

You persist, saying it was the girl.

"It was a long time ago," he says, and you imagine him rolling his eyes or flicking his hand dismissively, the way your father did when you were growing up. You feel embarrassed, as if you've foolishly believed something for a long time and suddenly your brother has revealed to you what maybe, just maybe, everyone else has known all along: the girl on the dock does not exist and your brother never thought much of you and you are more broken than you ever understood.

"Never mind," you tell your brother. Across the room, your boyfriend looks at you with such pity, as if, he, too, has always known during all of your stories and memories and confessions that you were misguided, silly, a fool. That look of pity, which you've never seen on his face before, at least not for you, feels brutal, like a betrayal, like a hook snagged in flesh. You want to hurt him.

"Sorry," your brother says. "If that's how you remember it, I'm sure that's how it was."

"Never mind," you say again. You feel now that there is nothing left to talk about. You think that most likely you'll never talk to him again until one of your parents dies.

He asks if you would like to Skype sometime. You say you don't know much about it—you're a bit of a technophobe—but your girlfriend could probably help you out. Your brother is puzzled now, and your boyfriend slurps from his mug with a violent smirk and pats one of the dogs come to sniff his bare feet. You repeat yourself, and your brother asks you to explain it—having a boyfriend and a girlfriend both—and you say that it's a tale for another time, a cliffhanger, so he'll have to call again to hear the rest of the story. You hang up the phone and say your boyfriend's name. He continues to pat the dog, and when you say his name again, he speaks with the same calm, flat voice he uses when disciplining a student. He has an idea for a tattoo for your right arm, if you still insist on getting one: a cassette with the tape unraveled and a fish tangled in it, gasping for breath.

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T. C. BOYLE

## Are We Not Men?

FROM *The New Yorker*

THE DOG WAS the color of a maraschino cherry, and what it had in its jaws I couldn't quite make out at first, not until it parked itself under the hydrangeas and began throtting the thing. This little episode would have played itself out without my even noticing, except that I'd gone to the stove to put the kettle on for a cup of tea and happened to glance out the window at the front lawn. The lawn, a lush blue-green that managed to hint at both the turquoise of the sea and the viridian of a Kentucky meadow, was something I took special pride in, and any wandering dog, no matter its chromatics, was an irritation to me. The seed had been pricey—a blend of Chewings fescue, Bahia, and zoysia incorporating a gene from a species of algae that allowed it to glow under the porch light at night—and, while it was both disease- and drought-resistant, it didn't take well to foot traffic, especially four-footed traffic.

I stepped out onto the porch and clapped my hands, thinking to shoo the dog away, but it didn't move. Actually, it did, but only to flex its shoulders and tighten its jaws around its prey, which I now saw was my neighbor Allison's pet micropig. The pig itself—doe-eyed and no bigger than a Pekinese—didn't seem to be struggling, or not any longer, and even as I came down off the porch looking for something I could brandish at the dog I felt my heart thundering. Allison was one of those pet owners who anthropomorphize their animals, and that pig was the center of her unmarried and unboyfriended life. She would be shattered, absolutely, and who was going to break the news to her? I felt a surge of anger. How had the stupid thing got out of the house anyway, and, for that

matter, whose dog was this? I didn't own a garden rake, and there were no sticks on the lawn (the street trees were an edited variety that didn't drop anything, no twigs, seeds, or leaves, no matter the season), so I stormed across the grass empty-handed, shouting the first thing that came to mind, which was "Bad! Bad dog!"

I wasn't thinking. And the effect wasn't what I would have hoped for even if I had been: the dog dropped the pig, all right, which was clearly beyond revivification at this point, but in the same motion it lurched up and clamped its jaws on my left forearm, growling continuously, as if my forearm were a stick it had fetched in a friendly game between us. Curiously, there was no pain—and no blood, either—just a firm insistent pressure, the saliva hot and wet on my skin as I pulled in one direction and the dog, all the while regarding me out of a pair of dull, uniform eyes, pulled in the other. "Let go!" I demanded, but the dog didn't let go. I tugged. The dog tugged back.

