

Michael Byers

THE SKY IN OHIO

THE HOUSE IN HEWER WAS THREE STORIES, much larger than they needed, and full of odd vacancies, as though the Jenkinses, from whom Paul and his wife were subletting, had planned to be away much longer than a single semester. But the kitchen cupboards were stocked, and in the basement, alongside the usual clutter, stood a huge upright refrigerator housing a billion frosted bottles of beer, to which Paul helped himself while instructing the babies, “This is an IPA, this is a, this is a *porter*, this is a stout, which means it’s very *dark*....” The babies, on the basement floor, were checking it all out. Meanwhile, upstairs, Olive was in eager flight, scouting around, poking her head into the mudroom and the garage and the second-floor sunroom, full of hard, happy intent. “Holy!” she purred, from the top of the stairs.

“You said what?”

“I like this place!” she hollered, showing only her head.

The dusty babies laughed.

It was no secret that she was tired of Seattle and of their brand of existence there, but Paul had not expected the swiftness with which joy arrived to his wife. By the end of their second day in Ohio, after the cribs were assembled and all the baby crap was set up and everyone had had a good long snooze, she announced, “All right, I’ve decided: we’re staying.” They were in the backyard, all four of them crammed in a plastic wading pool, Olive’s tidy flat middle folding and flexing as she reared and threw failed cherry tomatoes over the back hedge and onto the city golf course, one after the other.

“Oh!” he answered.

“Well, we—are,” she said. “I like this house. We could *buy* it from the Jenkinses. And you could really *be* a professor. And also, guess what! If we’re here, your mom can’t drop by while I’m nursing! She can’t *tell* me why the human race is doomed to—extinction! She can’t tell me how painful it is to die—from eating raw eggs! And so on!”

There was a blue, blue sky overhead and absolutely nothing in it.

Well, Olive could be sensitive to being thought too little of, and his mother was good at thinking too little of others, and, thus, The Ice Water Incident had happened, and The Don’t You Know About This Vacuum Cleaner Incident,

followed by The Some People Just Want to Dress Like Rock Stars I Guess Incident, The You Were Always Cruel Like Your Father Incident, The It's Like I Have a Headache in My Anus Incident, and, in the manner of such things, Paul and Olive had absorbed these moments with mostly good grace at the time and then worked out the ugly splinter from the flesh at home, together, and yet they became a main topic, sometimes the only topic, how crazy and difficult his mother could be, how oppressive, often, how joyless and morose, and Paul and Olive were trying their best but were just pretty tired of it, so when Paul heard that Serena Weaver, at Hewan College, where Paul himself had been a Classics major all those years ago, was looking desperately for a last-minute replacement for a semester while she, Serena, went to Turkey to dig up ancient artifacts of one kind or another, he was pretty much ready to go, although obviously he was about fifteenth on her list of possible replacements. "Yes, although hang on one sec," Paul had said, and had carried the phone down the hall to where Olive was nursing the twins, side-by-side, football-hold-style. "You want to go to Hewan College for three months so I can teach Greek for a semester?"

"*Hell* yes," she'd said immediately. "Lots of babysitters."

"So, yes," he told Serena.

Well, the babysitters had yet to arrive—it was only August—but things were looking up. Just the four of them here in Ohio. His wife there in the pool, her top loose, and he could see all the way to Argentina below. She was some chick, man, especially given their twins were barely *one year old!* Nobody really slept, but somehow Olive Haselton looked like a million bucks. Why not stay forever?

Paul, as his mother's son, had a few, like, anxieties, though, for which he maybe should have been seeing someone, anyone, but was not. And never mind pills. "I worry they'll mess up my brain," he would say.

At which Olive would say, "C'mon, man, it's just a brain."

But honestly he was afraid of so much, especially death and disease and failure (he was thirty-one years old and in perfect health, as he well knew), and everywhere he went he carried in his mind a doomy cloud, which of course had its origin in the Jovian weather system that was his mother's own anxiety and anger, which could itself of course be traced back to the literal insanity of *her* own mother, and which experience led *his* mother—oh, helplessly, of course!—to even now lash out in spite and fear at those she loved, to declare for example that They Never Had to See Each Other Again at his wedding to

Olive because he had the temerity to invite his own father, and of course he knew his mother was a sad and ridiculous figure, but still, the things she said could pierce him to the heart, her aim was unerring and her statements only aggravated his own inborn anxieties, his fears that he would ultimately fail at everything, at life, and at being a husband and a father (the Everything You Say Is Hurtful to Me Incident) and *therefore*—this was the other question in the air—that possibly here, away from home and his mother, he could regain whatever it had been that Olive had liked in him in the first place, he could shed his fears and anxieties, or at least sneak away from them temporarily. And it was not an un-dire situation, in that he had little babies and a patient wife who would one day not be patient any longer.

It was actually sort of serious, put that way.

A block away was the entrance to the Arboretum, and on the third day, the day before he was to show up on campus to get his keys, they put the kids in backpacks and headed into the woods. “Durk!” Mark said, after a minute of walking.

They all stopped, peering into the trees.

“Durk!” Mark said again.

“Turkey! Where?”

“Durk!”

“I don’t see a turkey, pal.”

“You’re a *tricker*,” said Olive, over her shoulder. “There’s no *turkey*. But what does a cat say?”

“Mow!”

