

## FREEZE FRAME

Your pictures are straight, your rugs are clean; no pets in this household because your husband is allergic, so they really are clean. Your shoes are lined up on the floor of the closet by the pair, your clothes hanging by category. You've taken out all the silverware, polished it, and put it back, though company never comes. Yet something's wrong, and though you can't see it, you can feel it. You've tried to pin everything down, but it's slipping all over the place. When Stanley left for work he said, "I hope you're going to have a good day." He hovered in the doorway. "You'll be all right, won't you?"

"Fine," you said. Last night you had a nightmare that your son Jeb flunked his finals, but don't get started thinking about that--not now, not again.

You've moved into the kitchen, sat down at the table, and turned the radio to classical. Bach is the right kind of music, bracing, joyful without being giddy. Measured. Your house is like that--measured, not joyful. You make yourself a third cup of coffee, though you need, if anything, to relax, but the small operations, the grinding and measuring, the whisking away of excess grinds, are always a comfort, as is the coffee, steaming in its blue mug with the yellow sunflowers on it, a rare touch of color in your industrial-style kitchen.

You line up three gingersnaps next to the mug, one atop the other, like inner tubes. You're keeping busy, trying not to think too much. The stack reminds you of a house your ex-husband Derek might have built when he was into houses--now he designs commercial spaces. Back then he made houses out of flattened disks of concrete painted in primary colors, even though this isn't Long Island or California, it's Massachusetts, and nobody else builds stuff like that here. (The two of you lived in odd-looking houses, too: one looked like a shoe box with a rounded roof, another like a loosely connected group of outbuildings, both on the edge of conservation land because Derek didn't like people.) But Derek is a powerhouse; he can sell anything to anybody. His resume is two and a half pages long. You haven't seen Stanley's resume; you don't think he has one. He's had the same job, selling imported machine parts, for over twenty years and doesn't need a resume anymore. Your mother objected to Stanley because he isn't rich enough, only she used the word "established" so as to seem tasteful. Derek's established, but what she doesn't know is he gave you a black eye one time and another time pushed you down the

back stairs. Stanley is gentle. He gives you massages in bed, though sex seems to be out of the question these days. You've been too worried for sex. Useless to blame Stanley. You're a bundle of nerves. You push your mug of coffee away from you, though you're sure you'll drink it later.

You can see your neighbor's daughter from across the street, riding her bike. Wearing a skirt and no helmet. Jeb never wore a helmet, either. He never took particularly good care of himself. You wonder why she's not in school; then you remember it's a holiday. Even so it looks as if no one's home except you and her. Where do people go, these days? The two of you might as well be extras in the last scenes of On the Beach, it's that desolate, a wan autumn sun failing to break through the clouds. Stanley went to work even though it's a holiday. He works a lot, though not as hard as Derek. No one works as hard as Derek.

For the hundredth time, you wonder if you should have quit your job when you and Stanley got married and moved to this town, even though you hated your job. Still, it gave you something to think about besides yourself, your son. Even your animals that you had in your previous marriage were good for that. Maybe you should get some animals that Stanley isn't allergic to, like fish. You hate fish. They're always dying and floating to the surface and having to be flushed down the toilet--you had them when you were young. You had every conceivable kind of animal when you were young--it was the one irregularity your mother tolerated. You even had a parakeet who flew away. You could get a parakeet now, except they get

lice, and the bottoms of their cages become encrusted with shit. You decide against a parakeet.

Your job used to distract you. You'd try to figure out how much your fat boss weighed, and his even fatter secretary, Doreen, and you used to imagine them at lunch together, having drinks first, because if they were more than normally noisy in the morning, they were rowdy by afternoon. They didn't care whom they disrupted; they were both married to other people; Ted even had three kids. Doreen had a high-pitched, hyena laugh. You used to study them from behind your partition. You were better paid than Doreen, more of an office manager, really, though your job description said assistant. Both Stanley and the shrink said why keep the job when you don't need the money or the aggravation. But it seems that, having quit, you don't find things any easier. You're just falling apart privately instead of publicly. You wander around the rooms of your split level talking to yourself. Several times a day you look into a mirror, startled every time.

