



Ladykiller - "Hush"
Charlotte Gill

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Hush

excerpted from *Ladykiller*

Brian loves Patty in a quiet, sublime sort of a way, always has. He feels lucky, exempt from the marital cycles of jagged passion and boredom. But lately? He hears her shoes on the steps and his ass clenches. Since his accident, as he likes to think of it, or perhaps even before, there's been something new. He listens to the long, belaboured pause between the key and the door and her arrival, like nothing in the world is easy. He struggles off the couch, slaps the TV off on the way to the hall, where he greets her with a kiss on the forehead. He makes a feeble play for the grocery bags dangling at her wrists. She wears the trench coat and the Reeboks—a uniform that makes him lose track of the days.

For dinner they are going to have steamed organic spinach with roasted sesame seeds and strands of seaweed that look like little black shoelaces. Patty expresses her mood in some snippy chopping and peeling of vegetables. They are going to eat marinated slabs of tofu, baked on a cookie sheet. Pureed organic parsnip.

At the table he asks, "Is there butter?"

"Butter's full of toxins." She passes him chopsticks. "But you can have apple sauce for dessert."

Brian can handle the wacky diet. They have a nice life. They have no children and no plans for children, which is all right since neither one of them can see the point of the constant, low-level chaos. He can handle the tired sighs and the miserable tilt to her eyebrows and the things she almost says but doesn't.

They eat in silence. It passes for appreciation.

After dinner, they do what they always do. She washes. He dries. "Look," he says. He nudges her with his elbow and points to the window.

Patty's hands leave the sink covered with foam. She steals his dishtowel away.

They huddle at the window together. A snotty evening rain runnels down the glass, obscuring their view of a little round woman trundling up the driveway. She carries a blanketed bundle in one arm, holds her jacket over her head with the other.

"That's the wife," Brian murmurs.

"Look who's been spying." The dishtowel is like a tongue between Patty's folded arms.

"With a baby."

"Uh-oh," she says.

"So far the husband's a putz."

"If we're going to peep," says Patty, "shouldn't we turn the off the light?"

Brian watches dating shows back-to-back, the California bozos with capped teeth and the pretty girls with their superior tits. Patty is too pure for all this. But she knits by his side—another Christmas present, another non-surprise he'll try not to wear beyond the driveway. She creeps off her armchair when he's not looking. He notices her absence, slides off the couch, and meanders around the house in search.

He finds her hiding behind the bathroom door, already deep into stage one of the complicated oral hygiene regimen that doubles as a means of keeping him—and sex—at bay. By the time she's finished he'll be down on the pillow, turning out the lights in his mind. So he barges in. He watches her spread antibacterial goop on each of her front teeth, then go at the molars with a miniature gumline brush. She looks at him and scrubs harder. Brian plucks the toothbrush from her mouth. "How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Terrible," she says. Her mouth is full of suds. "But it has nothing to do with you."

When they get into bed, Patty flips from her side to her front, cramming and prodding the pillow underneath her until it's satisfactorily positioned. Brian lies flat on his back.

The doors get locked. The cars in the neighbourhood get parked in their slots. His body winds down. He falls asleep. She falls asleep. The world relaxes. But not tonight. There's something underneath the deep rumble of the furnace and the sigh of their breath. Downstairs the baby is crying. "Oh," Patty groans. She buries her head under the duvet. "Here we go."

The alarm clock goes off like an air horn, slicing through Patty's half-sleep. She drags herself from the blankets, stands on the rug watching Brian, his face collapsed in sleep. For a second she thinks about stuffing his open mouth with the corner of her pillow. But she doesn't. She showers and dresses. She feeds herself breakfast and hauls herself down to the car like a great burlap sack of salt with a hole torn in the bottom.

Outside the sky is a big grey pancake with pink light sizzling at its distant edges. She gets into her Honda. She lets it take her to the exit and onto the tapeworm of highway that feeds itself over the bridge. When it comes time to signal and nudge her way into the guts of downtown, she could just keep driving into the mountains. Too bad there's nothing out there but antipodal cravings, nothing in between but deer and rednecks.

At work, she's the first. The office is deserted. It has the feeling of a surprise party that no one's remembered. She cloisters herself in the corner cubicle where she earns a non-union wage as a tertiary assistant in the tertiary world of H.R. On the middle of her desk blotter rests a mussed tower of paper and files. It's hackled with Post-Its.

"Go to hell, Wanda," says Patty to the stack.

The phone twitters and she jumps. These days any little thing makes her start. Her hand trembles out to answer it. "Hello?" she says.

"Robin?" It's the man with the creamy, intelligent voice. "Robin Brothers?"

"Didn't you phone me yesterday?" Patty asks.

"No," he says.

"Are you sure? Very, very sure?"

"Totally," he says.

"Well," she sighs. "I'm still not Robin."

"Wrong number," he says and hangs up.

The other girls begin to arrive. Hello, they sing to one another. They change their shoes. Good morning.

Patty has a recurring daydream of an anonymous man who makes love to her in a nice hotel room with open windows and white curtains while men shout foreign curses in the street below. Who is this man, her nameless, faceless, perfect mate? The weatherman? The man with the intelligent voice? It doesn't matter. She looks for him wherever she goes.

Such thoughts are a horrible waste of time, Patty admits. Perhaps what she needs is a real affair. So she can lie like a chromosome, her X to a strange Y on a strange bed with sheets that smell of bleach. So she can wonder who else has screwed furtively or jerked off to porn or perhaps

died on the mattress that holds her in its overused trough. Maybe what she needs is something that ends badly.

Patty shoves away from her desk and stands up. Her coworkers sit at their stations, a coven of typing and clicking. Patty stalks down to Wanda's door. She knocks and enters, finds Wanda at her desk surrounded by symmetrical document piles. At her elbow, a giant Starbucks cup with lipstick smeared on the lid.

