

# Gravity Dancers

EVEN  
MORE  
FICTION BY  
WASHINGTON  
AREA WOMEN



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*Estuary*

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JoAnne stood on the deck dousing the grill with lighter fluid, squeezing the can and painting the mound of black briquettes with a hard, thin stream. She struck a match and tossed it in. The fire raced to life and trembled over the coals. There'd be steaks for dinner to celebrate her bonus; her boyfriend Alan had insisted on it.

A celluloid ripple rose from the grill. A solitary lightning bug blinked out in the yard and down the hill, on the other side of the fence, a halogen lamp lit up in the hospice parking lot. Prime visiting hours. People stopped by on the way home from work to check up on the dying, slotting their cars nose to nose in the spaces. As soon as the coals got their thin ash coats, JoAnne was going to throw on three steaks. The steak for Lionel, her seventeen-year-old son, was the biggest, and that was just the sort of thing Alan would notice and comment on, trying to find something to say to Lionel. Lionel hated it when he did that.

But it was nice of Alan to try so hard. Soon, he'd arrive and take over the grill. One thing you could count on was Alan stepping in and trying to help out. She'd met him last fall, on a Washington Bicycle Club ride, when she was trying out the new Cannondale bike she'd bought on impulse for her forty-fifth birthday—with the passing, sheepish idea that something both childish and expensive might prop up whatever youthfulness she had left. Alan was literally a card-carrying member of the bike club. She tried to explain to him once that there was really no need to carry the WBC membership card in his wallet. What was the point? It's

not like you get a discount, or points, or credit of any kind. But he liked to keep such things, evidence of his affiliations.

Lionel was upstairs—engaged, she guessed, in some combination of doing homework, playing computer games, talking on the phone, instant messaging, downloading music, and lifting weights. When she'd called from the car on the way home from the store he'd answered the phone instantly.

"Who the fuck is this."

She could picture him in his room, feet propped on the IKEA desk they'd assembled together one Sunday afternoon five or six years ago. "This is your mother."

"Mom! Shit. Tick got cut off like two seconds ago. Sorry."

"Don't answer the phone that way. OK? Not smart."

"Plainly."

She told him Alan was coming over. Some people have the kind of children who would then have used the few minutes before she got home to straighten up a little, at least clear the pile off the dining room table—the iPod, backpack, baseball glove, whatever they'd dumped there when they got home from school. These kids would have heard the car and come out and helped with the groceries. Lionel was not such a child. So why hadn't she just told him to do these things? They were such small things, these requests, but exactly the kind of request that exhausted her. She was so tired of asking. Instead she just hoped he'd help. Hoping was her method, by default, a *laissez-faire* approach, she might call it, if pressed. But what was the difference, really, between *laissez-faire* and lazy?

She'd thought that through, waiting for him on the living room sofa at three in the morning the previous Saturday, terrified of every siren, unable to reach him on his cell phone. Telling herself it was nothing. It was going to be OK. It wasn't desirable but it wasn't dangerous. In a perfect world she would tell him what she expected and set positive and negative consequences. Countless parenting books and articles laid out this elementary concept. That was the way the real parents out there did it.

The coals were close to ideal when Alan pulled up in the drive. She took off the big oven mitt she wore while she tended the grill and quickly

combed and smoothed her hair with her fingers. He emerged through the back gate, holding a bouquet of flowers nestled in a stiff cone of paper.

"All for you," he said, holding them out like a torch.

JoAnne stepped off the deck and took them. Yellow spider mums. She stood on tiptoes to kiss him. A humid, briny warmth rose from his chest. The collar of the blue tattersall shirt he'd worn to work that day was still crisp with starch. "You didn't need to do this."

"It's a special occasion. Congrats. Hat's off."

