Living for the Future

NANCY WELCH

FIVE YEARS INTO OUR MARRIAGE, Evan and I land a house in Harmony Park. It's a lucky find, the realtor tells us: a five-room ranch with ancient appliances, yellowed ceilings, and a single bathroom.

"Were people smaller in the 50s?" I ask, half seriously.

The realtor files us into a third shoebox bedroom, identical to the other two but labelled nonetheless "the master." There is a shallow closet and just enough room for a dresser. Above the double bed hangs a portrait of Mary drawing a coverlet over her sleeping infant.

"They weren't smaller," says Evan, always ready to deliver a lesson. "They just lived smaller, for a few years at least, after the war. If you look up the street, you'll see the houses get bigger and bigger."

Evan is into his fourth two-year contract as a lecturer in the university's environmental program. He runs the intro courses, supervises field work for graduate students, and sometimes fills sabbatical vacancies with courses of his own. His favorite is called *Living for the Future*. On students' transcripts the abbreviated title reads *Living for* …. It is a Sunday crossword clue, an unanswered question, but the college kids love it. It gives credit for what most are already doing: braving winter streets on fat-tire bikes, avoiding plastic straws, drawing up plans for tiny houses and yurts. Evan gestures to the split-levels and colonials further up the street, a cul-de-sac curving around a patch of woods. He shakes his head. It is garbage day in Harmony Park. Bins, the overflow of refuse lifting their lids, are parked at the bottom of every driveway. Already, I

suspect, Evan is devising a new class project: adopt and repurpose a neighborhood's trash. He might not wait to close on the house before going door to door, inviting our new neighbors to join in collective composting.

My parents are evangelicals, the perpetually cheerful kind whose stadium church services feel like pro-football halftime shows, the car bumpers in the parking lot plastered with stickers like *Do you follow Jesus this close?* In Evan, I recognize their zeal minus their exasperating indifference to the planet we are all trying to live on.

The realtor beckons us close. We must lean in to hear him above the garbage-truck groans.

"The owner's kids are eager to get her into assisted living. It's a good time to make an offer."

He returns to regaling the house's possibilities, things we would never do like build up to add more square footage or take out a wall for an ensuite bath. Evan isn't listening. At the bedroom's high awning window, he stands on tiptoe and gives a play-by-play. From three different companies, garbage trucks move up and down the street, swinging into the opposite lane to skirt lawn-service vans. It is another cause for Evan to go door to door and for which I will join him. It floors me that anyone can be so oblivious as to fertilize their lawn in spring. You might as well dump nitrogen straight into storm drains to spill into the creek that snakes down to the lake where it will bloom into algae and kill several dogs by June.

The realtor turns to me. "And what about you two? Any children?"

Evan remains on his toes, taking inventory. The driveway of the house diagonal is sardine-packed with SUVs and an enormous Winnebago, its rear-end overhanging the street. The neighbors to the east have converted their front yard into a vegetable garden. It lies fallow, snow slowly receding from straw-covered rows. These neighbors are possible future friends, friends who upon first meeting will also ask, "And do you have any kids?"

"No, no kids," I tell the realtor, grateful that Evan, distracted, has missed this chance to offer a more elaborated reply.

Anyone who doesn't know us might conclude, upon a minute's conversation with Evan, that we are a couple summiting the middle peak of our thirties,

childless because we've taken a personal stand against overpopulation. Evan would surprise no one if he said, "We're doing what we can to prevent the sixth extinction" or "Look who's in the White House. Would *you* bring a child into this world?" I've suggested more tempered versions of such replies. People we will never see again, people we will never call friends—why not play along?

But Evan doesn't like games. *Living for …* hooks students with its do-it-yourself appeal, but only so Evan can impress upon them the harder facts. The ability to live close to the bone might save them from default on student loans, but it won't stop the banks from plowing their payments into shale oil and fracking. If they want to save the planet, they will have to take their educations beyond learning to whittle their own sporks. Evan stands a chance at the tenure-track because *Living for…* wins new recruits to the sober work of environmental science.