“What does a dog say?”

“Rof!”

“What does a lizard say?”

Mark stuck out his tongue.

“What does a camel say?”

“Ptu!” exclaimed curly Lola.

In the woods Lola looked around with greedy satisfaction at all the nice birch trees, then fell asleep under her hat. The path descended to Chestnut Creek and crossed an iron bridge. They dropped some sticks and watched them bump away. Then the path climbed the opposite bank and went through a summery meadow and emerged at an old railroad line, now an asphalt for bicyclists. Grasshoppers catapulted around, and the grass was alive with whirring. It

was lovely and full of Midwestern humidity and polleny haze but if you were certain people you could never be too cautious. “You know, West Nile Virus is big this year,” he observed.

“So, you know, when you’re dead, I’m going to boil your skull and keep it and kiss it all day long and I’ll say to the kiddos, Look—Daddy’s *smiling* again! He’s so *happy!*”

“I heard it on the radio, actually.”

She wheeled on him. “Argh! Stop it!”

“What?” he said.

“Just, please! You don’t always have to be about to die no matter what! We’re in a different place!” Then she spied something over his shoulder. “Oh my God, what on earth is *that?*”

“Ashbury House, dude.”

“Who lives *there?*”

“Bunch of stoners. I mean, it’s a co-op.”

“The stoners have gables! And lightning rods!”

Sure, but you had to cook your own food in co-ops, something he had had no interest in at age eighteen, when just about the best thing in the world was the cafeteria taco bar. “Actually I had a roommate in the dorm, this actual drug dealer, who somehow ended up with me. I think he forgot to fill out a form or something. And I just didn’t have any, you know, friends.”

“What a loser you were here, darling.”

“Completely. I mean, sort of. Anyway, he finally got his act together and moved out. Into *that.*”

“Oh, and *abandoned* you.”

“Yeah. He actually had these actual, uh, scales, and he would measure it all out. I guess he grew it himself back home somewhere. Like, he’d go driving off around dinnertime and get back first thing the next morning with this giant bag of weed. And then he’d be on the phone all day. Also he played on the basketball team somehow. You know what it was? People were just a lot more *real* than I was. Like, where was I? While all this was going on? Where was *I?* Like, they actually did things, and meanwhile I just went to the library and wrote papers and had feelings, and looked out the window or something.”

“Well,” she said.

“Unlike now, I guess you mean,” he said.

“No, but that’s interesting information,” she said.

“Actually, though, I really loved it here.”

“You did?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah! Totally. I had the best time.”

She awarded him a kiss for that.

They sat on a log and drank their water and ate their Pepperidge Farm Goldfish. It was hot, and they checked the sleeping babies under their floppy hats. When they were halfway home, the sky began to darken, and by the time they arrived, the wind had picked up and thunder was audible from the south. He had sort of loved this about Haver and in Ohio generally, the titanic storms, unlike anything he'd known in Seattle and therefore wonderful. And here one was, right on schedule! But, boy, they were actually a little scary, it turned out. By three o'clock the sky was black. “Holy crow,” he said, peering out the sliding doors.

The kids were crawling around on the plaid sofa, clueless.

“Hey, kids,” he said, “there's a big storm coming!”

“Oh, hon, don't.”

“Boom!” he said. “It's called *thunder*. Which, scientifically, is caused, when, electricity,” he faltered, “but it's just a big *noise* in the *sky*.” He turned on the radio for the warnings. The broadcast was interrupted by static when lightning flashed.

The phone rang.

His heart was in his throat, suddenly. “Oh, baby, don't answer it.”

She looked at it placidly.

“No, seriously, don't answer it. That's a documented fact!”

“Boil my head,” she said, and picked it up. “Hello!” she cried. “Yes. Yes. Yes. All right. Yes, just fine! Yes.” A great explosion tore open the sky. “All right! Yes!” She hung up. “Landlord, telling us about the storm cellar.”

“There's a storm cellar!”

She went to the sliding doors. “He said just for future reference. There it is.”

It was halfway across the lawn.

“I thought that was a sandbox. Jeez, I'm not going out there.”

In a kitchen drawer was a map of the state. The radio said the storm was strung out over most of three counties. A possible tornado had touched down one county over.

“A *possible* tornado,” Olive pointed out.

“I'm going down. Kids!” he cried, “I'm going to go do some *laundry*!”

“We’ll come down when we hear the freight train,” Olive said.

He hesitated at the top of the basement stairs, feeling wretched. Every flash of lightning made him leap. That fast, you’d be toast.

“Listen,” he said.

“Oh, just go,” she said. “I know you have to.”

He sat in the middle of the basement floor, away from the wiring. He risked touching the refrigerator and opened one of Loren Jenkins’s beers and sat studying the map, listening to the radio on battery power. O what a coward! The Spartans would have killed him at birth, pitched his wimpy infant self into the chasm. He huddled on the concrete floor watching a small pool form against one wall and listening to the thunder make its strange musical boomings before the storm began to abate and he managed to look up the basement stairs. His wife was standing there.

“Come on up,” she said, not unkindly. “It’s safe. We’re just all up here playing Turkey.”

Paul Lake, his life.

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The next day was very fine, sunny. “The babies and I are going to explore town,” Olive informed him, plumping Mark and Lola in the stroller, “because *you* have things to *do*.”

