

'Deeper, funnier, sadder and truer than a work of fiction has any right to be' INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY



JONATHAN



F R E E D O M

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF **PURITY** AND **THE CORRECTIONS**

FRANZEN

Jonathan Franzen

Freedom

«HarperCollins»

Franzen J.

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Patty and Walter Berglund were the new pioneers of old St. Paul – the gentrifiers, the hands-on parents, the avant-garde of the Whole Foods generation. Patty was the ideal sort of neighbour who could tell you where to recycle your batteries and how to get the local cops to actually do their job. She was an enviably perfect mother and the wife of Walter's dreams. Together with Walter – environmental lawyer, commuter cyclist, family man – she was doing her small part to build a better world. But now, in the new millennium, the Berglunds have become a mystery. Why has their teenage son moved in with the aggressively Republican family next door? Why has Walter taken a job working with Big Coal? What exactly is Richard Katz – outré rocker and Walter's old college friend and rival – still doing in the picture? Most of all, what has happened to poor Patty? Why has the bright star of Barrier Street become "a very different kind of neighbour," an implacable Fury coming unhinged before the street's attentive eyes? In his first novel since *The Corrections*, Jonathan Franzen has given us an epic of contemporary love and marriage. *Freedom* comically and tragically captures the temptations and burdens of too much liberty: the thrills of teenage lust, the shaken compromises of middle age, the wages of suburban sprawl, the heavy weight of empire. In charting the mistakes and joys of *Freedom*'s intensely realized characters, as they struggle to learn how to live in an ever more confusing world, Franzen has produced an indelible and deeply moving portrait of our time.

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Copyright

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Praise

‘Franzen pulls off the extraordinary feat of making the lives of his characters more real to you than your own’

DAVID HARE, *Guardian*, Books of the Year

‘By the end of *Freedom* you may feel you understand its protagonists better than you know anyone in the world around you’

NICHOLAS HYTNER, *Evening Standard*, Books of the Year

‘No question about it: *Freedom* swept everything before it in intricately observed, humane, unprejudiced armfuls’

PHILIP HENSHER, *Daily Telegraph*, Books of the Year

‘Head and shoulders above any other book this year’

SAM MENDES, *Observer*, Books of the Year

‘A masterpiece. Like all great novels, *Freedom* does not just tell an engrossing story. It illuminates, through the steady radiance of its author’s profound moral intelligence, the world we thought we knew’

SAM TANENHAUS, *New York Times*

‘Without question *Freedom* is a book that grabs hold of you. When I was in the middle I thought of its characters even while I wasn’t reading about them. Franzen’s skills as a writer are on giddy and unapologetic display: his superb facility for writing dialogue; his willingness to be shockingly, entertainingly dirty on matters of sex; and his terrific and terrifying sense of humour. I was completely absorbed’

CURTIS SITTENFELD, *Observer*

‘In this stupendous, magnificent, unforgettable novel, family has never seemed a more urgent and gripping subject. Witty and rich ... bold and sage and moving’

PHILIP HENSHER, *Spectator*

‘Franzen is an extremely sharp, witty and exciting writer, with a sense of ambition that harks back to the golden age, a time before good novels weren’t popular, and popular novels weren’t good’

CRAIG BROWN, *Daily Mail*

‘Enormously readable and totally convincing’

PHILIP ZIEGLER, *Spectator*, Books of the Year

‘A great novel about America. Rarely has the land of the free been scrutinised with such a sharp but loving eye’

ROBERT DOUGLAS-FAIRHURST, *Daily Telegraph*, Books of the Year

‘A cat’s cradle of family life, and if the measure of a good book is its afterburn, *Freedom* is a great book’

KIRSTY WARK, *Observer*, Books of the Year

‘A portrait of a world poised on the brink of combustion, and a nation losing its superpowers, shot through the viewfinder of one long, difficult (are there any other sort?) marriage’

RACHEL JOHNSON, *Evening Standard*, Books of the Year

‘It had me absolutely hooked’

MARK WATSON, *Observer*, Books of the Year

‘His most deeply felt novel yet—a novel that turns out to be both a compelling biography of a dysfunctional family and an indelible portrait of our times’

MICHIKO KAKUTANI, *New York Times*

‘*Freedom* is full of brilliances of description, spot-on dialogue and characters caught with deadly accuracy’

PETER KEMP, *Sunday Times*

‘An extraordinary stylist. In dialogue that conveys each palpitation of the heart, every wince of the conscience ... Franzen conveys his psychological acuity’

RON CHARLES, *Washington Post*

Dedication

To Susan Golomb and Jonathan Galassi

Epigraph

Go together,

You precious winners all; your exultation

Partake to everyone. I, an old turtle,

Will wing me to some withered bough, and there

My mate, that’s never to be found again,

Lament till I am lost.

— *The Winter’s Tale*

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GOOD NEIGHBORS

The news about Walter Berglund wasn’t picked up locally—he and Patty had moved away to Washington two years earlier and meant nothing to St. Paul now—but the urban gentry of Ramsey Hill were not so loyal to their city as not to read the *New York Times*. According to a long and very unflattering story in the *Times*, Walter had made quite a mess of his professional life out there in the nation’s capital. His old neighbors had some difficulty reconciling the quotes about him in the *Times* (“arrogant,” “high-handed,” “ethically compromised”) with the generous, smiling, red-faced 3M employee they remembered pedaling his commuter bicycle up Summit Avenue in February snow; it seemed strange that Walter, who was greener than Greenpeace and whose own roots were rural, should be in trouble now for conniving with the coal industry and mistreating country people. Then again, there had always been something not quite right about the Berglunds.

Walter and Patty were the young pioneers of Ramsey Hill—the first college grads to buy a house on Barrier Street since the old heart of St. Paul had fallen on hard times three decades earlier. They paid nothing for their Victorian and then killed themselves for ten years renovating it. Early on, some very determined person torched their garage and twice broke into their car before they got the garage rebuilt. Sunburned bikers descended on the vacant lot across the alley to drink Schlitz and grill knockwurst and rev engines at small hours until Patty went outside in sweatclothes and said, “Hey, you guys, you know what?” Patty frightened nobody, but she’d been a standout athlete in high school and college and possessed a jock sort of fearlessness. From her first day in the neighborhood, she was helplessly conspicuous. Tall, ponytailed, absurdly young, pushing a stroller past stripped cars and broken beer bottles and barfed-upon old snow, she might have been carrying all the hours of her day in the string bags that hung from her stroller. Behind her you could see the baby-encumbered preparations for a morning of baby-encumbered errands; ahead of her, an afternoon of public radio, the *Silver Palate Cookbook*, cloth diapers, drywall compound, and latex paint; and then *Goodnight Moon*, then zinfandel. She was already fully the thing that was just starting to happen to the rest of the street.

In the earliest years, when you could still drive a Volvo 240 without feeling self-conscious, the collective task in Ramsey Hill was to relearn certain life skills that your own parents had fled to the suburbs specifically to unlearn, like how to interest the local cops in actually doing their job, and how to protect a bike from a highly motivated thief, and when to bother rousting a drunk from your lawn furniture, and how to encourage feral cats to shit in somebody else’s children’s sandbox, and how to determine whether a public school sucked too much to bother trying to fix it. There were also more contemporary questions, like, what about those cloth diapers? Worth the bother? And was it true that you could still get milk delivered in glass bottles? Were the Boy Scouts OK politically? Was bulgur really necessary? Where to recycle batteries? How to respond when a poor person of color accused you of destroying her neighborhood? Was it true that the glaze of old Fiestaware contained dangerous amounts of lead? How elaborate did a kitchen water filter actually need to be? Did your 240 sometimes not go into overdrive when you pushed the overdrive button? Was it better to offer panhandlers food, or nothing? Was it possible to raise unprecedentedly confident, happy, brilliant kids while working full-time? Could coffee beans be ground the night before you used them, or did this have to be done in the morning? Had anybody in the history of St. Paul ever had a positive experience with a roofer? What about a good Volvo mechanic? Did your 240 have that problem with the sticky parking-brake cable? And that enigmatically labeled dashboard switch that made such a satisfying Swedish click but seemed not to be connected to anything: what *was* that?

For all queries, Patty Berglund was a resource, a sunny carrier of sociocultural pollen, an affable bee. She was one of the few stay-at-home moms in Ramsey Hill and was famously averse to speaking well of herself or ill of anybody else. She said she expected to be “beheaded” someday by one of the windows whose sash chains she’d replaced. Her children were “probably” dying of trichinosis from pork she’d undercooked. She wondered if her “addiction” to paint-stripper fumes might be related to her “never” reading books anymore. She confided that she’d been “forbidden” to fertilize Walter’s flowers after what had happened “last time.” There were people with whom her style of self-deprecation didn’t sit well—who detected a kind of condescension in it, as if Patty, in exaggerating her own minor defects, were too obviously trying to spare the feelings of less accomplished homemakers. But most people found her humility sincere or at least amusing, and it was in any case hard to resist a woman whom your own children liked so much and who remembered not only their birthdays but yours, too, and came to your back door with a plate of cookies or a card or some lilies of the valley in a little thrift-store vase that she told you not to bother returning.

It was known that Patty had grown up back East, in a suburb of New York City, and had received one of the first women’s full scholarships to play basketball at Minnesota, where, in her sophomore year, according to a plaque on the wall of Walter’s home office, she’d made second-team

all-American. One strange thing about Patty, given her strong family orientation, was that she had no discernible connection to her roots. Whole seasons passed without her setting foot outside St. Paul, and it wasn't clear that anybody from the East, not even her parents, had ever come out to visit. If you inquired point-blank about the parents, she would answer that the two of them did a lot of good things for a lot of people, her dad had a law practice in White Plains, her mom was a politician, yeah, a New York State assemblywoman. Then she would nod emphatically and say, "Yeah, so, that's what they do," as if the topic had been exhausted.

A game could be made of trying to get Patty to agree that somebody's behavior was "bad." When she was told that Seth and Merrie Paulsen were throwing a big Halloween party for their twins and had deliberately invited every child on the block except Connie Monaghan, Patty would only say that this was very "weird." The next time she saw the Paulsens in the street, they explained that they had tried *all summer* to get Connie Monaghan's mother, Carol, to stop flicking cigarette butts from her bedroom window down into their twins' little wading pool. "That is really weird," Patty agreed, shaking her head, "but, you know, it's not Connie's fault." The Paulsens, however, refused to be satisfied with "weird." They wanted *sociopathic*, they wanted *passive-aggressive*, they wanted *bad*. They needed Patty to select one of these epithets and join them in applying it to Carol Monaghan, but Patty was incapable of going past "weird," and the Paulsens in turn refused to add Connie to their invite list. Patty was angry enough about this injustice to take her own kids, plus Connie and a school friend, out to a pumpkin farm and a hayride on the afternoon of the party, but the worst she would say aloud about the Paulsens was that their meanness to a seven-year-old girl was very weird.

