Gregory Blake Smith

Missing, Believed Wiped

It was as if he had been there, with his parents and Speedy Alka-Seltzer and his non-existent kid brother: in the den of their Levittown house, in front of the black-and-white Philco, with Ernie Kovacs and the dancing Lucky Strikes and outside the 50s happening like a mushroom cloud.

Or in the turn-of-the-century tenements: say, this time, the Lower East Side with the smell of cabbage in the airshafts, the laundry strung from fire escape to fire escape, the pushcarts, the Yiddish, the rotting vegetables in the gutter, the tots singing "Ring-a-Rosie" and the fire at the Triangle still to come.

Or Main Street on a summer evening, the cars cruising past, Studebakers, Chevies, the T-bird her daddy had yet to take away: the soft Indiana night blooming, and him with his made-up buddies—Andy Carlson, Scooter McKane, The Douchebag—passing cigarettes and french fries and on the lookout for girls who never happened.

He lived in the patina of these things, in the surface glow of a past that was not his. LPs picked up from thrift stores, from eBay, advertising jingles downloaded in MP3 files. They had a heft that was lacking in his own life. He had only to see them, hear them, touch their worn surfaces and it was as though some archeology of his imagination uncovered in them—in the grass-stained baseball, in the mitt with the rotting stitching—drifting summer evenings, a halo of moths in the corner streetlamp.

Piece by piece he had shed his own life, dropped the subdivision outside Fresno where he'd grown up and adopted other, more iconic, origins: sometimes Levittown with its little prefab houses and struggling lawns and midget trees, other times the green ease of the Louisiana bayou, the windy blankness of Nantucket. Jazzman, Jew, whitebread kid from Muncie: who he was depended upon what he surrounded himself with, every inch

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of his NYU office covered with ephemera, postcards, advertising slogans, antique toys, bills, deeds. To pick one of them up—*Stalling Is Eliminated By Using Esso!*—was to have the rich vista of a past world open before him. By contrast anything from his own life, anything from 1975 onward, seemed impoverished, not quite there. Even the New York he'd found four years ago when he came to do graduate work had disappointed him. It had taken him months to begin to feel the antique under the modern, to see the ghosts of the garment runners on Hester Street, to hear the roar of the crowd that ran like rebar through the Ebbets Field Apartments. He began telling people he'd grown up in the East Village, had a pair of beatniks for parents. When September 11th happened he was thankful it wasn't the Chrysler Building or the Empire State. There had been no aura surrounding the World Trade Center.

His girlfriend of the time had taken that as the last straw. When she left, he put on his Guy Lombardo records and leafed through a copy of the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Ever since he'd been a boy he could spend whole days by himself. If he needed other people he found them in the statistics on the back of his baseball cards, or in his model railroad where August 8, 1938 endlessly recurred (milkcans loading at the Central Dairy siding; No. 7 being rebuilt in the roundhouse). It was an empathy without consequences. There was the occasional actual person to indulge, nowadays his thesis advisor, the freshmen in his American Technostalgia seminar, the necessary girlfriend. He went to second-run movie houses with them, talked Barbie dolls and advertising slogans with the other Cultural Studies grad students, argued which came first the Lucky Strike dancing cigarettes or the Kool dancing penguin? It passed for human interaction. Was sometimes more than he wanted.

So when the phone rang that day he didn't answer it. He never answered it, so this was no different. But the voice, half-heard from the living room after the answering machine kicked in, made him get up and walk into the kitchen to listen. He knew it was a wrong number—the emotion, the choking incontinence. Whoever it was, she was fighting to control herself. He stood there,

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embarrassed, unsure whether he should pick up the receiver and tell her she had the wrong number. And then she broke down, and for a good thirty seconds there was nothing but the sound of weeping. And then the sobbing turned into broken laughter, teary, maybe drunk. *Oh, god!* the voice said. She swallowed, swore, got herself under control. *Meet me at Daisy Buchanan's tonight, okay?* She sounded exhausted. *Denny? It's bad today. After work, okay?* And she hung up.

