

THE PULL OF GRAVITY

a novel by

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DAMAGED GOODS

“When the divers recovered Toby’s body from under the ice it was too waterlogged to cremate,” Irene told him, gripping her phone like a railing.

As a malpractice attorney Bobby was attuned to horrific detail, but he’d never heard that one. “And how’s your little boy doing?” He couldn’t fathom that grief either, although, as the father of two daughters, he wasn’t immune to wishing for a boy to redeem the sorry example of his own father-son relationship.

“Sam’s only in kindergarten, so he’s capable of believing his dad might still have the power to come home.” At the moment he was immersed in the Disney Chanel.

Bobby had learned about Irene’s husband’s death from the Connecticut College online monthly alumni newsletter, and although he was calling

immediately, it had already been six weeks. “I’m sorry I didn’t know to phone sooner, Irene. I’ve wondered off and on if I should have been in contact or not.”

“Definitely not, but thanks for calling now.” She was only able to identify her layered feelings about Bobby as complex but not ambivalent, so there was nothing erotic about her admittedly imperfect memory of their reckless encounter at their tenth reunion.

The single sentence report stated only that the husband of **Irene (McFarland) Green ’91** had fallen to his death from a bridge over the White River in Rio Blanco County, Colorado, and though the class secretary’s collective condolence to Irene and her son would surely prompt others, Bobby Tyler’s unhesitating nature made his the first call. He was also bold enough to inquire, “So what’s the rest of the story?”

Irene said, “Well, it’s certain that Toby fell to his death from a bridge, but ‘Backwards Step Fatal at Dedication,’ was the headline in the local paper, which Metropolitan Life finds ambiguous enough for a possible suicide ruling.”

“So you’re telling me he jumped?”

“No! I’m saying he could have been trying to take a picture of the bridge for Sam and me, but *they*’re saying he’d stepped beyond the railing *in order* to put his life at risk. The news photo shows him holding up his phone.”

If she were a client he'd already be scrolling through the relevant publicity and coming to his own conclusion, but for once he merely listened. His view included the capitol's landmark government buildings, including the Supreme Court.

"Toby's wallet was in his briefcase in the trunk of his rental car."

"And the car key?"

"In the glove compartment."

"But no note or anything?"

"Not unless you count his last phone message, when he could have calculated the time difference between Colorado and us and known we'd already have had to leave the house to get to school on time." Her voice was vibrating like a cello from the physical and emotional intensity of the daily effort required of her. Most people seemed satisfied to ask questions with more benign implications, or else to inquire about how Sam was coping.

"Does this mean he said goodbye, at least?"

"He said, 'Today's the day. The bridge is open. I'll be home soon.' So no official goodbye, if that's what you're asking. Toby didn't always sign off with 'I love you,' but that time he did. I saved the message until it expired."

Since these phrases told Bobby either nothing or everything, he couldn't think how to respond other than to say, "Nothing ever expires these days."

“Thanks for the tech lesson.” She knew sarcasm was useless, but, obviously, if she’d known how to preserve his father’s last words for their son, she would have!

“Sorry.” He’d reflexively jotted down *Today’s The Day! The Bridge Is Open! I’ll Be Home Soon!* “So did I ever meet him? I mean, it’s not like you knew him during college, right?”

“No, I met Toby that winter before the reunion, when he was in the process of joining an engineering firm with an office here, which is how I came to suburban New Jersey. We got married at the end of that summer,” she said without elaboration, “and a few months later, in the fall of 2001, I started in a school where a lot of children were about to lose their parents – eleven in the school and three that I taught – so my maternity leave was terrible timing too.” She wasn’t sure why she was telling him more than he’d asked to know, unless it was for the continuity of their having known each other in a previous life. Another possibility was that his self-referencing questions disqualified themselves. “I’m lucky to have as my colleagues other more experienced teachers to tell me how Sam’s doing.”