“I could walk with you.”

“We want to walk by ourselves,” she told him. “You should take this opportunity to actually *enjoy* the day.”

She kissed him ferociously, then went rolling away, and he ironed a white shirt in one of the Jenkins’s empty bedrooms and wandered off into the town on his own. Enjoy the day! For in December they would be going back to Seattle, to his real job as an advertising writer, from which he had weaseled an extended absence. If they wanted it to be, their life was all in the balance here in this little Ohio town. Because long ago he indeed had hugely enjoyed it here, storms and all, the little streets with their grand paneled-library-looking houses and the old sunburnt forties-era lawns and galvanized fences and the end-of-summer completeness to the gardens, above which the crows went *sift-sift-sift* on their canny rounds. Here they were again, the big broken slate sidewalks that once had lifted themselves so beautifully into his moony heart, here where he had been mostly lonely, and kept to himself for the most part, but also, at the same time, somehow, and very much in contrast, where he had been in love with

the World, In General, a state in which the very tissues of existence seemed to be infused with a loveliness he had not imagined possible, such that more than once he had stood outside the library just smelling the big Ohio night air, scented with old books and new corn, and being moved to private ecstatic transports, and saying not one word about it to anyone ever, because who the hell was he going to say *that* to?

“But now here was another chance to do it all again, and well, wait and see, maybe he could become his better self again, better and finer.”

It was a wonderful sensation, and he had tried explaining it, this feeling of, call it, Ubiquitous Beauty once to his beloved Greek professor and advisor Dana Vreeland, thinking it might be up her alley, but she had only peered at him over the top of her red plastic eyeglasses and waited for him to stop talking before she inquired, “Are you taking mushrooms, Paul?” But no, that feeling, he suspected now, had been only his spirit springing free after having been compressed uncomfortably by eighteen years in the sad slow-motion disaster zone of his mother’s house.

And now that feeling of springing free—okay, where had it gone off to?

Well, it had worn off, that’s all, and he was sort of a grown-up. O gone the lurid days of permeable youth! Maybe that’s all it was.

But no, the timeline made sense: boyhood full of fear and worry, then springing free at Hewer and leaping into life and finding Olive and making his way through the academic rounds, and then for whatever reason he had gone back home to Seattle, he had dragged Olive along. And basically there was his mother again, and all that stuff, all those fears and worries, had revived in him. He had picked them up again like a language, discovered his old fluency.

But now here was another chance to do it all again, and well, wait and see, maybe he could become his better self again, better and finer. And for good. Happily, a number of his old professors had kicked the bucket, or at least vanished into retirement, so the prospect of being confronted with someone who remembered and was expecting a former, possibly superior or at least undiminished version of himself did not much threaten. On the other hand, in a touch of karmic humor, the keys he was given turned out to unlock his dear

Dana Vreeland's office in the echoing basement of Wheat Hall. How strange this was, to be back in this dim little basement room, where the windows gave a view of the underside of bushes. Dana Vreeland was not dead. She and her husband, Stemmer Fish, had only retired from the Classics Department and withdrawn to a new house on the edge of town. Molly Cash, who had come to Hewer College since Paul had left, was the new department head. "Dana and Stemmer don't come around anymore," Molly said. "They didn't want to be looking over everyone's shoulders."

"They are both very tall," said Paul. "Or were."

"Still are!" She was forty-five, with a high mane of blonde hair and a small, pointed, pretty face. "They can't wait to see you. They were talking about you."

"I'll have to call them."

"Arsch! You haven't even called them!"

He checked his watch. "I've only been here four days."

"Well," Molly scolded, "they're looking forward to seeing *you*, anyway."

"Yeah, okay, well, gee," he clapped his hand to his head, "it's so weird to be back down here in the basement again suddenly! It's like I'm walking around inside my own brain."

Molly looked one way down the tiled hall, then the other. "Like it or not," she shrugged. "It's not too bad. Dana and Stemmer survived it for thirty years."

"It's just, I mean, I remember everything. Like that floor polisher," he pointed. "It's just still *sitting* there!"

"Isn't it nice, though? Being back?"

"Well, yeah," he said. "Or, anyway, it's weird."

"Well, I hope you have a good time here this semester," Molly said. "It won't be too scary. Maybe a little scary. Although, I guess there's a couple doozies in your Homer class." Then, suddenly, darkly, with great urgency, she whispered, "But I think you need a haircut."

He went stumping up into the sunlight still holding Dana Vreeland's key.

Yes, and this was mother-stuff too, for as a boy he had received his haircuts on an army-green kickstool in the kitchen while wrapped in a striped beach towel as the curls went whispering down, his father's task, and he could remember the man *hmming* and proposing and counterproposing as he considered the shape of the head before him. Paul would emerge with the ridged rubber of the stool's footpads having produced grooves in the backs of his young thighs, and with a