He was an ornithologist. He'd pointed out birds on that WBC bike ride: songbirds, birds of prey. A red-tailed hawk, a yellow-rumped warbler, a turkey vulture. He'd shared his fancy binoculars when they stopped for lunch but she didn't know anything about birds, couldn't even pretend to care about them, and the conversation lagged for a while. He didn't seem to mind, leaning back on his elbows, squinting at the sky, revealing an animal sense of entitlement to comfort. After lunch they coasted apart from the others, two abreast alongside a lightly populated pasture, the new macadam fragrant in the afternoon sun. He admired her bike; she told him it was new. They found things to talk about—movies, vacations, music. *The Aviator*. The Grand Canyon. The blues, he liked the blues. So did she. Didn't she? What was it that she liked? He coasted in the middle of the road, dropping behind her when the occasional car passed and then pulling up across from her again. What else, he said. Go on.

At the end of the ride they agreed to get together to "listen to some music." Alan lifted her bike on the rack. He rotated the pedal into position and then expertly tightened it down with the straps. She stood next to the open car door, watching him, spinning her keys. How long had it been? She was still young. Not too many weeks later he was up in her room, licking her earlobe, gently biting it, backing her up to the edge of the bed, onto sheets she'd changed that afternoon, before their date. "You smell even better than I imagined," he said, his warm hands everywhere.

In the kitchen, JoAnne was relieved to see Alan remove his BlackBerry from its holster and set it on the counter. The ring tone was some sort

of warble he'd downloaded from the Audubon Society. Once Lionel had done an impression of Alan, stalking around with one hand poised over the imaginary holster, like a nervous sheriff, hissing "Go ahead. Make my day, twerp." What pleasure it was to laugh with Lionel. They used to laugh together, when he was young, watching cartoons and movies. Now this. Was it mean to mock Alan behind his back? Because she did like him. She liked to talk to him. He listened, kindly. She liked him naked. She liked his round bald head and the prickly hairs that still grew there. She liked the way he held her ass when they had sex. Lionel found Alan tolerable. "He's a pretty boring guy," he told JoAnne once, "if you want my honest opinion. But I can see he's better than nothing."

JoAnne put the flowers in a vase and carried them into the dining room. She piled up the newspapers that were spread across the table and chucked them in the recycling bin. She consolidated the stacks of mail, tax forms, the certificate showing Lionel's completion of court-ordered driving school, the form Lionel still needed to take over to the hospice for a signature, proving that he had put in the required public service hours. She heaped these together and put them on the buffet to sort out later.

Alan was on the deck, tonging the coals. JoAnne slipped the bottle of wine he'd brought out of its narrow brown bag. It was a Côtes du Rhône, forty-eight dollars, far more than she herself would ever spend. Alan did it all the time. And why not? He had no children to support, no wife, no ex-wife, no pet, nothing. JoAnne pulled the corkscrew out of a drawer and put it on the counter beside the bottle. She studied the label. Someone in France made this, grew the grapes on ancient vines, smashed them, executed some long, drawn-out process of yeasts and sugars. Fermentation. Such a fuss. It would be wrong, bad form, greedy even, to go ahead and pour a glass right away and drink it alone in the far, dim corner of the living room. It would be rude to Alan, for one thing.

"Perfectamundo," Alan said, bringing in the steaks piled in a glass pie pan. JoAnne had already assembled the rest of the meal, the asparagus and salad and mashed potatoes. Now she distributed it all on three plates and called up to Lionel, four times, yelling up the stairs that dinner was ready, before finally dialing his cell phone. She heard one muffled ring,

then the door to his room open, and one clear ring before Lionel clomped down the stairs, snapping his phone shut and jamming it into his pants pocket. He wore a Washington Nationals cap, backwards. Wispy brown curls hung down his neck. He was letting it grow until July, and then the Naval Academy barber was going to shave it all off.

"Dude." Lionel slid into his seat.

"Dude!" Alan loved this, oblivious to Lionel's subtexts. He poured the Côtes du Rhône into two wineglasses, scooted one toward JoAnne and lifted the other. "Toast?"

"Can't toast with milk, dude," Lionel said.

"No?"

