

PARALLEL PLAY

by Art Taylor

The Teeter Toddlers class was finally drawing to a close—and none too soon, Maggie thought, keeping an eye on the windows and the dark clouds crowding the sky.

Ms. Amy, the instructor, had spread the parachute across the foam mats and gathered everyone on top of it. The children had jumped to catch and pop the soap bubbles she'd blown into the air. They'd sat cross-legged on the parachute and sung umpteen verses of "Wheels on the Bus" and two rounds of "Itsy Bitsy Spider." The routine never varied, the children's delight never waned—at least until the time came to raise that parachute with its spiral of colors into the air.

"Everybody off and let's go under," Ms. Amy said in a sing-songy voice. The children scrambled clear. The adults pulled the edges of the fabric tight. The parachute rose. All the kids raced beneath.

Or nearly all of them. Maggie's son, Daniel, grabbed her leg with his chubby fingers and held on tight.

"Don't you want to join your friends?" Maggie urged, same as she did each week. Daniel shook his head.

"No like," he mumbled into her thigh.

Despite what he said, Maggie knew he *did* like the parachute—or at least watching it, how it rose and fell, how it floated at the top for a moment and then drifted downward as the children giggled and tussled beneath. He seemed enchanted by it really—and Maggie saw some comfort there too, the parachute like a blanket slowly coming to rest, encircle, and enfold. But much as Daniel liked to watch, he refused to join the other kids underneath it, and generally he kept a distance from them, preferring to play on his own. Ms. Amy always asked one of the parents to crawl beneath as well, to keep the rowdiness under control, but the one time Maggie had volunteered, beckoning her son to join her, Daniel had stood at the edges and wept, almost frantically, until another

parent—Walter, the only dad in the class—had graciously swapped places with her.

Walter was actually looking her way now too. He smiled, Maggie shrugged. What could you do?

“Maybe next time,” Maggie said to Daniel, as Ms. Amy began to sing.

*Come under my umbrella, umbrella, umbrella,
Come under my umbrella, it's starting to storm.
There'll be thunder and lightning, and wind and rain.
Come under my umbrella, it's starting to storm.*

Maggie could hear the steady patter of rain overhead now. Through the windows, the sky was nearly black.

As she'd told Amy when they got to class late, her husband, Ben, was away on yet another business trip, and with all her hustling to get Daniel dressed and ready for class, she'd felt lucky to have gotten them out the door at all. Now she kicked herself for forgetting to check the weather earlier—and for forgetting an umbrella.

“Almost done,” she whispered, more to herself than to Daniel. But as she ran her fingers through his wispy blond hair, she could feel his tension easing up a bit.

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By the time they'd gotten shoes tied, hands washed, and made their way out the lobby door, the skies had indeed broken open—a hard, driving rain. Short gusts of wind pushed a cold spray under the awning, splattering it against Maggie's bare calves. First the forgotten umbrella, and now this. She kicked herself a second time for wearing such a short skirt today. She could feel that spray even when she stepped to the back of the sidewalk as other moms rushed past her to their cars, each of them hoisting a child in one arm and holding an umbrella up with the other.

All those *good* mothers, Maggie thought, the ones on top of everything.

Perched in her arm, Daniel leaned against her shoulder. She held up a hand to shield his face.

“If my wife hadn't reminded me this morning, I'd have forgotten mine, too.” A man's voice, beside her. When she turned, Walter smiled and hefted a big golf umbrella, closed tight. “If you're game, mine's big enough for two. Or four, I mean.” He nodded to Daniel. His own little boy—Jordan, a redhead wearing a dour look—stood beside him.

Wife, Maggie thought. At least that cleared up some things.

Another woman in the class (Kristen? Katrina?) had wondered whether Walter was a single dad or maybe a widower. Or maybe his wife

worked and he stayed home? No one had asked him directly. Maggie wondered if there hadn't been some interest on Kristen/Katrina's part. Walter wore thick-rimmed glasses, was graying at the temples, but he wasn't unhandsome really, and Maggie had even caught herself admiring the way he handled his son. Unlike the occasional father who tagged along with his wife or filled in for a single class—checking his smartphone every few minutes, awkward, distracted—Walter seemed eager and attentive, always making sure Jordan didn't cut in line for any of the activities, always encouraging a “please” or a “thank you.” Once, several of the mothers had gone across the street for frozen yogurt after class, and Walter had tagged along too, giving his son the bites with the most sprinkles and finally all of the cone.

