

## PATCH KIT

Kathryn Trueblood

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In the garage, she finds four varieties of wasp-doom—Totalkill, Home Defense, Spectracide, and Real Kill—all of them bought by her ex-husband and of unknown quantity and potency. She lines them up behind her on the driveway like a mini-brigade, fullest to least full, each guaranteeing a powerful foam spray and rapid termination but none specifying how to get the contents inside the nest. She doesn't suppose that this is what a woman a week out of the hospital should be doing, but the overgrown lawn can't be dealt with until the wasps are dealt with and it beats opening mail that details which procedures are covered, and by what percentage. Her plan is to rip open the nest with the stick and then blast the little fuckers.

The nest looks like a beat-up gray soccer ball and reminds her of the pictures of a self-sealed tumor that a cancer survivor showed her. Whenever Kara wants to cheer herself up, she says to herself: *At least you didn't get cancer.* Only vague autoimmune diseases, incurable but manageable.

She tries her son on his cell phone one more time. Rodney is fast on his feet—a top midfielder on the high school soccer team. His laconic *Hey*, almost makes her believe he has answered. *Hey, I'll check my messages probably weeks after you call, and if you've left something witty or worthwhile, I'll call back..* What? Is she supposed to appreciate his candor or call him an arrogant little punk ass?

She tears at the nest with abrupt vengeance, dropping the stick and ducking her head as she sends the foam spray toward the wasps, which look like agitated jelly beans. A few fly at her and hover about the trap door trying to return to the colony, and she zaps those too. The chant in her brain hisses its own stream of invective: *Die! You little fuckers! Die!* The cloud that roils over her head smells like industrial solvent and Jean Nate Eau de Toilette. She runs from the toxic lemony mist, pulling the garage door down with a strength she didn't know she had. Holding herself against the washing machine, she allows herself to cry for about one minute. . . because who could you ask to do this favor? Who? And she herself is so full of chemicals—chemicals that weaken her, chemicals that sustain her. *SIDE EFFECTS: Headache, dizziness, or stomach upset may occur. Tell your doctor immediately if you experience yellowing skin or eyes, dark or bloody urine, stomach or abdominal pain, vomiting.*

On Monday morning she posts an ad with the Center for Student Work Experience at the local university. She blows a hair out of her face forcefully, remembering that in her day it was simply called the “Job Board.”

Six calls come in that afternoon, and Kara pulls the ad before the phone can ring again. She takes the first candidate because he sounds eager and organized. “Be there at 4:00.” When his shaved head comes bobbing up the driveway, Kara's first thought is that she's hired a skinhead.

He walks with a springy step, a bend and lurch motion that conveys energy to spare. When she opens the door he smiles at her, the width of his untrained teeth spread in a cheery overbite, making a valid case against orthodonture. He ducks his head slightly as though in deference or modesty and it's then that she realizes her lilac pajama bottoms are sticking out from beneath her coat. Well, she's up, at any rate—got her hair combed and lipstick on but forgot about the lower half.

His forearms are speckled with paint, and she focuses on the splotches for a moment as though it were a dot-to-dot she could complete. "Good afternoon," he says, "I'm Wesley Eastman." She is surprised by the span of the hand he extends to her, his slender thumb long enough to touch the underside of her wrist.

"Yes, Ma'm, I'm studying at the community college."

"Please, call me Kara."

He smiles that beamy smile again and his eyes are a warm loamy brown. She likes him. She doesn't have to decide she likes him. She just does. "You know five people called right after you did. I took the ad off-line."

"I don't doubt that," he says. "My friend showed up for a dishwashing job at Speedy'O's and there were thirty people there."

"Hard times. I need to fix this place up and sell it. Too much for me to maintain."

"Gotcha. I just moved my mom in with my aunt, now that she's done with her deadbeat boyfriend, and my girlfriend just moved in with me."

Kara nods. "My son lives with me. He's sixteen." She shrugs, as if that's all there is to say. She does not want to talk about the divorce. You don't tell strangers that you are a woman living alone.

"Oh man, I gave my mom hell at that age."

"Yeah? Someone told me that boys at this age have seven testosterone surges a day. I swear I feel every one of them."

"You got that right." Wesley laughs then ducks his head again in that little gesture of deference. "Your ad mentioned home repair."

"Yeah, my son punched some holes in the house. But there's outdoor work, too."

"Did he break any fingers?"

"Nope, but he did feel bad later. Hard headed and hard-knuckled, I guess."