"Some cultures consider it vulgar. Just saying." Lionel shrugged in his maddening way, as if a passive resistor, both sanctimonious and strategic.

Alan set down his glass. "How about it? A touch for Lionel. A special occasion." JoAnne got out another wineglass and, as Alan poured, Lionel made upward motions with his hands, the way he'd signal a driver to keep backing up. But Alan stopped when there was just an inch or so in the glass. "That'll do, champ."

"Gosh," said Lionel, leaning over the glass and squinting. "How generous."

"That's plenty," JoAnne said. "You're underage and you have homework. And this is expensive."

"And all the more for you." Lionel lifted his glass. "I'm all ears."

Alan beamed, leaning forward. He'd prepared. "The reward of a thing well done is having done it." He held his glass higher over the table. "Ralph Waldo Emerson."

"Short and sweet," said Lionel. They clinked glasses. Lionel drank his wine in one open-throated gulp, and then rolled his eyes to the ceiling, as he twirled the stem of his glass between his thumb and forefinger, his lips pursed, aping profound meditation. "Fruity, with a hint of fried bologna." Her boy was no brownnoser. He tilted the glass over his mouth and tapped the bottom with his palm, knocking out the last drops. "Eminently drinkable."

"Nice, Lionel," JoAnne said severely. It would be wrong to encourage him.

"More like, pepper and raspberries," said Alan.

"Oh yes." JoAnne took another sip and nodded. She sawed at her steak. Three, four bites and she'd be done. The juices ran over the bottom of the plate, streaking it brown and pink and staining the potatoes. These were the fluids released by the muscles, she thought, the last traces of blood. You had to pretend to like it.

Between bites, Lionel reminded her that Tick had invited him to his family's beach house for the weekend. They were leaving early in the morning, to play golf and chill out, just the guys. Reminded her? Had he told her about this before? She'd forgotten, maybe. "We planned this," Lionel said. "Basically it's me and Tick hitting the beach. R&R. Liberty."

Liberty—a Naval Academy term. His admission had given Lionel the legitimate-sounding comeback to so many things. The high school counselor had laughed when Lionel mentioned that he'd like to apply there—luckily sparking a vengeful determination in Lionel. He'd pursued the appointment as ferociously as he stared down batters in a full count. Now, after the good grades and test scores and fastballs he figured out he had a bona fide pass to blow off steam. Maybe he was right. He'd worked harder, and gotten farther, than she ever had in high school, where her highest office had been treasurer of the drama club. "Drama Club," Lionel had repeated, incredulously, when she told him that. "That's—tragic." Fine. If Russ and Denise, Tick's parents, approved this beach trip, it was probably fine. They'd probably set ground rules and such; she'd call and confirm that later. Alan poured more wine; they ate in silence for a while. It was the best part of the meal. And she had the prospect of a weekend alone. Laundry, peace.

Alan cut his steak into small squares and triangles, separating the cache of meat from the scraps of bone, gristle, and fat before he speared a square of meat with his fork. "Excellent," he said. "Excellence is its own reward."

"Unless you're this excellent cow," Lionel said.

JoAnne laughed but she could tell by the way Alan refused to look at her, by the way that he focused instead on precisely straightening up the piles of debris on his plate, that he disapproved of Lionel. He was rude, ungrateful, spoiled. And he disapproved of her, too, the way she failed to control him. Yes. But Alan had no children, no wife, no standing. That was the excuse she gave for him, in her own mind. Years ago, Alan had been engaged to someone. But the woman—what was her name?—had gotten cancer and died. He'd taken care of her, driven her to chemo, helped her buy a wig. She'd died right there in the hospice, right behind JoAnne's house, he told her. He still had that pathetic wig: she'd found it, looking in a drawer for a coaster, a brown bob, a keepsake. He meant well.

"What about dessert?" JoAnne said, buoyed by reaching the end of the meal. "We have fudge cake and ice cream." She'd tossed in those indulgent items for Alan's sake—proof that they were celebrating.