The neighbor girl is circling idly now, doing big loops in the street. She looks carefree, if bored. You wonder what Jeb is doing to amuse himself these days, now that he's at college. But you suspect--no, you know--what he's doing. He's going to clubs, he's drinking. You wonder if he's going to gay clubs, or straight ones, or if he plays it judiciously, like Solomon, dividing his time equally. He doesn't discuss these things with you, or much of anything. He hasn't been home in six months, maybe longer. He says he's only being fair to his father because he was so long with you after the divorce, but you don't believe this to be the reason he goes more to Derek's.

You don't know what the reason is. Could it be that Derek is more tolerant, easier to be with? This is hard to believe.

"I never thought a son of mine would be at risk for AIDS," Derek said when he first learned the truth, when you both learned it, separately. Derek's eyes were red from crying, and as you stood on his front doorstep, having come to pick Jeb up, you wanted first to hold him in your arms and then to punch him, for saying Jeb was a son of his. Especially since he's married again and has another child, a baby, so if something happens to Jeb, he's got another chance, whereas you're menopausal, and even if you were foolish enough to want more kids, Stanley doesn't. His kids are grown--they're both settled, out West, both stable, like him--and he doesn't want to start again at the age of fifty-five. And why should he? Raising kids these days is risky even if you're twenty-five.

You can no longer see your neighbor's daughter, though you crane your neck and look up and down the street. You wonder if she's had an accident. But you would have heard something, wouldn't you, even with the windows closed? A minute later she swoops back into view, riding no hands. It's a wonder her skirt doesn't catch in the spokes. She goes into her driveway, stopping smoothly like a docking boat. Then she turns and heads back out again. After a while, she comes back. There's a lulling rhythm to it, out and back, out and back, yet each time she goes out of sight you imagine her having an accident.

First her skirt gets caught in her spokes, or a cat comes charging out, and then she goes over the handlebars and lands on her head. No one discovers her for

a long time because she and you are the only ones home, and you couldn't hear anything, shut up in your house, listening to Bach. She would have a concussion, and by the time they got her to a hospital, she would probably be dead.

"Dead?" you imagine her mother and father saying, uncomprehendingly.

"Dead? She was riding her bike around the block. She was a careful child, though it's true she didn't always wear her helmet."

The mother has a round face and glasses, a serious look. You've spoken to her twice. Her name is Cheryl or Sharon; you don't know the husband's or the daughter's name. This is a cold and smug neighborhood, everybody very self-sufficient. You shouldn't have moved here, you should have stayed in the city. It's possible that Jeb is staying away because the neighborhood is so dull. There's no club, no nightspot, even, within miles of you. Teens hang out near the old-fashioned trainstation, smoking their cigarettes, looking woebegone, like homeless people. They are homeless people, in a way, you suppose. You've seen them when you've driven to the 7/11 for milk or dump stickers. It was a mistake to think you could play at being an ordinary couple. Stanley's better at the game than you are, but he's not really ordinary, either. When you met him, the sex between you was so good that for a while you thought you'd met another madman, like Derek, but now you and Stanley settle into the two spoons position at bedtime with twin sighs, as if this is all a married couple of three years can expect.

"Don't you want anything for yourself?" the shrink said to Stanley the time he came with you. "You need to want something for yourself."

"Of course I do!" Stanley said.

"Good. And what is it that you want?"

Stanley fell silent. At last he said, "I want Caroline to be happy."

The shrink, a patient man with a beard and round glasses and small, pudgy hands that look too tentative for the work of this world, sighed.

"Caroline's been so worried about her son," Stanley went on. "She's been frantic, really. I'd like to see her get a good night's sleep for a change. That's what I'd like."