nice fresh head that looked, well, fine, probably. And anyway, what ten-year-old cares what his hair looks like? But just when he started to care about such things, divorce proceedings had commenced and their father had moved out of the house and his mother had gone, for all practical purposes, sort of semi-crazy, doing her best imitation of her own mother and letting the household slide into neglect so that suddenly beneath the fine unworrisome surface of the world was revealed this great abyss of sadness and uncertainty into which one might fall, one never knew when or how the abyss might show itself but there it waited, its gaping depths, his mother crying alone on the sofa with no one to comfort her, her anger and injury expanding to fill the darkened universe, and along the way she was also failing to do dumb things like teaching him and his brother to shave and not buying them their own deodorant, not really on purpose but as a consequence of the general decline, and, most crucially for Paul, letting his hair grow into a comically enormous Afro-type bush, portions of which would lift away in the wind in individual sections the size of tobacco leaves. As adolescence struck, he had been forced to the expedient of stealing his mother's Dove roll-on deodorant and her pink razors, but he had been unable to cut his own hair, which meant ignoring his head until he couldn't any longer, followed by wheedling in order to get someone to do something on his behalf, then rushed and guilt-stricken car trips to the barber, rough handling, etc., and topped off with a sensation, as he froze head-down in that vinyl chair while the clippers ratcheted dangerously past his ear, shearing him without mercy, that things everywhere had taken a drastic turn for the worse. Sadness, doom, the end of the world, look what it had all come to—to this! This vinyl apron, this flashing pity in the barber's blue eyes. And even lately:

“The older you get, the more Jewish you look,” his mother had said not long ago. She sighed, peering up at him. “I guess you're going to look like Richard after all.”

“Look,” he said, “you married him.”

“I *know*,” she sighed (again).

Ancient history, of course. But, ha! That was what he studied, all right!

Yes, it was going to be good to be out of town for a while.

He booted across the bright sunlit square and rendezvoused with Olive near the big Calder mobile in the depths of the art museum library, with the babies asleep in the stroller beside her. As was so often the case, he felt full of creeping unease, though obviously his life was basically perfect.

“Ssshshshshsh!” Olive said. “Aren’t they cute?”

“Well,” he said, “I mean, yeah, okay, a little.”

“Their good nap equals, guess what?” She turned over the hectic scramble of her yellow legal pad. “Good nap equals Olive the Mom has invented some new anagrams. Ready?” She turned the pad over again and said, “Okay: ‘Under the Calder mobile.’”

“Oh, heck,” he said. “ Mob, he, nude...”

“ A butchered model liner’!”

“Hey! Good one!”

She shrugged aw-shucks and said, “Okay: ‘The babies are asleep.’”

“Uh—”

“ A bearable pee thesis’!”

“Ha! That’s even better. That’s actually, you know—”

“Okay, ‘The sky in Ohio.’”

“ This guy’?”

“No, ‘The sky.’”

“ This guy in Ohio’?”

“No! Stop fooling around! ‘The—sky—in—Ohio’!”

“Okay, hit me.”

“ Honky, I hose it’!” She bent over giggling. Someone peeked around the stacks. She enjoyed her life, all right. It didn’t even seem hard to do, when you looked at her. How interesting it was to be married to someone like Olive—it almost gave him hope. “Also I found a new one for you, Paul Bartholomew Lake. You’re no longer my ‘Uh, Tapeworm Koala Bell.’ Now you’re my ‘Palatable Lower Hokum’!”

“I guess you’re pretty fun,” he said.

“Well, *somebody* has to be.” She considered him seriously for a long moment. “So, but we do need some groceries, though. Today I learned there’s only one grocery store here in town and everything in it is gray. The lettuce is gray. I don’t understand why produce would be gray in Ohio.”

For groceries you had to basically get in the car and drive all the way out to Middleton, which meant eleven miles on a country highway until you hit the Lowe’s and the Walmart. But until then it was Civil War-era brick houses by the railroad tracks, farms, a few trailery places but mostly nice spreads where the back line of the property was a ways off and visible as a line of poplars or something wispy he could not identify. It was a fine day to drive along, and it

was not bad to think about, fantasize about, having the kids out on a packet like that. Athenian citizens each had had their ten acres where they could grow wheat and eschew tyranny, and their kids might grow up wearing trucker hats and puffy vests but then they'd emerge out of the freezing winter cold and into some old, old amazing house and there he'd be, reading some Greek, and that would be all right, he would be beloved of them! No, not possible. But actually living in a college town, that would be okay, that would provide the proper influences.

"Forget influences," Olive said. "Remember the *babysitters*."

"Look at that one, though," he said. "Jeez, that's a huge place."

"Probably smells," she said.

They bought groceries, the babies in the two carts reaching out for everything. As was occasionally the case, both he and Olive were struck with slumping baby-produced fatigue at once, and the vast overlit supermarket put them both into a trance. "This is beer," he said, "for Mom and Dad, and this is wine, for Mom and Dad, and this is apple juice, for Mark and Lola, and this is a bag of lentils, for everyone, which are legumes, and this is green celery, and green lettuce, and this is a Russet potato, and russet is actually also the name of a color, but not the color of this potato...."

Just on the other side of the grocery store was a Supercuts. They tooled past in the car. Back in Seattle he had been a patron of Phillip's Premium Salon, in Fremont, next to the Women's Collective Boutique, and every two or three months or so he closed his eyes and endured the process and overtipped. But now something was happening inside the Supercuts, people were standing around weirdly in the gray darkness, all the lights off. Something was moving, a man was gesturing at the counter, as though a holdup were in progress. It wasn't a gun, probably, it was probably a hairdryer.

They watched for a minute.

"Hm, I don't know," Olive said.

"Well," he said, "at least I've learned where it is."

