

# one

It's not too late," I said. "You could still change your mind."

"What?" said Stu. "Now?" He glanced down at his watch. "Quarter till. They might already be there."

We'd rumbled down the hill in our rust-corrupted Volvo, my parents' "summer clunker" we inherited with the cottage. Now Stu turned and steered us through the narrows of 6A: past the shuttered ice-cream stand ("C U all next season!"), the barns with empty clam-shell drives and sluggish whale-shaped vanes. Weathered shingles, the gull-gray sky, the browned, static marsh—the sober shades of Cape Cod in December.

But this was what I'd longed for: a hushed and dullish outback. I hadn't set foot in New York since we'd moved.

"So call them," I said. "Say you thought of a better place. It's fine."

With one sure hand, Stu veered to dodge a road-kill squirrel; the other hand was fidgeting with his scarf. "What kind of a first impression is that?" he said. "We can't even commit to a *restaurant*?"

The Pancake King, where we were headed, had been his bright idea, overriding my suggestion of the Yarmouth House or one of our other surf-and-turf standbys. Someplace less expensive, he'd insisted: "Cheap enough so they'll feel at home if they're not used to fancy—or, if they are, maybe they'll think it's witty."

He'd made a decent case, but it was just conjecture. We knew so very little about Debora and Danny Neuman, certainly not enough to safely judge what they might like. And yet here we were, crossing the Cape to meet them, to see if she'd agree to have our baby. Had ever there been an odder double date?

While Stu tossed and turned about the question of where to meet, I was trying to float atop the waves of my own worry: Would Debora and her husband see the patched-up, worthy Stu and Pat? Would any of our old frayings show?

I didn't remind Stu—not in so many words—that it was he who'd pushed us toward a restaurant so silly. What I said (too carelessly) was, "Well, there's always the Yarmouth House . . ."

"Perfect," he said. "I knew you'd say 'I told you so.' I knew it!"

With a stagy crunch of gravel, he pulled to the shoulder and stopped. He stabbed the hazards button, got them clacking.

Stu was that incongruous thing, a Jewish airline pilot, and his manner could be just as oxymoronic. Forcefully indecisive, authoritatively whiny. With me, at least, in private, that could be his way. Strangers noted his rinsed-of-accent speech, his stringent crew cut, a gaze that seemed to own the whole horizon—the earned-in-sweat antithesis of a nebbish (a word he'd taught me). But late at night, or during sex, when Stu let down his guard, I could see his impressive eyes inch a smidgen closer, as though he wanted to stare at his own nose.

His eyes were like that now. I guessed they were, behind his Ray-Ban shades.

"Patrick," he said. "Pat, hon. Be honest. You're not nervous?"

The quaver of his humbled voice disarmed me. "Kidding?" I said. "Of course I am. I almost puked this morning."

"Okay. And Debora and Danny—you think they feel the same?"

Considering what we'd ask of them, how could they not? I nodded.

"Right," said Stu. "So, please, can't you let *me* feel that, too?"

The world at large got Captain Stuart Nadler, at the stick. Who did I get? Someone neurotic about his choice of lunch spots.

"Just let me spaz a little," he said. "It's nothing. It's routine turbulence. I mean, look at us. Look where we finally are!"

Where we were was a cattail-shaded stretch of silent road. Not a single car had passed since Stu had pulled us over.

I thought of an evening shortly after we had made the move, when I still worried he might quit and head back to the city; I had feared that our new life wouldn't—that *I* wouldn't—be enough. We went to see *Shrek 2* at the theater down in Sandwich, the lobby empty except for the wizened lady who took our tickets, who offered also to make a batch of popcorn. Stu, as the trailers started, looked around and whispered, "We can't be, can we? The only people here?" He flung a kernel of popcorn at the screen. But then, after the lights went dark, seeing that we were indeed alone, he jumped up and took my hand and skipped us down the aisle, belting out the soundtrack in falsetto. Our own Kingdom of Far, Far Away!

Now, in the car, he removed his aviators. "Kiss me," he said.

*There* was the Stu I craved: my own top gun.

I followed his order, and tasted his familiarly foreign tongue: still, after a decade-plus, surprising in its saltiness.

"Ready?" he said, and revved the engine.

"I've *been* ready," I said. "You know that."

And so into the brackish Cape Cod bluster we charged, back on the road and off to the Pancake King to meet our womb.

## two

A surrogate mother, at last! A woman who could give us what we couldn't give ourselves.

I was thrilled, even if I'd hoped we'd get here sooner. How could we have wasted nine full months since we had moved?

