

Susan Tepper

HELP

My wife doesn't cook. I can't remember the last time I saw her prepare more than a sandwich or a plate of cheese and crackers. We are both therapists in private practice, though I am a psychiatrist whereas Marcy is a clinical social worker. I know she comes home tired. Lord knows, I do. But there is something about entering that cold kitchen that puts me off. A stove top that never gets its share of gravy splatters, or puddles of spaghetti sauce, or any other delicious food hardened on — to leave its stain — well there's a stove top that hasn't lived a natural life. Try explaining that to Marcy, I get the hard stare, the do it yourself routine. Certainly I can do it myself! I don't want to. I want to come home some night to a warm kitchen where all four burners are covered by pots and pans that simmer and sizzle. I want a loaded oven. 400 degrees. Roasting succulent meat surrounded by cut-up potatoes and carrots and pearl onions and diced celery and, perhaps, a handful of mushrooms. I want kitchen windows steamed over from so much food cooking. That's what I want.

Today, in a phone conversation with a colleague, I found out that Karen Caruso, and her husband, Rick, have left the area to move to the Jersey shore. Until recently, Karen was a patient of mine. A patient for nearly two years. Gorgeous woman, total knock-out, incredible body. Also an incredibly controlling bitch but the type that did it softly — crept up on you. Before Karen, Rick had also been my patient for a short time. Rick wanted the PROZAC, I only saw him once a month. Karen was a regular.

Before going into the house, I stop a moment at the bottom of the back stairs. The black sky is a wash of gray clouds, all of it starting to break up as snow begins falling again.

Groaning and thinking no more snow, I climb the slippery wooden stairs, crossing the frozen straw welcome mat and entering through the mud room behind the kitchen. Still stunned by this latest news of Karen I mutter, "Can't believe it."

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Karen is a poet, she needs to live within a reasonable commute to the city, needs the life of letters at her feet. How will she survive down there with all that sand?

Shaking my head I pass through our lifeless kitchen, coming to a halt under the archway.

My wife is standing at the hall mirror fixing her short black hair. Suddenly I wish to remain mute. What must it be like to have your tongue cut off — to never have to speak again? My eyes skim the toast-colored wall, fastening onto a long crack in the plaster. It appears to be deepening. I can picture the wall breaking open, exposing the framework and plaster and lathe of the old house. You never know what you'll find inside an old wall. Years ago, while living in the city, a wall had to be opened for electrical work. As the contractor sawed into it, hundreds of thousands of cockroaches poured out.

Musing aloud I say, "Don't expect roaches." At the same time an upstairs toilet starts to flush without anyone using it.

Marcy says into the mirror, "What's this about roaches?"

And I'm thinking: run down, run down. Our old farm-style house is running down. A feeling of neglect, a barren quality permeates the drafty rooms, though they are fully furnished, mostly in the oranges and earth-tones popular during the eighties. The place hasn't been updated since. But neither of us ever discusses any needed repairs.

"What roaches?" she repeats frowning into the mirror.

"Nothing." I blow on my cold fingers. Marcy has brought snow in on her boots, there's a small puddle where she stands.

All summer long Karen Caruso sauntered into my office wearing strappy sandals, her toenails painted a blazing red — it took willpower not to gawk.

Marcy turns to face me, her round eyes darkly bright under dim hall

lighting. I almost say: You have exceptionally large eyes. Too large. Swallowing the impulse, I tilt my head and grin. To see my wife sparkle this way chokes me with a taste I don't care to identify. Marcy flashes her sweetly savage smile, saying, "So what'll it be, Luigi's or Chinese food?"

Luigi's! Shit! Italian like Karen Caruso. I grit my teeth, jiggling some change in my pocket. That's right, Marcy, rub my face in my weaknesses. Then shrugging, as if to say Luigi's or Chinese — it's of little consequence — I tell her, "You're standing in a puddle."

Lifting her boots in an exaggerated manner Marcy side steps the puddle answering for both of us. "Luigi's."

"Luigi's it will be." And I press my hands together in mock-prayer-mode and bow my head solemnly — half teasing, half shtick: the way I used to with Karen; standing just inside the doorway to my office, silently wishing her welcome: Welcome to my salum sancturum.

After my clownish behavior made Karen giggle that first time, I did it again and again, shamelessly, week after week. Anticipating her girlish giggle, delighting in it.