"I can cut it," Olive said. "Any old time—you just ask. Because I can do *anything*."

When he turned to gauge the seriousness of this offer no more than two seconds later, she was already half-asleep and then was out entirely, and so were the babies in the back seat. He pulled out carefully onto the highway and turned toward Hewer. He had noticed over the past year that it was possible to

be nicely alone like this while being with all these other people whom he loved. It was no Ubiquitous Beauty, but it was pretty fine, and here they all were as the farmland went up and down, up and down, as though it were sleeping too....

While his hair grew, he boned up for his classes and the sun-baked leaves turned crispy. He still had a few weeks before the semester started. He got a hat. This part of Ohio was awfully nice when it wasn't thundering, and though he remained unvisited by any of those ancient world-ringing feelings of beautiful excellence, he could sit in an Adirondack chair with the babies crawling around his ankles and dictionaries stacked in the glossy grass, and lean over to pull the cherry tomatoes off the vine and listen to the *swish-thwack* of golfers through the hedge, followed by men saying thoughtfully, "Damn." Not much was really going on. Sometimes he would go up with his books and his stack of new yellow pads and sit in Dana Vreeland's office, now suddenly and wrongly *his* office, where he would discover himself unwittingly replicating her old gestures. Though his eyesight was fine, he would often, as Dana Vreeland had done, bend comically forward at the waist to read from two inches away some passage of fine Homeric print on his desk. "What in the world are you doing?" Molly Cash would ask.

"I guess reading," he answered.

"Like *that*? Can you even see?"

"Hm," he said. And, okay, he couldn't explain it. It was what you were supposed to do as the occupant of Wheat B13: lean forward, grimacing! Anyway, Dana Vreeland had always worn a skeptical, pained expression as she corrected his Herodotus.

Well, all right, so why didn't he call her, for heaven's sake? She had been wonderful to him, scolding of and delighted with him in turn, never exactly taking him seriously, because how could anyone have taken his goony self seriously? And now he was afraid to call her because he had truly loved her, he suspected, because she was his mother too, obviously, and he had never done anything worth noting in the world except to get a lame-o Ph.D in Classics by the skin of his teeth, and he was a disappointment. The travesty of his hardly-there degree was still a matter of hot shame. He had met Olive while he was producing his unpublishable, barely passing, deeply flawed dissertation on Athenian property law—even thinking about it now gave him the urge to walk somewhere and get a cup of coffee, something he calculated he had done at least 1,150 times during the three years he spent writing it, eventually creating for himself a number of

rules which were supposed to govern his behavior while at the desk, i.e., 1) no email until noon; 2) no getting up to pee until he had written one page, later amended to one paragraph; 3) no ambitious cooking—and when he met her (she was the friend of one of his fellow students’ girlfriends), she had impressed him by having a job in computers and by accomplishing more in a week than he did in a month while also riding her bicycle up and down the hills of San Francisco and returning sweaty and with her hair full of bugs. She was simply better at a lot of things that had to do with being in public, having access to a kind of fearlessness that he did not understand, and this, for a time, had been fortifying. It was what had allowed her to move to Seattle with him in the first place after it was obvious he was not getting a teaching job anytime soon. She had helped him find his first paying gig at the Red Army Design Group and somehow continued to like him even though he wrote stupid pitches for Microsoft bCentral Small Business Solutions and this made him ashamed, too, so no way in hell was he going to call Dana Vreeland, except of course he *had* to. But he didn’t. Instead, he sat in her office and avoided looking at the phone.

But—so—this? Was this their life? The life they were meant to have?

“What if,” Olive said on the Jenkins’s horrible broke-backed bed, “we just *think* about being somewhere else, like this, not necessarily this but *like this*, some college town, I mean, just for a little while, not decide to *do* it or anything but just decide to *think* about it?” She got up on her elbow and the mattress dipped catastrophically. Her long, brown, smooth hair fell in pretty skeins over her cheek. “I mean, seriously, that’s what we said we’d do when we moved to Seattle—try other places out—and now we’re doing it, and I really like it.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“I *do*,” she insisted. The August night was crickets past the window screens, and the hum of other people’s air conditioners came to them from the neighborhood. “I like watching you sit out there in the lawn chair while your mom and everybody else you’re related to is about two thousand miles away.”

“Deadly lawn mushrooms everywhere.”

“You look like you used to,” Olive said. “You’re yourself. You’re all funny again and happy.”

“Happy! I am?”

“Aren’t you?”

He allowed himself to consider the possibility. Well, and what if it was becoming true, what if their plan was really working? But even as he had this

thought, Olive froze beside him and whispered urgently: “Listen!”

Because down the hall a strange sound was coming from the babies’ room.

It was a weird ticking or something, as though a june bug were scuffling along the ceiling. They lay motionless for a moment, and then they rolled out of bed and crept down the hall toward the dark bedroom, then into the room, where the sound was coming from Mark’s white Ikea crib. And, oh, no, it would be a bee, a *bat*—or, no, a *snake*, a snake from the golf course—and thus his mother would be proven right, and thus would open that abyss, and they had made the wrong decision, they had moved away to the wilds of Ohio and into danger, and a plunging panic gripped him, and the world tipped woosily to one side.

“As with so much in his life, he felt as though he were barely passing muster and that only some cosmic error allowed him to remain anywhere for long, evading detection and elimination.”

