

Wednesday, 6:38 pm

*B*etween the bare branches, through their belated flower absences, I can see them. Going towards him one after another, first the one boy whipping and then the next boy whipping. Then the rest of the boys go ahead and whip him together a while. I go on whispering at Annie. Annie goes on ignoring me. Then she goes down along the line of bushes to where across the street a man is raking—she calls out to the man but he does not hear. Meanwhile I go on whispering and watching the boys whipping between the bare branches, through their belated flower absences, he can see her. Going towards the patio with a red tray in her hand. He goes on sitting at Annie. Po goes on ignoring Stephan. Then, abruptly, he stands up from Annie as she takes her tray and places it on the table, then wipes the chair down with her beach bag. Next, from the corner of the patio, she takes an umbrella and places the pole in the hole in the centre of the table, and then she sits, so he sits. He goes on sitting at Annie. Po goes on ignoring Stephan. Eventually he sees her remove the umbrella from the table and, furling it up, place it back in the corner of the patio. Then she sits, so he sits, and the next time he looks between the bare branches and through their belated flower absences he sees her drop her hot dog in the puddle at her feet.

He waits for all the cars to pass before making his way across the street.

You can't sit here, he says, and she rotates to him with one eye squeezed shut against the rain, the other eye blinking erratically. Then, with both hands, she gathers up the enormous hot dog and places it carefully on the attendant tray.

You can't sit here, he repeats. Not with that hot dog. The Dairy Queen patio is right over there. Over where? Over there. But you're not even open, she says, smiling with thoughtful regard, revealing the fact that at least one of her teeth is dead. The tooth

looks slightly dark and hollow inside. No, he says, but he will be soon. And he has to set a precedent now doesn't he.

Chuckling whimsically, she extracts a big blue book from her cream-coloured beach bag. Do you want to see my whale book? she asks, brushing bits of beach from her wet red hair. Meanwhile the rainfall intensifies, beading from his chin, nose and brows, running in searching rivulets down the nape of his neck and fanning out across his shoulders. There's whales in there, he's told.

Taking a chair from the stack, he flops down to flip through the big blue book's many impressive pictures of whales while the woman, preparatory to consuming a good large chunk, takes to wringing out her ridiculously long hot dog in a fittingly ridiculous and ultimately futile attempt to rid it of excessive moisture.

He places the aptly named *Big Blue Book of Whales* on the table and says, Listen—

Now do you by chance live on the reserve? she interrupts, holding up, seemingly as case in point, the soggy, wrinkled, to some extent twisted hot dog. Because you just seem so, you know, *reserved*. He tells her he prefers the term stoic. Okay, she says, stoic. Reminds me of my sister Edna. Now Edna never spoke a word. Not a word? he says. Not a *word*, she says, and shuffles her chair up closer to his. So you know what our mother did? Took Edna to the hospital. Yessir, right to the hospital, and you know what they found? A tumour the size of a fist behind her heart. Yeah, a fist. Behind her heart. Daddy always claimed that by the time they got around to telling Edna, she'd already told herself.

She smiles contentedly as he picks up the book again and politely flips through, feeling, if nothing else, obligated to be enthused. In the meantime, across the street, in amongst the beach clutter of wave-tumbled timber and stone, a child complains bitterly to his father about this ongoing insult of salt-stinging rain, this constant west coast Canadian downpour. The child continues to complain, and it continues to rain, as a pair of bright yellow taxis, their hoods dimpled and glistening in the rain, glide past to hover in front of the Ocean Beach Hotel, discharging two flocks of boisterous young men therein.

Watching through the pall of falling rain the last of the young men enter the hotel bar, she says she had to ask. It's just that it's getting so bad right now. In fact it's getting so she can't stand *any* of those people anymore.

At the words "those people" he closes the book and taps the cover meditatively, sweating profusely from the forehead and underarms despite the inclement weather. At length he says there are a lot of whales in here though.