She'd come close to calling the police that time, but she knew too much about what could happen to kids when an At-Risk Youth Petition was filed. There was no guarantee she could get Rodney back out of the system once he went in. Instead she'd called his father. Enduring Guy's silent superiority was the better alternative.

"Why don't you show me the outside repairs first," Wesley says, taking a step back and opening his broad hands toward the yard, inviting her out since she has yet to invite him in. "Is it okay if I park my truck there?" He motions toward the brown beater Datsun parked at an incline across from the neighbor's. There's a snow flake fracture in the windshield, and the hood looks like too many people have sat on it.

Kara shrugs. "I don't see why not."

“I have to park my truck facing downhill cause the starter is broken.”

He explains to her how he can save her the expense of replacing the frontice boards on the house by cutting off the eave ends and sealing them. He isn't sure about the garage; he needs to see the other side of the door. He follows her through the laundry room, then stands looking up at the tracking for the door. She turns toward the machines, embarrassed. When her ex-husband moved out, he left a sign taped to the dryer, black block letters in Sharpie pen, it reads: Clean the Lint Tray Every Time You Use the Dryer. His last stand for order. She steps over and tears it off. Oh, the petty faults that had ticked throughout the day. She did clean the lint trap, only she liked to wait until the lint was thick, so she could roll the it up in her hand like a blanket.

Then she notices that above the dryer, taped to the utility cupboard, is the map of the garden her mother-in-law made after she'd spent a summer with them: hydrangeas in a circle around the birdbath, azaleas and forsythia in the back where screening was needed. Another plan Kara was supposed to carry out. She tears that one down, too.

Wesley is waiting for her to turn-around. “Looky here,” he says.

He pushes his thumbnail through the panel that meets the driveway. “It's rotted through for sure.” The length of the door is striped in black mold three panels up.

“Check it out,” he says, leaning closer, “It's sprouting wee little mushrooms.”

This strikes Kara as very funny, even though she's going to have to put a garage door on her credit card if she ever wants to sell this place. That along with charges for propane, prescriptions, and snow tires. “Wee little mushrooms,” he says again, “For real.”

Back outside, he squints up at the roof. “Power wash and clean the gutters. Okay. I should be able to bust that out by Thursday.”

She can tell he's a find as handymen go—honest, resourceful, ready to save her money. She decides to show him the broken bathroom fan. He stands on the toilet and turns the fan with his fingers. “Heck,” he says, “this don't need replacing.” He blinks to get the crud out of his eyes. “This just needs a good cleaning and some WD-40.”

“WD-40 will fix everything,” she says, caught up in the spirit of the moment.

“Straight shootin it will. Gets a stuck wedding band off even.”

He smiles down at her from atop the toilet, a purely friendly smile but clearly he has missed nothing. Then he steps down without so much as a hand to steady himself. As Kara stands beside him in the cramped space of the bathroom, she feels the heat his body emanates and has the urge to turn and round her back to him as she would sitting before a fire, feeling her back muscles let go.

They sit at the kitchen table and make a list of supplies he will pick up. She doesn't know if she should write him a check or give him cash, and a little voice in her questions the prudence of doing either.

“Something you should know about me.” Wes says. “I've been clean and sober for three years. I won't flake out on you.”

“Good for you,” she says, surprising herself by adding “though I can think of a lot of reasons to drink.”

“It is done unto you as you believe.”

“Who said that?”

“Christ ... somewhere.”

“Oh,” says Kara dully, wary that Wesley might now produce a Christ quote at every turn.

“A patch kit,” he says, clicking the button on the pen.

“A patch kit?” She picks up one of the five vials on the table and turns it until she hears the pills inside tilt. *SIDE EFFECTS: easy bruising, bleeding, unusual tiredness, shortness of breath, fast heartbeat.*

“For those divots your son made in the walls, I’ll fix a little mesh to the drywall first because them holes are too big for Spackle all by itself. You want me to teach him? Cause maybe he should know how.”

“Oh,” she says, thinking of how Rodney had turned away from her and punched one wall, then another, tears smarting in his eyes. “No, he’s at his father’s this week. But thanks.”

She doesn’t tell Wes that her son moved out a week ago, over to his Dad’s. She and Rodney have fought so much since she got sick. She read the pamphlets on living with children and chronic illness. Supposedly, if you reassure them that you need some extra help or extra rest but are otherwise still their same old parent, they will respond in loving, reasonable ways. This is not true at her house. Rodney wants to incite the wolverine in her, wants her to come tearing out of her den, teeth barred and ready to fend off cougars and grizzly bears, all of which he enacts without even trying. In other words, he’s not reassured that she’s okay unless there’s a daily show of force. And everything she asks him to help with only seems to piss him off further.