On the wall above the phone, his Felix the Cat clock wagged its pendulum tail.

It had to be because he never used a personal greeting, let the machine-generated voice welcome whoever called. She'd misdialed, didn't know she had the wrong number. He rewound the tape and played it from the beginning. *Pick up the phone, you insensible bastard*. He rewound and listened again, but that's what she'd said, not *insensitive* but *insensible*. She called him Denny again. *It's me*, she said. She was at work. Could he call her? Could they meet? It was about the apartment. She wouldn't make a scene. But he was the only one who would understand. And then the crying began. And then the laughter.

For the rest of the morning he felt strangely haunted. It wasn't just the eavesdropping on another person's life, but an eerie sense that someone he didn't know was emotionally involved with him, was having her heart broken because of him, because of his coldness, his uncaring, his insensibility. He took the subway into Little Italy for a mid-morning espresso, stood at the polished bar and said *prego* and *grazie*, pretended the cast brass and Gilded Age lettering was authentic. It helped. Back outside he gazed at the worn brick building fronts. In one of the railroad flats there was a door open and he caught sight of a stairway leading up to the second floor, the treads scalloped with a century of footsteps. He smelled garlic and oil cooking. He began to hear the sound of shod hooves on cobblestones. There was steam rising from the manhole covers. He walked and imagined himself with a Sicilian mustache.

Still, when five o'clock came he was outside Daisy Buchanan's in the West Village. He told himself it was because he didn't want

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her to think she'd been stood up. But he knew that it was something else as well, not simple curiosity, not quite voyeurism. She was a live piece of someone else's world. He could watch her. She might have some value.

He took up a spot at the bar where it curved toward the kitchen door. He could see the street from there, and most of the dining room. The restaurant had a twenties décor, with pictures of Robert Redford as Gatsby, Mia Farrow and Bruce Dern as Daisy and Tom Buchanan. Suspended from the ceiling were cloches and ostrich boas. And under the glass-topped bar, 80-year-old front pages from the *Herald* and the *Mirror*. And some sports pages. But it was all merely decorative. It didn't live.

He knew, of course, that "after work" could mean midnight as easily as five o'clock. But he'd take that chance, wait an hour, see who showed up. He placed bets with himself on how old she would be, what she would look like. There was the question too of "insensible": was it ignorance or wit? He looked at each woman who came in—each of them accompanied by a boyfriend, a girlfriend, a husband—and measured her, practiced on her.

At quarter to six when she showed up, he knew her instantly. It was all there: the moment-before make-up, the controlled nerves, the scare that took over her face when the room didn't answer her look. She was maybe five years older than he was—thirty-three, maybe thirty-four—skinny in that nervous way some woman had, nicely dressed he supposed, an expensive-looking clutch under her arm. She spoke to the hostess and let herself be led to a small table over against the wall. When she passed the bar he turned casually away and positioned himself so that he could see her reflection in the mirror behind the bar. She shrugged her way out of her coat, let it drape behind her over the chairback. He hoped she wouldn't take out a book. That would be too sad.

Five minutes seemed the proper thing. He marked the digital numerals on the cash register, waited, watched. The waitress brought her—could she be so sure Denny was going to show up?—a whole bottle of wine. It threw his timing off. He had to let her drink a little, resettle herself. Then he stood up.

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What he enjoyed most was the hardened look that came over her face when he stopped at her table. It was classic. It had provenance. He'd seen it in movies from the forties—very Barbara Stanwyck—that female barrier against a come-on. He smiled and didn't go away.

"Are you waiting for Denny?"

She flinched, drew back in her chair. "What?"

He smiled his Fred MacMurry smile. "You left a message on my answering machine. You must have misdialed."

Her brow clouded. It was going to take her a minute.