Looking both absorbed and delighted with this acknowledgment, she smiles provocatively at the book, so he too smiles at the book, and eventually looks up to see her staring out at the ocean, her expression a similarly dark and unfathomable sheet of shale.

Look, she says, don't get me wrong, I like the few I know. It's just that I can't stand the pigeonholing anymore. The pigeonholing? he says. That's right, she says, the pigeonholing. I can't stand the pigeonholing anymore.

She gazes out over the sea at the last of the daylight—what scant light the day managed to scrape up—now draining into the islands fringing the horizon far beyond the confines of the bay. Look am I boring you? she says, and he says, No, not at all. Well I thought maybe I was boring you, she says, and he says, Oh on the contrary.

Forming two fists, and stacking one upon the other, she rests her considerable chin atop the resultant tower. Then she removes her chin from her fists in order to rest it more comfortably, if improbably, on the rain-wet surface of the table. She surveys him from this position a while, then pivots steadily in the direction of the sea, raising the bluntness of her chin against the cold wet wind now tumbling in over the bay.

So anyway, she says, this one time Eddie's on the train, and there's this little green jawbreaker rolling around all over.

She glances over, tentatively, and seeing that she's taken sufficient hold of his attention, continues on with the story.

So there it was, she says, this little green jawbreaker, just rolling around all over the floor. Train pulled forward and it rolled to the back; then the train came to a stop and it rolled on back.

And as providence would have it, she explains, there were actually these three children present, toddlers really, all boys, each one helplessly intent on the little green jawbreaker himself, when suddenly the train came to a stop and this big fat Indian got on and sat down. Beside my Eddie, she says. And I do mean *right* beside my Eddie—like *there*—and so of course Eddie started to get a little uncomfortable. And itchy. It seems odd, he thinks, but this Eddie of hers is getting awfully agitated around overweight aborigines evidently. Eddie just *loves* his smoked salmon, she sighs reminiscently, becoming increasingly animated with the story. It's time for him to say something now, he knows, about Native Indians, or maybe it's East Indians, or both, but instead he remains silent, becoming gradually more engrossed not so much with what she is saying, but with that one hollow tooth she has and the way it reveals itself to him in her less self-conscious moments.

So anyway, she says, this Indian, what did he do? Why he picked up this little green jawbreaker and tried to give it to one of the children. Like *right* to the children. She suggests they were Indians too incidentally, though of what type she has no idea—you never really do—and the children's mother, well she said absolutely not of course, and so the Indian simply shrugged and sat back down beside Eddie—again like *right* beside Eddie, like *there*—rubbing up against him she supposed *somewhat* accidentally, this due to the fact that he, not Eddie but the Indian, was wearing somewhere in the vicinity of a dozen layers of clothing, each article just reeking of salmon, that fact alone seemingly enough to sanction a hefty measure of bigotry. And then this Indian, what did he do? Why he just popped that little green jawbreaker right in his mouth—Pop!—and started chewing. *And* chewing. *And* chewing. Naturally out loud and everything too.

A strange, almost doglike growl rises in her throat as she casually removes her hand from his and endeavours to sit up straight. And finally, overcome with laughter, she leans towards him with mouth ajar, revealing a ready mix of bun, meat and mustard-laced saliva cartwheeling around a thick pink tongue.

That's a nice bracelet by the way.

She's wearing a white cotton dress, the skirt of which rides up a little, and she's spent some time under house arrest lately, the evidence of which proves impossible to miss in that dress unfortunately.

*Excuse me?* she says, turning abruptly his way, then away, and he says, Well it is. A nice bracelet, he means. Do you really think so though? she says, assembling herself in a position better suited to receiving compliments, modelling for him her smooth, white, black bracelet-ed ankle and wiggling her long, widely spaced toes affectionately. And he says, Oh yes. Very nice. She must be cold though, he adds, indicating the high-riding dress and then the open-toed sandals below, and she says she manages. Well we all *manage*, she's told. But then just *managing* is hardly the point somehow.