"I'm not feeling well," says Patty.

Wanda squints at her. "You're kidding. These binders have to go out by three." Wanda is a lean triathlete bitch with smart angular glasses and an angular body that performs like an infallibly well-tuned machine.

"I'm feeling awful," says Patty, "and I'd hate to spread it around."

A week ago, on his rounds, he emptied an ATM in a convenience store. One of the neighbourhood street freaks decided to hook him in the nuts, for no reason at all, with a full bottle of Sprite. Until yesterday he could barely walk. The doctor called it acute contusion and prescribed medication for the pain. But pills do nothing for his pride. They don't stop his Brinks buddies from calling to hassle him. "She gotcha good, didn't she?"

"To tell the truth," Brian says, "I couldn't tell if it was she or a he."

For now he's laid up at home, dribbling water into the houseplants according to Patty's detailed instructions. The kitchen window looks out onto the backyard, the driveway and the lane, and he watches a gang of guys budge a huge sectional out of a cube van. They'll try to squeak it through the basement door into the suite downstairs. They'll fail, he can see that right now. Someone will come up and knock. Someone who doesn't speak English. They'll want to heave it through Brian's upstairs apartment and go down through the laundry room. Brian will have to agree to watch them ding the drywall and shuffle along on the clean carpet in their dirty boots. Or maybe he'll just say no. The couch belongs to their new downstairs neighbours, who are foreigners.

The former tenant was an old unmarried carpenter from when the neighbourhood was German. He lived in the suite beneath Brian and Patty, off a pension and odd jobs. He didn't smoke or flush at night or run his tools in the house. He didn't have girlfriends. He fixed things that needed fixing. But then he died, and that was the end of a very good thing.

The waiting room is lavishly perfumed with lavender, a scent associated in her mind with her doctor, who wears no lab coat and asks that her patients call her Yasmin. Her inner office is unlike any other doctor's office. There are ferns, fig plants and a Wandering Jew. The walls are the colour of sand. There are ambient nature sounds to choose from: Surf, Breeze or Babbling Brook.

"I'm always awake." Patty lies back on the table, which is more like a couch than a table. "Even when I'm asleep."

"I know," says Yasmin, who doctors with a firm, clean hand. "You've said." She begins by probing the arch of Patty's left foot with an electronic pen that reads the state of her insides. Patty stares at the ceiling, nervous about her liver. The machine bleats.

"What does that mean?" Patty wants to know.

"It means you can't tolerate caffeine. Caffeine is full of toxins."

"But I don't drink coffee."

"Then it must be something else."

"What?"

"Don't worry," says Yasmin. "We'll find out."

After the session Yasmin escorts Patty to the waiting room, where she jots things down for the receptionist. She invites the next clients in—a thin, pimply boy and his mother. How vigorous and healthy Yasmin looks by comparison, what perfect skin. Patty wants that skin.

The receptionist fetches two brown dropper bottles from the refrigerator then slides them over the counter along with a sheet of paper, still warm from the printer. Patty's eyes skim over the numbers and columns to the bottom right-hand corner—the total registers like a dizzying height. She presses her hand to her breastbone. "Is this right?" she asks. The receptionist nods and brandishes a pen. Patty takes out her cheques. She signs her wavy name on the straight line and rips the cheque out of the book.

Ever since moving in, the guy downstairs comes out of his apartment between ten and noon with a white plastic grocery bag full of garbage. He dangles it at arm's length by the rabbit-eared handles as if he's not well acquainted with trash. He walks out to the lane and drops it into the garbage can. Then the guy—Brian has learned he goes by "Joe" (too Anglo, it's suspicious) though they have not yet met—scans up the alley

and down the alley from under the duck bill of his ball cap. Then he goes inside.

Today there is no garbage, but two of Joe's buddies roll up in a red Mustang convertible. The driver wears a silver down jacket, though the day is unseasonably warm. The other, a Grizzlies sweatshirt with a hood and cut-off sleeves. Both wear sunglasses and shitty little goatees. They honk the horn and Joe saunters out in Nike shoes worth two-hundred bucks, a cell phone pressed to his ear. The guy in the front passenger seat gets out and leaps over the door into the back. Joe gets in next to the driver. The muffler farts out clouds of white smoke. The driver leans forward to retrieve something from the glove box, obscuring Brian's view of Joe. Then whatever is happening has happened. Joe gets out and heads back to his apartment. The Mustang rumbles away, the muffler like the roll of a big fat snare. Brian writes down the license plate number on the back of his hand.

Drugs, drive-by shootings, B & Es. Brian concerns himself with these things. He has worked in security since he was seventeen years old. He has worked. He's put in his sweat and his toil. Now he's more than twice seventeen, and his neighbourhood is evolving for the worse. He's not surprised. Entropy is the rule of the cosmos. Events begin well with a few surmountable complications. A taken-for-granted cresting. Then there's the inevitable downhill slide before everything begins to decay. He can think of nothing in life that's exempt from this pattern except for cockroaches and plastic. Nothing important, anyway. Neighbourhoods. Governments, empires, alliances. Buildings and other edifices. Everything goes to shit. Species with no natural predators. Polar ice caps. Bones and teeth and skin. Snowmen. Beauty. Rock bands. Marriage. Love.

Patty walks in. She's early, unexpected. She takes a look at him on the bed and asks, "How's your acute contusion?"

Who puts the cogs back in the universe once all the springs have sprung?

Brian steps down off the bed and lands with a thud on the carpet.

"What else do you get up to when I'm gone?" she wants to know. Patty is a Capricorn, all business about feelings until they're her own. She's still in her coat holding a fistful of keys.

