

Donovan Ortega

Going to the Bathroom

The clock says, 6:34 AM.

Ms. McGuthrie's first recognition that something is amiss is the faint odor wafting into the hallway. She smells it as she walks toward the bedroom of young Clay McGuthrie. Then she is in the doorway and draws a breath. Ms. McGuthrie feels the initial pang of terror. This is not the first time she has awakened to find that Clay has messed himself, but this is something for which she had not been prepared.

Her son is covered in shit. She finds him lying in it, encased in it. It is obvious he has rolled in it. Feces has erupted from his diaper, and a thick layer of it glazes the blankets that surround him. A smear of brown fecal matter slinks from hand to blanket and clings to the baby blue wall at the head of his bed. Clay lies diagonally across the mattress. His eyes are open; they do not betray the horror of being covered in shit, but do suggest worry, a sense that something went horribly wrong during the night.

She is horrified. Not because of the mess. It would prove an inconvenience. But inconveniences were something she had learned as a mother to take on her knees. What worries Ms. McGuthrie is that, at four years old, poor Clay can't seem to control his bowels. He had not been "adequately trained" as his pre-school teacher, Mrs. Alice Moss, remarked earlier that week. A stinging critique, Ms. McGuthrie feels, against herself as a mother and, by extension, poor little Clay, who cannot sense this glaring inadequacy yet, but would undoubtedly become aware of the deficiency soon. It will ruin him, she thinks. And then the real terror comes, a sincere fear that she is not only a bad mother, but that her son is, as Clay's father once put it, "a true blue dummy like me." She realizes that this singular moment, this memory, will stay with Clay for the rest of his life. A part of him will be forever covered in shit. The terror leaps higher into her throat and she exclaims, "Clay!"

She unwinds him from the bedding. The amount of poop is alarming. Some of it is dried in clumps while other portions are a thick soup that pool in the folds of the red blanket. She grabs his arms, saying, "Clay Clay Clay?" The boy lets out a whimper that sounds like "Momma" but is perhaps only a mumble.

She removes Clay from his predicament when, with both hands, she puts on a firm face and digs in. However, with Clay standing on the brown carpeted floor, his situation is still perilous. On his face are hints of fecal matter, and there is a heaviness at the bottom of his pajamas that suggests more fetid mess. Ms. McGuthrie grabs him beneath his arms, hoists him into the air, and trudges down the hall.

When she reaches the bathroom, she places young Clay McGuthrie in the tub and begins removing his Thomas the Tank Engine pajamas. But with his pajamas at his feet a new depth of repugnance is discovered. A hot pot of muck stews in Clay's heavy-duty diaper. Now that it is exposed, it smothers the bathroom in humid, rotted stench. Until this moment, Ms. McGuthrie's dismay had been primarily mental, but the physical onslaught is now complete. She turns from her son—who is standing in the tub like an idiot covered in his own shit, she thinks—and Ms. McGuthrie begins to vomit into the toilet. Only dry heaves at first, but with each successive gag the contents of her stomach splash into the bowl.

In his mother's moment of physical revulsion Clay's suspicions are confirmed. He, for the first time, offers proof that he too can smell what has happened. Clay McGuthrie begins to

cry while his mother black hole gags chunky bile into the toilet. His pajamas are at his ankles; his body is covered in filth; his mother is sick; and he knows it's his fault. So he cries big, sniveling tears and Ms. McGuthrie, in between bouts with the toilet bowl, looks up and, with her free hand, turns on the shower water and says, "It's gonna be okay. Everything's fine, sweetie." Ms. McGuthrie spits into the bathtub and a heavy stream of water bombards Clay. He stands in the cascade and cries. He covers his face with his hands while a river of brown bathwater swirls into the drain.

Clocks say, 8:25 AM.

Ms. McGuthrie applies lipstick in the rear view mirror. It makes her lips a violent red. It goes well with blonde, she thinks. Clay is in a car seat in the back of her Honda Civic and plays with a Batman action figure. He yanks on Batman's head. He twists Batman's arms with toddler ferocity. She glances at his car seat buckle before brushing up her eyeliner. She blinks twice. She looks at her face in the rearview mirror, brushes a black speck of eyeliner from the ridge of her cheekbone, and for an instant, sucks in her cheeks, a move she senses diminishes the pockmarks produced by a bacterial strain of acne that tore through her perfect teenage skin in the tenth grade.