She smiles just once, but with all available alacrity, and then averts her eyes and casts about sullenly. She would, if she could, just like to nurse again if possible though. She would? Sure she would. Unfortunately though she's of that age, having accumulated that set amount of experience, whereby she seems to slip all too easily into the manager's role. She does? Well sure she does. But then her employers always seem to see her as far too experienced and therefore overqualified to waste simply as an RN anymore. Look, she says as, across the way, pigeons begin to alight out along the rain-slick, pink-bricked promenade. First the one alights and then the next one alights. Then the rest of them alight together of course.

She asks if he sees them. Well sure he sees them. Well you see what I mean then, don't you? she says, and he says, Oh you mean the jawbreaker story? I guess so, sure. In a way.

From her beach bag she extracts a small compact, makes a few minor upgrades to her face, and then returns the compact to the bag, just as a brisk salt wind lashes down on top of his head and blows up under his arms, corkscrewing him out of his chair an uncertain moment before gradually giving up and moving on down the Drive.

Oh God, what time is it? she asks, having dropped one thick, altogether masculine hand to his knee and glancing anxiously about. Oh it's not time yet, she's told. Oh good, she says, offering

his knee one more experimental squeeze, a test really. Now where was she? Oh yes, she has to manage. It's her cross to bear, she supposes. She has to be this silly little manager, with this silly little accountability, who puts together silly little schedules and watches silly little labour costs, all the while hiring silly little women she thinks might be able to rotate the occasional silly little bed and— Oh yes!—she has to work a silly little strike every once in a while as well. And that's it. That's a manager, in her eyes anyway. A moot point really, but nevertheless interesting, in a way.

Calvins are on sale, she says, holding up a flyer produced from her beach bag. Calvin Klein jeans. They're on sale. At Sears.

And as she grips his knee, then lets his knee free, he studies the resulting dimples in the denim.

*Wednesday, 7:03 pm*

Thomas bounds on by in the rain. Thomas looks like he wants to stop and talk, but then his eyes widen at sight of the woman and he bounds on by for now.

Who's that? she asks, and he tells her that's *Thomas*. Used to be Tom, he says, but now it's *Thomas*—with an h. Tends bar part-*thime* down at the Ocean Beach Hotel. That's where she recognizes him from, the OB, she says, smiling the only way it's possible to smile while wearing a white cotton dress in the rain.

Tell me, though, what's he like, she says, and he says, Thomas? Oh, you know, the usual: Pina Coladas and getting caught in the rain. I do recognize him though, she says, hardly listening, intensely interested in a rapidly receding Thomas instead. He does triathlons too, he says, if you're into that sort of thing. Triathlons, huh, she says. Well he's very attractive. I mean I find him very attractive. He's in fantastic shape, I'm guessing. Thomas? he says. Oh yes, fantastic shape. He's selling Amway apparently.

Sheltering the pages from the wind and rain, about to offer the *Big Blue Book of Whales* what he hopes will be one last exploration before returning it, finally, to its rightful owner again, he suddenly feels a deeper chill drift across his face and neck, bringing with it dredged-up memories of ferocious winds, of flooding rains, of the terrible stagnation that followed and, finally, of death.

Flipping through the book, he pulls up his coat collar limp and embalmed with rain. He can't believe how many whales there are in here, he says. He didn't know there were that many species of whale even *out* there. Thirty-three, she assures him proudly, smiling her hollow-toothed smile, brushing rain-flattened red hair back across a shoulder. Suddenly she chokes, coughs, and spits up hot dog into an already awaiting napkin, then casually secretes the entire expelled bolus away beneath the table somewhere.