If his father asked him to do the dishes, it would be about doing what his father said. With her, it’s about being controlled, it’s about his autonomy versus her will, it’s about useless repetitive female tasks. Rodney is angry at himself when he co-operates because that means submission, but he’s also angry at himself when he bullies her because that’s domination. He’s also angry because he can’t articulate any of this.

She can’t win and she can’t break free, and since she came home from the hospital, she simply doesn’t have the strength to devote herself to domestic combat even if it is the only means of reassuring her son that she will be okay, even if she’s not sure that’s true herself. It’s hard to get well around a perpetually pissed-off person.

When he came back to the house to get his guitar amp, Rodney told her: “Moving to Dad’s is like being a fucking Vietnam vet and stumbling into a Buddhist temple.” She did not say, “Hardly.” She did not say, “At least I’m not a crackhead mom.” She said, “I’m glad you feel peaceful there,” and for that she was rewarded with a brief hug.

Her son is right on some level. You have to love a monster to love an ambitious woman, a woman who wants to have some effect upon the world, a woman who feels some days like she has eight arms, eight legs, and snakes



growing out of the top of her head. Before the divorce, Kara decided she wanted to be more than a court-appointed mediator; she wanted to be an attorney in family law, develop a practice dedicated to collaborative divorce, which really would only be an extension of what she was already doing. So, in addition to her regular job, she started taking pre-law classes at night at the local community college. Her husband wanted to know why she couldn't be content—Rodney was almost grown— and she wondered it herself. Maybe because she wanted some say in who her clients were, not like the last ones stuck in her memory bank—the mother who refused to disclose how much allergy medication she'd given their daughter when it was the father's turn for visitation. "She's a fucking psycho bitch," the father blurted in the hallway.

The mother turned to her daughter, "Don't worry honey, Daddy just has a temper problem."

The father had looked to Kara for sympathy, "Every day I would love to tell this woman to get off her fat lazy ass and show her daughter what responsibility means, not how to live off everyone else."

This was the content of her work: Everyone's bitch or bastard was 100% evil. Think up the worst thing you could say about somebody and apply that to the person you're divorcing. It was Kara's job to lead away the child clutching her Miss Kitty purse, clothes smelling of nicotine and cat pee, hair falling in blond ringlets that wouldn't last to adulthood. It was Kara's job to say to the parents, "No, you're not coming in with her." That's where the whole manipulation usually fell apart. And it was Kara's job to remind the parents that hurling unfounded accusations was what you call perjury in front of a judge. What she wants in her career now is a progressive practice, people who can keep the best interests of the child in mind at least some of the time. And she did want to make more money, for Rodney's future, because they hadn't saved a cent toward college or training, whatever it might be—and Guy's idea was to take a second mortgage out on the house while Kara's idea was to rollover her retirement and put it into law school. They argued over their future constantly and in so doing shredded it. *Hair loss may occur during the first few months of treatment.*

At soccer and parent night, Kara saw the women who weren't like her—they yawned in the afternoons instead of downing Starbuck's double shots cold from the can. They wore toe rings, painted nails, diamond solitaires, little hoodies and stringy tank tops like their daughters or else they'd de-sexed themselves, wore fumigator's tents and friar's hair. She could understand why she tired Guy out. She had been known to make a potluck contribution in the trunk of her car—ripping open two bags of frozen meatballs, dumping them in a crock pot, and asking the hostess to plug it in immediately.

The day Rodney left for his father's, he wouldn't look up from his X-Box where Kara saw hairy neon purple cockroaches, bloated and writhing, waiting to be shot, zapped, powdered, and then melted into undulating violet protoplasm that changed color like a giant mood ring. Were these the images that inhabited her son's mind? Apparently. In the hospital support group, they told her to create a metaphor for her illness.

Instead of yelling *Turn that goddamn thing off*, she said, in her American Medical Association parent-approved voice: “Five minute warning. Then it’s time to turn it off.”

“But Mom, I almost beat the next boss.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “Dinner is almost ready.”

“I just want to get to the secret chamber. Aww shit,” he yelled. He’d missed the yellow tail-torquing salivating lobster who coughed radioactive Brillo pads, and evidently it was her fault. *And this is one of the mild games*, she thought, *not the survival horror game genre*. To her son’s generation, unless they had an uncle or a cousin fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan, the war was just another game, and the tagline always read: “Join the party as battle ensues.”

On the Sunday Rodney moved to his father’s, she asked him to turn his X-Box off. “Get out of my room,” he said, eyes fixed upon the blaze inside the monitor.