“Chivalry lives?” Maggie asked.

“Common courtesy,” Walter said. He shrugged. “It's up to you. But it doesn't seem like it's going to let up anytime soon.”

As if on cue, a ripple of thunder rushed toward them. Heavier rain now, puddling and splashing. She turned to Daniel, who met her look with a hopeful one of his own.

“Jordan,” he said, pointing down at the little boy—surprising Maggie.

Jordan stared forlornly into the parking lot, seemingly impervious to the rain, but Walter smiled again.

“If you're sure you don't mind,” Maggie said. “We had to park three rows that way and then halfway up. We'd be drenched before we got there.”

Walter picked up Jordan. With a flick of his hand, he opened the umbrella wide and tilted it slightly her way. Each of them tried awkwardly to match the other's pace as she led them toward her car.

“I think we're going to get soaked anyway,” Walter said, raising his voice over the sound of the rain. “Here.” He huddled closer to her, almost stepping on Maggie's toes—close enough she could smell his cologne, some blend of mint and leather.

“I'm fine,” she started to say, or “No worries”—something like that, but then Daniel started wiggling, and it was all she could do to keep him and herself balanced.

As she opened the back door and wrestled Daniel into his seat, Walter maneuvered the umbrella over her, leaving himself almost completely in the rain. She struggled to fasten the buckles quickly, fumbled too much, then Walter walked her to the driver's side and spread the umbrella across the open door.

“Knight in shining armor,” she said. “I mean it.” Another gust misted the inside of the car.

Walter's face was dripping now. His glasses wore a thick sheen of water. Something twitched at one corner of his lips—maybe trying to muster a smile. “Tougher dragons to slay, I’m sure.”

As she started the car, she saw in the side mirror that he'd knelt down by the rear tire. The spokes of his umbrella scraped lightly against the glass. How he kept his hold on Jordan, she wasn't sure.

He stood back up and knocked on her window.

“Your tire,” he said when she rolled it down. “Looks like it may be going flat.”

She nodded. “Thanks. I’ll get it checked.”

“Seriously,” he said. “I’d be worried, if I were you.”

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Most of the traffic on the highway crawled through the mess, while other cars sped and weaved around the slower ones, swerving sharply to avoid the puddles rimming the road. Sometimes they missed, and water sprayed across Maggie's windshield, blinding her. A Toyota in front of her hydroplaned briefly, then righted itself. The brake lights magnified and blurred in the downpour. Her wipers could barely keep up.

By halfway home, Maggie could hear a dull rumble from the back corner, something indeed wrong with the tire, and the problem quickly got worse. Even when she turned onto the two-lane toward Clifton and was able to slow down more, she felt the whole car shimmying a little, pulling to the left. In the back, Daniel had begun to whimper.

Nowhere to stop at this point, and too many rollercoaster hills and turns still ahead. Sometimes cars barreled down right on top of you along these turns, impatient, impulsive, but the road was mostly clear today. She'd met one truck in the oncoming lane and glimpsed only a single pair of headlights far behind her, apparently as cautious as she was.

Her cell phone sat in the cup holder. She reached toward it, pressed the talk button. “Call Ben,” she said and then was surprised when he picked up.

“How's my best buddy doing?” he asked, his voice tinny, distant over the speaker. Other voices in the background.

“He's fine, but I'm struggling.” She explained about the tire, about the weather.

“Call Triple-A when you get home. They should be able to swap it out for the spare, at least for now.” She could hear him turning away, saying something to someone else on his end.

“Wish you were here,” she said.

“I know, I know. You hate to call the repairman.”

But that wasn't what she'd meant.

Another bit of conversation on the other end. Then: “Sorry, hon. Between meetings, but duty’s calling. Tell Danny I love him.” And he was gone.