Now where was she, she says, bringing the still formidable remains of hot dog perilously close to her lips, only to abandon the exercise at the last possible instant. Instead she pulls a stack of photographs from her beach bag and eagerly passes them over, seemingly intent on explaining them at once, individually and, as luck would have it, at great length as well. He sees she has them organized according to subject matter—people, pets, places—while continuing to flip indifferently through the whale book some more.

That's her sister, Edna, he's told. The dead one. And that one there's her second husband, Ernie. He's dead now too. . . . Anyway, she says, the first time I talked to Ernie, he calls me Wendy Wilson—Wendy *Wilson*, mind you—he calls me this and I don't even recognize him and I think, "Any man I don't recognize calling me by my maiden name, well that's trouble." She snorts spirit-edly, leaning in close to admit that ol' Wilson maybe used to run around a little.

Struggling to sustain interest, he returns the stack of much-handled photographs to the table, at which point she glances over, a small furrow emerging between her eyebrows, and so he reaches over to rub it for her.

And this one here's the fish farm where I first found Eddie, she says, allowing the impromptu massage to continue. And on their first date back in town, she explains, in keeping with the theme, she and Eddie went out for salmon at the since-destroyed Just for the Halibut Seafood Palace, where of course they had to ask about the specials. Because, in Wendy's experience, waitresses never really know the specials. It's sort of a little game we have, she rather wanly smiles, lending the tale a slightly conspiratorial air. She

closes her eyes as he works his thumb down the channel between her brows and the rain taps a meditative tattoo against the exposed, suddenly fish-grey planks of the patio.

So the waitress started telling them about the Neapolitan salmon special. “One pink, one white,” the waitress said, “in a Portobello mushroom pomegranate sauce.” No kidding, Wendy says, a Portobello mushroom pomegranate sauce. So she asked the waitress why it’s white. “What?” Why’s the one salmon white? “Cause it’s wild,” the waitress said. Wild? How the heck could she be so sure it’s wild? “Cause it eats shrimp,” the waitress said. Can you beat that? “Cause it eats *shrimp*,” this waitress said. Well we thought *that* was weird, Wendy laughs, talking on and on in that vein until, as he loses himself in the rhythm of the rubbing, her voice slips down, out and away from consciousness, and all but disappears *like this Malcolm, I say, and she says, Malcolm? What does Malcolm have to do with it? And why the hell are you so threatened by this? Oh I don’t know, Annie. Maybe because I don’t feel the need to air our dirty laundry to some fucking therapist. What’s wrong now, I say as suddenly she starts to feel it coming—there it is, here it comes, there it goes, out the rolled-down window and down the passenger-side door again. And afterwards, as she wipes the remnants of vomit from her face, we sit side by side staring straight ahead at the rain-swept parking lot where two young boys elevate their find for closer inspection. It hangs there like that, its wing agonizingly elongated, its carcass covered in grease, appearing much larger than it ought to, more terrestrial maybe, though less real, and I wonder aloud if it’s not some other breed of bird perhaps. No, it’s definitely a seagull, she tells me with that wonderful smile of hers, managing, in the face of enormous odds, to bring him reeling back to the conversation which consists, ostensibly, of an account of why she and Eddie felt they ought to be treating the waitress this way—that is, asking her such silly questions really.*

What’s wrong? she asks, again fitting her hand to his knee, its present perch of choice evidently. Nothing’s wrong, he tells her, finishing up the massage and offering the wet and well-worn pages of the *Big Blue Book of Whales* one last reverent tour for good measure. I’m sorry, she says, refocusing on something, it would seem, just beyond his right shoulder. Typically I don’t talk

this much. Typically I'm much more . . . Stoic? he says. That's it—stoic, she says, astonished at his insight. Typically I'm much more stoic, I'd say.

Across the way, looking more than a little ridiculous in their matching orange raincoats, a family of five piles forth from their bright new cyan minivan and together gaze out the length of the pier.

Down that way, he says. Pardon? the mother says. The whale, he says, it's down that way. And despite himself, nods the lot of them off in that direction.

