drunk and sneaked out there to have sex under the crabapple tree, but weeds and stones kept poking up through the blanket and the bugs were eating us alive, so we gave up, came back inside and did it in the bed like normal people.

I know, too much information, right? Anyway, it was the kids who discovered the portal back when we first moved in. They were into all that magic stuff at the time—*Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, that kind of thing—and while Gretchen and I steamed off old wallpaper and sanded the floorboards inside the house, they had this whole crazy fantasy world invented back there, complete with various kingdoms, wizards, evil forces, orcs, trolls, and what have you. They made paths, buried treasures, drew maps, and basically had a grand old time. We didn't even have to send them to summer camp, they were so ... tolerable. They didn't fight, they didn't complain—I hope someday, when the teen years are over with, they'll remember all that and have some kind of relationship again. Maybe when they're in college. Fingers crossed.

One afternoon, I guess it was in July, they came running into the house, tracking mud everywhere and breathlessly shouting about something they'd found. "It's a portal, it's a portal to another world!" I got pretty bent out of shape about the mud, but the kids were serious over the moon about this thing, and their enthusiasm was infectious. So Gretchen and I followed them out across the yard and into the woods, then down the little footpath that led to the clearing.

It's unclear what used to be there, back in the day—the land behind our house was once farmland, and the remains of old dirt roads ran everywhere—but at this time, a few years ago, the clearing was pretty overgrown, thick with shrubs and brambles and the like. We figured there'd just been a grain silo or something, something big that would have resulted in this perfectly circular area, but the kids had uncovered a couple of stone benches and a little fire pit, so clearly somebody used to hang around here in the past, you know, lighting a fire and sitting on the benches to look at it.

When we reached the clearing, we were quite impressed with the progress the kids had made. They'd managed to clear a lot of brush and the place had the feel of some kind of private room—the sun coming down through the clouds, and the wall of trees surrounding



the space, and all that. It was really nice. So the kids had stopped at the edge, and we came up behind them and they were like, do you see it? And we were like, see what? And they said, look, and we said, where?, and they said, Mom, Dad, just look!

And sure enough, off to the left, kind of hovering above what had looked like another bench but now appeared more like a short, curved little staircase, was this oval, sort of marble-sized, shimmering thing that honestly just screamed “magic portal.” I mean, it was totally obvious what it was—nothing else gives the air that quality, that kind of electrical distortion like heat or whatever is bending space itself.

This was a real surprise to us, because there had been nothing about it in the real estate ad. You’d think the former owners would have mentioned it. I mean, the dry rot, I understand why they left that out, but even if this portal was busted, it’s still a neat thing to have (or so I thought at the time), and could have added a few thou to the asking price, easy. But this was during the economic slump, so maybe not, and maybe the previous owners never bothered to come back here and didn’t know what they had. They looked like indoor types, frankly. Not that Gretchen and I look like backcountry survivalists or anything. But I digress.

The fact is, this portal was definitely not busted, it was working, and the kids had taken special care uncovering the steps that led to it, tugging out all the weeds from between the stones and unearthing the little flagstone patio that surrounded the whole thing. In retrospect, if I had been an expert, or even a well-informed amateur, I would probably have been able to tell the portal was really just pattering along on its last legs and would soon go on the fritter. But of course I was, and I guess still am, an idiot.

We all went over there and walked around it and looked through it—had a laugh making faces at one another through the space and watching each other go all funhouse-mirror. But obviously the unspoken question was, do we go through? I was actually really proud of the kids right then because they’d come and gotten us instead of just diving headfirst through the thing like a lot of kids would have done. Who knows, maybe this stellar judgment will return to them someday. A guy can dream! But at this moment we all were just kind of looking at each other, wondering who was going to test it out.

Since I’m the father, this task fell to me. I bent over and pried a stone up out of the dirt and stood in front of the portal, with the kids looking on from behind. (Gretchen stood off to the side with her arms folded over her chest, doing that slightly disapproving stance she does pretty much all the time now.) And after a dramatic pause, I raised my arm and tossed the stone at the portal.

Nothing dramatic—the stone just disappeared. “It works!” Chester cried, and Luann hopped up and down, trying to suppress her excitement.

“Now hold on,” I said, and picked up a twig. I braced my foot on the bottom step and poked the twig through the portal. This close, you could hear a low hum from the power the thing was giving off. In retrospect, this was probably an indication that the portal was out of whack—I mean, if my TV did that, I’d call a guy. But then, I figured, what did I know?

Besides, when I pulled the twig out, it looked okay. Not burned or frozen or turned into a snake or anything—it was just itself. I handed it to Gretchen and she gave it a cursory examination. “Jerry,” she said, “I’m not sure—”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry.” I knew the drill—she’s the mom, she has to be skeptical, and it’s my job to tell her not to worry. Which is harder to do nowadays, let me tell you. I got u

nice and close to the portal, until the little hairs on my arms were standing up, and I stuck out my index finger and moved it slowly toward the shimmering air.

Chester's eyes were wide. Luann covered her mouth with her fists. Gretchen sighed.

Well, what can I say, it went in, and I barely felt a thing. It was weird seeing my pointy finger chopped off at the knuckle like that, but when I pulled it out again, voilà, there it was, unharmed. My family still silent, I took the bull by the horns and just shoved my whole arm in. The kids screamed. I pulled it out.

"What," I said, "what!!"

"We could see your blood and stuff!" This was Chester.

Luann said, "Daddy, that was so gross."

"Like an x-ray?" I said.

Chester was laughing hysterically now. "Like it got chopped off!"

"Oh my God, Jerry," Gretchen said, her hand on her heart.

My arm was fine, though. In fact, it felt kind of good—wherever the arm had just been, was about five degrees warmer than this breezy little glade.