But Olive just leaned over and said, “Hey, bud, what’s up?”

In the crib Mark was awake and happy. No snake, no bat, no bee, no bug. He turned his big brown eyes at them in the dark.

“Hey, bud,” Paul said, because Olive had.

And Mark, as though working out a complicated argument, said, “Teh, teh, teh, teh, teh, teh, teh.”

“Teh, big fella,” Paul whispered back to him.

“He’s saying ‘teh,’” Olive smiled.

“What animal says ‘teh?’” Paul whispered.

Baby Mark thought about this for a second. Then he hit on it and with a blurt of stern wonderment he said: “*Mark.*”

The heart melts, it melts.

Then, lo, the term commenced, and people began coming on purpose to Hewer, Ohio.

The students did not resemble people he knew or was or had ever been. Years and years ago, when he himself had arrived at Hewer as a student for the first time, he had come with his father—a good thing, as Paul had never been to camp

or lived anywhere but home, so the bustle of meeting and joining, loading and unfolding and the marking of territory, was entirely unfamiliar to him. Then, after his father had flown home, Paul had spent the first weeks in a stunned haze and had given himself diarrhea by standing by a box of Washington apples in the dormitory lobby and announcing loudly to passersby that “they always export the good ones!” and munching down with gusto. *That* was who he had been, at least in part, before the great joys began enlarging themselves in him. But the students who suddenly materialized in tiny Hewer in the last week of August appeared to his eye at least as sophisticated as he was now as a grown man, well-groomed and confident and swinging themselves up out of their family Volvos. As with so much in his life, he felt as though he were barely passing muster and that only some cosmic error allowed him to remain anywhere for long, evading detection and elimination.

“They’re here!” Olive cried, on the other hand. “The babysitters!”

Lola stood up and put her hands over her head in celebration, then diapered down on the rug.

“Start asking around,” she insisted. “And I’ll just accost people, I guess. And put up flyers.”

As the machinery of scholarly things rumbled into action, he suffered a little flutter of panic as he realized how really ill-prepared he probably was, anyway for sure rusty and sleep-deprived, and now about to teach a seminar on Homer. He could still get through the old epics okay but he just disliked them, really, the bloody mess, the spears quivering in the breasts, the pointless, taunting insincerity of the gods who deigned to appear but could not, really, be killed, and nonetheless egged everybody on because they were bastards. Of course he had taught a little before while getting his Ph.D., but that seemed an eternity ago, and the evening before classes were to begin he sat at the kitchen table and dealt himself his handouts, feeling as he did an uneasy longing for his now-vacant snappy glass-walled window office at Twice Fine Design and its view of taxiing seaplanes. The papers piled before him now were paltry and homespun and relied entirely on his presence to make them work. He sort of got down on the floor and lay on his back on the cruddy rag rug. “Man, I dunno,” he said.

“You’ll be a superstar,” Olive told him. “What I mean by that is: Please enjoy yourself a little bit. It’s fun, isn’t it? I mean, what a goofy thing to do! Come all the way out here—who would do that?”

“Yeah, Greek is not goofy, it’s fundamental to, you know, the way the whole

world is built.”

Also, by the way, as she well knew, Greek was so esoteric that it naturally appealed to a certain type of person, to completists, logicians, collectors, anyone attracted to elaborate and nuanced systems, and those people were usually interesting in other ways too, so he wasn't really worried about the students very much. “I mean maybe a little bit.”

She got down beside him. “You know, I always think to myself one day I'm going to just figure out that alphabet, but I think that window has closed.”

“I'll teach it to the babies.”

“No! At least not yet. It'll just confuse them.” Lola crawled over them, and together they picked the lettuce out of her hair. “You'll be great. If you're not great, we can run away and hide.”

She hadn't even mentioned the thunderstorm, not once, nor his hair. And he hadn't thought about his mother in days.

And now, what was it? The air, the light. A slanting glory just beginning to suggest itself at the window.

“I do like it here,” he said.

“I know. I can tell.”

“I like this. I like the *idea* of this.” Lola, ever conscientious, brought Tupperware from a bottom drawer and dropped it on his belly for his use. Her walking had become expert, while Mark would just eye her, stationary, from a determined crouch, not quite willing to try it all out. His boy, all right. In their onesies they were solid sluggy kiddos with sweet puffy butts. Well, obviously, whatever he could do to make their lives good—that was his only job, actually; forget everything else. He'd known that the moment he'd laid eyes on them in the hospital, all gross and slimy. Learned it, actually, he'd learned that in the first flash of seeing them. He forgot it sometimes, but now he remembered it again. It was his only responsibility. Make their lives good, because they made his good.

Put that way, it was not that complicated.

And who in the world were these people, studying Ancient Homeric Greek not just once a week but three times, at nine o'clock in the morning? Well, they didn't look too bad. “Hello, everybody!” he saluted. A bright, bright day, the coffee still working in him, in a room that looked out onto the oaks and maples of Morley Square.

“Hello,” they said back.

“I am Visiting Lecturer Paul Lake, and about ten years ago I was right where you are, if you can believe it or not!”