“Daddy says hello,” she repeated, even though Daniel had surely heard. “He loves you.”

After the call ended, the phone chirped a battery warning. Apparently she’d forgotten to charge it.

Lucky to have gotten out of the house at all that morning, just like she’d told Ms. Amy.

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She breathed a little more easily when she finally turned onto the last road home, the trees overhead blocking some of the rain, the Kinseys’ house and the Millers’ and Frank Hadley’s small field, the familiar run of mailboxes, the UPS truck parked at the top of Mrs. Beatley’s drive. What an awful day for that job, she thought, rushing in and out of the weather with packages in hand—then felt a brief twinge of guilt, trying to remember if she was expecting one herself.

And then they were home, the car limping down the long, steep drive toward the house. She slowed as the water sluiced down the pavement, kept the car steady, eased them the final few feet.

More than anything, her husband had wanted a house with lots of land. No neighbors on top of you, room for Daniel to have a big yard, the kind of place Ben never had as a boy himself. Maggie understood how nice it was, especially in a dense area like northern Virginia. A refuge, a haven, Ben had said more than once, and she could see it too. But sometimes, especially with him traveling so much, and especially on a day like today, the space felt isolated, lonely even.

“Let’s go, little man,” she said, hoisting Daniel out of the car. They had a carport instead of a full garage, and here too the rain was sweeping underneath, but she stopped for a minute to check the tire. It was completely flat, and the edges of the wheel had been ground up a little where she’d driven on it. Ben would love that.

She went inside, took off Daniel’s shoes, and was heading to call Triple-A when the doorbell rang. Daniel rushed to it immediately, darting around her, already pushing past her as she reached for the knob. He loved when the mailman came by and the UPS driver too. Poor man, she thought, readying her apology.

But it wasn’t UPS at the door.

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Walter's glasses were still covered by rain, the drops so thick she couldn't see his eyes, and somehow that troubled her nearly as much as having him show up on the doorstep. Jordan stood beside him, and there was something unreal about that too, as if the two of them had materialized there, same as they'd been standing back at Teeter Toddlers. Except he wasn't the same, was he? No, he wasn't holding an umbrella now and...

"The tire," he said. "I didn't think you'd make it all the way home, figured I'd have to play knight in shining armor again. But here you are."

Too stunned to answer, Maggie tried to snatch Daniel back and shut the door, but her son pulled away from her like it was a game, poked his head around one knee, then the other, and then into the doorway again.

"Hey, Daniel," Walter said, stooping down, leaning forward, releasing his own son's hand to take Daniel's instead. "It's Jordan, your friend."

"Jordan," Daniel repeated, and Maggie could hear a mix of pleasure and surprise in his voice, like when he got a new Matchbox car.

Walter stared up through those smeared glasses. "I hate to barge in for a play date unannounced, but given the circumstances..."

Maggie shook her head, tried to hold back the tears suddenly welling up behind her eyes, finally found her voice. "It's really not a good time right now. My husband—"

"Away on a business trip." Walter nodded. "I heard you talking to Amy, that's what got me thinking about this, making sure you got home in one piece." He looked at Daniel again, smiled. "Surely you could spare a few minutes for the boys to play."

She nodded—unconsciously, reflex really. "A few minutes," she said. "A few, of course."

Her words sounded unreal to her, more than his own now, and even as she said them, she knew it was the wrong decision—everything, in fact, the opposite of what she'd always thought she'd do in a case like this. But really what choice did she have, the way Walter had inserted his foot into the doorway and held so tightly to Daniel's hand?

And then there was the box cutter jittering slightly in Walter's other hand, raindrops glistening along the razor's edge, the truth behind that flat tire suddenly becoming clear.

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"They call it parallel play," Walter said a few minutes later. They'd settled into the couch in the living room. The scent of his cologne seemed suddenly oppressive. Maggie was self-conscious again about having worn such a short skirt, different reasons now. The boys played on the floor a few feet away—out of Maggie's reach, but at least out of Walter's as well. Jordan still hadn't smiled, but he pushed a couple of Daniel's cars

across the top of the coffee table, something Maggie didn't allow Daniel to do, since Ben worried it would scratch the wood. As Daniel pushed his own cars on the floor, he stole glances at each of them in turn—smiling broadly, as if he couldn't quite believe all this was really happening.