Stop it you idiot, she says to herself.

She glances back at Clay, then at the traffic light that hangs like an ornament above her, and looks into the rearview mirror again, noticing, for an instant, the small, almost unnoticeable scars on her cheeks. The light turns green and Ms. McGuthrie speeds forward, depressing the clutch with her patent black heels, shifts into first gear, guns the gas and merges into the right lane. She must deliver the boy to pre-school. She will be late for work if she doesn't hurry—the second time that week. She imagines Mr. Scott tapping his watch. Her son, she knows, is not an excuse to be late. Mothers aren't allowed to be late. And then she bites her cheek—hard, purposefully, violently.

She shears a piece of flesh from the inside of her mouth. Not too deep. She massages the wound with her tongue. It is a nice hurt, the loose tooth pleasure that children are entitled to. Ms. McGuthrie traces the outline of the wound with her tongue while Clay yanks on Batman's head.

She will see Mr. Scott. He will tap his watch. She will smile at him. They're just friends, she will tell herself. But then, inevitably, just as the clocks ticks, she will kiss him behind the bathroom door. She wonders if he will be able to taste the blood she can taste now. He can't see the flesh inside her cheek. She bites it again, softly though. Not too hard, just enough to feel that sick, delicious, sharp pain. And there is a pressure in her belly. I have to pee, she thinks. She wonders if Clay McGuthrie, young Clay McGuthrie will ever find the toilet. And she has to go pee-pee, maybe poo-poo.

Mr. Scott's watch says, 9:16 AM.

Mr. Scott sits at his desk and scrolls through a layer of fresh leads on the computer screen. He looks at his watch. He clicks the mouse of the computer with what might appear to be purpose, but no work is being accomplished and he knows it. He navigates AlliTech's filing and sorting system with dexterity, but for all of its advancements, for all of its flash, for all of its, as the AlliTech representative had said, "Sexy slickness," Mr. Scott often finds himself navigat-

ing in circles. There is no end. And all he can think about is the bathroom anyway. He is often thinking of the bathroom. A painting of a jazz musician blows yellow notes out of a saxophone on his office wall—the portrait, to Mr. Scott, says “bathroom break.” A silver dish full of dark chocolates on his desk signals the same thing. Every object that surrounds him leads him to the first floor bathroom. The first floor of the office building has been abandoned for months and has become his weekly honeymoon suite. There, he understands, is the respite he requires. It is a vortex in which his wife and, subsequently, his life, do not exist.

He twiddles his goatee with his thumb and forefinger, a movement that conjures a spike of self-conscious fear that his facial hair is not thick enough. According to his neighbor, Mr. Gutley, it looks good, but that is a compliment reserved for goatees that are not fully formed he deduces. Mr. Gutley, the dishonest twat, he thinks: and this resentment bleeds into his pointer finger that is scrolling through the long list of leads. Leads which Mr. Scott feels a distinct apathy toward. I am the CEO, he thinks. My people will take care of this. And then the omnipresent voice in his head that tells him, “It’s not big enough. You got lucky. You don’t deserve it.” He is so accustomed to these thoughts that they blend into the background, but at certain times he can hear them, he can recognize them. And when he does, they have the pitch and tenor of his therapist, Julia Demarcos. That bitch. He stopped seeing her, but she still visits him in his mind, for she had worked on him, she had kneaded his soul, graphed his childhood development on a white board.

In his corner office, Mr. Scott hears his employees typing, picking up phones, making money, and still Julia Demarcos is with him. She assures him that there is “something wrong” that “something happened in your past” that, “you can’t be in love with Anne or your wife or anyone else” because: “you don’t love yourself” and, most importantly, “you have work to do,” and that, “subconsciously,” oh yes, “subconsciously, you have experienced a trauma,” that there were “parental forces at work,” that in his formative years, he was taught to “hate himself.” Click click click, the mouse moves in circles on the screen.