"I keep on top of the highlights," he says darkly.

"What else?"

"Is this a quiz?"

Patty sighs. She brushes her bangs aside then lets her arm slap down against her handbag. She inserts one of her keys into the niche in the door jamb. She digs around, and sawdust falls to the carpet like dandruff.

“Why are you doing that?” he asks.

She stops. “Did you go down and mention the crying?”

“I went down,” he lies. “But there was nobody home.”

She pinches her lips to one side. She holds up the end of her scarf, looks at it intently, folds it in half, then in half again.

Patty sweeps out the back door and hustles down the stairs. With each step she charts out what she will say and not say to these neighbours downstairs. The baby is not yet crying, but it will, later, when she’s in bed, because that’s what babies do. Babies need to be wiped and cleaned. They scream and insist. They undo their mothers in public. All that tyrannical, reflexive want packaged up inside something so small and deceptively cute. But it’s not the baby she can’t stand. It’s dependency, helplessness. It’s Brian.

She knocks. The door is flung open and Joe appears, looking like a big, neckless bouncer. Patty takes a hesitant step back. “I’m wondering—” she begins, but Joe has disappeared. Patty is left gazing at a pile of big shoes and little shoes on the square of linoleum that separates the laundry room from their neighbours’ low-ceilinged zone. Inside the apartment there’s a cascade of syllables she can’t understand. The smell of onions frying in butter. Where have all these shoes come from? It could be anywhere between Turkey and Bangladesh for all she knows.

Patty hears the swish of legs, nylon against nylon. The wife appears in bare feet, a navy blue Gap T-shirt and warm-up pants. There’s a palm-print of flour under the A and the P on her shirt.

She has it all lined up in her mind. She’s going to convey her complaint monosyllabically and with gestures. But Patty finds herself forgetting her purpose. She’s struck by how young and pretty and round the wife is. She says her own name again and pats herself on the chest.

“Karam,” says the wife.

“Karam,” Patty repeats. From now on she will want to get it mixed up with karma. “Your baby,” Patty begins. Despite her intentions, these words leak out sounding accusatory or portentous. Karam’s brow furrows. She squares herself in preparation for bad news or complaint. She looks used to bad news and complaints.

It's going to be tougher than Patty thought, this fine line between simplicity and condescension—when you don't speak each other's language, everyone ends up feeling stupider. Patty makes a cradle of her arms. Karam smiles edgily, revealing white, white teeth that have never seen coffee or tea. Before Patty can say more, Karam, too, slips from sight, leaving Patty to wait on the step again.

Karam returns, the nylon rustling softly this time, with the baby in a yellow sleeper. She holds it up for Patty as a testament to its inarguable cuteness. Only the baby isn't pretty. "Oh," says Patty. She leans in closer. It has a big lolling tongue and pointed lips. Shiny, purplish eyelids. It looks like a little brown turtle. A turtle with no shell.

Patty had things organized in her mind. She was going to explain that she is a very light sleeper. That she can't do without sleep. That sleep is the most fundamental aspect of good health. But all the fight has drained out of her. "Oh, my," says Patty, touching its sharp fingernails. Fingernails the size of crumbs. Is it sick? Is it mentally deformed? She's forgotten all her lines.

Brian eases bare-chested into sheets as crisp and knife-edged and as comfortable as parchment.

Patty flips the clasps on her jewelry. "There's something wrong with that baby."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with its lungs."

"It doesn't look right." Now she peels off the turtleneck. Underneath it is the familiar beige-toned bra with the wide straps and the mysterious closure.

"Well, what?"

She shrugs.

With habitual coyness, she turns away as if she's got a kind of virginity left to keep from him, something not yet seen. She thinks her inner thighs are starting to sag. As if he doesn't already know about her thighs or the pouch of flab around her navel. "Did you mention the thinness of our floors?"

The hem of the nightie flutters down past her shoulders and hips. "I never got that far."

"You lost your nerve."

She flashes on him. "Why are you bugging me?"

"I'm not."

"I had a language barrier to contend with."

“So you point at the baby and cover your ears.”

“Why don’t you point and cover your ears.”

This used to be his favourite part of the day. He used to watch Patty shuck off her clothes and her day and think: This woman is my mate. I want to impregnate this person. I want to be worth a million bucks. I want to crawl inside her as if she were a cupboard and taste everything inside.

They stopped sleeping naked after Patty read a book by a doctor from Colorado. According to the book, shoes were a bad idea and bras were a good idea. Sleeping naked was also bad because it disrupted your circadian cycle. For years she’d been turning over, waking herself up with blasts of cold air.

“So sleep closer,” Brian said.

When she climbs into bed he fields her like a giant baseball mitt. She fidgets in his embrace. She’s used to Brian on night shift, used to sleeping in the middle of the bed. Does she really want to feel the coarse hair on his thigh? Does he really want to feel her cold ass at his hip? Sleeping naked is for other people, couples still fascinated with each other’s bodies, for those who can overlook the ingrown stubble and the midnight farts.

She’s no fan of the human body, it’s true. There are too many ways to get sick. There’s a certain type of microorganism that dwells only on her eyelashes. A zillion kinds of bacteria in her gut. Everyday all the earth’s fungal spores rain down on her body. Sometimes she hates her own skin. Sometimes she can’t scrub hard enough.

“I don’t hear anything,” she says, “Do you?”

He grunts, disgustingly half-asleep.

“You’re too hot,” she says, shoving off from him.

She lies awake staring at the darkness, listening to his breath descend into the deep, familiar rasps of a snore. No one ever died because of lack of sleep? She’s read experiments on sleep deprivation in rats. After three days with no sleep they claw and tear at each other’s fur. After a week they burrow into their corners and lie there inert.