“Your five minute warning is over.”

No answer.

She leaned on the door frame. The room was bending around her like a carousel night light. *This medication may cause dizziness*. On Sundays, Rodney was obligated to do two household chores—he could choose. She knocked on his door again even though it was open.

“Go away,” he yelled. *Increase in blood pressure may occur. Persistent heartburn, fever, chills, shaking, mask-like facial expressions, muscle spasms.*

“I do not deserve to be treated this way,” she yelled back as the door slammed in her face. “Nothing has changed about the chores around here.”

She lay down on the lumpy futon couch, tilting leeward with it; her guts sloshing about in her ears. She could see herself in the picture window of the family room; a longish, pinkish, form looking like a hot dog in a bun. *Okay*, she said to herself, *last time*, and she hauled herself to her feet.

She knocked.

“Leave me the FUCK alone,” he yelled.

Her hand turned the knob reflexively. Locked.

“You open this door, Rodney.” The tiny little American Medical Association parent-approved voice whispered at her: *You can choose to walk away while you’re still calm*. She took a breath. “I know you’re pissed about the divorce, but you need to open this door.”

“I’m only pissed because you and Dad won’t fucking stop talking about it.”

“Rodney, I’m sick. I need your help.”

“Wah wah wah.”

That did it. She picked her key ring up off the table. It had a straight little poker on it that sprung the latch of the lock if she put it into the hole at the center of the knob.

The door sprung open, and he jumped to his feet. As fast as she could snap her fingers, he was in the doorway, close enough that she could thump him on the chest.

“Stay the fuck out of my room, you manic bitch.”

She looked up at him very deliberately before she slapped him. “No one calls me that,” she hissed at him. “No one.”



His eyes watered, but he held very still, not taking a step back.  
“I’m going to call your father.” The fingers of her hand burned.  
“Go ahead. That’s what Dad thinks of you, too.”

She turned on her heel and headed down the hall to her room. She found herself gasping for air, as though she had fallen overboard and slapped against the water. How could it be that the boy you loved most in the world, your own, dear, tender boy could turn into a rendition of your worst boyfriend, could treat you in a way you’d long ago decided you’d never stand for.

Guy was kind when she stopped crying long enough to call him. “Maybe it’s time for Rodney to come and live with me for awhile.”

“I’m sick,” she said, as though newly discovering it. “I’m sick.”

“You pushed yourself too hard.”

Every time Guy attributes her illness to stress, Kara bristles. The words *manic bitch* come to mind. “You think you’re being sympathetic, but really all you want to be is right.”

“Jesus, I was only trying to be helpful.”

“I was deeply satisfied with my work. Unlike you. You were bored.”

“I like my work well enough.”

“Well enough,” she repeated caustically. Self-righteousness flooded her with energy. Even remembering, her fingers and toes are suddenly are warm. *You couldn’t have handled it she thinks, if I’d finished law school, me out earning you.* But that’s over now. It’s pointlessness makes her want to lie down. *Increased sweating, sensitivity to heat, mental/mood changes (such as nervousness & mood swings) may occur.*

On Tuesday morning, she returns from an epic marketing trip, for her, epic anyway, and sees Wes up on the roof, nails in his mouth. He is astride the house, appearing to ride it as the fir and cedar trees behind him sway. When she cuts the engine, he looks down and they wave. “Ahoy, matey,” he yells.

She smiles but doesn’t yell back. Conserving energy is a new lesson she practices daily, so she won’t run out of energy before the practicalities are taken care of.

She had asked the checker to load the bags light, and she finds that he’s turned a frozen pie on its side and stuffed a frozen pizza behind it. These are the offerings she intends to make to Rodney if he ever comes back. Now, she turns the pie flat and carries the bag against her forearms into the kitchen.

“Hey,” she hears Wes call from the door. “Mind if I step in.”

“Okay,” she says, and then he is standing there, dangling two canvas shopping bags from each hand.

“Wow, thanks,” she says, shoving the coffee pot back to make room. “Why don’t you put them here.”

He cocks his head sideways so that their eyes meet. “You sound low,” he says.

He reads Kara with such accuracy, she wonders what she must look like or sound like.

“I’m sick,” she says, that phrase she can’t get used to. “I mean I’m on medical leave.” She gestures toward the vials of pills on the kitchen table.



“My mom’s got Hep C.”

Kara looks at him blankly. *Is this some new disease?*

“Hepatitis C,” he says gravely. “Oh yeah, I know a whole bunch about chronic illness.”

“Well, I got a bunch of ‘em.”