"Kids," I said, "stand behind me." Because I didn't want them to see what I was about to do. Eventually we'd get over this little taboo and enjoy watching each other walk super slowly through the portal, revealing our pulsing innards, but for now I didn't want to freak anyone out, myself least of all. When the kids were safely behind me, Gretchen holding them close, I stuck my head through.

I don't know what I was expecting—Middle Earth, or Jupiter, or Tuscany, or what. But I could never in a million years have guessed the truth. I pulled my head out.

"It's the vacant lot behind the public library," I said.

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I think that even then, that very day, we knew the portal was screwed up. It was only later, after it was obvious, that Gretchen and I started saying out loud the strange things we noticed on the family trip downtown. For one thing, the books we got at the library—obviously that was the first place we went—weren't quite right. The plots were all convoluted and the paper felt funny. The bus lines were not the way we remembered, with our usual bus, the 54, called the 24; and the local transit authority color scheme had been changed to crimson and ochre. Several restaurants had different names, and the one guy we bumped into whom we knew—my old college pal Andy—recoiled in apparent horror when he saw us. It was just, you know, off.

But the really creepy thing was what Chester said that night as we were tucking him in to bed—and how I miss those days now, when Chester was still practically a baby and needed us to hug and kiss him goodnight—he just started laughing there in the dark, and Gretchen said what is it, honey, and he said that guy with the dog head.

Dog head? we asked him.

Yeah, that guy, remember him? He walked past us on the sidewalk. He didn't have a regular head, he had a dog head.

Well, you know, Chester was always saying crazy nonsense back then. He still does, of course, but that's different—it used to be cute and funny. So we convinced ourselves he was kidding. But later, when we remembered that—hell, we got chills. Everything from there on

in would only get weirder, but it's that dog head, Chester remembering the dog head, the freaks me out. I guess the things that scare you are the things that are almost normal.

Anyway, that first time, everything seemed to go off more or less without a hitch. After the library we walked in the park, went out for dinner, enjoyed the summer weather. Then we went back to the vacant lot, found the portal, and went home. It's tricky to make out the return portal when you're not looking for it; the shimmering is fainter and of course there's no set of stone steps leading up to it or anything. Anybody watching would just have seen us disappearing one by one. In an old Disney live-action movie (you know, like *Flubber* or *Witch Mountain*) there would be a hobo peering at us from the gutter, and then, when we vanished, looking askance at his bottle of moonshine and resolvedly tossing it over his shoulder.

So that night, we felt fine. We all felt fine. We felt pretty great, in fact; it had been an exciting day. Gretchen and I didn't get it on, it was that time of the month; but we snuggled a lot. We decided to make it a weekend tradition, at least on nice days—get up, read the paper, get dressed, then out to the portal for a little adventure.

Because by the third time it was obvious that it would be an adventure; it turns out the portal wasn't permanently tied to the vacant lot downtown. I don't know if this was usual or what. But I pictured it flapping in the currents of space and time, sort of like a windsock stuck fast at one end and whipping randomly around at the other. I still have no idea why it dropped us off so close to home (or so apparently close to home) that first time—I suppose I was still trying to be normal. Like an old guy in denial about the onset of dementia.

The second time we went through, we thought we were in old-time England, on some heath or something—in fact, after I put my head in to check, I sent Gretchen back to the house to fill a basket with bread and fruit and the like, for a picnic, and I told Luann to go to the garage to get the flag off her bike, to mark the site of the return portal. Clever, right? The weather was fine, and we were standing in a landscape of rolling grassy hills, little blue meandering creeks, and drifting white puffy clouds. We could see farms and villages in every direction, but no cities, no cars or planes or smog. We hiked down into the nearest village and got a bit of a shock—nobody was around, no people, or animals for that matter—the place was abandoned. And we all got the strong feeling that the whole world was abandoned too—that we were the only living creatures in it. I mean, there weren't even any bugs. It was lonesome as hell. We went home after an hour and ate our picnic back in the clearing.

The third time we went through, we ended up in this crazy city—honestly, it was too much. Guys selling stuff, people zipping around in hovercars, drunks staggering in the streets, cats and dogs and these weirdly intelligent-looking animals that were sort of like deer but striped and half as large. Everybody wore hats—the men seemed to favor these rakish modified witch-hat things with a floppy brim, and women wore a kind of collapsed cylinder like a soufflé. Nobody seemed to notice us, they were busy, busy, busy. And the streets! None of them was straight. It was like a loud, crowded, spaghetti maze, and for about half an hour we were terrified that we'd gotten lost and would never find the portal again, which miraculously had opened into the only uninhabited dark alley in the whole town. (We planted our bicycle flag between two paving stones, and almost lost it to a thing that was definitely *not* a rat.) Chester demanded a witch hat, but the only place we found that sold them wouldn't take our money, and we didn't speak the language anyway, which was the whacked-out squirrel chatter. Oh, yeah, and everybody had a big jutting chin. I mean

everybody. When we finally got home that night the four of us got into a laughing fit about the chins—I don't know what it was, they just struck us as wildly hilarious.

Annoying as that trip was, I have to admit now that it was the best time we ever had together, as a family I mean. Even when we were freaked out, we were all on the same page—we were a team. I suppose it's perfectly normal for this to change, I mean, the kids have to strike out on their own someday, right? They have to develop their own interests and their own way of doing things, or else they'd never leave, god forbid. But I miss that time. And just like every other asshole who fails to appreciate what he's got while he still has it, all I ever did was complain.

I'm thinking here of the fourth trip through the portal. When I stuck my head through for a peek, all I saw was fog and all I heard was clanking, and I pictured some kind of waterfront you know, with the moored boats bumping up against each other and maybe a nice seafood place tucked in among the warehouses and such. I guess I'd gotten kind of reckless. I led the family through and after about fifteen seconds I realized that the fog was a hell of a lot thicker than I thought it was, and that it kind of stung the eyes and nose, and that the clanking was far too regular and far too deep and loud to be the result of some gentle ocean swell.

