

desert spooks, feeling strangely self-possessed and detached.

Casey slams his fist on the steering wheel. —All right. You win— He sounds furious. I turn slowly to look at him. I wasn't aware there was a contest. —Have it your way, I won't lay a hand on you.

I have no answer for this, since it was never in question. I turn back to my window. But in my detachment I feel elation, I might even say triumph. If there had been any contest.

Another silent mile.

—So does that mean you'll be my girl?

For the second time tonight, I feel the shock of cold water. I catch my breath—I don't know where I thought this thing between us was going, what I thought I wanted out of it—and flounder around, stalling for time.

—What does that mean?

—What the hell do you think it means? Are you stupid, haven't you ever gone steady?

I decide to add lying to my growing list of crimes. —No.

He exhales heavily, but I think it sounds more out of relief than irritation. He instructs me with exaggerated patience, as if I'm an exasperating three-year-old.

—It means you won't go out with anybody but me. And you'll wear my class ring and letter sweater.

I think about Mummy. I think about all the boys in Harden I haven't met yet. I'm surprised by my sudden panic.

—I don't know— My voice sounds small and apologetic. —I'll have to think about it.

I strain toward the lights of town as if they're buoys.

SCENE 12

Maggie's newest dog is driving her crazy. Reggie can hear him the minute she steps out of the car. Maggie says he runs and barks twenty-four hours a day. Reggie rings the chimes, she hears the dog scabbling on the polished oak floor. Maggie says his nails are scratching the tar out of it.

—Stay! Stay!— Maggie's most authoritative voice. The door swings open

—Oh!— Reggie braces herself. The setter pokes his head between Maggie's legs, panting and drooling, his tail wagging frantically behind her. —I was expecting him to come charging at me.

Maggie grabs the dog's choke chain. —No, we're making some progress.

Maggie leads the way up the hall. Jake stumbles over himself twisting to walk backwards, trying to get to Reggie.

Reggie shoves at him. —Down! Down!

—Down, Jake!— Maggie flourishes a horse's crop. —It's the only thing he understands. He thinks the rolled-up newspaper's a hilarious joke. He chews it up the minute I set it down— She's in jodhpurs, riding season's begun. —Sorry we have to use the family room. It's the only room I don't care that much about and can close off— She's put a child's barricade across the top of the short flight of stairs down to the sunken room.

Maggie's never been known for her housekeeping but the room's a particular mess: shreds of paper littered across the carpet, a strip of burlap wallpaper torn loose from the wall, teeth marks in table legs and chair arms.

—Why don't you keep him outdoors?

Maggie gives her daughter a tired look. —Come on, I'll show you— She grabs the setter by his choke chain —Heel, Jake!— and marches him out the sliding glass doors across the patio and across the lawn.

At the back of the lot Maggie's installed two metal posts between which is suspended a thick metal cable, from which hangs a horse's lunge line. A trough has been worn deep between the posts. Maggie snaps the lunge line to the dog's choke chain, takes Reggie's arm and starts her back toward the house. —Watch this.

Immediately the dog sets up a wild yelping and barking, racing back and forth on his line between the posts, digging his trench deeper.

—He'll keep it up for hours. The neighbors have complained, the police have been here twice— She goes back for the setter, who licks and gnaws her hand and arm as she unhooks him. —What am I to do?

—Give him back.

—They won't have him.

—Sell him.

—Who'd buy him?

—He has papers, hasn't he?

—Excellent ones. Serves me right. I got exactly what I asked for. The largest male in a litter of nine, sired by a field hunter, birthed by a farm bitch who'd been given fertility shots, or fed hormones, or whatever. Every time he sees a bird or squirrel, he quivers and freezes into a perfect point. It's in the genes, he's a natural.

—So sell him to a hunter.

—You know I don't believe in hunting.

—But he does.

Maggie shakes her head. —It'd be like selling my own child. I took him on in good faith, he accepted me with equal trust. I can't admit myself an inadequate mother.

They've settled on the couch, the setter happily at Maggie's feet, chewing a huge leather bone she's unearthed from beneath a pile of newspapers. She pats his pointed head and scratches a floppy ear. —I'm committed to him.