"*You* got my message?"

"Yes."

She raked his face with a look of mistrust. "What's your phone number?"

He told her.

"*Nine* three?" she said, repeating the last two digits.

"Yes."

She covered her face with her hands. And then there it was: the laugh he'd heard on his machine, choked, self-critical, but finding it funny just how awful things could be. The waitress brought a second wine glass, went away smiling at all the laughter.

"I'm so sorry," she managed to say, shaking her head at how stupid she could be. She wiped the laugh-tears from her eyes. "Please," she said, "sit down."

He sat down, waited for her to get herself under control. There was something wrong with her hair. It was longish, but very thin, with patches of wispy scalp showing here and there. She took a tissue out of her purse and blew her nose.

"God!"

Close up, she was sort of pretty, he supposed. At least there was a softness to her looks, something a little comical in the way her lips pursed. She had very small hands.

"You came all this way?" she said finally. "Just to tell me?"

He had the good sense to merely smile.

"That was very kind of you." And she gazed gratefully at him. "I'm Noreen," she said and held out her hand. "Or did I say that on the phone?"

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It seemed to come to her as they shook hands what she *had* said on the phone, just how unmanned she'd been. She made a show of reaching for the wine bottle.

"Here," she said, pouring. "I was either going to get snockered with Denny or get snockered alone. Either way it was going to be the death of the old me and the birth of the new." She pushed a glass toward him and held up her own. "Here's to love."

"To love," he said, trying to inject some irony into the word, but she didn't bite. He took a drink, gazed out across the room, then let his eyes return along the wall. There was a photo of Coco Chanel above their table. "So who *was* the old me?"

She eyed him as if to warn him off trespassing. But then something of the self-lacerating tone he'd heard on the phone took over. "Someone who toasts to love," she said.

"And who's the new going to be?"

She drilled him with a look. "Someone who toasts to love."

This wasn't going right. He leaned back in his chair, tried to regroup. What had been the objective? He had wanted to see into another person's life. He had wanted to sit in a restaurant across from a woman who had been hurt, jilted, abused, and see her hurt, hear her accusations and her pleading. He had wanted to live in her life, *trespass* in her life, as he did when he imagined himself coveting the girl in the T-bird, running shirtwaists in the Lower East Side. He let his eyes drift away, over her head. *See the world today, in your Chevrolet!* he sang silently to right himself.

"You're looking at my hair," she said.

He recalled his gaze, smiled, shook his head *what?*

"It's all right." She pulled a strand in front of her eyes. "It's pretty ugly, I know. *Alopicea areata.* Another half a year I should be completely bald." She gave a little tug and the strand of hair gave way. She held it delicately between thumb and forefinger. "That's a good reason to dump a girl, isn't it?"

This was more like it. He assumed a solicitous pose. "Was that what Denny did?"

She shrugged.

"Boyfriend?"

She let the strand of hair fall to the floor. "Husband," she

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answered in a flat voice. "Ex." The waitress came, asked if they were ready to order, but she waved her off, said they would just have the wine. "You'll help me with this?" she said, pouring for him again. "Or do you have to go?"

He made an empty-handed gesture: his time was hers. She put the wine bottle down, drank and then poised her wineglass at her lips.

"So who are *you*," she asked, "with all your lucky hair?"

He paged through an index of selves. Who to choose? Who to be for her?

"Who am I?" he repeated.

"You have to think about it?"

So he told her, straight: an NYU graduate student, finishing his dissertation, teaching a course in pop culture. Unmarried, unspoken for, a Brooklyn Dodgers fan. She asked him what his dissertation was on and he told her: a semiotic reading of Levittown (A what? she laughed), well, more than that: the golden arches, Ebbets Field, Donna Reed's pearls: signs, symbols, the American pop landscape as hieroglyph. He was doing for tract housing what the nineteenth-century luminists had done for Niagara Falls. Which was what? she wanted to know. He was finding living meaning in the landscape, *creating* meaning out of the American Image. Out of the long-gone airwaves, out of the ephemeral, the vanished. It was fun. She peered at him with an intensity that puzzled him.