Carol Monaghan was the only other mother on Barrier Street who'd been around as long as Patty. She'd come to Ramsey Hill on what you might call a patronage-exchange program, having been a secretary to somebody high-level in Hennepin County who moved her out of his district after he'd made her pregnant. Keeping the mother of your illegitimate child on your own office payroll: by the late seventies, there were no longer so many Twin Cities jurisdictions where this was considered consonant with good government. Carol became one of those distracted, break-taking clerks at the city license bureau while somebody equivalently well-connected in St. Paul was hired in reverse across the river. The rental house on Barrier Street, next door to the Berglunds, had presumably been included in the deal; otherwise it was hard to see why Carol would have consented to live in what was then still basically a slum. Once a week, in summer, an empty-eyed kid in a Parks Department jumpsuit came by at dusk in an unmarked 4x4 and ran a mower around her lawn, and in winter the same kid materialized to snow-blow her sidewalk.

By the late eighties, Carol was the only non-gentrifier left on the block. She smoked Parliaments, bleached her hair, made lurid talons of her nails, fed her daughter heavily processed foods, and came home very late on Thursday nights ("That's Mom's night out," she explained, as if every mom had one), quietly letting herself into the Berglunds' house with the key they'd given her and collecting the sleeping Connie from the sofa where Patty had tucked her under blankets. Patty had been implacably generous in offering to look after Connie while Carol was out working or shopping or doing her Thursday-night business, and Carol had become dependent on her for a ton of free babysitting. It couldn't have escaped Patty's attention that Carol repaid this generosity by ignoring Patty's own daughter, Jessica, and doting inappropriately on her son, Joey ("How about another smooch from the lady-killer?"), and standing very close to Walter at neighborhood functions, in her filmy blouses and her cocktail-waitress heels, praising Walter's home-improvement prowess and shrieking with laughter at everything he said; but for many years the worst that Patty would say of Carol was that single moms had a hard life and if Carol was sometimes weird to her it was probably just to save her pride.

To Seth Paulsen, who talked about Patty a little too often for his wife's taste, the Berglunds were the super-guilty sort of liberals who needed to forgive everybody so their own good fortune could be forgiven; who lacked the courage of their privilege. One problem with Seth's theory was

that the Berglunds weren't all that privileged; their only known asset was their house, which they'd rebuilt with their own hands. Another problem, as Merrie Paulsen pointed out, was that Patty was no great progressive and certainly no feminist (staying home with her birthday calendar, baking those goddamned birthday cookies) and seemed altogether allergic to politics. If you mentioned an election or a candidate to her, you could see her struggling and failing to be her usual cheerful self—see her becoming agitated and doing too much nodding, too much yeah-yeahing. Merrie, who was ten years older than Patty and looked every year of it, had formerly been active with the SDS in Madison and was now very active in the craze for Beaujolais nouveau. When Seth, at a dinner party, mentioned Patty for the third or fourth time, Merrie went nouveau red in the face and declared that there was *no* larger consciousness, *no* solidarity, *no* political substance, *no* fungible structure, *no* true communitarianism in Patty Berglund's supposed neighborliness, it was all just regressive housewifely bullshit, and, frankly, in Merrie's opinion, if you were to scratch below the nicey-nice surface you might be surprised to find something rather hard and selfish and competitive and Reaganite in Patty; it was obvious that the only things that mattered to her were her children and her house—not her neighbors, *not* the poor, *not* her country, *not* her parents, not even her own husband.

And Patty was undeniably very into her son. Though Jessica was the more obvious credit to her parents—smitten with books, devoted to wildlife, talented at flute, stalwart on the soccer field, coveted as a babysitter, not so pretty as to be morally deformed by it, admired even by Merrie Paulsen—Joey was the child Patty could not shut up about. In her chuckling, confiding, self-deprecating way, she spilled out barrel after barrel of unfiltered detail about her and Walter's difficulties with him. Most of her stories took the form of complaints, and yet nobody doubted that she adored the boy. She was like a woman bemoaning her gorgeous jerky boyfriend. As if she were proud of having her heart trampled by him: as if her openness to this trampling were the main thing, maybe the only thing, she cared to have the world know about.

"He is being such a little shit," she told the other mothers during the long winter of the Bedtime Wars, when Joey was asserting his right to stay awake as late as Patty and Walter did.

"Is it tantrums? Is he crying?" the other mothers asked.

"Are you kidding?" Patty said. "I *wish* he cried. Crying would be normal, and it would also stop."

"What's he doing, then?" the mothers asked.

"He's questioning the basis of our authority. We make him turn the lights out, but his position is that he shouldn't have to go to sleep until we turn our own lights out, because he's exactly the same as us. And, I swear to God, it is like clockwork, every fifteen minutes, I swear he's lying there staring at his alarm clock, every fifteen minutes he calls out, 'Still awake! I'm still awake!' In this tone of *contempt*, or sarcasm, it's *weird*. And I'm begging Walter not to take the bait, but, no, it's a quarter of midnight again, and Walter is standing in the dark in Joey's room and they're having another argument about the difference between adults and children, and whether a family is a democracy or a benevolent dictatorship, until finally it's *me* who's having the meltdown, you know, lying there in bed, whimpering, 'Please stop, please stop.'"

Merrie Paulsen wasn't entertained by Patty's storytelling. Late in the evening, loading dinner-party dishes into the dishwasher, she remarked to Seth that it was hardly surprising that Joey should be confused about the distinction between children and adults—his own mother seemed to suffer from some confusion about which of the two she was. Had Seth noticed how, in Patty's stories, the discipline always came from Walter, as if Patty were just some feckless bystander whose job was to be cute?

"I wonder if she's actually in love with Walter, or not," Seth mused optimistically, uncorking a final bottle. "Physically, I mean."

"The subtext is always 'My son is extraordinary,'" Merrie said. "She's always complaining about the length of his attention span."

“Well, to be fair,” Seth said, “it’s in the context of his stubbornness. His infinite patience in defying Walter’s authority.”

“Every word she says about him is some kind of backhanded brag.”

“Don’t *you* ever brag?” Seth teased.

“Probably,” Merrie said, “but at least I have some minimal awareness of how I sound to other people. And my sense of self-worth is not bound up in how extraordinary our kids are.”

“You are the perfect mom,” Seth teased.

“No, that would be Patty,” Merrie said, accepting more wine. “I’m merely very good.”

Things came, Patty complained, too easily to Joey. He was golden-haired and pretty and seemed innately to possess the answers to every test a school could give him, as though multiple-choice sequences of As and Bs and Cs and Ds were encoded in his very DNA. He was uncannily at ease with neighbors five times his age. When his school or his Cub Scout pack forced him to sell candy bars or raffle tickets door to door, he was frank about the “scam” that he was running. He perfected a highly annoying smile of condescension when faced with toys or games that other boys owned but Patty and Walter refused to buy him. To extinguish this smile, his friends insisted on sharing what they had, and so he became a crack video gamer even though his parents didn’t believe in video games; he developed an encyclopedic familiarity with the urban music that his parents were at pains to protect his preteen ears from. He was no older than eleven or twelve when, at the dinner table, according to Patty, he accidentally or deliberately called his father “son.”

“Oh-ho did that not go over well with Walter,” she told the other mothers.

“That’s how the teenagers all talk to each other now,” the mothers said. “It’s a rap thing.”

“That’s what Joey said,” Patty told them. “He said it was just a word and not even a bad word. And of course Walter begged to differ. And I’m sitting there thinking, ‘Wal-ter, Wal-ter, don’t-get into-it, point-less to argue,’ but, no, he has to try to explain how, for example, even though ‘boy’ is not a bad word, you still can’t say it to a grown man, especially not to a black man, but, of course, the whole problem with Joey is he refuses to recognize any distinction between children and grownups, and so it ends with Walter saying there won’t be any dessert for him, which Joey then claims he doesn’t even want, in fact he doesn’t even *like* dessert very much, and I’m sitting there thinking, ‘Wal-ter, Wal-ter, don’t-get into-it,’ but Walter can’t help it—he has to try to *prove* to Joey that in fact Joey really *loves* dessert. But Joey won’t accept any of Walter’s evidence. He’s totally lying through his teeth, of course, but he claims he’s only ever taken seconds of dessert because it’s conventional to, not because he actually likes it, and poor Walter, who can’t stand to be lied to, says, ‘OK, if you don’t like it, then how about a *month* without dessert?’ and I’m thinking, ‘Oh, Wal-ter, Wal-ter, this-isn’t going-to end-well,’ because Joey’s response is, ‘I will go a *year* without dessert, I will never eat dessert *again*, except to be polite at somebody else’s house,’ which, bizarrely enough, is a credible threat—he’s so stubborn he could probably do it. And I’m like, ‘Whoa, guys, time-out, dessert is an important food group, let’s not get carried away here,’ which immediately undercuts Walter’s authority, and since the whole argument has been about his authority, I manage to undo anything positive he’s accomplished.”

The other person who loved Joey inordinately was the Monaghan girl, Connie. She was a grave and silent little person with the disconcerting habit of holding your gaze unblinkingly, as if you had nothing in common. She was an afternoon fixture in Patty’s kitchen, laboring to mold cookie dough into geometrically perfect spheres, taking such pains that the butter liquefied and made the dough glisten darkly. Patty formed eleven balls for every one of Connie’s, and when they came out of the oven Patty never failed to ask Connie’s permission to eat the one “truly outstanding” (smaller, flatter, harder) cookie. Jessica, who was a year older than Connie, seemed content to cede the kitchen to the neighbor girl while she read books or played with her terrariums. Connie posed no kind of threat to somebody as well rounded as Jessica. Connie had no notion of wholeness—was all depth and no breadth. When she was coloring, she got lost in saturating one or two areas with a felt-tip pen, leaving the rest blank and ignoring Patty’s cheerful urgings to try some other colors.

Connie's intensive focus on Joey was evident early on to every local mother except, seemingly, Patty, perhaps because Patty herself was so focused on him. At Linwood Park, where Patty sometimes organized athletics for the kids, Connie sat by herself on the grass and fashioned clover-flower rings for nobody, letting the minutes stream past her until Joey took his turn at bat or moved the soccer ball down the field and quickened her interest momentarily. She was like an imaginary friend who happened to be visible. Joey, in his precocious self-mastery, seldom found it necessary to be mean to her in front of his friends, and Connie, for her part, whenever it became clear that the boys were going off to be boys, knew enough to fall back and dematerialize without reproach or entreaty. There was always tomorrow. For a long time, there was also always Patty, down on her knees among her vegetables or up on a ladder in a spattered wool shirt, attending to the Sisyphean work of Victorian paint maintenance. If Connie couldn't be near Joey she could at least be useful to him by keeping his mother company in his absence. "What's the homework situation?" Patty would ask her from the ladder. "Do you want some help?"

