MANKIND

&

OTHER STORIES

OF WOMEN
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MINA

Mina, an aspiring writer, asked Lenore to look at her work. An imposition, to be sure. Who has time to read novels these days, never mind a work-in-progress? Especially if the prospective reader is busy writing—or not writing—her own.

The request caught Lenore in a weak moment. She was out on the town with her book club, a speckled group of women her age (thirtyish) with careers in progress, including a couple of new mothers whose reading time was minimal. Their savage demolition of a hefty prizewinner cut right through the clouds of panic and jealousy that hang over the writing life. Seeing how other people treat literary success lifted her spirits, put her in a generous mood toward hopeful unknowns—like the waitress, Mina, who “couldn’t help but overhear…” and had also read the blockbuster, without pleasure.

Moreover, Mina had read Lenore’s latest short story on a popular literary blog. The other women, who had not read it, were impressed, although not as impressed as Lenore. In the space of a few minutes, Mina uncorked their second bottle of Chardonnay, poured a round, extracted
a promise from Lenore to take a look at her work, and emailed the manuscript from her phone.

Weeks passed. After several updates and whimsical 😊 reminders dropped into her inbox, Lenore forced herself to open the most recent attachment (revised since their chance encounter), skimmed the first few pages and fired off a comment: the beginning began too late, unless the style was experimental, in which case it was outside her field of expertise.

Mina waited twenty-four hours before writing back. She began by apologizing for the bother and thanked Lenore for taking the time to offer incredibly helpful feedback, which would be put to good use immediately.

Lenore felt terrible. How selfish and arrogant to have brushed off an unpublished writer like that. She read the rest of the manuscript and invited Mina to lunch.

They met at café within walking distance of Lenore’s Mile End apartment, which, though not rated for its menu, had a fireplace. While they waited for salads, Lenore made a few helpful comments about the manuscript, which Mina accepted gratefully, without encouraging discussion. After that, they talked about everything but writing. How Lenore had found her apartment, how Mina’s parents had come to Montreal from India, music, movies, a forthcoming literary festival, the celebrated authors who’d been invited, the local names who had not. By the end of lunch, Lenore wondered if she should invite Mina to be part of the book club, but did not act on the idea immediately.

It was fall, the literary season, a busy round of book launches and readings. Lenore had a habit of arriving late and leaving early. Mina spotted the pattern and took to waiting by the door. After several missed attempts, she finally made eye contact and they ended up going for drinks.

Lenore talked a lot about the film scene. At the time, she was friends with the legendary bad boy director, George, whose first feature had created a stir at the Sundance Festival. George had an eye for emerging talent. He invited potential stars to screen tests and had a stack of talent on file. He and Lenore had met at university, in a creative elective called Elements of Style. She’d worked on the script of his breakthrough film. It was clear she and George spent a lot of time together. Mina paid close attention, noticing how carefully Lenore skirted around the personal, as if she had something to hide.

There was no question about it. Lenore stood out among the many attractive women in George’s entourage. She was tall and slim with long blonde hair and unusually green eyes. In repose, her fragile features exuded a complicated beauty. Her smile was crisp. She self-identified as a writer, something Mina respected deeply. At one point, she was tempted to say the script was the best part of the film, but feared the judgement might reflect badly on George and jeopardise her budding friendship with Lenore, or at least require explanation. She did not want to divert conversation away from more interesting subjects, such as what it was like to be in a famous film director’s orbit.

Mina had strong opinions on the subject of fame. She had come to believe it was the ultimate goal of creativity in the 21st century, an achievement you could grasp. Take
thinking: “Because mental notes aren’t written down. They’re thoughts.”

He made his right hand into the shape of a gun, pointed two fingers at his temple and pretended to fire. Then he wrapped his arm around her slender shoulders and steered her toward the bar. In the long conversation that followed, he invited her to take a screen test for his up-coming movie, which had a role for an Indian beauty. He was developing a storyline around an immigrant triangle: a Hindu, a Muslim and an atheist.

Impulsively, Mina finished his sentence. “... walked into a bar ...”

He looked puzzled, continued talking about the project.