Mr. Scott looks at his watch anxiously. He fiddles with his beard. He thinks of his wife and what she is doing at this moment, maybe reading a magazine by the pool, maybe removing the mildew from the shower curtains. The bathroom seems so far away, but thank god, thank god, he thinks, for without my little bathroom paradise, I’d be lost. It is wrong, but so are many things, so many things.

A sphere of glass sits on Mr. Scott’s desk. It is a paperweight and he does not know how it was acquired. Suspended in the glass are long drips of red ink that form the shape of a flower. It has sat on his desk for as long as he can remember. It has something to do with him. He palms it, picks it up, feels the solidity of the thing, imagines bashing a skull with it as the phrase “blunt force trauma” enters his head, and then he thinks of his wife—the loving cherub.

He is very aware of the time on the corner of the computer screen—9:17, 9:17, 9:18—and then his wife, the perfect housewife really, who is probably, at this moment, rearranging the pantry, appears like a mirage:

It is the company holiday party. His wife in a long dress, smiling with those dimples in her cheeks—the click click of the clock on his wall, above the saxophonist blowing the yellow notes: She asks him the question that will serve as rationalization for his bathroom voyages—the sphere of glass, so smooth in his palm—Mrs. Scott, finishing her third glass of wine with a resolute gulp, leans into his ear and whispers over the excited chatter of his employees—the cursor, the arrow across the computer screen and into his heart: “Would you consider letting another man into our bedroom?”

At the computer, he pretends to look at his leads, all of the potential sales that a business might acquire, and he can feel the Christmas party, the excited employees drinking on his dime, Sinatra and the slow dances, the hotel bar, and his wife's hot breath in his ear. The filth. But perhaps, somewhere in the cracks and folds of his mind, he wishes he were the type of man who performs coitus with his wife while another man shoves one into her mouth. His compatriot and he, after a time, might switch places.

And then again, Julia Demarcos' words: "You experienced a trauma," and, "There's work to do." I must be sick, he thinks. Then he looks at his watch—small, numberless, ivory faced, brown leather banded—a gift from his wife, who, at this moment, he couldn't help but realize, what a nice girl she really was.

And then Tom Binter walks into his office smiling widely and shuts the door. He sits down in the large leather chair in front of the desk and crosses his legs.

"Anne McGuthrie is late again," he says.

"Send her in. Tell her I'd like to speak with her."

A digital clock on Mr. Binter's desk says, 10:34.

Outside the window that overlooks the first floor bathroom, lawn men are trimming hedges. Pedro Guzman wears long sleeves, pants, and a bandana around his neck. Mr. Scott waits outside the bathroom door, hiding in the annex that separates the bathroom from the hallway. He admires Pedro Guzman's beard. He judges it to be genetic and is jealous. He feels a tinge of shame. The beard is knotted and sweaty, but it is full, more full than anything he would ever be capable of.

As the Spaniard slices through bushes he notices Mr. Scott hiding in the hallway through the window. Pedro Guzman is in a hurry, moving left to right on the four-foot hedge, but he slows as he sees Ms. Anne McGuthrie arrive. Mr. Scott, who forgets about Pedro Guzman and the beard, embraces Ms. McGuthrie. He pushes her into the wall, traces his right hand down the side of her face to her chest, and buries his head into the place where her neck meets her shoulder. Pedro Guzman can see Ms. McGuthrie's face—her mouth is open, eyes closed, her hands grasp the back of Mr. Scott's shirt. His gas powered trimmer sputters as it slices through a thick stretch of hedge. He re-traces the place he has cut.

Mr. Scott fumbles with the door latch as he pulls Ms. Anne McGuthrie's skirt to her thighs. Pedro Guzman stares as the hedge trimmer vibrates in his hands. He drops the hedge trimmer and creeps toward the window. He pushes his face to the glass. Mr. Scott and Ms. McGuthrie trip into the bathroom, a hand on a belt, a foot on the back of a knee, Pedro Guzman smirking as Ms. McGuthrie's fingertips trace the elastic band of Mr. Scott's Fruit of the Loom underwear: Pedro Guzman's face is against the glass when Ms. Anne McGuthrie and Mr. Scott disappear into the bathroom.