Lionel pushed away from the table. "Way too rich for me." In mock delicacy he put his fingers to his thin necklace, a choker of tiny shells strung on twine, *hemp*, he'd enjoyed telling her. Enjoy it while you can, baby boy. "I donate my portion to all the little, nonexcellent people in your office. Let them eat cake."

Later that night JoAnne and Alan sat in the living room and finished off the wine. JoAnne suspected that she'd had most of it. She was a little drunk, which seemed to please Alan. He'd kept pouring more. It was easier that way. Alan got her to talk and talk. Go on, go on, he'd say.

He liked to try different kinds of wine. To JoAnne it was just so much booze. So much money, she thought, what a waste when, to be honest, aren't we just getting loaded here? Anesthetized? Maybe Alan wasn't as honest as she was. Maybe he was dishonest. He had to cloak it in connoisseurship, as if that were a virtue, in words like *varietal*. Or this possibility: that it was generous of him, putting things this way, since she did most of the drinking and he did most of the pouring. They'd go out to dinner, sit across from each other in a snug booth somewhere, he would study the wine list and order something she'd never heard of, a gamay or verdelho or whatever, and when they brought it he'd taste



it and give a nod. At first she'd be pleased and relaxed and he'd pour more wine saying, how funny you get, how pink your cheeks are. When she became morose he'd pour more wine as if to say, there, there. He'd drive her home, she could count on him to drive her safely home in her Subaru, down the murky streets.

Dishonesty or kindness or a narcotic blend of both.

She told him about the performance review with her boss, Brian, the partner whose turn it was to supervise the librarians at the law firm. He kept her waiting, of course. Then continually checking his BlackBerry when it buzzed, no matter what she was saying at the time. He'd check it out, a private glance, nodding yes, yes, I'm still listening to you, and he'd put it back in his jacket pocket and lean forward anew, making eye contact again as if to say, see what a stand-up guy I am. Despite everything you have my full attention. She'd made the case for a larger raise but succeeded only in finagling a bonus. It was irresistibly stupid, confiding all that to Alan. He was the only person in the world who'd listen to her long description of the mortifying meeting. He cared about her; in fact, he found her endlessly fascinating. She could go on and on, and it was OK with him. More than OK. She could go on and on and on and it was absolutely fine by him. Maybe, she said, maybe Brian didn't think she needed the money, now that he'd used his connection with Senator Oates to help Lionel get into the Naval Academy. "How's my man Lionel," he'd said as he walked her to the door. "Tell him I'm proud of him." Awful.

JoAnne lifted her glass, glad for the small weight of wine still in it, glad Alan had brought the bottle and then suggested that they sit on the sofa and finish it. There was this much more to look forward to, and then what?

"Still," Alan said, "it's a recognition of you and your work. I'd say thank you very much."

"Yep." Alan liked to listen but he glossed over the ugly parts, except when it came to Lionel. And she *had* thanked Brian. She'd given him that fudgy expression of gratitude, a hedge against—what? She'd stood there, receiving his acknowledgment, and despised herself. What futility. What

*grasping at straws*. She could picture it, the drowning person's final act of will, seizing a stray twig as it floated uselessly past. Alan put his arm around her and she curled against him, her head to his chest, grateful to hide her face in the expanse of blue tattersall.