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Mina felt terrible about sleeping with George, although not immediately. While she was making out with him that night, she thought of Lenore. There was a large black and white photo of them in the bathroom of his studio, arms wrapped around each other, a beach in the background. He didn’t seem like Lenore’s type. He was rough, quick. He laughed a lot, before and after. He unabashedly smoked cigarettes, a habit that in their circles was seen as a form of weakness, to be conducted shamefully, on balconies or in toilets.

It was not until the next day that anxiety set in. She was sure Lenore would find out about the skirmish and take revenge by re-reading and commenting negatively on every line of her work-in-progress. This would put her
off writing, forcing her to admit that waitressing was her true profession, thereby destroying her life. There was a second reason for feeling bad about sleeping with George right after the party. Now that they had crossed the line, she was pretty sure he would withdraw his offer of an audition on the basis of potential emotional complication. She would never hear from him again. Both her writing and acting careers had disappeared, in one careless swoon.

Nothing like that happened. The next day, his assistant called to set a date for the screen test. It went well. She was advised to get headshots and an agent. George took her out to dinner, drove her home, invited himself in. He fell asleep afterwards and stayed the night.

Weeks passed during which Mina avoided literary events. She scanned the blogs and googled Lenore’s name regularly, hoping to find out that her former mentor had signed a big book deal or moved to Toronto, conditions under which she might avoid the embarrassment of being shunned. Eventually, spring came. Lenore’s name appeared in the line-up of the literary festival held annually at a downtown hotel. She would take part in a panel discussion about the impact of e-books on literary style, beside an incredibly famous writer from New York. Under normal circumstances, an essential event. Mina resolved to confront her fears. She could not put ambition on hold forever.

The venue was packed. She found a seat at the back and prepared to take notes. When the Q & A was over, panellists and people who’d asked knowledgeable questions drifted downstairs to the bar. Mina went with the flow, chatted with a poet she knew faintly and ended up standing just behind Lenore, who was in conversation with the big name writer. Eventually, the big name drifted away and Lenore continued talking to someone else. It would have been easy to sweep Mina into the conversation, which was about the famous writer’s latest novel. In fact it was almost unavoidable. Instead, Mina was left on the periphery. Finally, she couldn’t stay still. She smiled gaily at a distant waiter, and shot off to an imaginary conversation, out of sight of Lenore. A minute later she was standing on the street.

So, Lenore knew about her and George! What was there to know? She had gone for a screen test and slept with him a few times. Actually, quite a few. She was almost sorry it had gone that far, even sorrier she had accepted his Friend request, though she’d made him promise not to post pictures of her or mention her name, saying her family abided by traditional Hindu codes and did not approve of women exposing themselves on social media. George complied. But he kept posting crazy artful pictures of parts of her body and dropped so many hints that it would have been easy for someone like Lenore to figure out what was going on. She peeked a look at George’s Facebook page. He and Lenore were not Friends. Had Lenore seen them together? How else could she have figured out what was going on? Unless George told her. And by the way, what was going on?

Mina herself did not have an answer to the question. She had gone from distant awe to up close and naked without the intervening step of dating. She was pretty sure there was no future in a bad boy legend, at least not
would rise to greet him from a deep sofa, surrounded by shelves of hardcover books, hand-carved elephants and gleaming brass vases, all of it swimming in a cloud of incense and pipe smoke. Walking embodiments of exotica, they would speak warmly and knowledgeably about their colourful homeland. Once steeped in their aura, he would stand back as his movie leapt from the page.

Problematically, Mina was born in Quebec. She had visited Mumbai a few times, always on overwhelming occasions such as weddings and funerals. For her, the place was a vivid childhood secret, as common as a warm bath, beyond description. As for her mother, she hated cooking. She had a business degree and a serious weakness for high heels. Her father read crime novels and liked golf. Settling in Montreal in their mid-thirties, they had founded a successful real estate firm, worked in the same office, ate TV dinners in front of the TV. They lived in the penthouse of a nondescript high-rise, socialized with business peers and clients, spent two weeks in Florida every winter. On only one point could Mina’s parents possibly be considered typically Indian: they dearly wished she would bring home an appropriate boyfriend and marry him. Another, possibly more serious, reason for her reluctance.