Did you see that look that woman gave you? says Wendy. She's angry. Sure she is. But then so's this entire town apparently. You see it in peoples' faces when they first come out in the rain, in that first fraction of a glance—that first flicker of rage—and then it's gone: you're not one of them. You're not one of those Indians that killed that girl. And yet you've still be pigeonholed by comparison, she somewhat sagely maintains.

The family recedes west along the beach, their matching orange raincoats bunching awkwardly above their matching rubber boots.

Smiling that smile, Wendy asks what time is it now. Oh it's time, she's told. Well she'd better get going then, she says, as they want her home by nine now.

She continues to flip through her whale book as they make their way to her ten-speed parked outside the public restrooms a short walk down the Drive. She invites him to ride, but he explains how that's not such a good idea just now. So then she begs him to ride, until finally he capitulates, but only on the strict condition that she ride the handlebars the vast majority of the way.

In the dark and the rain, then, aiming deliberately for potholes and puddles all the way, they ride east along the beach and past the naked brown woods of the Semiahmoo reserve, then out towards the highway and the American border where, just prior to customs and subsequent to the driving range, she finally falls off, managing to stick the landing impressively however despite such suspect high-heeled footwear. After a time she tells him to

take a right down a meagre potholed side street, then park in the garage of an old piss-yellow clapboard rancher. Children's toys lie scattered throughout the yard, along with what appears to be an old rusted-out Corolla. Wendy assures him that neither Eddie nor the children are home, and more importantly, in hers eyes anyway, that neither the toys nor the Toyota belong to her.

She unlocks the door and follows him inside. The interior walls are finished with a faux wood paneling scratched here and there by countless anonymous claws, while all shape and size of empty cardboard box clutter the thick green-carpeted hall.

He asks if she is moving, but she assures him she is not. Got a dog or something? he says, tracing along the wall an almost parallel series of four deep scratch marks. Oh Eddie's a dog all right, she laughs good-naturedly, and at Eddie's expense apparently, as having moved into the kitchen he spots a clematis expiring on the windowsill.

It's dying. What's dying? Your plant, he says, wiping dust from the chipped-paint windowsill, losing himself in the rhythm of the wiping as Wendy's voice ebbs to a mere murmur before disappearing below the waterline altogether *then? he asks, and I tell him that it drowned, poor thing. So too much love again? he says, and I say, Yup, too much love again. And not enough sunlight got in.*

*We watch her approach from across the lawn, her face looking grey and drawn. What are you two losers conspiring about? she asks while dabbing at her eyes with a tissue, first the one and then the other, careful not to dab away any of those precious few lashes remaining. I was just explaining your particular brand of horticulture to Stephan here, I say. Why are you crying though? Oh it's nothing, she says, knitting her imperfectly pencilled-in brows together. Just the girls. What about the girls, I say, massaging her forehead with a thumb, losing my mark a moment and regrettably smudging her would-be brows together as one. Oh just this baby bird they've got cornered by the fence, I'm told as, across the yard, dressed absurdly in what appears to be Lisa's lingerie, the children shriek out loud as once again they manage to corner their frightened and ailing prey.*

*Christ, Annie, they're just kids, I say, and she says, I know, but still. What the hell are they doing in that get-up though, Stephan wants to know, currently sporting as a shoe an empty bread bowl, formerly a vessel*

for spinach and artichoke dip, much to our collective enjoyment of course. And she says, *Oh I don't know, Steph. Playing fairies, I suppose.*

