Della suggested *Mary Poppins*, but Lindsey said Disney was out. Trevor had already seen the best ones at his babysitter Martin’s house, “and besides,” Lindsey said, “it’s a fascist organization where the rich get rich and the poor wear costumes.” Lindsey had just finished reading a book about Walt Disney’s FBI connections and his work for the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, and she was raving. Lately Della had noticed Lindsey adopting opinions—like this one—and strategies which seemed unconnected to her own life, gathered from a distance and carelessly incorporated. Lindsey’s convictions, though vague and fruitless, were clearly distracting, scratching from the inside like sand in her bloodstream. It worried Della to see her sister like this—tuned to some higher pitch, answering to dog whistles. Della worried about Trevor. Della worried that, in the end, Della would get stuck.

They were driving to V-Town (Videos! Value! V-Town!). It was a celebration; Trevor had lost a tooth. He sat beside Della in the front, strapped in, tonguing the empty space. Lindsey sat in the middle of the back seat, on the hump, talking and sighing (a new habit). Through the rearview mirror, Della watched the streetlights travel over her sister’s chin and chest. The buttons on her coat were big brass coins, and the sight of this—her sister’s chin, the shiny buttons flashing in the back seat—produced in Della the feeling that Lindsey was losing molecular weight, was dissipating into the big, black atmosphere, and (Della knew these feelings came of worry) was practically already gone. Lindsey was laughing. She said, “I’ll bet they don’t have *anything* Trevor hasn’t seen.” Trevor was six.

They had just been to Trevor’s favorite restaurant, which served food in long, steaming troughs—everything the texture of chickpeas—and had games on the tables and prizes for the children. After dessert, the waiter offered Trevor a “choice of prizes” from either a tray of plastic gemstone rings or a tray of plastic dinosaurs, and Trevor chose a ring with a large, marquis-cut diamond, which, he said, looked like a tooth. Lindsey said he inherited his good taste from his father, and then she said, OK, and left the restaurant to wait in the car.

This behavior, too, was new. Della was put in mind of a song they used to sing as children:

*Maybe she go, maybe she don’t go.*

*Many a time she afraid to go,*

*Many she do go . . .*
Delia knew—the possibility, at least, was there—that Lindsey was thinking on these occasions of going to where her husband, Russ, had gone, to "parts unknown." This was Lindsey's expression, "parts unknown." It's what she told people when they asked about Russ. "Oh, him?" she'd say in a flat, put-on cowboy accent, "why, he left for parts unknown." She managed in this way to romanticize his departure, her abandonment. Trevor's abandonment. She fictionalized. She wrapped events with curly ribbons. She would ask Delia, "Do you suppose he's in South America?" She'd say, "I bet he's a ranch-hand in Argentina. One of those singing cowboys? I bet he's rustling cattle for Burger King."

Sometime she sit on the old front porch
Saying nothin' that make no sense . . .

Maybe Russ would resurface and send for her. Maybe she'd go. And wouldn't Trevor be better off to stay put? Right here, with his school and his doctors and physical therapists and Martin and Della?

The waiter also gave Trevor a dimetrodon. He had noticed Trevor's canes leaning against his chair, and told him that "special boys" were allowed two prizes. Trevor accepted the toy and the compliment. He knew he was special, and furthermore, he enjoyed it. He had recently become a lord among ordinary children. Della thought he was cockier than a pop idol. A six-year-old Frank Sinatra—charismatic and luckless, traumatized and gorgeously arrogant.

The trade-off had, evidently for Trevor, been a fair one—his feet and lower legs (halfway down the shins) for the unceasing attention their loss had provided. Everyone—waiters, grocery baggers, pharmacists, playground monitors—every adult in New England, it seemed, was in on it. They saw the poor-little-boy amputee, with his canes and his wide, irregular gait, looking like a wounded bird, and they fussed and crooned. They said How strong! How brave! How cute! How amazing! His physical therapists called him "Professor." They behaved as if Trevor had done them an enormous favor by his cheerful progress through his stubbies to his PTBs, his muscle re-education, his seeming total acceptance of his loss, as if he had blessed them somehow, or absolved them. They had, in fact, fallen in love with the boy.

"And why not?" Lindsey had said to Della. "Trevor is a superior child."

By the time he started school (he attended kindergarten at Downey Elementary, where Della taught third grade), he was already a celebrity—the Boy Who Lost His Feet—and the other children were shily reverent. To survive a car crash, to have body parts crushed and then completely cut off—it was the kind of tangible, yet incalculable, pain that children could imagine and respect. They were fascinated by his prostheses, and some even wished that they could have them too, as they might wish for a cast on the arm or braces on their teeth. Della had noticed Trevor on the playground lecturing to a group of admirers, hiking up his pant legs, showing them where his legs had been severed, describing in detail the procedures—front-line incision, Gastrok flap—so gruesome and exhilarating. Another teacher said to Della, the kid should be selling tickets. Trevor even presented himself at show-and-tell. Lindsey said it was therapeutic. And maybe it was, Della couldn't say.

More likely, she thought, he had begged, or cried, and Lindsey had given in. She gave him most anything he wanted, and he naturally took advantage of it. He was
stubborn and headstrong because he could be. Lindsey tried to please him in the fashion of a cheating, yet indecisive, spouse—attempting through complete deference, through appeasement and soothing promises, to obscure her departure or soften the blow. She was the type of cheat whose note might read, *I'm leaving you. Dinner's in the freezer.* A cruel demand saying, *Need me when I'm gone.*

*They pulled into the parking lot of V-Town, and Della circled once without finding a space and was circling slowly again, hovering. It was Saturday night. Their town, Tulamec City, was teamless and dry, and people either drove to Cutty or Leeds or down to Ames Island on Saturday nights or they roamed the aisles of V-Town.*

*Trevor was saying to no one in particular, *I've already seen Mary Poppins.***

Della gave a light double-tap on the horn, a polite *excuse me, but...* to rouse a stopped car ahead. She said, “This is madness. I mean, where do all these people come from?”