Whenever Evan steps in on the "Any kids?" question, he is at once direct and uncharacteristically euphemistic: "We had a child, but we lost him." His answer is just this side of his mother's "Nate is no longer of this world" or my parents' "Our grandson has gone to live with Jesus." Some facts—he died, he drowned, he was almost two—are too hard, even for Evan.

We had a child, but we lost him.

As if we set Nate down and now, for the life of us, cannot remember where.

Move-in day is a Wednesday, Evan planning to head to school straight from the motel while I get my bearings in Harmony Park. I work at the university too, in the Extension Services' state water quality lab. The requisite skills for my job are the ability to be both precise and equivocal.

Is it safe to swim? neighbors and friends ask.

If I respond, "Well, this week's samples show 234 CUFs of E. coli per 100 milliliters of water," they grimace and ask again, *Can we swim?*

Sure, I say, the beaches closed only when the CFUs rise above 235. *If you want.* Thinking: *I wouldn't.*

But now it is only early April, the lake's shady coves still glazed with ice, enough snow in the mountains that no one yet dreams of exchanging skis for swimsuits. My boss is at the State House in Montpelier, giving expert testimony on phosphorous run-off for a bill that annually dies in committee.

Evan wanted to spend our final night in the sleeping bags I didn't realize we still owned, rolled out on the floor of our emptied apartment.

"Too many ghosts," I told him, and then, more sensibly, "Too many roaches."

We arrive at the motel separately, me in the car and Evan by bike. We are so giddy from being temporarily untethered from three rooms of furniture and a truckload of books, even Evan gets into the game of a lovers' tryst. Though I doubt the clerk will notice or care, I suggest he pocket his wedding band. The room smells of sweat and cigarettes, which I don't mind because it is the smell of other people's pasts.

Backing him toward the bed, I murmur, "Say that for me you'll leave all your worldly possessions behind."

Evan reaches down to sweep the dubious bedspread onto the even more dubious carpet.

"Say that for me you'll do anything," I whisper.

He is simultaneously trying to undo his belt and pull me with him onto the bed.

"You had me at 'leave all your worldly possessions behind,'" he replies.

The mattress sags, its sides rising up to hug us like a hammock. I've lost all sense of anything solid beneath me.

"Tell me," I say, "you want to try again."

My voice is so hushed, I scarcely hear myself above the bedsprings. But Evan is rolling out from beneath me. He struggles against the mattress to sit up. With the drapes pulled tight and only the hallway light leaking in, I can just make him out. He hovers over me like a question mark. The one time, almost a year ago, that he suggested another baby, I snapped, "Say that again, and I will leave you."

My reply had shocked us both momentarily still. We have never argued, never raised our voices. Evan saves his arguments—or rather, his patient and ethically committed data-based reasoning—for people who have yet to grasp their environmental obligations. Before we met, I shopped at Price Chopper and drank bottled water, my B.S. in Biology strictly technical. Evan introduced me to the person I hadn't known I could be. Someone who doesn't robotically take and record water samples, mute before their results. Someone who demands change, the movement of bills to a vote, without equivocation. The morning after our first date, Evan appeared at my door with a worn copy of

Silent Spring, anxious to remedy its omission from my undergraduate education. More recently, he has started prodding me, first gently, then more insistently, to start living for the future. That's when I thought of exchanging our apartment for a home whose rooms have never known our son. That's when I looked up the admissions requirements for the graduate program in watershed science. I could attend part-time. Employee tuition remission would cover everything but the lab fees. I had not thought of another child.

"Okay," Evan had finally said. "I won't bring it up again."

He has, naturally, stayed true to his word. If the subject was to be raised, it would have to be by me, which I've had no thought of doing. Until now, in this strange motel room. Suspended in darkness, my map of the world reduced to a humming heater and Evan's heart that until a second ago beat with mine, I had suddenly thought, *Baby?* Evan's face is a pale moon. I try to read his expression. Surprise? Hope? Concern?