Maggie tried desperately to work past her own disbelief, to fight that feeling of everything crumbling and crashing, to figure out a way through this. She'd heard about the bank teller who talked the robber into releasing all his hostages, the receptionist who convinced the school shooter to lay down his guns. Such things had happened, they had.

"I don't know what you mean," she lied. "Tell me more."

"Parallel play," Walter said again. "Kids this age, they don't really play together, they just play side by side—sharing the space but not really connecting, not yet." Walter's hand rested loosely on the box cutter between them, and Maggie was vaguely grateful it was at least closer to her than to her son. "It's like us, really."

"Like us?"

"Don't you agree? Think about it, how our lives have run along these parallel paths. Both of us becoming parents about the same time, both of us having little boys, both of us struggling to teach and correct and nurture those little boys. And then us coming together at Teeter Toddlers once a week—crossing paths, chatting here and there, chasing after our kids, turning away, coming back together again." He tapped the couch with his index finger, the rest of his hand not leaving the blade. "Sometimes, between our meetings each week, I think about you."

Maggie looked around the room, at all the things she sometimes took for granted. Wedding photographs and honeymoon pictures, Ben hoisting her up in his arms on the beach in Cancun, those carefree early days. The Champagne glasses from their wedding stood on a bar in the corner, the ones they took down each New Year's for a toast to renewal and recommitment. And then the photographs of Daniel as a newborn, the framed birth announcement, even the little hat he'd worn in the hospital, folded up in a small box frame—the first exciting taste of parenthood. On a higher shelf, an antique clock from her parents whirred and ticked in a glass case. She'd recently moved it out of Daniel's reach, since it was so very fragile.

Everything seemed fragile to her now, fragile and fleeting, seeing it like this.

She saw the room too with another set of fresh eyes. Those heavy candlesticks Ben's mother had given them, the marble paperweight on the desk across the room and Ben's brass letter opener beside it, the fire tools—everything she might use against Walter, all of it too far away. The phone was the closest thing to her, mere inches from the couch. But

how quickly could she get to it and dial 9-1-1? And how long would it take anyone to respond—especially out here, especially today?

“I can only imagine how it’s been for you,” Walter went on, “but for my wife and me... Well, hardly feels like we’re husband and wife anymore, some days hardly even friends. You think of being parents as being part of a team, bringing you closer, unifying you, but at best we’re like a tag team, a couple of caretakers. One or the other of us takes the late shift, one or the other gets up for early morning, each of us taking note of who did what and for how long—bean-counting, pettiness. What have you done for the baby lately, huh? And with her working full time, eight to five, and my job—”

The lights flickered, browned briefly, like the whole world skipping a heartbeat. The boys perked up their heads. Daniel turned a worried eye toward his mother. The rain held a steady patter against the roof and windows. The power caught again.

“It’s going to be okay,” she said, to the boys, to herself. She’d been clenching the fringe of the seat cushion. Slowly she released her grip. “I think it’s normal, the nature of parenting,” she said to Walter then, the kind of thing she’d read in advice columns. “My husband and I are very happy.”

Walter turned her way. “Are you?” He squinted a little, crow’s feet at the corners. “Because the way you’ve looked at me sometimes in class, and then this morning, flirting a little with me—”

On the floor, Jordan grabbed at something in Daniel’s hand—a little blue convertible, his favorite car.

“Stop,” Daniel cried. “Mine.” His face was suddenly anguished.

Jordan seemed neither angry nor concerned—simply kept his grip on the car and stared at Daniel, unremitting.

“Children, children,” Walter said. “Remember to share.” His voice was calm and patient, and the way he wagged his hand at them would’ve seemed innocent except for that box cutter. Maggie wasn’t sure which of the boys he was reprimanding.

She didn’t realize she was holding her breath until Walter put his hand back on the couch—the blade closer again to her instead of pointed at the boys.

