

Men's Department

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Ann had been watching her husband pick through suits long enough, and the painful blister on her heel had just popped. “Gray, navy, gray, gray,” she mocked, as Jim pawed the rack of hanging suits. The sleeves rippled as if a gentle breeze was passing over instead of Jim’s big hands.

“You’re not helping,” Jim said, pulling out a gray suit that looked exactly like the three suits he’d already set aside—all of which seemed identical to the suits that filled his half of their walk-in closet. Oh, sure, one had a red thread running through, and another had a blue thread, and the third had some flecks. The salesman—Ronnie—had pointed out those important distinctions. She knew that if Ronnie weren’t so polite, he would have agreed with Jim that she wasn’t helping.

They were at the nice department store at the upscale mall in Northern Virginia, the mall that offered valet parking. Not that she and Jim would use valet parking when there were those big lots for free and no tipping, either. So it was just something to fill up time during the weekly phone call to her mother back in Missouri—“Can you believe valet parking at a mall?” But nothing impressed her mother: “People don’t know how to park cars out there?” Her mother had always had a way of putting things that made people sorry they’d brought them up. But you couldn’t very well call someone and not say a word, right? So Ann had simply let her mother go on about how some people were too fancy for their own good.

Now, Jim held up another gray suit, and Ronnie nodded. "Very nice, sir." Ronnie's approving murmurs were like an air-conditioner blowing a continuous stream of temperate air. "Good cut."

Jim motioned to Ronnie to add the suit to the others. She caught sight of the price tag; this one was three hundred dollars more than the rest. Not that they couldn't afford it, but as people said back in Missouri, "Money's money." In fact, the suit cost about as much as half the year's rent on their first apartment as a married couple.

Jim had reached the end of the 42-regular section but walked back to the beginning of the rack for one more go-through: he was very thorough, which was something to admire about him though not necessarily love. Ann caught the quickest flicker of impatience in Ronnie's eyes, and, yes, she felt irritated by Jim's dogged search for the right suit when one seemed as good as the next. Still—this was Ronnie's job, after all, what he was paid for, dealing with people like Jim. So she said, "I've got to sit down," and she headed to the leather armchairs situated a short ways away, outside the men's dressing room.

She partially eased off her shoes, heel out but toes in, and leaned her head back onto the leather, closed her eyes. She should have stayed home. But the marriage counselor had suggested they do more things together: "Simple stuff. Grocery shopping. Walking the dog. Like that." As if those things were simple anymore. Grocery shopping had been even more of an ordeal than this with Jim insisting on individually picking out every green bean instead of just dropping handfuls into the plastic bag.

It hadn't always been like this. Twenty-six years ago, she and Jim had eloped, driving away one October night in his goofy AMC Pacer

that looked like a fishbowl. She was in the first semester of the nursing program at the community college, living at home, and she told her parents she was meeting a girlfriend at the library then staying at her place that night to finish up a project due the next day. It was that easy. She was eighteen, and Jim was the first person who had said he loved her. Eloping had seemed romantic and thrilling—her idea. Her father—having already paid for the overblown weddings of her two sisters—had been informing Ann for years that there was five grand in it for her if she eloped.

Later, when telling her parents what she'd done, her mother had shrieked, "He was joking, you nitwit!" They hadn't approved of Jim, who wasn't Catholic, whose parents were divorced, whose brother was locked up jail for assaulting a man in a bar.

"Jim did exactly one smart thing in his life," her mother told her repeatedly. "Getting in that pager company at the right time. Course that's really just timing, just luck, not real smarts." Where to begin? With all Jim's hard work building "that pager company" into the nation's second largest narrowband wireless messaging provider, with paging products and other wireless services to nearly four million business and individual subscribers? Or with the implication that marrying Ann apparently was not a smart thing for Jim to have done? Ann had learned to change the subject and let it go.

Eloping hadn't been the way it was in the movies, where you could knock on the door of the justice of the peace and get married. She and Jim had checked in as Mr. and Mrs. at the Holiday Inn, then drove to the courthouse first thing the next morning with a box of doughnuts to pass around. It was hard to imagine being so spontaneous,

so hopeful. Now, she didn't even buy doughnuts with all those calories and trans fatty acids.

