

SPRING 2004
roanokeREVIEW
VOLUME XXIX



Featuring:

Lucy Ferriss, Becky Kennedy, Francine Witte and Jason Byron Yarbrough

Road Rage

Lucy Ferriss

Winner, 2003 Fiction Contest

The next day, after work, Sarah drove to the stretch of highway where Brice had done it. On one side rose the bleached white towers of the paper-bag factory; the other, as well as she could make out through the streaming cars, was fenced-off swamp. Wetlands, they would call it now. From the shoulder where she'd pulled off she smelled gasoline exhaust and the tangy chemicals of the factory. Up to now the place had meant nothing to her. She lived on the other side of town, in the foothills.

There would be jokes about it, of course. Watch for low-flying Airedales. If you can read this, do you know where your dachshund is? Seatbelts save bitches.

They had kept dogs, when Brice was little. Three of them, ranging in size like the kids—a big golden lab for Mattie, a spaniel mix for Brice, a fox terrier for little Trina. When Brice was manic he'd come home from school and throw himself on the floor with the animals. "Oochy koochy parlee voo!" he'd cry out, a gangly kid of sixteen. "Bobbo, Martin, Peewee, my buddy wuddies!" They'd plant their paws on his chest and lick his face; he'd even open his mouth for them. Peter thought it was disgusting and said so, but you didn't cross Brice, in those moments. You planted a sort of fence around him, and hoped it held.

Sarah had the latest news this morning from the radio, which she liked to keep on in the kitchen. "Weird accident out on 44," the announcer had said in his adenoïdal voice. "Some local sociopath!

held a pure-bred Pomeranian responsible for his fender bender, and ordered the pooch's execution by tossing him into traffic. The dog was killed instantly, authorities said. Animal rights activists are *incensed*. The Pom's owner, Melinda Mayhew of Baxterville, told police she had just rolled down her window when a large white man reached in for the dog, who liked to ride on her lap. She reported the car as a red SUV. Says here she caught the first three characters of the license plate, which are EXT. That's in 'extension,' folks, and if this guy is an extension of anything, it's his own Rotweiler personality."

Later on there was a panel discussion, but Sarah wasn't listening. Already she'd gone out to inspect the Cherokee, though she knew it was red, for heaven's sake, and its plate read EYT478, which was close enough. The back fender was newly nicked, a giant thumbprint in the metal. Brice was in the basement, watching *X Files*. She marched downstairs. "They're looking for you," she said. "No shit," said Brice. John Lithgow was turning slowly around on the screen, a mocking puzzlement on his face.

"I think you should turn yourself in."

"Well, I don't."

"Brice, look at me. Are you off your meds?"

"No," he said falsetto, "I am not off my effing meds."

Sarah's eyes had burned as she shut them. "We'll talk about this later," she'd said. "I'm going to work."

When he was 12, when they started with just Depakote, Brice amazed her by swallowing the smooth pink pill each time she handed it to him. He hated it, but he swallowed it. If he didn't, she would take him back to the doctor. It broke her heart, the first few times, to see him so innocently pop the drug. It wasn't until they added the Lamprisal that meds became a battle of wills. Brice hated the weight gain, the nausea, the way he dropped asleep at his desk. He was off

his meds the summer he came home from college and the spaniel died. He slammed doors so hard that the one to the bathroom cracked. Then—yes—that was one of the roof walks. Brice at the gutter, two stories up, his arms splayed out like an angel. And you never knew, you just never knew when despair might lift its wings, and so she stood on the gravel drive and pleaded, she sent Trina to call 911, she endured the neighbors. The next day they had buried the pooch, and Brice had been calm as a stone.

A breeze kicked up the stink of the swamp. Sarah turned her head. Shit for brains, Brice would have called the woman who bumped him. Standing outside her driver's window, while she buzzed it down. Then the grab at what lay in her lap, its little pink mouth panting, and the fling across the single lane, to where the traffic whined. Well, he was mad. Anyone would be. He dealt with this patch of road every day, on his way from the bike shop where he'd found work. They needed a four-lane here, everyone said so. Forty miles an hour, and always some chuffing truck followed by a conga line. How many people, if they could grab something small and alive and hurl it, just to make something *happen*—how many wouldn't be tempted? Brice was different only in this way: he acted.

