



NEW LETTERS

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Janet Burroway • Carl Dennis • Marilyn Hacker
Albert Goldbarth • Trish Reeves • Gerald Stern
George Kalamaras • Diane Glancy



New Letters

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Primates

DONNA GORDON

It's the opening day of the new rain forest exhibit at the Franklin Park Zoo in Boston, and Nikki, the thirteen-year-old daughter of my fiancé, Brian, leans as far as she can against the Plexiglas wall, exhaling cold air in circular bursts. The gorilla in the simulated rain forest has warm brown eyes the color of melted chocolate. Green ferns jut around her face, framing it like a spiky flower. Her eyes shift thoughtfully from side to side.

Nikki stares, with the empathy of a child, as if trying to absorb the gorilla's gestures into her face. Finally, Nikki draws back and lets her head sink into her shoulders. "I wish I knew what she was trying to say." Nikki turns to me, eyebrows knitted together.

Brian and I are spending the weekend with Nikki because her mother, Audrey, an expert on Cinquecento painting, was unexpectedly called to Florence to help authenticate some fragments of drawings suspected to have been done by Raphael. There is speculation, however, principally visible in the treatment of the hands, that they were not by him after all, but by a teenage boy, an apprentice to another master draughtsman.

Nikki is thirteen going on twenty-five. Blond and slim in her nymphet prime, she is filled with disdain for most things, especially adults and food. In the Bird House amid the tuxedoed penguins and orange-beaked toucans, she complained about the smell of naphthalene. Outside, the water at the fountain is too warm. She is watching her weight, and will only eat soup and salad and popcorn.

Moisture is forming inside the big glass picture window that seals the gorilla's man-made atmosphere, complete with artificial sky and sun. The whole rain forest environment is controlled by a series of machines that function like heart and lungs. The blue slate wall outside is already scribbled with caveman graffiti: *hubba hubba*, *ugh*, and *Tarzan was here*. In the distance I see Brian, who has gone to get hot chocolate for all of us, standing beneath a red-and-white striped awning, balancing three white Styrofoam cups in his right hand, while a small, bearded man with fingerless gloves counts out change.

By profession Brian is a commodities trader, a member of that breed of legalized gamblers who risk fortunes every day. He has remarkably good legs for a man. Brian is a purist. He doesn't trade pork bellies or orange juice or grains. He trades for himself: gold and silver, the euro, Deutsche mark, yen, Swiss franc.

The thirst for danger runs in his family. Three months ago in September, when Brian first hired me through a referral from my friend Margo to help decorate his new house in Lincoln, and we were just beginning to get to know each other, he told me this incredible story. How in 1609, his Dutch ancestor on the boat to America overheard the captain say that whoever touched land first would be king—so he chopped off his hand with an axe and threw it to shore. This is the stock that Brian is made of.

Now Nikki turns toward the gorilla and squishes up her face in an ape-like way. The dark beast stares back with a leaden, depressed gaze. Her brown eyes roll slightly, moist and oily as olives.

Nikki leans still farther over the railing, making the signs of the deaf language with her fingers, thumb and forefinger contorted into oval and triangular shapes, gestures she learned in her seventh-grade class for *peace and love*. It strikes me then that the way people behave with animals is the way they secretly want to be treated themselves—with utter calm and indulgence.

“I think we need the Universal Translator,” I say to Nikki. “You know, like on *Star Trek*.” Referring, of course, to the original series still playing in reruns—not the hackneyed version that came afterward, in which everyone’s alien makeup is so transparent you can see where their ordinary human features begin behind the ears.

“That’s right,” Nikki says, looking past me into the creature’s beleaguered face. “Spock was able to speak to sheer energy, invisible blobs. He could figure out alphabets he never heard of.”

The gorilla’s steel-gray fur is matted and glistening. Fine gray hairs form a beard under her chin. She stares out with an unmistakably human look of doom.

“We really come from Africa,” Nikki glares defiantly, pushing a wisp of stray blond hair off her forehead, arching fists against the rail. “Leakey knew that. We’re all black at heart.”