Reggie thinks of Maggie's prime reason for having Jake. —Is he ever going to settle down enough to breed?

Maggie shrugs. —Who knows. If he ever gets out of adolescence. Look at him. Six months, eighty-five pounds, a head the size and shape of a football. And he won't mature until he's a year and a half, maybe two. Can you imagine what he's going to end up like?

—Poor Erin— Reggie looks around, suddenly aware of the high-strung bitch's absence. —Where is she, anyway?

—Hiding out, shaking herself to death in contemplation of her future.

Reggie smiles grimly. —I empathize.

Maggie casts her daughter a sidelong look. —I'll fix tea.

The setter picks up his bone, plops it on Reggie's foot, and resumes scratching his teeth. Reggie watches the saliva spatter her shoe.

Maggie and her animals. Reggie's been raised with everything: parakeets, white rats, hamsters, rabbits, guinea pigs. For a while, Maggie bred and sold pedigreed cats. Then she went to a dog show. She's had a French poodle, a golden retriever, and a Norwegian elkhound. Her mission now is to produce from the union of the aristocratic over-bred Erin and the rusticated happy-go-lucky Jake the perfect Irish setter.

Maggie sets the tray on the coffee table. She's made cinnamon toast, Reggie's childhood favorite. She pours, hands Reggie her cup, then purposefully sets her own cup down. —All right. Now just what's going on?

With equal purposefulness, Reggie languorously sips her tea.

—Well, let's see. Katelyn's so thrilled with her recital triumph, she's decided to dedicate herself to becoming a professional ballerina.

Maggie gives a short laugh. —She'll soon enough change her mind about that. It's hard work.

—Like I did about acting?

Maggie lets it pass. —I'm concerned about Lindsay though. Katelyn's such star material, I don't want her overshadowed.

—Don't worry. Lindsay knows how to look out for herself. She has big plans, too. She's determined her heart's desire— Reggie fixes her mother with a pointed

look. —She wants a horse.

Maggie raises her eyebrows. —Are you going to get her one?

—No. I'm leaving that honor to you. It's your fault.

Maggie lets this pass, too. For the time being. But Reggie knows she'll mull it over. Maggie knows she's the one with the stable facilities, the riding-club connections. Reggie's lost contact. She rides with her mother now no more than four times a year.

Maggie lifts her cup, sips. —And how's Howie?

—Good.

—He looked good at Abby's.

They're fencing. Thrusting, parrying, dodging.

Reggie's face goes hard. —Good and busy, doing good work, getting good evaluations. And worrying a good deal. But he's a shoo-in for the partnership.

—So what's the problem?

Reggie looks surprised. —Problem? What problem? Katelyn's happy, Lindsay's happy, Howie's happy. So what problem could there possibly be?

—You're talking to your mother, remember? I haven't seen you so tightly wound in years.

Reggie's face is proof of the words. —You're just like everyone. My kids are fine, my husband's fine, so I must be fine, too. Like there's nothing else to me.

Maggie hears the contained shrillness. —That's why I invited you.

—And you're right. There isn't. Not anymore— Reggie's mouth twists with bitterness.

—You know what I am, Maggie? What I've become? A Boston Proper mannequin playing out a shop-worn role.

—We're all caught up in roles, Reggie. You think Howie isn't? Husband, father . . .

—But at least Howie has some larger purpose in life, some accomplishment he can show the world. He's a major player, a man of power, manipulating monies, corporations, and people, grappling with the law and government. And often winning. I'm strictly minor, a supporting role that's coming to look more and more like a bit part. And I feel like a loser.

—From my perspective, you have a privileged life.

—Sure. Smug, superficial, and superfluous, with little freedom and even less excitement. I look at my future and all I can see are days ahead just like the days past, a cycle of pleasant and inconsequential repeat performances. Days of insignificance— Her voice catches. —Even Katelyn and Lindsay don't need me anymore.

—Of course they do.

—No, not *me*— She's trying hard not to cry. —I'm a face and name in a long history of faces and names, most of them forgotten. If I weren't performing these roles, some other woman would serve. It's not *myself* that matters.