Then he folds his body once more into mine. He burrows his face in my neck, muffling his voice. "Sure, Bev," he says. "If you want."

In the morning, Evan is up with the pre-dawn birds. He hasn't finished prepping his first lecture, he explains. He wants to take a closer look at a doctoral student's data on the white-nose syndrome decimating the region's bat population. If her data passes muster, a resistant colony has taken up home in the caves on Lowell Mountain.

"She didn't get it to me until yesterday afternoon, just as I was leaving," he says. "I couldn't sleep, it's all I've been able to think about."

He catches the look on my face. The night had brought me dreams of being hunted by a parliament of hungry owls, of seeking shelter beneath fallen trees. I awoke fetal-curled under Evan's arm.

"I know," he says, sitting on the bed and looking down at me. He's opened the drapes and the room is just starting to lighten. He runs his fingers through my hair. Some mornings, he takes his time, finding each frizzy snag and working it through. Today he is right back on his feet.

"If we're right about this colony," he says, "it's a big deal. A very big deal."

Bats were Evan's first love as a wildlife ecologist. They were also a selling point, along with its proximity to a bus stop and the bike path, for Harmony Park—the woods an inviting habitat, the backyard's canopy of sky made for sundown sightings. At bedtime, he used to read Nate the story of an orphaned

bat adopted by birds. The baby bat tries to teach his new siblings to fly in the dark, the birds try to teach her to stand on her feet, and this accidental family marvels that they can be so different yet feel so alike. I cannot hear the word *bat* without feeling hollowed out, an empty and yearning cavern. Still, I am with him in rooting for their survival. Evan practically dances as he buckles his bike helmet and attaches a reflective cuff to each pant leg.

"Hey," I call as he is about to duck out the door. "Check your pockets."

He fishes out the wedding band and slips it back into place. "The end of the affair," he jokes, then adds, "See you this afternoon. I'll be the guy with the U-Haul."

On this morning Harmony Park promises to live up to its name. The only car on the street is mine, the windows open to the day's unseasonable warmth. The grass has greened from recent showers. I try not dwell on the nitrogen leached from these lawns. In the neighbor's garden, hopeful pea shoots climb their poles. Outside the new house, a few crocuses bloom. I stand there, making plans for a rain garden, when an elderly man in khaki shorts and a canvas hat, cord pulled tight beneath his chin, crosses the street.

"Roger Szymanski," he says though immediately I know I will never call him anything except *Mister* Szymanski. "I'm the Welcome Wagon, if you're not too young to know what that is."

I am out of practice with meet-and-greets, having become expert at avoiding them the past two years. But the day is sunny and pleasant, it will be hours before Evan pulls up, and I find myself enjoying standing in this yard—our yard—and learning from Mr. Szymanski who lives where. He isn't in favor of front-yard farming. Still, he speaks approvingly about those neighbors—young couple, he says, who do more than most on the street by tending to the flowerbeds that mark Harmony Park's entrance. His tone changes when he turns to the house with the Winnebago.

"The Todds," he says. "Or they used to be."

Apparently, they were the Todds until the wife moved out, making way for a succession of girlfriends, names unknown. There is a boy too, in his teens, prone to throwing loud parties that invite police cruisers when his father and one girlfriend or another take the Winnebago on a weekend trip. These, Mr.

Szymanski assures me, are the only police cruisers ever seen on this street.

"And what about you and your—husband?" he asks.

"Husband, yes, Evan. We work at the university."

"Ahhh," he says. He peers at me from under his hat's wide brim, as if he has just encountered a rare or endangered species. "You're a reader then!"

On the spot, he invites me to join the Harmony Park book club, and on the spot, I tell him I'll think about it. I do commit to attending the annual spring garage sale and block party. We live too sparely to have anything to sell—not even the old sleeping bags because before Evan could spy and carry them down our apartment stairs with the last of the boxes, I stashed them in the crawl space. Still, we might take pleasure walking from driveway to driveway, browsing items bound for new homes instead of the landfill. As we linger over the kinds of things we used to own—a bassinette, a changing table—I might say, "We're thinking it could be time to start a family."