The woman's mouth in a perfect O. The dog silent, its paws out, wondering if this is a new trick, ready to land on his white feet. And the traffic moving now, like a drain unclogged, drivers behind honking, get going, Brice speeding away.

* * *

At the crunch of gravel, Sarah lifted her head. A van drew up about six feet behind her Taurus. A middle-aged couple got out and opened the hatch. After they pulled out what seemed to be a roll of plastic, the man looked over at Sarah. His thinning gray hair was

pulled back into a ponytail; his Greenpeace T-shirt had been unevenly bleached. "Awful, isn't it?" he said—loudly, over the noise of traffic.

Sarah nodded. "Hard to believe," she said.

The woman, also ponytailed, was tying one end of the banner to the fence bordering the factory grounds. "That murderer," she said conversationally, "ought to be strung up by his testicles."

She hisped a little, saying the word. Her partner tied the other end. The banner was black, with a picture of a white poodle's head. The tears that dropped from the poodle's eyes weren't very convincing, but the large blue type reading simply "Man's Best Friend . . ." did the trick.

"Realistically," said Sarah, "if they do catch him, what can they do to him? I mean, lynching to one side," she added when the woman's eyes widened.

"He gets convicted of extraordinary cruelty to an animal," said the man, "he'll do time." He stepped back to admire his handiwork. The banner fought the fence in the breeze. From passing cars came a few windy shouts of encouragement. Then another car, rusted blue, pulled over.

"Amazing, isn't it?" said the man who stepped out. He raised a camera to his face, squinted, and clicked. Both Sarah and the ponytailed couple stepped back, as if the lens were a weapon. "For the newspaper," the photographer explained, stepping around the car with his right hand outstretched. He was close to Sarah's age, lanky and badly dressed.

"We have a public relations office," said the woman.

"Don't wait for them." Her husband reached into his back pocket and handed the photographer a bent brochure. "Spread the word. Get the bastard," he said, and jerked his chin upward.

"Thanks, fella," said the photographer. He handed around

his card. *Dean Dexter*, it read. *Press-Advocate*. "I mean, it is news," he said, mostly to the two women. "Man bites dog, practically."

"There's to be a burial tomorrow," said the woman. She had drawn closer to her husband. Cars whipped by; children pressed their noses to the window, hearing their parents tell the awful story as they passed.

"Burial?" Dean Dexter jotted a note.

"Bean Repos Pet Cemetery," said the man. "Behind the K-Mart, on Route Ten, at 5:30. They're donating the plot."

"That poor Miss Mayhew," said the woman.

"Mayhew?" echoed Sarah, momentarily perplexed.

"Yeah, we got her name," said the ponytailed man. "Now all we need's his."

Sarah drove back through town, the highway widening as the buildings crowded closer together. Local economy had slipped since they'd moved here with Peter, the year Trina was born. In those days, the bag factory was hiring, and there was also a cutlery manufacturer, famous since the turn of the century. But the cutlery people had gone out of business, and the paper bag makers sent a third of their work overseas.

Every so often Sarah received a note from Peter, who now lived in Baltimore. He kept in touch with Trina; the other two, he had pointed out gently, weren't his. For Sarah he would enclose some newspaper clipping he'd found pertaining to their area. Last time it was the couple who stole cats from the SPCA, took them to the lake, and drowned them.

* * *

Brice had moved the Cherokee into the garage. Across the street, Mrs. Strohmeier was walking her dachshund. Sarah waved,

smiled. The dog was curling its hot-dog back, laying its hot-dog turds. It could be worse, Sarah imagined saying to Peter on the phone. He could be a serial dog killer. One of those people who leave hamburger balls mixed with ground glass in the park.

Sure. He could be the Unabomber. He could be Charles Manson.

She opened the front door. Smelled flowers and garlic.

"Brice!" she called.

"Hey, Mom," he called from the kitchen. "Shit!"

"Drop something?"