You must have been very hard to live with ever since Jeb left for college. When he was in prep school he was easier to keep track of, even though he wasn't living with you. Now you don't know what he's about. You don't know what he'll major in, even, though he doesn't have to decide for a year and a half. He used to be good at art, but he hasn't drawn anything you know of for months, maybe a year. His artwork used to be up all over your refrigerator and Derek's and even your mother's, who disapproved of Jeb before this sexual orientation thing. You wonder if people are truly bisexual. Or is it just a circumlocution so that, a year or two down the line, they can tell you, having softened you up, that they're really gay?

He did bring a girl to the house summer before last, sometime after he made his announcement. What was her name? Katrina, Katrinka? Something that made you think of Hans and the silver skates. This was after his fling with Raoul, who used to call up at all hours. Stanley thought he was a girl, from his voice. "A girl," you said, "named Raoul?" Jeb has told you that gay teens are often at risk for

suicide; the ones he hung out with smoked clove cigarettes, even worse for a person than the regular cigarettes Jeb smokes now, and they did a lot of other crazy things, too. You could hear the note of desperation in Raoul's voice.

The trouble was that Katrina was no real relief even though she was female. You could hear them murmuring and laughing during the night, and you were ready to kick them out more than once but couldn't bring yourself to, you were so glad it was a girl. Thank God he never brought Raoul home with him; he always went to Raoul's house instead. Raoul had a swimming pool, and Stanley, who was your almost brand-new husband then, imagined that they just towelled each other off a little too lingeringly, while you had no trouble believing they did a lot more than that. When it comes to specifics, though, you do tend to block. How could anybody want to make love that way? You think, actually, that he hasn't. He may have come close, but he hasn't. You have no basis for thinking this besides hope, yet still you think it.

When he and Katrina came down for breakfast, she scarcely ate anything. Jeb pulled up like a car to the pump, had eggs and cereal and o.j. and milk and coffee, but she merely toyed with her bagel and Diet Coke. She had wrists thin as rhubarb stalks, and long, mousy hair that covered her face so you couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"What can I get you?" you asked. "Cereal? I could scrimmage up some French toast." These are the questions you imagine asking a grandchild someday, only now you're wondering if you will ever have grandchildren. And anyway a grandchild would have a sunny, fat face and would bang a spoon loudly on the

highchair and not hunch over his or her plate, scarcely speaking. Stanley winked at you over the paper as if he were saying, "See? Boys were a phase," only you don't think it's just a phase.

Jeb's face was white, ashen, really, when he confessed to you. He couldn't look at you. You went walking with him in the park with legs like lead because you'd known for months that something was wrong, but you didn't think it was this; this never occurred to you. And he says you made him feel like shit, too. You said, "What have I done wrong?" as if, he told you, his life was wrong, he was wrong. You don't remember saying that, but you do remember staring at him as if he were a stranger and feeling as if your heart would break, so it is perfectly possible you did say such a thing. Afterwards you came home and you lay down on the chaise in the bedroom and cried so hard that Stanley, in a completely uncharacteristic move, lay down on top of you to comfort you. Finally you stopped crying. Nowadays you scarcely cry at all. You sit and stare into space instead, if you're not keeping busy.

The girl is back at the head of her driveway. A cat has come out from somewhere, and she leans down to pet it. You don't know if it's hers or not. It could be anyone's. It could have rabies, and bite her. Or she herself might have some surprises of her own not too far down the line. She could be gay. She could become a drug addict--you have wondered if Jeb is doing drugs in those clubs you know he goes to; you're pretty sure he is, and you just hope it's the milder drugs, and not heroin or coke--she could get pregnant, contract E. coli from bad hamburger--anything is possible. "Adolescent" should mean "surprising one" in Latin. You were

certainly taken by surprise that day in the park. Jeb is normally pale--he has startling coloring, pale skin, dark hair, green, green eyes--but that day he looked so spectral, you were panicked he might already have the AIDS you'd been fearing anyway, believing he was heterosexual. He had a tic in his eye, and the same kind of sad, twisted smile he wore when, years ago, you broke it to him that you and his father were divorcing.