Our first excuse for stalling—the one we'd dared to voice—had to do with all the stresses of taking over the cottage. On a ridge in West Barnstable, above the stylish dunes of Sandy Neck, the home was where we Faunces, for thirty-some years, had summered. Or, to follow Stu's edict that *summer* was not a verb, the cottage was my family's "summer home." (Stu had tried, less successfully, to wean me off of *cottage*: with four bedrooms, two baths, a two-car garage, the house would be a mansion in Manhattan.) I had stayed at the cottage every school break as a kid, and since my parents had died, had co-owned it with my sisters, but suddenly it was mine alone—actually, mine and Stu's—and suddenly, too, was meant to be the scene of our redemption.

All we'd known together was a queered-up city life: a life of sexual license, of looking the other way, our love stretched so thin it almost snapped; now we were nesting in this tranquil bayside home, having convinced each other that a baby would be the answer . . .

. . . and every domestic mishap gave a little karmic poke: *You really believe in happily ever after?*

A clogged oil-burner nozzle. A leak in the chimney flashing. A bombardiering blue jay that mistook our picture window for the sky and left it smithereened with cracks.

The old poetry major in me couldn't help but see the cottage in metaphorical terms. My answer was to make of the place a bold "objective correlative": an external framework to stand in for—and influence?—our emotions. Thus came my compulsion to de-bramble ancient blueberry bushes that never, till just now, had called for rescue, and my early-morning passion for repointing decorative garden walls (the ones now made more visible by de-brambling).

In order to prove our readiness to raise a child together, I would get the place—and us—in unimpeachable shape.

Not that I minded the effort. In fact, I sort of loved it. As someone who wrote textbooks, shuffling words and phrases, getting the chance to grapple with actual objects pleased me greatly. More than that, I liked the work because it now was my work. At thirty-six, at last I had my private patch of earth.

*My* work, *my* private patch of earth. But the house was also Stu's now—or should have been, and had to be. And that required additional adjustments.

Stu insisted, rightfully, that he should make his mark upon the house, which basically hadn't been touched since Mom had died. First to go was the sign—routed driftwood dangling from rusty chains—that had touted the property, ungrammatically, as "The Faunce's." Also tossed away were some dozen wall-hung photos, depicting scenes a great deal like (or maybe they were) our deck's bay view; Mom had bought them, as if to claim her view as *picturesque* she needed actual pictures for comparison. In their stead, Stu put up his raft of vintage travel posters. "Come to Ulster, the Holiday Wonderland, for a Real Change and Happy Days"; "Visitez L'Afrique en Avion." He also set out keepsakes

to remind him of New York: a coffee table whose surface was made of inlaid subway tokens; a sign from Yonah Schimmel's: "Eat Knishes!"

Better, then. Much better. But still, sometimes, he told me, he felt like a hermit crab in some other creature's shell. (It took all I had to keep from noting that his simile was proof of his becoming a Cape Codder.) "I watch you," he admitted, one April Sunday morning, when I was sprawled on the living room's shag carpet, doing a crossword. "The way you walk around from room to room. It's like you've got your memories, this massive *net* of memories, throwing it over every inch, to claim things."

True enough, and I wasn't about to block those recollections. Even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't.

The answer was to work on making memories now together, to co-star in our own all-new show.

Here we are, planting a row of rhubarb in the yard, dreaming aloud about the jams and chutneys we'll cook up. In the house, we take the muslin, mollusk-patterned curtains down, replacing them with sleek bamboo shades. And, acceding to beachy norms, but also being camp, we park a homely trinket on the lawn: a whirligig whose plywood fisherman forever hooks a big one.

For my birthday Stu surprises me: a flight in a rented Skylane. We skim over glacial ponds and purple fallow cranberry bogs: a chain of gems along the Cape's thin neck. Stu says, "You know, when we first started coming here, I couldn't help but see what was missing: no decent theater or Chinese food, no *oomph*. But living here"—he swoops above a pond, whose surface shivers—"now I can see what *I* was missing."

Next we're at the Cape Cod Mall, a nor'easter banging away outside, the halls packed with prepubescent girls. Mrs. Rita, the fuchsia-nailed proprietress of Mrs. Rita's Rice, bodily—almost violently—accosts us. "Write your name on a piece of rice," she importunes redundantly (the awning above her booth bears this slogan). She offers me a magnifying glass to glimpse some samples. *World's Best Dad. Class of 2004. Your Name Here*. I muse about how long this place would last in

New York: not long. "My specialty is guessing who people are to each other," she says. "You two guys—a couple, right? I think that's just fantastic. Anyone tells you otherwise, then screw 'em! Newlyweds, I'm willing to bet: the both of you've got that glow. How about two grains that say 'Till Death,' one for each? Put them in glass beads, on a necklace?" Stu looks at me. What would be the point in disabusing her? She has stretched a hand across the great divide of strangerdom; better to endorse her endorsement. "Sold," he says, and asks her to engrave the matching grains, but the glass beads? Thanks, we'll take a pass. "Really? Just the rice?" she says. "Aren't you going to lose them?" But here she goes, doing her nifty Lilliputian trick, as solemn as a sapper with a bomb. A minute later, finishing up the grains, she gives it one more try: "Can't just hand them off like this—naked! Are you serious? Okay, then, you're well and warned. The customer's always right . . ." We thank her, and pay, and deep-kiss right in front of her: let her take some credit for our romance. And then, when she lunges for the next passing couple (sixty-somethings in matching madras slickers), we turn and, with laughter in our eyes, without the need to ask, count to three: the grains go down the hatch.