When Lionel called her cell phone at eight on Sunday morning JoAnne was already in Alan's kitchen, in one of his bathrobes, her hair pulled in a tight ponytail, making coffee and trying to remember how much she'd had to drink the night before. "Alsatian riesling," Alan had told her, "apples and slate." Did they drink two bottles of it? Alan was still asleep. She'd dug some coffee out of the freezer, found the French press on top of the refrigerator. The place was claustrophobic. Not that it was messy, exactly. It was the exhausting number of things collected in exhausting categories. Coin collections, by continent, country, denomination. Musical instruments, historic, primitive, wind, string, percussion, bone, skin, hair. Feathers, beaks, and claws, gathered in sealed and labeled glass jars. Walls of books organized by the Dewey decimal system, books from college, outdated travel guides. The entire Hardy Boys collection, or so Alan had charmed her by claiming, on an early date. Duck decoys: groups of loons, drakes, mallards, and teal. Gleaming kitchen implements that went unused: a rice cooker, a juicer, a mortar and pestle. She'd given up on persuading him to get rid of things. It was never going to happen. Waiting for the coffee to brew, the grounds rising into a dense, floating stratum, she envisioned being called in after Alan died, suddenly, in a car crash, or slowly, at the hospice. There was no one else so she'd come over and dump everything into huge black trash bags to be hauled to Goodwill. That would be the only way. Was it so terrible to picture the pleasure she'd take, the joy of throwing everything away? Yes. He meant well: she kept telling herself that. He was interested in so many things. His refrigerator was plastered with magnets that organized what they held into three columns: menus, information, and memorabilia. Hunan One, Tandoori Café; a Crescent Trail map, performance schedules for Wolf Trap and the Birchmere; pictures of his niece and nephew and JoAnne and an inspirational sticker: *make yourself necessary to somebody*. Looking at his

refrigerator you'd think he had a full life, crowded with family, friends, activities. But basically he had nothing. All this was meant to hide that.

"Mom." Lionel's voice was shaky. "Where are you? I got a little problem here." JoAnne pressed the receiver tight against her ear. The police pulled him over for DUI and he'd spent the night in the Sussex County, Delaware, jail. No one was hurt. "Can you just come and get me?"

Yes, she could. "You're OK? Tick's OK?"

"I said that already." He sounded grim, hard, awful.

"OK. Jesus Christ, Lionel."

"I tried you. At home." He didn't sound like he was crying, not exactly. Something wrenched, stunned.

"My cell phone's on."

"Plainly."

Words, a shabby rope of words.

"I'm sorry about this, Mom. I really am."

Alan insisted on coming along on the three-hour drive to the Eastern Shore. JoAnne swallowed two extra-strength Tylenols and, without showering, quickly put back on the sandals and shift she'd worn out to dinner the night before. Alan sat in the passenger's seat as she drove Route 50 toward Annapolis and the Chesapeake Bay Bridge.

"It's an object lesson for Lionel," he said.

"I know." Her mind raced and she could feel the blood thrum in her trachea. The ordinary words she managed to speak came out bent, damaged.

"Consider it a learning opportunity."

"OK. I know."

They rode in silence for a few minutes.

"So, how's *JoAnne* doing." He put his hand on her thigh, patting it lightly with his fingertips. He turned to her and flipped off his sunglasses. They dangled at his collar from a spongy orange sports band. She ran her fingers along the steering wheel's plastic elephant-hide-like surface and then gripped it at ten and two, the way she'd been taught. The Annapolis exit came up on the right and then disappeared behind them.

Annapolis. She might as well go ahead and say it. "You know, this might cost Lionel his place at the Naval Academy." His place—did she ever really believe that?

"It's a distinct possibility," Alan said. *Distinct*. How he enjoyed pronouncing it.

It was her fault. When she'd played telephone tag with Denise, to talk about the arrangements, about the ground rules and expectations, why had she given up?

"I've been a rotten role model. I drink too much."

Alan picked up the pace of his patting. "Don't do this. Be tough on Lionel, not on JoAnne. You don't drink too much. It's good to relax."

She was hung over and driving three hours to get her son out of some grim jail. It had happened so easily. They'd fallen into it. She'd been so—relaxed.

"Don't beat yourself up here. There are things you might do differently. But don't beat yourself up. You do the best you can." He finally stopped patting her thigh and just rested his hand there. "OK?"

"You think this—" she gestured ahead, flicking her wrist to encompass the whole of the trip they were on, "this is the best I can do? This is the least I can do."