Or I might not. I've pretty much forgotten how to initiate conversation. At work, I am not high enough in the scientific pecking order to hazard opinions. Without kids to connect us, our friends have mostly melted away. So far, my rejoinders to Mr. Szymanski's neighborhood narrative have been limited to *Really* and *Interesting*. But when he tells me that our house's former owner raised five children there, I say, "Wow!" I look at it with new respect, imagining stacks of bunkbeds, the impatient line outside the closed bathroom door.

There was a time when Evan and I had talked about a sister or brother for Nate. Obama was still in the White House. The Paris Climate Accords were in the works. We had both been only children and still felt the loneliness of it, the lack of back-up support for his ailing mother, no one but me for my parents, ever optimistic, to ask, "Did you get to church this week?" But this house, I'd confirmed on my morning walk-through, is barely big enough for a family of three. One bedroom will become Evan's study. The other room can hold a desk for me until such a time, if there will be such a time, when the baby graduates to a room of its own. All morning I've been expecting a call from the doctor's office—I'd thought I should at least make an exploratory appointment about removing the IUD—but when my phone buzzes, it is with a text from Evan. He is headed to Lowell, an hour-and-a-half drive each way. The doctoral student will drive. *Will get to you soon as I can. Sorry. This could be BIG!*

"And is it just you and your husband?" Mr. Szymanski is asking. He glances

at the house formerly known as the Todds'. Perhaps he is wondering if we have a troubled teenager too.

I knew the question was coming. I am prepared.

"No kids," I say, then add, like a trial balloon, "Not yet."

It is after dark when Evan pulls in. He springs from the U-Haul and launches into an account of the afternoon. Bats, maybe scores of them from the amount of guano, not a sign of disease, no tragic piles of brown corpses. They hadn't stepped beyond any cave's entrance; it is too early in spring to risk disturbing a hibernaculum. Even so, they'd needed to shuck and disinfect their outwear, pants, socks, boots, and gloves when they got back to campus.

"That's what took us so long. Well, that and we wanted to wait for dusk to see how many have come out of hibernation to put on a show."

He turns back to a car that has just pulled in. From behind the wheel a young woman emerges.

"Hey, Jess," he calls. "Give me your phone."

Most likely I have seen Jessica at one of the lab parties or kick-off-the-school-year cook-outs Evan wheedles me into attending—so many capable young women in cargo pants and flannel shirts worn open over their tanks, pony tails pulled through the backs of baseball caps. Jessica's cap is embroidered with the Appalachian Trail logo—*From Georgia to Maine*—and I expect she wears it because she really did hike a chunk of it.

"Great to see you again, Beverly," she says, stopping next to Evan and handing over the phone. "I'm sorry we're so late!"

Evan asks Jessica to remind him of her code—that's how closely he and his grad students work, they share each other's passwords—and calls up a grainy video.

"Wait … Wait … There!"

Across the darkening sky a tiny black *v* skips and vanishes from view. Then into the frame, from left and right, high and low, more skipping and skittering *v*s. It is impossible to tell how many. They fly so fast, crisscrossing one direction and the other. A minute into the video, I hear Jessica shouting, then Evan too, the image bouncing with their voices.

"I'd just spotted an owl, waiting for his chance," Jessica explains. "Not that it

can be helped. Not that owls are the problem."

The house has overhead lights only in the kitchen and hallway, so we dig through the U-Haul first for some lamps before lugging in the rest. Evan drags the futon into our bedroom and announces that assembling the frame can wait for morning, no cockroaches likely to inhabit Harmony Park. In the kitchen I pass around take-out containers. When I apologize for having just two sets of chopsticks, Jessica laughs and says she learned in the Peace Corps to like eating with her fingers. Slurping cold noodles, the two make plans. Evan wants to assemble a team to return with the first of May. Meanwhile they have enough data to go after a grant.