There was no one on the street, no one in the next yard over, no one in the house behind me to come to my aid. I was dressed in the T-shirt, shorts, and slippers I'd pulled on not ten minutes earlier, when I'd got out of bed, and here I was caught up in this maddening interspecies pas de deux at eight in the morning, already exhausted. The dog, this cherry-red hairless freak with the armored skull and bulging musculature of a pit bull, showed no sign of giving in: it had got my arm and it meant to keep it. After a minute of this, I went down on one knee to ease the tension in my back, a gesture that seemed only to excite the animal all the more, its nails tearing up divots as it fought for purchase, trying, it occurred to me now, to bring me down to its level. Before I knew what I was doing, I balled up my free hand and punched the thing in the head three times in quick succession.

The effect was instantaneous: the dog dropped my arm and let out a yelp, backing off to hover at the edge of the lawn and eye me warily, as if now, all at once, the rules of the game had changed. In the next moment, just as I realized that I was, in fact, bleeding, a voice cried out behind me, "Hey, I saw that!"

A girl was striding across the lawn toward me, a preternaturally tall girl whom I at first took to be a teenager but who was actually a child of eleven or twelve. She marched directly up to me, glaring, and said, "You hit my dog."

I was in no mood. "I'm bleeding," I said, holding out my arm in

evidence. "You see this? Your dog bit me. You ought to keep him chained up."

"That's not true—Ruby would never bite anybody. She was just . . . playing, is all."

I wasn't about to debate her. This was my property, my arm, and that lump of flesh lying there bleeding into the grass was Allison's dead pet. I pointed to it.

"Oh," she said, her voice dropping. "I'm so sorry, I didn't . . . Is it yours?"

"My neighbor's." I gestured to the house just visible over the hedge. "She's going to be devastated. This pig"—I wanted to call it by name, personalize it, but couldn't for the life of me summon up its name—"is all she has. And it wasn't cheap, either." I glanced at the dog, its pinkish gaze and incarnadine flanks. "As I'm sure you can appreciate."

The girl, who stood three or four inches taller than me and whose own eyes were an almost iridescent shade of violet that didn't exist in nature, or at least hadn't until recently, gave me an unflinching look. "Maybe she doesn't have to know."

"What do you mean she doesn't have to know? The thing's dead—look at it."

"Maybe it was run over by a car."

"You want me to lie to her?"

The girl shrugged. "I already said I'm sorry. Ruby got out the front gate when my mother went to work, and I came right after her. You saw me—"

"What about this?" I demanded, holding up my arm, which wasn't so much punctured as abraded, since most of the new breeds had had their canines and carnassials genetically modified to prevent any real damage in situations like this. "It has its shots, right?"

"She's a *Cherry Pit*," the girl said, giving me a look of disgust. "Germline immunity comes with the package. I mean, everybody knows that."

It was a Tuesday and I was working from home, as I did every Tuesday and Thursday. I worked in IT, like practically everybody else on the planet, and I found I actually got more done at home than when I went into the office. My coworkers were a trial, what with their moods, opinions, facial tics, and all the rest. Not that I didn't

like them—it was just that they always seemed to manage to get in the way at crunch time. Or maybe I didn't like them—maybe that was it. At any rate, after the little contretemps with the girl and her dog, I went back in the house, smeared an antibiotic ointment on my forearm, took my tea and a handful of protein wafers to my desk, and sat down at the computer. If I gave the dead pig a thought, it was only in relation to Allison, who'd want to see the corpse, I supposed, which brought up the question of what to do with it—let it lie where it was or stuff it in a trash bag and refrigerate it till she got home from the office? I thought of calling my wife—Connie was regional manager of Bank U.S.A., by necessity a master of interpersonal relations, and she would know what to do—but in the end I did nothing.

It was past three by the time I thought to take a lunch break, and, because it was such a fine day, I took my sandwich and a glass of iced tea out onto the front porch. By this juncture, I'd forgotten all about the pig, the dog, and the grief that was brewing for Allison, but as soon as I stepped out the door it all came back to me: the trees were alive with crowparrots variously screeching, cawing, and chattering among themselves, and they were there for a very specific reason. (I don't know if you have crowparrots in your neighborhood yet, but, believe me, they're coming. They were the inspiration of one of the molecular embryologists at the university here, who thought that inserting genes from the common crow into the invasive parrot population would put an end to the parrots' raids on our orchards and vineyards, by giving them a taste for garbage and carrion instead of fruit on the vine. The only problem was the noise factor—something in the mix seemed to have redoubled not only the volume but the fury of the birds' calls, so that you needed earplugs if you wanted to enjoy pretty much any outdoor activity.)