“You might be right,” I say. “Darwin might agree.” At thirteen, she is almost my height. If we were a few years closer in age we might be sisters, heroines side by side with long flowing hair and O-mouthed expressions of surprise in a novel by one of the Brontës. We are in many ways physically alike. Though I am twelve years older, and though we are not identical feature for feature, one might suspect by the look in our faces that we are thinking along the same lines.

Finally, just when Nikki appears to have given up making contact with the gorilla, the animal miraculously responds by intertwining her fingers. It seems finally she understands. *The gorilla’s words are in her eyes.*

“Look,” Nikki shrieks, as the animal gestures to her. “She’s trying to tell me something.”

Now Brian sneaks up behind both of us. “How are my girls?” he says, and we both turn around to face him. Ordinarily, they see one another on Sunday afternoons and Tuesday nights. It seems they share a private code.

When Brian and Audrey got divorced nine years ago, he gave her everything—the house, the jewels, the Civil War relics, including the old musket and gun from the battle of Lexington and Concord. According to Brian, Audrey was a social climber who wanted him to scale the corporate ladder with suction cups. He wanted to go out on his own, which meant taking big chances with the markets, risking the possibility he might lose everything.

After Brian moved out, he was broke for a year and lived in a rooming house in Brighton. Audrey used to bring Nikki to him on Sundays. Nikki was only four and would stand shyly in the doorway looking up at the ceiling, completely unaware of the depth of his decline. “Don’t worry Daddy, it’s all right,” she’d said. “Things will be all right again.” That still gets to him, even now.

Later that year, in April, when Brian went short on gold, he made such an obscenely large fortune that if he were smug and artless he’d consider himself set for life.

After the divorce, Nikki was the only real woman in his life. She watched the girlfriends come and go in waves of Prada and Chanel. As she got older, she counted on the fact that her father’s girlfriends, while beautiful, didn’t have the stamina to keep up. They lasted a year at most. But now after only six months, Brian and I have become engaged, and I think this has proven to be tremendously disappointing to her.

I had gotten the referral from my friend Margot, for whose design firm I’d interned after dropping out of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, where I’d studied

painting for two years, but could no longer justify the cost of tuition. I had student loans, a car payment, and a room in a rooming house overrun by mice. Before going to work for Margot, the only kind of decorating I had done was with colored frosting on a birthday cake. But I soon learned the difference between chintz and toile, and after three years on her payroll was starting to earn a decent paycheck, though the idea of indulging the whims of the rich was foreign and somewhat abhorrent. I had covered the walls of my own apartment in the Back Bay with life-sized posters of the "Venus de Milo" and slept with a mattress on the floor. It was the first winter I'd indulged and bought a new winter coat and snow boots.

Margot, ten years older and far more experienced, was an old friend of Brian's family, and was in over her head with a slew of unfinished McMansions dotting the Northeast corridor. Mostly I worked on small-scale apartments for single men or women on Beacon Hill or in the South End, living on a budget. It wasn't until much later I realized she'd set us up.

That day I pulled up in front of the house on Sandy Pond Road. It was late September. I could see when I turned up the circular drive and saw the magnolias past bloom, and the pond stretched out in the distance, that the house was much too big for a single man. It struck me as art in the abstract, the way a house appears staged in a movie.

I sat there in my Honda Civic with the motor running, not wanting to get out. Then the lights came on, illuminating the foyer windows, and Brian opened the door. He was tall and good looking, the way Wasps who live perfect expensive lives and never run out of money are portrayed in Tourneau watch ads in *The Times*.

I was recovering from a bad case of laryngitis, and even though I had forewarned Brian about this over the phone and tried to reschedule, he had insisted on keeping the

appointment. My voice was strained and raw as we went from room to room and I took inventory on my iPad. He brushed against my shoulder accidentally, trying to get a closer look at a wallpaper catalog open in my hands. Clues are everywhere—in a person's choice of clothes, in the color of their eyes, in their pets. Some clients are willing to take a risk, while others just want matching everything from front door to backyard.