“It’ll get easier to deal with,” he says. “Think of yourself like a racing car. You’re in the pit now and the team is working on you, but you’ll recalibrate your life, and you’ll be good to go.”

“I like that. I’m in the pit now.”

“But you’ll get out of the pit,” he says, wagging a finger. “Hey, I need to leave early tomorrow afternoon.”

“Not a problem. Like I said, this can fit around your schedule.”

“Well it’s kinda special. We’re having a party. My mom and me, we’re celebrating our recovery date.”

“That’s neat, that you chose recovery together, that you can hang out together.” She remembers asking Rodney to clean up his room before the appraiser came. *Are we going to move?* He was stricken, fear flaring his nostrils, his face suddenly flush.

“My son keeps telling me he’s afraid he has a brain tumor. I had him walk a line with his arms out.”

“The old DWI test.” Wesley pronounces it *deewee*—Driving While Under the Influence.

“Yeah, as though he were on a balance beam. I told him: ‘If you had a brain tumor, there would be pressure on one side and you couldn’t balance.’”

“Ask him if his balls are swollen.”

“What?”

“Yeah, go ahead. Tell him people with brain tumors always have swollen balls. Better yet offer to look at them.” Kara is laughing, wide-eyed. “I’m not kiddin you, works every time.” Wesley nods, beaming his big smile right at her.

She likes looking out the family room window in the afternoon. Now that Rodney is at his father’s, she takes naps on the couch. The backyard is giving up its boundary, turning back into forest. Goat’s beard hangs like great swaths of lace beneath the firs, and the huckleberries make a foreground of red dots against the sword ferns. She is drowsing in a luxuriant sleep when the phone rings.

“Mom, can you loan me some money, or buy me a pack of cigarettes?”

“Honey, you can’t smoke and survive soccer drills.”

“I don’t care about the team anymore. And I’m not smoking cigarettes anyway. I just need some money.”

“What’s the deal? Rodney.”

“I want to buy some pot, Mom, if you must know.”

“That’s not going to fix things.”

“Yes it will. You have no idea how dark I feel. I hate myself. I hate every minute of every day. The only reason I have for existing is to smoke pot.”

“Rodney, I understand that you feel extreme right now.”

“No, I feel beyond black, I’m where black melts.”

“Is it school? Rodney. Is it the team?”



“I don’t know, Mom. Everything sucks. I mean yeah, I’m sick of hanging with jocks and school is ridiculously cliquy, and when I go over to friends’ houses their parents look at me like I’m going to steal their big gold crucifixes. But it’s beyond that, I can’t see any purpose to anything. It’s like I’m behind plexi-glass watching all these stupid little fucking gyrations and I can’t relate, at any level.”

“Honey, it’s not going to be like this forever. If school is wrong for you, we’ll find a better match. You can do Running Start. You can go to Junior College. Skip high school if you don’t respect it. This isn’t your whole life. You’re not stuck.”

“Yeah, but that means you’ve got to care about the future, Mom, and I honestly don’t Mom. I don’t.”

“Depression can be treated, son. We’ve talked about this.”

“Don’t even speak to me in that pseudo therapist voice. You and Dad can take all the pills you want.”

“Son, there’s family history to consider—”

“I don’t want to be fuckin treated, Mom. I don’t even want to *be*.”

“Promise me, Rodney, promise—”

“No, Mom, I’m not promising you anything.”

*SIDE EFFECTS: Nausea, dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, seizures.* While other parents talked about colleges and scholarships, Kara’s goal for Rodney had always been *twenty-five and alive*. She says this like a chant now, to keep herself together while she searches for her purse and keys. *Twenty-five and alive.*

Kara meets Guy in the parking lot of his apartment building. He’s wearing the green thin-wale shirt she bought for him last year, and she notices that he’s cut his hair very short—that new-again 50s look, the almost crewcut in middle-age. He wears it well because his features are sharp and lean.

“We can call for a Crisis Responder or take him to the Emergency Room,” she says as she comes up beside him.

“Whoa,” says Guy. “Let’s just see where he’s at.”

They take the stairs together, and Kara is grateful that one of them isn’t having visions of Rodney hanging from the end of his belt.

They burst in like a SWAT team and Rodney looks up from his guitar wide-eyed on the sofa. “Jesus,” he says as though they are the ones who scared him.

*RARE BUT VERY SERIOUS SIDE EFFECTS: Severe dizziness, trouble breathing, hallucinations, unusual restlessness, unexplained fever.*

Guy walks her to the car afterward. “Rodney’s been upset about a girl, a new girl at school. She broke it off with him. I haven’t had time to tell you.”