*And in the twilight, thinking she's still very beautiful standing there, I place my arm around and under her arm, only to find that she's uncomfortable this way. So then I place my arm up around her neck, finding this too to be uncomfortable as my arm catches on her wig, causing it to shift slightly, and off she runs to the bathroom to fix her beach bag, spilling its entire contents to the floor. Sobbing, she crouches to gather up her photographs now fallen out of order as, moving cautiously amid the assortment of cardboard boxes into the adjoining living room, her guest finds himself all but overwhelmed by the distinct but mingling odours of rotting garbage, damp animal and wet wool. He removes his wet clothes and, dropping each article to the floor, manoeuvres naked through the maze of boxes in the direction of the bedroom at the very far end of the hall. All at once he smells his own rank body odour, and finding on the dresser a bottle of *Glow by J. Lo*, proceeds to douse both himself and the bed with it. Finally Wendy arrives, stack of photographs in hand, each damp and discoloured from washing now, naked herself except for ratty leopard print underwear, furry leopard print slippers, and of course that large black bracelet weighing equally on both his conscience and her ankle.*

*Wednesday, 11:41 pm*

Hey, Wendy? Yes, Chris? Eddie *is* a dog isn't he, he says, and she pauses a moment, seeming exhausted and thoughtful, then says of course Eddie's a dog. Why? Just confirming, that's all, he says. He may have, what, misjudged her a little, he admits.

And later, lying prone in bed, having set his face firmly to the claw-marked wall in protest, he, Chris, not the real Chris but a false Chris, a faux wood-paneled Chris, listens carefully as she continues to flip through the *Big Blue Book of Whales* behind him. He has this terrific headache now, no doubt another symptom of what is becoming, despite all best efforts to the contrary, an ongoing and even mounting crisis of conscience somehow.

Oh and Wendy? Yes Chris? I've got this terrific headache now, he says, and no sooner has he said it than her feet are swinging to

the floor, launching her out of bed and into the adjoining bathroom where drawers open and close, crash and bang with theatrical offstage commotion until eventually she returns with a tall vial of pills and a taller glass of water.

What are these then, he says. Tylenol Threes, she says, offering him a couple along with the glass of water. He pops the Tylenol in his mouth and swallows them down with grim determination, then returns his attention to the wall. Eventually she wiggles up behind him, gently kissing his shoulder.

You're so surreal, she says. Well I'm so glad you think so, he says, drawing his shoulder abruptly away. What's wrong? Nothing's wrong. Well you seem, you know, upset, she says, and he says if he does—and he's not saying he is—the only thing that would make him that way would be her calling him *surreal* for Christ's sake. Not yet, he says, pushing her roving hand away.

Feeling her rise up behind him, he suddenly feels as though he might be sinking into the mattress beneath him. Vertigo, he's thinking, when suddenly she descends upon him.

Tell me about her, she whispers, her large black bracelet wearing a deep painful trail into his ankle. Who? he says, and she says his wife. His *wife*? How the hell'd Wendy know he had a wife? Platinum? she says, reaching over to twist his wedding ring around his finger. Silver, he says, drawing his hand away. Purchased for the princely sum of twenty pesos in Los Cabos, Mexico—on a beach. Yeah exactly, Wendy. A beach. We were married on a god-damned beach. How romantic, she says. Not really, he says, reluctantly returning his hand to hers. You can get very sick down there, hey. Very sick. Of course she's not very well now either. I'm sorry, Wendy says, and so he tells her not to be. After all, it's not her fault. Not entirely anyway.

He pulls his shoulder clear of her probing lips and studies, in the slowly obliging darkness, the patterns of scratches on the faux wood-paneled walls. That sinking feeling is still there, although not quite so overwhelmingly as it was before, and studying the patterns of absent Eddie's scratches makes him feel, by comparison, that much more stable and even buoyant somehow.

What's she like then, this wife of his, and he says Stephanie? Like the, what, the little man behind the curtain, he'd say.

Wendy laughs wildly and out of all proportion to this remark, then foot-pushes the only remaining sheet clear of the bed. Now, stretched naked and spread-eagled across the mattress, she flips over onto her stomach and laughs all too wildly once again. Tell me about her *honestly*, she says, so he says well, to be honest, it's getting difficult to tell where his wife ends and he begins anymore.