"Shrimp marenngo. Damn things slip. Do you *have* to devein?"

"I don't know." Sarah set down her purse. Still in their wrapping the flowers lay, begging for water, on the dining room table. Tulips and baby's breath. "I'm allergic to shrimp. You know that."

"No shit!" He appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, his T-shirt spotted with shrimp leavings, a paring knife in one hand. "How much is a clove of garlic?"

"They vary. One of those big pieces is a good-sized clove. Or you could use two smaller ones."

"You're kidding! I thought it was the whole—you know, the whole *thing*."

"A bulb has about ten cloves in it."

"Fuck! No wonder it all stinks!"

He raced back to the kitchen. Sarah sat on the carpeted stairs and removed her shoes, which pinched. She had always been allergic to shrimp. When Peter still lived with them, she sometimes served battered shrimp for the four of them and a hamburger for herself. She'd sigh and say, "Gee, that looks good. But Mom's allergic."

Pushing herself up, she padded into the dining room, found a vase in the bottom cupboard, filled it at the kitchen sink. "What's *that* for?" said Brice.

Sarah nodded at the flowers.

"Shit!" he said. "They're wrecked."

"They're fine," Sarah said. She reached out to touch Brice's elbow, which was batting like a chicken wing, working the shrimp. "What is not fine," she said as he shrugged her off, "is being off your meds."

When she had arranged the tulips, she left him alone. Upstairs, in the bathroom, sat the translucent orange bottles, the complicated lids with tabs like tongues. Once, years back, Brice had thrown a full bottle to the floor and stomped on it with his boots. Amber flew everywhere; the pills ground to pink powder. For weeks after, she ran across needle-shaped plastic shards, under the toilet, caught between tile and grout.

This time, sitting on her bed, she spilled the caplets out and counted. Of the Depakote, 25 left. Last week there had been 40. Brice was supposed to take 4 a day. The Lampressal was down by 14; 2 a day. They were fine on the Lampressal. Just the stabilizer not taken. He was a table with a broken leg.

She called Brice's shrink, Dr. Grossman, a worried guy whom Brice barely tolerated. "Doctor's service," came an impatient voice.

"Is he around?" Sarah asked.

"He'll be picking up messages. If this is an emergency, he can be paged." Sarah pushed the pills around on her bedside table "Just ask him to call," she said. They were hard to spot, the emergencies. There had been weeks when Brice did nothing but sleep, for instance. And weeks when he had not slept, it seemed, a wink. There was the stash of yard-sale clock radios in the basement, Brice down there trying out each one's whine or buzz or click. "Are you going to sell them?" Sarah asked once. He stared at her. "I have to *fix* them first," he said. And trundled out to buy more. There had been the night he grabbed two pool cues and swished them through the air in front of Sarah's face, like Bruce Lee with his chains.

In high school there had been the money that disappeared from her wallet, and the sudden appearance of lacrosse equipment. Brice didn't play lacrosse. The night he bound and gagged Trina—now there was an emergency. Sarah and Peter had gone out to dinner and left Mattie in charge and Mattie had fallen asleep and Brice had swaddled Trina and left her with the spiders by the furnace.

Peter had taken Trina, after that one, and gone to Baltimore.

The rest you couldn't call emergencies. Not the Egypt mania that had seized him in sixth grade, when he wallpapered his room in hieroglyphics and sculpted a life-sized Isis from construction foam. Certainly not Brice's other homemade meals, pizza spilling onto the oven floor or chicken curry thickened with a whole box of cornstarch.

When the doorbell rang, Sarah jumped—as if, for a moment, there had been the possibility of that ponytailed couple standing there with their banner. Detecting guilt, they had followed her home.

"Brice!" Sarah called, dribbling the pills back into their jar. A thump from the kitchen. Brice was dropping things. Trina was away at college, safe; Mattie had moved to Florida. Stumbling to the bathroom, Sarah drenched a blue washcloth with cold water, pressed it to her face, patted dry, descended. At the door, pierced like an earring board, stood Brice's girlfriend Lori.

"Hey, Sarah. Brice in?"

"Can't you smell him?" said Sarah.