There was a sigh and a cushiony plop as someone flung down into the other chair; Ann opened her eyes, jammed her feet back into her shoes. But it was only a young woman, college-age like her daughter, wearing black everything—tight shirt, tight jeans, nail polish. She squirmed this way and that in the chair, finally ending up in a position that Ann's mother would not have considered ladylike—her legs pulled in close, knees under her chin, thick black boots hunked right up there on the leather cushion. Shoes like Frankenstein wore in the movies. Her daughter up in New York had those same boots and worse. It was how girls were anymore. Sugar and spice and everything nice—please.

"They all look the same," the girl said, and Ann was startled, because she'd been thinking how all these girls looked the same. But the girl continued, "All gray," and Ann realized she meant the suits.

"Or navy," Ann said.

"Like a uniform."

"I suppose so." Ann didn't normally talk to strangers in malls or on airplanes—or pretty much anywhere. It wasn't a sin to be reserved, and Ann was certain the world would be a nicer place if more people gave that a try instead of blurting out every last thought in their heads.

"I feel sorry for them." The girl bent forward and set her pointy chin on her knees. Her long black hair (undoubtedly a dorm room dye job) dropped forward like a dark curtain across her face. No doubt there were a few places pierced on that girl's body that shouldn't be, not to mention tattooed. The girl laughed abruptly, like something

spurting out. “Not the suits, the men having to wear those boring suits.” She laughed again and flung back her head, so her hair flipped away from her face. “You can’t feel sorry for a suit. Maybe if it’s some beautiful, expensive suit stuck on a dumpy pudge of a guy and it’s a sweaty day and the tie doesn’t match and there’s a salad dressing stain on the lapel.” She laughed again. “I’d feel sorry for that suit.”

It seemed to Ann the girl laughed too much—perhaps from nervousness—letting that har-de-har cackle barge through the men’s department where the murmurs were reserved for cut and fabric and which tie and what shirt and cuffs or no cuffs.

The girl unfolded her legs, stretched them far out in front of her, then slid and slouched down so that her legs extended too far into the aisle. There was a three-sided mirror with a platform across from where they sat; Ann could see several reflections of the girl’s legs in the mirrored panels, oddly cut off as if there was nothing more to the girl than all those legs. “How long can it take when every suit looks the same?” The girl sighed, started twisting a hank of hair around one finger.

There were no other chairs in the men’s department to move to, and anyway, Jim would be coming along soon enough to try on his selections in the fitting rooms. At least he looked good dressed up; the girl wouldn’t roll her eyes, or “feel sorry” for his suits. Not that she cared what this ridiculous girl thought. And how could you feel sorry for a suit anyway, a piece of clothing? Ann sighed. This girl was terribly out-of-place; it was impossible to imagine she was dating a boy who wore suits; certainly none of the boys Ann’s daughter brought home would wear a suit, let alone a nice suit from a store like this. Those

boys...Ann barely saw the same one twice, though who could be sure; their names were always something like Jason or Josh, and they all seemed to be musicians. Talk about piercings and tattoos. Well, those tattoos were permanent, as she understood it—that laser removal was expensive, painful, and not one hundred percent effective. Was that barbed wire circling your flabby bicep going to seem like such a good idea once you turned forty or sixty?

Sometimes I'm such a fossil, Ann thought, worrying about tattoos. She shifted slightly, let her folded arms loosen, and smiled at the girl. "Then they have the nerve to complain about shopping with us."

The girl's face went blank. "Excuse me? Who? What?"

Ann felt redness creep up her neck, flame across her cheeks, when all she was doing was trying to be friendly. "Men," she said. "Men have the nerve to—"

The girl interrupted with the loudest laugh of all. "What a joke, Derek sitting around while I tried on a shirt. He'd rather jab needles in his eye. He hates the mall. I practically live at the mall, that's what's so funny." Again the someone-being-strangled laugh, and the girl pushed back hard against the chair, making it groan. Ann turned away, pretended to be interested in the stack of sweaters piled on a table a few feet away. The sweaters were mostly black, gray, and navy, as interchangeable as the suits. As the men who wore them. No—she shouldn't let herself think that way.

Counseling had been her idea. She'd been the one to choose Colette Ramsey from a listing in the Yellow Pages, embarrassed to ask friends for a recommendation, though Lord knows enough of them had been through some therapy or another. She had expected Jim to

be more surprised when she made the suggestion, but he had nodded, reminded her of his upcoming business travel, leaving for Phoenix on Tuesday, back on Friday. So she had made the appointment for the following Monday and there they were, another couple getting marriage counseling. (Not something mentioned in those phone calls to her mother.)