A few streets away, a siren Dopplers by and her whole body tenses. It’s not the crying baby itself, but the idea of a crying baby, the proximity of stress and discomfort, the waiting, that shreds the quiet in her mind. Brian sleeps, oblivious. The siren sets the rotten dog howling behind the fence next door. Patty holds her breath. When the crying begins, it’s no

surprise. It travels up from the basement, up the stairwell and through the rooms of their apartment and into her ear canals. The wailing begins light and faint, then blossoms into waves of shrieking and gasping. Her mind follows the cadence, a lump of anger rising up in her throat. She pounces up on all fours. Brian turns onto his side and reaches for her shoulder. "Don't." She quivers on the verge of tears. "Don't even touch me."

The horizon pukes sherbety light on another gorgeous morning. Patty storms out of bed, throws her clothes on the bed and stomps around on her heels over every square foot of the apartment. She feels like a stretched length of yarn, like something dangled from a rooftop. Brian appears, puffy-eyed. His big goofy hands scratch around in the pockets of his robe. "What's up?" he wants to know.

"I'm going to work." She looks at him through eye slits, on the verge of some dangerous honesty. She fumes into the hall and snatches her coat off its hook. Brian's slippers scuff along the floor. Pick up your god-damn feet, she thinks.

"Look," says Brian at the door to the basement, which is ajar. On the floor between the door and the jamb rests a palm-sized lump, wrapped in coloured cellophane. He nudges it with his toe then picks it up. "This must be for you."

"How do you know?"

"It's pink, for a start."

She takes it out of his hands and yanks at the corkscrew of ribbon. The plastic comes apart. Inside are four white cakes, cut into the shapes of diamonds. She holds one to her nose and the smell is nearly indescribable: Like rose petals, crushed and wet. But also something creamy and edible. It reminds her of something she can't quite place. Something lovely. From childhood.

"Is that soap?" Brian asks. "It looks like soap."

She peeks through the open door into the unlit stairwell and catches a whiff of another smell that isn't hers or Brian's, a smell that's decisively theirs. Without thinking, Patty lifts one to her mouth nibbles a corner. A milky sweetness floods over her tongue. Her eyes water—she hasn't had sugar in years. "It's not soap," she says. Though she'd rather it was.

Brian wanders from room to room, forgetting his purpose. Perhaps all that's needed is a little air, some locomotion. He pokes his head through the neck hole of the Harvard sweatshirt—a gift from his mother, who trots off to all parts since the death of his father—as yet unworn. He slides his arms into it but then takes it off because only morons advertise the fact of their non-education. He's very happy and mostly optimistic, but the world has its lucent truths.

Outside the weather's fine. Sun-dappled sidewalks, a moist breeze. He begins at a careful stroll, assessing the status of his injury. All is fine. The neighbourhood rhododendrons bloom. The aroma of flowers is everywhere.

He proceeds to the park without deciding to. At the gates an old guy hurries a Yorkie down the asphalt path. "Come on, Rippy." Rippy sniffs and pees on the underbrush. "Rippy, let's go." The guy becomes resentful, yanks Rippy along in his harness. It's his wife's dog, obviously.

Brian quickens his pace to a vigorous walk. But three-quarters of the way around the path a knifing pain shoots through what he's sure must be his prostate.

He hobbles around the circuit in the requisite direction, perturbed by the pedestrian traffic. Suddenly everyone's annoying. The skateboard punks, the old dames, slow as ducks. Get a job, he wants to say to everyone he passes. Even the chatty girls with the high ponytails and the nice calves and the pom-poms at the heels of their socks.

Brian limps back to the house. Upon arrival he finds Patty, back again early from work. She's cross-legged on the couch, staring at the sky beyond the window. No guy likes to see his wife in a meltdown—after all, it's probably his fault—but this is terrible. Patty's face leaks tears and mucous. His nuts throb with a vicious ache. He thinks of this pain as laden with meaning, there to punish or humble him in some medicinal, necessary way. Her hand clutches out at his, her fingers chilled and moist.

"Can't you hear it?" she asks.

The next thought that darts through his mind startles him: What if she's gone crazy? "I don't hear a thing." He crafts the sentence with his least inoffensive tone.

"Smell that," she says. "Do you smell that?" Patty has burst into the room where Brian wipes polish onto his work boots in slow, deliberate strokes.

He sniffs and shrugs.

"It's electrical." Her nose works the air like a marsupial's. "Like hot metal." Her eyes land on the blackened rag between his fingers, the boot between his knees. She gasps and rolls her eyes as if he's the most obtuse human being she's ever known. She whirls and flees the scene.

"That hurts," he says to the wall.

When the smoke detector starts to blare downstairs, she collides with him in the hallway. "Fire," she says, clutching him by the buttons and the chest hair. "They're trying to burn the house down." He disentangles her fingers but lets her drag him by the forearm down the basement steps to the laundry, where their downstairs neighbours have spread out an assortment of belongings. Brian and Patty walk the narrow path of clean floor past the washing machine. Patty nudges things out of the way with the side of her foot and the back of her hand—satin blankets and underwear strung on clotheslines and garbage bags full of extra whatever.

Patty pounds on the door. Brian can see her thinking what she's already told him dozens of times: These are people who never throw things out. Who will never teach their child not to shriek for attention. Who believe in nylon and polyester and disposable diapers. Who sweep the floor but not the corners. They're those kind of people.

The door opens. The smoke detector blasts out at them like an auditory wind—a noise so loud all of Brian's body hair stands up. Joe emerges in a black Gold's Gym T-shirt, yacking urgently into a cordless phone over the sound.

Brian sees they are exactly the same height. He can look Joe straight in the eye.