And in the third stall, the reverberations of lawn maintenance are barely audible over the flushing of the toilet—the repeated flailing of human appendage continually trips the automatic sensor and torrents of fresh water are sucked into the toilet hole.

Mrs. Alice Moss says, time for pee-pee, poo-poo.

At pre-school, young Clay McGuthrie feels something wheeling in his stomach. He knows it is time to go. The other children form a line at the door of the bathroom. Taped to

the door is a picture of a smiling toilet seat. Clay McGuthrie's stomach turns. From the corner of the classroom a voice pierces the commotion of children. It says, "I don't want to ask twice, Clay." It is the tone of the voice that triggers the reaction. It is a mixture of rage and shame, but he cannot attribute this to anything specific. He can only feel the pressure begin to build up inside of his belly. And he wants to release it in the proper place. Mrs. Moss is distracted from Clay's ambiguous shuffling when Julie Rivkin and Dale Stallwort begin pushing one another in the potty line. Mrs. Moss breaks apart the battling four year olds just in time to witness young Clay McGuthrie pull down his pants and squat above an open desk drawer. Young Clay McGuthrie looks back at Mrs. Alice Moss, squints, and pushes.

Ms. McGuthrie's phone says, lunchtime.

This isn't good, she thinks. He's married. I shouldn't be doing this. She picks at her salad with a plastic fork. She sifts the onions from the mixture in front of her. Her head is down. She wonders if Dan Shields, her neighbor in the next cubicle, notices her extended bathroom voyages. He types away frantically at a document, navigating AlliTech's seamless system. She smooths her hair with her hand, glances at her reflection in the glass window of the cubicle, and pretends to work.

And yet, despite the gloominess of sleeping with a married man, it still made her feel good. We can't control who we are attracted to, can we? We work. It feels right. And because of this goodness, she clings to the hope that something might work out. But in her soul, the part of herself that is not connected with bodily function, she knows something is wrong, and although she could never articulate what exactly that meant, it was something akin to the feeling of someone who has been kicked down a concrete stairway. Who, with each successive roll down the steps, feeling every inch of the cement blocking—the blood stained, perfectly perpendicular corners that smash into the skull and ribs and face, thinks, "This is it. I'll stop soon," but continues down the interminable corridor, floor after floor, floor after floor, always hoping for a landing, but never finding a landing.

Ms. McGuthrie feels a pressure on her bladder, the subtle hint of the body to the mind, a necessity of function. She walks to the bathroom, happy for this little excuse of pleasure. On the toilet she lets the tinkle tinkle tinkle in the pot and as it happens there is a focusing of her reality. For fifteen seconds it is impossible to deny the truth of the corridor, the infinite stairway in which she is falling. But as her stream begins to drip-drop her telephone vibrates in her purse. She picks up the phone and says, "Mrs. Moss?"

She listens for a moment but then interrupts Mrs. Alice Moss, when she says, "He's done what?"

Her voice echoes in the tiled chamber.

Mr. Scott's watch says, lunchtime.

Mr. Scott unwraps a chocolate and pops it into his mouth. He picks another candy from the glass dish and offers it to Mr. Binter. Mr. Binter declines and sits down in the chair. He says, "Anne has gotta go, man."

"What's she done now?" says Mr. Scott.

Mr. Binter says, "She's talking on the phone. Another problem with her kid."

Mr. Scott is staring at the candy dish, but looks up when Mr. Binter says this:

“And everyone knows you’re fucking her.”

“I am not,” he replies weakly.

Mr. Binter smiles like he knows something of which Mr. Scott is unaware.

“Have you stopped seeing your therapist?”

“Yes, but what does that have to do with anything?”

Mr. Binter shrugs his shoulders.

“You were better when you saw her,” he says.

“But everything that came out of that women’s mouth was Freudian,” Mr. Scott insists. “No one subscribes to Freud anymore, right? My childhood was wonderful. My mother, wonderful. My father was fine, maybe a little temperamental, but he wasn’t that bad of a man. And aren’t we judged on a complete body of work? I don’t believe any of it.”