After weeks of pestering, George wore her down. She set conditions. He had to promise to tell her parents he was Greek (easy enough, as he was Greek). He was making a documentary film on the Indian diaspora and would be going back to Athens as soon as the shooting wrapped up.

George laughed. He wanted to know why. She did not want to come right out and say, because they mustn’t think we’re serious, although the truth was hanging in the

One day, after he had taken her to every hot, curry-scented dive on Jean-Talon Boulevard and insisted on watching Bollywood movies in bed until Mina couldn’t stand it any more and spoke up for a wider menu, he asked to meet her family. He said it was difficult to get “under the skin” of the characters. He needed more.

What?
Context.

Mina was sure George already had a firm idea of what her parents would be like. Her mother would emerge from the kitchen in a waft of savoury smells, dressed in a beautiful sari. A kindly, gentle man, her father
a high-pitched shout: “Vikram, get the door.” A siren call, luring him away from his mother’s breast. At sixty-four, he was too wise to give in to lust or tyrannical orders. He rolled over, ready to tuck into the feast.

Moments later he felt a hand on his shoulder and opened his eyes. George and Mina were standing over him. His first thought was, I’m dead. Who are these people? Why is Gita wearing one of her wedding saris?

After the tumult of Mina’s adolescence, Gita had learned to hide even the whiff of a plan from her head-strong daughter. She kept her observations to herself: the filmmaker was young and quite good-looking. No ring on any finger. She had decided the subject of the evening would be his project. She would play her part as an authentic member of Montreal’s Indian diaspora, the film would go ahead, Mina would become famous and fall in love with the man who made her dreams of glory come true. Who knows, she thought, I might even get a part.

For once, Vikram’s runny memory came in handy. Still in the fog of dreams, he outdid himself, presenting the city of his boyhood as a mythical place deserving of its old colonial name, Bombay, where nothing ever changes. Gita, who’d spent her formative years in a London boarding school after the death of her mother, kept her contributions factual. She was careful to steer the dinner table conversation back to the guest’s film, offering socio-political tidbits and statistics found on the Internet.

When they couldn’t eat another bite and it was time for tea, George followed Gita into the kitchen, claiming Greek boys always follow the cook. He took out a notebook and started quizzing her on the dishes, but she said
pretty obvious she was angling to be in the film, a turn of events she had not anticipated.

On the way down in the elevator, George said he had half a mind to do a documentary on the Indian diaspora in Montreal.

Mina laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous. You’ll forget all about it when you get back to Athens.”

The door opened and they were thrust into a vast marble lobby, reminding George of an Etruscan frieze. His one true talent was to grasp situations as a single image. That night he saw Mina, arms outstretched, running toward some god-like beast slightly out of frame, him following, reaching out for her, licking her long black hair as it flew in the wind, their bodies frozen in eternal movement. He wondered why he had not seen this treasure before.

Shortly afterwards, George came to Mina with a crisis. The guy who owned the studio loft he’d been staying in was tired of snorkelling in the Bahamas and had returned to Montreal. He wanted his property back. The apartment George had formerly shared with friends was no longer available. With the film heating up, he simply did not have time to scout around for a place. He wondered if he should bunk at her place, pay half the rent. With lower overhead, she could work fewer shifts at the bar and spend more time on her writing. He presented the arrangement as a mutual convenience.

How could she say no?

they were family secrets and could not be divulged, even for the purposes of a film. Obediently, he put the notebook away. In her best casual voice, she asked about Greece. Where did he live? What did his parents do?

George was familiar with the elasticity of truth surrounding courtship matters. He had no trouble playing along with women’s games. He was good at inventing clever, charming explanations for little incongruities. Not a problem, as long as things worked out in the end. And if they didn’t, he’d cover his head with his arms and run for the door. But lying straight-faced to a mother was something else. If he lied now and things worked out with Mina, he would pay for it later.

Standing in Gita’s kitchen, he had a moment of clarity. He realised he did very badly want things to work out with Mina. He did not need to say much. Gita understood. George would be the instrument of grandchildren. The meagre scrap of family she’d been granted as a child would expand and become the source of memories for future generations. It was enough that George existed, that he wanted Mina, and that he was standing in her kitchen. In time, Mina would do her part.