But even on the best of days, our happiness felt fragile. Every forward step, if set down wrong, could remind me of the hurt Stu'd caused, could flare that sprain again.

The day we gobbled Rita's rice, we went next to Filene's. I'd seen their ad in the *Cape Cod Times*: boxer shorts, all brands, two for one. I picked up some Jockey packs, but Stu splurged on Calvins. "That way," he said, "simpler to tell, in the laundry, whose are whose."

"Yuh," I said, "as if *you* do the laundry."

He pinched my butt. "Just watching out for you, my love. As always."

After we'd paid, and browsed the bedding aisles for duvet covers (Stu was still chipping away at my mother's old décor), I had a thought: "Hey, let's look in Baby."

"Now?" he said, and then, "Why not? The power of positive thinking."

Even during these early days, adjusting to our new life—assuring each other, "Once the *house* is dealt with . . ."—I'd been getting ready for a baby. I read Dan Savage's book *The Kid*, and pored through old issues of *Gay Parent*. I boned up on breast-milk facts, theories of early learning. Cloth or plastic? I could have penned a tome.

But still, almost three months gone, we had yet to even start to try to find a surrogate.

I tried to push Stu along, but never to push too much. He would be ready when he was ready, and not a second sooner. (I'd asked my buddy Marcie, once, how she'd known she was ready to be a mom. "Pat," she said, "if we waited till we were *ready* for having kids, there'd never be another baby born.")

"Ooh, look at this," I said now, holding up a onesie, blue-striped like a French sailor's shirt.

"Huh," said Stu. He shrugged.

"All right, how 'bout this?" The second one was brown, and showed a tiny trumpet, below which were the words: Little Tooter.

Stu ran the fabric hypercritically through his fingers, a spoof of a Jewish garment broker. "Feh," he said. "Not that junk. For *our* kid? Only silk!"

I wanted to be cross with him, for being so blithely pie-in-the-sky. But then, without his humor, we never would have gotten this far. And what was having kids about if not pipe-dream ambitions?

I'd moved on to baby shoes. How cute! Mini One Stars! "But Christ," I said. "Twenty-five bucks? For shoes that'll fit *how* long?"

Stu didn't answer. He stared at something—or nothing—in the distance. "Hey, just thought of a thing I need at CVS," he said. "Meet you in ten, out front? At the car?"

Why not ask me to come along? An innocent reason, surely. What nefarious business could be waiting at the drugstore? Maybe he thought I wanted to stay, that I wasn't finished browsing.

I almost said, "I'll just come with," but couldn't find the air, couldn't risk the cold and stifled Stu I might then see. The old feelings of shame and abandonment knocked me windless—just like when we'd partied at the Roxy, one last time.

That had been back in New York. A foolish final try to deal with Stu's immoderation.

I was not supposed to mind his sleeping with other men: Article 1 of the Gay Constitution. And truthfully, I'd always known, with Stu, what I was in for. After all, a *pilot*? Wasn't that half the draw? The glamour of the uniform, the randy Right Stuff strut. Sure enough, in his line of work, he'd gathered a pile of playmates. Shane in Miami; Owen in L.A.; a bunch more whose names I'd blocked out.

"You *let* him?" asked my editor, Steve, when I'd confessed this once. "Jesus Christ, if my wife ever caught me . . ."

Well, it wasn't like I hadn't had my own digressions, but Steve's amazement kept me from imparting this admission. (Educraft, the firm where we worked, produced texts for school kids, to prep them for state assessment tests. Because the books were sold in states like Georgia and Missouri, the office, despite its address, was more Mayberry than Gotham.)

I had lived so long within our orthodoxy of excess, I could forget how odd our customs must have seemed to Steve. For him and his faithful wife, sex was the wedding china: a spotless thing, saved for Sunday dinners. For us (so went the party line), the etiquette was less strict. Sure, we had the nice plates, the ones we used at home, but if sometimes, out of the house, we grabbed a snack on paper napkins, what earth-shaking calamity was that?

Actually, for me and Stu, it hadn't been calamitous. Not at first, especially not when we had strayed together.