Jim didn't talk much about the appointments, and she was hesitant to ask if he thought they were working, afraid of his answer. Colette could probably tell the marriage was doomed; after every appointment, Ann imagined her reaching for a swig of Scotch or a cigarette, anything to erase the memory of listening to the two of them. The appointments were as dull as the marriage. Probably Colette would have preferred a couple that screamed and heaved knickknacks at each other, not two people who barely had enough to say. Often, the only sound in the room was the ticking of the cat clock on Colette's wall, the whir as its tail swung back and forth like a metronome.

Colette would ask questions like, "Why did you get married?" She and Jim would stare down at the Navajo print rug for what felt like a long time until one of them would say something like, "I guess we were in love," and the other would nod. It was more of an excuse than a reason, an apology, as if Colette were an angry parent. That sentence had an obvious, unspoken, final word—*Then*. We were in love *then*—but both she and Jim left those obvious, unspoken words unsaid.

There was a box of Kleenex on the coffee table in front of the couch where they sat that Ann stared at during the silences, thinking about people who were able to cry in front of a marriage counselor,

who said what they thought and felt, people who let it all out. Who made a scene, her mother might say, since she had said that quite a bit when Ann was growing up: Don't make a scene. Ann knew that plenty of people cried in Colette's office because the tissue box changed from week to week—a field of purple flowers, teddy bears hand-in-hand, butterflies.

Ann's parents had been married forty-nine years, her father's unexpected death coming just a week before the golden wedding anniversary party she and her sisters had planned. Everyone had been shocked at the death, of course, and also at the fact that this unassuming man had dared to die at such an inconvenient time. Her mother had been incredulous that the restaurant refused to refund the party deposit and still groused about it two years later (not that it was her money lost).

A salesman hustled by, moving so fast the suits suspended off his upraised hand fluttered. He stepped around the girl's legs then disappeared into the fitting room with an air of importance. The girl cried, "All those?" as she twisted and turned in her seat, half-rising out of the chair and craning her neck to stare backward in the direction from which the salesman had come. "We'll be here forever, and I told you I'm starving!" She flung herself back in the chair, and that was when Ann realized the girl was waiting not for a boyfriend, but for her father (probably divorced, probably guilty, probably that kind of rich where things were done with great excess). Suddenly everything made sense. Of course this girl wouldn't date a man who wore suits from this store. Ann smiled at her silly mistake.

The man approached quickly, with great big strides, as if he were used to people having to keep up with him. Ann thought he was

perhaps slightly older than herself; he was tall, broad-shouldered, with thick, iron-gray hair. She had a feeling he was someone who was once political and important, someone who showed up to answer tense questions on those Sunday morning talk shows. Now he had become another lobbyist or lawyer afraid to leave Washington and be ordinary again. Nevertheless, no matter who he was or how important, he still had to cope with this terrible, noisy daughter. Ann smiled at him, a sympathetic “kids these days” sort of smile, gave her eyes a little roll. He was very handsome, like a well-aged movie star. No wedding ring.

The man looked through her. No smile, no acknowledgement of how tough it was for both of them to have daughters who insisted on wearing those ugly Frankenstein boots. In fact, he didn’t notice Ann at all, and almost stepped on her purse which was well out of the way of anyone who had been watching where they walked. She straightened up, gave a ladylike cough as she pulled her purse up into her lap. Next thing you know, he’d sit in her chair—plop down on top of her! That was always the thing about those important men.

The girl stood up, whining, “How many suits is that?” She might’ve been a four-year-old with that voice. Spoiled.

With his thumb, the man brushed a bit of hair off her face, then leaned in and gave her cheekbone a brief, fatherly peck. “You’re so impatient,” he said, the indulgent way another man might say, *You’re so beautiful*.

“Well,” she said, “I just...,” and instead of finishing her sentence, she smiled. Her teeth were straight and even, like pearls on a necklace. Ann imagined expensive braces, the man driving the girl to appointments in his fancy sports car, skimming confidential memos in

the waiting room. (Jim talked about getting a Porsche—a ridiculous amount of money for a car. And, frankly, what a middle-aged male idea for problem-solving. Dear Abby advocated marriage counselors, not over-priced new cars.)