Handing him a tray of sweets, she said: “Be careful with my daughter. Be firm. She never knows what she needs.”

It was nearly midnight by the time they left the Chaudhari apartment, bearing armfuls of leftovers. The false pageant of her mother’s banquet had irked Mina. It was
The snorkeller hired a van to help George move. Within twenty-four hours, her apartment was stuffed with boxes, suitcases, odd pieces of sentimental furniture and mounds of film paraphernalia. He said he had a new insight into the script and wanted to get it down before the brilliance faded. The funding agencies were expecting an outline by the end of the month. He set up his computer on the coffee table, using the sofa as a chair, a printer and filing cabinet at his side. He had an awful lot of toiletries, even more than she did. A day after his arrival, the bathroom was a mess, but being around George at work was exhilarating.

When he was writing, he wore a ragged bathrobe and slippers. He drank back-to-back coffees, did push-ups, typed in maniacal bursts then hit the gym. Mina signed up for afternoon shifts at the bar so she could be home when George wrapped up his day. The tips were minimal but she figured it was worthwhile, for the sake of the screenplay. If they were both home, she shut herself in the bedroom which was too small for a desk, so she worked in bed, her laptop on a pillow. Mostly, she scribbled notes and thought about what to write.

After two weeks of furious typing, the rhythm fell apart. George stared at the screen, paced, made phone calls, a loud cycle of abuse, pleas, apologies. By the end of week three, he admitted the outline had hit a wall. The premise was brilliant, the characters and context rich, well developed, clear on the page. But the architecture wasn’t there. His ideas refused to rise up and walk.

Mina was mystified. “What do you mean — there’s no plot?”

“No! Architecture! Structure! Storyline! Okay, call it plot.” She’d never seen him so distraught. He was always the picture of confidence.

“Maybe you could hire a writer,” she said.

“Maybe you could hire a writer.” George mimicked her voice in a cruel, high-pitched whine.

“Well, I’ve heard of such things,” she shot back. It stung. He pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, grabbed his coat and stormed out without saying goodbye. She went into her office bedroom and cried.

A few hours later, George came home in a better mood. He apologised for blowing up. He told her nicely to get dressed, they were going out to dinner. It was already ten p.m. She wasn’t faintly hungry, but agreed. Obviously, he’d had some kind of breakthrough.

Over calamari and pinot noir at Milos, George explained how creativity works in the film business: in fits and starts. It’s a collaborative art form. He appreciated her suggestion about hauling in a screenwriter. Of course it was obvious, but a good clear idea often hurts when it lands. He would need her help to pull this one off.

“There’s only one person who can salvage this picture,” he said, smiling into her brown eyes. She had taken a screenwriting course in university, but had not exactly finished a script. Still, a lot had happened since then.

“Who do you have in mind?” she said.

“I think you can guess.” He was still smiling.

She waited, figuring it was best not to be wrong about this one.

His answer: “Lenore.”

Lenore?
“It’s a nice image,” Mina said. “Who is he?”
“He’s a life force who stops the Indian girl from making a terrible mistake.”
“An angel?”
“Could be. Or maybe he’s an atheist,” Lenore said. “Ask George. I’m sure he’ll have an opinion. Anyway, it was his idea. Feel free to remind him.”
She reached for her scarf, began bundling up for the journey home.
Mina looked at the pile of pages on the table.
“I could type these up and email them to you,” she said.
Lenore agreed that would be helpful. Mina slipped the notes into an inside pocket of her vintage lambs-wool coat.

It was snowing when they stepped out into the night. Just before she got into Dean’s car, Lenore said: “I hope you’ll continue working on the script with me. It’s a collaboration, right? The best ideas drop out of the sky. Brainstorming is good.”

Mina headed along St. Viateur, intending to take the St. Laurent bus north, but when she got to the corner the Number 55 was pulling away. The wind had dropped so she walked, thinking about the white man, what he meant.