She'd done nothing after the ticket last fall, ninety miles an hour on I-66. Nothing. He'd gotten off with court-ordered driving school. Alan thought she should have grounded him for a couple of months. But everything Lionel had said was true: it was late on a school night, there were midterms, his adrenaline was pumped, he'd just gotten the win in four extra innings, there was no traffic. True, true, true. Excuse, excuse, excuse. She'd bought them all. It was impossible to explain to Alan, who just shook his head, disappointed, when she tried.

"Let me help," Alan said. And wasn't that why she'd asked him to come? She'd thought she needed help but now he seemed like just another person to take care of.

"Actually, I feel like some music. Some music would be good."

It was late morning, bright and warm on the other side of the tinted windshield, when JoAnne paid the toll and drove out on the southern span of the Bay Bridge, over the great horizontal of blue-green water. Hundreds of small boats bobbed on the surface of the bay, like bathtub toys. Suspension cables laced the tall towers and the roadway rose high over the shipping channel. It was, she remembered from Lionel's seventh grade science poster, "A Giant Step Over the Bay," one of the world's largest over-water structures, stretching four and a half miles over one of the world's largest estuaries. He'd laid out the poster on the dining room table and with a squeaky blue magic marker wrote inside the large balloon he'd drawn over the water, as if it were a cartoon character, saying *An Estuary is where fresh and salt water mix. It is a very fertile place for things that grow.*

"See that." Alan pointed across her, down off her side of the bridge. "Osprey nest." A mass balanced on a channel marker. He hunched forward, focusing on something else, something swooping low. "Double-crested cormorant. Son of a gun." He leaned over and pointed through her window. They were on the highest part of the span now. A sign "Don't Stop" appeared every quarter-mile or so. She looked down. The bird was gone now, though she only allowed herself to glance quickly before locking her eyes again on the road straight ahead. "See?" Alan was looking through his binoculars now, huddled behind them, searching. Spotting things was important to him; he was proud of his life list.

She glanced again, out over the void opening beneath them. How easy it was to simply steer along inside the lines, on this elevated, steel-strutted ribbon of road. How disastrous it would be to lose control. Would they burst the barrier, go over the side, into the bay? Just a few degrees counterclockwise on the steering wheel would change everything. It was remarkable that people didn't give in to the impulse to try it, all these law-abiding citizens, resisting the fleeting urge to be done with it, to leap away. The car would be airborne, glinting in the sun, noiseless—the final hysteria that would flare inside it unheard by anyone, and quickly extinguished—then splash down into the brackish waters in one swallowing gulp.

But no. You didn't do that. Hardly anyone did that. No. There was Lionel to think about, for one thing. JoAnne's throat tightened. She gripped the steering wheel and looked down at the water again. The heavy water, the floor below the empty air. Everything depended on control, linear control. She had to drive through something now, barrel ahead into a wall of resistance, a force-field of pounding, a silent screeching noise. Behind the noise was the radio, on the station that Alan had chosen, an announcer babbling in some language. English. Don't stop. It seemed impossible, yet required, to simply drive forward. It was important, then, to keep looking at the license plate on the car ahead of her. It seemed necessary to talk to Alan, who was tucked behind his binoculars, facing the other way now.

"Songbirds or birds of prey?" Stiff voiced.

"Both." He lowered his binoculars and looked at her. "Are you all right? Your cheeks are flushed."

"Yep." It was like talking over a secret tornado, extreme weather that she had to compensate for, and hide. "Hunky dory."

"Good." He touched his cool fingertips to her cheek.

Finally clear of the bridge, the road a mere stripe pressed into the solid landscape, she turned into the huge parking lot of an outlet store complex. She found a bathroom and locked herself in it for as long as she could justify. She washed her face and neck, lathering up the industrial, hot-pink soap from the dispenser on the wall. She'd never done that before, washed herself that way in a grimy public rest room. She'd seen a vagrant do it once, glanced stealthily at her in the mirror over the bank of sinks. The woman had rubbed the soap on her face and neck and arms, and then put her head under the faucet and wet down her hair. Now JoAnne blotted her face with trifold paper towels, molding them, cool and wet, over her hot eyelids. She was going to go get her son from jail.