“Families,” Lindsey said. “Families, families, fartbellies...”

Trevor spat his hand into the tight airspace of the car. “This ring pinches!”

“People have kids and the kids have kids and soon nobody even knows where it started.” Lindsey punctuated her statement with a short, tight sigh.

“Well, it’s inconsiderate,” Della said. “They know I’m back here waiting. I saw them look back.”

“Aunt Della?” Trevor said with lofty consideration. “I’ve decided to give my ring to you.”

It was Della’s cue to say *ob-such-a-gentlemen,* but Della refused. She wanted true sacrifice from the boy or nothing at all.

Lindsey laughed. “Del, you better take it! This may be the only offer you get!”

“Right,” Della said, a good sport. “Shit. Let me have it.” She took the ring and placed it on her pinkie finger. She wiggled it in the air.

“Trevor’s going to be a lady killer, that’s for sure.” Lindsey was leaning over the seat and tapping on Trevor’s shoulder, poking at his neck. “The girls’ll be carrying his books home from school.”

“I know,” Trevor added, “that the Sears Tower is the tallest building in the world.”

His voice was slick with closely guarded pride.

“*Actually,*” he said, “*I built* the Sears Tower.”

“Did you?” Della said flatly.

A girl walked out of the store and approached the car in front which was still blocking the way, wide and squat, puffing white exhaust. The girl leaned down to speak to the driver and Della honked again, this time with long, assertive strokes.

“Hey!” Lindsey said. “Did you know we can park in ‘handicapped’ now? I finally registered Trevor—I think I’ve got the sign with me. . . .”

Lindsey leaned sideways in the back seat to catch the light from the store and sifted cautiously through her enormous pocketbook. “It’s hard to remember it, though. I mean we’re so conditioned to think that those spots are forbidden, aren’t we? Like
we think they’re for other people. I remembered to do it the other day at Hench Brothers and it was delicious! Trevor wasn’t even with me.”

Trevor sang, “Hench Brothers, Hench Brothers—We gotta lotta!”

“Oh . . . oh, here we go!” Lindsey pulled the little sign from her bag—the stylized person-in-wheel-chair emblem, plain and smooth and neutral—and displayed it against her chest. “You gotta take it where you can get it!”

Blonde hair looped down from her scalp in sharp spears, touching her brow in little pulse points, as if she were wired for an EEG. Her face, Della saw, had changed in the past few months. A look of reckless, edgy glee had set in. It was the face of a marathon dancer or a hunger striker, of someone holding on for release.

“I thought about it first,” Lindsey said. “I thought, should I do this, or should I stick to my principles? Then I thought, what’s a principle except an excuse to behave a certain way? To do something or not do something, right or wrong, and who’s to say which way’s right? So I thought, Trevor would tell me to ‘go for it,’ wouldn’t you Trev?”

Trevor started laughing, “Go for it, Mom!” Then he explained, “She said I said ‘go for it’ and I said ‘go for it, Mom!’”

His laugh seemed crazy and sad. But weren’t all children giddy like this? Didn’t Della’s students sometimes laugh like they had been holding their breath for hours?

Della honked again, though she could see that the girl was now getting into the car, and the girl stopped and looked back, disgusted. On top of her head was a sprout of yellow hair from a tightly gathered knot. She looked like a water bubbler or a pineapple. Her expression was bruised, and, as she gave Della the finger, her mouth hung open provocatively—a practiced, angry sleaziness that marked the girls of Tulamec City. Generally, teenagers unnerved Della—their large, uncensored bodies and random cruelty, their ability to shame and humiliate. She believed in their power of seeing—their undisciplined minds were all feeling and insight—and this girl gave her the familiar sense of being caught and revealed, of having a light thrown over her which made visible the moss and the barnacles, the accumulation of an undetermined life.

Della’s own teenhood in Tulamec City had been spent in the basement rumpus rooms of friends: drinking liquor stolen from parents or procured through older siblings, watching TV, smoking dope when it was available (she never bought it herself), suffering brusque, unsatisfying sex. She had meant to stay away after college. She had followed a boyfriend to San Francisco where she was quickly replaced with slender, wild girls who were not so “hung-up.” Her retreat home, then, was meant to be temporary, a re-grouping, but she fell into a depression, gained more weight, and, as the years passed, believed her path to be thick with hazards—potholes and stones and miles of icy sidewalks—something always tripping her up, slapping her down on the hard-packed soil of Tulamec City.

Their mother was an important obstacle. Della had come home only mildly disheartened, but the influence of their mother—who stacked and buttered I-told-you-so’s like pancakes—had so warned and comforted her that she developed a natural fear of her own potential foolishness. Even after their mother’s death, Della felt a preemptory judgment, an anticipation of shame which she heeded and promoted to
the position of clear reason. Responsibility, then—to Lindsey, to the old house, their mother's things, to a set of expectations—was a grim but proven ground to walk on. She still slept in the girlhood room that she had shared with Lindsey, and the house remained as it had in their mother's lifetime, as if the green paper, the scratchy, fire-retardant surfaces and frosted baroque switchplates had some stronger, better claim on life than Della had herself. While Lindsey daydreamed and schemed, Della joylessly polished their mother's silver and ironed the Christmas linen, thinking to herself, what else? Her imaginative powers flinched, then folded, on this question. She held out for Providence, expecting that one day she would be propelled into her future by an unexpected occurrence. Like a character in a spy story who unwittingly picks up the wrong suitcase, she would one day make an arbitrary move, perhaps meet a mysterious stranger, and be launched into a series of escapades and foreign capitol, the required destinations of one who is running for, and meeting with, her life.

She pulled into a parking space (handicapped—Lindsey saying, “Well, Trev, looks like you’re good for something!”) but now Trevor refused to get out of the car. He said he didn’t want to go to V-Town, he wanted to go home, he had to get to bed for the Tooth Fairy, his legs were tired, his stumps hurt, they couldn’t make him get out of the car. He crossed his arms, curled his body close in, made himself into a chunk of stone.