After briefly surveying the grounds, we went back inside and sat opposite one another on the bare oak floor in the empty living room, our legs folded beneath us, as the last of the afternoon light disappeared behind the wall of glass framing the hills. Pretty soon Brian stopped talking, stopped concentrating, as we leafed through sample books of wallpaper and paint. All the time he had had this strange involuntary grin spreading wider across his face that he seemed helpless to control, as if none of this mattered, as if he were seeing something else.

"I think I may have known you in another life," he said finally, searching my face. "Do you believe in that sort of thing?"

"Not really," I said, thinking it was a line.

But two weeks later, by the time the parchment-colored Roman shades were on order along with the Iranian tabriz, we were lovers.

At first Brian and I thought we'd fill the house with furniture and give it that overstuffed look that's pictured in *New England Home*. But night after night, watching the empty rooms slowly fill up with violet, golden light reflected off the water, the more it became obvious that the pond itself was an inhabitant.

The truth is, Brian and I come from dramatically different backgrounds. My mother was a small-town housewife, my father a used car salesman. I had to work after school as a clerk in a sporting goods shop to help my mother pay the bills after he died. Choosing art school instead of college was completely impractical. Though I loved to draw, there

was no way I could trade a good likeness of someone's face or hands for a reliable paycheck.

Brian is Wasp to the core—his bone marrow is probably laced with ivy. Harvard College and Harvard Business School. His father had a seat on the New York Stock Exchange and was briefly a candidate for governor.

Brian didn't tell me about Nikki right away. It was early morning, the light just starting to fill out the corners of the room. I went downstairs and found a note next to the coffee pot: "Be back soon with a special breakfast treat." An hour later, he showed up with Nikki. I was only wearing a robe and felt naked and humiliated.

I wanted to kill him then and there for having kept her a secret. What kind of man would do that? What kind of father? What kind of fiancé, for that matter?

As she stood there in the hallway looking small and dark, and casting an uncertain shadow, I began to understand that he hadn't told her about me either.

"Nice to meet you, Nikki," I said, stunned by the reality of her flesh and blood. "Your father's told me so much about you. I'm glad to meet you finally."

Brian stood leaning against the newly painted ecru wall, looking only slightly guilty. The house had a ghostly feel that time of day, with gray light reflected off the lake—already frozen solid though it was only mid-December.

"I stopped first and got bagels. Want to go for a skate before breakfast?"

Nikki and I just looked at each other. She had come into the light, and I could see she was tall and lean, her eyes pale green, her long blond hair loosely twisted into a braid. She was wearing a scoop-neck shirt that hugged her thin body like a leotard.

"You know I don't eat carbs," she said, directing her eyes toward my stomach. "The last thing I would want is to look like a middle-aged fraulein."

"Nikki," Brian warned. "Play nice. If anything, you and Jess look like sisters."

He was right.

"Dad's always doing stuff like this," Nikki said, coolly, asserting her long-term knowledge of him. "You're not the first. He's had a thousand girlfriends, you know."

"Nikki!" Brian said. "Enough! You two don't mind, do you, if I go take a quick spin across the ice?"

She looked around at the nearly empty living room. "Dad said you've ordered furniture and stuff. I like it better like this. In my mom's house everything's an antique. My mom likes quilts and old things. She says I'm like her divining rod. She points me in the direction at flea markets and antique shows and I find her something good."

"Maybe you can help me with this place," I said. "We'll make it cosier."

"Sure," she said, looking down at her shoes. "But this house is too big for just Dad, don't you think? No offense, but I don't know how long you'll be around."

The late afternoon sky was darkening with amber and violet streaks. Together we moved to the window, where a handful of bare, white birches stood out like a circle of white candles around the jagged ellipse of the pond. We could barely spot Brian edging out onto its mirrored surface. We stood there saying nothing for a few long awkward minutes, somehow frozen but separate, until the sun was completely out of sight.

Later that night, after Brian returned Nikki to her mother's house in Cambridge and Audrey's distinguished new husband, Mylo—a third-generation Cantabridgian with a salt-and-pepper beard and a trust fund—I confronted him.

