

The Finger

They'd left the house without a flashlight, which Walt now regretted. He could barely see the road, paved but narrow, with the occasional gravel driveway branching off into the darkness. The lake shimmered a dull silver to their left. They always walked this way, counter-clockwise around the lake, one of their many habits he was bored with.

He'd asked Clare to take a walk in order to tell her that their marriage was over. He hadn't wanted to tell her at the house, thinking the words might come easier out here. But he couldn't get them past his dry lips. Instead, he kept looking up at the sliver of moon hanging in the trees.

"Bob and Debra Ann went to see someone," Clare said. "Some kind of counselor, and it really helped them."

"Oh?" Walt said, scratching his chin.

Clare, perhaps inspired by her dull friend Debra Ann, had lately decided that she and Walt were merely "in a rut," nothing that a little professional help couldn't cure. There wasn't enough "communication," Walt was "distant," there were "intimacy issues."

"What do you think?" she asked.

"About what?"

"About us. Seeing this counselor."

"Us?"

Bob had told him all about it, about how Debra Ann and the counselor had ganged up on him, and how they'd scolded him for not crying. He agreed with Bob that counseling was for those who need to tell themselves they've tried everything.

“We need to get it all off our chests,” Clare went on. “But in a safe environment, with a neutral observer, so we don’t get hostile.”

Walt hated this kind of talk. Ever since Clare had started therapy, her conversations were peppered with terms like “supervising ego” and “unconscious anger.” All of a sudden she knew everything about him, why he said or did certain things, why he couldn’t sleep at night. She knew that his “emotional unavailability” was due to his alcoholic father and cold, distant mother. She knew everything, it seemed, except that he’d been having an affair.

“Debra Ann says this counselor is an amazing woman. She really got Bob to open up and be honest about his fear of commitment.”

Walt wished he had the nerve to say, *But I don’t have a fear of commitment. It’s just that, recently, I’ve been more committed to somebody else.*

One day Walt had gone into the little bookstore on Main Street looking for a copy of *Light Years* and ended up getting into a discussion about James Salter with Leah, the owner. Walt had been in the store a few times but had never bought anything, had barely noticed the tall, slender woman behind the counter, but, as she talked about Salter’s work, her green eyes growing large, he could see how pretty she was. Those eyes—the way they contrasted with her long, dark hair—were like lamps in a far-off house in the middle of the night. She had no copies of *Light Years* in stock, she told him finally, but she would order one for him. He spent the rest of the week debating with himself about what to say to her when he went to pick up the book. In the end, he decided it couldn’t hurt to have a friend in town, or at least that’s what he told himself, and so he asked her to lunch. That was three months ago.

“Haven’t you noticed how different they are?” Clare asked. “Bob used to be so mean to Debra Ann. All those cutting remarks.”

“I haven’t really noticed,” Walt said. He didn’t tell her the reason that Bob was so mellow these days was that he’d also started seeing someone else, a nurse at the local hospital.

“The ten-year mark is a milestone,” Clare told him. “That’s when it really sinks in that this is forever. It can be hard, especially for men.”

Ten years, Walt thought. It seemed so much longer. Back then they were living in the city, in a small one bedroom in the Village—the center of the world. They stayed out late on weeknights, spent all day Sunday in bed, and went through money as if determined to die broke. Then came 9/11 and Clare all of a sudden developed a desire to live in the country. “Time to grow up,” she’d said. For Walt it meant, “Time to run away from the place where everything is happening.”

But, sufficiently beaten down by Clare’s post-attack anxiety, he gave in. They bought their little house on the lake, he quit his full-time job to freelance, and Clare found work at the local weekly newspaper, where she covered town meetings and the latest collisions between deer and SUVs.

Leah could relate to his frustration. She’d moved out here with her ex several years back and started up the bookstore just to maintain her sanity. When they divorced she thought she’d move back to the city, but she’d grown fond of the store and decided to stay on instead.