"Has anything really awful ever happened to you?"

The question took him aback. "Awful?" he wanted to know.

"Awful," she repeated and let the word stand on its own.

He told her no, he didn't think so.

"You don't *think* so?" she repeated, a little hostile.

"Other than growing up in Levittown," he laughed. Then, when she didn't play along: "No. Nothing really awful has ever happened to me."

She pressed her lips together, kept herself from saying anything more. *Fragile, handle with Johnsons*, he let the announcer in his head say. She drew back in her seat, as if from the edge of her rudeness, let her gaze drift around the restaurant. On the wall

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across the way was Gatsby's yellow Mercedes. This, he decided, still smarting a little, had been "their place." She and Denny meeting here to discuss whether he should accept the offer from Merrill Lynch. And that marvelous winter night—it was sleeting, remember?—when she had told him no, no alcohol for her tonight, because—guess! couldn't he?—she was pregnant!

"I have to go," she said, turning back to him.

So that was going to be it.

"Wait," he said. He searched for something with which to stall her. "Has anything really awful ever happened to *you*?"

The Barbara Stanwyck look came back. "You mean worse than my hair falling out? Worse than my husband leaving me?" Was he supposed to answer that? "You mean like breast cancer? Or my only child dying in a freak accident?"

"Forget it," he said. Then, defensively: "You asked me first."

She reached for her jacket on the chairback behind her, but then her shoulders slumped. She let the jacket puddle in her lap. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's a bad time for me. It's been a bad year."

"Tell me," he tried.

She shook her head "no," and then, as if to make it up to him: "But let's finish the wine. And you can tell me about the travails of growing up in—where was it?"

So half an hour later they were cutting through Washington Square on the way to his office to see his Levittown stuff. They stopped in front of the statue of *Washington at Peace* because he wanted to tell her—he'd been showing off his American Image repertoire since they'd left the restaurant—that the bodybuilder Charles Atlas had modeled for it back in 1918. If she stood right here—here, he said, touching her on the shoulders and orienting her—she could simultaneously *see* George Washington and *smell* the back pages of pulp magazines where the muscled photo of the World's Most Perfectly Developed Man had appealed to generations of ninety-eight-pound weaklings. Could she smell it? No? Well, *he* could! And he grinned at her, maybe a little drunk.

Inside his office while she looked at his Levittown advertising circulars, he lectured her on how this was the original tract

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housing, the prototype for a subsequent America, and how he'd grown up there (in the fifties, he almost said, but caught himself), if not in the first wave of baby boomers, well, later. He showed her on an aerial photograph the actual house, the swingset in the backyard, maybe even that grainy splotch his tousled self sitting on the teeter-totter. There were dozens of books written on Levittown—he swept a hand at his bookshelves—but they were all filled with the usual statistics, graphs, post-war pie charts. He was after something quite different, something that married the flesh and the spirit, that fused the pre-fab physicality of Levittown with the voiceover that told you that in the sixty seconds this message took, Bufferin could already be in your system, fighting your headache.

"Yikes!" she said, rolling her eyes like who's the nutcase. He smiled, ran a proprietary eye over the aerial photo, then looked back at her.

"*You'll wonder where the yellow went*—"

And he took out the bottle of bourbon his office-mate kept in a file cabinet, poured for her, for himself.

And tried to show her what he meant, the correspondence, the mapping that linked the Levittown Tigers and the Esso mascot. He got out his files and folders, played his DVD of black and white advertisements, but as he talked he noticed that she was distracted, that she kept looking sidelong at a conference poster he had hanging on the inside of his office door. When she became aware that he had stopped talking, she laughed, apologized, then pointed at the poster and asked what that was—*Missing, Believed Wiped*—what did that mean?