Which was the case now. The birds were everywhere, cursing fluidly (“*Bad bird! Fuck, fuck, fuck!*”) and flapping their spangled wings in one another's faces. Alarmed, I came down off the porch and for the second time that day scrambled across the lawn to the flower bed, where a scum of birds had settled on the remains of Allison's pet. I flailed my arms, and they lifted off reluctantly into the sky, screeching, “*Turd-bird!*” and the fractured call that awakened me practically every morning: “*Cock-k-k-k-sucker!*” As for the

pig (which I should have dragged into the garage, I realized that now), its eyes were gone and its faintly bluish hide was striped with bright-red gashes. Truthfully? I didn't want to touch the thing. It was filthy. The birds were filthy. Who knew what zoonoses they were carrying? So I was just standing there, in a quandary, when Allison's car pulled into the driveway next door.

Allison was in her early thirties, with a top-heavy figure and a barely tamed kink of ginger hair she kept wrapped up in various scarves, which gave her an exotic look, as if she were displaced here in the suburbs. She was sad-faced and sweet, the victim of one catastrophic relationship after another, and I couldn't help feeling protective toward her, a single woman alone in the big house her mother had left her when she died. So when she came across the lawn, already tearing up, I felt I'd somehow let her down and, before I could think, I stripped off my shirt and draped it over the corpse.

“Is that her?” she asked, looking down at the hastily covered bundle at my feet. “No,” she said, “don't tell me,” and then her eyes jumped to mine and she was repeating my name, “Roy, Roy, Roy,” as if wringing it in her throat. “*Fuck you!*” the crowparrots cried from the trees. “*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*” In the next moment Allison flung herself into my arms, clutching me to her so desperately I could hardly breathe.

“I don't want to see,” she said in a small voice, each syllable a hot puff of breath on the bare skin of my chest. I could smell her hair, the shampoo she used, the taint of sweat under her arms. “The poor thing,” she murmured, and lifted her face so I could see the tears blurring her eyes. “I loved her, Roy. I really *loved* her.”

This called up a scene from the past, a dinner party at Allison's—Connie and me, another couple, and Allison and her last inamorate, a big-headed boor who worked for Animal Control, incinerating strays and transgenic misfits. Allison had kept the pig in her lap throughout the meal, feeding it from her plate, and afterward, while we sat around the living room cradling brandies and Bénédicte, she propped the thing up at the piano, where it picked out “*Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*” with its modified hooves.

“It was a dog, right? That's what”—and here she had to break off a moment to gather herself. “That's what Terry Wolfson said when she called me at work—”

I was going to offer up some platitude about how the animal hadn't suffered, though for all I knew the dog had gummied it relentlessly, the way it had gummied my arm, when a voice called "Hello?" from the street behind us and we broke awkwardly apart. Coming up the walk was the tall girl, tottering on a pair of platform heels, and she had the dog with her, this time on a leash. I felt a stab of annoyance—hadn't she caused enough trouble already?—and embarrassment, too. It wasn't like me to go shirtless in public—or to be caught in a full-body embrace with my unmarried next-door neighbor, either, for that matter.

If the girl could read my face, she gave no indication of it. She came right up to us, the dog trotting along docilely at her side. Her violet gaze swept from me to the lump on the ground beneath the bloodied T-shirt and finally to Allison. "*Je suis désolée, madame,*" she said. "*Pardonnez-moi. Mon chien ne savait pas ce qu'il faisait—il est un bon chien, vraiment.*"

This girl, this child, loomed over us, her features animated. She was wearing eyeliner, lipstick, and blush, as if she were ten years older and on her way to a nightclub, and her hair—blond, with a natural curl—spread like a tent over her shoulders and dangled all the way down to the small of her back. "What are you saying?" I demanded. "And why are you speaking French?"