When she got home there were two plates on the table, a candle burning between them, a bottle of wine uncorked and breathing. George had eaten one piece of the pizza but the others were nicely spaced out on a cookie sheet and waiting in the oven.

As she hung up her coat, he peppered her with questions. They all boiled down to one: What had Lenore thought about his outline?

“She seemed basically aware of the potential. She said she’d sleep on it.”
“So she is interested?”
“I would say she is, yes.”
He followed her to the table, poured two glasses of wine. She sat down, waiting for the pizza to appear.
“What did you two girls talk about? I mean, three hours?”
An awkward moment. She wondered how Lenore would answer his question. If she would answer. Three hours? The time had flown by. It was the most creative time of her writing life, thus far. She was not ready to share it with George.
“Oh, you know, stuff,” she said, picking up the glass. “Ask me tomorrow. It’s been a long day.”
There was a time when Sage saw her life stretching ahead just as it was meant to be. Things that had once made her afraid or annoyed or bored ceased to exist. Her best side turned to the future. Hope, expectation, confidence ruled. During this time, she was with George and all was well.

Then one day the tide turned. She missed her period. Ignored it for a while, then saw a doctor. The cause was perfectly normal. Nobody’s fault, a technical failure.

George did not hesitate, not for a moment. He was young and broke; they both were. They couldn’t consider tying themselves down to a family, not yet. Still, he went through a cartwheel of emotions and explained them all in detail. To himself, but out loud. What would it be like to be a father? Girl or boy? If one or the other, what difference? How do parents cope? Who are the good ones? Where did his go wrong? In the days they spent waiting for her appointment, they made love often. He held onto her as if she might get broken apart by the waves of manhood surging through him. He’ll make a wonderful father, she thought. Someday.
When it was over, George had a business trip to L.A. He was trying to get a film project off the ground and had an important contact to follow up. She went to her mother’s sixtieth birthday party in another city. When they got back together, he was in a strange mood. The rest was long and slow and in the end, messy. She cried, shouted that she didn’t deserve to be treated like shit. He agreed. And so they broke up.

It took her three years to get over George. Two before she could walk by his apartment, another until she could smile at a guy and not compare. His name was Patrick. She met him in a woodworking class, night school. They were both clumsy and looking for the same thing: manly skills, or at least the appearance. Patrick’s bookcase was better than hers, well-planned and sturdy. In the end, they partnered up on the final project, a matching coffee table, and moved the pieces into their first apartment.

He thought her name was strange and lovely. Sage: One of the herbs of Provence. A synonym for wise.

For the longest time, she feared the rebound effect, that maybe Patrick was a consolation prize. The hole left by George would never be filled. But did that mean she had to live like a zombie for the rest of her life?

She continued to spend time alone after they moved in together. She took long walks on the mountain, booked mysterious trips to Toronto, New York, Boston, just to be sure she remembered her natural state, alone. Patrick barely noticed. He was a hard worker, always juggling two jobs, saving to buy a rundown apartment they could fix up. He was obsessed with getting a stake. She wasn’t sure she even wanted to stay in Montreal, didn’t give a moment’s thought to things like rising prices, market value. He talked about them all the time.

One day he dragged her to see a place on rue Cham-bord, near the park. Definitely a fixer-upper, he warned, as they climbed two flights of crooked stairs to the third floor. He wanted her opinion. She didn’t have one. It was too late anyway. He’d already put in a ridiculous offer, and been accepted.

Sage was better with power tools than her woodworking instructor had judged. They never argued. She left the glossy decisions to Patrick. Granite versus stainless steel, rain shower or tub. After two years of late nights, weekends and holidays, the home of his vision emerged from the ruins. It had two bedrooms plus a den, walk-in closets, a gigantic terrace, hardwood floors as smooth as glass, skylights in the hall and bathroom. They served sparkling wine at the open house.

When the guests were gone, Patrick said it was time to start a family. His declaration left her numb. She had no opinion. No strong emotion two months later when the pregnancy test came back positive, except a slight tingling sensation in her fingers and toes, as if a part of her had begun to unthaw.