“And how *is* he doing?” Bobby could have divulged here that he’d actually *counted on* having a son, but again he stopped short of inserting his own disappointments.

“He’d be better if he could sleep through the night. And me too if I could, if I’d ever stop getting these letters disputing my version of everything.” She’d shed the defensive edge in her voice, which now sounded more representative of the vulnerability she felt.

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t want you to think I’m soliciting your business, Irene, but since I deal with insurance companies all the time, I’m sure I could help you out with this. I always object to forcing the next-of-kin to prove a death isn’t a suicide, and I always win.”

Irene loosened her grip on the phone but didn’t drop it. “I have no money, Bobby.”

“Look, you’re a widowed single-parent schoolteacher,” he said as if these were the precise criteria for his firm’s *Pro Bono* cases.

“It’s not the insurance money, it’s the ruling.”

“I understand, and I’m glad you want to protect your husband’s name.”

“That too, yes, but what I need more is for Sam, since I don’t want Metropolitan Life with the power to declare him the child of a suicide. My best hope for myself is that one day I’ll be able to figure out how to ‘live with’ the mystery of my not ever really being able to know what happened.”

“Well, it might not surprise you to learn that ‘mystery’ isn’t an official category in the insurance business, but so that I can come to my own

conclusions I think you should express mail the relevant documents to my office right away.”

She hesitated before deciding to say, “I didn’t have the stamina to improvise a plan for our February school vacation week, so a trip to the post office might seem like an outing. Sam’s sixth birthday is tomorrow. His best buddy is in Florida, swimming in his grandparents’ pool.”

Without even checking his calendar Bobby impulsively urged, “Then here’s a solution. Why don’t you two take a train ride down to my office this afternoon? My secretary will book you a room in a hotel with a swimming pool, so Sam can swim too. Unless – understandably – he’s afraid of water.”

Sam looked to be concentrating only on his hot dog, but as their train sped past a stop that was too local for AMTRAK, he looked out the window at the backstop behind home plate. In his backpack was the glove Toby bought for him the last time they went shopping together. “Is Dad still the coach, Mom?”

“Well, the team will need a substitute, but because you and Dad practiced together so much, he’s still *your* coach.”

“So the things he said will always be true?”

She chose to say, “Yes.”

“Like the way trying something new is always scary?”

“If that’s what he told you, it’s true.” But Irene inserted herself enough to ask, “Is that what you’d say about school, though, that it was scary?”

“Yes, but only on my first day.”

“Glad to hear it. And my guess is that this might be true for baseball too.”

“Then I can handle it?” He gave her the rest of his hot dog and she ate the last two bites because this took less energy than walking the length of the car to dispose of it.

Now Sam leaned into her like a puppy, for her to scratch his head. His all-out effort was in case hard work could somehow influence the final outcome, and Irene’s bargain was similar. She knew better, but in the way that a bad debt can be forgiven, she too wanted to believe in the power of good behavior to invalidate her failings. Their premarital marriage counseling had made it possible to go forward with their plan to marry despite her blatantly pathetic sexual betrayal. The discovery of her pregnancy proved that “for better or worse” wasn’t only a metaphor.

Toby told her that his becoming a father fulfilled the promise of their own first meeting, when she tripped on a threshold and he reached out and

caught her. The saving grace for her in that moment was that instead of merely asking if she was OK – “No, I’m mortified!” – he’d improvised the hushed voice of an Olympic figure skating sportscaster predicting, “That’s going to cost her with the judges because she declined to go for the optional triple axel but still couldn’t execute the double rotation, and right there she lost her chance for the gold.”

She hoped Sam would develop his father’s gift as a mimic, or at least his sense of humor, instead of her own overly practical sensibility. Sam had clearly inherited her dark hair and straight paintbrush eyelashes, but his ears – with the exquisite intricacy of a pair of walnut halves – were the feature she’d noticed first about him. Toby agreed that they were distinctive, while supplying the gentle reminder that, with every species he could think of, the ear’s essential parts are hidden.