Two more hours of driving. Taking care of this would cost her money. Here's where that bonus would come in handy. Thank you, Brian. If things got complicated at the police station she might even have to call him. Sickening. Outside the car, the midday sun flattened the Eastern Shore's open landscape. A barn roof gleamed from across the plowed

field. Certainly there would be birds out there, gulls, or wrens or herons, birds of one family or another, picking at worms and seeds. Something for Alan.

But he wasn't looking for them now. He turned off the radio. "This is a teachable moment for Lionel."

"Yes."

"Like the speeding ticket."

"But worse."

"Exactly," he said. "And how are you planning to use it?"

Use it. Was a teachable moment just a moment of weakness you seized, a hawk swooping down on an injured rabbit? "How *should* I use it?"

"Now you're just humoring me."

JoAnne rolled down the window and reached outside, feeling the rush of thick, urgent air against her open hand. "Doesn't a moment like this do the teaching itself? By its nature? Jail and so on?"

"I'm serious. Listen to yourself."

Why not stick with birds? Stay in his category. There they were, right outside: a whole bright landscape richly populated with suitable things. She pushed against the wind with her hand, felt it streaming between her fingers. Out to her left a huge mobile watering device stretched across a field like an ambitious and rickety construction of Tinker Toys. Mists of water puffed out all along its lower rail. Some farmer had invested a fortune in it.

"I'm serious, JoAnne," Alan said. "I'm telling you the truth."

"Plainly."

Lionel wasn't in a jail cell, as JoAnne had imagined. She found him slumped in a green vinyl chair, waiting in a holding room. A youthful black policeman, maybe five or six years older than Lionel, brought them into an office where he punched information into a computer. JoAnne sat stiffly, gripping her purse on her lap, on the edge of the swivel chair that the officer had rolled over to her. He reviewed the facts in Lionel's file. Lionel had been driving the Jeep Liberty—Tick's car—at 3:13 a.m. His blood alcohol level according to the breathalyzer was 0.08%. Tick was

passed out in the passenger's seat and because he was too drunk to drive he also stayed at the station until his parents picked him and the Jeep up earlier that morning. Alan asked the policeman if the arrest would stay on Lionel's record. There were guidelines, he said, but it was up to the judge to determine that.

JoAnne sat down next to Lionel while the officer prepared the paperwork. He was grubby in baggy shorts, filthy rubber flip-flops and a gray sweatshirt with the hood over his head. "Mom, bear with me here. I was driving because Tick was too fucked up, he couldn't even see straight." JoAnne pulled the hood back, revealing Lionel's matted hair. He twisted away, keeping his hands in the pouch of his sweatshirt.

"You were the designated driver?" she asked.

"Tick and the tequila shots—he's a fucking maniac. We'd both be dead if he was driving."

"Lionel, you were drunk. You drove drunk."

"Aren't you happy I'm alive? Tick was *hallucinating*. I had to wrestle him for the keys. The whole time he was here he was in there *vomiting*." He pointed to a bathroom door. "He hit his head on the toilet and he was *bleeding*. Then this morning his asshole dad screams at me for driving his fucking Jeep and getting Tick in trouble."

There were always extenuating circumstances. And it was true that Tick's father, Russ, was a bully. Lionel might as well get a taste of his wrath. She was glad that he had.

JoAnne and Lionel both had to sign the papers, then she paid the fine. Alan grasped Lionel on the shoulder with an indulgent "Dude." Lionel headed for the backseat of the car, but JoAnne told him to sit in the front where she could talk to him.

"Do you mind?" JoAnne asked Alan, as she unlocked the car. Lionel got in, slammed the door, pulled his hood up and pretended to sleep until they were out of town. Then he asked, without opening his eyes, if they could get something to eat. JoAnne soon found a McDonald's, ordered at the drive-through window, and pulled into the parking lot to eat in the car.



