

## THIS IS PEACE, THIS IS PERFECT PEACE

Here is something: I wake up in a sweat. What time is it? Is it one? Is it two? I sit up in bed, I can't remember the dream, except that I'm standing in a doorway in this same nightgown, looking out—but the door slams, it locks me awake, suddenly sweating. A door like a slash between two words, *there* and *here*, and I'm *here* in this damp gauze, sleeves edged with ribbon and picot like a border of snowdrops at the edge of a garden, the kind of nightgown a little girl wears.

The cloth sticks to me, I'm damp all over. August, one or two a.m. in August. I get up and go out the back door, maybe the grass will be cool. But under the grass I can feel the day's heat still in the earth. The moon beats down, I can see plates from lunch left on the grass, and napkins, one of Janet's dolls, and Erin's playpen, its white mesh sides shimmering. The plates and napkins catch this white light and glare, even my body feels slightly out of focus, hot and blurred and wavering, like heat rising from a field. The doll or one of the napkins will suddenly ignite, burst into flame—

That's Katherine.

Then there's her husband, Dave. Tall, a player of basketball. Tall and competent, an M.A. from M.I.T., he can handle anything, handling things is his business. Now give him something to handle, give him Georgia-Pacific Pulp and Paper, the huge presses and the spools of paper winding, winding. And for this he needs a forest of Douglas Fir. Cut the trees, peel back the dark bark to the sapwood white to pale yellow, finally to heartwood, yellow or orange-red to red. Take it apart, fiber by fiber, and then beat and mash this and mix it with chemicals and stir it in great vats and finally press it into thin, white paper.

And give him a presto log machine. Let him stand and watch the workmen stuff wood chips and sawdust into the molds, like sausage into casings, let him see the molds being turned and pressed, and see him watching as one by one the logs roll out of the mouth of the machine, all identical and each one perfect. He strides up and down the rows between the stacks of logs, and he is beaming because every log is perfect. They burn long and slow and each one is absolutely perfect. KATHERINE:

*Hold still*, my father said, and I held still inside my white dress just like he told me to until he snapped the shutter. Then I wanted to run shouting across the lawn, running and flying and falling in the grass. But the white dress wouldn't let me. Years of white dresses, the sashes too tight, keeping me perfect and still for all the cameras, the eyes. I became very good at holding still. People would look at me and tell my mother how pretty I was and I would hold still so they could get a better look at me, so they could look at me as long as they wanted to.

I did other things, lots of things, but they were not real. I took ballet lessons, and piano lessons and I was good at math and good at biology and good at ice skating, but none of these things were real. As I did them I felt I was in a dream, dreaming these things. What was real was the clothes I wore and how I felt when I walked in them, stiff and having to stand up straight.

Every morning I put on a dress as though that dress was my task for the day, to wear that dress correctly. Ballet was fun and math was fun, but I knew I would never do these things, because they were not important. What was important was looking right and holding still in that rightness.

I met Dave in college. I was in college waiting for something. I passed time wandering through dress shops, not actually trying on dresses but thumbing through the racks. The dresses were either severe and black, or dainty, with puffed sleeves, in a print dotted with small flowers like a meadow. I would look until the glare of the lights on the gaudy colors gave me a headache and then I would go for coffee.

I drank coffee and smoked cigarettes and I waited. I was waiting for someone tall and absolutely certain, and when he touched me on the shoulder I put out my cigarette and stood up, I walked out with him. We walked straight into the light—I had lost my sunglasses, left them on a counter—and the plate glass, the sidewalk, the sky, everything dazzled. This light was planned for us: as in the movies there was no question. We got into the white Impala parked at the curb, I was finally happy.

The next day I found a dress I really liked, I bought that dress.

DAVE: My wife is perfect. The first time I saw Katherine I thought *That's it*. I looked at her and I thought *It's my job to make this possible*. And that's what I do. I arrange things, I pay for things, I give Katherine all the things she needs, everything she might possibly need. When I worry I worry is there something else she needs. You know what I like to do, I like to wake up and watch Katherine when she's asleep. She's absolutely still, her skin smooth and white as paper and her face perfect, like sculpture, or a figure on a vase. I can't get enough of staring at her, and I tell myself how lucky I am, and I think *yes, she's fragile as sculpture, Christ, be careful*. I tell myself *Handle with Care*.