"Where is the fire?" Patty demands. The urgent authority in her voice makes Joe step aside in the door. Patty attempts to dart past him into the house, but he stops her by the forearm and points down at her shoes. "Oh, give me a break," says Patty, kicking off her shoes in an exasperated rush.

In sock feet Brian steps into the apartment, which is different from what he remembers. Long tubes of fluorescent light and commercial-grade low-pile carpet, stone grey, the same as in the office where his supervisor and the dispatch girls work. Good for high traffic, stain resistance, rug burns.

A stratum of thin blue smoke hovers a foot from the ceiling. Patty zips instinctively into the kitchen. Brian follows her. Joe follows Brian. Patty scans the stove dials and pulls at the oven door. It won't open. "What's

in here?" she yells at Joe. Joe shrugs. He's off the phone now but holds it in his hand. "What do you mean you don't know? Where the hell is your wife?" He pulls at his lower lip, guilty and bewildered. She points to a knob. "Do you know what you did? You put your pizza on self-clean. The door won't open until the cycle's done." She touches the stove with her finger, then withdraws it quickly. She makes a sizzling sound with her mouth.

Patty is formidable. "I think he understands the hot part," Brian says. Brian almost feels bad for Joe.

Next Patty bustles to the smoke detector, which she's too short to reach. "Kill it," she shouts with her eyes closed, fingers in her ears.

Brian comes to her aid, reaches to the ceiling and rips the cover off the smoke detector. He pulls the wire cap from the nine-volt. Joe peers over their shoulders like a passerby. Brian glances at the leaping white cat and the bolt of lightning on the battery's casing, then hands it to Joe. Joe stares at it on the flat of his palm.

Patty points at the stove. "Move it for me, Moose," she commands.

"What if I get electrocuted?" asks Brian. She hasn't called him Moose in ten years.

Patty sets her hand on the oven door's handle. "We'll get electrocuted together."

Joe slides into his wife's oven mitts. Brian wraps two dishtowels around his hands. He touches the corner of the stove and breaks into an instant sweat. He and Joe grunt and jiggle and scrape the thing away from the wall.

When there's room Patty dives in behind it, wiggles her slight frame into the space they've made for her. Brian peeks over the back where Patty, bent sideways at the waist, works the plug prongs back and forth. She stands up. "There." She drops the cord on the floor like a snake she's just strangled with her bare hands.

Brian and Joe stand there looking at each other as if they should shake hands. Patty cocks her ear towards deeper regions of the apartment then moves off down the narrow strip of hallway. Brian and Joe trail behind.

At the end of the hallway are two closed doors. Patty turns the knob on one of these, and the baby's cries blare out at them from the darkness. Patty steps into it. Brian's dips his head into the room, allowing his eyes adjust. Patty makes shushing noises on her way to the crib, which isn't a crib at all but a small mattress on the floor with cushions wedged under the edges.

Halfway across the room, Patty gasps. Brian sees her silhouette jump. He pushes the door open wider and the light falls upon the glossy eyes of Karam, who sits cross-legged in the middle of this mattress, in the dark, rocking with the baby in her arms. As if she could escape from the noise and the smoke by playing hide-and-go-seek. Patty shoots Brian a look over her shoulder. What are these people thinking?

Upstairs Patty flings open all the windows. Brian trails after her like a simpering boob from room to room so that she can't think straight. "That baby's going to cry until the end of time," she laments.

"It won't."

"We're going to go mad."

"We'll move."

"No way," she says, stomping her foot for emphasis. "We were here first."

"Well, we'll make sure and tell them that."

"You're no help at all."

He looks at her and sighs, "What do you want me to say? That the baby is crying on purpose just to piss you off?"

Patty throws her arms up in the air. They are back in the kitchen where they started. How should she know why babies cry? She doesn't have one. She and Brian are DINKs with the combined income of a veteran Safeway cashier. But why stop there? Here's to not going on vacations. Here's to renting, not buying. To their postal code. The White Spot. Rusty shitbox cars. Here's to Winners and Payless. No frills and bag lunches. Here's to no kids. To having run out of ways to amuse oneself.

Patty slings her purse onto the counter by the straps. She rifles through to the very bottom in search of her wallet.

Brian hovers at her side with the meat of his palm on the sink's edge.

"How much cash have you got?" she wants to know.

He slides his wallet out of his back pocket and counts out a few well-used, flannel-textured bills.

"What for?" he asks. "Are you planning to buy the baby?"

She nips at his money with the ends of her fingers. Brian holds it in the air just beyond her reach.

"Give it to me," says Patty.

"No," says Brian.

"Fine then." She clicks her wallet shut and hurls it back in her purse.

"Things will change," says Brian. "Babies grow up."

A little muscle under her left eye twitches and flutters. "Not always," she sneers. "Look at you."

Yes, look at men: Husbands get sympathetically sick the very minute their wives come down with the flu. They don't clean toilets. They can only handle one thing at a time. They punch out at five. Nothing's their fault. They'd rather be golfing. They are dogs in the institution of marriage. Lumbering, dumb. Always getting tangled up in your legs.

"Why do you do that?" Brian complains.

"What?"

"That. Half a fight, and you're not happy until it's a whole one."

"Because you push me to it."

"What have I done?"

"Exactly. What have you done? It takes you three months just to get up in the morning." She watches his expression to see what will happen to it. It wavers. A shiver of satisfaction creeps over her scalp. Brian holds his index finger aloft and begins to say something but doesn't. He gives the air between them a broad sweep with the back of his hand. Then he stomps out. Patty leans against the cutlery drawer. Downstairs the baby is still crying. She can't feel sorry. She hasn't slept. It's all the baby's fault.