“Half hour tops,” and wasn’t that how it went with those political men; they thought nothing of slashing funding in half for some poor little do-gooder government program, but couldn’t say no to their daughters. He looped one arm around the girl’s back, tightened and pulled her body in close to his as he kissed her on the lips, hard and lingering, the girl’s face tilted to his, balancing tiptoe in those ugly boots, his hand reaching lower to caress the girl’s buttocks, fingers hiking up the back of her shirt, then wedging inside her jeans. The skin of the girl’s back was very pale.

Ann knew she shouldn’t stare, but she did. Certainly that wasn’t the way fathers kissed daughters, or, for that matter, how husbands kissed wives. Not her husband, anyway, not now. And even if he did, it would be a kiss in private, not in a store where anyone could gawk. Not that these two noticed; Ann might’ve been a random piece of furniture, another leather chair in the men’s department—a bit of background; something tasteful provided for comfort, designed to blend in. That exposed rectangle of the girl’s skin was so pale, like a baby’s; Ann couldn’t take her eyes off that intimate patch.

Her breath quickened to think of being twenty-five years younger, to be entwined in an embrace, to run her tongue over her lover’s secret tattoo, to feel his warm hands squeezing a path down her pants. She had defied her parents! She had eloped with Jim! She hadn’t always been a middle-aged woman in marriage counseling. Though who would know that now? Only Jim.

On and on—as if that kiss was part of a show. Ann coughed meaningfully, looked away at the stack of dull sweaters.

This man with his money and power, knowing that other men with money and power jumped to return his phone calls, knowing he could date any young girl he wanted; and this awful girl, twenty-two, -three, -four, feeling special to have been chosen, when it was merely a matter of being a twenty-two, -three, -four- year-old body. Didn't she understand the world contained an endless supply of young girls; what did she think would happen when her body turned thirty-two, forty-two, fifty-two, when it wrinkled and sagged and slowed; did she really think someone would be there to give her a second look or make her feel special?

Finally the man withdrew his hand from her pants, letting the back of her shirt drop down; the two stepped apart as the kiss ended. His lips were smeared with red lipstick, and the girl touched the stain with her index finger, smiled. Ann coughed again, louder this time, and the girl murmured, "Bless you," oblivious to Ann's glare, not knowing the difference between a sneeze and a cough that clearly was sending a message of disapproval.

The man reached up and grabbed the girl's finger, drew it into his mouth and gently bit down, sucked on it for a moment. One of them went, "Mmmm," as she slowly slid her finger from his mouth. Neither did anything about wiping that smear of red lipstick off his face. Too busy gnawing on each other.

There was her own young daughter up in New York, kissing the skinny lips of those pierced, scraggly musicians—Jason and Josh—one as good as the next, as if who didn't much matter. "I'm never getting

married," she constantly warned Ann, "what's the point?" As with one of Colette's questions, there was an unspoken answer: No point.

Ann blinked quickly before tears could fully form. She wasn't about to do something like cry for no reason in the mall.

Ronnie swept by, the gray suits draped over his arm. He gave Ann a clipped nod and the glimmer of a professional smile. So the end was in sight. Jim would be along shortly to try on his suits. He'd pick one, get it fitted, they'd eat a quick dinner at the Italian place, then drive home, too listless to complain about traffic. Jim would slouch in his study watching CNN and drinking Scotch. She'd be at the kitchen table, flipping through whatever magazines or catalogs had arrived in today's mail. At a certain point, one of them would call, "Good-night," and drift upstairs to bed, the other following half an hour later. Colette would suggest she sit with Jim and watch CNN. She sighed to think of the boredom of it.

The man and girl had let go of each other and were discussing something in low, back-and-forth voices, where to go for dinner it sounded like. The girl said, "What's vegetarian there besides French fries?"

"Look," the man started. Then he pushed back one sleeve, glanced so quickly at his watch he couldn't possibly have seen the time. "Half an hour," he said.

"Which means at least an hour." The girl flopped into the leather chair. The man walked towards the dressing room, not looking back at her.

Jim was suddenly in front of Ann, looming large as he stood in front of her. She tilted her neck back to look up at him. She hated the sweater he was wearing, though she'd given it to him last month

for his birthday. Green—what had she been thinking? It was a sweater that seemed to be trying too hard. Plus he had on a dress shirt underneath—for trying on suits—but the extra bulk was sloppy, and the sweater didn't look the way it had on the mannequin in the store display. There was no evidence, but she suspected Jim colored his hair now; he knew she did, because he complained about the charges on the AmEx bill. They, both of them, were old, old, old, and nothing could be done about it. She forced herself to sound cheerful: "Find some things you like, honey?"