Janet's a little copy of Katherine. Dave can't get enough of looking at Janet, he stares at her while she diapers her doll, while she watches T.V. He admires her critically, he plans what he will give her, ballet lessons, swimming lessons, lessons on the violin. He gives her all the lessons there are and he buys her dolls and a two story doll house with pink polkadot curtains and he helps her learn to ride her bike. Learning to ride is tricky, she doesn't understand how to brake. To stop she grips the handlebars and jumps off the seat, bangs her soft crotch against the red frame.

Stop crying! he says. You're not hurt, stop crying!

I hurt myself! she sobs.

Now Dave doesn't know what to do with this sobbing. He's capable of handling just about anything, but he doesn't know how to handle this sobbing. He's uncomfortable, he doesn't want to see her face breaking into little pieces, like a bowl he's dropped. He is guilty of dropping this bowl, and he stands with

his arms held out from his body, he doesn't know what to do with his hands. They're for big things, they're not for small, delicate things.

Erin's just a baby, not even one. He can't walk yet, he doesn't see the bowl break. *My son*, Dave thinks, and he holds Erin at arm's length straight above his head. Erin is so small he doesn't seem much bigger than a basketball, and Dave feels very tall. He feels he is probably taller at this moment than he has ever been, it actually occurs to him to go measure his height. He hands Erin to Katherine.

Erin isn't very big, but he feels heavy to Katherine, heavy for such a small size, like a sack of sugar. And sweet as sugar. She kisses his damp cheek and bends and sets him down in the playpen, like putting a sack of sugar away in the cupboard. He's heavy, but so small, she thinks she might lose him! So the playpen is a good idea, she won't lose him while she dusts the Baldwin baby grand. Dave gave her the piano for her twenty-eighth birthday, and he gave her an Evan Picone original and three dozen long stemmed roses.

Was there anything else she wanted for her 28th birthday? he wonders.

Am I too heavy? he asks her. Am I hurting you?

Oh no! she says. No.

But he's not quite sure he believes her. No, he doesn't believe her, she is delicate as a little girl, he decides that he's decidedly too heavy. He'll have to be very careful, she's so fragile and very pretty as she dusts the piano. Very pretty, in a white apron. Does the apron have a ruffle around the edge? She polishes and polishes the glassy surface of the Baldwin. And she hurries, she has to hurry because her mother, Ethel, is arriving at the airport at 3:00 p.m.

#### THINGS THEY NEED FOR ETHEL'S VISIT

1) ROASTS. This family eats a lot of beef, especially roasts. Dave is a meat and potatoes man and Katherine usually cooks a roast on Sunday, and there are always several roasts waiting in the freezer. Shoulder roast, rib roast, rump roast, round bone pot roast, blade bone pot roast, seven bone roast, And now that Ethel is coming, Katherine buys three more roasts and puts them in the freezer. She doesn't like to run out of roasts.

2) A LARGE DININGROOM TABLE, rectangular, oak. Actually the table once belonged to Ethel and before that to Ethel's mother. It is a family heirloom. This is where the roast will be served, they will all sit down together when Ethel arrives and Dave will carve the roast.

3) A MIRROR, three by five, in a carved, gilded frame. The frame decorated with relief, a frieze of women in dresses with puffed sleeves and billowing skirts. A mirror is essential, women need to be continually checking their faces, and Dave stands in front of the mirror and straightens his tie, humming, then crosses the lawn in just three or four strides, gets into the Mercedes to drive to the airport.

And one more thing. They will need

4) A SLEDGEHAMMER. Though this is a problem, a sledgehammer is very heavy. Can she lift it? Katherine, can you lift this sledgehammer, wearing a ruffled apron?

KATHERINE: 92°, the thermometer holds all afternoon at 92°. I pace, waiting for Dave to come home. Janet frets, I snap at her, a phone call here, a phone call there, a quick trip to the supermarket, and the afternoon is smashed to little pieces. I feed Janet and Erin and get them into the tub, I tell Janet a hundred times to stop this, stop that, put that back, don't talk back. And finally he's home. He comes in the door, sweeps Janet up, reaches to pull me toward him. Hey, how are my girls, he says, can I get a kiss from my girls!