"Because I can. My IQ is 162 and I can run the hundred meters in 9.58 seconds."

"Wonderful," I said, exchanging a look with Allison. "Terrific. Really. But what are you doing here, what do you want?"

"Your mother!" the birds cried. "*Up yours!*"

The girl shifted from one foot to the other, suddenly looking awkward, like the child she was. "I just wanted to please, *please* beg you not to report Ruby to Animal Control, because my father says they'll come and put her down. She's a good dog, she really is, and she never did anything like this before. It was just a—"

"Freak occurrence?" I said.

"Right," she said. "An anomaly. An accident."

Allison's jaw tightened. The dog looked tranquilly up at us out of its pink eyes, as if none of this were its concern. A bugless breeze rustled the trees along the street. "And what am I supposed to say?" Allison put in. "How am I supposed to feel? What do you want, forgiveness?" She gave the girl a fierce look. "You love your dog?" The girl nodded.

"Well, I love—*loved*—Shushawna, too." She choked up. "More than anything in the world."

We all took a minute to gaze down on the carcass, and then the girl lifted her eyes. "My father says we'll pay all damages. Here," she said, digging into her purse and producing a pair of business cards, one of which she handed to me and the other to Allison. "Any medical treatment you may need, we'll take care of, one hundred per cent," she assured me, eyeing my arm doubtfully before turning to Allison. "And replace your pet, too, if you want, *madame*. It was a micropig, right, from Recombicorp?"

It was a painful moment. I could feel for Allison and for the girl, too, though Connie and I didn't have any pets, not even one of the new hypoallergenic breeds. There was a larger sadness at play here, the sadness of attachment and loss and the way the world wrecks its changes whether we're ready for them or not. We would have got through the moment, I think, coming to some sort of understanding—Allison wasn't vindictive, and I wasn't about to raise a fuss—but that same breeze swept across the lawn to flip back the edge of the T-shirt and expose the eyeless head of the pig, and that was all it took. Allison let out a gasp, and the dog—that crimson freak—jerked the leash out of the girl's hand and went right for it.

When Connie came home, I was in the kitchen mixing a drink. The front door slammed. (Connie was always in a hurry, no wasted motion, and though I'd asked her a hundred times not to slam the door she was constitutionally incapable of taking the extra two seconds to ease it shut.) An instant later, her briefcase slapped down on the hallway table with the force of a thunderclap, her heels drilled the parquet floor—*tat-tat-tat-tat*—and then she was there in the kitchen, saying, "Make me one, too, would you, honey? Or no: wine. Do we have any wine?"

I didn't ask her how her day had gone—all her days were the same, pedal to the metal, one *situation* after another, all of which she dealt with like a five-star general driving the enemy into the sea. I didn't give her a hug or blow her a kiss, either. We weren't that sort of couple—to her mind (and mine, too, to be honest), it would have been just more wasted motion. Wordlessly, I poured her a glass of the Sancerre she liked and handed it to her.

"Allison's pet pig was killed today," I said. "Right out on our

front lawn. By one of those transgenic pit bulls, one of the crimson ones they're always pushing on TV?"

Her eyebrows lifted. She swirled the wine in her glass, took a sip. "And I got bit," I added, holding up my arm, where a deep-purple bruise had wrapped itself around the skin just below the elbow.

What she said next didn't follow, but then we often talked in non sequiturs, she conducting a kind of call-and-response conversation in her head and I in mine, the responses never quite matching up. She didn't comment on my injury or the dog or Allison or the turmoil I'd gone through. She just set her glass down on the counter, patted her lips where the wine had moistened them, and said, "I want a baby."

I suppose I should back up here a moment to give you an idea of where this was coming from. We'd been married twelve years now, and we'd agreed that at some point we'd like to start a family, but we kept putting it off for one reason or another—our careers, finances, fear of the way a child would impact our lifestyle, the usual kind of thing. But with a twist. What sort of child—that was the question. Previous generations had only to fret over whether the expectant mother would bear a boy or a girl or if the child would inherit Aunt Bethany's nose or Uncle Yuri's unibrow, but that wasn't the case anymore, not since CRISPR gene-editing technology had hit the ground running twenty years back. Now not only could you choose the sex of the child at conception; you could choose its other features, too, as if having a child were like going to the car dealership and picking which options to add onto the basic model. The sole function of sex these days was recreational; babies were conceived in the laboratory. That was the way it was and that was the way it would be, until, as a species, we evolved into something else. The result was a nation—a world—of children like the tall girl with the bright-red dog.