Suddenly Sam sat up and crossed his arms, his face filling with concern. “How far is this place where we’re going, Mommy?” His voice cracked as he said, “I don’t like this crazy idea one bit!”

“It’s the next stop. Why not?”

“Because how will Dad know where to find me?”

Since this was the larger “it” that Sam doubted he could “handle,” Irene felt irresponsible to have suspended Sam’s intensified need for advance

planning. This would be the first night since Toby's death that they wouldn't be sleeping either at home or at Toby's parents' house, and in his deliberate way Sam was working overtime in trying to cope. What could possibly warrant her dragging him to another city on the chance that an interpretation of Toby's state of mind – by a stranger to him – could translate into money?

In Sam's pulse she felt his heartbeat steadying itself with her absolute promise that, if he wanted, they could take the train right back home after the meeting. Perhaps it was the plus and/or minus of his being an only child, but Sam never much cared for surprises, even good ones, which was why it pained her to have given him any reason at all to distrust her. She'd learned from Toby, the hard way, how difficult trust is to earn it back.

In the waiting room prior to their first hour of premarital counseling he'd transformed his own anxiety into a chirpy imitation of a bossy realtor's critique of the oversized couch. "Look how it makes a couple's troubles more obvious as they each stubbornly withdraw to an opposite end. Plus, a complimentary pair of swivels from IKEA would be a lot more affordable," was his prescription for an instant makeover.

Once in the consulting room Toby found Dr. Julian's matching leather chairs less crucial than the surprising way she didn't automatically make him feel wrong – instead of *wronged* – for his unwillingness to excuse his wife's

inexcusable behavior. To her own credit, Irene sought to explain herself – *to* herself as well as to Dr. Julian and Toby – rather than wasting their time and patience on her rationalizing.

The exception was when she said it wasn't *only* about infidelity, however, not at a tenth college reunion when you've got all those people thrown together with a common goal of reinforcing each other's denial about having reached the fatal age of thirty. True, she'd dated Bobby all during sophomore year, but there were other old boyfriends she'd have been glad to see too, provided that they hadn't changed either. Bobby's chief appeal was that he hadn't grown up!

The decade after their college graduation coincided with the Clinton presidency, and while most of the Class of '91 had clearly profited from the easy money – Bobby arrived in a monogrammed dress shirt with RJT embroidered on the French cuff – she'd become certified to teach in a middle school. Oh, and shouldn't she mention that during these same ten years, her twenties, both of her parents dropped dead?

Bobby greeted Irene with a hug worthy of a funeral and shook Sam's hand in the knuckle-knocking fashion of teammates. In the corner of his corner office was a stainless steel telescope aimed at the Capitol, and Bobby

pulled a chair up to it for Sam to stand on. With the extra-hospitable style of a flight attendant in the business cabin he offered Sam a beverage of his choice and nuts or cookies warmed in the microwave. Sounding more like himself, he added, “Keep an eye on the government for us, will you, pal? I got my first telescope too when I was five.”

“I’ll be six tomorrow,” Sam corrected.

Irene explained, “Precision’s a value for the child of an engineer.”

And since this was their subject, Bobby told Sam they’d only be next door in the glass-walled conference room. Of course his secretary would stand by with office supplies, but Sam also had the contents of his backpack to rearrange. It wasn’t as if he didn’t know how to spend time alone.

Bobby began by telling Irene, “I’ve asked an associate to join us, but before I call her in I just want to say I hope I can help. I feel bad for your son, especially since he’s such a winner – I’d feel bad if he was a loser too – so I’m glad you brought him.”

“We’re inseparable now.”

“I can see that.” He set the table with three fresh legal pads and a jar of pens, offering her his excellent view of the city. “What I want to say is that I hope I didn’t upset you by calling you. I don’t mean to be disrespectful of your husband, or you, or your awful situation.”