Everybody stirred at the pathetic comedy of this. A total of six students, two girls and four boys. He took attendance, for which he had allotted ten minutes and which was concluded in not quite entirely one. “I guess you must all know one another,” he surmised, and medieval Geoff, with the red beard, bared his choppers and said, “Ha, ha, ha. And how.” As Molly Cash had warned, there were in fact some doozies—actually they were all potential doozies but principally a girl named Rachel, the obvious ringleader, with a mist of brown hair and a pair of very large, yellow spectacles.

But the babies, so he pressed on.

“Well, so, Homer, yeah. This is Homer,” he said. Then he was off and launched for a minute or two with the syllabus. For about the first twenty seconds it was okay, but, actually, it was a very thin agenda, he suddenly saw. And, hm, also, without really a ton of detail or clarity. Actually, in the light of morning, it was an obvious failure. And they all felt it. When he reached the bottom of the page he could sense the room sinking into a sullen urgency in which a hundred unsaid things were being barely suppressed out of something like courtesy. He was sweating and the pads of his hands were leaving damp marks on the cedar tabletop.

“So,” the one called Rachel began, after a moment’s appalled silence, “are we going to use the *Theogony*?”

He said, “Are we!”

She pushed up her glasses with her ring finger. “Just last semester with Molly we were talking about how Hesiod compiled the *precursor* stories to everything and it just seems like if we’re going to do a whole semester on Homer I mean I know there’s just *a lot*, but maybe we could start with a little of that background too, even though Hesiod was later, but like there are maybe traces of the *Titanomachia* in Hesiod, and the Plutarch essay about that, do you know Hesiod very well?”

“Wow,” he said. “That was a lot of questions.”

“The *Theogony*’s really cool,” Rachel said.

“We’ll see. I hadn’t planned on it.”

“But maybe!” Rachel piped. “Maybe we could bring some things in.”

“Jeez, Rache,” the black girl called Tiffany groaned. “You are such a dork.” She grinned and tossed her head around: “I know!”

“That’s why we all love you,” Quentin pronounced.

“We don’t *all* love you,” Geoff put in.

Paul said, “So who wants to include the *Theogony*?”

Every hand went up.

“Okay, well, I guess I’ll put it on reserve.”

“We all have it,” Rachel told him, “from last semester.”

“So, when the class says, just, Homer, does that mean—what does that mean?” Quentin asked.

“That is an excellent question,” Paul said.

How long had it been since he had taken anything quite as seriously as these six students were taking this moment? Not since he’d been one himself, maybe. He bent down to look at the syllabus from two inches away, as Dana Vreeland might have done.

His mind emptied.

Whereupon he straightened and surfaced with an unexpected paragraph in his mouth. “As you can see, the syllabus lists some of the passages I would like us to address, which, I guess it’s fair to say, are some of the essential ones that you should be familiar with, most of them passages in which the language can be seen to be shifting between earlier and later forms, so you can get a sense of that sort of interesting phenomenon, that kind of interpolation going on between earlier and later versions of the story. And we’ll address some of the classic parts, too, such as the shield of Achilles, and Hera putting Zeus to sleep, and Odysseus’ stop at Circe’s island, and the trip to the Underworld, because we just, you know, just *should*.” He took a breath. “Now, because it’s impossible to cover the entirety of Homer in a single semester, most courses organize themselves around a discrete theme and take on, for example, battle scenes, or ‘Passion and Compassion,’ or, like, ‘Marriage and Society,’ as themes.”

They were all watching him. There was one more thing to say.

And this is when he had his idea. It was suddenly as obvious as any thought he had ever had in his life.

“But,” he said, “I thought maybe we could focus on the parts that talk about, actually, Beauty.”

There was another current, then, suddenly, a nice little current ran round the circle of the room. He had not been prepared for what this idea sounded like aloud. A big bubble of something climbed the column of his torso and broke gently behind his sternum, full of silvery luster.

“When Thetis calls up the sea nymphs,” Geoff said quietly. “That list is awesome.”

“Yes, exactly.”

“When Odysseus sees the smoke from Circe’s house,” Tiffany said.

“Yes.”

“Hector kissing his boy and taking off his helmet because his little boy is afraid of him in Troy,” said Rachel. “That always gets me.”

“Scamandrius,” he provided. “Although everyone calls him Astyanax. Hector’s little boy. Aw, yeah.”

Oh, dear, he was blinking something back.

“Yay,” Rachel whispered. “That idea makes me really happy.”

After class he retreated into the basement, to the office, and, holding his breath, called Dana Vreeland’s number. She picked up on the second ring. “I recognize that number from somewhere,” she said. “Are you my ghost?”

“I’m sorry.” He shut his eyes. “I can’t stand myself sometimes.”

“Oh, my,” she fluted, “and I hear you have *babies*. I can’t *wait* to see them. Are you coming to see us?”

“Yes,” he blurted, his eyes filling with sudden tears, “yes, yes, yes. I just have to do one thing.”

“Okay, so there’s these two Mongols. This one isn’t an anagram, it’s a palindrome,” Olive explained, under the Calder mobile again.

“Okay.”

“And one of the Mongols is named Sol, spelled S-O-L, and he’s Jewish, and they’ve both been kicked out of the Mongol army for skimming money, and so now they’re working as prep cooks.”

“Like at the Mongolian barbecue.”

“Well, whatever—it doesn’t matter where they work. And so one Mongol, the non-Jewish Mongol, says to the other one—okay, ready?”

“Ready.”