To my way of thinking, this was intrusive and unnatural, but to Connie's it was a no-brainer. "Are you out of your mind?" she'd say. "You really want your kid—*our* kid—to be the bonehead of the class? Or what, take career training, cosmetology, *auto mechanics*, for Christ's sake?"

Now, tipping back her glass and downing the wine in a single belligerent gulp, she announced, "I'm thirty-eight years old and I'm putting my foot down. I've made an appointment at GenLab

for ten a.m. Thursday. Either you come with me"—she was glaring at me now—"or I swear I'm going to go out and get a sperm donor."

Nobody likes an ultimatum. Especially when you're talking about a major life-changing event, the kind of thing *both* people involved have to enter into in absolute harmony. It didn't go well. She thought she could bully me as if I were one of her underlings at work; I thought she couldn't. She thought she'd had the final word on the subject; I thought different. I said some things I wound up regretting later, snatched up my drink, and slammed through the kitchen door and out into the backyard, where for once no birds were cursing from the trees and even the bees seemed muted as they went about their business. If it weren't for that silence, I never would have heard the soft heartsick keening of Allison working through the stations of her grief. The sound was low and intermittent, a stunted release of air followed by a sodden gargling that might have been the wheeze and rattle of the sprinklers starting up, and it took me a minute to realize what it was. In the instant, I forgot all about what had just transpired in my own kitchen and thought of Allison, struck all over again by the intensity of her emotion.

We'd managed to get the dog off the carcass, all three of us shouting at once while the girl grabbed for the leash and I delivered two or three sharp kicks to the animal's hindquarters, but Allison's dead pig was none the better for it. The girl, red-faced and embarrassed despite her IQ and whatever other attributes she might have possessed, slouched across the lawn and down the street, the dog mincing beside her, while I offered to do the only sensible thing and bury what was left of the remains. I dug a hole out back of Allison's potting shed, Allison read a passage I vaguely remembered from school ("The stars are not wanted now: put out every one; / Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun"), I held her in my arms for the second time that day, then filled the hole and went home to make my drink and have Connie slam the front door and lay her demands on me.

Now, as if I were being tugged on invisible wires, I moved toward the low hedge that separated our properties and stepped across it. Allison was hunched over the picnic table on her patio. She was still dressed in the taupe blouse and black skirt she'd worn

to work, and she had her head down, her scarf bunched under one cheek, and that got to me in a way I can't explain, so that before I knew what I was doing I'd fallen down a long dark tunnel and found myself consoling her in a way that seemed—how can I put this?—so very *natural* at the time.

It was dark when I got home. Connie was sitting on the couch in the living room, watching TV with the sound muted. "Hi," I said, feeling sheepish, feeling guilty (I'd never strayed before and didn't know why I'd done it now, except that I'd been so furious with my wife and so strangely moved by Allison in her grief, though I know that's no excuse), but trying, like all amateurs, to act as if nothing were out of the ordinary. Connie looked up. I couldn't read her face, but I thought, at least by the flickering light of the TV, that she looked softer, contrite even, as if she'd reconsidered her position, or at least the way she'd laid it on me.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I was upset, okay? I just went for a walk. To clear my head."

She had nothing to say to this.

"You eat yet?" I asked, to change the subject.

She shook her head.

"Me, either," I said, feeling the weight lift, as if ritual could get us through this. "You want to go out?"

"No, I don't want to go out," she said. "I want a baby."

And what did I say, from the shallow grave of my guilt, which was no deeper than the layer of earth I'd flung over the shrunken and lacerated corpse of Allison's pet? I said, "Okay, we'll talk about it."

"Talk about it? The appointment is Thursday, ten a.m. That's non-negotiable."