Lori sniffed. She was a perky, pretty girl, despite some residual acne damage to her chin and lower cheeks. When she actually got her dentistry degree, she said, she was going to take the piercings out. They would frighten patients too much, would remind them of pain. Now she clacked her tongue stud against her lower teeth. "They say garlic cures a cold," she said. "Hey, Bricey boy!"

"God! You have got to help me!" Brice called from the kitchen. Lori winked at Sarah. Lori thought Brice was a clown. I

know, I know, she'd said when Sarah tried to tell her about the darker side. I just wait it out. He doesn't mean a bit of it.

"I'll let you two be," said Sarah.

"Nonsense! Mom! I made this for you!"

In the kitchen, Brice twirled. He offered a shrimp by its tail and Lori bit off the body. A handsome boy, though not as tall as his long-lost father. On the Risperdal he'd gained twenty pounds in three months. Now he was back to his wiry self, a sprite dancing around his queen. Sarah lifted the pot lid from the rice, breathed its plain scent.

"I wanted to do crème brûlée for dessert," Brice said, "but I got too involved with deveining."

"That's important," said Lori. "Those veins are really the shrimp's intestine. They can be full of gross stuff."

She dipped a spoon into the sauce and tasted it. "That'll cure a cold," she said.

"Will it make you pregnant?" Brice asked.

"Brice!" Lori twisted out of his arm. "Do you want me pregnant?" she said. Her blue eyes showed just the trace of alarm.

"Might be fun. Hey, you and my mom can both be pregnant. Sit around and knit booties together."

He leered at Sarah, or rather in Sarah's direction. His eyes focused somewhere to the left of Sarah's waist. Sarah held her breath.

"Well, I don't want to be pregnant," said Lori, trying to steer back to the land of light banter. "Not until I've set up a practice."

"Good girl," said Sarah.

"Well, then"—Brice set a can of olives on the counter and fished around for the opener—"my mom will have to go through her confinement alone."

Lori glanced at Sarah. "I am not pregnant," said Sarah.

Suddenly she knew why Brice had gone off his meds. Anger

rose in her like steam.

"Really?" said Brice. "I am sorry to hear that, Mom. It's not for lack of trying," he said as an audible aside to Lori.

Lori brightened. "You're dating?" she asked Sarah.

Sarah made fists, released them. "I'd hardly call it that," she said.

"Well, don't be Oedipal, boyfriend!" said Lori. She took a kitchen towel and flicked Brice lightly on the back with it.

"I'm not!" protested Brice. "I just don't think fifty year-old babes ought to be sneaking around. Doing the hotel scene." He dumped the olives into the simmering shrimp before Sarah had a chance to suggest draining them.

"What makes you think," she asked her son, forcing a smile to stay on her face, "I do the hotel scene?"

"Clerk called four days ago," said Brice. "Said you'd left some personal things."

Four days ago. Perfect.

"Well, if they were personal," said Lori, ready to mediate, "then they are your mom's business. Hey, we are all grown-ups here!"

"Absolutely," said Brice. He lifted the skillet, swimming in shrimp, and carried it out to the dining room. "Consequences happen, though. Especially if you forget your personal things."

"Oh, please," said Lori, following him with the rice. She rolled her eyes in Sarah's direction.

The facts were these. After Peter left, there had been two men, one of them during the year Brice had been off trying to cope with college. They had both pulled away once they saw what a handful Sarah's son was. This town didn't offer much. You went through a second husband and two lovers, and you were at the bottom of the barrel. For the last few months, Sarah had been hanging around one of the hotel bars after work. She was no longer young, but neither

was anyone else. Once or twice—no, three or four times—she had taken a room. The men were married, of course. But they weren't around enough to back away from her son. She didn't have to hear them say, as if to a condemned person, "I am so sorry, Sarah."

"So I'm driving over this way," said Lori brightly when they were seated. She had already begun separating out the chunks of garlic. Sarah had served herself rice with butter and a few tomato chunks. "And they are holding a vigil, can you believe it? For that poor little pooch."

"You heard about that, huh?" said Brice. He scooped a load of shrimp and rice into his mouth.