"My mom's going to help me when she gets home."

"She's going to be tired, it's going to be late. You could surprise her and get it done right now. You want to do that?"

"No, I'll wait."

When exactly Connie and Joey started fucking wasn't known. Seth Paulsen, without evidence, simply to upset people, enjoyed opining that Joey had been eleven and Connie twelve. Seth's speculation centered on the privacy afforded by a tree fort that Walter had helped Joey build in an ancient crab apple in the vacant lot. By the time Joey finished eighth grade, his name was turning up in the neighbor boys' replies to strenuously casual parental inquiries about the sexual behavior of their schoolmates, and it later seemed probable that Jessica had been aware of something by the end of that summer—suddenly, without saying why, she became strikingly disdainful of both Connie and her brother. But nobody ever saw them actually hanging out by themselves until the following winter, when the two of them went into business together.

According to Patty, the lesson that Joey had learned from his incessant arguments with Walter was that children were compelled to obey parents because parents had the money. It became yet another example of Joey's extraordinariness: while the other mothers lamented the sense of entitlement with which their kids demanded cash, Patty did laughing caricatures of Joey's chagrin at having to beg Walter for funds. Neighbors who hired Joey knew him to be a surprisingly industrious shoveler of snow and raker of leaves, but Patty said that he secretly hated the low wages and felt that shoveling an adult's driveway put him in an undesirable relation to the adult. The ridiculous moneymaking schemes suggested in Scouting publications—selling magazine subscriptions door to door, learning magic tricks and charging admission to magic shows, acquiring the tools of taxidermy and stuffing your neighbors' prizewinning walleyes—all similarly reeked either of vassalage ("I am taxidermist to the ruling class") or, worse, of charity. And so, inevitably, in his quest to liberate himself from Walter, he was drawn to entrepreneurship.

Somebody, maybe even Carol Monaghan herself, was paying Connie's tuition at a small Catholic academy, St. Catherine's, where the girls wore uniforms and were forbidden all jewelry except one ring ("simple, all-metal"), one watch ("simple, no jewels"), and two earrings ("simple, all-metal, half-inch maximum in size"). It happened that one of the popular ninth-grade girls at Joey's own school, Central High, had come home from a family trip to New York City with a cheap watch, widely admired at lunch hour, in whose chewable-looking yellow band a Canal Street vendor had thermo-embedded tiny candy-pink plastic letters spelling out a Pearl Jam lyric, DON'T CALL ME DAUGHTER, at the girl's request. As Joey himself would later recount in his college-application essays, he had immediately taken the initiative to research the wholesale source of this watch and the price of a thermo-embedding press. He'd invested four hundred dollars of his own savings in equipment, had made Connie a sample plastic band (READY FOR THE PUSH, it said) to flash at

St. Catherine's, and then, employing Connie as a courier, had sold personalized watches to fully a quarter of her schoolmates, at thirty dollars each, before the nuns wised up and amended the dress code to forbid watchbands with embedded text. Which, of course—as Patty told the other mothers—struck Joey as an outrage.

"It's not an outrage," Walter told him. "You were benefiting from an artificial restraint of trade. I didn't notice you complaining about the rules when they were working in your favor."

"I made an investment. I took a risk."

"You were exploiting a loophole, and they closed the loophole. Couldn't you see that coming?"

"Well, why didn't you warn me?"

"I did warn you."

"You just warned me I could lose money."

"Well, and you didn't even lose money. You just didn't make as much as you hoped."

"It's still money I should have had."

"Joey, making money is not a *right*. You're selling junk those girls don't really need and some of them probably can't even afford. That's why Connie's school has a dress code—to be fair to everybody."

"Right—everybody but *me*."

From the way Patty reported this conversation, laughing at Joey's innocent indignation, it was clear to Merrie Paulsen that Patty still had no inkling of what her son was doing with Connie Monaghan. To be sure of it, Merrie probed a little. What did Patty suppose Connie had been getting for her trouble? Was she working on commission?

"Oh, yeah, we told him he had to give her half his profits," Patty said. "But he would've done that anyway. He's always been protective of her, even though he's younger."

"He's like a brother to her ..."

"No, actually," Patty joked, "he's a lot nicer to her than that. You can ask Jessica what it's like to be his sibling."

"Ha, right, ha ha," Merrie said.

To Seth, later that day, Merrie reported, "It's amazing, she truly has no idea."

"I think it's a mistake," Seth said, "to take pleasure in a fellow parent's ignorance. It's tempting fate, don't you think?"

"I'm sorry, it's just too funny and delicious. You'll have to do the non-gloating for the two of us and keep our fate at bay."

"I feel bad for her."

"Well, forgive me, but I'm finding it hilarious."

Toward the end of that winter, in Grand Rapids, Walter's mother collapsed with a pulmonary embolism on the floor of the ladies' dress shop where she worked. Barrier Street knew Mrs. Berglund from her visits at Christmastime, on the children's birthdays, and on her own birthday, for which Patty always took her to a local masseuse and plied her with licorice and macadamia nuts and white chocolate, her favorite treats. Merrie Paulsen referred to her, not unkindly, as "Miss Bianca," after the bespectacled mouse matron in the children's books by Margery Sharp. She had a crepey, once-pretty face and tremors in her jaw and her hands, one of which had been badly withered by childhood arthritis. She'd been worn out, physically wrecked, Walter said bitterly, by a lifetime of hard labor for his drunk of a dad, at the roadside motel they'd operated near Hibbing, but she was determined to remain independent and look elegant in her widowed years, and so she kept driving her old Chevy Cavalier to the dress shop. At the news of her collapse, Patty and Walter hurried up north, leaving Joey to be supervised by his disdainful older sister. It was soon after the ensuing teen fuckfestival, which Joey conducted in his bedroom in open defiance of Jessica, and which ended only with the sudden death and funeral of Mrs. Berglund, that Patty became a very different kind of neighbor, a much more sarcastic neighbor.

“Oh, Connie, yes,” her tune went now, “such a nice little girl, such a quiet little harmless girl, with such a sterling mom. You know, I hear Carol has a new boyfriend, a real studly man, he’s like half her age. Wouldn’t it be terrible if they moved away now, with everything Carol’s done to brighten our lives? And Connie, wow, I’d sure miss her too. Ha ha. So quiet and nice and grateful.”

Patty was looking a mess, gray-faced, poorly slept, underfed. It had taken her an awfully long time to start looking her age, but now at last Merrie Paulsen had been rewarded in her wait for it to happen.

“Safe to say she’s figured it out,” Merrie said to Seth.

“Theft of her cub—the ultimate crime,” Seth said.

“Theft, exactly,” Merrie said. “Poor innocent blameless Joey, stolen away by that little intellectual powerhouse next door.”

“Well, she is a year and a half older.”

“Calendrically.”

“Say what you will,” Seth said, “but Patty really loved Walter’s mom. She’s got to be hurting.”

“Oh, I know, I know. Seth, I know. And now I can honestly be sad for her.”

Neighbors who were closer to the Berglunds than the Paulsens reported that Miss Bianca had left her little mouse house, on a minor lake near Grand Rapids, exclusively to Walter and not to his two brothers. There was said to be disagreement between Walter and Patty about how to handle this, Walter wanting to sell the house and share the proceeds with his brothers, Patty insisting that he honor his mother’s wish to reward him for being the good son. The younger brother was career military and lived in the Mojave, at the Air Force base there, while the older brother had spent his adult life advancing their father’s program of drinking immoderately, exploiting their mother financially, and otherwise neglecting her. Walter and Patty had always taken the kids to his mother’s for a week or two in the summer, often bringing along one or two of Jessica’s neighborhood friends, who described the property as rustic and woodsy and not too terrible bugwise. As a kindness, perhaps, to Patty, who appeared to be doing some immoderate drinking of her own—her complexion in the morning, when she came out to collect the blue-wrapped *New York Times* and the green-wrapped *Star-Tribune* from her front walk, was all Chardonnay Splotch—Walter eventually agreed to keep the house as a vacation place, and in June, as soon as school let out, Patty took Joey up north to help her empty drawers and clean and repaint while Jessica stayed home with Walter and took an enrichment class in poetry.

Several neighbors, the Paulsens not among them, brought their boys for visits to the lakeside house that summer. They found Patty in much better spirits. One father privately invited Seth Paulsen to imagine her suntanned and barefoot, in a black one-piece bathing suit and beltless jeans, a look very much to Seth’s taste. Publicly, everyone remarked on how attentive and unsullen Joey was, and what a good time he and Patty seemed to be having. The two of them made all visitors join them in a complicated parlor game they called Associations. Patty stayed up late in front of her mother-in-law’s TV console, amusing Joey with her intricate knowledge of syndicated sixties and seventies sitcoms. Joey, having discovered that their lake was unidentified on local maps—it was really just a large pond, with one other house on it—had christened it Nameless, and Patty pronounced the name tenderly, sentimentally, “our Nameless Lake.” When Seth Paulsen learned from one of the returning fathers that Joey was working long hours up there, cleaning gutters and cutting brush and scraping paint, he wondered whether Patty might be paying Joey a solid wage for his services, whether this might be part of the deal. But nobody could say.

As for Connie, the Paulsens could hardly look out a Monaghan-side window without seeing her waiting. She really was a very patient girl, she had the metabolism of a fish in winter. She worked evenings busing tables at W. A. Frost, but all afternoon on weekdays she sat waiting on her front stoop while ice-cream trucks went by and younger children played, and on weekends she sat in a lawn chair behind the house, glancing occasionally at the loud, violent, haphazard tree-removal and construction

work that her mother's new boyfriend, Blake, had undertaken with his non-unionized buddies from the building trades, but mostly just waiting.

"So, Connie, what's interesting in your life these days?" Seth asked her from the alley.

"You mean, apart from Blake?"

"Yes, apart from Blake."

Connie considered briefly and then shook her head. "Nothing," she said.

"Are you bored?"

"Not really."

"Going to movies? Reading books?"

Connie fixed Seth with her steady, we-have-nothing-in-common gaze. "I saw *Batman*."

"What about Joey? You guys have been pretty tight, I bet you're missing him."

"He'll be back," she said.