You were selfish, no question about it, whether or not you asked where you had gone wrong. You worried he would never have a family, but what you were thinking was that you would never have any grandchildren. You hadn't thought much about grandchildren and now suddenly life scarcely seemed worth living without them. You worried about what your mother would think, your friends, Stanley's friends, Stanley himself. All the while you were imagining Jeb doing it with a boy, and then you would try not to imagine it. You would never let a man make love to you there, where men have to do it; not that you're doing sex in any way these days. You wonder how much this has to do with Jeb. The shrink thinks there's a close connection. You do, too. Did you secretly want to do it with Jeb, and now that he's doing it, or may be doing it, with a boy, you don't want to anymore, so you can't with Stanley, either? Or is it possible you're just so worn out with worrying you don't feel like doing much of anything anymore?

You've been told only bits and pieces about these clubs he goes to. You know they have loud music, so loud Jeb jokes he may be growing deaf already, but do they have strobe lights anymore, caressing all those young bodies? And does

Jeb caress any young bodies, or, with those looks, attract caresses from older men, men who make the thing with Raoul look like mere child's play? You're so busy thinking about him, you can't think about anything else. Sometimes you're glad you quit your job, for this reason, and other times you think a job is precisely what you need to get your mind off him, some simple job, not too taxing. You've thought about working at the little video store in town that is always ill-stocked and disorganized. You know a good bit about movies because when you're not brooding or keeping busy so as not to brood, you're watching movies--in the theater, rented, on T.V., you're indiscriminate. You could help people in a job like that, put in a word or two for taste, for the honest dramas that change lives. (Or do they? You doubt your life has ever been changed by a movie. You wish one would change it now.)

The girl has gone indoors, or somewhere. Her bike lies like a moribund beast at the top of the driveway, spinning its front wheel. This is not the way you would guess that this child would leave her bike. Perhaps she's been abducted by a stranger, or aliens. You sit, staring out your contemporary window with the plastic partitions, breathlessly waiting. She's been abducted while you daydreamed and mourned about your son, who, after all, is alive and well. Why should you be so frantic about his sexual orientation? You wonder if he has a salad bar at that college; you never even asked him that. You say so little in your phone conversations, and since he doesn't say much, either, your talks are of a record-breaking brevity. He says the food is lousy, but if there's a salad bar, you could tell

him to eat lettuce, and maybe cottage cheese, even though he hates it; at least then he'd have something healthy.

Often you don't get Jeb, you get the roommate, and then the conversations are even shorter. The roommate is pre-med, very businesslike. He doesn't smoke; some kind of bureaucratic snafu occurred for them to end up together, and Jeb has to smoke outside the room, which makes him hate the roommate even worse. "All he does is study," he grumbles.

"Well," you said last time, faking a lightness you didn't feel, "maybe some of it will rub off on you." Why can't you praise him, the way you used to do when he was younger? He's smart, handsome, and he can be very charming. You could inspire confidence in him instead of worrying and disapproving all the time, just like your mother. Your mother, like Stanley, thinks the whole thing is a phase. "He's no more gay than I am," she once snorted. The thing is, you've wondered sometimes if she is gay. She used to run her hands over you in a very suspect way when she made your party dresses in your teens. You've even wondered about yourself. You've had more than one lesbian dream, and sometimes you stare at a beautiful woman too long, as if you wanted to be her, yes, but maybe also as if you wanted her. Still, you can't imagine putting your nose, your mouth where they would have to go. So you suppose you're not gay, after all.

Your coffee has gone cold. The girl still hasn't come outside. As time passes, however, the scene is less suggestive of hurry and disaster, maybe because the bicycle wheel has stopped spinning.