He slides his feet together, one against the other, and hugs his knees against the cold. In truth, this is one of my devices, this sliding together of the feet for warmth, one he feels particularly guilty deploying here with this particular companionship of course.

What's she *really* like though, says Wendy, wanting more, so he says stiff. Stiff? Yeah, stiff, he says. As a board. Something's happened so that he and Stephanie can't be romantic anymore. That's sad, she says, and he says it is sad. What's worse, though, is this . . . Yes? she says. This terrible and somewhat debilitating feeling of trying to leave someone who's become, despite all your best intentions, completely dependent on you, he says.

She hesitates. You must still love her then, she says, and he says Stephanie? Well of course he still loves her—he's her *husband*. She's his *wife*. They were married on a *beach* for crying out loud. Jesus Christ.

He returns to the wall as she props herself up in bed behind him, flipping quickly through her photographs of Eddie, Edna, Ernie, et cetera some more.

So you'd never, you know, leave her? says Wendy, and he says he doesn't think so, no, he doesn't think he can. Well if she knew about this she'd kill you, I bet, Wendy says, and he says, Believe me, Wendy, if I thought she knew about this I'd kill himself.

He slides his feet together, one against the other, and listens to the beleaguered drainpipe outside the window. After a while a car rattles by and up the road, casting angled amber lights briefly across the bedroom wall.

I'm sorry, she says, so he says, Forget it. Don't worry about it. Though I do appreciate your apology of course. More than you realize, she sighs. Excuse me? Sorry? What's that supposed to mean? he says, flipping over to face her, and she says she doesn't understand. That statement, "More than you realize," Wendy, what's that mean exactly? She says she still doesn't understand. I'm simply asking for a definition of "More than you realize," he says. Like in lieu of something more, some act of physical violence or something, I'm *lucky* you're only apologizing? Is that it? Like I'm getting off *easy* perhaps? Or is it that you're simply apologizing *more* than I realize. Is that it. That must be it. But then that couldn't be it. After all, that wouldn't make any sense, he surmises. At least not in this particular context. After all, I didn't say I appreciate the fact you're sorry, or that I appreciate how sorry you are—because I don't—I said I *appreciate your apology*. I'm afraid I still don't understand, she says, so apprehensively in fact that the furrow between her eyebrows emerges like never before, and it's all he can do to resist the impulse to abandon his protest and massage it into submission for her.

Well Christ, Wendy, what's not to understand? After all, you're the one who said it. "More than you realize"—that's what you said. Well I'd just like to know what that means. In fact, I'd like to know *exactly* what that means. Because, hey, if that's some sort of threat or something, well then I'd really like to know. So that I might, you know, prepare a proper defence. I'd at least like the opportunity to prepare a proper defence here, Wendy. I think I have that right, he says.

She pulls away to lie stiffly in the bed, breasts pancaking unattractively into her armpits, appearing oddly white and inorganic in this lack of light, mummified with resentment. Soon enough she is fast asleep. And some time later, long after midnight perhaps, he will move around to her side of the bed to where the Tylenol Threes are kept. He will open the container and choke down its entire contents, making sure not to miss so much as one pill, in the end taking in something like ninety, he thinks. Then, moving out to the kitchen, he will happen upon a large bottle of Pinesol, stored where else but under the sink, and for a moment he will consider choking this down as well, but then think better

of it, as Pinesol would of course be impossible to keep down *the bed with her already in it, having raced in ahead to lie there naked, curled up against the cold. And so I take the sheet and spread it over her eager squirming body, making certain it's square to the bed—Is it square?* she says, and I say, *It's square, Annie.—followed by the blanket and then of course the duvet as well. And as I fold the sheet over and down, she giggles and moans with satisfaction, twisting her hands up under her chin in a manner somehow reminiscent of a bird's wings, asking me to kiss her eyelids, and I do kiss her eyelids, softly, first the one and then the other, before turning off the light and whispering softly, Goodnight, you godless little whore.*