“Okay. Well, maybe it’s a delayed reaction too, you know, to the divorce.”

“I certainly wouldn’t be the one to say it,” he chuckles awkwardly, “but that’s a big part of it, I think.” He breaks her gaze and looks over the roof of Kara’s car, taps on it once. “I’ve gotta go.”

Kara pulls out of the driveway, past the vine maples whose leaves are backlit and showing all their veins. The light between them stabs at her eyes like

showers of sparks. It seems that Rodney has gotten what he needed—both of his parents, there with him, in mutual compassion. Yes, the kid threw away his meds again, and they’ve been advised to hide all theirs, but Guy surprised her, telling Rodney “Okay. We’ll try things your way for a while. Say pot is your medication, and you’re not going to stop smoking it. But then you’ve got to use it like medication, not just party.” It was brilliant of him really; here Kara had been fighting Rodney tooth and nail over getting stoned. All this partying was going to cost him his position on the team if he didn’t watch out.

“Look,” Guy had said in the parking lot, “Pot may be one of the things keeping Rodney alive right now. If he gets kicked off the soccer team, so be it.”

These had been the moments with Guy that had always brought her back into the marriage—his compassion and common sense as a parent had seen them through the worst.

She is still stunned sometimes by the enormity of her decision to leave him. They were, after all, educated people who married believing they were equals, feminist men and women, embarking on a great and noble experiment. They never imagined that seventeen years of full-time career and parenthood would leave them almost no resilience at all, and that the shortfall of energy would become a deficit in sympathy. In desperation, they’d turned to counseling and doctors, where each had soon been diagnosed with all variety of disorders—cyclothymia, dysthymia, mania — and a smorgasbord of presenting traits. They’d learned the language of specialists; diagnoses had replaced epiphanies. The medicine cabinet filled: Zoloft, Celexa, Elavil, Atavan, Wellbutrin, Buspar, Temazepan. Like the moon and star shaped marshmallows Rodney sifted from his breakfast cereal, his parents swallowed blue ones, pink ones, yellow ones. And then it was Rodney’s turn ... and Rodney was refusing.

She comes home from errands on Wednesday and finds Wes pressing blue painter’s tape around the molding in the family room.

“This was the room you wanted painted, right?”

“Yes.”

“Your kid stopped by today.”

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“Yeah, he came by to get his guitar pedal. I says fine with me and he stomps out.”

She looks up at the 1973 ceiling, which has come to look like a bad rash—raised hives blotchy everywhere as though the house has had a bad reaction. She stands there with the car keys in one hand and her purse in the other, feeling her eyes brim with tears.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” says Wes. He wipes his hands on a rag and steps in front her. Her purse and keys drop. She’s babbling about Rodney.

It isn’t just a hug that Wes gives her; he encloses her so that she can lay her head on his shoulder and blubber. She notices that when he’s scrunched up close, like now, she can see the folds at the back of his neck. When he feels her straighten, he steps away.

“Hey, your kid won’t be a hell-cat forever. Man, I think of all the shit I flipped my mom.”



“Good,” she says, her voice thick with mucus. “I’ll be so happy when we’re past this.”

“I don’t know if you’re the praying kind,” Wes says, watching her shake her head, “but I am, so I’ll pray on it for you.”

“Thank you,” says Kara, “I need all the help I can get.”

At the gastroenterologist’s the following morning, she flips through some women’s magazines and reads “What Not to Do the Morning After.” The article advises staying for coffee but not for breakfast, making an excuse—“I’ve got a brunch date.” Why do they always recommend lying? Is that the way to ensure that you get married? To take up a life of lying? Kara knew you couldn’t be in charge of someone else’s change, but what if you couldn’t even reveal your own? Did marriage mean you couldn’t have goals unless the other person agreed with you, and wasn’t that the Overwhelming Compromise? The one that set up for constant grinding accountability and resentment between you?

*SIDE EFFECTS :Decreased sexual ability/desire, enlarged/painful breasts, irregular heartbeat/fainting.*

There was such a gulf between what she once thought was possible when she first married and what took hold increasingly—the notion that someone was in charge. Creeping paternalism. How confusing when Guy talked like a feminist but harrumphed and gurumphed if the domestic routine was altered in any way. Kara remembers being afraid to tell Guy about a dent in the car. Should she have laughed in his face? When did it stop being about taking turns? Where was the line between sacrifice and surrender, the one an action, the other one’s entire being?