“I don’t care about all that. The problem is this—everybody knows what you’re doing on the first floor. I just overheard someone talking about it in the break room.”

“I know, I know.”

“Going to her house is one thing, but in the office is crazy. You can’t see that? Can’t you think of your wife? How would Lisa feel about this?”

Mr. Scott smirks.

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me? You probably talk to her more than I do.”

“Would you quit with that shit?” says Mr. Binter. “C’mon let’s get some lunch.”

Mr. Scott follows Mr. Binter out of the office. He stares at the back of Mr. Binter’s head and devises a plan. Mr. Binter was, perhaps, his best friend in the entire world, but the only thing holding them together was the tenuous thread of circumstance. As it was with most of the relationships in his life — his wife most noticeably, who might be, at this moment, laying by the pool and drinking a juice cocktail.

Happy Hour from 3-7 PM, says the sign.

With a bottled beer in hand, Mr. Binter says this:

“There are some girls that are meant to get pregnant. They are the ones that you see with children at twenty-two. It’s like, set in the stars. They’re not too smart. They’re real needy and they usually start fucking at about fifteen. Those are the ones and Anne is one of ‘em. No one wants to get involved with somebody like that. Yeah, she’s cute, but she’s got a kiddo with a baby daddy and they’re both snotty and shitty and dumb.”

“Oh come on, Tom,”

“You come on! Listen to me, I’m not just talking about Anne here, I’m talking about what these girls are like in general—I was just banging this chick out in Montgomery, I swear to god girls in Montgomery love me—but I know what this little southern belle thought when she met me: ‘Oh god, once he finds out about my kids he’ll want nothing to do with me.’ And she was right. When it comes down to it, the little butterflies you get in your stomach don’t last—the kids snatch the butterflies out of the air, crush them in their dirty little palms, throw ‘em on the ground and poop on ‘em. So break it off.”

“I’m married,” says Mr. Scott. “I can’t break anything off. I’m married.”

“You’re having an affair, if you didn’t know it.”

“I never thought I’d have an affair,” says Mr. Scott hopelessly

“You stop that shit right now,” says Tom Binter. He slugs his beer. “Cut it off with Anne. You’ll come out smelling like roses.”

“Like roses?” Mr. Scott says. He fiddles with his cocktail napkin.

“Listen, no one would blame you. Anne’s a good looking girl.”

“That makes it okay?”

“No, but we’re sexual beings, dude. Look at Bill Clinton.”

The bartender, Gordon Bluemeyer, polishes beer mugs in the back of the bar. He can hear the men talking. He listens to them and removes smudges from the mugs. He traces a wet rag around the lip of each of glass. He stacks the dry, clean mugs on the dish station platform in orderly rows. His ears perk when he hears one of them say, “At the Christmas party last year my wife asked me if I would let another guy fuck her with me.”

Tom Binter slaps Mr. Scott on the shoulder and says, “Seriously? She said that?”

“Yes. Those words came out of her mouth.”

“Really?”

Mr. Scott sips his beer. The bar is empty, but they hear Gordon Bluemeyer stacking clean glasses behind a swinging plastic door.

The Mickey Mouse clock in Mrs. Moss’ classroom says, 3:30 PM.

“Ms. McGuthrie, can we speak in private?”

Ms. McGuthrie nods and follows Mrs. Alice Moss from the classroom into the hallway. Clay McGuthrie is leaning against a wall and looks anxiously at his mother. Ms. McGuthrie eyes him, judges his posture to be of, as she once described his father, “a retarded person,” and bites her cheek. She wonders what she has done wrong. Mrs. Alice Moss speaks to her in hushed tones and Ms. McGuthrie nods and accepts the whispers as one would accept a guilty verdict. Clay McGuthrie is thinking of the word, “trouble,” but he isn’t entirely sure why. He is also angry, but again, he is not sure why. The world is something to be formed, so his most pressing concern was his butt. It is chafed and burning and he fiddles with his blue shorts.