As she grew bigger, the feeling travelled throughout her body. Not always pleasant, her legs and arms swelling, belly growing enormous, cheeks out like mumps. She was afraid she was gaining too much weight, and had nightmares about losing it after the birth. The more she tried to control her diet, the hungrier she got. She kept a meticulous food diary. The doctor told her not to worry, she was still within the normal range. But she felt huge
and ugly. She tried to focus on the baby and what it would mean to be a mother. Girl or boy? If one or the other, what difference? How do parents cope? Who are the good ones? Where did hers go wrong?

Patrick remained his usual calm, confident, quietly excited self, as though it was all just another lap of their long-term project. They were filling up the spare room, a matter of assembling the right parts, following instructions, keeping your eye on the nail while wielding a hammer instinctively. In the end, he was right. The birth was natural, painful, utterly normal, except that the baby was twins. Girls, one hiding behind the other on the ultrasound. The doctor was embarrassed. Thrifty Patrick was ecstatic. He called it “two for the price of one.” Three weeks after they were born, she could almost comfortably zip up her favourite jeans.

For a time Sage was sure her life had started again. The long period of hibernation had ended. Patrick made a wonderful father. Their workload was exhausting, relentless. At least twice a day, she collapsed onto the bed, gripped by bone tired pain and exultation. The treadmill of new motherhood banished fear and irritation. She had no time for the luxury of boredom. She lived day by day, without expectation. Her best side faced forward; hope, curled up in her arms, constantly hungry for milk.

By comparison, the early childhood years were a breeze. Lucy and Alana (after Charlie Brown’s friend, and Patrick’s granny) played well together, slept in the same bed, wore the same clothes and never fought over toys. They were talented, easygoing, full of love. A world unto themselves, by the time they were four, they could retreat into some elaborate fantasy and not come out for hours. If she knocked at their door with a tray of cookies and milk, they’d look up dreamily, say “thank you Mummy” in sing-song voices, and turn back to their games. Mostly she didn’t mind. She was busy, needed, grateful for respite. She found a part-time job she could do from home.

When they started school, the rhythm changed. The old feeling came back, a sick sense that she was standing on the side looking in. She took a trip to New York City and made a terrifying discovery. She had lost the ability to be alone. The house felt empty, her job was numbing. Patrick and the guy who tiled their bathroom had opened a business together, and were making scads of money renovating old apartments. He wanted to sell their floor and get a triplex. When Sage said she didn’t think she could stand the noise and mess, Patrick assured her the new place would be ready before they put the old on the market, meaning he’d be working days, nights, weekends and holidays for months, maybe a year. He urged her to quit taking on work and open a business, do something, anything, what she’d always wanted. “As long as it makes you happy.” He meant well, she knew it, but underneath was judgement. He was telling her to get her act together. Be happy. He couldn’t see the hole. He hadn’t been around then. It wasn’t Patrick’s fault, she knew, and yet knowing meant nothing. Knowing was her problem, not theirs.

She started seeing a therapist. Three months into their weekly visits, she still hadn’t mentioned the source of her problem. What was her problem? Anxiety, boredom, fear, a toxic combination? No. Those were symptoms, consequences. Not the problem.
A hazy midsummer day, she bumped into George on St. Catherine St. He was wearing a pale seersucker suit and had gained weight. He looked good, but slick for her taste. His mouth shot open, a celebrity grin. He flung his arms out and grabbed her up into a bear hug. He was a star. His first feature had won a prize at the Sundance Festival. She couldn’t help it, she gushed right back.

When he was gone, she felt nothing. It started to rain. She stood on the corner of St. Catherine and Peel while her hair and clothes got drenched. She felt great. So, the problem wasn’t George: something to tell the therapist.

Months passed. The girls started piano and violin lessons. No competition, they insisted on learning the same songs. Sage was amazed that time could pass so quietly while she felt so bad. She quit therapy and tried weight training, but dropped out after two weeks. It was too much effort. She was exhausted. She cut her work commitments down to part-time, telling Patrick she wanted to take a computer graphics course. But she couldn’t find the energy to enrol. She slept a lot. She decided sleep was the solution.

A tiny voice from her religious upbringing said, it could be worse. This is a good life. Life is good.