Patty charges downstairs yet again. She knocks on the door again. When Joe answers, the light behind his head is dazzling. She steps up to him. "Look at these," she says. She shows him the aggravated pinks of her underlids. "You on the other hand have no wrinkles and the whites of your eyes are still white and I think you could sleep through a nuclear attack and still have good dreams." She begins to work the money in her hand into a tight little tube. "Who gets up at night and feeds that baby? I bet two hundred bucks it isn't you." She prods it into the dorky, ornamental pocket halfway up Joe's sleeve. He backs away, startled by the alien feminine touch, so that she has to lean in to complete the delivery. "Understand?" she asks, stepping down her tone a notch trying not to sound like a small-minded bitch. "Yes?" She nods. "No?" She shakes her head.

Joe shoots her a strange sidelong glance. Perhaps he has no idea what she's saying. But then no one's that stupid when money's around. "That's a gift," she says, pointing to his pocket. "Take the baby to a nice hotel for a night. Or two. Give your poor wife a break."

Patty shuts the door and leans against the wall. Brian measures out tea leaves from one of her little plastic bags not because he likes the taste but because something has come in with her, like a front of black weather. Something that needs a placebo, some calming, some combing down.

Patty rubs her finger back and forth over her thumbnail. She starts to cry. He drops the tea ball into the pot and the chain goes slithering in after it. He walks over to her and takes her hands in his big fists. He kisses the ends of her fingers. He kisses her wet face.

"I hate everything," she says.

"No, you don't," he tells her. She pulls her hands away and presses her fingertips into her eye sockets. The kettle starts to rumble. He collects her in his arms like a tightly bound bundle of something, newspapers or laundry.

She can't see the light in anything. She finds nothing funny. She never did. He wants to feed her a bloody steak in small bites. He wants to lay her out under tropical sun. He wants to carry her into the bedroom and the peel the clothes away. He feels like covering his wife and injecting her with happiness. If only it were transferable, like cash or body heat, this thing that he has that she doesn't. The average contentment she jealously despises, that makes her hate him along with the rest of the world.

Brian arrives in the locker room with his uniform already on and his duffel in hand. He finds the night shift guys, his old pals, changing from their uniforms into sweatpants and down vests and white sneakers. His supervisor has slotted Brian into daytime detail, a lucky switch, though one made with no explanation. He tries not to think it's because of his new testicular vulnerability.

His locker is marked with his name. He looks at the label, the way in which he formed the letters of his own name so long ago. He opens his locker, and the door falls open with a clang. He drops his bag into the bottom, and when he turns, his buddies have stopped lacing up shoes and fastening Velcro to look at him.

"Hey guys," Brian says tentatively.

"How's it hanging?" they tease, but they've missed him. They slap him on the back and they high-five. They say, "Hey, man, it's good to have you back."

But something's changed or missing or maybe he's just being paranoid. Minutes later they are trickling out of the locker room in a gaggle.

He's left there, the first guy to show up for the changing of the guard. Brian sits down on the bench with his jacket on until the day shift arrives, one by one. They mill and unzip. They open and close lockers. How long will it take for them to notice him?

Patty dealt with the neighbours. No more crying. There is so little movement downstairs, Brian begins to forget they all share the house. No longer does he shift limb by limb into bed, apologizing as if Patty has caught him watching porn or kicking the pet they don't have.

They lie on their pillows. "Isn't this nice?" asks Brian.

"Shhh," says Patty. "You'll hex it."

Sleep, after not sleeping, is the most delicious pleasure known to man. They tumble into it and doze through the alarm in the morning. They wake up to the radio show banter of Larry and Willy. They are getting to like it.

It's raining after days with no rain. Pigeons are cooing under the eaves. Patty lifts the elastic of his pajamas. Her light hand settles on his cock and waits there like a thrilling, electric question he's afraid to answer. There's his handicap down there—what if he's lost his aim? But mostly it's been a very long, delicate time between them.

"Does this hurt?" she asks. Her hands probe around. "Does this?"

"You're going to make me late."

"Just answer the question."

"No," he says, "it doesn't hurt at all."

In Yasmin's waiting room, Patty reads a yoga magazine, flipping pages without registering the content. Yasmin comes out to fetch her. Yasmin, with hair drawn back in a slick dark coil, a severe part on the side. She smiles a flat little smile. Patty wonders if she's done something wrong, or if it's just Yasmin's mood. Did someone piss her off? Patty wonders what Yasmin's house looks like and who shares it with her. She wonders if Yasmin is a lesbian.

Patty follows Yasmin into her office and then they begin the procedure. "Lie down," says Yasmin, though Patty knows exactly what to do—this Thursday as with every Thursday. She sits up on the table, then lies back. Yasmin goes to the head of the table and leans over Patty, rubbing her palms together. She plunges her thumbs and fingers into Patty's hair.

Patty tells Yasmin what's gone wrong with her body during the week. Yasmin listens and massages little circles into Patty's scalp. Patty relates the intricacies of her dietary regimens. Yasmin listens and hums. The humming annoys Patty. She begins to embellish the story of her body, while reclined on the vinyl, just to see if Yasmin is listening. "I had an all-over rash," Patty says. "I've been experiencing nausea." But none of that is true. Patty has been feeling like an ox, like the healthiest ox on earth.

"Are you hydrated?" Yasmin asks. "Maybe you need a new water filter. Have you thought about buying distilled?"

Has Yasmin thought about varying her pattern? This is getting tired. Each week Patty talks. Yasmin listens, sort of. She praises Patty for her diligence with diet or the purity of her constitution. But praise is just the beginning. Here's what else Patty must try. Patty must purchase this or that product, or improve her self-discipline. Patty must climb higher for Yasmin. Nothing's good enough, or else Patty would not be here, she'd be cured. Cured—as with disease, as with leather—the word lingers in Patty's thoughts until she begins to doubt its meaning.