“Thank you.”

“Or to pretend there’s no history.”

“Isn’t *moot* the right legal term for ours?”

“I agree, but in case you think I should have been in touch since the reunion, if you did, I want to apologize that I wasn’t.”

“No, I didn’t, and it’s better that you weren’t.” Irene reached for one of the pens and placed it across the top of the pad. “So can we get started?”

In introducing his associate Bobby made it clear that he was still working on making the adjustment to her newly acquired married name. “I’m sorry for your loss,” the younger lawyer told Irene, and since it wasn’t her job to say more, she took a seat, placing her back to the view, and more like a meter maid than a member of the franchised elite, noted the date and time at the top of the page.

Bobby turned to Irene. “Please tell us in your own words what happened and what’s happening. I ask this not because I want to sound like *Special Victims Unit* but because it’s your best defense.”

Since there was no fixed beginning, Irene started by saying, “Well, I got the news at school with a phone call from Toby’s office saying there had been an incident on the bridge. I thought I’d heard ‘accident’ and was picturing two cars colliding and thinking about how disappointed Toby would be not to have

things go as smoothly as he'd planned them. He was so excited by this project that I'd asked – and he considered it before saying we couldn't afford it – about my coming out for the ceremony.”

“Is it true that you couldn't afford it?”

“In a general sense, yes, since we live – lived – on two small paychecks.”

“Then you're saying it was your clear expectation that he'd come home?”

“Yes. It mostly still is.”

During the pained silence the associate poured three glasses of water while Irene took in a fresh breath. Holding her glass with two hands, Irene asked, “How can Metropolitan Life think it's humane to investigate Toby's motives? Why isn't it automatic for them to write a check to reimburse us for all those premiums we paid to them instead of buying airline tickets?”

Bobby said, “I couldn't agree more. But it's automatic on MetLife's part to want to confirm that it wasn't deliberate, so first we need somebody to provide an evaluation, a recommendation letter, basically, to acknowledge that, like everybody, your husband occasionally worried. Not obsessively or anything, but he wasn't immune to stress, is the point. He was able to cope and had no hidden disorders that could cause him to crack. This process is called Rule/Out in the medical profession.” Posing like an actor playing a doctor in a

prescription drug ad, he leaned forward to deliver the line, “We can at least safely assume that he had no fear of heights.”

The associate wasn’t free to smile, but Irene laughed with a kind of relief.

“And we’ll need bank statements, needless to say,” Bobby continued.

Irene interrupted to say, “You already know I can’t afford you.”

Ignoring her, he persevered, “To demonstrate that he wasn’t irresponsible or erratic in his spending, presuming he wasn’t.”

Irene assessed Bobby’s finely tailored charcoal suit with its pale blue pinstripes to coordinate with the Vineyard Vines necktie patterned with gold starfish. His long hair was sculpted into a helmet, and his flamboyant gold watch was clearly designed to intimidate. She said, “Not unless Toby had an offshore account, or some other secret source of funds.”

Now Bobby needed to look like a real lawyer as he said, “I trust you’re joking.”

His impulse to track down Irene’s phone number that morning was shadowed by the guilt Bobby knew he should have felt in these years since their reunion. Neither of them went back for their fifteenth (and, yes, he’d been

curious enough to look for her name on that list) which he took to mean that she was either avoiding him just as much as he was avoiding her, or that she hadn't given him a single thought. He wasn't proud of not having been deterred by the fact that she'd been engaged to marry another man. But he'd stolen her from someone else before, hadn't he, back when it was allowed?