She decided to wait to discuss the whole thing. The Naval Academy, everything. He'd be off the baseball team, banned from commencement. His license was suspended. She'd spun out the long list of items in her head. It would all have to wait.

But Alan, hunched in the back with his chicken sandwich and orange juice, wanted to talk.

"So Lionel, quite an experience, I imagine." He was going to take advantage of that teachable moment, see the job through to the ugly end, like whatshername with the wig. His captured, wounded audience.

Lionel sipped his large soda noisily. "Uh huh."

JoAnne handed around the few napkins that had been included in their bag.

"What do you take away from it?" Alan leaned forward between their bucket seats. "I mean, a preliminary assessment." He smiled at Lionel.

"Search me." Lionel bit the corner off a ketchup packet and squeezed a puddle of it onto the napkin JoAnne had handed him. He grabbed a cluster of fries and dragged the splayed ends across it.

"It's kind of like the opposite of what we were celebrating earlier this week, your mom's bonus. There are rewards and incentives for good behavior and now you know about the punishments and disincentives society creates for bad behavior." He said this like he was explaining an elementary math problem to a young child. Lionel shook his drink, rattling the ice.

"I bet you're tired," JoAnne said.

"Yeah." Lionel wadded up his napkin, crushed the empty Big Mac container and tossed it all in the bag. He wiped his palms on his dirty shorts.

Alan sat back in the seat. He cleared his throat. "A great man once said we better make the most of our own selves because in the end that's all we have." He poked his head back up between the seats again. "Emerson!"

Lionel erupted. "You think I give a shit? Think I need your *guidance*? Fuck off."

"Hold on," Alan said. "That was totally un—"

"Why are you even *here*?"

"Your mother—"

JoAnne interrupted. "Wait! Quiet!" She turned to Lionel and yanked the hood off his head again. Time to deprive him of that snug little cave. "Get a grip."

Lionel glared at her. "Leave my head alone." He pulled the hood back up, closed his eyes, and leaned back against the headrest.

"This is what you have," Alan said. "This is what I was trying to tell you."

JoAnne turned and looked at him. His napkin was spread across his knees, and he sat up stiffly. What did he want? Why was he even here? "Yes. I hear you. Please be quiet."

"You asked, you asked me..." Alan was rigid, red-faced. The veins on his neck stood out. He leaned forward. "See? This is what I was talking about. You need—"

"SH SHH! SHHH!" Lionel put a finger to his lips, insistent, mocking, his eyes still shut.

"Just never mind," said JoAnne, putting her hand on the back of Lionel's headrest to twist fully back toward Alan. "No more. OK?"

Alan shook his head slowly, as though it was all such a thoughtless waste. More in sadness than in anger, JoAnne could almost hear him think, as she started the car and turned back out into the road, toward the bridge.

The sun slid down as they drove back across the Eastern Shore, swelling on the horizon as they moved from Delaware to Maryland. Lionel slept, his rich odor filling the car. Pickles and sweat. There was the decent chance that Alan was also asleep in the backseat. And even though JoAnne couldn't see it yet, the Bay Bridge loomed larger and larger, in her mind at least, its towers planted deep below the mud and rising high into the airstream, shouldering miles of narrow, arched roadway, the birds swirling below, the channel and that bright, terrible sensation of gravity sucking at anything beyond the guardrail.

On her right, in the outlet store lot, a haze of yellow lights revealed rows of parked cars. It was the best place to pull over, change drivers.

But she wouldn't ask Alan and she couldn't ask Lionel. That would be wrong.

And there it was, the metal construction, lifting fastidiously over the water, carrying rows of cars into the dusk. It took so little talent to line up and drive straight over the lane that was provided for that purpose. It was the very least she could do. JoAnne gripped the steering wheel tightly, sinking her fingers into the meat of her thumbs. Soon enough the land sloped away, the road lifted up, and somewhere down below the local waters washed against the pylons.