We'd met in the early '90s, when AIDS was all we saw. Then came the new drugs, which nearly stopped the dying, and we were freed to take another sort of drugs, the *fun* ones. Weekends, we would pack the dance floors, licking strangers' lips, as if to spread our own subversive

joyful epidemic. Stu or I would pick a guy, or two, or they'd choose us. Once, amid the dancing throng, Stu had nuzzled my armpit; a big-eyed boy observed and stepped right up: "I'm gonna *love* you." He did, right there in the strobe lights, on his knees, and then moved on.

It wasn't always easy, in that rush of restitution, to keep sight of each other, and of *us*. We'd do this thing on the dance floor sometimes, locking mouths and breathing as a unit: I'd take air in through my nose and blow it from my mouth to his; he would gulp, then puff the exhalation back through mine. A Möbius strip of breath. A promise, a profession: I'm your lungs, your heart; I'm your life.

Which made it all the harder, then, to lose our perfect sync.

We blinked and it was the 'oos: the "oughts," we awkwardly called them. I heard it as "oughts," but not from any outside, adult force, as in *Young man, you ought to mind your manners*. My mom had died the year before, six years after Dad, and being parentless totally derailed me, even if (or maybe because) they'd often braked my progress. Eventually, though, without them, my oughts welled up within me: ought to wipe the windshield and start searching for a turn ahead, ought to dream of what I'd do or make to leave a mark.

Meanwhile, Stu was letting himself get snared in the World Wide Web. Time was, if he overnights in Phoenix or in Charlotte, and if he had some energy to spare, he'd head out to the bars and try his luck; the nights he scored were sweetened by the many when he hadn't. But now that he had Manhunt—and Gay.com, and Craigslist—Stu could scarcely take a trip without first making plans with some stranger he had ordered up like take-out. To satisfy his taste on any day he just clicked Search. A blond, green-eyed bottom between the ages of twenty and thirty, who lived within five miles of the airport Hilton? *Click*. A guy who favored dirty talk, or jockstraps? *Click, click*.

Soon he started surfing for tricks when he was in New York, disappearing for hours on every off day. The first few times I asked him where he'd been, he told the truth. After that, he lapsed into an adolescent vagueness: "Out," he'd say, or "You know, here and there."

How could I say this broke our rules? We'd chosen not to *have* rules. That was what we'd come to think constituted gay liberation.

In the past, my absence from the room when Stu was sleeping around had seemed to me mostly circumstantial: a matter of geography or timing. But now Stu's adventures seemed dependent on my absence; he wanted less to be with someone else than *not* to be with me—at least that was what I felt and feared. We had sex together, still, but that was disconnected from his drive to do things, to be things, on his own. A Stu I didn't know, a slippery, quenchless Stu, was coming to frightful life behind my back, but after years of seeing myself as part of Stu-and-Pat, I couldn't bear to break our hyphenation.

I had heard Stu's scorn when he talked about a friend of ours who made his boyfriend cancel his Manhunt profile: "You shitting me? What is he, a lesbian?" I wanted Stu back, I wanted *us* back, but didn't know how to get this, not without provoking similar salvos aimed at me.

Did that explain my mixed-up plan to go back to the Roxy, the site of our ecstatic early bonding, in hopes of finding someone for a three-way? I wanted to remind Stu of the glory days we'd shared, when we could turn the heads of any crowd we happened into—not because either of us was all that notable-looking, but because *as a unit* we gave off a fusive force: a couple so well crafted, so solidly adhered, that strangers hoped a touch of us might solder their own seams. (Maybe, like me, these strangers had grown weary of so much leeway.)

And so, with a week of off time coming up for Stu, I told him to get set for a blowout. He was spent—he'd flown through heavy weather up from Tampa—but rallied when I gave him two small pills with smiley faces. We bathed and flossed, donned our best show-off-your-pecs shirts, and sped to the club as if into our past.

(Stu had never—and wouldn't have ever—indulged in these activities without a good four days between flights. And no, not primarily due to fear of being tested; the Feds asked for his pee in a cup just once every two, three years. Stu played things safe because safety was his calling: sobriety as its own kind of high.)

The club was packed, though more than half the crowd was bridge-and-tunnel, dudes as squat as La-Z-Boys with soft slipcover girlfriends. We did spot some solo gays: punching the air, lock-jawed, wormholes where I'd hoped for smiling eyes. That was the difference crystal meth had made. I'd tried it once and hated it: it felt like someone hammered a Swiss army knife up my nose and opened all the blades inside my brain. Stu refused to touch the stuff at all.

We kept pushing ahead, to below the starry disco ball, where all the festive fags used to clump, and there was a group of old-time happy campers. Abracadabra: our pills kicked in. Everything went ribbony. The techno picked the lock of my impatience.

"Ahhh," said Stu. He reached around me, rubbed my sweaty neck. "It's great the way, when I rub yours, it feels like *mine* relaxes." He licked the honeysuckle of my ear.

"Yum," I said. "How long is your tongue? I love it."