"How could you not tell me?" I demanded. "What other secrets are you keeping from me?"

I poured myself a glass of wine and sat on the floor in front of the fire in the empty living room. Some of the new

furniture was due to arrive later that week—an extra-long burgundy velvet sofa, two club chairs and a rug imported from India woven entirely from deconstructed saris. There were only the brass beds upstairs, the pots and pans in the kitchen, a set of pewter candlesticks.

Brian put down his scotch on the mantle and used tongs to add a log to the fire. I got the feeling that this was all a joke to him, no more than a puzzle to be solved, like playing the markets. Isn't that what gamblers are good at, playing hide and seek with the truth?

"I should have told you, Jess," Brian said, coming to sit across from me on the floor, "right from the get-go. But I was scared you'd run and I didn't want to risk it. I know it looks bad, but I didn't exactly know how to tell you. Then I figured everything would get sorted out if I just brought her here."

"And have us stand around like idiots?"

"It wasn't my intent. I love you both. Lots of people have blended families these days. C'mon, you can handle it."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not. That's not the only problem. Haven't you noticed how much we look alike? Or are you the kind of father who wants to sleep with his daughter? You've got two of us, an extra, like a baker's dozen or something. And what about Audrey? I haven't met her yet. Are we three versions of the same face?"

He moved closer to try to kiss me, but I put up my hand.

"I wanted to surprise you later, but now I can see I shouldn't wait," he said. "We're going to NYC next weekend. I bought us tickets to the new exhibit of Raphael's drawings opening at the Met."

He strode to his bookcase and pulled out a tome of Raphael's drawings, the book I'd savored since high school and had brought here from my apartment.

"I know how much you love his work, and when I heard about the exhibit in New York, I had to get you in to see it."

I moved closer to the window, feeling the force of freezing temperatures pressed against the glass. The criss-

crossed shape of my arms cast a shadow in the shape of an "x" that traveled the length of the living room floor.

It occurred to me that he was doing with me what he would do with Nikki if she were there: divert from the situation and then try and buy her off. How long had it been since I had been to New York and seen anything? Or spent a night in a hotel and walked down 5th Avenue? These were all unattainable before I met Brian. Despite my reservations, I loved that he knew me and what would make me happy.

"And with Nikki being such a big part of your life, how do you manage to keep things civil with Audrey?" I asked.

"Look, it's all very easy," he said. "We split Christmas and Thanksgiving and every other weekend. Nikki likes being with Mylo's family. They're a bunch of artists and professors. They do things by the book and are boring and conventional."

"She doesn't even want to get to know me," I said. "Do you see the way she glares? I'm not interested in being someone's wicked stepmother."

"Please don't be angry or hurt," Brian said. "Can we give it some time?"

I could bail, I thought. I could run now and avoid a host of other problems. It wasn't his money that mattered, it hardly really registered. It was the feeling I'd had since the day I met him that I was no longer adrift, that I belonged with someone finally, that when he looked at me something cut clear to the bone.

Sometimes, on the weekend, when Brian and I pick up Nikki in front of her mother's understated Cambridge Victorian, she is already waiting on the wooden porch in a wild oversized outfit. Then sometimes she refuses to come out at all, and Brian has to go to the door and persuade her, and she'll put old sweat pants over her pajamas and tie her head with a scarf and sit blindfold in the back of the car making animal noises. Then Brian will grunt and sputter and ignore me until they both start laughing. He is her hero.

The problem is this: after weeks of staring at one another over tables at restaurants and at movies and zoos, it still feels impossible to break the ice. These efforts at friendship are exhausting. Perhaps I try too hard. She is a diplomat and will recite exciting stories of visitors who have come to her private progressive school that day and have taught her 7th-grade class how to throw clay pots or weave rugs or imitate sounds in nature like a Native American.