She was right—it was time to start a family—and she was right, too, about cosmetology and auto mechanics. What responsible parent wouldn't want the best for his child, whether that meant a stable home, top-flight nutrition, and the best private-school education money could buy, or tweaking the chromosomes in a test tube in a lab somewhere? Understand me: I was under duress. I could smell Allison on me still. I could smell my own fear. I didn't want to lose my wife—I loved her. I was used to her. She was the only woman I'd known these past twelve years and more, my *familiar*. And there she was, poised on the edge of the couch,

watching me, her will like some miasma seeping in under the door and through the cracks around the windows until the room was choked with it. "Okay," I said.

Which is not to say that I gave in without a fight. The next day—Wednesday—I had to go into the office and endure the usual banalities of my coworkers till I wanted to beat the walls of my cubicle in frustration, but on the way home I stopped at a pet store and picked up an eight-week-old dogcat. (People still aren't quite sure what to call the young, even now, fifteen years after they were first created. Kitpups? Pupkits? The sign in the window read simply **BABY DOGCATS ON SPECIAL**.) I chose a squirming little furball with a doggish face and tabby stripes and brought it home as a surprise for Connie, hoping it would distract her long enough for her to reevaluate the decision she was committing us to.

I tucked the thing inside my shirt for the drive home, since the minute the girl behind the counter put it in its cardboard carrier it began alternately mewling and yipping in a tragic way, and it nestled there against my chest, warm and content, until I'd parked the car and gone up the steps and into the house. Connie was already home, moving briskly about the kitchen. There were flow-ers on the table next to an ice bucket with the neck of a bottle of *Veuve Clicquot* protruding from it, and the room was redolent of the scent of my favorite meal—pipérade, Basque style, topped with poached eggs—and I realized that she must have made a special stop at *Maison Claude* on her way home. This was a celebration and no two ways about it. In the morning, we would procreate—or take our first steps in that direction, which on my part would involve producing a sperm sample under duress (unlike, I couldn't help thinking, the way it had been with Allison).

We didn't hug. We didn't kiss. I just said "Hey," and she said "Hey" back. "Smells great," I said, trying to gauge her expression as we both hovered over the table.

"Perfect timing," she said, leaning in to adjust the napkin beside her plate, though it was already precisely aligned. "I got there the minute they took it out of the oven. Claude himself brought it out to me—along with a fresh loaf of that crusty sourdough you like. Just baked this morning."

I was grinning at her. "Great," I said. "Really great."

Into the silence that followed—neither of us was ready yet to address the issue hanging over us—I said, “I’ve got a surprise for you.”

“How sweet. What is it?”

With a magician’s flourish, I whipped the new pet from the folds of my shirt and held it out triumphantly for her. Unfortunately, I startled the thing in the process, and it reacted by digging its claws into my wrist, letting out a string of rapid-fire barks, and dropping a glistening turd on the tiles of the kitchen floor. “For you,” I said.

Her face fell. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You really think I’m that easy to buy off?” She made no effort to take the thing from me—in fact, she clenched her hands behind her. “Take it back where you got it.”

The pupkit had softened now, retracting its claws and settling into the crook of my arm as if it recognized me, as if in the process of selecting it and secreting it in my shirt I’d imparted something essential to it—love, that is—and it was content to exist in this new world on a new basis altogether. “It’s purring,” I said.

“What do you want me to say—hallelujah? The thing’s a freak, you’re always saying so yourself every time one of those stupid commercials comes on—”

“No more a freak than that girl with the dog,” I said.

“What girl? What are you talking about?”

“The one with the dog that bit me. She must have been six-four. She had an IQ of 162. And still she let her dog out, and still it bit me.”

“What are you saying? You’re not trying to back out on me, are you? We had a deal, Roy, and you know how I feel about people who renege on a deal—”

“Okay, okay, calm down. All I’m saying is maybe we ought to have a kind of trial or something before we—I mean, we’ve never even had a pet.”

“A pet is not a child, Roy.”

“No,” I said, “that’s not what I meant. It was just, I’m just—” The crowparrots started up then with one of their raucous dinner-time chants, squawking so piercingly you could hear them even with the windows shut—“*Big Mac, Big Mac*,” they called. “*Fries!*”—and I lost my train of thought.

“Are we going to eat?” Connie said in a fragile voice, tearing up.