The two women stood by his open door. The night was cold, and an icy rain had started to fall.

“Trevor?” Lindsey said with a submissive lilt, a soft coo of persuasion. “Don’t you want to pick out the movie yourself? Big boys go into the store and pick out the movie themselves. Trevor?”

“C’mon Trev,” Della said. “Get out of the car.”

Trevor flexed his knees. He pretended to be engrossed with the tail on his dimetrodon.

“Trevor?” Lindsey said, only slightly more forcefully. “Do you want a time-out?”

“Say please . . .” Della mimicked, an impatient sing-song. She thought Lindsey might as well ask him if he wanted candy or wanted to drive the car. The time-out, though currently popular, seemed useless to Della, and dangerously indulgent. Besides, Trevor was already having a time-out. The time-out was his asset and power. It was the technique of passive resistance—to stall, refuse, go limp, and thereby foil the busy plans of adults with self-imposed time-outs. Moreover, Della had never actually seen Lindsey make good on her threats. Della reached in the car and grabbed Trevor’s arm.

He screeched, “You can’t touch me! My body is private! It belongs to me! You can’t touch me! This is my body . . . .” He pumped his arms like tough little pistons. “My body is private! It belongs to me. . . .”

Della recognized this chant from school. The teachers at Downey drilled the children in techniques to prepare them for the private abuse it was feared they would all fall victim to. And Della felt guilty now, a potential abuser grabbing Trevor like this. I am not responsible, she told herself. She tried to force him out; she put her weight into it, held his arms down, but Trevor was strong and slippery. Through therapy, his arms had become quick and keen. Establish authority, she thought. Tough love. But she
didn’t feel love. Some harsh, slapping urge came over her—she was entirely sick of children, of this child, his self-centered needs and dissatisfactions. What she was thinking was worry about me for a change. She was thinking not mine, not mine.

*

Inside V-Town there was heat and light, and it felt good to Della after standing in the wet parking lot battling Trevor’s impressive will. A large store (one unbroken rectangle the size of a discount liquor store), it was filled with long diagonal rows of short, shallow shelves, four feet tall, displaying the colorful video boxes—each a pert advertisement, an eye-catching promise. Color television sets hung like hornets’ nests throughout the room, cocked at convenient angles, flashing in unison previews of movies. From a centralized speaker system came music, bits of conversation, explosions. Male voices pitched each film, invoked the names of stars. The room was charged with the magnetism of hype.

Della paused near the checkout to remove a wet slap of bangs that clung to her forehead. Small clusters of people conferred together, argued. Friends greeted one another. People stood side by side, their heads bowed, reading boxes. They milled. They pivoted on their own bewilderment. Children’s voices rose and dive-bombed over the shelves. There was a laxity, a frivolity, though also a measurable amount of friction electricity in the air—mild coercions in progress, people gambling and negotiating over the next few hours of their lives.

A girl approached Della, saying “Wow, hi! I didn’t recognize you.”

She was wearing a red bowling shirt and visor—the V-Town uniform—and it took Della a moment to realize that this was the pregnant girl from the fitness class she had taken last spring at the Y. The girl was small and thin now, recovered from her pregnancy, though there was a tired puffiness to her face that, under the fluorescent lights of V-Town, at least, suggested a festering unhappiness.

“Hello,” Della offered. She gave the girl her best kind-teacher smile.

“Oh my god, you look fabulous!” The girl held her hands up to her mouth—a gesture of pleasant shock.

Compared with what, Della wondered. She made a quick, embarrassed inventory—her old pea coat (loose and sagging), her tan bucks and cuffed-up jeans. How bad had she looked before? The girl’s compliment seemed to Della not as it was intended (an affirmation, hearty praise), but as a slight against her former self. She tried to suppress these feelings; she knew that members of the fitness class often greeted each other with enthusiastic amazement—a kind of collective wishful-thinking. And the fact was that Della had lost a considerable amount of weight—nearly forty pounds—and people were truly amazed when they saw her. Still, the down-and-up stares were humiliating. Her weight loss had placed her body in the public domain, and people were free now to stare and remark upon her; they had been excused from the normal boundaries of rudeness. The whole business disgusted her—she had seen the late-night “infomercials” on TV where women shared the details of their own private weight-loss battles (“I hated myself. I did!”). All that biology and shame laid bare for the cruel public eye.

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She had even used a diet book once called *Be A Loser!* and the message, though meant to be cute and ironic, had been clear.

“Really,” the girl insisted, “you’re like a different person!”

“Thanks. You look good, too. Is it a girl or a boy?”

Della noticed Lindsey across the room, grimly concentrating on the back of a video box. Trevor was hidden by the shelf, but she knew he was there by Lindsey’s hip (she had bribed him out of the car with the promise of a long-coveted toy), his tear-stained face turning now to a funnel of desire.

“Oh, the baby?” the girl said. She crossed her arms. “Actually, I never found out for sure. I mean I could have, but I told the agency I didn’t want to know, so they didn’t tell me. I was pretty knocked-out during the . . . uh . . . delivery.” The girl turned to wave at a group of boys who had just entered the store. “Hi Chuck! Hi Doug!”

The boys nodded to her coolly as they passed, each making a quick back-jerk of the head.

“Some family is taking care of it. I’m back at school now, you know? I took the SATs this morning. Oh, just a sec, I’m sorry, excuse me. Shelly!” She chased after another girl.

_Some family is taking care of it._ Della pictured a baby sitting on a porch somewhere, lapping water from a plastic crockery dish. She heard the girl gasp, “Oh my god! I totally flunked it!”

Last spring, in the fitness class, the thought of this girl’s impending motherhood, her fantasy wedding, had seemed like disaster. Now it was resolved, clearly for the best, and, as Della imagined it, even the sharp edges of the question mark in the girl’s gut would wear down in time. But there stood Lindsey—her dangerous energy, something inside her ticking like fingers drumming on a table—whom Della could imagine telling a stranger somewhere in the future, _Oh, my sister’s taking care of him._ And what would Della do?