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Before Daniel was born and even afterward, during all those breast-feeding sessions, all that rocking him to sleep, Maggie couldn’t get her fill of books and articles and blog posts about parenting a newborn: not just why to breast-feed but how, swaddling techniques and sleeping routines, advice on balancing the baby’s needs with her own, tips for managing

the changing relationship with her husband. Ben had joked about her addiction, but she'd found so much of it educational.

She remembered now getting caught up in a discussion board right after Daniel was born—one headlined with a single, simple question: “Would you die for your child?” There had already been pages of comments in reply, almost unanimously “yes,” but Maggie had felt compelled to add her own comment.

“In a heartbeat,” she'd written, with a surge of love and pride, and when she'd told Ben about it later, he'd agreed.

“What parent wouldn't do the same if it came to it?” he'd said. “What good parent?”

It had seemed so easy at the time, the world in balance somehow.

Now everything seemed in disarray, verging on chaos.

Outside, the rain had intensified again. Lightning flashed. Fresh bursts of thunder sounded in the distance. Wasn't that usually before the storm—the warning signs of trouble ahead?

“Mama,” Daniel said. “Juice?”

“Of course, honey,” Maggie said, then caught herself. She turned to Walter. “Is it okay for me to get him something to drink?”

Walter crinkled his forehead. “Of course. Why wouldn't it be?”

When she stood, Walter rose and followed her. The living room and kitchen were an open floor plan, only a few steps away, but he'd probably considered, as she had, the knives in there, the kitchen mallet, the meat cleaver.

At least he'd be farther away from Daniel, she thought, but having him behind her, out of sight for even those few seconds walking to the kitchen, unnerved her in a different way. Step after step, she waited for him to attack. Silly, really, to have worried right then. He could've done it at any time.

He stood close to her as she poured the juice. She made a sippy cup for Jordan as well, for which Walter thanked her. As she watched the boys playing with their cars, vrooming here and there on the floor, she gauged the distance to the knives in the block. Then Walter stepped in between, gesturing at something else on the counter.

“You have a tea set,” he said. “Actual silver?”

“Stainless,” she said.

“Some tea would be nice, don't you think? On a day like this?”

The unreality of it all struck her again, his casual, conversational tone. Keep him happy, Maggie reminded herself, keep him satisfied. “Would you like me to make some?”

“Only if you'd like a cup yourself.” He smiled. “I'd hate to impose.”

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“Delicious,” Walter said, taking a sip with his left hand, keeping the other one between them as before. “And such a beautiful set.”

She’d brought out the complete tray: a full pot, cups and saucers, a sugar and creamer, a pair of ornate spoons. A small plate of crackers too, which the boys were enjoying with their sippy cups. “Here’s your favorite,” she’d said to Daniel, touching his hair—some small comfort in the midst of all this uneasiness before Walter had patted the couch for her to join him again.

“You know,” Walter said. “This is what I’d imagined really, when I pictured being a parent. Kids playing on the floor, my wife and I sitting on the couch—doing the crossword or reading a book or having tea like this.” He held up the cup in his left hand, a little awkwardly. “But my wife these days, she’ll make a cup of coffee for herself and never even think I might want one, never even think.” He laughed, ugliness behind it. “Do you and your husband ever do things like this?”

She shook her head. “It’s tough to find time.”

“You have to *make* time.” A sudden sharp edge underscored his words.

Maggie sipped her tea. She’d loaded it with sugar, but it tasted bitter.

“And isn’t time what it’s all about?” Walter said. “I’d thought we were lucky, my wife and me, with our situation. My schedule had always been pretty flexible—project management over at MicroCom—and since most of us telecommuted anyway, I figured I’d stay home with Jordan, work at nap time and then nights after my wife got home. Keep him from having to go into day care immediately, you know? But it was so much harder than I’d expected, especially since Jordan has never been a good sleeper. Sometimes, you know, I wanted to shake him. Don’t you know I’ve got emails to answer? Don’t you know there’s a deadline looming, and the boss is waiting? Why can’t you go to sleep?”

He smiled at Jordan, who had glanced up at his name. “Isn’t that right, little fella?” he said, but his son just stared back at him with another dull expression.