In fact, we had ended up in hell—a world of giant robots, acrid smoke, windowless buildings and glowing toxic waste piles. We should have turned right around and gone back through the portal, but Chester ran ahead, talking to himself about superheroes or something. Gretchen went after him, Luann reached for my hand (maybe for the last time ever? But please, I don't want to go there), and before you knew it we had no idea where we were. The fog thickened, if anything, and nobody knew who had the flag, or if we'd even remembered to bring the thing. It took Luann and me half an hour just to find Gretchen and Chester, and two hours more to find the portal (and this only by random groping—it would have been easy to miss it entirely). By this time we were all trembling and crying—well, I wasn't crying, but I was sure close—and nearly paralyzed with fear from a series of close calls with these enormous, filthy, fast-moving machines that looked like elongated forklifts and, in one instance, a kind of chirping metal tree on wheels. When I felt my arm tingle I nearly crapped myself with relief. We piled through the portal and back into a summer evening in the yard and were disturbed to discover a small robot that had inadvertently passed through along with us, a kind of four-slice toaster type thing on spindly anodized bird legs. In the coming weeks it would rust with unnatural speed, twitching all the while, until it was nothing but a gritty orange stain on the ground.

Maybe I'm remembering this wrong—you know, piling all our misfortunes together in one place in my mind—but I believe it was in the coming days that the kids began to change, or rather to settle into what we thought (hoped) were temporary patterns of unsavory behavior. Chester's muttered monologuing, which for a long time we thought was singing, or an effort to memorize something, took on a new intensity—his face would turn red, spittle would gather at the corners of his mouth, and when we interrupted him he would gaze at us with hatred, some residual emotion from his violent fantasy world. As for Luann, the phone began ringing a lot more often, and she would disappear with the receiver into private corners of the house to whisper secrets to her friends. Eventually, of course, the friends turned into boys. Gretchen bought her some makeup, and the tight jeans and tee shirts she craved—

because what are you going to do, make the kid wear hoop dresses and bonnets?

As for Gretchen, well—I don't know. She started giving me these *looks*, not exactly pitying but regretful, maybe. Disappointed. And not even in me, particularly—more like, she had disappointed herself for setting her sights so low. I'm tempted to blame the portal for all this, the way it showed us how pathetic, how circumscribed our lives really were. But I didn't need a magic portal to tell me I was no Mr. Excitement—I like my creature comforts, and I liked it when my wife and kids didn't demand too much from me, and when you get down to it, maybe all that, not the portal, is the reason everything started going south. Not that Gretchen's parents helped matters when they bought Chester the video game for his birthday—an hour in front of that thing and adios, amigo. Whatever demons were battling in his mind all day long found expression through his thumbs—it became the only thing that gave the poor kid any comfort. And eventually we would come to realize that Luann was turning into, forgive me, something of a slut, and that Chester had lost what few social graces we had managed to teach him. Today his face is riddled with zits, he wanders off from the school grounds two or three times a week, and he still gets skidmarks in his tighty whities. And Luann—we bought her a used car in exchange for a promise to drive Chester where he wanted to go, but she gave him a ride maybe once—it was to, God knows why, the sheet metal fabricating place down behind the supermarket—and then forgot him there for forty hours while she did god knows what with god knows who. (“It doesn't matter what I was doing! Stuff!”)

But I'm getting ahead of myself. You'd think we would have quit the portal entirely after the robot fog incident, but then you're probably mistaking us for intelligent people. Instead we went back now and again—it was the only thing we could all agree to do together. Sometimes I went by myself, too. I suspect Gretchen was doing the same—she'd be missing for a couple of hours then would come back flushed and covered with burrs, claiming to have been down on the recreation path, jogging. I don't think the kids went alone—but then where did Chester get that weird knife?

In any event, what we saw in there became increasingly disturbing. Crowds of people with no faces, a world where the ground itself seemed to be alive, heaving and sweating. We generally wouldn't spend more than a few minutes wherever we ended up. The portal, in its decline into senility, seemed to have developed an independent streak, a mind of its own. It was ... giving us things. Things it thought we wanted. It showed us a world that was almost all noise and confusion and flashing red light, with a soundtrack of something you could hardly call music made by something you maybe could mistake for guitars. Only Luann had a good time in that one. There was Chester's world, the one that wheeled around us in pixelated, rainbow 3-D, where every big-eyed armored creature exploded into fountains of glittering blood and coins, and the one that looked like ours, except thinner, everything thinner, the buildings and people and trucks and cars, and from the expression of horror on Gretchen's face, I could tell where that one was coming from. And there was the one place where all the creatures great and small appeared to have the red hair, thick ankles, and perk-up little boobs of the new administrative assistant at my office. Gretchen didn't talk to me for days after that, but it certainly did put me off the new assistant.

And so before the summer was over, we gave up. The kids were too busy indulging their new selves and quit playing make-believe out in the woods. And Gretchen and I were lost

our private worlds of self-disgust and conjugal disharmony. By Christmas we'd forgotten about the portal, and the clearing began to fill in. We did what people do: we heaved our grim corporeal selves through life.

I checked back there a couple of times over the next few years—you know, just to see everything looked all right. Needless to say, last time I checked, it didn't—the humming was getting pretty loud, and the shimmering oval was all lopsided, with a sort of hernia in the lower left corner, which was actually drooping far enough to touch the ground. When I poked a stick through the opening, there was a pop and a spark and a cloud of smoke, and the portal seemed to emit a kind of hacking cough, followed by the scent of ozone and rot. When I returned to the house and told Gretchen what I'd seen, she didn't seem to care. And so I decided not to care, either. Like I said before, there were more important things to worry about.