She joined Lindsey and Trevor in the family section where Trevor seemed cheerful and cooperative.

“So,” Della said, “what’s it going to be?”

Trevor tipped his head from side to side, mimicking one of Lindsey’s gestures. “Well, I thought about it, and I decided that I want my mom to choose because she knows all the movies.”

Lindsey smiled down at him as she might smile at an incomprehensible chalk drawing on the sidewalk. Della grabbed the box closest to her reach.

“How about this?” The movie was called *Dr. Primate*—animated, cheap-looking, an exciting, racy box design.

“Meet Chad,” Della read, “a young veterinary student who is about to discover he has a strange and magical power. . . .” She put the movie back. “Look, I really don’t care.”

Lindsey said, “Well, I don’t care. Should we spread out?”

They were all three looking dumbly at the long row of boxes when from above and behind them came the voice of Bela Lugosi. “May I help you?”

“Martin!” Trevor shouted, maneuvering his body—a practiced twist and flip on the canes. He bounced low and careful on his rubbery feet.
Martin bent over Trevor and seized his shoulders. He did the spooky boowha-ha-ha-ha laugh and Trevor screamed, squirming under his big hands. He lifted the boy into the air, and Lindsey said, “Woop!”, her chin upturned following her child’s sudden flight. Della thought cruelly of Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim.

Martin Needle was astonishingly tall—How’s-the-weather-up-there tall, Abraham-Lincoln tall. Even his head was tall—a long, tapered cylindrical shape, like a conga drum. He taught fifth grade at Downey Elementary and had become Trevor’s babysitter on the night of his one date with Della. They were preparing to leave for a concert in Boston—high hopes on Della’s part, a schoolyard fantasy of two teachers going home together and doing it—when Lindsey appeared at Della’s door and said please? That evening at Highland Pizza and Tulamec Dairy Spot—both accommodating changes in their plans—Martin had behaved indifferently towards Della, but he fell in love with Trevor. Still, Martin was one of the few “eligible” men in town, the only other teacher at Downey who was unmarried. Della often found herself paired with him at dinner parties and scheduled on the same playground rotation. Though she laughed at match-makers, claiming Martin as “just a friend,” she was aware that her recent weight loss had been inspired, in part, by a vague hope still hung, however uncertainly, on Martin.

Lindsey stretched and massaged her pale neck. “Martin. You man-about-town,” she said, fatigued but flirtatious. “What are you doing here?”

Martin placed Trevor gently on his feet, making certain his stumps were firmly in their sockets, his balance sure, before letting go. “I’m not alone.” He winked at Trevor.

“Oh?” Lindsey said. “Got a date?”

“Yeah, you know, big doings. Empty thrills. Actually, she called it off at the last minute. Her mother got sick, or some such thing. No biggie.”

Lindsey clicked her tongue. “Anyone we know?”

“I doubt it. Hell, I don’t even know her. You know, Marriageable Martin? Some old friends from Manchester set it up. I think they all pity me, or envy me, I can’t tell which.”

“Oh, envy. Definitely,” Della said.

Trevor was rocking dangerously on his legs, displaying his open mouth to Martin and pointing to it, one cane up, one cane down. He tried to speak this way: “I lah a tooh, sheh?” He opened his mouth wider, tipped back his head for inspection, closed his eyes, sang ahhhh as if he were at the doctor’s.

“You lost a tooth?” Martin said. “Well, let’s have a look.” He stooped, placing his hands gently around the base of Trevor’s jaw as if he were holding a bird’s nest. “Oh . . . oh, yeah, yup. Looks like you’ve got a water squirter there.” (In Martin’s thick New Hampshire accent, it sounded like wahta squehteh). “Tomorrow, we go to target practice!”

Like a father, Martin’s claim to Trevor was proud and ostentatious—a public claim—loud and joking and physical. The two easily entertained each other and had developed a repertoire of role-playing situations in which Martin played evil, arch enemies—bad cowboys, bad gangsters, bad corporate executives, bad knights—or evils of the natural world—bad bears and cats and dinosaurs, tornadoes, hurricanes, tsunamis, creeping fog—and Trevor, as an ambiguous combination of hero-victim, always prevailed.

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Thank God for Martin was the phrase that clicked pityingly off people's tongues wherever Trevor was discussed. Martin even used this phrase from time to time—he knew very well the role he was playing in the boy's life. He had stepped in, he had saved the day. Once he told Delia how he believed in Graces that brought people together like this. He listened to old song lyrics and believed the universe worked by miracles and tiny destinies, that the Powers concerned themselves with guiding romance and mending broken hearts.

Della thought the only power guiding Martin's relationship with Trevor was Lindsey. She took full advantage of Martin's attachment. She was always alone, carefree, roaming. Della had found her at home alone on evenings napping, watching videos, playing solitaire. On a Saturday afternoon, she found her in the hardware store trying on paint caps and flirting with the owner, Harvey Kohler. When Della asked where Trevor was, Lindsey looked at her for a long, uncomprehending moment before answering, "Oh. He's with Martin." She pulled the cap seductively over one eye and rolled a shoulder for Harvey, who responded with a bawdy laugh, more indulgent than sincere. Lindsey said, "Thank God for Martin," and tossed the cap to Harvey.

"So, what's it going to be?" Martin rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. He was joining them, or, rather, they would join him. He had insisted.

"Out? Outside?" Martin teased. "Out back? Out and about?"

Trevor composed himself. "Disney," he said slowly, with dramatic pause, "is a fascist organization."

"Oh, it is?" Martin laughed. "You sure about that?"

"Yes." Trevor rolled his eyes at Martin's apparent ignorance. "He makes poor people wear costumes."

Della caught a whiff of Trevor's child's interpretation: huddled masses in rags and mouse ears. A quaint misunderstanding, though not altogether false.

"Well, that is shocking," Martin said, "but you know what I say? The artist and the art are separate, see? If Walt was a fascist—if he made people wear costumes... well! That may or may not be true. But then you see we have the work of art set free from its creator. Like offspring. A product of the man but certainly not the man himself. Look around you—what do you see?"