I let him take my hand, I want to squeeze his hand, I want him to feel my murderous restlessness—

A LONG PAUSE here, about four hours of pause.

A pause for gin and tonics.

A pause for Chicken and baked potatoes and a tossed, green salad.

A pause to change a diaper.

A half hour pause for the news on T.V.

A pause for a conference on The Spending of Money.

A pause for a bedtime story.

A pause for three drinks of water.

With each pause the spool advances a notch, winding Katherine tighter and tighter—and I hook my fingers into his shoulders and pull him down and pull myself up to meet him. Above him the ceiling, the sky, and we're going to fly. I hang on, arms and calves and thighs like bombs slung under the belly of an aircraft, and as we lift the bombs explode softly; their motion slowed, the hundreds and hundreds of feathery pieces spray up, hazy, like a fountain, and then drift slowly down over the country side, settle slowly down.

This is a temporary relief.

Now Ethel arrives, very fast. The pace picks up. Ethel always does things fast, is always ahead of the present, leaning forward into the future. Doing one thing she's already thinking about the next thing she will do. Even standing and staring out the window Ethel's running. A motor, revved, and it's got a small whine, not a whine you notice at first, but if you listen carefully you can hear the small but definite whine of the motor. A motor runs things, you have to give it work, keep it busy. It's no small task keeping this woman busy. She's got terrific energy, enough energy for heavy construction, for building dams, enough energy to generate power for a city. But we can't let her do these things, we have to find something appropriate. A lot of volunteer work might do the trick, organizing charity balls, organizing benefits. The League of Women Voters might do the trick.

But for the time being put her to work in the kitchen because it's time to put in the roast. Ethel has just completed a course in flower arranging, so let her arrange a centerpiece for the table while Katherine lays the roast in a shallow pan on a little bed of aluminum foil. She puts onion flakes and rosemary and lots of pepper on top of the roast and slides the pan into the oven. Humming, she winds the timer.

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION. The timer ticks steadily. It moves forward swallowing second after second like an hour glass, one grain at a time, and when the glass is filled it will burst, like a woman's fan suddenly opening, it will blossom like a flare, a bright orange, searing flame.

While Katherine sets the timer Dave sets the sprinkler on the lawn, turns on the spigot, sits back with a bourbon and water. The sprinkler whirls, a machine purring smoothly and steadily as a machine should. The whirr is soothing and the fine mist begins to cool the grass. In the kitchen the heat's on

but here on the lawn Dave feels cool and calm, he feels at peace, perfectly at peace.

So when he passes the mirror on the way to the basement with the sledgehammer—someone has carelessly left the sledgehammer on the lawn, he found it when he set the sprinkler—as he strides past the mirror he is annoyed to see that it is cracked.

Christ! How did that happen? he thinks. He puts the sledgehammer on the floor and looks into the mirror. The cracks across his tie splits his head from his suit. This is annoying. Now they'll have to replace the glass, he'll have to tell Katherine to phone an order for new glass.

Katherine! he calls.

#### A PAUSE TO PUT ON AND DISCUSS CUTTING OUR HAIR

Ethel's brown hair is short, precise, stiff curls around her face, like a hat made of feathers. Katherine's hair doesn't quite come to her shoulders, and Janet has long hair, it hangs almost to her waist. Katherine is brushing it for her.

Hold still! Katherine says sharply.

You're hurting me! Janet winces. And Ethel says:

You should have it cut for her Katherine, why don't you cut it.

She wants it long, Katherine says. Like mine. And anyway Dave likes it long.

Do you like it long Sweetie? Ethel asks. Why don't you want to cut it, hmmm? As she speaks she spreads her lips with Crimson Flush, the words come out of her mouth smeared.

What did you say Mother? Katherine asks.

I said to Janet *do-you-like-it-long-Sweetie?*

I like it long—Janet says.

Then hold still! Katherine says sharply.

But why does it hurt! Janet sobs.