"Who hasn't heard about it? You know my mom keeps Pomeranians. She says they are the *smartest* dogs." Lori said this to Sarah, who nodded as if she were in the market for a canine. "And my sister knows that Melinda Mayhew."

Brice had swallowed, made a bellows of his cheeks, and blown. "Whew!" he said. "That's some garlic bulb!"

"My sister sells Mary Kay to her. She says that lady won't stop till she finds the guy. My sister says she's nuts."

"I'll second that," said Brice.

Sarah let her jaw drop. *No no no*, she sent the message to her son. He was pouring more wine, warm chardonnay he'd found in the cabinet. He wasn't supposed to drink alcohol. But you picked your battles, and meds were in the field. *No no no don't tell her!*

"You know her?" said Lori. She tugged at her eyebrow thing. "Is that a coincidence or what, Sarah? Brice knows that poor lady too! And she really is nuts? I've always hated Poms myself. Little panthers."

Brice started giggling. He spat a couple of masticated shrimp onto his plate and couldn't stop. He pounded the table with his fist. His eyes teared. "I'm sorry. I am *sorry*," he said when he'd finished

an ounce of control. The giggles still sprung from him, like hiccups. He drained his glass of wine. "But it was just so *funny*. *God* you should've seen. Like one of those stunts in the movies, when the pet goes hurling across the screen. Like, where'd the *brakes* go? Jesus." He wiped his eyes. "It was a satisfying moment. And yes, Lori, she is nuts."

"What are you talking about?" said Lori. She pulled at the studs that dotted her ear cartilage. "What was so funny? Stop *choking*. Lordy."

"Little poochie." He thrust his arms in front of him, the hands flisted to make paws. "Aaah!"

"You're the—you're the guy?" Lori paused with her wine glass halfway to her lips. "The guy in the red truck? Who hit that poor lady? And threw away her *dog*?"

"She hit me, A. B, you just said she was not that poor lady but that nuts lady. C, guilty."

Lori's arm refused to move. Her elbow stayed in a precise V. All that past winter, when Brice had been paralyzed with depression, she had stuck it out. Had gone to Dr. Grossman to learn what she could do. Brice had told her she made him want to puke and still she had stuck it out. Once you know how sweet he can be, she had said to Sarah, you can't give up on him.

Now she rose, her wine barely wavering in the glass. "The awful thing," she said, "is that I believe you."

"That's me. Honest Brice."

"Someone ought to call the police." Lori's tongue stud clacked. She looked to Sarah, who moved her shrimp around her plate.

"Go ahead," said Brice.

Lori set her wine down on the table, turned, and walked out. "Good luck, Sarah," she called over her shoulder, sounding eerily

like Peter.

Next day Sarah found herself at the Beau Repos cemetery, where she laid eyes on Melinda Mayhew.

All day, again, the incident had been on the news, a tragicomic punctuation to world events. The drivers of the oncoming cars were interviewed. "I thought it was a T-shirt flying through the air," said one young woman; another said, "People on our side of the road were very friendly. The fellow whose wheels went over him, he was very upset." At work, Sarah's colleagues talked about tailgaters, pork-barrel road construction projects, and some people's obsession with bringing their pets on car rides. After work, Sarah had simply headed toward the plaza by the expressway. The ceremony was in progress when she arrived. A black-robed minister officiated, and people were bowing their heads. All around them were little stone markers, for Fluffy and Terrence and Beauregard, "our faithful one." The ponytailed lady stood next to the minister. Spotting Sarah, she wiggled fingers at her, a new friend. Sarah nodded briefly, then bowed her head with the rest.

"Those who are faithful to us unto the end," the minister intoned, "those who connect us with the mystery of God's whole creation, those who place their trust in us, their sacred trust. What can we say but that Samantha gave her life for her mistress?"

Sarah cried. Granted, she cried easily on such occasions. This time she thought of the lab, the spaniel, the terrier. If Brice ever left home, she would get dogs again. She would be one of those old women who lived for their dogs. At this she cried.

"I would not be surprised," said a voice at her ear when the service concluded, "if the guilty party were among those present. Would you?"