Trevor pointed to a video box. "Look at this!"

"Yes. Organisms. Offspring. Each box contains an individual world, separate from anything else. Author, director, actor—these are merely nutrients, or, uh, perhaps chromosomes which guide the organism, but the organism itself is something new. A synthesis. A unique chain of chemical reactions."

Martin's head was talking high above them—almost as high as the television sets—and Della pictured it hanging there, brightly, endlessly talking.

"So," she said irritably, "The art—the product—doesn't reflect back on the artist? So we all get off scot free? That's a great lesson for Trevor, Martin. I shot an arrow in the air. . . . it fell to earth I know not where. . . . Aren't we responsible for where our arrows land? I'd like to feel independent from the junk I do every day—that would be a relief. But as a matter of fact, I don't. People need to be careful, Martin." Della
became aware of the heat in her face and turned her attention to unfastening her coat buttons.

"Della, dear! You are literal, aren’t you? The arrow represents the imagination, yes? What you call careful, I might call a failure of the imagination. I might call timidity. Besides, one will invariably produce—not just several spotless works, or masterpieces—but countless works, of all degrees of quality. Do you see?"

Trevor thrust a video box up between them. "Look-at-this!" he said with a grand show of impatience. "I saw him before. My mom says he is like a god."

Della read, "Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House."

"A perfect example!" Martin wagged a finger at the box as if he were shaking down a thermometer. "Cary Grant! Now here’s a man who on screen projects all that is gracefully—conventionally—masculine, and yet in real life he beat his wives and took male lovers. See? The persona is separate from the person. Does anyone really care about Cary Grant’s virtue? I mean look at him!"

"Yeah, OK." But Della wondered where the boundaries were. Where is the point at which connection dissolves, or the person no longer informs the persona? When is one free to say, “that thing’s done,” and try again? In her experience, most things were not so easily shaken off. When she was fat, she thought of herself as a thin-person-trying-to-get-out; but after she lost the weight, she felt there was a fat person on the inside, informing her actions, telling her No, be careful. And Later. Or is this what Martin meant by a “failure of the imagination”?

"OK," Martin said. "Let’s can the chatter. We must press forward into our movie-watching night!" He spread out his arms awkwardly—a gawking pterodactyl. "Behold, the crowning glory of civilization."

"Let’s hurry," Trevor said, pushing Martin’s legs, ram-like, with the top of his head. Yes, Della thought. Let’s hurry. Let’s do this thing and get on with our lives. She felt a kick from inside her stomach. Not hard or breathtaking—just a nudge, a confidential elbow-prodding from a friendly agent. Where had Lindsey gone?

Della scanned the store. A crowd was gathered around the checkout—people waiting with selections, nudging their loved ones closer to the counter. The girl from Della’s fitness class was regarding a computer screen with a look of apprehension. She called a co-worker over and the two of them stared deep into the surface of the screen, unbelieving, as if it were issuing orders to kill. Della recognized faces: former students, former classmates—familiar but transformed, older, making claims, carrying with them plans and histories of which Della knew nothing. "I tell you what," a woman in the next aisle was saying, “I’m thinking of a number between one and twenty. . . .” and Della found herself thinking ten. She felt a tap on her shoulder.

"I thought that was you!” It was Edna Sloan, Della’s neighbor.

"Christ!" Della said. Edna’s face was close—bright and open like a hand-puppet. She had been a favorite with the sisters when they were kids.

"I wasn’t sure until I saw Lindsey’s little boy over there, bless his heart. Who’s the stick?" She pointed behind a cupped hand in the direction of Martin who, with a cane under his arm, had just struck another customer sidelong.

"He’s a friend."
“I’ll say he’s a friend!” Edna smacked and sucked her lips, making “yummy” sounds. “And don’t you look the prize?”

“Thanks.” Della looked down at herself—a performance of absent-minded humility. “So, where is Lindsey? Has she already left?”

“Left? No, I don’t think so. . . .”

“No? Oh well. I thought she might be gone by now. The way she talked the last time I saw her—when was that? July? No, it was before the girls’ trip to Bermuda. Anyway, she told me about going to, I think it was, Guatemala? To join her husband—some sort of business venture—horse racing . . . or, no? . . . dog racing!” Her laugh hit the ceiling.

“Lindsey told you that?” Della felt suddenly painfully stung, like a Band-Aid had been ripped from her skin—her alarm exposed, infected, glistening. Dog racing? Someone in the store cried a disheartening Over-my-dead-body!

“Yes. I thought it sounded a bit, well, not crazy, but oh . . . enterprising. I didn’t know they did that down there. Is it greyhounds?”

“Greyhounds . . . I think so. . . .” Della was trying to save face, but whose? “They all got fat, though,” she said, “the dogs, I mean. They sat around eating kibble and then they all came down with kennel cough or parvo virus or . . . what’s that disease that kills dogs?”

She wanted to tell Edna that Lindsey was kind-of loopy, dangerous even, that she should be reported to some official agency, locked up, be given a time-out. The voices of people around them were merry and indistinct, blending like the reeds of a harmonica up and down the chromatic scale, open throats buzzing.

Edna placed a comforting hand on Della’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, hon, it’s just that I guess I didn’t . . .” Edna looked around the store and back at Della. “How is she getting along?”

“Fine. She’s great.”

Over the crisp noise of a pop soundtrack, Della could hear Martin saying, Absolutely! Terrific! A saxophone seemed to be asking, Howza Muthah? Howza Muthah? and Martin said, Outstanding!

Della felt a rising lightness—the word grave came to her—a grave lightness, as if dozens of birds, aware of a silent encroachment, took flight all at once. She remembered the day Russ left, how Lindsey said she knew he would leave as soon as the alarm went off that morning. He was drinking coffee, playing with the settings on his diving watch, and then, Lindsey said, the realization came to her as something she already knew, like suddenly remembering the name of a foreign capital. Ulan Bator, just like that.