Then Stu started to pollinate the group of guys around us. A peck to this one's cheek, a squeeze of that one's ass. "A pilot," I could hear him answer above the trippy beat. "No, really. And don't try any 'joystick' jokes, I've heard them!" An unconceited cockiness, a clean-state kind of glee, and under it all: boyish emancipation. My guess was, he'd looked the same in kosher days of Hebrew School, sneaking out to eat a BLT. Now, as then, what pleased him most was making people see the Stu he'd self-created, not the product of any faith or father.

He lingered by an acne-scarred Latino with smart blue eyes: jockey-small, dancing with an impish, clenched-hand focus. Stu quick-spun him, salsa style. They spoke with winking ease.

When I caught sight of his tramp stamp—Take It Easy, But Take It—I thought: *He's the one we're bringing home.*

"How 'bout him?" I asked when Stu returned. "You want to try? Work a little bit of our old magic?" In the old days, when we would take a third into our bedroom, it always seemed the granting of an honor. We were never haughty about it, or purposely exclusive. What we were was giddy with our own good luck in love; we longed to give someone else a glimpse.

"Nah," said Stu.

"Why not?"

"Don't know. Not really into it."

"You seemed into it a second ago. Have you met that guy before?"

Stu glanced at the man. "Define 'met.'"

I felt a twinge, but the music now was stoking up my stomach, boiling through me, turning me into vapor. Stu massaged my neck again. He sucked my Adam's apple. Then we kissed, the way we'd used to, figure-eighting air. We breathed and breathed: one big set of lungs.

A minute might have passed, or a hundred, or a half.

"Hey, I've got to pee," said Stu. "I'm heading to the bathroom."

Right—me, too; we were so in tune! "Yeah," I said. "Wait, I'll come with . . ."

Could eyes slump like shoulders? That was what Stu's did. He couldn't, or at least he didn't, hide his irritation. "I'll be quick, okay?" he said. "Stay right here. You're fine." He disappeared into the sweaty horde.

There I stood, abandoned, a hundred percent un-high. Had Stu and the Latino made a plan to go hook up? Was that why he was zipping off, without me? Or did he just want to be alone, away from me? I tried to keep dancing but my feet were like a leper's, decomposing with every little step. I didn't want Stu to catch me searching through the crowd for him, and so I bent my head and closed my eyes.

After fifteen minutes (time was sharp and strict again; I had checked and double-checked my watch), I went off to see if I could find him. He wasn't at the front bar or the back bar or the balcony. Not by the columns we had sometimes used as meeting points.

I did find the other guy, the acne-scarred Latino. Leaning against the wall outside the bathroom.

Brine on my tongue, acid up my throat. Everything burned. "Remember the guy," I said, "who you danced with? The pilot?"

He cocked his head, smiling, with a look of satiation. "Why?" he said. "You know him?"

A decent question.

What did I want to ask this fellow? If he had just had sex with Stu? And, if so, what the sex had been like? But no, what I wanted more to ask was what had *Stu* been like? The new Stu, who'd formed himself so pointedly apart.

How pathetic would that be? Asking a stranger to tell me what my lover was truly like.

What, then, could I ask? *Where is he?*

The guy's skin was shining, his sweaty nut-brown skin. Jealousy was a fuse alight within me. I battled a desperate urge to lift my hand and touch him, this creature whom my distant Stu had touched.

I didn't think I'd ever felt such shame. I said, "Forget it."

## three

Could you *decide* to want kids?

Whether to have them: that was a choice. And when, and with whom. But *wanting* them? Wasn't that just an ore you had within? At least that's how it was for me: not chosen but discovered, uncovered. At first I saw just glimmers, gold flecks in the dross. Then, with every passing year, more glow, longer veins. The mother lode was everywhere inside me.

Was Stu's desire for kids like mine? Doubtful, but who could say? He was so good at willing himself and making it seem like wanting.

The first time I looked at him and thought what kind of dad he'd be was during one of our early trips, to Prague. We had spent a chastening afternoon touring Josefov, the remnants of the old Jewish ghetto. In borrowed yarmulkes we padded through the hushed, haunted sites: the cemetery, where graves were jammed in groups like panicked captives; a synagogue whose walls teemed with names of slaughtered Jews.

We'd planned next to find a shop mentioned in our *Rough Guide*, where Stu hoped to buy some old posters (he coveted a Czechoslovakia State Railway placard from the '30s that depicted Prague Castle), but now, as we walked down the hill to Old Town Square, our destination

embarrassed me: too frivolous. And hell, if goyish *I* felt that way, how much more must Stu, who knew that but for God's good grace—or probably mindless luck—one of the corpses might have been his father's.

And yet, when you leave a place of doom and human cruelty, aren't you also sometimes pricked by weird, euphoric wildness? A sense of *Life is short, let your hair down*.