Once the old cigarette-butt issue had been resolved—Seth and Merrie admitted to having possibly exaggerated the summerlong tally of butts in the wading pool; to having possibly overreacted—they'd discovered in Carol Monaghan a rich source of lore about local Democratic politics, which Merrie was getting more involved with. Carol matter-of-factly told hair-raising stories of the unclean machine, of buried pipelines of slush, of rigged bids, of permeable firewalls, of interesting math, and got a kick out of Merrie's horror. Merrie came to cherish Carol as a fleshly exemplum of the civic corruption Merrie intended to combat. The great thing about Carol was that she never seemed to change—kept tarting up on Thursday evenings for whoever, year after year after year, keeping alive the patriarchal tradition in urban politics.

And then, one day, she did change. There was already quite a bit of this going around. The city's mayor, Norm Coleman, had morphed into a Republican, and a former pro wrestler was headed toward the governor's mansion. The catalyst in Carol's case was the new boyfriend, Blake, a goateed young backhoe operator she'd met across the counter at the license bureau, and for whom she dramatically changed her look. Out went the complicated hair and escort-service dresses, in came snug pants, a simple shag cut, and less makeup. A Carol nobody had ever seen, an actually happy Carol, hopped buoyantly from Blake's F-250 pickup, letting anthem rock throb up and down the street, and slammed the passenger-side door with a mighty push. Soon Blake began spending nights at her house, shuffling around in a Vikings jersey with his work boots unlaced and a beer can in his fist, and before long he was chainsawing every tree in her back yard and running wild with a rented backhoe. On the bumper of his truck were the words I'M WHITE AND I VOTE.

The Paulsens, having recently completed a protracted renovation of their own, were reluctant to complain about the noise and mess, and Walter, on the other side, was too nice or too busy, but when Patty finally came home, late in August, after her months in the country with Joey, she was practically unhinged in her dismay, going up and down the street, door to door, wild-eyed, to vilify Carol Monaghan. "Excuse me," she said, "what happened here? Can somebody tell me what happened? Did somebody declare war on trees without telling me? Who is this Paul Bunyan with the truck? What's the story? Is she not renting anymore? Are you allowed to annihilate the trees if you're just renting? How can you tear the back wall off a house you don't even own? Did she somehow buy the place without our knowing it? How could she do that? She can't even change a lightbulb without calling up my husband! 'Sorry to bother you at the dinner hour, Walter, but when I flip this light switch nothing happens. Do you mind coming over right away? And while you're here, hon, can you help me with my taxes? They're due tomorrow and my nails are wet.' How could this person get a mortgage? Doesn't she have Victoria's Secret bills to pay? How is she even allowed to have a boyfriend? Isn't there some fat guy over in Minneapolis? Shouldn't somebody maybe get the word out to the fat guy?"

Not until Patty reached the door of the Paulsens, far down on her list of go-to neighbors, did she get some answers. Merrie explained that Carol Monaghan was, in fact, no longer renting. Carol's

house had been one of several hundred that the city housing authority had come to own during the blight years and was now selling off at bargain prices.

“How did I not know this?” Patty said.

“You never asked,” Merrie said. And couldn’t resist adding: “You never seemed particularly interested in government.”

“And you say she got it cheap.”

“Very cheap. It helps to know the right people.”

“How do *you* feel about that?”

“I think it sucks, both fiscally and philosophically,” Merrie said. “That’s one reason I’m working with Jim Schiebel.”

“You know, I always loved this neighborhood,” Patty said. “I loved living here, even at the beginning. And now suddenly everything looks so dirty and ugly to me.”

“Don’t get depressed, get involved,” Merrie said, and gave her some literature.

“I wouldn’t want to be Walter right now,” Seth remarked as soon as Patty was gone.

“I’m frankly glad to hear that,” Merrie said.

“Was it just me, or did you hear an undertone of marital discontent? I mean, helping Carol with her taxes? You know anything about that? I thought that was very interesting. I hadn’t heard about that. And now he’s failed to protect their pretty view of Carol’s trees.”

“The whole thing is so Reaganite-regressive,” Merrie said. “She thought she could live in her own little bubble, make her own little world. Her own little dollhouse.”

The add-on structure that rose out of Carol’s back-yard mud pit, weekend by weekend over the next nine months, was like a giant utilitarian boat shed with three plain windows punctuating its expanses of vinyl siding. Carol and Blake referred to it as a “great-room,” a concept hitherto foreign to Ramsey Hill. Following the cigarette-butt controversy, the Paulsens had installed a high fence and planted a line of ornamental spruces that had since grown up enough to screen them from the spectacle. Only the Berglunds’ sight lines were unobstructed, and before long the other neighbors were avoiding conversation with Patty, as they never had before, because of her fixation on what she called “the hangar.” They waved from the street and called out hellos but were careful not to slow down and get sucked in. The consensus among the working mothers was that Patty had too much time on her hands. In the old days, she’d been great with the little kids, teaching them sports and domestic arts, but now most of the kids on the street were teenagers. No matter how she tried to fill her days, she was always within sight or earshot of the work next door. Every few hours, she emerged from her house and paced up and down her back yard, peering over at the great-room like an animal whose nest had been disturbed, and sometimes in the evening she went knocking on the great-room’s temporary plywood door.

“Hey, Blake, how’s it going?”

“Going just fine.”

“Sounds like it! Hey, you know what, that Skilsaw’s pretty loud for eight-thirty at night. How would you feel about knocking off for the day?”

“Not too good, actually.”

“Well, how about if I just ask you to stop, then?”

“I don’t know. How about you letting me get my work done?”

“I’d actually feel pretty bad about that, because the noise is really bothering us.”

“Yeah, well, you know what? Too bad.”

Patty had a loud, involuntary, whinnylike laugh. “Ha-ha-ha! Too bad?”

“Yeah, listen, I’m sorry about the noise. But Carol says there was about five years of noise coming out of your place when you were fixing it up.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I don’t remember her complaining.”

“You were doing what you had to do. Now I’m doing what I have to do.”

“What you’re doing is really ugly, though. I’m sorry, but it’s kind of hideous. Just—horrible and hideous. Honestly. As a matter of pure fact. Not that that’s really the issue. The issue is the Skilsaw.”

“You’re on private property and you need to leave now.”

“OK, so I guess I’ll be calling the cops.”

“That’s fine, go ahead.”

You could see her pacing in the alley then, trembling with frustration. She did repeatedly call the police about the noise, and a few times they actually came and had a word with Blake, but they soon got tired of hearing from her and did not come back until the following February, when somebody slashed all four of the beautiful new snow tires on Blake’s F-250 and Blake and Carol directed officers to the next-door neighbor who’d been phoning in so many complaints. This resulted in Patty again going up and down the street, knocking on doors, ranting. “The obvious suspect, right? The mom next door with a couple of teenage kids. Hard-core criminal me, right? Lunatic me! He’s got the biggest, ugliest vehicle on the street, he’s got bumper stickers that offend pretty much anybody who’s not a white supremacist, but, God, what a mystery, who else but me could want to slash his tires?”

Merrie Paulsen was convinced that Patty was, in fact, the slasher.

“I don’t see it,” Seth said. “I mean, she’s obviously suffering, but she’s not a liar.”

“Right, except I didn’t actually notice her saying she didn’t do it. You have to hope she’s getting good therapy somewhere. She sure could use it. That and a full-time job.”

“My question is, where is Walter?”

“Walter is killing himself earning his salary so she can stay home all day and be a mad housewife. He’s being a good dad to Jessica and some sort of reality principle to Joey. I’d say he has his hands full.”

Walter’s most salient quality, besides his love of Patty, was his niceness. He was the sort of good listener who seemed to find everybody else more interesting and impressive than himself. He was preposterously fair-skinned, weak in the chin, cherubically curly up top, and had worn the same round wireframes forever. He’d begun his career at 3M as an attorney in the counsel’s office, but he’d failed to thrive there and was shunted into outreach and philanthropy, a corporate cul-de-sac where niceness was an asset. On Barrier Street he was always handing out great free tickets to the Guthrie and the Chamber Orchestra and telling neighbors about encounters he’d had with famous locals such as Garrison Keillor and Kirby Puckett and, once, Prince. More recently, and surprisingly, he’d left 3M altogether and become a development officer for the Nature Conservancy. Nobody except the Paulsens had suspected him of harboring such reserves of discontent, but Walter was no less enthusiastic about nature than he was about culture, and the only outward change in his life was his new scarcity at home on weekends.

This scarcity may have been one reason he didn’t intervene, as he might have been expected to, in Patty’s battle with Carol Monaghan. His response, if you asked him point-blank about it, was to giggle nervously. “I’m kind of a neutral bystander on that one,” he said. And a neutral bystander he remained all through the spring and summer of Joey’s sophomore year and into the following fall, when Jessica went off to college in the East and Joey moved out of his parents’ house and in with Carol, Blake, and Connie.

The move was a stunning act of sedition and a dagger to Patty’s heart—the beginning of the end of her life in Ramsey Hill. Joey had spent July and August in Montana, working on the high-country ranch of one of Walter’s major Nature Conservancy donors, and had returned with broad, manly shoulders and two new inches of height. Walter, who didn’t ordinarily brag, had vouchsafed to the Paulsens, at a picnic in August, that the donor had called him up to say how “blown away” he was by Joey’s fearlessness and tirelessness in throwing calves and dipping sheep. Patty, however, at the same picnic, was already vacant-eyed with pain. In June, before Joey went to Montana, she’d again taken him up to Nameless Lake to help her improve the property, and the only neighbor who’d seen them there described a terrible afternoon of watching mother and son lacerate each other over

and over, airing it all in plain sight, Joey mocking Patty's mannerisms and finally calling her "stupid" to her face, at which Patty had cried out, "Ha-ha-ha! Stupid! God, Joey! Your maturity just never ceases to amaze me! Calling your mother stupid in front of other people! That's just so attractive in a person! What a big, tough, independent man you are!"

By summer's end, Blake had nearly finished work on the great-room and was outfitting it with such Blakean gear as PlayStation, Foosball, a refrigerated beer keg, a large-screen TV, an air-hockey table, a stained-glass Vikings chandelier, and mechanized recliners. Neighbors were left to imagine Patty's dinner-table sarcasm regarding these amenities, and Joey's declarations that she was being stupid and unfair, and Walter's angry demands that Joey apologize to Patty, but the night when Joey defected to the house next door didn't need to be imagined, because Carol Monaghan was happy to describe it, in a loud and somewhat gloating voice, to any neighbor sufficiently disloyal to the Berglunds to listen to her.