“You girls pop over some time and see the new addition,” Edna said, taking her leave. “I’ve put in a kitchen greenhouse and a breakfast nook. I’ve put in new fixtures, too. It’s very bistro.”

In the brightness and cacophony of V-Town, the world outside seemed untenable, aloof. Ulan Bator? Bistro? Only the world as it was pictured on the TV screens seemed inhabitable. This world could be chosen in advance, held in the hand—comedy or drama—predictable and reversible. It was hard for Della to imagine the road outside, the rain, the little houses waiting, the caulking left to dry.
Delia heard Trevor shouting, “Mom! Mah-ahm!” and she looked to see Trevor and Martin standing at the side of the store facing the plate glass. Martin was holding a video box flat against the window and pointing to it while Trevor banged the glass with the top of a cane.

Lindsey was outside, standing in the rain amidst the bright flood lights. Her gaze seemed endless—past the parking lot, past the street, the White Hen Pantry and the Texaco, out into the hapless darkness, as if she were waiting for a ship to arrive.

Della expressed a sharp breath, a “kuh!” of exasperation. She joined Martin and Trevor by the window, where Martin made a little hop towards her, then back again. He held the video out in front as if he were proposing a toast.

He said, “King Kong!”, tapping the box, nodding. “Is this not great?”

Trevor said, “Look! Mom’s got ghosts!”

The reflections of TVs and fluorescent lights were dimly projected onto the dark sky above Lindsey’s head, making the air seem fussy with spirits, a flickering blue vapor.

“Heard about art!” Martin said, laughing sweetly. He meant King Kong.

* *

At Martin’s door, Della was given a hostile once-over by the Old English, Luann, a large, philosophical dog whose puppies were asleep on the floor, heaped about in fat little mounds like tiny sea lions.

“Eleven!” Martin said, raising his brow.

Martin also nurtured dozens of African violets under sun lamps, a hobby which Della associated with old spinsters—they were such precious, temperamental plants—and she wondered, entering his house, was Martin entering his spinsterhood? Perhaps in compensation, his walls were decorated with old mechanical drawings: sketches of John Deere tractors from the forties and fifties, the first Corvettes, the floor plan of a transatlantic passenger dirigible. But even the boyish dash of this collection tripped on a dainty nostalgia.

He took Della’s coat and the bag of chips she had bought at the White Hen. Lindsey and Trevor, who had gone ahead with Martin, were already seated on the living room sofa, a puppy on each lap, facing the TV. Martin stepped aside for Della, bowing slightly. He shook the bag of chips, flinging drops of rain water on his pants.

“I'll get a bowl for these. Hush, Lu!”

“Well, poor girl,” Della said, offering the dog the back of her hand. “You must have had a time of it.” The dog sniffed thoughtfully.

Lindsey called from the couch, “I hate you, Martin! Trevor will absolutely have to have one now, won’t you Trev?”

“This one is named Martin,” Trevor told his mother, indicating the puppy on her lap. “And this one is named Peter Jennings.”

Della sat in Martin’s recliner and cranked it all the way back. She closed her eyes and opened them to be served a drink—punch?—in (oh my!) a Return of the Jedi tumbler.

Martin settled in next to Trevor on the couch and raised his hands, making them shimmer in the air like a showman’s. “Kids? We’ve got a new option! When Luann
had the puppies, I got the whole thing on videotape—well, highlights, actually. To
tell the truth, the miracle of birth becomes a bit routine after the first, say, five or six,
but it's really something to see! You want to? Trevor? Lin?"  
Trevor shouted, "King Kong! King Kong!" and Luann came forth immediately to
check him out.
"Really Martin," Della said, horrified. "Let's stick with the plan."
"Absolutely! Yes! No, I mean just for starters, like a cartoon—a newsreel, if you like.
Movietone News—'The Nation watches in wonder while Miracle Mom gives birth to
eleven..."
Luann bent backwards and snapped at a puppy who was pawing a teat.
"Whoa!" Lindsey said. "Every mother should have a set of teeth like hers."
"Yes? You think so?" Della said to Lindsey. "And what would you do with them?"
She was thinking of Lindsey's lie to Edna Sloan. Such depressing swagger! Cruelly
dissemissive of Trevor, and, well, of Della.
"Oh, you know," Lindsey said playfully, "I'd give this guy a little nip"—she pretended
to bite Trevor's arm—"and then I'd eat him up!" She plunged her face into his neck
and he squealed with delight.
"Oh," said Della. "I thought you might use them on your greyhounds in Guatemala."
"What?" Lindsey's laugh was a stretched smile, a shot of air through her nose.
Della rolled her head back dramatically. She said to the ceiling, "I think you know
what I mean."
"Really? Well, OK. It sounds like fun. Greyhounds, did you say? Martin, what do
you think?"
"Lucky greyhounds!" Martin flashed Lindsey a smile, more tender than lecherous,
and Della felt a tremor of jealousy.
"So, humor me," he said, the remote control poised in the air. "Just one or two
births. I really think Trevor should see this. Who wants to get the lights?"
But it was Martin who stood up and leaned over Della's chair to flip the wall switch
behind it. It was a difficult operation since Della was fully reclined, and Martin had to
steady himself on the arm of the chair. For a moment, it seemed that he would climb
in on top of her, his body was so close, parallel—she could appreciate its full size against
hers, its length, its body dimensions—and she closed her eyes, imagining an embrace.
But Martin reached the switch and pushed off in the dark, leaving a scent behind—a
sour, but not terrible, combination of, perhaps, coffee and Colgate, wet nerves and
shampoo. He had a choice, didn't he? Martin was in a position to choose between
them, and Della felt—with a flash which could only be truth—that she was the gloomy
option, the sister of the beloved. But how stupid to think in terms of choice! One
doesn't choose (look at poor, smitten Martin!). These things can't be helped. And
still, reasonably (she could not be otherwise), she felt there was an appropriate choice.
After all, she shared a world with Martin that Lindsey never entered—the school-year
rhythms, answering to bells, discipline, lines, the dreary talk of quit-smoking schemes
in the teachers' lounge, routine. A love to fit neatly inside a life. She had not, in fact,
chosen Martin. But who else? Life's offerings were few. Who was she to challenge the
one offering which had been so close for so long?
On the television screen, Luann lay panting on a blanket in her whelping box, “the nursery,” the on-screen voice of Martin told them. The camera moved stuck-and-start down the gray mass of dog to the business end where a shiny, dark form was emerging. “OK,” said Martin’s voice, “here’s number one. . . . It looks as if it’s still enclosed in its membrane. . . .”