Today there has been a last minute change at the doctor’s office and she will have to see the physician she doesn’t like. She wants it over quick. He palpitates her middle and finds her scar to be satisfactory, though any time she has to lie back beneath examining room lights, it makes her body tremble. Fifty-two hundred Kelvin is the temperature of white light. Guy had told her that; he’d been a photographer before he started the landscaping company.

The surgery has burned an image behind her eyes, a black and white photo of herself naked, laid out beneath the surgical lights that have left this scorch mark on her brain. It was merciful that the anesthesia took her like a swift blow to the head. Back in the hospital room, a nurse had stepped inside the door: “The doctor is here.” Kara had never seen the nurse before; for that matter, she had never seen the doctor before. A man with black beady eyes and a matte-black toupee was making steady alarming progress toward her.

“He’s not my doctor,” Kara protested. “I’ve never seen him before,” but the nurse had already gone.

The man smiled and stopped, “I was the attending physician. We haven’t met formally”

Before he could get any closer, Kara made a severe effort to sit up so that he would have to shake her hand before he touched any part of her. She couldn’t get over the affront. Who else has met her unoccupied body on a table? Then it made her think about the moment she swam into her body and was born; also the moment she would swim out of it and be free.



When she pulls into the driveway, she sees Wes on the ladder at the butt end of one of the eaves, his back arched, the eave only inches from his chest. She doesn't call out or wave. Rodney is standing at the bottom of the ladder. She sits very still, listening to the fan of the engine and their voices floating over the sound.

"Hey, man, can I bum a smoke? Not to be a total hobo or anything."

Rodney smiles at this last bit. His smile is quick and winning; he has no idea how beautiful he is.

"Tell you what, bro, take this paint, and I'll smoke you out when I'm done."

She watches as Wes lifts the paint can and lowers it behind him where Rodney receives it with both hands.

"Okay," says Wes, coming down. "Now I go roof monkey." He repositions the ladder, climbs it and hoists himself over the gutter. "Shit, I forgot the zinc stripping."

"Where is it?" Rodney asks.

"On top of the washer in the garage." Wes signals with a jerk of his head.

Rodney goes to the garage and comes out with a roll of silver metal in each hand.

"What do you do with this stuff?" he asks.

"It's moss killer, man. You nail it down so the roof won't turn green."

"Is it toxic?"

"Not unless you lick it, dude." They have a laugh at that.

"Come on up. The view is cool from here," Wes says, taking a pack of Camels out of his pocket. His eyes travel downward from the clouds to Rodney who is clambering up the ladder. "Hey, there's your mom." He hollers down to her: "You got groceries?"

She shakes her head. Rodney stands beside Wes and turns toward the neighborhood. She waves at him, and he waves back. At least it starts out like a wave but it ends up as a hand held at arm's length.

Back in the bedroom, she turns on the heating pad and lies down. She can hear the scuffling of their feet on the roof and the rattling drift of gravel that follows each step, the percussion of the hammer, and between beats—jokes and boasts and laughter. She fights the urge to sleep, hoping for a chance to speak with her son, but he leaves without coming in to say goodbye. She knows because she can see him from the bedroom window, sauntering down the driveway in that pair of jeans he hemmed with a stapler.

On Friday, Wesley comes to put a the sealer coat on the eaves since the weather is dry enough for painting. He calls Kara at 8:30 in the morning to be sure she knows he's coming.

"Soon as that puppy is painted, I'll start on the family room."

She sees him now from the window, positioning the ladder; he's wearing dark glasses and she wonders if he is stoned and just as quickly sweeps the thought from her mind. Wes is not her son though certainly his presence comforts her with the possibility of what Rodney might become. Wes plants the ladder then lurches to the left suddenly, towards the rhododendrons where she can't see him. She gets up to make coffee, like she used to for Rodney, even

though she can no longer drink it. Wes usually brings in his doughnut, and they chat awhile.

“Hey,” he says, walking in with the glasses still on. “Today I’m super fly.”

“What’s with the glasses?”

“Shit, I got a migraine.” He slumps into a chair, all pretense gone. Then he takes off the glasses and presses the palms of his hands over his eyes. She’s never seen him without his good cheer.

“Caffeine will help.”

“Yeah. thanks.” He puts both hands around the mug she places in front of him. There are three or four creases beneath each of his eyes. “My student loan didn’t come through. I wrote one of the years wrong on it I guess.” Clearly, he is resigned to the mishaps of bureaucracy and complete dismissal for no discernable reason. “Next time I’ll get it right.”

“Oh,” Kara says. Wes is looking at the ceiling as though he could prevent the spillage of tears if he just kept his head horizontal.