She told him this over lunch. She’d dressed up for the occasion in a tight leather skirt that didn’t quite reach her knees and a sleeveless blouse. Walt had surprised himself

by putting on his expensive Italian suit coat for the first time since quitting his full-time job. He was up-front about being married, mentioning Clare several times in the first ten minutes, though he found his tone veering toward a sort of embarrassed exasperation whenever he referred to her. Leah seemed unfazed, even curious about Clare. She asked what she was like, what she did for work, what she looked like. For a moment he thought they could perhaps all become good friends, the three of them going out for dinner and drinks every now and then, but then he decided he didn't want that. He wanted Leah all to himself. After lunch they shook hands and she told him to let her know what he thought of the book.

“This is all very natural, sweetie,” Clare told him. “There’s no harder work than marriage.”

They passed the Turner house, where a party was in progress. The Turner boys were a wild bunch, driving their souped-up cars too fast around the road’s tight corners, occasionally knocking over mailboxes, and, when their parents were out, throwing these notorious parties. The usually placid night air thumped with hip-hop bass notes and peals of teenage laughter.

“Poor Mark and Laurie,” Clare said of the Turners. “Those kids are a real burden. If they can stick together through *this*, we should be able to.”

“I suppose you think everything would be okay if we had kids,” he said.

“Oh, Walt, that’s not what I meant.”

She took his hand, the way she always did when she detected his frustration on this topic. But it only made him more angry.

Last year, after trying for months to conceive, Clare had talked him into having his semen analyzed. The whole experience was humiliating, with the smirking receptionist handing him that plastic cup and escorting him to a small, tiled room with a flimsy door. He could still picture the chair covered with examination-table paper, the shelf stacked with pornographic magazines, the television with a built-in VCR. The whole time he heard the people next door in the laboratory, chuckling among themselves. Not since he was fifteen years old in his parents' house had Walt masturbated within earshot of so many people going about their business. When the results showed that his sperm were not up to par—something about low motility—he'd felt emasculated and ashamed. Every time Clare spoke about couples who had children—even the Turners with their delinquent teenagers—Walt experienced it as a thinly veiled personal insult.

One of the reasons Leah had split with her ex was that she didn't want to have children. "The world is so crowded already," she'd told Walt that first time as she ran her long fingers lightly over his chest. A week had passed since their lunch. He'd stopped by the bookstore twice already, first to chat about *Light Years*, then just to say hello. During visit number three, she asked him if he'd like to step out for lunch. She told her assistant she'd be back in a couple hours, then led him down the street and up a flight of external stairs to her apartment above a pharmacy. She pulled leftover chicken from the fridge, which they ate cold with wine at her kitchen table. After lunch and a full bottle of pinot grigio she took his hand and escorted him to the bedroom. When she kissed him, parting her soft, wet lips, the hairs on his arms stood up. It had been forever since he'd felt that electric jolt that comes with the touch of a woman. Afterward, with one long leg draped over his belly, she spoke about her ex's anger at her for not wanting to have his babies.

She went on to express her disdain for self-absorbed suburban ladies like Clare, with their biological clocks and SUVs. She was relieved, she said, that Walt was sterile. “That means no contraception,” she said with a mischievous grin.

“But I do think the adoption process could bring us closer together,” Clare said as they passed the Turner house. She squeezed his hand again.

“I told you,” Walt said, tearing his hand away, “I think we should hold off on that.”

“Why? It takes so long Walt. It wouldn’t hurt to start on the paperwork.”

He sighed. Paperwork meant lawyers, and lawyers meant money. If he was going to climb into that mud pit he may as well get what he really wanted out of it: a divorce.

They turned onto an especially dark stretch of road, flanked by fields of huge old maple trees, their full branches hanging overhead like a canopy. From somewhere around the next bend came the rumble of an engine.

“I’ve been doing some research,” Clare said. “We could fly to China in about twelve or fifteen months if we start the ball rolling now. Sheena at work did it with her husband, came back with an adorable little Chinese girl. They couldn’t be happier.”

Leah had also been talking about adoption lately. While she felt no need for a biological heir, she had decided that caring for an unwanted child would be a service to humanity. But instead of the predictable China—it seemed like every other couple in town had an adorable little Chinese girl in a state-of-the-art stroller—she was interested in Africa. “Have you ever met an Ethiopian?” she’d asked. She said they were absolutely gorgeous, with their smoky brown skin and neon smiles. For weeks now Walt had fantasized about raising such a child with Leah.