“Because I went out of my way. Because I wanted this night to be special, okay?”

So now we did hug, though the pupkit got between us, and, coward that I am, I told her everything was going to be all right. Later, after she’d gone to bed, I took the pupkit in my arms, went next door, and rang the bell. Allison answered in her nightgown, a smile creeping across her lips. “Here,” I said, handing her the animal. “I got this for you.”

Fast-forward seven and a half months. I am living in a house with a pregnant woman next door to a house in which there is another pregnant woman. Connie seems to find this amusing, never suspecting the truth of the matter. We’ll glance up from the porch and see Allison emerging heavily from her car with an armload of groceries, and Connie will say things like “I hope she doesn’t have to pee every five minutes the way I do” and “She won’t say who the father is—I just hope it’s not that a-hole from Animal Control, what was his name?”

This is problematic on a number of levels. I play dumb, of course—what else can I do? “Maybe she went to GenLab,” I say.

“Her? You’re kidding me, right? I mean, look at that string of jerks she keeps dating. If you want to know the truth, she’s lower-class, Roy, and I’m sorry to have to say it—”

I’m not about to argue the point. The fact is I tried everything I could to talk Allison out of going through with this—finally, to my shame, falling back on the same argument about the whole *Übermensch-Untermensch* dynamic that Connie used on me—but Allison merely gave me a bitter smile and said, “I trust your genes, Roy. You don’t have to be involved. I just want to do this, that’s all. For myself. And for nature. You believe in nature, don’t you?”

*You don’t have to be involved.* But I *was* involved, though we’d had sex only the one time (or two, actually, counting the night I brought her the pupkit), and if she had a boy and he looked like me and grew up right next door playing with our daughter, how involved would that be?

So there comes a day, sometime during that eighth month, a Tuesday, when I’m working at home and Connie’s at the office, and I’m so focused on the problem at hand that I keep putting off my bathroom break until the morning’s nearly gone. That’s

the way it always is when I'm deeply engaged with a problem, a kind of mind-body separation, but finally the body's needs prevail and I push myself up from my desk to go down the hall to the bathroom. I'm standing there, in mid-flow, when I become aware of the sound of a dog barking on the front lawn and I shift my torso ever so slightly so that I can glance out the window and see what the ruckus is all about. It's the red dog, the Cherry Pit that set all this in motion, and it's tearing around on my hybrid lawn, chasing something. My first reaction is anger—anger at the tall girl and her fixer father and all the other idiots of the world—but by the time I get down the stairs and out the front door the anger dissipates, because I see that the dog isn't there to kill anything but to play, and that what it's chasing is being chased willingly: Allison's dogcat, now a rangy adolescent and perhaps a third the size of the dog.

For all my fretting over the lawn, I have to say that in that moment, with the light making a cathedral of the street trees and the neighborhood suspended in the grip of a lazy, warm autumn afternoon, I find something wonderfully liberating in the play of those two animals, the dogcat especially. Allison named him Tiger because of his coloration—dark feral stripes against a kind of Pomeranian orange—and he lives up to his name, absolutely fearless and with an athleticism and elasticity that combines the best of both species that went into making him. He runs rings around the pit bull, actually, feinting one way, dodging the next, racing up the trunk of a tree and out onto a branch before leaping to the next tree and springing back down to charge, doglike, across the yard. "Go, Tiger!" I call out. "Good boy. Go get him!"

That's when I become aware of Allison, in a pair of maternity shorts and an enormous top, crossing from her front lawn to ours. She's put on a lot of weight (but not as much as Connie, because we opted for a big baby, in the eleven-pound range, wanting it—her—to have that advantage right from the start). I haven't spoken with Allison much these past months, but I still have feelings for her, of course—beyond resentment, that is. So I lift a hand and wave and she waves back and I watch her come barefoot through the glowing grass while the animals frolic around her.

I'm down off the porch now, and I can't help but smile at the sight of her. She comes up to me, moving with a kind of clumsy grace, if that makes any sense, and I want to take her in my arms

but can't really do that, not under these conditions, so I take both her hands and peck a neighborly kiss to her cheek. For a minute, neither of us says anything, then, shading her eyes with the flat of one hand to better see the animals at play, she says, "Pretty cute, huh?"