"Don't wait to get started on your dissertation," he advises Jessica. "This time next year, we'll be calling you *Doctor*."

Their conversation flows too fast for me to drop a *Really* or *Interesting*. But when Jessica says she is looking forward to finding a nursing colony, I say, quietly, "Wow."

I've never seen one, of course, so what I picture is conjured from the storybook Evan used to read: the upside-down mamas, wings cradling their sleeping and suckling babes, a single pup for each. When Nate grew enough old to be troubled by the story, the mother bat felled by a marauding owl, he began calling to me in the night from the toddler bed that shared our only bedroom.

Mamma, where are you?

Right here, baby bat.

After supper, I watch from the window as Evan walks out with Jessica so he can button up the U-Haul to return in the morning. By her car, they talk for a long time, Evan's side of the conversation accompanied by animated gestures. Every now and then a car passes, and I wonder if the occupants take Jessica and Evan as the new couple moving in. They look like they belong together in their cargo pants and ballcaps, both of them slim and strong from four-season bicycling. When she climbs into the car, Evan rests a hand on the driver's door and bows over her to say one thing more.

The sudden ache I feel has nothing to do with a fear they might be involved—sexually, I mean. Evan is on the committee that wrote his department's zero-tolerance policy for amorous relationships between faculty and students. Even without the threat of termination, he'd have little stomach for a genuine game of infidelity. After we met—at a presentation my boss gave for Evan's

department, bringing me along to set up and run her slides—we had deferred our first date until Evan could move out of the apartment he still shared (in separate bedrooms, he'd stressed) with his ex-girlfriend. The ache I feel isn't jealousy but longing. To wake up in the morning with my nose already on the scent of a potentially world-saving result. To walk into the water-quality lab and confidently proclaim, "What I think is …" To have solved the riddle of what I am living for.

Even so, when Evan returns and we settle into the futon the floor, I ask him where his wedding ring has gone to this time. I'd noticed the bare finger when he was unlocking Jessica's phone. He startles, then presses a palm to his forehead.

"Talk about bats," he says. "I must have left it in the autoclave. We wore gloves, but I don't want to take any chances."

The chance, he means, that the *Geomyces destructans,* its name grimly portentous, had hitched a ride on their clothes, on the inside of a watch or ring. Boot bottoms just like theirs have carried the fungus from Georgia to Maine, on trips out west for hikes in Death Valley or to ski Jackson Hole.

Evan rolls to me, propping himself on an elbow. "I know we're trying, but I'm beat. Is that okay?"

I fill him in about the call from the doctor's office. They are scheduling appointments two months out. Mine is not until the middle of June.

"Good," he sighs, dropping down to his pillow. He is seconds from sleep. "That's good."

His relief steadies me. We are always in synch, and the few times when we are not, I've noticed he simply adopts my view as his own. The sides of any choice are typically so close—coop membership or farm share?—it hardly matters.

"Remind me," he had said, laughing and looking chagrined, after he'd finally brokered an amicable move-out from his former girlfriend's apartment, "not to play house with anyone I'm not meant to stay with."

"I can't imagine," I'd replied, "there will ever be a need."

Through the rest of April, I rise each morning resolved to do at least one thing to help me shake the sense of waking up to someone else's home. From a

piece of salvaged wood and sawhorses, I fashion a desk for the middle bedroom. At night Evan helps me write the personal statement for my grad-school application. When I try to rein in my anger—Spring has brought strong storms that overwhelm the sewers; twice the treatment plant has failed, dumping tons of half-treated sewage into the lake—he counsels, "Be honest. Be who you are." At the Harmony Park garage sale and block party, the sun making a just-in-time return, I find it surprisingly easy to converse with our neighbors. They are all keen to learn whether the beaches will open in late May.

"Well, most of the solids had been removed before the spill," I say, carefully. "We have more tests to run regarding the risk of E. *coli*-related illness."

And then: "If it were up to me, the beaches would stay closed. If they open, don't go."