Clay McGuthrie watches his mother talking to Mrs. Alice Moss. His mother is nodding. His mother is glancing at him, always glancing, never recognizing what he might have said. Mrs. Moss is gesticulating with her hands. I know I did a bad thing, he thinks, but even within this solid thought there is deep confusion. He can’t articulate exactly what it is, but the chaos is similar to awaking in a house that is upside down:

Clay McGuthrie recognizes that everything that should be on the floor is above him: the ovens and sofas and toasters and tables and chairs are hanging from the ceiling. But it is not the ceiling—he looks up at the roof and there is carpet and tile there. And young Clay McGuthrie is walking among the grotesqueness of this flipped life. And now his mother is standing above him on the floor. The house cat is lying in his soft bed, upside down and purring. The boy’s mother pours water from a pitcher and the water falls up into the glass. The boy’s shoes scrape against the textured ceiling as he shuffles nervously. A pot of water heats on the stove and the steam rises towards the floor. The boy calls out to his mother, “Mom Mom Mom Mom,” and she looks down at the ceiling, her hair straight as an arrow, lips red as blood, and says, “Time to go pee-pee? Poo-poo?”

The water in the pot bubbles and down pop droplets of water and vapor. Clay McGuthrie can feel the heat from the stove. He looks up into the inverted pot of boil and is sure that the raging water will fall upon his head. He cowers on the ceiling, covers his face as the pot hisses and fumes above him, but then Clay looks up at the floor and recognizes that the water has found its level: the boil splatter pops down and falls up into the pot. Then Ms. McGuthrie

looks at him sternly.

“Get off the roof. Crawl up the walls,” she says. “It’s time to go pee-pee. It’s time to go poo-poo.”

Mr. Scott’s watch says, 4:31 PM.

Mr. Scott sits on the barroom toilet and opens his colon and lets the contents of his lower intestines flow into the pot. He grunts softly, releasing the things inside of him. He feels something else there and moves forward an inch. There is more waste to be discharged. It is lodged solidly. This next portion will take work, he realizes. He bends forward and stretches his arms outward: like a dog, he thinks. And the alcohol begins to move from his stomach and disperse into the blood stream. He feels the necessity of the task before him and perhaps emboldened by the alcohol, proceeds to bend forward even more to attempt to straighten the choke point that forms when one sits to poop. Try and squat—like a dog squats, someone had told him when they were explaining the trouble “comfort seat” toilets caused in the western hemisphere. In the east, they had explained, everyone squats. Now he is just drunk enough to try. He leans forward, but doesn’t think he has the correct angle for elimination. He leans backward and props his feet on the stall door. He feels his colon open wider. He can feel his intestinal track realigning. He feels more excrement loosen and fall from his body. It plops in the toilet. But just as this small victory occurs, he is hit with an acute awareness of his predicament. It is not the alcohol. It is the necessity of the task at hand: his business in the bathroom. Because of its immediacy, everything else in his life became sharpened: Mrs. Lisa Scott, Ms. Anne McGuthrie, Mr. Tom Binter and the first floor bathroom—the relationship of these people and his relation to them were somehow clarified in the cramped, dingy stall. In this moment of animalism he is faced with the reality of his choices.

Mr. Scott hears someone taking a piss in the urinal beside the toilet.

“Is that you, Tom?” says Mr. Scott. “Is that you there?”

Arnie Dixon says, “The fuck you talking about man?”

“Sorry,” says Mr. Scott weakly as another plop-plop falls into the toilet.

He can here Arnie Dixon flush the urinal with a force he feels excessive, then hears the door swing open and shut. He didn’t even wash his hands, Mr. Scott thinks. He flushes the toilet, careful to raise himself from the seat so as not to get sprayed by the mixture of shit and fresh water. He sits back down again to be sure that his bowels are cleared. But you never can be completely sure, he thinks.

He wiggles on the toilet in an attempt to loosen something that might be hardened in his belly. But he believes his mechanisms to be clear and stands up. His pants are at his ankles and he unwinds a portion of toilet paper from the roll, folds it neatly, and slides it between the crack of his haunch. He removes it and views the slight brown stain on the white paper. Barely a smudge, he thinks, before tossing it into the bowl and repeating the process.