The last time you talked to Jeb, you discussed money again. You always discuss money, if nothing else. Derek is richer than Stanley and you, but he's fed up with what he calls Jeb's extravagant lifestyle. You're guessing he thinks he can turn Jeb back into a heterosexual by sending him so little money he can't go to the clubs or drink or smoke cigarettes like the other gay boys. You've considered this possibility yourself, but you believe that money is scarcely the root cause if he is gay, or bisexual, if people are bisexual. (And if they are, do they turn gay at last? Do they leave some woman they've married--whom they married because they didn't want to see, ever again, the look on their mother's face, or on anyone else's, when they told her they weren't straight? Do they leave this woman, maybe having had kids with her, even, to be themselves before it's too late? And does that feel, to the woman, just like any break up, or does it feel worse, somehow, and stranger, the way you felt that day in the park?)

You sent him the money, of course. He made some joke about his tightwad rich father, and you were so glad of a joke between you that you went right downtown and sent him a money order for the full amount, two hundred dollars. You have no idea if he's doing any work or not. Does he go to the library as well as those clubs? Often when you reach him, even at dinner time, he says he's been asleep. Why would he be asleep at dinnertime? You wonder if he's on some kind of drug, to sound as sleepy as he does. Do other parents just up and ask about this kind of thing? You never do. Of course, you're on drugs, too. You have your Ativan,

not just at night, to sleep, but sometimes during the day as well. The shrink says you're better, though.

"Why do you think so?" you asked last time.

"You're stronger. Do you remember how you were shaking when you first came here?"

You do. You shook all day long, ever so slightly. Even Stanley didn't notice, but the shrink did, right away, and gently, almost tenderly pointed it out. It was why you liked him.

The phone rings, startling you. Despite the Ativan, you jump. You are hoping against hope it's Jeb, but he just called a few days ago.

"Hi, Sweetheart," Stanley says. "You're home!" You don't know why he says that; you're always home. "So, how are you?"

"Good," you say. "Fine."

"What's for dinner?" he says, laughing. He has a hearty appetite, for a thin man. It's not even lunchtime yet.

"I'm not sure yet."

"Want me to pick something up?" Stanley's very helpful. He goes not just to the grocery store but the dry cleaner's, the bakery, the drugstore, whatever. His patience and goodwill have no limits. Derek was the opposite; he never did an errand for anyone, scarcely did errands for himself. Yet ambivalence, even hatred notwithstanding, the way you loved Derek is the way you want to love someone now. You think of Raoul's voice on the telephone, that note of desperation, though maybe

it wasn't passion you were hearing but the voice of a boy who smoked clove cigarettes and was about to spit up blood. Was that his charm for your son? Did none of the girls he knew have that note in their voices?

"Well," you say, "we have pot roast and carrots and onions. We could get by all right. Dessert, maybe. You want dessert?"

"Sure, I'll pick up something. Are you sure you're all right?"

"Yes," you say, biting the word off with an annoyance which you regret immediately. It's not Stanley's fault you're in such a funk. "It's just that dream I had, that's all."

"The one about Jeb and his finals?"

You're touched he remembers. Derek never remembered your dreams; in fact, he usually wouldn't even listen to them. Other people's dreams drove him wild with impatience.

The dream was creepy, it is true. In it, Jeb was wandering around campus, pale and forlorn, on some drug, like a character out of Poe, and wasn't even showing up for his finals, which were in strange subjects he wasn't taking. Later, after breakfast when you cleaned out all the cannisters, for something to do, you saw a dead silverfish in the flour, and the stiff gray form made you remember your dream all over again. You shuddered, nearly picking up the phone to dial Jeb.

"He'll be fine, Caroline. It's only a dream," he says. Stanley takes a hearty, philosophic approach to academic performance, as he does to most things. He

made C's in college. Derek made B's. You're the only one of the three of you to make A's, and look where you are today.

"Want me to get some frozen yogurt?" he says, "with raspberries on top?" He doesn't know how to pick out fruits or vegetables. He doesn't handle them, or even really look at them. Then when they're rotten or unripe, he's always so surprised.

"No, you know what? I'll go downtown. Don't you go--I'll go."