The gardening neighbors invite us over for a potluck. They seem impossibly young, like the little brother and sister we'd longed to have. When they ask about kids, it is Evan who responds.

"No, but we're talking about trying."

The gardening couple is delighted. In unison they cry, "So are we!"

In truth, we scarcely have a moment to talk, Evan on the bike path each morning before first light. He is prepping his graduate student team for the May 1st return to the caves. He and Jessica are working on a grant that could fund a full survey of the hibernacula and finally get Evan on the tenure track. They are also trying to keep the colony under wraps. Lowell Mountain is a battleground between those who want a wind farm, giant turbines rising on the ridge above the tree line, and those who do not. Evan's colleagues, the ones who decide every two years if he will keep his job, are divided. On one side is the case for clean energy and good jobs, on the other for birds, bats, and postcard perfection. One night I hear Evan arguing on the phone. His voice rises, exasperated. It is a voice I've never heard from him before.

"Jess wants to reach out to the bird people," he explains. "I've told her there's no science on their side."

When I wonder if he is being too hard on her, he shrugs. "She can hold her own."

At school Evan has only a lecturer's cubicle—no privacy from those colleagues who have staked the future and their own money on wind—so he goes to campus early and then, as soon as he's done teaching, brings the work home.

I return at day's end to find him with Jessica bent over the computer in his study, other students in the kitchen, stirring a vegan chili, our suburban home turned into a commune or college dorm. The students offer me dinner and their help siting border rocks for the rain garden. One evening I am on my knees, adding pollinators, when I look up to see Mr. Szymanski in his khaki shorts and canvas hat beelining across the street.

"A lot of young people hanging around your house," he says. "A lot of young women."

I sit back on my calves and wipe sweat from my brow with a dirty glove. "Yes, they're Evan's students."

"Sometimes he's here with one around lunchtime, while you're at work," he tells me.

Mr. Szymanski, I've learned, isn't simply the Welcome Wagon. He is the Neighborhood Watch. I look up at him. I hope he knows how to read my face. It says, "So?"

"Well," he finally says, pulling tighter the cord beneath his chin, "just wanted to let you know we might have a loud party on our hands this weekend."

The people who used to be the Todds have spent the afternoon readying the Winnebago. There'd been vacuuming, Mr. Szymanski reports, and crates of canned goods, a cooler, carried on board.

"Roger that," I reply, then regret the sarcasm. Mr. Szymanski has an invalid wife, rarely seen except when he helps her, clinging to him like an IV pole, to the car. A middle-aged man—his son, I presume—sometimes stops by, a barking dog shut in his truck the entire time. Evidently, I belong to the Neighborhood Watch too.

"I mean, thanks," I tell Mr. Szymanski. "Thanks for letting us know."

The next day, sure enough, the Winnebago is gone. That night dozens of cars, Jeeps mostly, fill the Todds' driveway, then line themselves up on both sides of the street. I have to run out, arms waving the kids away from crushing my beebalm beneath their tires. I try to give friendly warning about keeping down the noise, but there is at least one keg and many cases. At 1 a.m., the music still blares. Then the cruisers arrive.

Since we've moved to Harmony Park, I have had no more nightmares of being hunted, seeking shelter. I have enjoyed a potluck with my neighbors,

submitted my graduate school application, and received back almost immediately the greenlight to sign up for a summer class while my application is under review. At the garage sale I picked up a rocker much like one we used to own. It sits next to my sawhorse desk. I've even managed to sit at the desk and look at it without weeping. But now our bedroom flashes with reds and blues, and I am spun right back to the gravel road that runs alongside the Huntington River. So many highway patrolmen, sheriffs, firefighters, and paramedics, all marshalled to bear witness to the small body of a boy no longer of this world.