“That’s how you take a proper shit,” he says as he swings open the door to the bathroom and walks out into the bar. He intends to talk to Mr. Binter about the possibilities with his wife. When he arrives at his barstool, Tom Binter has two shot glasses on the bar. He points at one and says, “Let’s get to the bottom of this,” and Arnie Dixon walks out of the bar and into the late afternoon.

Anne checks the clock; Anne McGuthrie checks the clock; Ms. Anne McGuthrie checks the

clock; Ms. McGuthrie checks the clock, the clock, she checks the clock, clock, clock, clock.

Mrs. Lisa Scott walks Dover, a black Labrador retriever, in the early evening. A breeze lilt in from the east and gently puts the day to bed. Dover sniffs something and tugs at the leash connected to Mrs. Scott's arm. She follows the dog into the swale, pulling back upon the dog as he nears the road. She is not unhappy. She is not happy. She feels however it's most convenient to feel. So now, she feels like dusk. She brushes her hair away from her face. In the light of the evening, she is beautiful. And she knows it. Her body: so easily elegant. Her face: proportioned and light. The dog turns back around and pulls her back to the sidewalk and she says, "Easy boy. Easy, Dover."

And they are walking again, toward a patch of trees next to a playground. The playground is new and has multi-colored mini towers, a wobbly bridge, a red seesaw, a field of rubber-safety chips. She imagines all the little kiddies running around the playground. It is a vision in which she takes a neutral position. There is nothing the matter, she thinks. I never wanted children.

When her husband calls her and tells her he'll be working late, she knows he is lying. But that is fine. Everything is just fine. I'll leave your dinner in the refrigerator, she says. She is swinging on a swing. Somebody that saw me now might think I'm a sad sight, but I'm okay. Really, I'm fine. Everything is okay.

Dover is off the leash and rummaging through the trees and bushes. He barks loudly. It is getting dark and Mrs. Scott walks across the wobbly bridge. Another breeze sweeps in from the east. Her phone says, bleep-bleep. It is a text message from Mr. Binter. It says: "we need to talk."

Does it matter anymore? I'm no good, but it feels all right. Everything is fine. Mr. Binter is all right.

Dover squats between two trees and looks back at Mrs. Scott standing on the bridge. She is smiling into her phone. Dover repositions himself and pushes.

7:56 PM says, Mrs. Scott's phone.

Ms. Anne McGuthrie makes herself a cocktail — vodka and soda water. Mr. Scott is not in the kitchen. Mr. Scott is not in the parking lot. Mr. Scott is not calling. He told me he'd be here by now. She sips the cocktail in the kitchen while young Clay McGuthrie watches television in the living room. Nailed into the wall behind the television are candle votives that are lit and flickering. There are shadows on the walls, a mixture of television and fire. Clay McGuthrie is sitting in front of the television peacefully. She thinks, wouldn't it be nice if he came, wouldn't it be nice and then—a knock at the door.

Mr. Scott steps into Ms. McGuthrie's apartment and gives her a long hug. Mr. Scott pulls away from the embrace and sees Clay McGuthrie on the floor in the living room, three feet from the television. Clay stares into the screen, he stares into the blue light. Mr. Scott says, "Hi Clay!" enthusiastically, but Clay never looks away from the cartoon explosions. His neck tilts higher toward the screen. Then Ms. McGuthrie says, "What about your wife?"

"She'll be alright. I've taken care of it."

The nightlight glows in young Clay McGuthrie's room.

In her bed: Mr. Scott touches Ms. McGuthrie's face. Ms. McGuthrie leans into it, kisses his nose, kisses his lip, kisses his forehead, kisses his lips, kisses his cheeks. Mr. Scott is lying on his stomach. He is naked and she is naked. Mr. Scott is surprised how beautiful she is in the darkness of the bedroom—her cheekbones appear sheared from the moonlight, her eyes shine from the pillow. He kisses Ms. McGuthrie's forehead and turns away.