Just a few weeks ago, though, I started hearing strange noises at night. "Didya hear that?" I'd say out loud, and if I was in bed with Gretchen (as opposed to on the sofa, alone), she would rise up out of half-sleep to tell me no, it was just a dream. But it wasn't. It was a little like a coyote's yip, but deeper, more elongated. And sometimes there would be a screech like metal on metal, or a kind of random ticking; and if I got up and looked out the window sometimes I thought I could see a strange glow coming from the woods.

And now, even in the daytime, there's a funny odor hanging around the yard. It's springtime, and Gretchen says it's just the smell of nature waking up. But I don't think so. Springtime supposed to smell like motor oil and dog piss in the morning? To be perfectly honest, I'm beginning to be afraid of what our irresponsibility, our helplessness, has wrought. I mean, we bought this place. We own it, just like we own all our other problems.

I try to talk to Gretchen about it, but she doesn't want to hear it. "I'm on a different track right now," she says. "I can't be distracted from my healing." "Healing from *what*?" I want to know. "My psychic disharmony." I mean, what can you say to that? Meanwhile, I have no idea where our daughter is half the time, and I haven't gone up to Chester's room in three weeks. I can hear him up there, muttering; I can hear the bed squeak as he acts out his violent fantasies; I hear the menacing orchestral strings and explosions and tortured screams that emanate from his favorite games.

Problems don't just go away, you know? Problems get bigger and bigger and before you know it they're bigger than you are, and it's too late to fix them. Some days, when I've gotten a decent night's sleep and have had a few cups of coffee, I think sure, I'll just get on the phone, start calling people up and asking for help. A school guidance counselor, a marriage therapist, a pediatrician, a witch or shaman or wizard or physicist or whoever in the hell might know what to do about the portal, or even have the balls to walk down that path and see what's become of the clearing.

But on other days, days like today, when I'm too damned tired even to reach for the phone, the only emotion I can summon up is longing, for a time when the world was miraculously whole when I couldn't wait to get up in the morning and start living.

I mean, the magic has to come from someplace, right? It's out there, bestowing itself on somebody else's wife, somebody else's kids, somebody else's life. All I want is to get just a little of it back. Is that so much to ask?

# No Life

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In the sunblasted park, at the water's edge, a titan willow shades a circle of grass and lake. Beneath it the children can be seen wearing red tee shirts, white sneakers, and tan shorts. There are about twenty-five of them, from four years old to fourteen. A few brave the heat with a soccer ball; most are engaged in a game that seems to involve keeping a bunch of beanbags in the air. The grass is dead: it's late June and there hasn't been a day of rain in three weeks. Edward and Alison are watching from their car.

Edward is thinking that, from here, they all look pretty good. Scrubbed and uniformed, the children glance from time to time at the organizers grilling meat nearby, setting out food on covered plates on a folding buffet table. The sight gives Edward a magnanimous, fatherly feeling. He thinks he'd better keep this feeling in check: You don't go hungry to the grocery store, he likes to say.

Alison is thinking: I don't want a white one. I don't want to be one of those people who have to have the right kind. Give me a black one or a Chinese one or something, they're all kids, they've all got good hearts, it doesn't matter.

Neither gets out of the car. Edward says, "Couldn't have picked a nicer day."

Alison sighs. "The grass," she says.

Then they notice the other couples. How could they have missed them? They're so conspicuous, each standing alone, far, far from the other couples, all of them perfectly still, watching. They're clean, neat, studiously casual: belted shorts and golf shirts for the men, sundresses and summer hats for the women: exactly the way Edward and Alison are dressed.

The children don't seem to notice. Some have been passed over a hundred times. Some have no hope at all, Alison is thinking, but they've come anyway, just in case. They're playing, just like normal children. They are normal children, she reminds herself.

"There," Edward says, pointing. A couple is making its move, heading for a spot beneath the willow where three children are playing a board game on the grass. As they approach, the man and woman bend over, readying themselves to speak. One child, a black-haired, dark-skinned boy, looks up.

The couple is intercepted by an organizer.

"Whoops," says Edward.

The organizers are wearing white tee shirts with an insignia on the breast. This organizer, a plump, youngish woman, has her hand stuck straight out to be shaken. The man and woman right themselves to clasp it. They are led to a buffet table and given name tags. The black-haired boy watches until he's handed the dice. Then he turns back to his game. The woman, narrow-faced, wan, thin-haired, continues to stare at the boy until her husband pulls her away.

"I can't do this," says Alison.

"It's a walk in the park," Edward tells her, then realizes the unintended joke and says, very loudly, "Ha!"

He gets out of the car; she follows.

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The head organizer is named Greta. Edward misses the name when she introduces herself and ends up having to lean close to read her name tag. But not too close; he doesn't want her to think he's checking out her boobs, though of course he is. Consequently he reads it as "Great." Can that be right? She is tall and unbalanced, like a stack of colorful wooden blocks.

"I am simply thrilled to see you all here today," says Great. She has herded the couples onto a patch of grass that is burdened by direct sun, where they have been asked to sit. Behind them the children play, stealing glances. "A few guidelines. One, we have brought no forms to fill out, nothing like that. Today is just for kicks. If you hit it off with a particular child, let us know, and we can arrange a meeting. Two, don't talk about why you're here, please. The children already know, and they are a little nervous! So talk about something else—doggies, sports, airplanes, church."

Edward begins thinking about how he might incorporate all these subjects into a single sentence.

Alison thinks that the other couples look better qualified, wealthier, tougher than she and Edward. They probably have connections: she always believes all other people know one another. What if our child turns out to be religious? she wonders. A Baha'i? A Jain? There would be time to get books out of the library.

"And third, and this is most important, please: do not, under any circumstances, ask a child if he or she wants to come home with you, okay? Okay! Terrific!" Great claps her hands. The couples stand up.