"It's a phrase the networks use," he told her. He shut the DVD player off. "It's how they classify missing programs."

She gazed at him, then returned to the poster.

"Videotape was reusable," he explained. "So all these great programs were purged, taped over. Don Larsen's perfect game in the 1956 World Series. James Dean playing Jesse James in an episode of *You Are There. Esso Newsreel, Camel News Caravan*—all lost. Wiped."

"Wiped," she repeated. There was something pained—was she

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just drunk?—in her expression. She reached her hand out to the poster, ran her fingertips over a photo of Ernie Kovacs.

"Except they're not."

She inquired with her eyebrows.

"They were broadcast, so they're all out there somewhere. Radio waves. In the universe somewhere—*The Kate Smith Hour, Treasury Men in Action*—they still exist, they're still alive, if you have the antenna to receive them."

He had meant it wryly—or at worst as a brag on the antenna that he had—but the look she gave him made him feel like she thought he was mocking her, making fun of some private hope—her husband? her hair?—some restoration that had been awakened by the odd phrase: if something was only *believed* wiped, then perhaps it wasn't.

"Are you all right?" he brought out at last.

"I've got to go," she said. She tucked her head in, didn't look at him. "I've got to get home to my daughter."

She opened the office door. He followed her out into the hall, nonplussed. "You have a daughter?"

But she didn't answer, didn't even turn. She walked down the hall, into the stairwell. He had to turn and lock the door, then hurry to catch up. Out on the street he thought he heard her say, under her breath, *wiped* but when he shot a look at her, her lips were closed. He did his best to keep pace with her. They were headed downtown, toward SoHo. It was eight-thirty, maybe nine o'clock.

"James Dean—" she said suddenly when they were nearing Houston; he had been just about to give up, be discreet, leave her alone—"Charles Atlas!"

She kept her eyes straight ahead, but her face was gripped with emotion. He didn't answer. They crossed Houston. Five minutes went by. Then:

"You think you can smell the back pages of comic books!"

She seemed on the verge of crying, of losing it like she'd done on the phone. He didn't know what exactly she was talking about, what it was that had so distressed her. Still, he kept alongside her. They turned down Mercer Street. The pedestrians thinned out.

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"You're pretty upset," he said finally. "Perhaps I should go."

On either side of them there were warehouses with cast-iron facades. Victorian Gothic, Italianate, neo-Grecian. He could tell her all about them, make the skivvy-shirted laborers live for her. Did she not want that?

"I'll leave you alone."

But she kept walking, gave him no opportunity to leave except rudely. A yellow cab zoomed past. Then—oddly, unexpectedly—she took his arm.

"I want you to meet Abbie."

"Abbie?" he repeated. "Your daughter?"

Her face eased, relaxed.

"How old is she?" he asked, for something to say, but she was someplace else. Gone was the fierce emotion that had got hold of her. Something, some thought, had calmed her. In another instant she closed her eyes and—trusting him to look out for her—walked a good thirty yards blind. There was the faintest smile on her lips.

"Listen…," he began to say, but she had stopped, opened her eyes.

"There," she said, as if she were soothing someone. "I'm all right now." She turned something like her old face on him. "You'll come up for a minute?" And she climbed onto a loading dock that ran along the building they were in front of, gestured for him to follow. She stopped at an old freight doorway that had a teak entryway fitted into it. Along one side there was a polished brass intercom and five buzzers.

"So what're you, a stockbroker?" he asked, trying for something like normalcy. The lofts down here, he knew, were in the seven figures. She punched a security number into a keypad; the door buzzed itself ajar.

"Not me," she said, "Denny."

Inside it was industrial chic—red-painted girders, iron piping, exposed brick. In one corner of the foyer a Bridgeport miller stood like a sculpture. The elevator was huge, with an old scissors-action door. She took out a key, inserted it, and they rose four or five floors. When the elevator stopped she slung the door

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back. It opened directly into the loft area.