"Are you sure? I'm right here."

You've wondered if he's too sweet for you, or just a wimp, overly passive. Maybe you need someone you can't control, like Derek. Derek is certifiable, you've sometimes thought. He drinks, his body's gone all to pot, and he talks too loudly, like a crazy man. He's alive, though; there's no doubt he's alive. Sometimes you wonder if you are, or if you're like those people in Invasion of the Body Snatchers. You remind yourself to see the old version; you've only seen the newer one, with Donald Sutherland and Brooke Adams. "No, no, I'll go," you say.

"Okay. Well, I gotta go." He drops his voice to a near-whisper, as if he's talking dirty. "Bye-bye, sweetheart." You wish he would talk dirty. It would brighten your day. Yet he calls you every day, sometimes more than once. You wonder what you've done to deserve such an attentive man. Derek never had another woman, so far as you know, but he found other ways to be inattentive.

So you'll go to town, do some errands. Once out in the car, you'll take on renewed life. Things will look clean and heartening, somehow, even on a gray day, with the leaves piled in the gutters. In the market, you'll imagine prevailing on Jeb to

come for Thanksgiving. When was the last time he stayed with you for a holiday? You can't remember. He doesn't even stay with Derek most times. He goes to the houses of friends, or people he scarcely knows whom he calls friends, from one of whom he contracted scabies, and from others, God knows what. The turkeys are lined up already, their fat, pale breasts turned skyward in a hopeful-looking row, and you'll imagine him, not bringing a friend this time, but coming alone, sleeping late, and then tucking into the chow. Turkey and stuffing and mashed potatoes; maybe you'll make a special stuffing this year with cornbread or oysters, go all out. God knows you have the time. He'll have seconds, thirds. He'll laugh, like in the old days--when does he laugh anymore? when do you?--and sweep back that silken wing of hair, so dark it's almost black.

By the time, however, that you've turned the corner into the next aisle, you'll probably have decided he won't come. It's nothing he holds against you or Stanley, you suppose, though he thinks Stanley's jokes are very corny and that you are a nag. Still, there are no shouting matches at your house, the way there are at his father's. No, it's just that he wants his own life, he has told you--but is that a good reason not to come home?

Maybe while you're downtown (you'll be headed for the parking lot by then, carrying your grocery bag) you'll decide to check in at the video store, and not just get a movie this time but ask if they need any help, working there. You can ask with a little laugh as if it's all just a big joke, if they say no. You can see your mother choking with disgust, wondering why she and your father sent you to college to work

in a place like that. You see Stanley, even, taken aback, puzzled in the extreme. But, oddly, you imagine yourself quite content there as the days roll by. The banality of it, the order, the utter lack of ambition. You wouldn't want to manage or own the store; you wouldn't want to do anything more than your job. When people come in you would use your knowledge advisedly--you would put in the right word, discreetly, to steer them toward something better. And after the movie is rented, you'd have a little chat with them. They might complain of a relative overstaying his welcome, or a teenager, driving them around the bend. You could nod, understandingly, without committing yourself or feeling you've betrayed your son's secrets, which you do now every time someone comes over or calls you on the phone. You lie awake, wondering, "Did I say the wrong thing?" (You probably did. What would be the right thing?)

When your customer leaves, you would have the shop to yourself; it would be your little domain. You'd alphabetize the movies, get them in order. Things are in a jumble in that place now, scattered every whichway. You'd be humming to yourself, even singing. You'll write letters to the distributors getting broken movies replaced, movies that are off track. And when you're all alone in there, and it's peaceful, you'll play your favorite movies over and over. If a part is disturbing, you can push "Fast forward" and sail right past. You'll be in control. Or if it's a heartwarming part, you can play it again and again, even freeze it in place, studying the reconciling gestures, so as to memorize them, that a mother makes to a son, say, who is upset, or the

ones the son makes to her, when at last after much trouble he turns toward her and decides to let her in.

The End.

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