As they neared the turn in the road—a sharp left through the woods—Walt could hear the rapid approach of the vehicle, its stereo turned up all the way. Headlights flashed through the trees. It looked like a pickup, moving very fast.

“I just think we should figure out our problems,” he explained, “before we add such a huge complication to the mix.”

“A ‘huge complication’?” Clare said. “Is that what a child means to you?”

They’d just reached the turn when the pickup roared around the bend, nearly running them over. In the split second during which the vehicle passed by, a mere foot or two away, Walt saw into the cab where two boys flanked a pretty girl with blonde hair. There was something especially infuriating about the trio, above and beyond their rudeness and lousy driving, and before he could think about what he was doing, he lifted his middle finger. Even within that crowded fraction of a second, he detected that his gesture had registered. Then the truck was past them.

“Jesus!” Clare said, stumbling on the uneven shoulder of the road.

“Are you all right?” Walt took hold of her arm.

“They could’ve killed us!”

Clare dusted herself off and they continued walking. As they made the sharp left turn, Walt glanced back to see the truck slow to a crawl, then stop. It was about fifty yards behind them. The brake lights glowed bright red in the dark.

“Anyway,” Clare said, “I was going to say, it might do you some good to have a ‘complication’ in your life.”

She hadn't noticed that the truck had stopped. Walt looked back again. What if the driver started to back up, or turned around? They were probably all drunk and looking for a fight. They might even have a gun in that ridiculous truck.

Clare said, "I think we've both gotten so comfortable with our lives that we could use a little shaking up, you know?"

Yeah, Walt thought. How about a little shake-up right now? Through the trees in the woods he could still make out the fire-red brake lights.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Uh-huh," he said, his ears tuned to the truck's low rumble. He considered telling Clare that they may be in some danger, but then he would have to tell her about his obscene gesture, and she would berate him for being so adolescent. Still, if the truck returned he would have to do *something*. He figured he had three options: dash into the woods and hide; run to the next house and ask for help; or stand his ground and confront the hoodlums. If only Leah were here with him instead of Clare. Leah inspired him to be stronger, mostly in dumb little ways—sending back an undercooked hamburger, or asking for directions from a stranger—but he could feel these small adjustments shifting, ever so slightly, the tectonic plates of his character.

"Every time I bring up the idea of adoption," Clare said, "you shut down. Do you even realize that?"

Leah's right, he thought. Clare is so self-absorbed she can't even see what's going on right in front of her. Could she not hear the growl of the truck less than one hundred yards away? Could she not detect the hyper alert, anxious way that he was carrying

himself? How would she protect her precious little Chinese girl from danger when she can't even tell if she herself is in peril?

“You're shutting down right now, aren't you?” she said.

He listened for the truck.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Shhh!”

The engine still rumbled, but it seemed quieter, either because the truck had moved on, or perhaps just because the distance was greater between them. He could not relax until he knew the truck had gone.

“What is your problem?” Clare asked.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“I thought I heard a fox,” he said. She had a thing for foxes—maybe that would keep her quiet for a moment.

“Where?” she whispered.

“In the woods.”

She cocked her head to listen.

He heard it, now that Clare had stopped talking: the truck engine. It had not moved. He wondered what they could be doing back there. Were they debating their course of action, one boy wanting to go back and kick some ass, the other anxious to get to the party, with the blonde girl torn between the two?

“I hear a car or something,” Clare said.

The truck engine grew louder. It was moving.

“Must be those Turner kids,” she added.

“Will you *shut up*?” Walt hissed. Even in the dark he could make out the look of shock on her face.

The truck, still around the bend, was coming closer.

“Walt?” Clare moaned.

“Okay,” he said as the truck’s headlights shone through the trees, “I need you to go into the woods.”

“What?”

“Just do as I say.”

The truck was just reaching the bend in the road. In a second or two, the headlights would be in their eyes.

“Please,” he said. “Go into the woods and wait for me.”