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Edward heads straight for the tallest child, an ugly, pale boy with stretched features: a long nose; narrow, slanted, almost Asian eyes; a pointed chin. He is sitting in the shade watching the other kids. Edward sits beside him.

"You don't want me, man," the kid says.

"Thanks for the tip," Edward tells him, and the kid looks surprised. "Why, what's wrong with you?"

"My folks were no good. Also people tried me out before and it didn't work."

"You were bad?"

The kid laughs. "Uh-huh."

"What'd you do?"

"Smoked weed."

"Mmm," says Edward.

"I never did it before. Their freakin' real son gave it to me, except they didn't believe me when I told them."

Edward reads the kid's name tag in an ironic, obvious way. Nate. "Oh, I believe that. Kids have no boundaries, Nate."

Nate stares at Edward for a moment. He says, "What's your name?"

"Ed."

"Do you let kids call you Ed or do they have to call you Mister something?"

"It's just Ed," Edward says. "Like Cher."

Edward thinks maybe he's gone too far. Nate is squinting at him like he's mad.

"Like who?" Nate says.

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Alison watches Edward take off alone and feels sick to her stomach. They're in this together she thinks. But she imagines what Edward would tell her if she said so: "We can cover more ground split up," he'd say, as if it were a scavenger hunt. And then she hears him say, "It is a scavenger hunt, Al." He calls her Al. Most of her boyfriends called her Allie, and the worst of them, a long-lashed pec-pumper named Lou, called her Alison, as if this formalized respect would fool her. Edward calls her Al and she calls him Edward. That happened on the first date. Al and Edward: it went through her head all night long. Then they got married and tried to have a kid for nine years. She didn't want the drugs; she was afraid of octuplets, and the what? Aborting some, but not others: that wasn't for her, it seemed so arbitrary. What if they killed the wrong ones? So adoption is it. It's the right thing to do. They read about the picnic in the paper.

A child comes to her, a tiny white boy. "Fow me dis!" he says, "fow it to me!" He thrusts a frisbee at her. She draws back, horrified, and it tumbles to the ground. The child picks it up and hands it to her again.

"Oh! I don't know ..." It's a test! she thinks, taking the frisbee. It's a test and I'm flunking!

The child runs away to a small group of older boys. They are grinning with apparent mischief. "All right!" she calls out. "Get ready! Here it comes!"

She throws the frisbee, and it wallows in the air and falls ten feet short. "No!" the child says. "Wike dis! Wike dis!" He grabs the frisbee and flings it away, over the heads of the other children, and they chase it and are gone.

She wanders, watching Edward out of the corner of her eye. He is talking to exactly the wrong kid. She's done research. Adolescents and teens may already have developed beyond your ability to control them. Sometimes she suspects that Edward doesn't really want a child at all, and that this secret truth has rendered them infertile. She's not sure of the mechanics of the thing, but it is as easy to believe as what the doctor has told them.

At first their desire for children was as passionate and straightforward as a Labrador retriever, and as thoughtless. They liked each other and wanted to make more of themselves. They screwed with delightful abandon. Once it was clear things weren't working, though, sex became perfunctory. It seemed absurd and implausible, like Twister. They still have it, of course. Sex. They call it "it." "We should do it." Neither ever refuses, no matter how unappealing the prospect, because then there would be somebody to blame for their never doing it anymore.

They are most successful at it when he wears a condom.

Alison has been thinking these thoughts for a while before she realizes how she must look slumped, agape, alone. She looks up, startled, at the scene around her. Predatory adults kneeling, touching, telling jokes. I don't know any jokes! she thinks.

Then she sees her child.

Really. He looks like her. He has her long fingers (curled around a plastic bat), her high forehead (sweating, like hers!), her coarse, raccoon-colored hair (though on him, tousled and gently curled, it looks charming). He is so obviously the one that it takes her several seconds to realize that he is already talking to some adults, older adults. Mature adults. The man wears boots and a bolo tie; narrow and bent, he looks like a hick. A rich hick. The woman is freckled and tan. It's over; the child has been claimed.

Still, her legs carry her toward the three of them.

"I don't want parents," Nate tells Edward. "I'm fine without them. Pretty soon I'll get out of high school and I'll take the money they give me at the home and buy a bus ticket."

The speech sounds rehearsed. "Where to?" Edward says.

"Vegas."

"What's there?"

"Everything, man. Girls. Money. I want to deal poker. You ever seen those guys? They're smooth."

"I agree."

Nate looks off across the park, squinting at the bright hills and water. It would be a piece of cake to live with this kid, Edward thinks. He'd be like a roommate. Because Edward doesn't want a baby anymore, really, the same way he doesn't want a sport-utility vehicle or a handheld computer. All the years of fertility brochures and pregnancy books, all the babies who pitch for mutual funds and radial tires and insurance policies and of course diapers and powders and creams: all of it has driven Edward to conclude that babies are a brand name. They are a product. They are conventional. They are what other people want you to have. Take hell with them, with their big round heads and skinny asses and button noses. He'll take this guy.

All he has to do is find Al and introduce her to the kid. He scans the crowd. There she is standing in the sunlight with a skinny sort of ersatz Texan and his wife. He stands up and brushes his butt off.

"Sit tight, Nate," he says.

"Whatever."

But as he draws closer to Alison and the Texans, he realizes it isn't going to work this way. In fact, it isn't going to work at all. That's because a child is there, among the three of them, a child of about five with the long, asking-for-it face of a chronic sinus sufferer. The child is holding a busted wiffle ball bat, whitened and creased in the middle, where it's been pounded against a tree. When Alison turns, her eyes are chaotically glittering, as if full of broken glass. She's in love.

Dammit, things ought to be simple. Nate fades away behind him like a Coke can tossed out of a car window.

"Hi!" he says to the four of them and presses his palm against Alison's humid back. Nobody says anything except the doomed child.