A Czech boy beckoned Stu just then, and Stu returned his flirt. I thought, *Oh, is this how Stu will cope?*

He wasn't like the hustlers we had seen at night, in New Town: slicksters with their polished porno come-ons. This boy was much younger—fifteen, sixteen, tops? Grubby at the neck, dressed in ratty castoffs, so skinny that his clothes resembled rags caught on barbed wire.

"Nice," he said. "Make feel nice, yes, yes? Okay?"—the words all diced up by his accent. He named a fee equal to the price I had seen at the airport for a carton of Camels.

Stu, without consulting me, said, "Come! Come with us." He hooked the boy's belt loop, pulled him close.

Telling the story later, in New York, I'd draw this moment out: my anger and confusion (*How could Stu not even ask me?*), my fear that the kid had hidden cronies who'd attack us. Plus, my sudden heartbreak at discovering this shady side to Stu—a man who'd exploit a teenage boy! More and more I'd lay it on, to heighten the coming twist: Stu just wanted to take the poor kid in.

His name was Mirek, and I had guessed too old: he was fourteen. After his parents died—a crash on the D5 highway—he'd lived on a beet farm with his uncle. (We pieced the tale together with a dictionary and pictograms; Mirek had already spent most of his English.) But then his uncle caught him with a boy—naked, rubbing—and kicked him out of the house, just like that. For six months he'd lived in Prague, begging, turning tricks, squatting in a vacant tool-and-die plant.

Stu let him move in with us, the three days we had left, and sleep on a rollaway in our room. He fed (and fed and fed) the kid, and bought him a winter coat, but nothing gladdened Mirek more than the Mets cap Stu gave him, which Mirek wore rapperishly raked.

I had never seen Stu be so trusting, so patient, so willing to revise all his plans. Mirek responded touchingly, softening by the hour. Walking through the sooty streets, he loved to mother-hen us, steering us from blocks he thought too dodgy. At night he would kiss us both, chastely, on the cheeks, then dive into zealous, boyish sleep.

A three-day-long threesome, but not of sex. Of sharing. (Part of me almost might have said *salvation*.)

Maybe Stu did more harm than good, by raising Mirek's hopes. Maybe he should have marched him to the Children's Welfare office, and sat there till they came up with a plan. But here was the thing: Stu was not behaving based on logic; his prudent, pilot's self was put on hold. Instead, he was guided by a fierce, blazing instinct to protect the boy—to *give*, and give *right now*.

I could remember thinking, *That's the part of parenthood you can't fake*.

Inevitably, though, we left Mirek and flew back to New York. Stu gave him some cash; what else could he do? For years, every Christmas, he sent more.

Occasionally, after Prague, he mused about *what ifs*. Going back and nabbing Mirek and flying him home to live with us, enrolling him in the Harvey Milk High School? Our place was already tiny enough—a coop—for just us two, especially since I'd left my in-house writing gig at Educraft and now did all my work for them from home. "But maybe," said Stu, "we'll build a Murphy bed inside the closet . . . or maybe we could find a bigger, cheaper place? In Brooklyn?"

He talked with great sincerity, but it was all just talk. Stu was still too married to his footloose, no-strings life, still too happy reaching for the low-hanging kind of happy.

He didn't get serious about having a kid until his sister's news.

Rina had bragged since toddlerhood of the huge brood she would rear, to rectify the family's rotten fate. Their father, Walter Nadler, said the clan had been tenacious—"needlers," as the family name suggested—but Walter's sister and brother, his four teenaged cousins, had all been turned to ash at Treblinka.

Stu could always taste that ash (that was how he talked of it), growing up in Walter Nadler's household: dense, smothering lungfuls of compulsion. The weight would have sunk him if it weren't for Rina's promise to their parents, after Stu came out as gay: *Shush, I'll give you grandkids till they're crawling out your ears!*

Things had looked good recently: she'd married Richard Feinberg, a man who absolutely wanted kids. Three, in fact: "A triangle is the strongest shape," he'd say. "Knock one side, the others hold it up."

They gave themselves a year of "just us" bliss (or so I guessed), then buckled down into baby-making mode. At Labor Day, when we all shared a house at Seaside Heights, the two of them conspicuously kept heading for the bedroom, at all hours, to—wink, wink—take naps. But at the next family klatch, at New Year's, in Manhattan, the news was that there wasn't any news. "Can't complain," said Richard bravely. "A few more rolls in the hay . . ."

Six more months of nothing, though, and Rina sought a doctor, who asked if sex was painful, if lately she'd been cranky. "Trying and getting nowhere? Of course it hurts," she told him. "Don't you think *you'd* be cranky, too?"

The doctor ran some tests and returned a diagnosis: premature ovarian failure. "A few women with POF—5 percent—get pregnant. With your levels? I wouldn't hold my breath."