Yasmin works the base of Patty's skull. "You're loose back there," says Yasmin. "That's good. Most people are very tight."

But Patty doesn't want to be loose or easy. She'd rather be hard, a puzzle for someone to solve. She opens her eyes and peers up at Yasmin. Yasmin stops kneading. She smiles. Upside-down it looks as if she's baring her teeth.

Brian arrives home from work to the aroma of basted meat. He salivates wildly. "What's on?" he says, clutching Patty by the hips.

"Free-range lemon chicken. Roasted tarragon potatoes."

He could kiss the ground, they're eating food again, but he doesn't want to discourage her with too much enthusiasm. "I could eat my left arm." He bends to her lips then straightens. "Oh," he says. "You cut your hair." He runs his fingers through a few stubby strands of it.

"Do you like it?" she asks.

"I like it," he says wistfully. "I love it."

When they sit down at the table, Brian devours half his meal without taking his eyes off the plate. Patty falls quiet, knifing little slivers from her vegetables. He's picking chicken flesh from a bone by the time he notices. "What's wrong," he asks. "Not hungry?" She sets down her knife

and her fork on the edge of her plate. She shakes her head. He wonders if she's going to cry.

The phone rings. Patty rushes for it. "Leave it," he says. She sinks back down and dabs at her mouth with her napkin, which she then shoves under the table onto her lap.

The answering machine in the hall whirs and beeps. They listen to a glottal voice. It sounds like no one they know. Somebody overweight. Somebody pissed off. "This is Gus. Remember me? I used to work the day shift. Well listen, pal, I hope you're satisfied. Because now I'm stuck with your shitty night shift leftovers. What were you thinking, you stupid jerk? You and your busted ball."

Now it's her idea to make love in the middle of the night, though furtively, with the lights out, once she's assured herself that everyone else is asleep. She wants to make up for something. She wants to knock herself out. Brian is going to let her.

He is going to lie on top of her and try to be light. He is going to try not to think of his busted ball. He's going to try and be a good lover. To look down at her and see her as beautiful. He is going to try to be present as she's asked—whatever that means. But there's something that keeps distracting him. They are not what they used to be. They are trying too hard.

Downstairs, there is the click of a light switch. It's the start of something. Trouble, or rather, a restlessness. They hear Karam's voice, then Joe's. Lately they've been hearing a lot of midnight conversation: There is an exchange of information. Sometimes the conversation ends in a verbal skirmish and sometimes it just ends. Then there's the aftermath, the flushing of the toilet, the whoosh of water in the pipes. The TV.

Patty whispers, "Stop."

He does, still inside her. He waits. Then thrusts himself deeper as if she won't notice.

"Don't," she says testily. She turns her head on the pillow, straining towards the muffled volley of words. "Now I can't." She slides out from under him, drapes her arm across her forehead as if to cover a fever or a migraine.

"You don't really want to do this, do you?" says Brian.

She closes her eyes and winces. "I spent four-thousand dollars at the naturopath."

He props himself up on an elbow. "Say that again."

“Things got a little carried away.

“What things?”

“We’re overdrawn.” She pummels the pillow and throws herself down on it with a dissatisfied groan. “The Mastercard is maxed.” Brian gapes at the back of her head, his body tingling, his penis at attention.

Cars glide up and down the alley with music streaming from the windows. Kids tear by with balls and sticks and rollerblades. An evening on the cusp of summer. The whole neighbourhood is out in the balm of it.

Brian sips from a wine glass. Patty sits on a lawn chair, arms folded, one knob of bony knee slung over the other. He sets the glass down on the barbecue’s wooden slats. He prods and flips things on the grill. Fat drips and flares. When Patty thinks he’s not looking, she picks up his glass. He sees her from the corner of his eye. She tips the glass back and a quarter of its contents disappear into her mouth. She puts the glass back, sluices the mouthful around then swallows. It’s an evening on the cusp of everything.

Downstairs there is the opening of a door followed by the bang of the knob on the wall. Patty swivels towards the noise. Brian leans out over the railing. Karam comes into view in an ankle-length bathrobe. She’s barefoot. Her hair is undone from its usual tight braid. It fans out down her back, in bobbing, unbrushed waves.

Brian and Patty watch her travel down the driveway. Towards the bottom she steps on something sharp, a piece of gravel or a cube of tempered glass. She lets out a startled yelp and continues into the lane at a limping half-jog. They watch her pink soles flash away in the dusk. As she slips from view behind a garage, they glimpse the hem of her robe, the trailing end of her long skein of hair.

Brian raises his eyebrows at Patty.

“Don’t look at me,” she says.

Karam reappears on the other side of the garage having picked up some flapping, uncontrolled speed on the laneway’s decline. She runs, not to fetch something, but away from something. Like a cloud of bees or a tormenting itch. Or out of her own skin. Then she’s gone. Slipped out of view behind a cedar hedge.

Joe emerges, walks his measured, stooped walk to the end of the driveway. He stops in the alley, looks right and then left. He glances back at the house and catches sight of Brian and Patty on their balcony. He flashes them a distracted, phony, wobbling smile. Patty lifts her arm

into a column of charcoal smoke as if to wave or to beckon. She points after his wife, down to the right, towards the park. Joe doesn't nod or acknowledge the signal. He takes off at a jog with his head down. He doesn't call her name. No one calls her name.

"Should we help or something?"

"Like what did you have in mind?" asks Brian. Call the cops? Phone an ambulance? Weird, private things go on between couples.

Patty steps inside to the kitchen and comes back out with a glass of her own, which she presents to Brian, an empty vessel to be filled. He peers right into the black hole of her pupil while slopping Chardonnay into her glass. They exchange a conversation of looks:

Drinking?