“And then my wife, the way she’d come home sometimes too tired to take over like we’d agreed. Too tired for him, for me, for anything, it seemed like, and all of a sudden it’s falling back on Mr. Mom again, right? Me pushing back those emails and those deadlines, her pushing me away.” His fingers drummed against the cushion, his palm against the box cutter, the blade catching and cutting lightly into the cushion. “Sometimes I wanted to shake her too, shake all of us up, shake everything loose. I’ve been so tired.”

“I know.” Maggie forced a small laugh. “I feel like I haven’t gotten a full night’s sleep since Daniel was born.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Walter said. “It’s more of an... existential tired.” He shook his head. “I feel like I’m disappearing bit by bit.”

The children had moved onto wooden blocks now. Daniel had built a small tower of them, and as he put a red triangle on top, Jordan calmly and deliberately pushed a pickup truck into it, toppling the pieces.

“Play nicely, boys,” Maggie said, unsettled by Jordan but trying not to seem like she was reprimanding him alone. Walter didn’t seem to notice, and neither of the boys responded to her, but Jordan did pick up the blocks and begin to help Daniel rebuild.

Daniel smiled. Maggie felt relieved. If it weren’t for the circumstances, she’d have felt grateful her son had found a friend.

“I got laid off last week,” Walter said. “And if I felt like there was nothing left of me before...” He was staring off into a corner of the room now, or maybe somewhere inside of himself, the box cutter still fraying the fabric of the cushion. “I don’t know if you know how that makes a man feel. How useless, how... how impotent. And since my wife and I—” He shifted, turned toward Maggie. His grip on the cutter tightened again. “Do you know how long it’s been since...”

Maggie tried to keep eye contact as he struggled to find the words. Whatever she’d been trying to do here, talking him down, whatever, she was losing faith it would work. At some point, he would force himself on her, and she could take that, she thought, she could survive it, as long as he didn’t kill her. But she worried more about Daniel. Whatever Walter was going to do with her, would he do it in front of the boys? Would he take her away to the bedroom and leave the children alone out here? And what if something happened to one of them while they were—

“What is it you want?” Maggie asked finally, barely getting the words out herself. “From this, I mean.”

“The way we talked this morning, I thought we might be...” He seemed to be searching for the word. “Friendly. I need a friend.”

“And this is the way you try to find that?” She glanced toward the box cutter. She tried to sound firm.

“Sometimes friendliness needs a little encouragement.” He smiled, satisfied. It was a terrible thing to see.

The lights flickered and browned again. Something in the distance buzzed and hummed, sizzled, burned. Then the power went out for good.

“Don’t worry. It’s going to be fine,” Walter said, and he put his hand with the box cutter on Maggie’s thigh. He seemed to intend it as a gesture of reassurance, but his hand was colder than the blade.

His talk about impotence, the comment about being existentially tired, about disappearing. His calmness. His coldness. Everything came

together, and she could picture how easily, there at the end, they all might die.

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In the instant after the power went out, the instant after he touched her bare leg with that cold hand, Maggie lunged forward and grabbed the teapot. She swung it toward his head. She felt the blade nick her skin, ducked from his hand as it swung upward. She pulled the top off the pot too and splashed the hot tea toward his eyes. Then she hit him again.

The room wasn't dark, only shadowed. The boys had surely seen at least dimly what she'd done. Already startled by the power outage, they hustled back on the rug, away from whatever was happening, and then jumped again when Maggie leapt past the coffee table toward them.

"It was an accident," she said. "Everything's going to be okay." She could hear Walter moaning and writhing behind her as she reached for Daniel. He squirmed and pushed against her as she started toward the door. Almost by reflex, she grabbed Jordan too.

Then she ran.

Out the door, into the rain, anywhere but in the house.

Wind and water lashed against her. The boys tucked their heads into her neck, held tight now, trying to shield themselves. At least that worked in her favor.

Daniel had grown so much heavier in recent months she'd struggled sometimes to carry him for long, and now Jordan added extra weight. Would Walter have hurt his own child if she'd left him behind? She couldn't even consider that phrase: *left behind*. Instinct, maternal instinct maybe. Either way, she would do this, she would.