“This is amazing how she goes to work here . . .” said the real Martin, there on the couch.

“Oh my god, this reminds me,” Lindsey said. “My friend from work, Julia?—she’s molto-pregnant, positively medicine ball! So, at her shower we watched a videotape of her ultrasound! Well, of course, it was amazing and weird and all that, but the . . .”

Martin pushed a stifling hand at her. “Wait! Watch right here!”

Luann on TV was eating the membrane off her first wet and motionless (dead?) puppy, who lay in a bloody, clotted fluid on the blanket. She gnawed mechanically through the umbilical cord, her black eyes calm and dull, and licked the puppy vigorously, pushing it with her nose, until, suddenly, it snapped to life, crying sharply.

Martin said, “Incredible! . . . She knows just what to do. . . .”

“Yes . . . so,” Lindsey continued. “The funny thing was, the kid is wiggling around in there—we can see its little arms and feet and head and everything—but all of a sudden we can see that he’s got this tiny little boner! Truthfully, the kid had an erection like you wouldn’t believe! We absolutely howled!”

“Now, here,” Martin said, “you’ll see the placenta come out—see that?” He pointed toward the television, got up, sashayed in a crab’s crouch closer to the screen. “It’s that meaty-looking lump of tissue—there!”

“Poor Julia!” Lindsey was saying. “The rest of the night it was all ‘your son’s an exhibitionist!’ and ‘Freud was right!’ and on and on. Every gift seemed hilarious after that. We could imagine some twisted new purpose for each one. Booties, breast pumps, everything became obscene!”

Martin sat on the floor next to the television, concentrating. His lips were parted slightly and he looked to be the ventriloquist to the on-screen voice, saying, “Good girl, Lu! Ludee-Ludee-Lu! Bravo, Bella!”

“The docs told Julia they can even masturbate in there! Can you imagine?”

Martin on the floor said, “You can see,” he pointed again at the screen, “that the puppy is now feeling for a teat . . . he’s deaf and blind. Luann is eating the placenta. You see?”

Martin watched—two Martins watched. Luann serenely munched.

“. . . In the wild, of course, this serves the function of nourishing the bitch during what may be ten, twenty, twenty-four hours of labor and delivery.”

Lindsey said, “That’s nothing! I was in labor for thirty hours with Trevor.”

“I didn’t want to come out,” Trevor said.

Della was beginning to feel the sweat of sickness coming on—those steaming troughs of dinner-paste! placentas!—the glands in her throat were buzzing. She put down her drink. Darth Vadar gave a reproachful look from the side of the tumbler (poor Darth Vadar—a prosthetic head!). She struggled for a panicky moment with the lever on the side of the recliner before the back slammed up, the feet tucked in, and she was free
of the chair. There was, then, an obstacle course of puppies for her to clear in the
darkness, and, getting the tip of a paw, she caused one puppy to yipe alarmingly,
exciting Luann’s protection and Martin saying Careful!—Hey!

Inside the bathroom, Della’s distressed reflexes relaxed. The room was well lit with
a large ceiling lamp and two rows of frosted bulbs across the vanity—white on white—and
all the capable wattage cheered her. She sat on the edge of the bathtub, steadying
herself on a scaffolding attached there—a metal frame with handles and a fold-out seat
slug like a saddle over the side of the tub—which Martin had built for Trevor. Looking
around, Della saw that the room was thoroughly Trevorized. Sharks and submarines
and little men with articulated joints lay together in their unlikely proportions on
the floor of the tub. A step stool fashioned with adjustable support rails stood ably
by the sink, on which stood a pink pillar of glittery toothpaste bearing a zap of bold
lettering that read IMPROVED! SWEETER! On the far wall, above the toilet, hung
a collection of Trevor’s paintings, framed and colorfully matted under glass.

They were good, Trevor’s paintings. Shapes were recognizable, sizes feasible, his
colors were brighter than real but well suited to his cheerful subjects. At the base of
each frame, Martin had attached an engraved brass title plate, and these, Della thought,
though extravagant, were, in contrast to Lindsey’s improvised devotion, very sweet.
She stood for a closer look.

The paintings were self-portraits. One was called Trevor Flies a Rocket Through a
Cloud; another, Trevor Swallows the Sun. There was Trevor, Robin Hood, and a Big
Moose in which Trevor and Robin rode the big moose together, bareback, and, Trevor
Climbs a Tree, which depicted the boy standing on a high branch of an evergreen tree,
snow-capped mountains in the background, broad, red smile, orange face, stocking
cap, fists on hips, two strong legs spread wide. The effect was Byzantine—the stiff
posture and dilated pupils, the obvious elements of kindergarten iconography: the self
as happy, the sky as blue, mountains, sun, tree, snow.

Heartbreaking, Della thought bitterly. The idealized Trevor as able-bodied sport,
a depiction of misguided optimism and faith. She heard chirping echoes of Lindsey:
What do you think, Martin? Greyhounds, did you say? The self as happy, the sky as
cherry-colored froth.

Trevor’s ring was edging into the web of Della’s finger, its adjustable metal prongs
grabbing a pinch of skin. Della examined the faceted plastic stone and decided it looked
nothing like a tooth. Of course, she thought, Trevor could afford this sort of fancy,
he was still wrapped in its childish warmth. But each year he would shed another layer,
wouldn’t he? Like baby fat, another imaginative garment—that, mittens, scarf, boots—
until what? In the chill of adulthood, how would Trevor appraise himself?