Rina asked if her eggs could be harvested, at least.

"Well, but see, there aren't really eggs left to be harvested. The point is that you started with too few."

"I wanted," she said later, "to shove the point right up his ass."

Stu doused his grief, as usual, with dark humor. Double whammy,

he told me, for the dying-out Nadlers: one child has POF, the other is a poof.

But the humor, we both knew, was an overcompensation. And so was his ensuing bender, a flurry of online hook-ups that he plowed through with fatalistic haste—like someone in a high-speed chase who nears the cop-car barricade and wildly, for an instant, floors the gas.

This was the spree that led me to plan that awful Roxy night.

After the Roxy, I told Stu of my sickening beggar's shame: wanting to ask a stranger for some scrap of who Stu was. I told him that I couldn't afford to feel that way again, that if I did, I'd have to think of leaving.

"But Pat," he said. "You know me better than anyone in the world. Better than maybe I know myself, I honestly think. Believe me. So please: don't give up on me. I'm sorry."

I didn't want to give up. I wanted not to want to. But if I closed my eyes, the feelings all came back: alone in the club, that nausea of desertion.

Only a few weeks later, in bed, before sleep, Stu pressed close and cupped my naked shoulder. "What if," he said. "What if *we* had a baby?"

It caught me by surprise, as did my almost immediate inclination to say yes.

"Of course there's a million things to figure out," he said. "And most of the burden would fall on you, I know, since you're at home. But I'd be here as much as I could. And maybe my folks would, too. People do it. People work it out."

Whether to have a baby together was probably not the question that I should, at that moment, have been asking. More reasonable was whether to *stay* together. But Stu seemed convincingly to have come to the end of something: not just one particular binge, but the whole phase, the frantic, fruitless search. Rina's diagnosis seemed to change him almost physically, as if the capability that withered in his sister had somehow been transplanted into him. He looked . . . how could I say it? *More full*. His chest, his face.

Continuing the Nadler line was now, he felt, his duty. "Actually, more than a duty, though," he told me. "More like a privilege. Same as how I felt on my bar mitzvah."

"But Stu," I said. "You don't believe in Judaism. Did you ever?"

"Not the, you know . . . whatever, the stuff about God. But standing there, saying the words my father had said, and *his* father? It's almost like I hadn't learned the prayers: *they'd* learned *me*. Hard to describe. A bigness, you know? It's bigger than just *my* feelings."

He said he finally understood the word *reproduction*: he dreamed of seeing the family features reproduced again. The thick hair, the forceful Nadler nose.

Here, then, was our difference: keeping his family going was the gist, for Stu, of fatherhood; for me it meant inventing a family *separate* from my old one, showing myself (and everyone else) that I could be a parent—better at the job than my own folks.

Stu wanted to *father* a child, and I wanted to *raise* one. Couldn't our goals happily coincide?

My friend Joseph was less sanguine: "How about an *imaginary* baby, like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? You could still fight about it, but no diapers."

I'd gone to see him at Educraft, where he was the managing editor. Joseph was making espresso for a red eye in the kitchen. Keyboards in the main room clacked like hamsters' wheeling feet.

"But I've been wanting kids," I said. "I've told you that already." I mentioned Zack and Glenn—my first gay-father friends—and Milo, their magnetic little son. Zack was white, Glenn was black, and they'd made Milo mixed: Glenn's sperm plus a Caucasian donor's egg. The boy had bewitching eyes, a sepia complexion like someone in an old family photo. "Every time I'm with him," I said, "I crave one of my own."

"Yes, but you and *Stu*? I wouldn't have thought."

Joseph and Stu, I'd had to accept, were not the best of pals. Stu complained (and not without a measure of justification) that Joseph's

sense of humor was a trick birthday candle: amusing at first, but pretty soon you're desperate to put it out.

But Joseph had been my fairy godfather since I'd first hit New York. He'd landed me my job and my rent-controlled apartment, and took it upon himself to be my one-man homo Harvard: teaching subjects from literature (Isherwood, Capote) to geography (the city's cruisiest corners). Joseph, who'd outlived his lover, Luis, and two-thirds of the friends in their address book, had affection to spare, and I was glad to take it.

Lately I'd confided in him my growing spousal doubts. He knew all about Stu's extracurriculars.

"What if Stu continues with his wanton ways?" he said. "And you're barefoot and pregnant, as it were."

"I don't think he will," I said. "He's changing. This will help."

Joseph downed his red eye in a single shuddering gulp. "Having a baby to save the marriage? Yawn."

Fate then gave another little nudge. This time, *my* sisters.

Sally and Brenda, with whom I'd been sharing our parents' cottage, announced that they wanted to sell the place. They had never spent as much time there as I, and had less at stake in its upholding—maybe because they both had their own conventional families now (square holes in which they'd safely nestled their square selves), and didn't dread the judgment of our old-guard parents' ghosts.