“*Why?*”

“Trust me, Clare.”

She just stood there.

“*Do it.*”

He pushed her toward the trees, but it was mostly the force of his voice that propelled Clare off the road and into the woods.

“Go on,” he called out to her as the truck rounded the bend. “Keep going till you can’t see me.”

She had disappeared into the darkness but he could hear the crack of twigs as she ran. The truck was on the straightaway, its bright beams shining in his eyes. He considered following Clare, but for some reason he was not afraid anymore.

Earlier, Walt had parked in the public lot in back of Leah's apartment and waited in his car until he saw her come home from the bookstore and climb the stairway. By the time he got out of his car, traversed the parking lot, and climbed the stairs, she had taken off all her clothes and lay in bed. This was their usual routine, two or three times a week. He thought now of her pale, smooth skin, her long legs wrapped around him, ankles locked and pulling him deeper inside her. Before she came, she went completely still, like a cat in freefall, just waiting, breathlessly, for the impact. When it arrived, she let everything go, including all decorum. It was nothing he'd ever seen or heard before: the way she writhed, the filth that poured from her mouth, as if each word, each gyration, could prolong the sensation. It horrified him at first, then he laughed. Now it turned him on like nothing else ever had.

He stood by the side of the road, blinded by the headlights. The truck slowed, then braked to a stop ten yards away. The driver turned off the engine, leaving the lights on. The night sounds fell into place as if into perfectly carved slots: crickets, leaves rustling in the breeze, the far-off barking of a dog.

Walt raised his hand to shade his eyes, but could not see inside the truck. The occupants remained where they were, perfectly quiet.

When he announced that he was planning to leave Clare, Leah had not been as enthusiastic as he'd hoped. Not that she was displeased, exactly. *Reserved* was perhaps the best way to describe her reaction. There were no hugs and kisses, no tears of joy, but neither did she turn away. She continued to drape her long leg over him, but spoke in an unusually serious tone. She asked what he would do, where he would live. She wondered how Clare would react—would she be so angry that she'd make the divorce ugly? These

were all good questions that he had not seriously considered. He had thought only of Leah and his life with her: the days and nights together, the trips to be taken, the sex. Even as she posed her thoughtful questions he glossed over them, declaring that he didn't care, that he cared only about *her*, about *them*.

“Walt?”

He heard the crackle of twigs in the woods.

“Stay there,” he said.

The truck had not moved, nor had anyone inside spoken. They just sat there. Walt saw the tip of a cigarette glow red, then die out.

When he left Leah's apartment today, there had been a new seriousness between them. Normally they would kiss, hold one another, sometimes even return to bed. She would laugh, they would make plans to meet in a couple of days, both of them wishing out loud that they could meet sooner. This afternoon, there was a kiss, but it was without heat, and there was no laughter. They said they would get together in two days, but they both knew that, if Walt went ahead with his plans, the meeting would be consumed with a discussion of what had happened with Clare, and what it meant for their future.

Everything would be different. No, he'd thought as he descended the stairs—everything was *already* different.

He'd been so sure Leah loved him, just as he'd been sure he loved *her*. But now, as he stood there in the road with the truck's headlights burning his eyes, he was not sure of anything.

The girl giggled in the cab, then came a male voice: “I'm bored. Let's go.”

The engine started with a bellow, followed by the grind of gears as the truck rolled backwards. The driver angled it sideways, then turned around. Still blind from the glare, Walt could barely make out the three occupants. A beer bottle shattered at his feet. The girl laughed and the truck tore off, exhaust clouding the view of its red taillights.

Clare emerged from the trees.

“Are you all right?” she asked, wrapping her arms around him.

He watched the truck’s lights turn and fade into the trees, the rattling engine now a dull, far-off purr.

“What were they doing?” she asked. “Why did they come back like that?”

“I don’t know,” he said. He felt his head go heavy and his eyes fill with water.

“What’s the matter?” Clare asked, touching the tears that rolled down his cheeks.

But he could not tell her.

“Let’s go home,” Clare said, taking his hand. “You’ll feel better then.”

And, knowing she was probably right, he went with her.