It was Dean Dexter, the photographer. "What makes you think that?" said Sarah, wiping her eyes.

"It's too strange a crime to be as random as it appears. Killing a person's pet is a crime of passion, a revenge crime. Who has something against Ms. Mayhew?"

He nodded in the direction of a tall, athletic-looking woman who stood by the minister in a posture of embarrassment and anger. The others present had started to murmur, to break up and drift off.

"Excuse me," said Sarah. She stepped over to the tall woman, almost tripping on a hidden headstone. "Miss Mayhew?"

"Call me Mel," said the woman. Her voice was gravelly, a smoker's voice.

"What a tragedy for you," said Sarah.

"A dead child is a tragedy. A dead dog is sad and weird."

Mel Mayhew wore a business suit and sneakers. Behind her, the expressway whined. "Samantha was my mom's dog," she went on. "I promised Mom I'd take care of her when Mom died." She kicked a clump of grass with her sneakered foot. "The rest is just stupid," she said. She looked over Sarah's shoulder. "Can you get that guy out of here?" she asked.

Sarah turned. At her back, Dean Dexter was scribbling notes. "For Pete's sake," Sarah said.

"News is news," he said.

"Try 'Girl hits boy,'" said Sarah.

"You know something, don't you?"

She looked closely at him. He was fifty, or almost. No wedding ring. Somewhere behind his inquisitive eyes, a failed passion. The joy she would bring him, telling him about Brice, was hideous to contemplate. "I know," she said slowly, "how complicated the world is."

She came home to Brice still asleep—amazing how deeply he could sleep for so long, like a rock at the bottom of the ocean. The Mr. Coffee had turned to sludge. There were three messages on the

machine. The first was from Dr. Grossman, returning her call; he could be paged. The second was Trina, giggling, could Mom send her those blue slippers, the ones she wore on visits? The third was from Lori, recorded just a half-hour earlier. She was crying. She was going to call the police, she said. "Even though I do hate Poms," she said, snuffing. "You could gun down a hundred Poms as far as I'm concerned. Make coats out of their fur. Only they mustn't belong to somebody, Brice. It's—it's the love thing. Whatever people love. It's not up to you to take it away."

She had called, she said, to give Brice time. In case he wanted to leave town. She would call the police in a half hour, she said. She knew Brice was home. She'd driven by and peeked in the window of the garage at the Cherokee.

Sarah slipped off her shoes. She went upstairs. "Brice, honey," she said, shaking his shoulder. The odor he gave off was ripe, a man's odor. "You need to get up," she said.

"Right," he said, and turned away from her.

"The police are on their way. Lori called them. And Dr. Grossman called."

He did not stir. Sarah sighed, then went to the bathroom. This was Peter's technique. She filled the bathroom cup with water, returned to Brice's room, and said, "Now, Brice." When he only mumbled, she tipped the cup. Water trickled onto his neck.

"Goddamnit!" he said. Sarah stepped back when he jumped from the bed. It was, she used to tell Peter, the worst way to wake a person up. The most effective too, he said. "Mom," Brice said, hulking over her, his lips tight and his eyes narrowed, "I am asleep."

"Not now, you're not," she said. She took his elbow and steered him downstairs. "Listen to this," she said. As she flicked on the answering machine, the doorbell rang.

* * *

The detective, a young good-natured man with a badge reading "Connolly," began gently. They had had a report, Connolly said. Their duty was to investigate. Could they speak—?

Brice wouldn't give. "I was just joking. Jeez," he said when Sarah let the cop in. His eyes, awake now, danced at his mother. "You take everything so *seriously*."

"Brice, please," Sarah said.

Connolly wrote things down on a little pad. He'd already been out back, to have a gander at the red truck. He looked around the front hallway as if he could find a clue in the corners of the ceiling. "I could take you down to the station now," he said to Brice, "or you could come on down yourself. Anytime tonight."

Sarah waited for Brice to answer, then said, "Which is better?" "I'd follow us down, if I was you. Make it easier. After twelve hours I'll have to send someone out here."