Maggie puts her hand on her daughter's knee. —That's not true at all, Reggie. Katie and Lindsay love you.

—And take me for granted. And why shouldn't they? They're caught up in their own busy lives. Classes, parties, dances. I'm the good mother. Just like Howie takes me for granted, as the good wife. But there's not one thing in my life *I* can take for granted— She sobs. —Not even my husband's showing up for a simple movie and dinner out— She tries to choke it back, gives up, and lets it pour out.

—Is that what started all this? Howie forgot a date?

—Not one date, Maggie. Three. Three times in six weeks— Reggie's sobs choke her throat, shake her shoulders. Maggie looks around for a kleenex, hands Reggie a linen napkin. —I've disappeared, gone up in smoke. I'm not real anymore. All I am is an image left in someone else's mind. A photo in a gold frame on Howie's desk, to be looked at, smiled at, and forgotten— Maggie pats her daughter's knee. Reggie's eyes fasten on hers, beseeching. —I'm a phony, Maggie, a two-dimensional paper doll with a two-dimensional wardrobe and two-dimensional cardboard set to parade around in— She sobs. —*I'm a goddamn Barbie doll.*

Maggie nods. —So that explains the clothes.

—I have to make a clean sweep, get rid of the tinsel and tissue.

—Not too clean, I hope. Be careful you don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

—I'm not like you, Maggie— Reggie snuffles into her napkin.

—I never wanted you to be— She smiles. —I'd like to think of myself as an original.

—That's just it. You are. Full of your own color and light— Reggie wads the soiled napkin —I'm dull and flat— takes a breath, looks at her mother. —The only time I felt full of sunsets was in Arizona.

Maggie looks hard at her daughter, puts her hands on her thighs, nods and sighs —I was afraid of this— and stands, going to the glass doors, looking out. —Taking you to Arizona was the worst decision your father and I ever made.

—No! It was the best. It opened my life, expanded my horizons.

—You were too impressionable. We should have left you with Abby.

—And closed off all those doors? How would I have ever learned how other people live? What other possibilities there were for being a person and making a life? You would have left me with only one room.

—You were too young. You didn't know how to discriminate, to be selective. Not every door you open is marked with your name, Reggie. Not every room you enter holds *your* bed.

Reggie throws the napkin to the floor. Her voice is harsh. —So that's it then, I guess. That's what I have to learn now. How to discriminate *my* door, select my *own* bed.

—Be careful, Reggie— Maggie turns from the glass, regards her daughter thoughtfully. —Those sunsets. Were they the big sky . . . Or were they Casey?

Reggie's eyes are full of pleading. —I don't know— Her voice becomes a whisper. —That's what I have to find out.

Maggie's face is tight with grim irritation as she moves back into the room. —That boy's like a bad penny, he keeps popping up— She picks up the crumpled napkin and tosses it onto the tray with finality. —This thing has got to be put to rest.

Reggie looks up at her mother, feeling young and frightened. —I couldn't agree more.

Maggie shakes her head. —You're like this pup here. A late maturer.

Reggie smiles through her tears. —I thought you said I was an early bloomer.

—When did I say that?

—When I started menstruating at ten.

—Well maybe physically, and *maybe* intellectually. But certainly not emotionally— Maggie starts collecting the cups and saucers. —You may be intelligent, Reggie, but sometimes you're not too smart.

—Meaning what?

Maggie sets the last cup on the tray —I leave that for you to work out— picks up the tray —You're the one searching for meanings— and disappears into the kitchen.

The new books arrive, boxes and boxes. Maggie is in a frenzy to unpack them. We make a party of it, Maggie, Dorothy, and I. Maggie makes chicken salad sandwiches. Dorothy supplies sweetened iced tea, which Maggie can't abide. I bake Toll House cookies.

There are several hundred books ranging from de Angeli's *Mother Goose* to Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. No reference is made as to how they've been paid for, but the shipment's been sent to our house, with the invoice in Maggie's name, and I'm wondering what fiction Dorothy's laboring under. Maggie considers it tacky to mention trust funds.

My job is to lift the books out of the boxes and carry them to the designated