I nod.

"You see how Tiger's grown?"

"Yes, of course, I've been watching him all along . . . Is that as big as he's going to get?"

The sun catches her eyes, which are a shade of plain everyday brown. "Nobody's sure, but the vet thinks he won't get much bigger. Maybe a pound or two."

"And you?" I venture. "How are you feeling?"

"Never better. You're going to be seeing more of me—don't look scared, that's not what I mean, just I'm taking my maternity leave, though I'm not due for, like, six weeks." Both her hands, pretty hands, shapely, come to rest on the bulge beneath her oversized blouse. "They're really being nice about it at work."

Connie's not planning on taking off till the minute her water breaks, because that's the way Connie is, and I want to tell Allison that by way of contrast, just to say something, but I notice that she's looking over my shoulder and I turn my head to see the tall girl coming up the walk, leash in hand. "Sorry," the girl calls out. "She got loose again. Sorry, sorry."

I don't know what it is, but I'm feeling generous, expansive. "No problem," I call out. "She's just having a little fun."

That's when Connie's car slashes into the driveway, going too fast, and all I can think is she's going to hit one of the animals, but she brakes at the last minute and they flow like water around the tires to chase back across the lawn again. It's hard to gauge the look on my wife's face as she swings open the car door, pushes herself laboriously from behind the wheel, then starts up the walk as if she hasn't seen us. Just as she reaches the front steps, she swivels around. I can see she's considering whether it's worth the effort to come and greet our neighbor and get a closer look at the tall girl who hovers behind us like the avatar she is, but she decides against it. She just stops a moment, staring, and though she's thirty feet away I can see a kind of recognition settle into her features, and it has to do with the way Allison is standing there beside me, as if for a portrait or an illustration in a book on family planning, the



XY chromosomes and the XX. It's just a moment, and I can't say for certain, but her face goes rigid and she turns her back on us, mounts the steps, and slams the door behind her.

When the CRISPR technology first came to light, governments and scientists everywhere assured the public that it would be employed only selectively, to fight disease and to rectify congenital deformities, editing out the mutated BRCA1 gene that predisposes women to breast cancer, for instance, or eliminating the ability of the *Anopheles* mosquito to carry the parasite that transmits malaria. Who could argue with that? Genome-editing kits ("Knock Out Any Gene!") were sold to home hobbyists, who could create their own anomalous forms of yeast and bacteria in their kitchens, and it was revolutionary—and, beyond that, fun. Fun to tinker. Fun to create. The pet and meat industries gave us rainbow-colored aquarium fish, seahorses that incorporated gold dust in their cells, rabbits that glowed green under a black light, the beefed-up supercow, the micropig, the dogcat, and all the rest. The Chinese were the first to renounce any sort of regulatory control and upgrade the human genome, and, as if they weren't brilliant enough already, they became still more brilliant as the first edited children began to appear, and of course we had to keep up . . .

In a room at GenLab, Connie and I were presented with an exhaustive menu of just how our chromosomes could be made to match up. We chose to have a daughter. We selected emerald eyes for her—not iridescent, not freakishly bright, but enhanced for color so that she could grow up wearing mint, olive, kelly green, and let her eyes talk for her. We chose height, too, as just about everybody does. And musical ability—we both love music. Intellect, of course. And finer features, like a subtly cleft chin and breasts that were not too big but not as small as Connie's, either. It was a menu, and we placed an order.

The tall girl is right beside us now, smiling like the heroine of a Norse saga, her eyes sweeping over us like searchlights. She looks to Allison, takes in her condition. "Boy or girl?" she asks.

The softest smile plays over Allison's lips. She ducks her head, shrugs.

The girl—the genius—looks confused for a moment. "But, but," she stammers, "how can that be? You don't mean you—?"

But before Allison can answer, a crowparrot sweeps out of the nearest tree, winging low to screech "*Fuck you!*" in our faces, and

the smallest miracle occurs. Tiger, as casual in his own skin as anything there is or ever was, erupts from the ground in a rocketing whirl of fur to catch the thing in his jaws. As quick as that, it's over, and the feathers, the prettiest feathers you'll ever see, lift and dance and float away on the breeze.