*

From the other side of the bathroom door there was a scratching, as if Luann wanted
in, but it was Martin saying, “Hey! Honey! Get a wiggle on! The mighty Kong awaits!
We’re off to the prehistoric island!”

Della removed Trevor’s ring and tossed it in with the wreckage at the floor of the
tub. She opened the door and faced Martin, who, poised like a square dancer, was offering her the service of his arm.

“Shall we?” he said.

Della looked at his arm, his eager, pretty face.

“Questions?” Martin said, “Concerns? You look as though you lost something in there.”

Della said, “Actually, Martin, we are not actually going to a prehistoric island. You know that, don’t you? I mean, in case you didn’t know, it’s not even cute.”

“Hey,” Martin was talking to Lindsey now. “What’s with the sister here?”

“Forget it, Martin,” Lindsey answered from the couch. “She’s inert matter. Passive density. She can go home if she wants. Tell her that, Martin. Tell her she can cheer up or go home.”

Martin looked to have an inner sputtering, a bucky motor failing him now, and Della saw a look of previously worked material and shared opinions, a complicity.

“That’s nice,” she said to Lindsey, “coming from . . . well, what are you? You go diving headlong into . . . you think you’re like Houdini or something. You dive into some idea you have. And you think you can just . . . take it back.”

“Oh, Houdini!” Martin said, recovering his campy hostliness. He was fingering the air as if he were scratching at a crusty stain. “Houdini’s underappreciated. I mean, here’s a man who was handcuffed, leg-ironed, nailed into a packing crate with two hundred pounds of lead, dropped off a ferry into the East River, and in fifty-seven seconds he was on the surface. Now, that’s not merely a magic trick, and it’s not just lunacy either, it’s . . . divinity, isn’t it? Ordinary, human divinity. When Houdini died, people expected him to escape from the dead!”

“Oh,” Della said grimly. God, Martin was pompous. “Thank you, how interesting.”

Lindsey sighed at Della, formed her mouth into a careful word shape, relented, started again: “Glub, glub, glub,” she said and giggled stupidly. “Do you remember, Della, when we tried to raise Mother from the dead? It was so goofy. Martin, you would not believe how funny it was. Mother didn’t think so, I guess, but, I don’t know. Remember Del? Somehow, it was a riot.”

It was true. When their mother lay dying, Della and Lindsey bought an expensive bottle of perfume for her birthday. They had gone into Boston and bared their wrists and necks at cosmetics counters in Filene’s and Jordan Marsh. It had been a good day. They sniffed each other, laughed, made faces. They rolled up their sleeves and held their hair back to expose new spots, asked the nougat-completed saleswomen impossible questions: Do you have something less grassy? Like this, but with more sky? Less humid? More blue, you know, optimistic? They tried to imagine each perfume on their mother’s warm skin, heated under the blankets of her hospital bed. It would be like a promise, they said. It would make her think of life, draw her out, suggest to her the possibility of cocktail parties, of air travel, the Italy Club, a visit with her friend, Mirella, in Florence. They counted on the triggering power of olfactory memory, the curative powers of the imagination.

Their mother’s imagination, as it turned out, would not be a factor. There were too many organs involved, too much spread. In the end she had said about the perfume,
“get that out of my face,” and they did, they resacked the fine little bottle along with the happy-birthday dunce caps from their heads. Later, in the waiting room, they applied the perfume to themselves, pouted like models. They laughed wildly. They said, *get that out of my face*, and wore the party hats as beaks, pecked at each other, did impressions of certain doctors: *Life, you know, is precarious for us all... There are no guarantees; I nearly cut my throat shaving this morning...*

Lindsey was telling the story and Della was interrupting, saying, “It wasn’t funny, Lindsey. Martin? It was not funny. It was tragic.”

But Della was lying. Not completely lying. Their mother’s death was a tragedy for Della: it would make her slow and cautious in the years that followed, marking the start of a stingy, begrudging adulthood. But during their mother’s final days, and just after, the sisters had felt such relief, such wicked delight in what felt at the time like freedom. They shared the belief that death had performed for them an excision, like cataract surgery, removing the thick, membranous presence of their mother. They could see the outlines of possibilities then and imagine daring new selves moving confidently through colorful, sharp-edged cities. But this giddy release lasted only a few weeks. Then came grief and hell to pay.

“Well, anyway, it didn’t work,” Lindsey said, “and the perfume—do you still have it, Del?—it was, actually, pretty awful.”

Martin said, “That’s—ladies, you know how I adore you—but that’s a very sad story. I won’t sleep tonight! Really! Why do you torture me?” He was laughing. He tried to take Della into his arms, a parody of comforting, but Della deflected him, keeled around his enormous wake, and joined Lindsey and Trevor on the couch.

The movie began. Trevor, who was close to unconscious, squirmed onto Lindsey’s lap, flopped his head back with lordly indifference. The puppies snored and wheezed. One scratched the floor in noisy fits. Lindsey snuggled up to Della and nuzzled her shoulder affectionately. She spoke softly into Della’s neck. “Do you love me?” she said. “Do you love me? Dove?”

There were tricks, weren’t there? There were maneuvers required to, say, free oneself from the crate. But, having managed that, one would have to know where to swim, what to aim for. One would need to imagine the surface above, the ferry, the crowds, the shock of cold air striking first the mouth, then the lungs.

Lindsey cooed, “Be sweet,” and Della smoothed the hair above Lindsey’s ear and stroked her head obediently.

In the dark, Della watched as destitute Fay Wray was plucked from the street and transformed into a starlet by a slick-talking movie director. “It’s money,” he told her, “and adventure and fame. It’s the thrill of a lifetime and a long sea voyage that starts at six o’clock tomorrow morning.” In the end, of course, it was King Kong.

The movie was a last-ditch hope and a warning to its 1933 audience, those ailing, watchful people caught in the worst year of the Depression, who, like Della, were afraid the way out was as random and expensive as anything else in life.