"Joey was *so* calm, *so* calm," Carol said. "I swear to God, you couldn't melt butter in his mouth. I went over there with Connie to support him and let everybody know I'm totally in favor of the arrangement, because, you know Walter, he's so considerate, he's going to worry it's an imposition on me. And Joey was totally responsible like always. He just wanted to be on the same page and make sure all the cards are on the table. He explained how he and Connie had discussed things with me, and I told Walter—because I knew he'd be concerned about this—I told him groceries were not a problem. Blake and I are a family now and we're happy to feed one more, and Joey's also very good about the dishes and garbage and being neat, and plus, I told Walter, he and Patty used to be so generous to Connie and give her meals and all. I wanted to acknowledge that, because they really were generous when I didn't have my life together, and I've never been anything but grateful for that. And Joey's just so responsible and calm. He explains how, since Patty won't even let Connie in the house, he really doesn't have any other choice if he wants to spend time with her, and I chime in and say how totally in support of the relationship I am—if only all the other young people in this world were as responsible as those two, the world would be a much better place—and how much more preferable it is for them to be in my house, safe and responsible, instead of sneaking around and getting in trouble. I'm so grateful to Joey, he'll always be welcome in my house. I said that to them. And I know Patty doesn't like me, she's always looked down her nose at me and been snooty about Connie. I know that. I know a thing or two about the things Patty's capable of. I knew she was going to throw some kind of fit. And so her face gets all twisted, and she's like, 'You think he *loves* your daughter? You think he's *in love* with her?' In this high little voice. Like it's impossible for somebody like Joey to be in love with Connie, because I didn't go to college or whatever, or I don't have as big a house or come from New York City or whatever, or I have to work an honest-to-Christ forty-hour full-time job, unlike her. Patty's so full of disrespect for me, you can't believe it. But Walter I thought I could talk to. He really is a sweetie. His face is beet red, I think because he's embarrassed, and he says, 'Carol, you and Connie need to leave so we can talk to Joey privately.' Which I'm fine with. I'm not there to make trouble, I'm not a troublemaking person. Except then Joey says no. He says he's not asking permission, he's just informing them about what he's going to do, and there's nothing to discuss. And that's when Walter loses it. Just loses it. He's got tears running down his face he's so upset—and I can understand that, because Joey's his youngest, and it's not Walter's fault Patty is so unreasonable and mean to Connie that Joey can't stand to live with them anymore. But he starts yelling at the top of his lungs, like, **YOU ARE SIXTEEN YEARS OLD AND YOU ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE UNTIL YOU FINISH HIGH SCHOOL.** And Joey's just smiling at him, you couldn't melt butter in his mouth. Joey says it's not against the law for him to leave, and anyway he's only moving next door. Totally reasonable. I wish I'd been one percent as smart and cool when I was sixteen. I mean, he's just a great kid. It made me feel kind of bad for Walter, because he starts yelling all this stuff about how he's not going to pay for Joey's college, and Joey's not going to get to go back to Montana next summer, and all he's asking is that Joey come to dinner and sleep in his own bed and be a part of the

family. And Joey's like, 'I'm still part of the family,' which, by the way, he never said he wasn't. But Walter's stomping around the kitchen, for a couple of seconds I think he's actually going to hit him, but he's just totally lost it, he's yelling, GET OUT, GET OUT, I'M SICK OF IT, GET OUT, and then he's gone and you can hear him upstairs in Joey's room, opening up Joey's drawers or whatever, and Patty runs upstairs and they start screaming at each other, and Connie and I are hugging Joey, because he's the one reasonable person in the family and we feel so sorry for him, and that's when I know for sure it's the right thing for him to move in with us. Walter comes stomping downstairs again and we can hear Patty screaming like a maniac—she's totally lost it—and Walter starts yelling again, DO YOU SEE WHAT YOU'RE DOING TO YOUR MOTHER? Because it's all about Patty, see, she's always got to be the victim. And Joey's just standing there shaking his head, because it's so obvious. Why would he want to live in a place like this?"

Although some neighbors did undoubtedly take satisfaction in Patty's reaping the whirlwind of her son's extraordinariness, the fact remained that Carol Monaghan had never been well liked on Barrier Street, Blake was widely deplored, Connie was thought spooky, and nobody had ever really trusted Joey. As word of his insurrection spread, the emotions prevailing among the Ramsey Hill gentry were pity for Walter, anxiety about Patty's psychological health, and an overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude at how normal their own children were—how happy to accept parental largesse, how innocently demanding of help with their homework or their college applications, how compliant in phoning in their afterschool whereabouts, how divulging of their little day-to-day bruising, how reassuringly predictable in their run-ins with sex and pot and alcohol. The ache emanating from the Berglunds' house was *sui generis*. Walter—unaware, you had to hope, of Carol's blabbing about his night of "losing it"—acknowledged awkwardly to various neighbors that he and Patty had been "fired" as parents and were doing their best not to take it too personally. "He comes over to study sometimes," Walter said, "but right now he seems more comfortable spending his nights at Carol's. We'll see how long that lasts."

"How's Patty taking all this?" Seth Paulsen asked him.

"Not well."

"We'd love to get you guys over for dinner some night soon."

"That would be great," Walter said, "but I think Patty's going up to my mom's old house for a while. She's been fixing it up, you know."

"I'm worried about her," Seth said with a catch in his voice.

"So am I, a little bit. I've seen her play in pain, though. She tore up her knee in her junior year and tried to play another two games on it."

"But then didn't she have, um, career-ending surgery?"

"It was more a point about her toughness, Seth. About her playing through pain."

"Right."

Walter and Patty never did get over to the Paulsens for dinner. Patty was absent from Barrier Street, hiding out at Nameless Lake, for long stretches of the winter and spring that followed, and even when her car was in the driveway—for example, at Christmastime, when Jessica returned from college and, according to her friends, had a "blow-out fight" with Joey which resulted in his spending more than a week in his old bedroom, giving his formidable sister the proper holiday she wanted—Patty eschewed the neighborhood get-togethers at which her baked goods and affability had once been such welcome fixtures. She was sometimes seen receiving visits from fortyish women who, based on their hairstyles and the bumper stickers on their Subarus, were thought to be old basketball teammates of hers, and there was talk about her drinking again, but this was mostly just a guess, since, for all her friendliness, she had never made an actual close friend in Ramsey Hill.

By New Year's, Joey was back at Carol and Blake's. A large part of that house's allure was presumed to be the bed he shared with Connie. He was known by his friends to be bizarrely and militantly opposed to masturbation, the mere mention of which never failed to elicit a condescending

smile from him; he claimed it was an ambition of his to go through life without resorting to it. More perspicacious neighbors, the Paulsens among them, suspected that Joey also enjoyed being the smartest person in the house. He became the prince of the great-room, opening its pleasures to everyone he favored with his friendship (and making the unsupervised beer keg a bone of contention at family dinners all over the neighborhood). His manner with Carol verged unsettlingly close to flirtation, and Blake he charmed by loving all the things that Blake himself loved, especially Blake's power tools and Blake's truck, at the wheel of which he learned how to drive. From the annoying way he smiled at his schoolmates' enthusiasm for Al Gore and Senator Wellstone, as if liberalism were a weakness on a par with self-abuse, it seemed he'd even embraced some of Blake's politics. He worked construction the next summer instead of returning to Montana.

And everybody had the sense, fairly or not, that Walter—his niceness—was somehow to blame. Instead of dragging Joey home by the hair and making him behave himself, instead of knocking Patty over the head with a rock and making her behave herself, he disappeared into his work with the Nature Conservancy, where he'd rather quickly become the state chapter's executive director, and let the house stand empty evening after evening, let the flower beds go to seed and the hedges go unclipped and the windows go unwashed, let the dirty urban snow engulf the warped GORE LIEBERMAN sign still stuck in the front yard. Even the Paulsens lost interest in the Berglunds, now that Merrie was running for city council. Patty spent all of the following summer away at Nameless Lake, and soon after her return—a month after Joey went off to the University of Virginia under financial circumstances that were unknown on Ramsey Hill, and two weeks after the great national tragedy—a FOR SALE sign went up in front of the Victorian into which she and Walter had poured fully half their lives. Walter had already begun commuting to a new job in Washington. Though housing prices would soon be rebounding to unprecedented heights, the local market was still near the bottom of its post-9/11 slump. Patty oversaw the sale of the house, at an unhappy price, to an earnest black professional couple with twin three-year-olds. In February, the two Berglunds went door to door along the street one final time, taking leave with polite formality, Walter asking after everybody's children and conveying his very best wishes for each of them, Patty saying little but looking strangely youthful again, like the girl who'd pushed her stroller down the street before the neighborhood was even a neighborhood.

"It's a wonder," Seth Paulsen remarked to Merrie afterward, "that the two of them are even still together."

Merrie shook her head. "I don't think they've figured out yet how to live."

MISTAKES WERE MADE

Autobiography of Patty Berglund

by Patty Berglund

(Composed at Her Therapist's Suggestion)

Chapter 1: Agreeable

If Patty weren't an atheist, she would thank the good Lord for school athletic programs, because they basically saved her life and gave her a chance to realize herself as a person. She is especially grateful to Sandra Mosher at North Chappaqua Middle School, Elaine Carver and Jane Nagel at Horace Greeley High School, Ernie and Rose Salvatore at the Gettysburg Girls Basketball Camp, and Irene Treadwell at the University of Minnesota. It was from these wonderful coaches that Patty learned discipline, patience, focus, teamwork, and the ideals of good sportsmanship that helped make up for her morbid competitiveness and low self-esteem.

Patty grew up in Westchester County, New York. She was the oldest of four children, the other three of whom were more like what her parents had been hoping for. She was notably Larger than everybody else, also Less Unusual, also measurably Dumber. Not actually dumb but relatively dumber. She grew up to be 5'9½ which was almost the same as her brother and numerous inches taller than the others, and sometimes she wished she could have gone ahead and been six feet, since

she was never going to fit into the family anyway. Being able to see the basket better and to post up in traffic and to rotate more freely on defense might have rendered her competitive streak somewhat less vicious, leading to a happier life post-college; probably not, but it was interesting to think about. By the time she got to the collegiate level, she was usually one of the shorter players on the floor, which in a funny way reminded her of her position in her family and helped keep adrenaline at peak levels.

Patty's first memory of doing a team sport with her mother watching is also one of her last. She was attending ordinary-person Sports day camp at the same complex where her two sisters were doing extraordinary-person Arts day camp, and one day her mother and sisters showed up for the late innings of a softball game. Patty was frustrated to be standing in left field while less skilled girls made errors in the infield and she waited around for somebody to hit a ball deep. She started creeping in shallower and shallower, which was how the game ended. Runners on first and second. The batter hit a bouncing ball to the grossly uncoordinated shortstop, whom Patty ran in front of so she could field the ball herself and run and tag out the lead runner and then start chasing the other runner, some sweet girl who'd probably reached first on a fielding error. Patty bore down straight at her, and the girl ran squealing into the outfield, leaving the base path for an automatic out, but Patty kept chasing her and applied the tag while the girl crumpled up and screamed with the apparently horrible pain of being lightly touched by a glove.