So far in our efforts to get to know one another, the three of us have been to two Japanese restaurants, one Chinese, and an old European Hungarian bistro for which Nikki was far too young but we smuggled her in anyway. We've been to more than one movie, starring unspeakably good-looking actors disguised as blood-sucking vampires and Nazi spies, portrayed by Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, Justin Timberlake, the Bieber.

We've gone on a shopping spree at Bloomingdale's where Nikki and I both had makeovers at the Lancome counter and saw our newly sophisticated faces projected on a video screen, Brian examining the handiwork with pride.

"How many years apart are you two sisters?" the heavily made-up clerk asked, speculating between layers of purple eye shadow and black mascara.

Nikki's eyes clouded over and she made a fist with one hand.

"She is not my sister. She is a stereotype, a young woman who needs to hitch herself to an older man for security and fortune," she said, before bolting from the store.

The clerk shrugged. "I've seen it all," she said.

Brian looked at me with a combination of irritation and amusement. I had the feeling again that he enjoyed this rivalry.

Today the zoo is neutral territory. Being Saturday, it's filled with families on parade. You can pick out the single fathers by their frightened eyes and the way they hold their

children's hands much too tight. The babies in their crochet pastel jumpsuits ride by in strollers like kings. I can't help but think that these infants somehow know more than we do, that they're somehow in rhythm with the beasts, that they still feed on the same knowledge.

Audrey's mother went to Smith and then Harvard and now teaches at a small state arts college in Massachusetts. Famous painters run in the family, wealthy philanthropists, people who sit on the boards of major museums. I have never met Audrey, but from what I gather she is composed and dresses entirely in Ralph Lauren.

Soon the gorilla appears to have fallen asleep next to some fake-looking large gray rocks, the kind that Superman could demolish with his pinky. We exit the main path and walk slowly out the wrought-iron gate toward the parking lot, past the snorting gray elephants and pituitary giraffes, their soft triangular heads lost in the mossy tops of trees.

We drive west out Route 2 in the fading light, past the rust-colored elms and jaundiced oaks. In late fall, New England begins to ready itself for loss. Already I have moved some of my things into the master bedroom, and I sense that Nikki is not happy about this. She is silent for the first fifteen minutes of highway, slumped in the middle of the back seat as though she is saying to me *I hate you* between her teeth. She opens *The Times* to the travel section, checking the temperature in Florence, going down the column past Brussels and Delhi to see that it is a brusque 55.

"I hope my mother doesn't get abducted by terrorists," she says, shuddering. "Those little Italian men are always driving around in black cars and snatching people off the streets, holding them ransom. I was there once. In Florence, I mean," and her eyes grow animated. "My mother was finishing her research, and we walked all over the city and had *gelato* twice a day. I've already seen Michelangelo's

‘David,’” she confides in a whisper, “the real one, not the copy outside in the plaza near the Uffizi. I touched the David’s foot once when the guard wasn’t looking. It was bigger than my whole arm.”

By now we’ve pulled up in front of the large yellow colonial mansion by two-foot-wide columns and a circular drive. The house itself is a force beyond reason—with its palatial foyer, sunken living room, formal dining room, eight bedrooms, and four baths. Not to mention a maid’s kitchen and separate carriage house.

Brian unloads the car, pops the rear, and I see that Nikki has packed a black overnight bag the size of Houdini’s trunk. She gives me a scathing look and hauls it upstairs to her room and locks herself in. A huge room with twin brass beds and absolutely nothing on the walls. By comparison, her tiny attic room at home hosts her various collectibles: antique hats, her great-grandmother’s old, high-button shoes, a dress mannequin with the near-expressionless face of a colonial rag doll.

It’s Saturday night and Nikki is sleeping over for the next few nights, and I’m making my special mystery pizza from scratch. My hands are pasty, and I am covered with flour up to my elbows, as I knead the dough and it bounces back. Brian has built a fire in the living room, while Nikki sits at the kitchen table studying seventh-grade math problems with dogged intensity, as if she truly believes the world is made up of these invisible shapes and balanced equations. Brian is good with math.