"Whoa!" he said, stepping inside.

It was almost a parody of postmodern vogue: a Wurlitzer 1015 with its bubble tubes going, de Stijl chairs, a Betty Boop statue, a Bauhaus this, an Art Nouveau that, Mapplethorpe and Stieglitz on the walls—

"What-a-dump!" he said in his Bette Davis voice.

She tossed her clutch on the Empire sofa, took her jacket off. There was a photo of a little girl—maybe two-and-a-half, three-years-old—on an endtable in a Victorian frame. She picked it up, held it out to him.

He smiled. What did one say about people's kids?

"Cute," he said; then: "Where is she?"

She turned the photograph back to herself, smiled, reached out and touched the girl's face with her fingertips. It was a gesture that strangely recalled her touching Ernie Kovacs on the poster. He turned away, still a little dazzled by the room.

"She wasn't in color," he found himself saying.

She spun around. "What?"

He saw that she thought he'd meant her daughter. "Betty Boop," he said with a gesture toward the waist-high statue of the cartoon character as a cocktail waitress—red high heels, slinky dress, turquoise eyes. "She was strictly black-and-white. Except for some colorization the Japanese did in the seventies. Trying to update her for TV." He made a gesture of dismissal: "Inauthentic. She has to go."

She was looking at the pert statue, the too-big head, the impossibly small waist. "Well, if it comes to that," she said, sending her gaze across the room, "it all has to go. I've got seven more months and then I have to sell." And when he didn't understand: "The divorce settlement. It has 'a structured fiduciary withdrawal.' On Denny's part. I can't keep this place without his money."

Something compassionate seemed called for. "Where will you go?"

She shrugged. "I was going to throw myself on his mercy tonight—" she laughed; this was evidently funny—"offer to sign over my share to him, pay the taxes if he'd pay the mortgage.

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That way, I'd get to stay here and down the road he'd end up owning the place outright, and incidentally feeling better about his moral self. What do you think? He's *got* the money."

He made a "who knows" gesture.

"Right," she said, like the hand-writing was on the wall. She reached behind her, picked up a bottle of something, Scotch, a couple of Old-fashioned glasses. "Boop-oop-a-doop."

"Still, it's a great place."

"It's *my* place," she said angrily. "I lived here. *Abbie* lived here. It's hard to just erase—" But she caught herself, hung fire, the glasses pinched between her fingers in one hand, the Scotch bottle held by the neck in the other. She eyed him, as if making up her mind about something. "Come here," she said after a minute, "I want to show you something."

And she turned, cut through the furniture. He didn't know what else to do except follow.

It was a bedroom she took him into, partitioned off from the loft space and furnished with a matching art deco bedroom set—1930s, Grand Rapids—bronze hardware and rich waterfall veneers cascading to the floor. Along one wall there was a huge window, a flat-screen TV along another, and in the corner an old Kelvinator refrigerator with deco lightning bolts zagging across its door, out of which she got some ice, poured the Scotch. He wasn't used to drinking like this, wondered if she was. She pulled the drapes back from the big window, sat on the low sill with her drink between her knees. She fingered the drapery cord like a rosary.

"I watched it all from here," she said simply.

It took him a second to understand. Then he realized the window faced downtown, toward Battery Park: some warehouse rooftops, a few taller buildings, and then open sky where the World Trade Center should have been. He had for an instant a wild thought that Denny had worked there, that he had died and this whole night—phone message, restaurant, apology—was some twisted pantomime she periodically put herself through. But he just as quickly knew that that was wrong, that that couldn't be it.

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"You want to hear a story?" she asked. She rattled the ice cubes in her glass, drank.

"Sure."