The surprise he felt now, and again without regret – with relief – was that he wasn't sexually attracted to her, despite her having that luminous beauty of the deeply aggrieved. Her skin clung to her bones as if for dear life, and she had the starved look in her half-closed eyes of a neglected domestic pet. Whether intentionally or not she was letting the color in her hair grow out, which made him aware of how carefully groomed he himself was, not to mention his immaculate wife. This wasn't a criticism of Irene, not at all, but he wanted to pay attention to these observations because, if he were feeling otherwise, he'd have to delegate the case. For the record – so was he deposing himself? – his motives were innocent, and this was as true in his improvised phone call that morning as it was now, when he was about to go to work on her behalf. Being evidence-oriented by profession, however, he was obliged to examine why it was that, instead of just putting Irene and Sam into a cab to the hotel, he decided to invite them home for dinner.

Bobby excused himself from the conference room to make the phone call. At this point in the day, like all lawyers whose insatiably competitive work required them to produce billable hours deep into the night, he'd often be calling Lynne to say he'd be late for dinner. Instead he asked, "Honey? I'm bringing a college classmate and her little boy home with me, alright?" Lynne's cool competence typically compensated for Bobby's spontaneity, and they both relied upon this balancing effect even when, as now, Lynne hesitated. She told him she had a fundraising committee meeting to get to, and Bobby countered, "But her husband just died."

When Irene and the associate came from the conference room only a minute later, Sam burst into tears. She looked to Bobby for some explanation, but his face registered total bewilderment. The associate seemed unsure whether to leave the room or pretend to be invisible, but since her boss offered no direction either, she remained in place, struck by the fact that if she were the mother of a child this age she'd have given birth as a senior in high school, and wouldn't be here.

Irene knew to rub Sam's bony little back until he became able to talk, until, step by step, with an investigative patience that even a professionally credentialed attorney could learn from, she'd be able to discern the conflict and resolve it.

“It isn’t fair!”

“What isn’t fair, Sammy?” She’d learned to ask this seemingly obvious question by having on other occasions incorrectly assumed Sam was desperately missing Toby, when his problem instead turned out to be entirely mundane, which then made Sam feel terrible for *not* having been thinking about his dad.

“You promised we’d go swimming, Mommy!”

She found it miraculous that Sam hadn’t developed a frantic fear of water. He must not have allowed himself to picture the scene the way she was obliged to – Toby’s bloated body – or perhaps his stubborn determination was Sam’s self-punishment for somehow having caused his father to die, or his pitiful unconscious wish to rejoin Toby by drowning. There was such an endless supply of licensed and amateur analysis out there that, after six weeks of it, she was only still just getting started. “That’s true, I did, and we can go to the hotel and swim right now if you want to.”

“Then why does he say we have to go to *his* house?”

Now Bobby practically shouted, “But wait! I have a pool at home!” His expression revealed that he’d forgotten their outing to Washington was to compensate for Sam’s buddy’s vacation trip to Florida.

Irene waited for the associate to gather up her papers and disappear before informing Bobby that he had no right to change the plans without consulting her. Couldn't he imagine how what might seem to him like a normal dinner invitation could feel to her like a breach of protection – “Can't you see how fragile I am?” – or see why it was so wrong to present Sam with a new arrangement without asking permission?

Sam politely waited for his mother to finish her complaint before saying, “You have your own pool? Cool!”

The commute was prolonged by traffic but was otherwise uneventful, and when Bobby parked his champagne-colored luxury car in a driveway whose golden paving stones were arranged like a plate of caramels, Irene imagined this blond world as the ideal of what a high-priced Washington lawyer would want to come home to after a demanding day. His wife's welcome was warm too, and if she seemed a bit brisk, Lynne said this was only because of the committee meeting she couldn't skip. At the kitchen island she assembled the ingredients for a salad and apologized for the box of pasta and jar of red sauce intended to satisfy the kids. Behind her, Irene noticed that in the hallway leading to a back door, one wall was paneled with what appeared to be a gallery

of framed family photos, the opposite wall fixed with pegs on which hung a surplus of coats and jackets. Like the serene decoration of their house, Lynne too was naturally blond, though Bobby's calling her "Honey" was also because of the family brand. It had been to his credit, literally, that when they met it didn't occur to him, when she told him she came from Minnesota and her father was in the thermostat business, that her name could be Honeywell.