"They're just suits," he said. *Not what I really want.* He might as well have said the words with that grimace and disdainful shrug giving away his true feelings.

"Not my fault men's fashion is dull," Ann said, trying to smile. Her face felt like it might shatter, and she blinked away more rising tears.

There was a moment of silence. And it wasn't her fault they were shopping for suits in the men's department, it wasn't her fault this was how things ended up. Would buying a Porsche be so different? More colors to choose from, more money, but wasn't it just a car, a thing that could smash up or get broken? Ann felt the girl watching them, staring hard like the dull, empty life she and Jim shared was an image on a TV screen.

Ronnie emerged from the fitting area, and said, "I've set up room two, sir. Whenever you're ready." He stepped aside to straighten a stack of sweaters.

Jim nodded, folded his arms across his chest, causing the green sweater to bunch up. He seemed to be waiting for something.

She was reminded of the way she and Jim had paused outside the heavy courthouse door, standing awkwardly on the stairs—he two

steps above her—neither of them speaking, the silence thickening and hardening as if into a shape. Sunlight made her squint as she stared up at him; men in suits with official, important, adult courthouse business streamed around them, coming and going.

Finally, still without speaking, Jim pulled open the door and held it for her. The interior seemed dim and gray, hazy like mist, the way a dream was only half-remembered by lunchtime. Outside was a bright fall day, the blue sky, leaves skittering across the sidewalk, the sounds of birds and traffic, as Ann climbed the last steps and passed through the doorway, carrying the box of doughnuts. Once inside Jim grabbed her hand—his warm, hers icy—and he said something that made her laugh so long and hard that several people stopped walking and turned to look at them. And then they got married.

Now, Ann didn't know what to say, and after a moment, Jim strode into the dressing room.

Ann frowned at the girl, who didn't seem the least bit embarrassed to have been caught staring; instead she asked, "How long you been married?"

We're not married, we're secret lovers, was what Ann was tempted to say, but she said, "Twenty-six years." She kept her voice neutral, as if twenty-six years could be a wonderful thing.

"He's cute," the girl said, gazing at the entrance to the fitting rooms. "You're a cute couple." Her voice was neutral as well, leaving Ann unsure if this was a condescending joke or a sincere comment, so she murmured vaguely, something that could pass as "thank you" or as a non-response.

The girl picked at a frayed spot on the knee of her black jeans. "My parents split up before I was born, so I have this thing about

married couples, imagining what if they were my parents.” She bent her head so her hair fell forward. The bones of her spine seemed tiny and fragile, lined up along the back of her pale neck. Did the man ever kiss her there, Ann wondered, did the man call her skin “alabaster” and tell her she was beautiful?

“I wouldn’t mind if my parents were like you,” the girl continued. “Shopping for suits. Like you don’t want to spend a minute apart, like you’re totally inseparable.” Her finger had worked its way through the jeans, making a hole in the fabric. “It’s nice to see that for some people love can be forever.”

Ann knew she should tell the girl that she had it all wrong: she and Jim were heading toward a sure divorce, and a marriage counselor had made them come shopping together. She blurted, “My parents were married for nearly fifty years.”

The girl looked up, momentarily pulled her finger out of the new hole in her jeans. “How fabulous!”

“There was going to be a party, but my dad died right before,” she said. “So not quite fifty years.”

“Fifty years,” she said. “Wow. See—it’s in your genes.”

Ann’s parents were barely speaking to each other at the end, two worn-down marathon runners keeping the same pace, eyes fixed on the finish line, seeing nothing beyond the narrow course under their feet. More than once her mother had said, “He’s better than nothing”; her father put a heavy padlock on his workshop door, and they’d had to call a locksmith to open it after he died. Fifty years of that. Ann said, “Time isn’t what makes people happy.”

The girl yanked a tiny black thread off her jeans and rolled it between her thumb and finger before flicking it onto the carpet. “It’s

such an uncertain world. So fifty years of anything.” Her eyes were big and brown and penetrating. “When one year feels impossible, sometimes even one month.”