She took up the drapery cord again. Then she asked him where he'd been that day, a year ago—everybody would always remember where'd they'd been, right?—and when he told her, said how she'd been getting ready to go roller-blading, that she and Abbie had bought a pair of kiddie roller skates the day before—they were for a three-year-old, hardly rolled at all—and that they were going to skate over to Greene Street, stop into D'Angelo's if the breakfast crowd was gone and have an orange juice and a treat. She'd left Abbie practicing happily on the wooden floor in the loft and come back into the bedroom to check the temperature on the TV. It was September, the weather was changing, did they need sweaters? So she'd turned on the TV and there it was. For a second she'd thought it was some disaster flick, changed the channel, changed it again: but it was everywhere, the twin towers engulfed in flame and smoke. She couldn't begin to convey how bizarre it was to open the drapes and see out her bedroom window—like an even bigger television screen—the same sight.

"There were sirens on the TV and then a split-second later the same sirens outside. It was like two things you were used to keeping separate had fused." She looked at the blank TV, then out at the vista of lights and rooftops. "I had the presence of mind to call to Abbie, to tell her that Mommy would be ready in a minute. I didn't want her coming in and seeing that. And then it was like how was I going to prevent her from seeing it? It wasn't just something bad on the TV. It was there, right outside. I remember thinking if the towers fell—I could only imagine them toppling over, not falling in on themselves—would they reach us?"

She was looking out the window, as if gauging the distance to where the towers should have been.

"Which was stupid of course."

He gazed out the window himself—the view was beautiful: the lights, the low-scudding clouds, the rooftops and building facades.

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"I couldn't stop myself from watching. I knew I should go see about Abbie, but I couldn't leave the window. After a while I realized she'd stopped roller-skating—there was no more clack-clack on the floor—but the sirens were so noisy, and the TV sound, that I couldn't tell what she was doing. I kept my hand on the remote in case she came in. But she never did."

And she rested her eyes on him. There was in her face a soft appeal, as if she wanted him to forgive her something, understand her. Outside, like a sound effect, a siren had begun to wail.

"Thousands of people were dying," she said simply, staring back into her lap.

The siren moved closer. She let another minute pass, and then went on.

"What she had done was, she had started playing with the drapery cord on one of the loft windows." And she looked at the cord she had been holding in her hand, traced a fingernail along its weave. Then she let it drop, lifted her head and gazed out into the city. "It was the roller skates," she said after another minute had passed. "She must have slipped. Or when the cord got around her neck, not been able to keep on her feet. I don't know. She was only three. When I found her, her legs were sort of splayed out under her. One of her fingers was between the rope and her neck. Like this—" and without turning back to him, she held her own fingers against her neck. In the loft a clock began striking the hour. "What I can't bear," she said, and then waited to get control of herself, "is what she must have thought those last minutes. The panic, the disbelief of why didn't Mommy come." She paused, as if this last was too much. "I can't bear that."

There was, he saw, a tear in her eye—nothing like the breakdown on his message machine—just a wetness that brimmed and threatened to spill over.

"I tried calling 911," she said, and here something of the absurd circumstance of what had happened must have struck her because she let out a horrible laugh. "But of course I couldn't get through—the World Trade Center was collapsing. I didn't know CPR but I tried anyway. Kneeled down on the floor and tried to blow air into her lungs. Oh, I knew she was dead. She had

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turned blue just like you hear about, and there was no pulse. I carried her down into the street, crying and stumbling and screaming for help, but—" and here again the crazed spurt of laughter escaped her—"the World Trade Center was collapsing. There was no one to help. There were no taxis. Everyone was panicking, running, watching the sky. I found a policeman over on Broadway with his squad car in the middle of the street blocking traffic from going downtown. I tried to get him to help me, but—" and then she said it a third time, as if the horrific coincidence of it, the nightmare collusion, was something she would never get over—"the World Trade Center was collapsing, and what was the death of a little girl to that?"

He could see her in the TV screen, her reflection, and behind her the starbursts of colored lights all the way out to the Battery. She had turned her face to him. But he wasn't looking at her.