But where to now?

As she ran, everything lurking at the back of her mind rushed to the forefront, and everything she saw struck her with an awful clarity. With the power out, the phone had been dead. Her own cell had been dying, useless she was sure. It didn't matter whether her tire was flat, because Walter's car was parked behind hers, angled slightly across the driveway, maybe to make sure she couldn't steer around it. As for the drive itself, the water coursing down made it impossible for her to get to the road, a steep climb even without two children.

She could've stayed in the house, she knew. Those candlesticks, the letter opener, the knives in the kitchen. But could she have used any of those things on him while the boys watched? She shuddered at the thought.

What neighbor would be home? The Millers next door wouldn't be back from work for hours. Hadn't the Kinseys gone on vacation?

Frank Hadley, who lived across the fallow field, had retired. That's all she knew about him really. Kept to himself, never much more than a wave in passing. Still her best bet, and she made for it.

Her hair matted against her, clung to her face, blocked one eye. Her arms ached. Her legs too, especially against the uneven dirt of the field. Her thigh was warm. Blood, she knew.

Daniel was crying now, soft sobs into her shoulder. Behind her, she thought she heard her name being shouted from back at her own house. Another shout, this one indistinct. A flash of lightning above.

"We're playing tag," she said. "We're playing hide and seek." She wasn't sure if either of the boys heard her, if Jordan even knew what hide and seek was, but she kept on. "It's a game, it's all a game."

She ran harder.

* * * *

No car at Hadley's. The power out there as well. Maggie's ankle had turned somewhere in the field, the same leg that had been cut, and she was limping now. All of them were soaked.

"We have to hide," she said. "We've got to win the game, okay? I need you boys to help."

Daniel looked bewildered, Jordan looked dazed. She couldn't imagine what she looked like to them.

Then she heard a banging and saw a workshed behind the house, the door hanging loose where the wind had caught it. She glanced back across the field. Walter was on the far side, making his way toward them. She rushed toward the shed, hoping Jordan hadn't seen him.

The shed was the size of a small garage, the inside mostly shadowed, but light filtered through a couple of dirty windows. She could make out a small workbench with a few tools on a rack above, and more hanging on the wall. A concrete floor, covered here and there with dirt or sawdust. A small lawnmower had been pushed into one corner. A couple of sawhorses stood nearby, a faded tarp draped across them.

She put the children down, her arms nearly numb now. Water dripped from her hair, from every inch of her. "Over here, boys. Come on." She lifted the tarp. Neither of them moved. Jordan stared at her with apprehension. Daniel shook his head. They were soaked too.

"Everybody up and let's go under," she said, trying to mimic Ms. Amy's singing. Jordan seemed curious now, even if the drab tarp was a poor substitute for the colorful parachute. He moved tentatively toward her, but Daniel seemed even more fearful.

"I need you boys to do this," she said, and she felt herself beginning to crumble again—fought to keep things light. She reached out and

touched her son, smoothing his wet hair behind his ear, trying to comfort. “Daniel, you’ve got to be my little man, okay?”

Daniel shook his head more firmly, determined. “No like,” he said. Behind him the door banged, startling them all. Jordan jumped toward her, and she hugged him, easing him behind her. It wasn’t Walter yet, just the wind again, but he was coming, he’d be there soon.

She began to sing, her voice trembling and cracking. “Come under my umbrella, umbrella, umbrella. Come under my umbrella, it’s startling to—” She wanted to go back to the morning, to the comfort of the class, the parachute there. She wanted to erase having accepted Walter’s umbrella, to undo everything that had happened since then.

“Car,” came a voice beside her. Jordan. He held up a tiny hand, one of the Matchbox cars clutched in it. She hadn’t even seen. “Here,” he said. He opened his hand toward Daniel.

Slowly, too slowly, Daniel moved past her, took the car, and the two of them sat down together beneath the tarp.

Maggie smiled, felt the tears finally come. She wanted to crawl under there with them, snuggle close, hide from everything. But instead she forced herself to pull down the edges of the tarp and shelter them inside. She couldn’t let them see—not her tears, not any of it.