The cottage was no longer worth the cost to them, they said, and, even if it were, neither could afford it. Sally, who had a son at Choate and another on the verge of applying, had recently given birth to twin girls (a shock to everyone, considering her complaints, last Thanksgiving, of the burn of an early menopause). And Brenda, the younger, had lost much of her savings when a pet-food business she'd bet on went bankrupt.

The house was admittedly a monster to maintain. Constructed in the pre-global warming, go-go '50s, it featured a convoluted system of copper pipes that could never quite successfully be drained, which

meant we had to run the boiler all winter long. Practically the whole north-facing wall was picture windows, and heat leaked in torrents through the glass.

Now, after four grudging years of bill dividing—the mortgage, the insurance, the property taxes, the heat—my sisters both said they needed out. The only way to keep the cottage would be to buy their shares, which Stu and I could never swing, on top of our other expenses. We just couldn't. Not if we stayed in New York.

I took him to the cottage for Presidents' Day weekend. A storm had just tickled the Cape with snow.

The three days were empty in the healthiest of ways. We caught up on *Vanity Fairs*, played endless games of hearts; sometimes we just stared out at the bay. Hour by hour I watched as Stu shed his need for noise—the city's ceaseless peep show of distractions—and tuned in to the song of his own thoughts.

How I loved the cottage and its ambitious anachronisms, which brought me back to boyhood summers of big and careless dreams. My dad had only come down here as work allowed, on weekends; Sally and Brenda would canter off to horse camps in Maine; and so it was mostly me and Mom. We clammed and played badminton, pattered in the yard; she taught me names of hawks and oaks and blooms. Nights, we'd steam mussels we had plucked from a nearby jetty, or, if we were tuckered out from all our independence, drive to town for Baxter's fish and chips.

Once, on a foggy afternoon, we went to Plymouth, to see (for maybe the third time) the Rock. Circling for a parking spot, my mom suddenly braked. "Pat, look!" she said. "On that street sign: it's *you!*" The name of an alley we were passing was Faunce Place; I felt the satisfaction (and the onus) of entitlement. *Faunce Place*. The place where a Faunce belonged.

Nth-degree, that was how I felt about the cottage—the place on earth where everything seemed unassailably mine, and more than that:

just plain unassailable. The sun rose exactly where a sun *should* in the windows; the air was the salty, ageless definition of air.

Stu must have had a hint or two of my intentions, because, when I proposed the plan, he didn't object in principle. He said, "I'd have to see about a transfer."

We were down at Sandy Neck, walking along the shore. The winter sky was paler than the sand.

"Logan's a busy base for us," he said. "I could commute—you know, take puddle-jumpers from Hyannis? Remember Chuck, my redhead friend from flight school? That's what he does now. Air-commutes to LGA from Montauk."

I knew he would have to deal with much more than logistics. Moving to the Cape, for me, would be a kind of homecoming; for him it would mean leaving the only place he'd lived. So maybe this was all just talk, like going back for Mirek.

But Stu wasn't spiling in the swollen tone he sometimes used; his voice now was flat and straight and small. "And you?" he said. "You'd keep your gig with Educraft? You could?"

Moving was no problem for me, work-wise, I assured him. All I needed? A laptop, an Internet connection, a road up which UPS could drive.

"All right, then," he said. "Fair enough."

He looked, as he scuffed along the surf, staid and doleful, squinting at the blankness of the sky. Far from draining my confidence, his look was what encouraged me: despite how much the move might sting, he was preparing to choose this. Choose us.

Life on the Cape wouldn't "solve" the problems we'd been having, or keep Stu from cruising on the Web, if he reverted. I knew he might still find men in various ports of call. But if we were to stay together, to have a kid together, I would need collateral—assurance of his commitment—and starting a new life out here could provide that.

This place was a calming force, an antidote to frenzy. I'd been struck, this weekend, sharing the empty hours with Stu: the cottage, more than

anywhere else, left us *unadulterated*, by which I meant both closest to the essence of our union and farthest from our various infidelities.

"You know," said Stu, walking beside me, "it actually makes good sense. The condo's too small to raise a kid in. The city's too full of filth. Not to mention a hundred times more pricey." He ticked off the reasons on his fingers. "All of that would be different here. *Everything* would be, right?" He balled his fingers into a fist of conviction.

This was when he might have whooped or pulled me to his breast; a Stu in the movies might have done that. But my Stu, the one I loved—despite, still, regardless—my Stu only held my little finger. He spoke not a word but told me everything he needed to (*sorry, my sweet, so sorry; you're mine; I adore you*) with tiny, tender pulsings of his hand.

We listened to the landing waves, their message: *Kiss! Kiss!*