Beside me, Evan sleeps. He could sleep through Armageddon. He slept right through last week's deluge that I feared would dissolve the foundation, set us afloat like a Noah's Ark, an unlikely pairing, given our age and our ambivalence. Only an hour ago he dropped like a felled tree onto the futon; he'd been at school all evening, packing a van for tomorrow's return trip to the caves. Before I could turn on a light and say, "Hello, stranger"—making light of my hurt and trepidation that, for all our talk of trying, he's been too beat since the night at the motel—he patted my thigh and was out. Now, looking down at him, dead to the crackle of police radios, the rumble of a dozen Jeep engines turning over, I think one thing. I want to wake him up and pick a fight.

So that's what I do. Or I try to. Evan is slow to surface, confused by the lights, the noise from the street, and me swooping in. Why tell me to be myself in my grad-school statement if he was only going to elbow me aside and rewrite it? And what about the night I'd tried to add my two cents to a noisy debate in our kitchen? Yes, I may have had a cup of sangria too many, but who does he think he is, cutting me off? *Never mind, Bev, you don't really know what we're talking about*. I can tell him who he is: a lifetime lecturer, his students funded on other people's grants. And speaking of students, let's talk about Jessica. Shall we make up a room so she can move in?

Evan is trying to hold me. He is saying, "It's okay, it's okay" and "You're not being fair. I know you know that." His voice is low and soothing, the voice he once used with a fretful Nate. It hits me that we never fight because he does not believe I can hold my own. The realization only winds up my anger for a next, more terrible round. Nate. Did he even love our son? How could he when he has not in any way been undone by his death? Maybe because—out in the field with his precious students—he hadn't bothered showing up for his birth.

Of course, I know I am being unfair, Nate having arrived a week before my

due date, Evan near the Canadian border without a cellular signal. But fights should not be fair. They should not be as one-sided as this one is turning out to be. Evan will not match me point for point, will not answer one unwarranted accusation with another. He will not deliver the blow—*You were supposed to be watching him*—that could knock me off my feet and make it possible for me to strike back, *And where were you?*

I stop, gasping, not sure where next to go. I could say, "All you care about is bats," but even I know how puny that sounds. And bats matter to me too. Between us and the sixth extinction they roost, their nursing colonies tending babies who, given the vanishing bees, are the future's pollinators, our bulwark against crop-destroying, disease-ferrying insects that mushroom with every record rainstorm while the human solution of pesticides thicken the lake's algae blooms. More dogs will die. People too, the bromides of *Living for* … too little, too late for what has been unleashed. That is in essence what I had written for my grad-school statement before Evan undertook a last-minute rewrite lest the admissions committee judge it too unacademically apocalyptic.

Then, almost at once, peace falls over the neighborhood. The street is emptied of party cars. The cruisers with their lights whisper away. With them goes the worst of my anger. Shame moves in. I wish for a better time than this to tell Evan about the invitation to take a summer class. The email arrived days ago, but we haven't had more than two minutes with both of us conscious and in the same room.

It doesn't matter. He is rolling over, pulling the sheet up to his ears.

"Maybe you're right," he says. "Maybe we do need to talk. But not now."

At the small memorial service we'd held for Nate, there had been no minister or prayers. Instead, Evan had read—I still can't fathom how—the bedtime story, *Stellaluna*. My mother clutched a white Bible. My father assured everyone—atheists like Evan and me, a couple of self-schooled Buddhists, a Unitarian or two—that his Jesus doesn't require infant baptism. Mainly what I remember is the aid of my parents' arms, keeping me upright, like Mr. Szymanski bearing his wife to the car, then back to the house again.

Afterwards, the grandparents departed, our friends evaporating, and Evan busy at school, I could not face returning to work. In our apartment I paced,

unable to find a place where I could sit or sleep. When Evan found me one late afternoon shivering in a quilt on the fire escape, he looked up a group for parents who have lost a child. It conflicted with his teaching schedule, but he coaxed me into giving it a try.