"Hello."

Edward thinks he should probably introduce himself to the adults, but he has a feeling he's not going to like them. He bends over and says, "Who's in charge here? You, sir?"

The child says, "No, Mrs. Scott is," and points across the park to the tall woman, the one who looked like she might fall over. Great. Great Scott! Perfect! The boy is cowering, so Edward stifles his laugh. Raymond is his name. It's marked on his name tag in that new kind of printing they teach now, with little curlicues after all the letters, so that the children will find it easier to connect them someday, when cursive is taught.

Edward feels a willful hand on his shoulder. He allows it to pull him up into a standing position.

"Harlan Breece," says the Texan, "Linda Breece." Edward shakes the man's hand and gives Linda a little bow. Then Harlan Breece shakes Alison's hand, too. Edward tries goofily

shake Alison's hand, but she rejects him with a nervous smile. Everyone, actually, is smiling. Meanwhile Harlan is sizing them up, and after a moment he turns back to the boy, his face confident and calm. Edward sees that Harlan has deemed them not worth worrying about. His wife, seeing this too, relaxes, and a blush blooms briefly. Edward understands that the competition has begun. He turns to Alison.

"You ought to get into the shade," he says, for she is deep red and illuminated by sweat.

"I'm fine," she tells him brightly. "Raymond likes baseball. His favorite player is ... who is it?"

"Sammy Sosa," says Raymond.

"Son," says Harlan Breece, "you ever been to a real baseball game?"

"No, sir."

"Well, somebody ought to do something about that."

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"I want him," Alison says. They are in the car with the windows shut tight, the AC pumping hot air into their faces. The children are climbing into a bus while someone with a clipboard checks off their names. The event is over. The two couples talked to the boy Raymond for a good twenty minutes, not moving an inch, despite the blazing sun: a contest for which the heat-toving Breesces (genuine Texans, as it happens) were genetically predisposed. The Breesces revealed that they lived on the lake, that Harlan was a judge. They'd acquired a child once before, a foster child, as Linda had suffered a "female problem" that left her unable to conceive. The boy had gone back home after a year. The implication was that the separation had crushed poor Linda, and indeed, Linda looked the part, with her moist eyes and weary chin, and the heavy upper arms Alison tends to associate with deep sadness. The Breesces had sold their ranch to a developer and moved here, of all places, to the Finger Lakes.

All of this was spoken in code, of course, with occasional frank asides to Edward and Alison, whenever a nugget of information seemed like it might break their spirit. Judge Money. Experience with foster children.

The teenager is getting on the bus now, the one Edward had been talking to. Alison says, "You could have been more helpful. Why were you talking to that young man?"

Edward's gaze follows the teen until he disappears. "Nate. I don't know. Nobody else was going to talk to him."

Though she knows it annoys him, she can't help sighing. Edward roots for the underdog. He buys cheap shirts from sale racks and votes for local crackpots every November. It's one of the things that, when she loves him, she really loves, and when she is angry at him, she finds him intolerable. He is intolerable now, but already her intolerance is on the wane. She can't seem to get worked up about anything these days. It's a feature of their marriage: as sexual passion has faded, so has pride, so has resentment. Sometimes she feels she may vanish completely into an undifferentiated fog of vague love.

She isn't a crier—she prides herself on this—but she begins to cry. Edward pats her leg. The air is cooling down. In fact, it is suddenly ice cold. A chill runs through her. The tears shut off. Edward shuts off the AC.

"I'm thinking of a word," he says.

"Oh, God, not right now."

“No, let’s do it. You know you wanna.”

“I don’t!” But she can’t resist the game. They’ve played it on every road trip they’ve ever taken. They’ve played it naked. They’ve played it in elevators and on the Great Wall of China. She wipes her face, hangs her head, whispers, “Fallopian.”

“After.”

“Infertility.”

He snorts. “Before!”

“Uh, gum?”

“Close, in a way. After.”

“Itchy,” she says, scratching her legs.

“Itchy comes after infertility.”

“Edward, I just don’t feel like doing this right now.”

“It’s between infertility and gum,” he says quietly. “Something delicious.”

“Hot dogs. Hominy?”

“Perfect for a day like this. A sweet, refreshing treat.”

She turns to him. He is holding an invisible ice-cream cone and licking it lasciviously, his eyebrows rising and falling, his eyes rolling back in his head with simulated pleasure. He has not yet noticed the approach of Harlan Breece, who is walking bent over with his hands on his khakied knees, squinting in Edward’s window.

Edward sees the shadow of the massive hat falling across the dash before he hears the tap on the window, not a tap actually but a small thud, as Breece is using his fingertip, not his fingernail. In fact, Edward notes as he rolls the window down, Breece has barely got any fingernails at all. They are as irregular and receding as his hairline. He counts this as a victory and is able to meet the Texan with a broad and truly genuine smile. A ten-gallon smile, he thinks, that’s how we do it in Upstate New York! He realizes he is still holding the invisible ice-cream cone and releases it. Invisible ice cream splatters his thighs.

“Harlan, hello!”

“Hi there, Alison dear,” Breece drawls, glancing past Edward, “and I’m ashamed to admit I’ve forgotten your name.” Breece grimaces calmly at him.

“Edward. ‘Big Ed,’ if you like.”

“You’ll accept my apologies then, Ed, and hear me out. I’m pleased to tell you that Linda finds you both mighty charming, and she’s asked me to extend an invitation to dinner up at our little lakeside cottage. We still got a little water left in the lake, in spite of this heat of yours.”

We got a little water! Heat of *yours*? Edward loves it, an honest-to-God member of the privileged class, whose wife finds him and his wife mighty charming. Without turning to Alison, Edward says, “Well, we’re real sorry about our heat, but we’d love to come take a gander at your water.”