I remove the pizza from the oven—its intoxicating smells of garlic and oregano scent the air—and set it on the table. Nikki refuses to try it. “No thanks,” she says, faking sweetness—and helps herself to a stick of celery from the platter of raw vegetables instead.

“Sure you don’t want anything else, Sweetie?” Brian asks across the counter, gazing affectionately. She reaches

to hug him, one arm stretched long and gorilla-like around his neck. "No thanks, Daddy," she says. "We have dance tryouts this week at school and you know how it is, a leotard shows everything. I don't want to show up wearing a slice of pizza or a hot dog or hamburger."

I look at Brian with lingering doubt, wondering why he's not on her case to eat, wondering if he even knows what anorexia is. And what about Audrey?

Later that night we sit in the pitch-dark living room watching *Rear Window* on cable, while countless white stars illuminate the blackened sky over the lake. It's almost like living with a third person. The water changes constantly and has distinct moods. Brian sits in the middle of the sofa, and Nikki and I sit on either side. Part of my desire to win Nikki over has to do with my depth of feeling for Brian—despite the omission. Since I met him my emotions are no longer my own. I am afraid I will never feel that way again, complete in my bones, shattered in a spectacular way.

During the scary part of the movie, where the murderer Raymond Burr is coming up the stairs to kill Jimmy Stewart, who is trapped in a wheelchair, I am surprised at how fragile Nikki is, how her eyes flash with fear. As the tension heightens, she covers her eyes with her hands.

"I can't look," she yells.

"It's OK, " I say. "In a few minutes it will all be over."

I look over at Brian who winks back, as if to say he's got it all under control. I smile uneasily, weighed down by the undercurrent of what I still haven't been able to explain. How as long as Nikki puts herself between us, the more I feel divided against myself, surprised by the degree of understanding I feel for her, despite her bad behavior. After my father died, my mother shocked me by insisting on her right to fall in love again, and joined a group called Parents Without Partners. Soon our lives were littered with the Fred Flintstones and Mr. Magoos of the unnatural world. I will

never forget the sense of theft I felt, watching my mother being stolen right out from under me, by men who didn't seem to have the right to be part of our lives, or know the slightest thing about her.

Later, after Nikki has silently gone up to bed, and Brian and I lie naked in the dark watching the ancient medallion of moon scrape the wooden beams of the ceiling, I whisper to him that though I am in love with him, I am afraid that Nikki and I will never be friends. She will never break.

"She's just a kid," Brian said, arm stretched beneath the weight of my neck and shoulders. "All kids are ready to love, just be yourself; be patient a little longer."

"That's not it," I say. "She's dead set against me. You've lived a charmed life. You have no idea what it's like to watch your mother or father find another partner and go about life like it's business as usual. Even if Audrey already has Mylo. A kind of loneliness sets in. I can't explain."

The next morning, Sunday, when Nikki comes downstairs, Brian has already gone out for a run. I'm in the kitchen alone in jeans and a white T-shirt making blueberry pancakes and coffee. I want to tell her to eat something. I want to tell her that we are more alike than different. I want to tell her *I know*.

She stands in the doorway in black leggings and a long, oversized maroon sweatshirt that falls clumsily off one shoulder. The thin bones of her wrists protrude, and her pale eyes are drawn up dramatically at the edges with kohl black liner, as though she's trying on a role. She walks into the kitchen and suddenly stops. A deadness floods her gaze for a few long seconds. Then she raises her left hand above her head, and pirouettes toward me in a fleeting whirl, moving so quickly I'm afraid she won't stop.

"That looks pretty professional," I say, stepping aside at the last second, knowing this performance is rooted in defiance. "Thanks," she says, and wordlessly walks to the coffee pot, sniffs it for a second, then helps herself to a cup.

A little spills on the counter and she looks backward across her shoulder to see if I'm watching as she wipes it up with a sponge. If Audrey were here I'm sure that the coffee would be replaced by milk. Nikki sips it slowly at the kitchen counter. A few minutes later, when she hears Brian coming through the front door and depositing his keys on the hall table, she gets up and stashes it furtively in the sink.