Don't hassle me.

It's been a long time.

I don't care.

Brian holds the tongs aloft. He wears Patty's apron with the geese on it and an oven mitt with geese on it, and suddenly he feels like an ass, like a pussywhipped jerk. Patty is his wife, his closest companion. But right now he'd like to toss his wine in her face, gun her down with an icy spray from the garden hose. What kind of love is this?

A drawer rolls open, and it's a clue. The contents scuttle and collide with the front of the drawer, and someone—Joe, Brian guesses from the roughness of manner—roots around in search of the necessary item. Downstairs, they sleep in the day and stay up all night, their routine flipped like cushions in a ransacked house. Brian hears Joe snoring when he comes home from work. Downstairs, they save their common, everyday sounds for the middle of the night: The tapping of toothbrushes against the porcelain in the sink. The stacking of plates in the dish rack. Patty pounces up out of sleep.

Where is the baby? Brian and Patty aren't sure, but they have unmentionable ideas. They skulk about in separate bubbles of solitude. It feels like a kind of embarrassment.

Brian sits down to loosen his laces in the kitchen, making a study of the shoe itself. The grommets, the lace tips, the side-slipped tongue. There's the tick of the clock in the kitchen and the burbling of the drain upstairs. When the shower stops he thinks he can hear Patty drying herself. After awhile he lumbers up the stairs, one foot then the next.

He finds her perched on a corner of the bed. Slippers on her feet, legs crossed, hair turbaned in a towel. She pinches the bathrobe closed at her clavicle, rubs the terry between thumb and forefinger. She has lavender puffs under her eyes. There is a plate on the bed. She begins slicing a pear into four. All Brian can see is juice dripping off the blade of her knife. She wraps the pear wedge in prosciutto. She folds it into her mouth. What business does she have eating food like that? "Where the hell did you get that ham?" Brian demands. "How much did it cost?"

What are babies but a fraction of an adult? It was one-tenth the size of Patty. One-tenth of her weight and adult proportions. An unformed personality. A sickly, soft-boned, toothless creature. Perhaps a tenth is too much. How about half of a tenth? A twentieth. A fraction of a fraction.

Do they go down? Do they ask? How will they know for sure?

Babies are the commonest, easiest thing to make. Everywhere, all over the world, people wind up with little reproductions of themselves. Mothers jerk them around in the bath trying to lather soap onto all the right body parts, trying to wash the dirt of life from their faces and armpits. They shake the poop out of diapers. But it's no use. You can't make life fair just by getting it clean.

Anxiety sits like a brown clayey lump in the middle of her mind. Patty can't push it around. Why worry? It's a useless emotion. It's not real. It can't touch her. She decides to march forth in her thoughts. The car is nice. She is going to be happy and positive. She's going to sit in deep traffic, listening to a dreamy male voice on the radio. She's going to imagine what this man looks like, and if he would find her sexy.

Then, while she's stopped at the intersection, there's an ambulance. Its lights flash in her rearview. There are too many cars. It's a tight situation. She's stopped too close to the minivan in front of her. She honks at the driver to move up. He glances at her in his mirror and then back to the car in front of him. Behind her, the streams of traffic are parting. The ambulance is upon her, its sirens insisting in their professional way that she move, move, move. She cranks the wheel and clenches her teeth, breathing, breathing deeply all the time. The car is her enclave of warmth and protection. She wedges it out of her lane between the minivan and a pickup parked at the curb. The ambulance proceeds, as it must. It squeaks by her door, a big white box. As it passes the paramedic in the passengers seat shoots her a nasty look. Get the hell out of the way. The

paramedic with his fleece vest and his short, white sleeves. Why? It's not her fault she's involved. Nothing is her fault.

The ambulance speeds away, but somehow not fast enough. What about the person on the gurney in the back? Is she dying? Is someone holding her hand? The mere thought of it makes the tears crest on the rims of her eyelids. But now she's waited too long to get back into the flow on the street. Now she's waiting some more, nosing into the stream of cars whose owners pretend not to see her. Her neck hurts from craning. She butts back in. A car honks and she's clouded in a sudden fog of emotion. When the time comes, who will want to hold Patty's hand? Her life is too small, her desires too selfish and nasty. Who will sit by her hospital bed while tubes pump fluids to replenish what has leaked? She feels like she's leaking right now. Who will applaud when she triumphs over death? She's back in the thick of the rush-hour tide. She lets it carry her home. She turns her corner. It's too close to home to cry.

Three women stand in the driveway, two young, one old. They have noses exactly like every woman Patty has ever seen enter the downstairs apartment. They stare. Patty smiles. They don't. As she climbs the steps, Patty feels their eyes on the triangle of scarf across her back, her stockinged calves where the muscles begin to burn. She has the key ready in her hand. She scurries inside and closes the door and leans her full weight against it.

Brian slouches in to greet her. He's so slow and dour. He's got something to tell her, she can tell. It's going to be creepy and bad. The light fades in the house. Brian approaches. He tries to wrap his hand around hers. She slaps him away. He wants to slather her with sympathy. He wants to drool all over her parade. Cars and more purring cars in the driveway. Doors thud softly. Clouds slide over the sun—her least favourite weather of all, when you want to turn the lights on before it's even dark. Their apartment is too white. They never entertain. They need to cover the walls. Polite little heels click across the asphalt. Downstairs the apartment fills with murmuring women. What's the matter with these people downstairs? They're not normal. Why don't they shout and kick holes in the walls? Why don't they scream at the ceiling and be done with it? Go fuck yourselves, she'd love to yell out over the rooftops. She doesn't want their news. They can keep their goddamn news to themselves. She's going to call up some people and invite them for dinner. She's worked hard for this mood. This unbearably fantastic mood.

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