Irene stood as still as a camera while Toby's VoiceOver provided an ecstatic "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" soundtrack as she panned the dining room. "Notice on the polished birch sideboard the chunks of raw turquoise that look like rocks arranged in a Japanese garden! In our peripheral vision the freeform swimming pool shimmers in its glass enclosure, opposing flashes of aqua to accentuate the neutrality of this very carefully curated environment. Would you care to guess where the stone floor was imported from? Yes! The quarry located near George and Amal Clooney's *château* in Provence."

Toby could have guided Irene and the audience at home through each room in the house, if not for the dynamic arrival from upstairs of the two cobalt-eyed daughters who, at thirteen and twelve, proved polite enough, at their father's immediate direction, to promise Sam a swim after dinner.

At the table, Bobby corrected, “It’s Irene,” when Lynne asked him to offer “Eileen” more salad.

“Thanks, but no,” Irene answered. “I was only eating Sam’s cucumbers because I know he won’t. My table manners have lapsed.”

“Irene. Sorry.” Lynne wasn’t sure if Bobby had ever mentioned this particular classmate before tonight – and she certainly didn’t know whether or not to allude to the tragedy in front of her daughters – but she too thought it ought to be illegal for an insurance conglomerate to make the widow prove it wasn’t a suicide in order to collect.

Irene said, “My mother’s middle name was Eileen.”

“So I was close,” Lynne said.

“Well, no, because Eileen was the name of her mother, who exiled my mother for marrying my divorced father. Et cetera.” She left unsaid that she never met that grandmother.

“I’ve never understood the rules of that system,” Lynne said as if talking about astrology.

“Me neither,” Irene agreed, refusing to detail the human cruelty and wishing she hadn’t mentioned it.

“But I’m not Catholic,” Lynne added with a tolerant shrug of her elegant shoulders.

“Me neither,” Irene repeated. She looked across the table at Sam and beyond him to the swimming pool, wondering how to escape the pain she’d brought on herself.

Lynne refolded her napkin and placed her hands on either side of her plate. “I’m sorry, but I should get going. In case you’re not still here when I get back from my meeting, it was very nice to meet you, to meet you both.” She managed to make these perfunctory pleasantries sound genuinely pleasant.

Since Irene’s only wish was to get this evening over with as efficiently as possible, it was easiest to say, “You too.” She’d already offered elaborate regret for their intrusion, so now she said, “Thank you for everything,” and left it at that.

The heels of Lynne’s fine leather boots made two distinct sounds as she crossed first this stone floor and then the ceramic tiles of the kitchen. Because the rest of them remained silent it was also possible to hear Lynne retrace her steps to reappear from the back hallway, now wearing a smart brick-colored quilted down jacket. In her gloved hand she held a brass key ring, and while regarding Sam intently she appeared to be contemplating whether or not to make him – his birthday – her excuse for skipping the meeting. Looking from Sam to Bobby, it was unclear from the set of her mouth whether she had

something more to say. But when she turned again to leave, all she said was, “Don’t forget the dessert, girls.”

Abigail and Barbara both had their mother’s long arms and legs, but the older one, Abby, had the seventh grade slouch that Irene identified – and identified with – as typical of a girl who just wants to be left alone. She’d nicknamed her baby sister Babby, to rhyme, and she still called her that – or Barbie – to exert her authority. “Chocolate chip cupcakes!” she called out from the kitchen, prompting Sam to help clear the plates like a big boy.

Irene’s steady headache had only intensified, and Bobby’s loud voice was hard to take, no matter how dedicated he was to resolving what he called the injustice of her situation. Meeting Lynne had undermined whatever self-regard she’d managed to hang onto, making it clear to her that, at every opportunity, she ought to have told Bobby she’d rather go it alone.