Ann became uncomfortable under that fixed gaze, wishing she hadn't mentioned her parents. What did they have to do with anything; she and Jim had left Missouri behind long ago. She looked straight up at the overhead lights, spotted a black globe hiding a security camera, tried to distract herself by guessing how much a security system for a big, fancy store would cost. But she had no idea, and she felt the girl's stare still pressing into her. Ann spoke sharply: “You know, half of all marriages fail.” She had read that sentence in one of the books Colette had recommended and had highlighted it yellow because it seemed significant. The words jumping out had startled her, but she couldn't undo the marking.

The girl started picking at her jeans again; the hole was noticeably large. She said, “And people still get married. Are they crazy or what?”

Yes. Another word left unspoken by everyone. Except her daughter—no wonder, having grown up watching her and Jim drift through the motions of a marriage. Worse than a tattoo, those sad, dull images forever imprinted on her.

The girl shook her head as if losing an argument with herself. She suddenly folded her arms tightly across her chest and slouched down in the chair.

Ann had seen the same frustrated expression on her daughter's face plenty of times: a petulant, little-girl frown that was supposed to be threatening but instead was heart-breaking with its childish intensity. Something occurred to her—something that obviously made

sense mathematically—and she spoke without thinking: “Of course, if half fail, that means half succeed.” Her voice was false and cheerful, like Jim assuring her that the black pair of pants didn’t make her look fat. No one could believe that voice.

The girl stared at her thumb, bit off a hangnail. “I guess.”

Jim emerged, wearing the gray suit with the red stripe. The pants bunched up above his stocking feet, forcing him into an awkward shuffle. He stood in front of Ann, buttoning the jacket, checking the price tag, then tugging one sleeve after the other. “What do you think?” He hunched his shoulders.

Ronnie stepped forward, proceeded with his own tugging, accompanied by encouraging murmurs.

Ann nodded. It was a gray suit, her husband of twenty-six years in yet another gray suit. Her throat felt tight, too tight to speak, so she nodded again. “Nice,” she managed to say.

Jim held his arms straight, checking the sleeve length. Ronnie fussed with the back of the suit collar, tucking in a fold of extra fabric, murmuring as he adjusted the fit. Then he led Jim to the platform in front of the triple mirrors, and suddenly there were three Jims, three gray suits.

The girl sat up straight, scooted to the edge of her seat, gripping both armrests with her hands. She glanced at Ann, then at Jim. “You look great,” she called. She sounded anxious, motherly, as if Ann was screwing up somehow and needed to be pointed in the right direction.

So Ann echoed, “You look great.” As indeed he did, standing there as if on stage. Tall; firm; no paunch; that still thick, still dark fingers-through-it hair—Jim was the classic man in a gray suit. He looked

so good. Was it possible they were still in love after all these years?

The girl leaned over and said to Ann, "You're lucky." She spoke as if stating a fact no one would dare dispute. *The earth revolves around the sun. You're lucky.*

Ann's heart beat fast as she stood up and smoothed away the wrinkles from her skirt. She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly as she walked to the platform where her husband was preening in the mirrors. When he noticed her reflection, he turned to face her; she lifted her hands and he reached for them, surprised, helping her step up onto the platform next to him. Ronnie moved aside, his annoyance clearly visible now, and Jim was about to say something, but Ann closed her eyes and pressed her lips against his, twined her arms around his neck, leaned into the gray suit so she could feel the warmth of his body, imagining his heart deep inside his chest beating in time with her own, imagining what you might think if—like the girl, like her daughter—you stopped thinking forever.

She opened her eyes and stepped back, holding both Jim's hands in hers. It couldn't have been as quiet as it felt, not in a busy department store, but at that moment, everything seemed still and silent, poised, like the two sides of a scale looking for perfect balance.

Ann pulled a thread out of Jim's shoulder seam, and he reached up and brushed where her hand had been. Then he said, "This isn't...." He stopped. His eyes met Ann's in the mirror. In the background, Ronnie hovered, the girl slouched and sulked, and there was a whole department of men's suits. But Ann saw only her husband, the reflection of his eyes gazing straight and hard into the reflection of hers.

She pressed one finger to his lips and finished the sentence for them: "Working," she said. "This isn't working. I know. It's okay."

He sighed, closed his eyes. Up close like this, she saw crow's feet along the side of his eyes, a network of tiny lines mapping the skin of his face, some gray in the short hairs at his temple.

Ann leaned in to kiss him once more, and there was the girl's face reflected in the mirror, watching wide-eyed, as a child would. □