“Splendid,” says Harlan Breece, and angles his brush-covered panhandle of an arm through the window. Edward shakes the hand at the end of it. “When’s good for you?”

“Just about anytime,” Edward says as the first bad vibes reach him from Alison’s side of the car. “It isn’t like we need to get a sitter.”

“Tomorrow? Eight?”

“Of course, sure.”

The panhandle withdraws and returns, this time bearing a white slip of paper with a map printed on it. It dawns on Edward that Breece just happened to have this map on him, and probably has several more. You never know when you're going to need to invite somebody up to the shack for some pig's feet and moonshine. Edward accepts the map and gives it a game squint, then nods at Harlan as he rolls the window back up, his own pumping arm looking very working class, vulgarly utilitarian, like an oil derrick.

When the window is shut tight, he turns to Alison. "That oughta be fun."

"You will be alone," she says.

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But he isn't alone when, the following night, they get into the car and point themselves north along the scenic Lake Ridge Highway. She meant it when she said it, but really, she would never abandon him. Of course the Breeces didn't find them charming, no doubt they found them odious. But tonight, none of it bothers her, because she knows that they, she and Edward, are going to win. Alison phoned up the agency first thing this morning from her desk at Spitznagel & Pinch Real Estate and told the girl that they wanted to "meet with the little boy Raymond." Take a meeting, she restrained herself from saying. And the girl said, "Oh, he is a cutie, isn't he, it's amazing nobody's whisked him home yet."

Nobody's whisked him home. Hanging up the phone, she pictured herself doing the whisking, ushering little Raymond into their car, into their house. The Breeces hadn't got him yet. During her lunch hour, she stopped at the library and learned that childless couples in their thirties are more likely to adopt successfully than those in their fifties, and she felt a cautious optimism. Thirties: that's us!

Or so thinks Alison. Edward, however, at thirty-seven, doesn't see himself as being in his "thirties." If pressed he would probably say he's "around twenty-five." That was his age when he met Alison, the age when he hung up his bong and shaved his beard. He regards marriage as a kind of deep freeze that perfectly preserves the version of Ed—Version 3.0, following Innocence (1.0), The End of Innocence (1.1), and College (2.0)—that got married. Sure, he noticed a few little changes, the usual ones: the hair loss, the out-of-breath, the getting-fat. But these are minor setbacks, if they're setbacks at all. When he was a kid he'd get these hard, fleshy growths on his fingertips, tiny numb extinct volcanoes, which lasted a good six months and went away on their own. That's how it is with these things.

But this morning, when he was sitting in the breakfast nook, looking out at the suburban street and the elementary school and the cafeteria workers ineptly parallel parking at the curb, he suddenly found it difficult to see. He didn't know what it was at first, a darkening, a fluttering, and for a moment he thought he was having a heart attack. Just for a moment. And thinking he was having a heart attack made his heart stand briefly, horrifyingly still, so that he seemed to be having another one. Then his focus shifted, and he saw that the bird feeder hanging from the eaves, suspended in the center of the window, was bristling with nuthatches. There had to have been twenty, flapping madly about the six seed-choked holes, and Edward laughed and instantly relaxed. Not a heart attack! Nuthatches!

They've got the dome light on and Alison is trying to read the map. "There's supposed to be a secondhand clothing place ... and then a bridge ... wait, two bridges, take the first left after the second bridge, not the left after the first ... and then go 2.3 miles ..." The map

absurdly, counterproductively detailed, so that if they miss a single landmark they'll be eating roasted possum off the end of a stick in the woods tonight. Still, somehow, they manage to find the place. The Breeces' driveway is a couple of ruts that snake through a half-reclaimed farm field and plunge into an untrimmed copse of box elders. And beyond the treeline: Taliesin. Or something like that. Massive, slabbed, lit like a pumpkin; you can see everything inside—the furniture and art and a gigantic fireplace—and right through the back windows onto the lake and the blazing sunset reflected there. Alison suppresses a wave of hatred for the rival real-estate agency that sold it: she could have bought a baby on the black market with that commission.

They park in a gravel lot the size of a tennis court. Theirs is the only car. It is Linda who comes to the door, looking awfully tall without Harlan. She leads them inside.

Harlan's in front of the fire (as they've got the AC pumping pretty hard in here) with a drink in his hand. A mesquite smell fills the room. "Harlan, dear," his wife calls out, and he theatrically snaps to attention and a grin spreads across his face, a wide face for such a thin guy. Edward notes a bear rug. Wow!

"Welcome, welcome!" says Harlan. He sets down the drink on a coffee table made of petrified wood and throws his arms wide.

"Howdy, pardner," Edward says, and imagines he sees a flicker of irritation on the judge's face. They shake hands. This time Harlan uses his free hand to seize Edward's forearm, and Edward does the same. For a moment the two men are locked in a Boy Scout Death Grip. It is Harlan who lets go. Edward notices Linda and Alison attempting to greet one another. Alison is a handshaker, and he just bets Linda is a kisser. The two stare nodding at one another from a distance of several feet.

"What's your poison, Ed?"

"Does hizzoner drink tequila?" Edward says impulsively.

"Hell yes."

---

Linda is talking about their failed foster-child experiment. Alison listens with alarm. It is a sermon, really, a testimonial, delivered with the strained alacrity of an introductory economics lecture. There is no room for question or comment.

"He was the sweetest little boy, a little black boy," she says. "His momma was hooked on the drugs, and he never had no daddy to speak of. His daddy wasn't ever around—well, I suppose it could have been anyone. His momma went to prison because of picking up drugs at somebody's house with the little boy in the back seat. And well, Harlan and I saw him and we thought, He's the one. He had the sweetest kinky hair and his skin was so smooth and dark. Well.