*If you do not hold still*—but Katherine herself is close to tears. She remembers quite vividly *how it hurt*, and yet she is now the one who is taller and therefore assigned the task of hurting. This is exasperating! She cannot imagine how she has got into this position. She doesn't want to be the big one hurting the little one, but she repeats:

If you do not hold still—

But why, why does it have to hurt? Janet sobs.

BECAUSE THE MIRROR IS CRACKED, JANET. If the mirror were a photograph you would say that someone had drawn a jagged line across the three of them, through the three of them. A line connecting the grandmother and mother and daughter is awful lineage. But then, you would ask, is the line connecting them—because in that case wouldn't the line be a circle instead, surrounding them, herding them together, ewes in a fold?—or is the line crossing them out? The slash Dave's form uses to mark the Douglas fir for harvesting?

MADONNA WITH CHILD. As Ethel snips pink roses and red roses she is already imagining how the arrangement will look in the middle of the solid oak diningroom table. But when she walks into the diningroom she finds someone has been there ahead of her and has made an arrangement of the table itself. Someone has smashed the table with the sledgehammer—there's the sledgehammer, to one side—beat the wood to a flat, mashed pulp. It resembles a huge flower. And in a circle all the way around this center, little sticks of

kindling, like petals. Inside its dark finish the meat of the wood is white as paper, the same color as Ethel's face at this moment.

Katherine! she calls.

But Katherine is busy dragging the playpen across the lawn. She has to tip it sideways to get it through the doorway. The smell of the roast through the doorway—

SOMEONE CHECK THE ROAST, I THINK I SMELL THE ROAST. Sugar won't burn but the roast can burn. A twenty pound blue and white sack of sugar won't burn, and it's open to question whether or not the playpen would actually burn. Maybe the mesh is not a fiber that will burn, maybe it will blacken and melt and drip down, leaving the metal corner bracings and rim?

Quick now, hurry. Erin is sitting up in his crib, like a cherub, sucking his pacifier. Katherine picks him up, this sugary little bundle, kisses his damp, puffed cheek. She carries him to the diningroom, bends and sets him in the playpen. A book of matches, from *La Potagerie*, on the mantle, and a wadded newspaper—

Katherine! It is Ethel, her face as white as a plate. And that exclamation—Katherine!—like the sound of a plate cracking into jagged pieces, wakes Dave from his bourbon and water, he crosses the livingroom in three or four strides to see what has broken. Janet, behind him, also wonders what has broken, she follows dragging a doll by one leg.

Then Dave smells the roast.

The roast, he says. Katherine, I think I smell—

TAKE OFF THAT RUFFLED APRON, KATHERINE, you're not pretty. Slowly she unties the apron, hands it to Janet. The apron passes from Katherine's hand to Janet, an heirloom, the last white dove fluttering down. Janet, Katherine thinks, will figure out what to do with it.

Behind Katherine the full moon is rising, and it frames her face, a halo. This is what Dave sees, his perfect wife, her pretty face exactly in the center of this circle of light. Classic. An icon. How perfect, he thinks, that she should have placed herself exactly in the center of this center. Except that she's no longer wearing the apron. Except that she's no longer holding her infant son.

*Hold still*, Katherine remembers someone saying.

No, she answers, and inside the moon her mouth opens around the bloody phlegm of her scream. And as her mouth opens he sees for the first time her canines, sharp, like fangs. Jesus, it certainly isn't something he wants to see, this is not the masterpiece he bought and paid for. This woman, the mother of his children?

And her scream ignites the timer. Clearly the roast is burning. The needle of the timer is shaped like an arrow, and now he feels a small, sharp perforation in his chest, as though he's been shot. Inside something like blood pools and pools toward the brim, and what he thought was his perfect life begins to ooze through the tiny opening.

It is a shock to him that there is nothing he can do to stop this. He can do almost anything, he thinks of himself as capable of handling almost anything. If a roast burns, for instance, he can take them out for Kentucky Fried Chicken. But there is, he realizes, no way he can close this wound, close Katherine's mouth, get her to hold still in the middle of that perfect circle of light.

This is the woman who is the mother of his children, there is no way to deny it. And he thinks that if he could, he would do anything, he would do anything at all to make her pretty again.