Would you die for your child?

Yes, yes. In a heartbeat.

Would you kill for him?

She lifted the pitchfork she’d seen hanging on the wall, took a quick breath, and headed toward the door.

* * * *

Maggie kept Daniel and Jordan under the tarp in the shed, each of the boys sitting on one side of her, until Hadley came home. They sang “Wheels on the Bus” and “Itsy Bitsy Spider” and “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” Each time one of the boys tried to move away, she sang “Come Under My Umbrella” again and hugged him tighter. Daniel touched occasionally at the wound on her thigh. “Band-aid soon,” she said, glad neither of the boys had noticed the blood elsewhere on her.

When she heard Hadley’s car on the drive, heard the car door slam, she lifted the tarp and shouted, “We’re in here.” Hadley wouldn’t know who *we* were. Just someone. Someone needing help, she hoped. She didn’t take the boys back into the yard, didn’t dare, and the minutes crept slowly before Hadley himself opened the shed door. Grizzled, stoic, he was carrying a shotgun when he came in, poised and ready. Even after he relaxed his grip on it and asked Maggie if she and the boys were all right, he kept staring at her with some mix of concern and curiosity and fear.

She knew what he'd seen, could imagine why he'd been cautious about coming into the shed. "I've called the police," he told her. A comfort? A caution? She wasn't sure, but she'd already figured he would call for help.

She heard the sirens a few minutes later, and the boys echoed the sound. When they left the shed, a police cruiser blocked their view of the body—strategically so, she thought. The rain seemed, finally, to have stopped.

Soon the whole yard buzzed with action and investigation, questions and more questions, lights circling, people moving. Social services were called for Jordan—maybe his mother too, Maggie wasn't sure.

Even as the paramedics cleaned and bandaged her thigh, she kept repeating "We're all right" and "He didn't hurt the boys" and "He didn't hurt us."

"But he would've," Ben said, when she called him from Hadley's phone. "That's what you need to remember, what you need to tell them."

Self-defense, he said more than once, and *preservation instinct* and then *maternal instinct*. She wasn't sure if he was reassuring her or building a defense—trying to be with her in the moment or already planning for the future—and when he told her how brave she was, when he called her a hero, she didn't correct him.

Maggie would tell him later about the worst images that had run through her head and about what she'd convinced herself she'd have been willing to do. And she'd tell the court too, if it came to that: what Walter had said, the way the box cutter felt on her leg, her fear for herself and her child—and for *his* son too. That was important.

But there were other things she'd never tell anyone, not even Ben. How Walter was right with so much of what he said. How lonely it had felt reading all those childcare books and articles on her own, and how lonely it still felt being nearly the sole caregiver to Daniel, with Ben's job demanding more, keeping him on the road for days, weeks at a time. How lonely it felt when Ben did come home and rushed right past her, barely a quick kiss, to give his best buddy a hug, then turn away from them both the moment his cell phone rang. And how many times had Ben simply given up on trying to rock Daniel to sleep and shrugged it off on Maggie? Even two nights ago, before this latest trip, he'd done that again, and when she'd finally fallen into their own bed, he'd nudged her into making love—exhausted, hurried, far from energetic. But after all, Ben would be leaving for several days, and it was important to connect.

It had been a pleasant surprise at Teeter Toddlers to have a handsome man offer up his umbrella, chivalry not dead and all. He had smelled nice, and she'd enjoyed for a moment that little spark of flirtation between

them—innocent, of course, playful at best, but flattering. And Walter had always seemed so good with his son too, attentive in ways Ben had never been.

Those were the things she didn't want to admit, even to herself—those other thoughts that had been pushing her forward when she emerged from the shed, pitchfork in hand, and Walter rushed toward her with his arms outstretched. It wasn't bravery, and it wasn't just fear. She'd felt ashamed, she'd felt betrayed. She'd felt more alone than ever. And she'd felt sure she could drive all that away, stab after stab, as the winds whipped and the rain battered against them and the pitchfork plunged into Walter again and again and again and again.

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