Patty was aware that it was not her finest hour of sportsmanship. Something had come over her because her family was watching. In the family station wagon, in an even more quavering voice than usual, her mother asked her if she had to be quite so ... *aggressive*. If it was necessary to be, well, to be so *aggressive*. Would it have hurt Patty to share the ball a little with her teammates? Patty replied that she hadn't been getting ANY balls in left field. And her mother said: "I don't mind if you play sports, but only if it's going to teach you cooperation and community-mindedness." And Patty said, "So send me to a REAL camp where I won't be the only good player! I can't cooperate with people who can't catch the ball!" And her mother said: "I'm not sure it's a good idea to be encouraging so much aggression and competition. I guess I'm not a sports fan, but I don't see the fun in defeating a person just for the sake of defeating them. Wouldn't it be much more fun to all work together to cooperatively build something?"

Patty's mother was a professional Democrat. She is even now, at the time of this writing, a state assemblywoman, the Honorable Joyce Emerson, known for her advocacy of open space, poor children, and the Arts. Paradise for Joyce is an open space where poor children can go and do Arts at state expense. Joyce was born Joyce Markowitz in Brooklyn in 1934 but apparently disliked being Jewish from the earliest dawn of consciousness. (The autobiographer wonders if one reason why Joyce's voice always trembles is from struggling so hard all her life to not sound like Brooklyn.) Joyce got a scholarship to study liberal Arts in the woods of Maine where she met Patty's exceedingly Gentile dad whom she married at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. In the autobiographer's opinion, Joyce had her first baby before she was emotionally prepared for motherhood, although the autobiographer herself perhaps ought not to cast stones in this regard. When Jack Kennedy got the Democratic nomination, in 1960, it gave Joyce a noble and stirring excuse to get out of a house that she couldn't seem to help filling up with babies. Then came civil rights, and Vietnam, and Bobby Kennedy—more good reasons to be out of a house that wasn't nearly big enough for four little kids plus a Barbadian nanny in the basement. Joyce went to her first national convention in 1968 as a delegate committed to dead Bobby. She served as county party treasurer and later chairman and organized for Teddy in 1972 and 1980. Every summer, all day long, herds of volunteers tramped in and out through the house's open doors carrying boxes of campaign gear. Patty could practice dribbling and layups for six hours straight without anybody noticing or caring.

Patty's father, Ray Emerson, was a lawyer and amateur humorist whose repertory included fart jokes and mean parodies of his children's teachers, neighbors, and friends. A torment he particularly

enjoyed inflicting on Patty was mimicking the Barbadian, Eulalie, when she was just out of earshot, saying, “Stop de game now, stop de playin,” etc., in a louder and louder voice until Patty ran from the dinner table in mortification and her siblings shrieked with excitement. Endless fun could also be had ridiculing Patty’s coach and mentor Sandy Mosher, whom Ray liked to call Saaaandra. He was constantly asking Patty whether Saaaandra had had any gentlemen callers lately or maybe, tee hee, tee hee, some *gentlelady* callers? Her siblings chorused: Saaaandra, Saaaandra! Other amusing methods of tormenting Patty were to hide the family dog, Elmo, and pretend that Elmo had been euthanized while Patty was at late basketball practice. Or tease Patty about certain factual errors she’d made many years earlier—ask her how the kangaroos in *Austria* were doing, and whether she’d seen the latest novel by the famous contemporary writer Louisa May Alcott, and whether she still thought funguses were part of the animal kingdom. “I saw one of Patty’s funguses chasing a truck the other day,” her father would say. “Look, look at me, this is how Patty’s fungus chases a truck.”

Most nights her dad left the house again after dinner to meet with poor people he was defending in court for little or no money. He had an office across the street from the courthouse in White Plains. His free clients included Puerto Ricans, Haitians, Transvestites, and the mentally or physically Disabled. Some of them were in such bad trouble he didn’t even make fun of them behind their backs. As much as possible, though, he found their troubles amusing. In tenth grade, for a school project, Patty sat in on two trials that her dad was part of. One was a case against an unemployed Yonkers man who drank too much on Puerto Rican Day, went looking for his wife’s brother, intending to cut him with a knife, but couldn’t find him and instead cut up a stranger in a bar. Not just her dad but the judge and even the prosecutor seemed amused by the defendant’s haplessness and stupidity. They kept exchanging little not-quite winks. As if misery and disfigurement and jail time were all just a lower-class sideshow designed to perk up their otherwise boring day.

On the train ride home, Patty asked her dad whose side he was on.

“Ha, good question,” he answered. “You have to understand, my client is a liar. The victim is a liar. And the bar owner is a liar. They’re all liars. Of course, my client is entitled to a vigorous defense. But you have to try to serve justice, too. Sometimes the P.A. and the judge and I are working together as much as the P.A. is working with the victim or I’m working with the defendant. You’ve heard of our adversarial system of justice?”

“Yes.”

“Well. Sometimes the P.A. and the judge and I all have the same adversary. We try to sort out the facts and avoid a miscarriage. Although don’t, uh. Don’t put that in your paper.”

“I thought sorting out facts was what the grand jury and the jury are for.”

“That’s right. Put that in your paper. Trial by a jury of your peers. That’s important.”

“But most of your clients are innocent, right?”

“Not many of them deserve as bad a punishment as somebody’s trying to give them.”

“But a lot of them are completely innocent, right? Mommy says they have trouble with the language, or the police aren’t careful about who they arrest, and there’s prejudice against them, and lack of opportunity.”

“All of that is entirely true, Pattycakes. Nevertheless, uh. Your mother can be somewhat dewy-eyed.”

Patty minded his ridiculing less when her mother was the butt of it.

“I mean, you saw those people,” he said to her. “Jesus Christ. El ron me puso loco.”

An important fact about Ray’s family was that it had a lot of money. His mom and dad lived on a big ancestral estate out in the hills of northwest New Jersey, in a pretty stone Modernist house that was supposedly designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and was hung with minor works by famous French Impressionists. Every summer, the entire Emerson clan gathered by the lake at the estate for holiday picnics which Patty mostly failed to enjoy. Her granddad, August, liked to grab his oldest granddaughter around the belly and sit her down on his bouncing thigh and get God only knows

what kind of little thrill from this; he was certainly not very respectful of Patty's physical boundaries. Starting in seventh grade, she also had to play doubles with Ray and his junior partner and the partner's wife, on the grandparental clay tennis court, and be stared at by the junior partner, in her exposing tennis clothes, and feel self-conscious and confused by his ocular pawing.

Like Ray himself, her granddad had bought the right to be privately eccentric by doing good public legal works; he'd made a name for himself defending high-profile conscientious objectors and draft evaders in three wars. In his spare time, which he had much of, he grew grapes on his property and fermented them in one of his outbuildings. His "winery" was called Doe Haunch and was a major family joke. At the holiday picnics, August tottered around in flipflops and saggy swim trunks, clutching one of his crudely labeled bottles, refilling the glasses that his guests had discreetly emptied into grass or bushes. "What do you think?" he asked. "Is it good wine? Do you like it?" He was sort of like an eager boy hobbyist and sort of like a torturer intent on punishing every victim equally. Citing European custom, August believed in giving children wine, and when the young mothers were distracted with corn to shuck or competitive salads to adorn, he watered his Doe Haunch Reserve and pressed it on kids as young as three, gently holding their chins, if necessary, and pouring the mixture into their mouths, making sure it went down. "You know what that is?" he said. "That's wine." If a child then began to act strangely, he said: "What you're feeling is called being drunk. You drank too much. You're drunk." This with a disgust no less sincere for being friendly. Patty, always the oldest of the kids, observed these scenes with silent horror, leaving it to a younger sibling or cousin to sound the alarm: "Granddaddy's getting the little kids drunk!" While the mothers came running to scold August and snatch their kids away, and the fathers tittered dirtily about August's obsession with female deer hindquarters, Patty slipped into the lake and floated in its warmest shallows, letting the water stop her ears against her family.

Because here was the thing: at every picnic, back up in the kitchen of the stone house, there was always a bottle or two of fabulous old Bordeaux from August's storied cellar. This wine was put out at Patty's father's insistence, at unknown personal cost of wheedling and begging, and it was always Ray who gave the signal, the subtle nod, to his brothers and to any male friend he'd brought along, to slip away from the picnic and follow him. The men returned a few minutes later with big bubble-bowled glasses filled to the brim with an amazing red, Ray also carrying a French bottle with maybe one inch of wine left in it, to be divided among all the wives and other less favored visitors. No amount of pleading could induce August to fetch another bottle from his cellar; he offered, instead, more Doe Haunch Reserve.

And it was the same every year at Christmastime: the grandparents driving over from New Jersey in their late-model Mercedes (August traded in his old one every year or two), arriving at Ray and Joyce's overcrowded ranch house an hour before the hour that Joyce had implored them not to arrive before, and distributing insulting gifts. Joyce famously, one year, received two much-used dish towels. Ray typically got one of those big art books from the Barnes & Noble bargain table, sometimes with a \$3.99 sticker still on it. The kids got little pieces of plastic Asianmade crap: tiny travel alarm clocks that didn't work, coin purses stamped with the name of a New Jersey insurance agency, frightening crude Chinese finger puppets, assorted swizzle sticks. Meanwhile, at August's alma mater, a library with his name on it was being built. Because Patty's siblings were outraged by the grandparental tightfistedness and compensated by making outrageous demands for parental Christmas booty—Joyce was up until 3 a.m. every Christmas Eve, wrapping presents selected from their endless and highly detailed Christmas lists—Patty went the other way and decided not to care about anything but sports.

Her granddad had once been a true athlete, a college track star and football tight end, which was probably where her height and reflexes came from. Ray also had played football but in Maine for a school that could barely field a team. His real game was tennis, which was the one sport Patty hated, although she was good at it. She believed that Björn Borg was secretly weak. With very few

exceptions (e.g., Joe Namath) she wasn't impressed with male athletes in general. Her specialty was crushes on popular boys enough older or better-looking to be totally unrealistic choices. Being a very agreeable person, however, she went on dates with practically anybody who asked. She thought shy or unpopular boys had a hard life, and she took pity on them insofar as humanly possible. For some reason, many were wrestlers. In her experience, wrestlers were brave, taciturn, geeky, beetle-browed, polite, and not afraid of female jocks. One of them confided to her that in middle school she'd been known to him and his friends as the She-Monkey.