The way it's supposed to work is this: You share your story, the circle of strangers creating a soft pillow of compassion. There was a man who made sympathetic clucking sounds. Others knew just the right time to grip and hold a storyteller's hand. It did not matter where we lived or what we did. We were all different and yet in our loss so much alike. That's the idea. What actually happened is that the moment I said Nate drowned at Huntington Gorge, a shadow dropped over the room. Around the circle people sat up, pulled back, until it wasn't really a circle anymore

"We weren't swimming," I said. Everyone knows not to swim near the gorge, the river corkscrewing around massive boulders, its currents sucking bodies under even before they reach the mighty drop. The place is plastered with *Extreme Danger!* warnings. A bronze plaque lists the first name and last day on earth for every person who drowned there from 1950 until they ran out of room in 1994. But when I scanned the faces for understanding, people looked away. The mother-hen man clucked but not sympathetically. No one held my hand.

We had a child, but we lost him.

How careless.

We weren't swimming but picnicking. Heading home from our first camping trip as a family, we decided to stop along the banks upstream of the gorge. We spread out the sleeping bags to serve as a picnic blanket. After we had eaten, Evan decided he would go into the brush to collect enough alpine strawberries for us each to enjoy a handful. Leaning back on my elbows, I turned my face to warm sun. I closed my eyes. Only for a second. Not even a minute. Long enough. Even then, I wasn't instantly gripped by dread as I had been when once I turned around from doing the laundry to find Nate gone. Flying from one room the next, certain I'd left open the window with the loose screen or the door to the rickety fire escape, I finally found him right back where I started, playing peek-a-boo in blankets I'd just pulled from the dryer. Opening my eyes above the gorge, well away, we had thought, from the water, I hadn't called out *Baby bat, where are you?* because I thought, drowsy from the sun, *He's with his father.*

The next day when, nearly dusk, Jessica's car pulls in, she pauses in the driveway just long enough to drop Evan off. Before he has closed the car door, I know it is bad news. He moves slowly toward the house, his shoulders hunched, as if over the handlebars of his bike. When he looks up, his face is ash. Just a few steps into the caves, they'd found the first corpses, noses webbed with white. On Jessica's phone, they'd captured video of one bat, sick and disoriented, attempting an erratic daylight flight. I feel a stab at the thought of the nursing colony. I hope Jessica had not found it. They will have to go back in the coming weeks to collect spores, map the spread, Jessica's dissertation another footnote in the dismal story of the bats' demise.

Neither of us have any appetite for supper, so I join Evan on the back patio. For the first time since we've moved in, the night is warm and clear for sitting outside. It is also the first time since Nate was an infant, I realize, that I've sat with Evan at dusk—no longer occupied with a restless toddler, no longer dwelling in rooms where he cannot be found. I fetch the old quilt to protect us from early mosquitos, but when I hold up an end for Evan, he doesn't shift his chair closer to mine. He isn't wearing his ring, and this time I think he meant for it stay in the autoclave.

He is quiet, head tilted back, watching the empty sky. Then, after a minute or two, he says, "When I said that we should talk, what I wanted to tell you is I do want another child."

He pauses. "I want a family but not …."

The sentence dangles, as if he wants me to finish it or as if he isn't yet certain how it should end. I wonder if with Jessica he has yet had the conversations we'd had before we could have our first date. Perhaps, as with the ex-girlfriend, he will need my permission: be honest, be who you are, even if who you are is depressingly familiar, an academic man enthralled by the chance to introduce a young woman to her own potential. She will first have to complete her Ph.D., of course. We will have to broker the disposal, before anyone has learned our last names, of the Harmony Park house. Now that I am envisioning a future in which we will each live without the other, I can picture Evan's with some clarity. Sadness fills me, but it is also a sadness for losses much bigger than our

own. I am filled as well with a fierce wish: *Please let there be at least one.* Not a child. I'd had a child. I do not want another. On that piece of my future I am finally sure.

At last, from the far corner of the canopy, the very edge of my vision, the first bat appears. A tiny black *v*, it skips across the opening between the trees, then vanishes. Almost as quickly, there comes another or maybe the same, reversing its course, satisfying its hunger in our patch of twilight sky. Then the canvas hangs empty. We wait, not daring to blink or look away, both of us hoping this is not the end of the show.