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One night, Patrick called her into their bedroom and closed the door. He had something to tell her. He reached out, took her hand. She wondered why he’d shut the door. The girls were sleeping at his sister’s. Her mouth went dry.

He took forever to speak. Then he circled around the subject, beginning with consequences, how she had every right to be furious. He wouldn’t hold anything she said or did against her, because he’d been wrong from the start. Totally, he was at fault, every step of the way.

What are you saying? The words stuck in her mouth.

She’d braced herself with one arm planted on the bed. The arm began to melt.

“I hope you can understand. It’s not just something I kept from you, okay? I kept it from myself. You have to know that. I...” He stopped, as if he wanted to take the sentence back.

A cloud lifted, revealing what she’d long suspected: This is the end of a good life, a life I was too weak to live. Now it will be gone and a much worse life will fill in the hole. I won’t be dead any more. I’ll be sorry. The next word is goodbye.

He said he had a son out west. From the time he worked on the rigs. He hadn’t seen him in ages, though he’d sent money, a lot of it, which was why things were always tight.

“How old?”

“Thirteen,” he said. “It wasn’t my choice. Well, some of it, obviously. But I’ve never had anything to say about it. Until now. I mean ... I’m sorry, Sage.”

She took his other hand. “Don’t say you’re sorry. That’s a terrible thing to say.”

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put your feet up.” She laughed, tossed the fag into the wind and buckled up.

The rest of the ride was quiet. The boy drifted off to sleep. As Sage stroked his arm, he nestled his mop of black hair in her lap. Mouth open in a half grin, he drooled on her jeans.

She caught Patrick’s gaze in the rear-view mirror. He had a look in his eyes she’d never noticed before, although it had always been there. Heat from the boy’s riled body spread from her lap to the hole inside her. By the time they reached home, the hole was full. Gone.

Ten days later they went to the airport to meet a plump, black-haired kid with thick glasses and a loopy grin, and the social worker charged with bringing him east. The boy came up to Sage’s shoulder. He had two identifiable learning disabilities and no concept of boundaries, the vocabulary of a four-year-old, and mathematical aptitude bordering on genius. He cried when they wouldn’t buy him ice cream and wet his pants on the back seat of their car.

The social worker made a fuss. “Look what he’s done,” she screeched, as if he couldn’t hear. A buxom woman tightly packaged in a navy pantsuit, she lit up a cigarette and made a desultory attempt to blow the smoke out the back window. She said she’d never been to Montreal and was looking forward to seeing the sights.

By the time they turned onto the autoroute, the boy was sobbing. Cigarette smoke filled the car. Sage ordered Patrick to pull over. He said he couldn’t pull over just like that on an eight-lane highway in rush hour. The social worker ordered the boy to calm down. Sage ordered the social worker to shut up. Patrick took the next exit, pulled into the first gas station he came upon, got out, slammed the door, and started to cry.

Meanwhile, the women screamed at each other over the boy’s tantrum.

Sage got out, ordered the social worker to sit in the front seat, Patrick to get back in the car and drive. She sat next to the boy in the back seat. He put his head on her lap, stopped howling.

The social worker was furious and lit another cigarette. Patrick said: “What you need is a couple of beers and
The baby born to the Walmsley family during a late-January snowstorm was colicky. She couldn’t keep her mother’s milk down. When she wasn’t sleeping, she cried. Her sisters Flo and Marlene, brothers Roger and Luke, took turns looking for the magic trick that would settle her down. A new sound or a bright object dangled in front of her face might provide momentary distraction, but as soon as the novelty wore off, she started up again, high-pitched screams that turned her face purple before settling into mournful wails. When she stopped, the sun came out from behind a cloud. She’d look up at them as if she’d been away or busy with some dogged mission. Whoever noticed first would summon the others. When Roger tried catching her wobbly smile with his Kodak Brownie, the flash sent her into hysterics. She was christened Patricia Kathleen but Luke called her Patty Kate, and the name stuck.

Helen Walmsley was thirty-nine by her fifth pregnancy, and slow to recover. Her mother stayed on through the summer to help. After months of sleepless nights, Gran started feeding the crier a teaspoon of pabulum mixed with