As far as actual sex goes, Patty's first experience of it was being raped at a party when she was seventeen by a boarding-school senior named Ethan Post. Ethan didn't do any sports except golf, but he had six inches of height and fifty pounds on Patty and provided discouraging perspectives on female muscle strength as compared to men's. What he did to Patty didn't strike her as a gray-area sort of rape. When she started fighting, she fought hard, if not too well, and only for so long, because she was drunk for one of the first times ever. She'd been feeling so wonderfully free! Very probably, in the vast swimming pool at Kim McClusky's, on a beautiful warm May night, Patty had given Ethan Post a mistaken impression. She was far too agreeable even when she wasn't drunk. In the pool, she must have been giddy with agreeability. Altogether, there was much to blame herself for. Her notions of romance were like Gilligan's Island: "as primitive as can be." They fell somewhere between Snow White and Nancy Drew. And Ethan undeniably had the arrogant look that attracted her at that point in time. He resembled the love interest from a girls' novel with sailboats on the cover. After he raped Patty, he said he was sorry "it" had been rougher than he'd meant "it" to be, he was sorry about that.

It was only after the piña coladas wore off, early the next morning, in the bedroom which, being such an agreeable person, Patty shared with her littler sister so that their middle sister could have her own room to be Creative and messy in: only then did she get indignant. The indignity was that Ethan had considered her such a nothing that he could just rape her and then take her home. And she was *not* such a nothing. She was, among other things, already, as a junior, the all-time single-season record holder for assists at Horace Greeley High School. A record she would again demolish the following year! She was also first-team All State in a state that *included Brooklyn and the Bronx*. And yet a golfing boy she hardly even knew had thought it was OK to rape her.

To avoid waking her little sister, she went and cried in the shower. This was, without exaggeration, the most wretched hour of her life. Even today, when she thinks of people who are oppressed around the world and victims of injustice, and how they must feel, her mind goes back to that hour. Things that had never occurred to her before, such as the injustice of an oldest daughter having to share a room and not being given Eulalie's old room in the basement because it was now filled floor to ceiling with outdated campaign paraphernalia, also the injustice of her mother being so enthralled about the middle daughter's thespian performances but never going to any of Patty's games, occurred to her now. She was so indignant she almost felt like talking to somebody. But she was afraid to let her coach or teammates know she'd been drinking.

How the story came out, in spite of her best efforts to keep it buried, was that Coach Nagel got suspicious and spied on her in the locker room after the next day's game. Sat Patty down in her office and confronted her regarding her bruises and unhappy demeanor. Patty humiliated herself by immediately and sobbingly confessing to all. To her total shock, Coach then proposed taking her to the hospital and notifying the police. Patty had just gone three-for-four with two runs scored and several outstanding defensive plays. She obviously wasn't greatly harmed. Also, her parents were political friends of Ethan's parents, so that was a nonstarter. She dared to hope that an abject apology for breaking training, combined with Coach's pity and leniency, would put the matter to rest. But oh how wrong she was.

Coach called Patty's house and got Patty's mother, who, as always, was breathless and running out to a meeting and had neither time to talk nor yet the moral wherewithal to admit that she didn't have time to talk, and Coach spoke these indelible words into the P.E. Dept.'s beige telephone: "Your

daughter just told me that she was raped last night by a boy named Ethan Post.” Coach then listened to the phone for a minute before saying, “No, she just now told me ... That’s right ... Just last night ... Yes, she is.” And handed Patty the telephone.

“Patty?” her mother said. “Are you—all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“Mrs. Nagel says there was an incident last night?”

“The incident was I was raped.”

“Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. Last night?”

“Yes.”

“I was home this morning. Why didn’t you say something?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why, why, why? Why didn’t you say something to me?”

“Maybe it just didn’t seem like such a big deal right then.”

“So but then you did tell Mrs. Nagel.”

“No,” Patty said. “She’s just more observant than you are.”

“I hardly saw you this morning.”

“I’m not blaming you. I’m just saying.”

“And you think you might have been ... It might have been ...”

“Raped.”

“I can’t believe this,” her mother said. “I’m going to come and get you.”

“Coach Nagel wants me to go to the hospital.”

“Are you not all right?”

“I already said. I’m fine.”

“Then just stay put, and don’t either of you do anything until I get there.”

Patty hung up the phone and told Coach that her mother was coming.

“We’re going to put that boy in jail for a long, long time,” Coach said.

“Oh no no no no no,” Patty said. “No, we’re not.”

“Patty.”

“It’s just not going to happen.”

“It will if you want it to.”

“No, actually, it won’t. My parents and the Posts are political friends.”

“Listen to me,” Coach said. “That has nothing to do with anything. Do you understand?”

Patty was quite certain that Coach was wrong about this. Dr. Post was a cardiologist and his wife was from big money. They had one of the houses that people such as Teddy Kennedy and Ed Muskie and Walter Mondale made visits to when they were short of funds. Over the years, Patty had heard much tell of the Posts’ “back yard” from her parents. This “back yard” was apparently about the size of Central Park but nicer. Conceivably one of Patty’s straight-A, grade-skipping, Arts-doing sisters could have brought trouble down on the Posts, but it was absurd to imagine the hulking B-student family jock making a dent in the Posts’ armor.

“I’m just never going to drink again,” she said, “and that will solve the problem.”

“Maybe for you,” Coach said, “but not for somebody else. Look at your arms. Look what he did. He’ll do that to somebody else if you don’t stop him.”

“It’s just bruises and scratches.”

Coach here made a motivational speech about standing up for your teammates, which in this case meant all the young women Ethan might ever meet. The upshot was that Patty was supposed to take a hard foul for the team and press charges and let Coach inform the New Hampshire prep school where Ethan was a student, so he could be expelled and denied a diploma, and that if Patty didn’t do this she would be letting down her team.

Patty began to cry again, because she would almost rather have died than let a team down. Earlier in the winter, with the flu, she'd played most of a half of basketball before fainting on the sideline and getting fluids intravenously. The problem now was that she hadn't been with her own team the night before. She'd gone to the party with her field-hockey friend Amanda, whose soul was apparently never going to be at rest until she'd induced Patty to sample piña coladas, vast buckets of which had been promised at the McCluskys'. El ron me puso loca. None of the other girls at the McCluskys' swimming pool were jocks. Almost just by showing up there, Patty had betrayed her real true team. And now she'd been punished for it. Ethan hadn't raped one of the fast girls, he'd raped Patty, because she didn't belong there, she didn't even know how to drink.

She promised Coach to give the matter some thought.

It was shocking to see her mother in the gym and obviously shocking to her mother to find herself there. She was wearing her everyday pumps and resembled Goldilocks in daunting woods as she peered around uncertainly at the naked metal equipment and the fungal floors and the clustered balls in mesh bags. Patty went to her and submitted to embrace. Her mother being much smaller of frame, Patty felt somewhat like a grandfather clock that Joyce was endeavoring to lift and move. She broke away and led Joyce into Coach's little glass-walled office so that the necessary conference could be had.

"Hi, I'm Jane Nagel," Coach said.

"Yes, we've—met," Joyce said.

"Oh, you're right, we did meet once," Coach said.

In addition to her strenuous elocution, Joyce had strenuously proper posture and a masklike Pleasant Smile suitable for nearly all occasions public and private. Because she never raised her voice, not even in anger (her voice just got shakier and more strained when she was mad), her Pleasant Smile could be worn even at moments of excruciating conflict.

"No, it was more than once," she said now. "It was several times."

"Really?"

"I'm quite sure of it."

"That doesn't sound right to me," Coach said.

"I'll be outside," Patty said, closing the door behind her.

The parent-coach conference didn't last long. Joyce soon came out on clicking heels and said, "Let's go."

Coach, standing in the doorway behind Joyce, gave Patty a significant look. The look meant *Don't forget what I said about teamwork.*

Joyce's car was the last one left in its quadrant of the visitor lot. She put the key in the ignition but didn't turn it. Patty asked what was going to happen now.

"Your father's at his office," Joyce said. "We'll go straight there."

But she didn't turn the key.

"I'm sorry about this," Patty said.

"What I don't understand," her mother burst out, "is how such an outstanding athlete as you are—I mean, how could Ethan, or whoever it was—"

"Ethan. It was Ethan."

"How could anybody—or Ethan," she said. "You say it's pretty definitely Ethan. How could—if it's Ethan—how could he have ...?" Her mother hid her mouth with her fingers. "Oh, I wish it had been almost anybody else. Dr. and Mrs. Post are such good friends of—good friends of so many good things. And I don't know Ethan well, but—"

"I hardly know him at all!"

"Well then how could this happen!"

"Let's just go home."

"No. You have to tell me. I'm your mother."

Hearing herself say this, Joyce looked embarrassed. She seemed to realize how peculiar it was to have to remind Patty who her mother was. And Patty, for one, was glad to finally have this doubt out in the open. If Joyce was her mother, then how had it happened that she hadn't come to the first round of the state tournament when Patty had broken the all-time Horace Greeley girls' tournament scoring record with 32 points? Somehow everybody else's mother had found time to come to that game.

She showed Joyce her wrists.

"*This* is what happened," she said. "I mean, part of what happened."

Joyce looked once at her bruises, shuddered, and then turned away as if respecting Patty's privacy. "This is terrible," she said. "You're right. This is terrible."

"Coach Nagel says I should go to the emergency room and tell the police and tell Ethan's headmaster."

"Yes, I know what your coach wants. She seems to feel that castration might be an appropriate punishment. What I want to know is what *you* think."

"I don't know what I think."

"If you want to go to the police now," Joyce said, "we'll go to the police. Just tell me if that's what you want."

"I guess we should tell Dad first."

So down the Saw Mill Parkway they went. Joyce was always driving Patty's siblings to Painting, Guitar, Ballet, Japanese, Debate, Drama, Piano, Fencing, and Mock Court, but Patty herself seldom rode with Joyce anymore. Most weekdays, she came home very late on the jock bus. If she had a game, somebody else's mom or dad dropped her off. If she and her friends were ever stranded, she knew not to bother calling her parents but to go ahead and use the Westchester Cab dispatcher's number and one of the twenty-dollar bills that her mother made her always carry. It never occurred to her to use the twenties for anything but cabs, or to go anywhere after a game except straight home, where she peeled aluminum foil off her dinner at ten or eleven o'clock and went down to the basement to wash her uniform while she ate and watched reruns. She often fell asleep down there.

"Here's a hypothetical question," Joyce said, driving. "Do you think it might be enough if Ethan formally apologized to you?"

"He already apologized."

"For—"

"For being rough."