"And now I can't bear to leave the loft."

He imagined the men in 1931 Grand Rapids, grateful to have a job still, their younger buddies laid off, the Depression all around like a rainy day. He supposed some of them—one of them anyway—had been in the first world war, had known the mud and the death and the fear. He had touched that furniture, maybe done the varnish job, laying on coat after coat in the quiet of the finishing room, rubbing it out with pumice, then rottenstone.

"You probably noticed all her stuff around."

He hadn't noticed it. But he nodded his head gently.

"And you understand?"

He tried to look kindly.

"What you said about the past. All those postcards and stuff. It's a way to keep it alive, isn't it?"

"Yes," he managed.

"Denny says it's unhealthy. He says a decent interval of mourning has passed. He says having all her things here only makes it worse. But I say—" and she let her voice drop to a lower register—"as long as her things are here, she's here. I can feel her in them. It's like what you said about Charles Atlas. When I see her playdough, or her Tweety-Bird toothbrush, or her tricycle—

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you noticed it outside, didn't you?—then I see her. When I see her Dorothy doll on the living room floor, it's like she's just stepped out for a minute, gone to the bathroom, or she's getting a change of clothes from the toybox." She let out a laugh, euphoric, a little drunk. "I've kept everything! I've even got her dirty laundry. Her pajamas, her clothes from the day before. They're still unwashed, lying where she left them on the floor of her room. Just wait until she comes home! I'm going to march her in there and tell her to pick them up. Young lady. I'll say that." And she tried it out—"Young lady!"—turning a face to him that managed somehow to be both radiant with belief and horrified. He tried to smile back. But his face was frozen.

"You just march yourself in there, young lady, and pick up your room!"

She stabbed him with her smile. And then, before her face could collapse, she picked up her glass, tossed her head back and drank. But it was no good. Her chin began to quiver, her shoulders began to shake, and then she was lost. A deep, shuddering weeping took hold of her. She turned away from him, sobbed into the window panes.

For the first time that evening he wanted to touch her, to reach out and comfort her. He looked at her stricken form, the thin body convulsed with sobs. He knew he should stand up and cross to her. And then he knew he should leave. And then he had the thought that he would write to her, saw in a lovely, generous, impossible flash an entire future in which he and this woman, even though they would never see one another again, would collude in the making of a world, a world in which Abbie would forever be away at school or camp or college, but like a good girl always writing home, her penmanship changing from year to year, her life kept real with poison ivy, skinned knees, boyfriend troubles…

He stood up. She had lifted her feet up onto the sill, was sitting there with her face buried in her knees, hands clasped around her shins. It would be a simple thing for him to go to her, to put his arms around her. And it would be the right thing, wouldn't it? And yet he couldn't do it. He couldn't do it. He

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looked around the bedroom, at the realness of the furniture, the blankness of the TV screen, watched for a minute the heaving shoulders, and then turned and quietly left the room.

Back in the loft he saw—how had he missed them before?—toys and clothes and coloring books lying haphazardly about the huge space. It was just as she'd said. As if a child had only just left the room, was just outside your vision, your hearing, your ken.

He took the stairs, managed to find—when he realized he needed a key for the elevator—a metal fire door that opened onto a concrete stairwell, and descended floor by floor until he reached the foyer.

Outside, the street was empty and the air was cold. He paused on the sidewalk. How quiet it was! There was the murmur of traffic, but it was distant, away, seemed to sift from the sky onto his hair and shoulders. He looked up at the top floor of the building, at the row of lit windows, empty, then let his eyes fall to the tricycle tucked into a doorway off the loading dock. Somewhere, avenues over, a siren sang. He started slowly along the sidewalk, then stopped and listened. It was as if there were something to hear—in the city, in the night—something someone was trying to tell him. He held his breath and waited, stared into the air. But there was only the world, with its intolerable intensity, its unbearable absence.

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