"We brought him back to the ranch and gave him all the advantages, don't you know. He had a nanny of his own kind who was just as sweet as a biscuit, and we gave him riding lessons and Harlan took him out on the little golf course we used to have, just four holes. This was in the days before black boys played golf. And he went to a wonderful little school we found for him outside of Dallas, with children from all different races, they had the Mexicans and the Chinese and the Indians and all that. Well, we thought it would be just perfect. Except he had some trouble with reading, and they found out there was something

wrong with his eyes, and also his ears, which explained why he didn't seem to be listening to what we were saying to him sometimes. If you ask me, it was the drugs, the drugs his momma took when he was in her belly. And then poor Angelina, that's the colored girl who was his nanny, she had to go back to Trinidad to take care of her momma, and the next one we got was a Mexican, name of Armada—"

"Amara," Harlan says, staring hard into his tequila. Alison can't help but notice that Edward's glass is empty and that his eyes are casting about for the bottle. There it is, right in front of Harlan. She watches as Edward leans right past him and grabs it around the neck.

"Of course," Linda goes on. It occurs to Alison that the Breeces cannot possibly have any friends here. She wonders why they left Texas at all, how Harlan managed to get appointed judge in Lake County. Edward keeps drinking. She nudges him to let him know that she considers this unwise, and Harlan, raising his eyebrows in a flirtatious manner, seems to notice.

When the story peters out, they eat. It is DIY, black-bean-and-chicken fajitas. The salsa is out of a jar, a local store brand. The tortillas are cold and clammy and the chicken has had every last drop of moisture cooked out of it. It is a cursory dinner, clearly not the intended focus of the evening. Alison begins to wonder, with some concern, what the real focus is.

After dinner they drink some more, then Harlan gets up to take the plates to the kitchen. "A little thing I like to do for Linda," he explains. "Be a man, Ed, give me a hand here."

The two leave the room, balancing the plates in their arms. Edward is weaving dangerously. His shoulder bumps the kitchen doorway and Alison winces. She remembers the booze-soaked dinner parties they used to have, the giant vats of food, the shouted conversations during which not enough could ever seem to be said. And later, when the guests had gone, love. Their grad-student pals, with their retro eyeglasses and liter bottles of red wine, where are they now? Los Angeles, Costa Rica, Alaska. She and Edward were so smug about staying: real people stay put, they told themselves. And here they are, right where they wanted to be.

She turns back to Linda and has to stifle a gasp. The older woman has come to life: hands on her knees, she leans forward as if to impart a powerful secret. Her eyes glow orange in the firelight, her skin is flushed—and how did her neck get to be so long and muscled? She looks like ... a cheetah.

Alison realizes that this is it. The moment. She is about to learn why they were asked here.

"Where is your bathroom?" she asks.

Startled, Linda coughs, licks her lips. A small smile arranges itself. She points to the stairs.

"Second door on the left."

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In the kitchen, Edward drops the plates on the counter. For a moment he is disoriented enough to mistake the sound for a flying object, and he ducks. His brain stays where it was, though, and the room doubles. He blinks hard. When his vision is restored, the face of Harlan looms.

"I got a lot of good friends," Harlan says.

"Not me," Edward replies. He's trying to be funny, but suddenly this doesn't seem funny at all. Perhaps because it is true.

“People in law enforcement, people in the courts,” the judge goes on, ignoring the interruption. “One particular friend of mine is located in Cambridge, Mass.”

“Never heard of it.” Harlan is very close, leaning right over him, giving off an odor. It’s the smell of mentholated salve. Has he got arthritis? Edward feels sorry for the older man, sorry for the life he’s leading here on the lake, in the house, with the wife. He’s sorry for having come to dinner. The fajitas are a bitter ball inside him.

“Sure you have. You’ve been there.”

“Have I?” says Edward.

“Yes, you have. You were there between the years of 1981 and 1987. You went to college there. Remember that?”

“Sheesh,” Edward tells him. “I sure don’t know. Do you think I could help myself to a glass of water?” Was it really that long ago? He still has dreams about college, in which important mail is waiting for him in his campus mailbox and he can’t remember the combination.

Incredibly, Harlan moves even closer. “You had yourself a little business there, didn’t you Eddie?”

“I was an English major.”

“You were in sales and distribution.”

“Nah.”

“Unfortunately your little business came to the attention of the Harvard administration. You were spared prosecution in exchange for your permanent absence from the campus. After that you got yourself enrolled at Tufts and slunk outta there a couple years later. Is that refreshing your memory?”

“You bet it’s refreshing. I don’t even need that water anymore.”

Harlan attempts a grin, but the corners of his mouth don’t seem to be cooperating. “Keep cracking those jokes, pothead,” he whispers, and the whispers clatter around the gleaming disinfected kitchen. Behind Harlan, on the counter, Edward spies the takeout boxes from Taco Treat. Two of them, then four, then eight. Then just one. Oh dear. “Seems that your records with the agency lacked this important information. I took the liberty of updating them for you.”

“The agency?”

“The adoption agency.”

Something is welling up inside Edward, something acid and explosive, first in his churning stomach, then in his esophagus, then in his throat. How dare this man judge me, he thinks—but then again, that’s what judges do. They make judgments! And then it’s out of him and across the room: hot laughter, cracking the air. Judgments! He falls against the counter, tears pouring from his eyes. Harlan has taken a step back. He’s put on his workaday face, the one he must wear as he pretends to listen carefully to all the evidence. Edward is gasping for breath.

“What the hell?” Harlan says.

Edward pounds the counter, hurting his hand. It feels great! He can’t seem to speak, but what would he say? The picnic, the Breeces, this house, it’s all so fucking funny! Maybe he and Alison should give up on the sex and do this at night instead, get drunk and tell jokes.

But Harlan doesn’t seem to get it, and he doesn’t seem to like not getting it. He sets himself in a bearish crouch, and his lip curls under, and the fuzzy panhandle rears back. Yikes!



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