Mr. Scott stares at the clock on the bedside table. The room is black except for the faint light coming in the window from the street. It is 1:30 in the morning, he thinks. And this thought, this mindlessness is mixed with the other unutterable thoughts between them:

What is—Where is—Clay—my wife—with Clay—wrong—is this—I wish—Clay is—I am—right—wrong—he reminds me—she reminds me—I wish—of a girl—Mr. Binter—was gone—Clay—of my ex-husband—needs to go to school—what will—where is—happen—the bathroom? He—I better—needs to leave—get going—But I—bathroom—hope he—I, I, I—hope—we are comfortable—and it all makes sense—in this light.

Ms. McGuthrie kisses Mr. Scott's nose, she kisses his cheek, she kisses his cheeks. The pale yellow light from the street lamp leaks over her. Mr. Scott can see the wisps of her blonde hair in the golden rays. He reaches across the rift of blanket, across the gulf of pillow, so aware of what he does, a conscious movement of body, an organized action of muscle and tendon and skin, her hair in his hands, his fingernails massaging her scalp, his fingers intertwined and smoothing Ms. McGuthrie's wild strands of hair, now more golden than ever in the glow from the street lamp that rises from the sidewalk and hovers above the black road.

In his bed, young Clay McGuthrie has a feeling in his belly, a gurgle, a pressure, and as it releases, he feels so, so warm. And Mr. Scott feels warm too. And Mrs. McGuthrie feels warm too. Mr. Scott's hand is on her head. She loves the way it feels. Amidst this pleasure she remembers Clay is sleeping in bed, remembers that Clay might be a "true blue dummy like me." But there is a hand on her head and she imagines, if she were capable of imagining, her hair aflutter on a beach, somewhere, in the wind, somewhere without young Clay McGuthrie and only Mr. Scott, or someone else, it didn't matter, she realizes. She couldn't distinguish the man that lay in her bed from any other—Mr. Scott's head was in the shadow. She couldn't see his face.

Ms. McGuthrie says, "My cheek hurts. I've been chewing it all day."

"Why?"

"I like it," she says.

"I do that sometimes."

"Do you?"

"Sometimes."

"I remember being little and wiggling a loose tooth until the pain was too much, and then I would climb up my father's leg and beg him to pull it out."

"I never did that," says Mr. Scott.

"I would ask him to attach the string to the door and the string to my tooth."

"I would wait for my teeth to fall out."

"No, it's better to do it with a door. I can still remember my father's rough hands delicately tying the string to the tooth. He would test its looseness before he did it, its attachment to the gums, and then in a quick jerk, the tooth would be hanging from the string, spinning in tight circles on the string."

"Sounds violent."

"Yes, sometimes. My favorite part was looking at myself in the mirror, admiring the

place where the tooth used to be.”

“Kids are cute when they lose teeth,” says Mr. Scott.

He kisses her on the nose.

The clock says, 5:33 AM.

Mr. Scott takes a piss into the pot, careful to aim in the center of the toilet so he doesn't get any urine on the seat. He misses, splashing some on the seat when he becomes distracted by the presence of three oblong pieces of turd resting at the bottom of the toilet. She forgot to flush, he thinks incredulously. She forgot to flush. His urine is bright yellow and he pushes hard. The jet of urine is loud in the silent apartment. He jiggles, spraying more urine on the seat and takes a step back from the toilet. He flushes the toilet and the cacophony of waste removal floods the home.

Which is why when young Clay McGuthrie, lying in his bed with a clammy coldness on his thighs, who had listened to his mother's soft moans in conjunction with the creak creak of the rusty mattress springs and the thump of the headboard, hears the toilet flush, he realizes that there is something he has forgotten to do, that there is something about the coldness of his thighs, the sopping wetness of the sheets clinging to his stomach and it is correlated with the sound of the toilet: he can hear his mother's voice saying, “Have to go to Pee-Pee or Poo-Poo? Pee-Pee or Poo-Poo? In the potty goes Pee-Pee and Poo-Poo,” and she's saying it in a high-pitched whine, the voice that he knows is intended for him, meant for Clay McGuthrie, because his mother wants him to love the sound of the toilet.