“Renee’s moving out. She’s drinking again, but trying to make out like I’m the problem, cause we’d have more money if I dropped out of school.

“I thought we was going get married, and when I finished next spring she would have a shot at getting a nursing degree. I been up all night crying. Shit. My head is killing me. I’ll work unless I puke again. If I start puking, I got to go home.”

“No, you should go home now, Wes. Take care of yourself.”

“Home isn’t home no more. Renee stole some of my stuff last night.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Yeah,” he shakes his head as though his spine just quivered. “You got any Ibuprofen?”

“Yes,” she says, going to fetch it from the cupboard.

“Coffee is good,” he says. I’ll get my cinnamon twist outta the car.”

Back at the table, Wes takes a long drought of the coffee, “Whoee, that’s better. Man, I was seeing UFO’s for awhile there.”

“You get oracular headaches?”

“If that’s the word for those light thingees, then I got ‘em.”

“I get migraines, too,” Kara says simply.

After awhile Wes says, “You gotta get this house on the market. Get out from under the past.”

Kara shrugs: “It’s my boy’s home.”

“He’ll have to man-up sometime.”

She watches the big bites of cinnamon twist pass behind Wesley’s Adam’s apple, and she knows he can’t afford to take an afternoon off just as sure as she knows that her Medical Leave will run out in two weeks.

“You’re a good person, Wes,” Kara finds herself saying.

“Yep,” he says, his lovely fingers nearly all the way around the mug.

“You’re good people, too.”

“You’ll find your right person,” she says. “You’re loving, and you deserve love.”

“I sure hope it’s sooner rather than later.”



That night, Rodney stops by, like a saboteur. He doesn't go to the front door, he comes around the back and smacks a hand on the sliding glass. All she sees for a moment is this looming figure, a pale stretched face. The adrenalin goes straight to her eyeballs. He comes in, seems buoyant. "I, uh, am in the neighborhood visiting Mary Alice, thought I'd stop by." Mary Alice is a girl he's known since they were five-years-old and peed in the woods together.

"How you feeling?" His smile is so sudden, it glints. He can only look at her long enough to ask.

Her heart is pumping out pure unsaturated love, grateful to even be asked.

She shrugs, waiting to see if he will hug her. He slings his long arms over her shoulders and she goes up on to her toes, mashing her face into his warm neck briefly.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I'm sorry I scared you."

"I know, honey, I know. I'm sorry I slapped you."

"Naw," he shrugs. "I deserved it. We just get like... unstoppable force meets immovable object. That's just how we are."

"I'm glad to see you're doing better. That's all," she says. "And your Dad, too."

"You, too, Mom," he says, "Good to see you out of your bathrobe."

"Yes," she laughs, "I even went to the mailbox today." Then she adds quickly, "Marie came by and brought me a meatloaf."

"Ooof, Marie's meatloaf," he shakes his head. "Gotta go, Mom." She sees that he is no longer bearing the weight of his mother's illness, of his parents' grief, and she wants to keep it that way. She touches him lightly on the shoulder before he steps back out into the coniferous dark.

The can calls itself Orange Peel Patch. It promises to splatter texture on dry wall with an adjustable nozzle, from fine to heavy. Kara looks up at the ceiling and thinks *chicken pox, diaper rash, poison ivy, prickly heat*.

Wesley has finished putting tarps down in the family room and steps beside her. They survey the ceiling together. "Yep, You got some bald spots," he says. "We'll get this ceiling of yours texturized in time for me to start painting tomorrow."

Kara holds up the can. "Listen to this. The propellant used in this aerosol product is known to be carcinogenic according to clinical trials conducted in California."

"Lemme see?" Wes squints at the bottle. "Blah blah blah, *blah blah*. blahddy blah."

"Like the fine print on my meds," she says wryly.

He pulls the cheap plastic goggles over his eyes, smiles at her, and lets the band snap. "Are we in California?"

"No." She raises her voice to match his.

"Does what happens in California make a damn bit of difference to us?"

"No," she shouts, in the rhythm of it now.

"Then turn me loose!" He points the nozzle, laughing now.

"Shit yeah!" she shouts. Elation makes her tingle all over as cake batter blobs fall upon the tarp, upon the ladder steps, upon her shoes. *Remember that*

*your doctor has prescribed this medication because he or she has judged that the benefit to you is greater than the risk of side effects.*

On Saturday afternoon, when she gets home from the pharmacy, Kara again sees signs that Rodney has been in the house. He has put an island in warm blue water on her computer as the screen saver—warm blue and vigorous green—shimmering just inside the screen.