Now he was reaching for the wine and pouring more than she wanted. “You can relent, you know,” he said. She’d gotten so little advice that, until today, she’d believed she had to pay her taxes on time instead of deferring them until her circumstances could be clarified. “I know what you’re thinking: easy for me to say.”

She nodded as a way to let it go at that instead of admitting defeat. But then she changed her mind and asked, “Don’t you ever feel guilty?”

Without hesitating he said, “Not to answer a question with a question, but why else did I pick up the phone to call you this morning?”

“I almost didn’t answer it.”

“And if you hadn’t and I’d left the same message of wanting to help, wouldn’t you still be here now?” But wasn’t *be here now* the discredited motto of the generation whose marriages failed? “So did you ever tell him?”

“Yes, immediately. I had to. And you?”

“No.” He braced himself with both hands and offered as his excuse, “A long time ago I had an office flirtation and Lynne pretty much asked me not to tell her unless I’m planning to leave her, in which case I’m not to deceive her. Anyway, she knows I’m never leaving her, not her and not the girls either.”

Irene felt envious of such clarity, regardless of the self-serving duplicity embedded in it. “I’m ashamed to admit that, as awful as it would have been for Toby to call off our wedding, I can’t imagine my life without Sam.”

Again Bobby thought about telling her how much he’d wanted a son of his own, but instead he said, “Wait. He threatened that?”

“He told me he doubted he could ever trust me entirely, and maybe he never did.”

Bobby said, “Well, I don’t enjoy speaking ill of the dead, but was he that insecure about everything, or just you?”

“He wasn’t at all insecure about Sam, which is my best argument in favor of the ‘accidental’ ruling.”

“Good point, glad to hear it. But, still,” and now he made his voice even quieter, “I doubt we were the only two of our tenth reunion classmates to have unprotected sex.”

She’d purposefully left her diaphragm at home that weekend – a clear statement of intent that Toby had found possible to allow in her defense – but apart from the recklessness of their having acted like the nineteen year-olds they’d once been together, what could be more secure than the protection of a vasectomy?

Sam trailed the girls from the kitchen back into the dining room, holding with both hands a saucer with a cupcake on it. Like twin magicians Abigail and Barbara produced from their pockets a box of matches and six birthday candles, and once they were lit and his cupcake looked like a crown prince’s crown, while they were all singing to him, Sam made his fervent wish.

Seeing him squeeze his eyes shut in order to focus all his energy, so did Irene, which caused the tears to spill out from under her eyelids. Even though Sam was only half the age of Bobby's daughters, they each seemed genuinely willing to escape the demands of this neither/nor time of life in favor of a temporary return to childhood. She saw it all the time in her classroom.

Sam had been wearing his bathing suit under his cargo pants all day, so he was already ready. Irene's suit was in her canvas overnight bag, but she was feeling too exposed as it was and would refuse to be coerced into putting it on. She wasn't particularly eager to see Bobby's body either, no matter that for an academic year – half their lives ago – she'd known it intimately. The reunion encounter didn't count, since she didn't remember either of them undressing.

The vaulted glass structure surrounding the pool was worthy of a train station in Paris, but Irene couldn't supply the engineering lingo necessary to inventing a commentary authentic to Toby. It would intrigue him, certainly, yet wasn't it a bit – *un petit peu* – pretentious? Maybe he'd simply dismiss it as absurdly overbuilt, but her inability to speak for him exaggerated how lonely she felt without him. They'd grown so close that she could often guess what he was about to say, as well as what he wasn't saying. Though this wasn't always a comfortable experience, she liked to think it kept them honest.

When the girls went to change into their bathing suits, Irene brought the dessert plates to the kitchen. Guessing to find a bathroom in that hallway off the kitchen, she glanced at the wall of photos of the family, separately and together, and saw how in every picture from birth until now Bobby's wide smile never changed.