"How's everyone doing?" he says, coming into the kitchen a little out of breath, cheeks scarred red from pushing against the wind. But he soon senses the all-too-familiar divide.

"Just waking up," I say, reaching to hand him a cup of coffee, giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Thinking about a plan," I add. "Seeing as we've got the whole day together."

"How about you, kiddo?" Brian asks Nikki. "Got any ideas?"

"Whatever you two want is fine," she says. "You two go ahead. I may stay in and do my homework."

Brian and I eat breakfast while Nikki keeps her nose in a book. Nothing moves. In the sunroom in the corner closest to the window, she sits on the sofa growing smaller and smaller, immersed in words. Dark clouds crowd the sky over the lake in gray shades the color of the Confederacy. By the time I've finished reading the paper and have had a second cup of coffee, the afternoon still looms in front of us, vacant and unavoidable.

For a while, after I had started wetting my feet in the design trade—but before I met Brian—I used to go on Sunday afternoons to the Venetian courtyard of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum along the Fenway and sketch the gardens. Deep blue-violet hydrangeas criss-crossed with silver Artemesia, and nearby red and yellow Guzmanias—its vase-shaped rosettes engineered to store water. Marble and bronze statues of Persephone and Odysseus. Time gave way to feeling and I was accountable to no one. Now I look at the two of them and remembered that state of existence

without judgment. If I mattered to someone else, did that mean I mattered to myself? Was mattering the same as being in love?

Despite the engagement ring, despite the sex, the house with the circular drive—all of it—the way he touches me now will never be the same. I look at Brian and see something different than what I saw before. I don't think it occurs to him.

"Why don't we take a walk around the lake," Brian suggests, pushing his chair back from the table where he's been studying the financial pages. "Something that will get us up and out of the house. Pretty soon these trees will be completely bare," he says, gesturing out the window with a note of sadness. "One more week and it'll all be over."

"Why not," I say. "I'm game for a walk. Nikki?"

"We can be like Thoreau," Brian continues, reaching for his coat. "He camped out on this exact same spot on Sandy Pond one hundred years ago before moving down the road to Walden. Maybe we'll discover something he left behind," he says trying to pique Nikki's curiosity. "Like a fossil or a skull."

Nikki shrugs and closes her book, leaving *Lord of the Flies* behind. Her eyes glaze over and her shoulders narrow, resembling for a moment yesterday's gorilla in the zoo, as she steps into her boots and puts on her parka.

We head out the back door across the shorn field dried to the color of hay, taking the path to the right single file. The trees are brown and skeletal, without a soul in sight. Brian is first to lead, picking his way carefully around the stone border of the lake. The ground is frozen beneath our feet, leaving only faint imprints, as though we are weightless, as though we are invisible. Above us, squirrels move in and out of trees, warning the others in the quiet that we are coming.

From time to time one of us stoops to show each other something marred by predators—the frail skeleton of a bat,

calcified remains of a bird, leaf patterns imprinted in rock. Vines hang down in places that block our path and we brush them aside.

Nikki walks between us, but her heavy boots slow her down. After we have hiked nearly three-quarters of a mile around, the sky has begun to lose light, and Brian stoops to re-lace his boot. Nikki chooses this moment to run on ahead, declaring she wants to lead.

"Wait," he calls, "let's stay together . . ."

She has run off so fast that we have to hurry to keep up. Soon we've lost sight of her.

"Now what?" I say to Brian, who is worried but not worried.

"Nikki has walked this trail umpteen times," he says, his palms empty. "The whole thing is barely three miles around. She's not going to get lost, trust me."

"Are you sure?" I ask, surprised by my growing anger. "Did it ever occur to you how much she must hate us? Hate me? That maybe it's not cool to have your daughter see you've picked a girlfriend who's so much like her? And to have your girlfriend see how much she resembles your daughter? What message does that send? Do you think either of us feels loved?"

"Now wait a minute," he starts off. "You're overreacting. You don't need to be her mother and you don't need to be her friend. Can't you just try a little harder to make it work?"