"And what did you say?"

"I didn't say anything. I said I wanted to go home."

"But he did apologize for being rough."

"It wasn't a real apology."

"All right. I'll take your word for it."

"I just want him to know I *exist*."

"Whatever *you* want—sweetie."

Joyce pronounced this "sweetie" like the first word of a foreign language she was learning.

As a test or a punishment, Patty said: "Maybe, I guess, if he apologized in a really sincere way, that might be enough." And she looked carefully at her mother, who was struggling (it seemed to Patty) to contain her excitement.

"That sounds to me like a nearly ideal solution," Joyce said. "But only if you really think it would be enough for you."

"It wouldn't," Patty said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said it wouldn't be enough."

"I thought you just said it would be."

Patty began to cry again very desolately.

"I'm sorry," Joyce said. "Did I misunderstand?"

"HE RAPED ME LIKE IT WAS NOTHING. I'M PROBABLY NOT EVEN THE FIRST."

"You don't know that, Patty."

"I want to go to the hospital."

"Look, here, we're almost at Daddy's office. Unless you're actually hurt, we might as well—"

"But I already know what he'll say. I know what he'll want me to do."

"He'll want to do whatever's best for you. Sometimes it's hard for him to express it, but he loves you more than anything."

Joyce could hardly have made a statement Patty more fervently longed to believe was true. Wished, with her whole being, was true. Didn't her dad tease her and ridicule her in ways that would have been simply cruel if he didn't secretly love her more than anything? But she was seventeen now and not actually dumb. She knew that you could love somebody more than anything and still not love the person all that much, if you were busy with other things.

There was a smell of mothballs in her father's inner sanctum, which he'd taken over from his now-deceased senior partner without redoing the carpeting and curtains. Where exactly the mothball smell came from was one of those mysteries.

"What a rotten little shit!" was Ray's response to the tidings his daughter and wife brought of Ethan Post's crime.

"Not so little, unfortunately," Joyce said with a dry laugh.

"He's a rotten little shit punk," Ray said. "He's a bad seed!"

"So do we go to the hospital now?" Patty said. "Or to the police?"

Her father told her mother to call Dr. Sipperstein, the old pediatrician, who'd been involved in Democratic politics since Roosevelt, and see if he was available for an emergency. While Joyce made this call, Ray asked Patty if she knew what rape was.

She stared at him.

"Just checking," he said. "You do know the actual legal definition."

"He had sex with me against my will."

"Did you actually say no?"

"No,' don't,' stop.' Anyway, it was obvious. I was trying to scratch him and push him off me."

"Then he is a despicable piece of shit."

She'd never heard her father talk this way, and she appreciated it, but only abstractly, because it didn't sound like him.

"Dave Sipperstein says he can meet us at five at his office," Joyce reported. "He's so fond of Patty, I think he would have canceled his dinner plans if he'd had to."

"Right," Patty said, "I'm sure I'm number one among his twelve thousand patients." She then told her dad her story, and her dad explained to her why Coach Nagel was wrong and she couldn't go to the police.

"Chester Post is not an easy person," Ray said, "but he does a lot of good in the county. Given his, uh, given his position, an accusation like this is going to generate extraordinary publicity. Everyone will know who the accuser is. Everyone. Now, what's bad for the Posts is not your concern. But it's virtually certain you'll end up feeling more violated by the pretrial and the trial and the publicity than you do right now. Even if it's pleaded out. Even with a suspended sentence, even with a gag order. There's still a court record."

Joyce said, "But this is all for *her* to decide, not—"

"Joyce." Ray stilled her with a raised hand. "The Posts can afford any lawyer in the country. And as soon as the accusation is made public, the worst of the damage to the defendant is over. He has no incentive to speed things along. In fact, it's to his advantage to see that your reputation suffers as much as possible before a plea or a trial."

Patty bowed her head and asked what her father thought she should do.

"I'm going to call Chester now," he said. "You go see Dr. Sipperstein and make sure you're OK."

"And get him as a witness," Patty said. "Yes, and he could testify if need be. But there isn't going to be a trial, Patty."

"So he just gets away with it? And does it to somebody else next weekend?"

Ray raised both hands. "Let me, ah. Let me talk to Mr. Post. He might be amenable to a deferred prosecution. Kind of a quiet probation. Sword over Ethan's head."

"But that's *nothing*."

"Actually, Pattycakes, it's quite a lot. It'd be your guarantee that he won't do this to someone else. Requires an admission of guilt, too."

It did seem absurd to imagine Ethan wearing an orange jumpsuit and sitting in a jail cell for inflicting a harm that was mostly in her head anyway. She'd done wind sprints that hurt as bad as being raped. She felt more beaten up after a tough basketball game than she did now. Plus, as a jock, you got used to having other people's hands on you—kneading a cramped muscle, playing tight defense, scrambling for a loose ball, taping an ankle, correcting a stance, stretching a hamstring.

And yet: the feeling of injustice itself turned out to be strangely physical. Even realer, in a way, than her hurting, smelling, sweating body. Injustice had a shape, and a weight, and a temperature, and a texture, and a very bad taste.

In Dr. Sipperstein's office she submitted to examination like a good jock. After she'd put her clothes back on, he asked if she'd ever had intercourse before.

"No."

"I didn't think so. What about contraception? Did the other person use it?"

She nodded. "That's when I tried to get away. When I saw what he had."

"A condom."

"Yes."

All this and more Dr. Sipperstein jotted down on her chart. Then he took off his glasses and said, "You're going to have a good life, Patty. Sex is a great thing, and you'll enjoy it all your life. But this was not a good day, was it?"

At home, one of her siblings was in the back yard doing something like juggling with screwdrivers of different sizes. Another was reading Gibbon unabridged. The one who'd been subsisting on Yoplait and radishes was in the bathroom, changing her hair color again. Patty's true home amid all this brilliant eccentricity was a foam-cushioned, mildewed, built-in bench in the TV corner of the basement. The fragrance of Eulalie's hair oil still lingered on the bench years after Eulalie had been let go. Patty took a carton of butter-pecan ice cream down to the bench and answered no when her mother called down to ask if she was coming up for dinner.

Mary Tyler Moore was just starting when her father came down after his martini and his own dinner and suggested that he and Patty go for a drive. At that point in time, Mary Tyler Moore comprised the entirety of Patty's knowledge of Minnesota.

"Can I watch this show first?" she said.

"Patty."

Feeling cruelly deprived, she turned off the television. Her dad drove them over to the high school and stopped under a bright light in the parking lot. They unrolled their windows, letting in the smell of spring lawns like the one she'd been raped on not many hours earlier.

"So," she said.

"So Ethan denies it," her dad said. "He says it was just roughhousing and consensual."

The autobiographer would describe the girl's tears in the car as coming on like a rain that starts unnoticeably but surprisingly soon soaks everything. She asked if her dad had spoken to Ethan directly.

"No, just his father, twice," he said. "I'd be lying if I said the conversation went well."

"So obviously Mr. Post doesn't believe me."

“Well, Patty, Ethan’s his son. He doesn’t know you as well as we do.”

“Do you believe me?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Does Mommy?”

“Of course she does.”

“Then what do I do?”

Her dad turned to her like an attorney. Like an adult addressing another adult. “You drop it,” he said. “Forget about it. Move on.”

“What?”

“You shake it off. Move on. Learn to be more careful.”

“Like it never even happened?”

“Patty, the people at the party were all friends of his. They’re going to say they saw you get drunk and be aggressive with him. They’ll say you were behind a shed that wasn’t more than thirty feet from the pool, and they didn’t hear anything un toward.”

“It was really noisy. There was music and shouting.”

“They’ll also say they saw the two of you leaving later in the evening and getting into his car. And the world will see an Exeter boy who’s going to Princeton and was responsible enough to use contraceptives, and gentleman enough to leave the party and drive you home.”

The deceptive little rain was wetting the collar of Patty’s T-shirt.

“You’re not really on my side, are you,” she said.

“Of course I am.”

“You keep saying ‘Of course,’ ‘Of course.’ ”

“Listen to me. The P.A. is going to want to know why you didn’t scream.”

“I was embarrassed! Those weren’t my friends!”

“But do you see that this is going to be hard for a judge or a jury to understand? All you would have had to do was scream, and you would have been safe.”

Patty couldn’t remember why she hadn’t screamed. She had to admit that, in hindsight, it seemed bizarrely agreeable of her.

“I fought, though.”

“Yes, but you’re a top-tier student athlete. Shortstops get scratched and bruised all the time, don’t they? On the arms? On the thighs?”

“Did you tell Mr. Post I’m a virgin? I mean, was?”

“I didn’t consider that any of his business.”

“Maybe you should call him back and tell him that.”

“Look,” her dad said. “Honey. I know it’s horrendously unfair. I feel terrible for you. But sometimes the best thing is just to learn your lesson and make sure you never get in the same position again. To say to yourself, ‘I made a mistake, and I had some bad luck,’ and then let it. Let it, ah. Let it drop.”

He turned the ignition halfway, so that the panel lights came on. He kept his hand on the key.

“But he committed a crime,” Patty said.

“Yes, but better to, uh. Life’s not always fair, Pattycakes. Mr. Post said he thought Ethan might be willing to apologize for not being more gentlemanly, but. Well. Would you like that?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“Coach Nagel says I should go to the police.”

“Coach Nagel should stick to her dribbling,” her dad said.

“Softball,” Patty said. “It’s softball season now.”

“Unless you want to spend your entire senior year being publicly humiliated.”

“Basketball is in the winter. Softball is in the spring, when the weather’s warmer?”

“I’m asking you: is that really how you want to spend your senior year?”

“Coach Carver is basketball,” Patty said. “Coach Nagel is softball. Are you getting this?”

Her dad started the engine.

As a senior, instead of being publicly humiliated, Patty became a real player, not just a talent. She all but resided in the field house. She got a three-game basketball suspension for putting a shoulder in the back of a New Rochelle forward who’d elbowed Patty’s teammate Stephanie, and she still broke every school record she’d set the previous year, plus nearly broke the scoring record. Augmenting her reliable perimeter shooting was a growing taste for driving to the basket. She was no longer on speaking terms with physical pain.

In the spring, when the local state assemblyman stepped down after long service and the party leadership chose Patty’s mother to run as his replacement, the Posts offered to co-host a fund-raiser in the green luxury of their back yard. Joyce sought Patty’s permission before she accepted the offer, saying she wouldn’t do anything that Patty wasn’t comfortable with, but Patty was beyond caring what Joyce did, and told her so. When the candidate’s family stood for the obligatory family photo, no grief was given to Patty for absenting herself. Her look of bitterness would not have helped Joyce’s cause.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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