“He says, ‘Semite! No graft, Sol, for—O no, hero Mongol! I peel beef! A feeble epilog! No more honor of lost, far-gone times!’”

Good lord but she was beautiful. Look at that dark ringlety hair, that big beak of a nose, those blue eyes. That was his wife, by God. Christ almighty he had it good.

“What?” she asked, all blinking.

“Nothing!” he smiled. “Amazing!”

“I’ve been working on it for a *while*. Hey, but, *you!*”

“It went fine, great. Fine. Also I finally just now called them.”

“Who?”

“Dana Vreeland and Stemmer Fish. We’re going to go see them.”

“Right now?”

“Almost,” he said.

He took the babies. He turned and rolled the stroller over the humpy brick walkways of Morley Square and stopped at House of Style. He considered the plate glass and the window display, which showed a mustachioed cool dude now completely blue, a dead plant, and some flies. “One little sec here, kiddos,” he said. Gingerly he backed into the beauty salon, pulling the long stroller after him. There was the old burned-hair smell he remembered and a million ladies who all looked at him at once with pity, then alarm, noting that here was a man with two babies unaccompanied, and that possibly he was here to take more hostages.

He went to the desk and said, “I was wondering—it’s not possible, but I used to get my hair cut by a woman named Donna?”

“Oh, she’s still here,” the receptionist said.

“No kidding!”

“Well, what else is there to *do*, sometimes?” said the receptionist. “She only comes in on Thursdays, though.”

“Which is today?”

“Well,” the receptionist said, “you want a haircut, hon?”

Before he could say no he said yes, and the receptionist hoisted herself up from her cushioned chair and went through the little knee-rail and called out, “Donna, some old friend of yours is here.”

Donna, well, okay, she looked a little older than he expected but otherwise the same—loose white permed curls and a sort of sandbaggy body. “*You* again,” she observed.

“Hiya,” he said. “I guess I lucked out.”

“I guess you did. Are these yours?” She waddled around and peered down into the stroller. “Both of them. Well, that’s something else.”

“How about that,” he said.

“Twins!” she clapped, a little unconvincingly. “You must be married.”

“Yep.” He got a lot of credit for twins, which he never did anything to deflect.

He had never considered that he deserved some credit for being *married*, too.

She straightened and eyed his head. “You always used to do this,” she said: “come in when it was just so far gone, you know, just—whoooooooo!” She made a balloon-filling gesture. She waved him with her back to the sinks, and he rolled the stroller across the linoleum, where the wheels made a soft unpeeling sound. She put him in a chair and leaned him back and fauceted warm water over his hair. “Daddy’s going to get a haircut,” Donna sang, “Daddy’s going to get his hair washed first, Daddy’s going to have a nice new haircut....”

“He took the long way home, where above the Jenkins’s giant white house the crows were everywhere in the trees, raucous with gossip.”

In the mirror Mark was studying him with concern.

“No, it’s cool, buddy,” he said. “It’s just a little bath for my head.”

“Ba!” Lola said.

Somewhere a hairdryer was going.

The ladies played with his babies.

Afterward he faced her, feeling grateful and formal. This is what short hair did to him. “I’m glad I happened to come by on Thursday, Donna,” he told her.

Donna scoffed and said, “Oh, Gert was just fooling around. I’m here every day.”

Well, so he pushed his little family people out the door and with his head cool with the breeze of Ohio he headed for home. And where did you start, when you started a real life? A regular haircut was as good a place as any. And second after that, #2 maybe, was polished shoes. Plus, original eyewear and novelty socks and he would present himself in the fullness of his own silly self, and all of it would be a start. The kids made animal calls and you smelled the corn and the drifting booky heaven of the library on the wind and the brick streets rolled away, and up there over the blue stormless sky was just, you know, *asulos*, and where was Paul Lake? Pushing a stroller along these pretty streets, that’s where he was. He took the long way home, where above the Jenkins’s giant white house the crows were everywhere in the trees, raucous with gossip. Hundreds of them everywhere, a black shifting flock. “Gee, guys,” he said, and he crouched down beside the stroller. “What are they talking about? They’re

talking about something in the world of crows!”

“Caw!” Mark observed.

“Caw! Cawk! Tok tok tok!” he answered. He hunkered and watched the treetops for another minute until the sliding glass door opened and his wife stepped out onto the patio. At this the entire flock of a zillion birds lifted as one and went sifting out of the treetops and headed south over the hedge and over the golf course into the air above Ohio.

“Now we can go see Stemmer Fish and Dana Vreeland,” he said.

“You look excellent,” she said.

So he loaded his family into the car, why not, the giant flock of crows still making their diminishing noise, and anyway there he was, going, backing down the long driveway, and when he turned back to the house on some urge, he saw a turkey—*the* turkey!—bobbling out of the hedge, staring up at the sky as if wanting to follow, wondering where everybody had gone to. And Paul was going to keep it to himself, suffering the fearful instinct to retreat from this perfect joy, to keep it private so that he could be sure of it, so that no one would snatch it from him. That if you ever admitted the world was full of wonders, if you ever acknowledged the beauty of everything, then—well, then you risked—then everything was—or—? Ah, fuck it, who cared. Because then he, some new version of him, just this guy in Ohio, was calling out, aloud, helplessly, happy as hell, “Durk! Look, kids, durk! Durk! Duuurk!”