"I guess we'll stop by a little later," said Sarah. She put her hand on Brice's shoulder. If the police would just leave—there was another squad car at the curb, now, and a couple of unknown cars had parked across the street—she would page Dr. Grossman. Brice is aiming for residential treatment by court order, Grossman would say; let him get what he's after. Still. "Just give us a couple hours," she said.

"No pressure," said Connolly. He took her hand. His palm was warm and dry, his fingers thick. She wanted to keep hold of his hand, but he squeezed and then pulled away and reached for Brice's, which didn't come out of Brice's pants pocket.

The door closed behind Connolly. The house still smelled, faintly, of shrimp. Already it was evening, a Friday evening, the time of week when people like Sarah gathered at the hotel bar and

recapped their restless week. "Poor cop," Brice was saying. "He's got to do this shit for a living."

"Honey, get dressed," said Sarah. "We're going down there." "I got other places to go," said Brice.

He laid his hand on the railing and skipped carpeted steps, vaulting up. Sarah waited for the slam of his bedroom door, the rattling of his dresser drawer. Some days he shoved the clothes in, and when they stuck in the hinges he yanked the drawers open. Other days—rare ones—he had taken everything out, folded it beautifully, and stacked shirts and pants in triple rows worthy of Wally Cleaver.

She crossed her arms over her chest. She would call Grossman. If he came over, they might persuade Brice down to the station, and from there maybe to signing himself in for treatment. Just to get the meds back in sync. The door squeaked, overhead. Only it wasn't Brice's bedroom. Sarah's eyes snapped open.

By the time she reached the landing, Brice's feet were disappearing up the ladder.

"Honey?" said Sarah. "Brice?"

Gingerly she set her bare feet on the metal rungs. Unfinished planks on the attic floor covered the fiber insulation; here and there sat Have-a-Heart traps that they had used in the spring to catch squirrels. Nothing was stored in the attic. At the far end, behind the chimney, Brice had shrugged off his slippers. Waning daylight angled through the trap door to the roof. "Brice?" Sarah said again; but with the trap dislodged, he had hoisted himself up.

"Shit," she said. She stood on the planks, straightened, and thumped her head on a beam. "Shit!" She bent; she scuttled, crablike. The last time he had pulled this stunt had been the weekend before Peter left, and she had stood on a frozen lawn and shouted up at him, had pleaded, had talked him down.

This time she reached her arms through the opening to the

roof and tried to hoist herself up and through, as her son had done. But the arms were too weak, the body too heavy. "Goddamnit, Brice!" she called. She heard his steps, moving over the tiles. The roof slanted, but at a shallow pitch. "Pull me up!" she demanded. Her voice sounded small, in the muffled space of the attic. His feet stopped moving.

Sarah pulled over one of the Have-a-Heart traps. How long had it been since they trapped a squirrel? And driven it out of the city, far into the hills, to set it free in the woods where it could tell its new clan about the wonders of town life. Brice had loved those trips, Trina too. Sarah dragged over the other trap, stacked it, stepped carefully onto the flimsy cages, and pulled herself out to the roof.

"Mom," Brice said without turning. "You made it."

"Don't scare me, Brice," she said. She stood and squinted against the setting sun. Her son was a silhouette farther down on the slope of the roof, facing west.

"No fear," he said.

He lifted his arms, like wings. Sarah's throat bulged closed. From below, in the gathering darkness, came a scream. Carefully she took two steps forward. The rough tiles held her feet. Below, cars lined their street. Passengers were getting out. Sarah counted. The fourth in was a white Mazda: Melinda Mayhew. A couple of cars behind her, the ponytailed couple's van. Then from beside the first, rusty blue car came a flash, and Dean Dexter called out, "You okay up there?"

"We're fine," Sarah said. Only softly, not to him; to Brice. You didn't make something happen by shouting. "Back up a step, honey," she said.

"I like it here."

The open air flattened his voice. Sarah inched forward, the

grip of the tiles a sure thing. Reaching up, she took her son's outstretched hand. It was a big hand, a man's hand. She managed just to wrap her fingers around the palm. The sun slipped below the tops of the trees. As the breeze brought a far-off wail, they blessed the multitudes.