The girls had reappeared in their marine blue Speedo suits and, as the first one in the water, Sam declared the temperature perfect. Irene was less certain of spring's ability to officially arrive this year, even here in what was technically the southern half of the country, so she needed to be wearing the pale yellow feathery wool shawl that Toby gave her to make her look like a chick.

Bobby sat in the nearest to hers of the four sailcloth-cushioned bamboo and rattan armchairs. "I'll never forget what you told me on the phone this morning," he said, "about having fourteen kids in your class whose fathers didn't make it home from lower Manhattan that day."

She could have told him he'd already forgotten the specifics – it was three in her class and eleven altogether – or that some of them had lost their mothers. Instead she wondered if he knew that both of her own parents were gone. She had trouble remembering which of her old boyfriends they'd met, when all that mattered in the end was that they'd not met Toby.

“I admire you, Irene, is all I’m trying to say. I also admire my wife, but mainly for figuring out how to be rich without making a career of it, like right now when she’s off doing some variety of good that needs doing. Come to think of it,” he said, “I’m the only one of us three whose values are questionable.”

“Lynne is lovely, and I appreciate her generosity tonight.”

“What I mean is that she doesn’t know. I didn’t tell her.”

“Yes, you said that.”

Bobby sighed like an old woman. “I should be ashamed of myself, I know. You’re right about Lynne too. Lovely is an old-fashioned term, and it fits. She is.”

“Now you’re finally sounding guilty,” Irene said gently.

The girls were flinging Sam around like a toy, and between his squealing and their shrieking the mood was suddenly chaotic, but in a good way, as Toby would say. Irene considered the chronology and saw that at the time of the reunion his daughters would have been around Sam’s age now, which made her feel curious about the decision he’d made – he and Lynne together, presumably – not to have more children. She and Toby had been trying to have another for more than a year, but with no success.

Bobby said, “I remember that exhilarating sheer energy feeling I had as a boy, so I’m glad to see Sam temporarily *off* his best behavior.”

It was unsettling to see Sam so wound up, but Irene felt uncomfortable for a different reason. Even at the risk of having to refuse Bobby’s help in persuading Metropolitan Life to interpret Toby’s death as an accident – Sam could perhaps one day come to live with the alternative legacy, if he had to – she needed to know now whether or not she’d been lied to. “I’m not trying to trick you, Bobby, but when you said ‘unprotected’ a minute ago you meant ‘unplanned,’ right? I need to know because, on that occasion, as you’ll surely remember, you and I had a very short but pointed discussion about protection.” Now she faced him to say, “So I’m going to ask you directly: did you have a vasectomy?”

“Yes,” he answered, “and that’s the truth.” If she were the lawyer instead of him, she’d know to ask the follow-up question - to discover whether he was telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth - to get him to specify when he’d had the procedure.

“Mom! Watch!” Sam was standing between the two sisters he now too was calling “Abby!” and “Babby!” and, with his toes right up to the edge of the opposite side of the pool, he used his thumbs to hold his overlapping fingers together to make an arrowhead, the way they’d taught him, for penetrating the

water like an Olympic athlete. He waited for Irene to shout “I’m watching!” before falling forward to hit the water at just the right angle. Only his wild little legs scrambling the air above his head betrayed the fact that he’d never done this before.

Since he wouldn’t be able to make it all the way across the pool’s width, both girls dove in and rafted him over to where the grownups could make the proper parental fuss.

Sam grasped the near edge of the pool with both hands, and like twin mermaids the girls simultaneously tipped their heads back under the surface to let the water stream their long hair away from their faces. Their profiles mirrored each other, but Irene didn’t register the extent of their symmetry at first because she was concentrating solely on Sam, who was bracketed by them and twisting his head from side to side as if he couldn’t decide which one of them he loved more. They were both fair like their mother, and Sam was dark like her, but Irene couldn’t fail to notice their identical ears.