"For who?" I say. "For you? You waited a month to tell me you were a father! You have no right to ask anything. But I still care enough about Nikki to go and look for her. She's probably so upset she's freezing somewhere."

"I know my daughter better than anyone," he says. "I'm sure she's OK somewhere, just pretending."

We walk together in silence toward the direction she has gone off in. After five minutes, it seems Nikki doesn't want to be found. "Let's split up," I say. "You go that way and I'll continue here. Let's synchronize watches and meet back in ten minutes."

I pick my way among the speckled roots, following the scent of running water, past tangled branches frozen solid in ice. When I can no longer see the top of Brian's red wool hat bobbing like a flare between us, I stop walking and stand still long enough to catch my breath, then look up to see a few new flakes of snow begin to falter. I feel light-headed—coming apart—as if I've traded something I couldn't understand for coming to know how I really feel.

I continue walking, stoop to test the earth beneath my boot where it springs back—damp, alive. When I look up again, I see a snarled cluster of branches directly ahead that appears to have been broken unnaturally by human hands.

I pry them apart, come upon a tunnel of narrow birches somehow dry, preserved, protected by a layer of evergreens feathered with snow. In the distance I can make out a human shape. It's Nikki crouched under a tangle of brush stripped clean of leaves. She turns, startled by the sound, and I see she's crying.

I move to put my arm around her shoulder tentatively, and am surprised at how thin it is. She flinches, turns toward me, her eyes wild.

"Look, Nikki," I say, seizing her by the shoulders. "There's something I want you to know. I'll never mean half as much to your father as you do. I'll never be as pretty, or as wise, or as talented. I'll never be . . . you . . ."

"But it's you he loves," she shouts. "He *chose* you. I know he did."

"Don't be so sure," I start to say, wishing I could reassure her. "I have to choose him back. I don't even know if that's what I want to happen. He's pretty mixed up as far as I can tell."

"Are you leaving, too . . ." she begins. But before I can answer, we're interrupted by the crash of breaking branches scraping the air behind us, as Brian staggers into the clearing, his head and shoulders weighted down by a layer of wet leaves the texture of fur.

"Finally," he says. "Finally, I found you two, I've been looking all over! And here you are having a tea party in the woods."

Nikki and I say nothing for a second, amazed at how clueless he is. Then we look at each other and burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Brian asks.

"Dad," Nikki says, "I'll give you a hint. It looks like you're wearing a wig. A bad one."

"Jeez," he says, pulling the stray leaves loose. "Thanks a lot. C'mon. It's getting late. If we're lucky, by the time we make it back to the house the ice will be perfect."

One thing the three of us have in common is we love to skate. The pond itself is a mystery. Once, Brian and I found pure white sand where you'd least expect it, buried under leaves, a circle of it, like a cove. Pure white sand soft as talcum.

It's near dusk when we kneel at the pond's frozen edge to pull on our skates. The sky is darkening overhead, violet and umber with a heart of steel, and Nikki and I have still not made peace.

We stand on the shore adjusting our laces, watching the waning gibbous moon begin its ascent, arcing steeply over the darkened hills. At the last minute, when the three of us are poised to begin to sweep across the ice, Brian stops short, holds up his bare hands.

"You two go ahead," he calls, looking back over his shoulder. "I forgot my gloves."

Nikki starts first, then I follow. We skate out onto the open ellipse of the pond, approaching one another from opposite ends. She looks at me for a second, awkwardly, then nods and moves ahead, one black leg skidding over the ice like a fragile heron, her face flushed, arms wide. I skate toward her, steadily placing one foot after the next, steadily moving toward her against the wind. When we are

within inches of one another, I reach for her hand and she meets me halfway, positioning her arms like a leading man, and we move awkwardly together in a tiny circle.

Her dark wool cap has sunk low over her forehead, and her sharp green eyes blur and lose focus a little as we momentarily glide across the ice hand-in-hand. I don't know if she is crying or if the cold has stung her eyes. For a quick second, I look back toward shore where Brian is standing alone on the frozen lawn, watching.