Marcy doesn't giggle but turns back to the mirror giving her hair a final smoothing. It's dyed coal-black to cover the gray. Not natural-looking; but that's not for me to say. Karen Caruso, I'm sure, dyes her hair as well. Karen is also close to fifty though she barely looks forty, and in soft lighting can pass for thirty-five. Her straight auburn hair cascades onto her shoulders like a teenager. On sunny days, if she happened to take the settee tucked under the window in my office, as opposed to one of the free-standing chairs, I'd watch the light play off her shimmering hair.



People just naturally expect you to start with their childhood. They like that. They want you to know about every time they spit up their PABLUM. Horse shit! You start with the here and now and to hell with Freud! Karen was torn up about Rick — should she stay, should she

leave him? She'd tied him to the stake, and she alone held the lighted match — all because of one unfaithful foray on his part. Poor Rick. It got so I couldn't stand that perennial ping pong game Karen was playing with herself: ping and pong, back and forth, ping and pong. Finally, after months of this, I had to lay it on her. Folding my hands in my lap I had looked her square in the eye: There is no reality, I said.

Well! You'd have thought I told the Pope there is no Jesus Christ the way she carried on, dissecting it, week after week, trying to put a firm foundation around something that could possibly, just possibly, not exist. Karen playing ping pong again. For a lapsed Catholic she had bought in to a lot of the jargon. Fascinating! I watched her disbelief of her belief system waver, take form, waver, then go totally haywire — like I'd taken a mallet and smashed the chalice of holy wafers.

Each time she made a point she sort of sprung forward in the chair — like she was about to jump out of it. Or out of her skin. Karen practically hand-wringing, so deep was her despair. Of course there's a reality, she kept insisting; suspicion only making her all the more seductive.

On more than one occasion she'd pointed menacingly in my direction demanding to know: If you're over there, Doctor, and I'm here, how can there be no reality? How? How?

Ah-ha! Darling, I wanted to say. Darling Darling Darling. I wanted to soothe her, bow her head to my shoulder, stroke her silken hair, drop to my knees and murmur into her belly. Instead, I smiled. Slightly. Deliberately keeping it small; saying the word almost in a whisper: If.

Karen, being Karen, charged right back at me.

If, I repeated even more softly. If is the operative word.

Ready to blow she had screamed: That's so fucked up!

At last showing her true colors. If I were a painter (that if again) I would paint Karen using a predominance of red. Naturally her rage couldn't be

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contained — she's Italian and therefore predisposed. Genetics. Quite remarkable. And after the long stretch of calm between us, it was exhilarating to ruffle the surface of her lake. And, very sexy.

Marcy has thrown off her wool coat, she's taking her down-filled coat out of the hall closet and handing it over to me. Our long standing custom. I help her into it, sliding it up over her shoulders. At the nape of her neck a tiny black tail of S-shaped hair snakes out from the clean line of sheared bottom hair. Disturbing. I take a step back, saying, "Have you ever considered letting your hair grow?"

From deep in her throat comes a laugh that's almost indiscernible; but enough so I know to drop the topic. Marcy slaps her gloves against the hall table. "I don't know, this coat might be too heavy, maybe I should switch back to my wool."

"You'll be fine." Anxious to get the hell out of the house, anxious to have my dinner, I sniff the air for food smells, naturally finding none.

At Luigi's Trattoria we order a soup, a salad, a pasta tagliarini — all to share. Not because we can't afford to each have our own, but because I am conscious of my weight. I want to maintain my current fighting-weight of one-hundred-sixty-nine pounds. And because Marcy has put on nearly thirty pounds this year. I'm hoping the half-portions will incentivize her to reduce. She blames it on the estrogen but I'm not so sure. I watch her blowing on the spoon of hot minestrone, looking flushed and giddy as it glides into her mouth.

How in the name of Moses does Karen Caruso manage to stay so svelte? Certainly not from too much sex — sex, or a lack thereof, being the crux of her marriage problem.

Ravenous, I break off a hunk of Italian bread mashing it into the saucer of olive oil, taking a big bite. Early on — it may have been her first session — in a rush of tears Karen announced that her marriage was dying from a lack of sex. Surprise!

I laugh, choking a little on the bread. Marcy looks up from her soup and

smiles.

"Dear," I say, tapping my front tooth, "there's a smidgen of lipstick..."

"Shucks," she says, grinning wider.

And in spite of everything I throw back my head and laugh. "Oh, Marcy." But I'm thinking Karen. Oh, oh, Karen.



I know what my wife feels like. I know what she smells like. That's the thing about marriage — after a while, no surprises. I could be held hostage in some foreign country, half-starved with my eyes gouged out, rags stuffed in my ears, and I could pick out my wife — hands down. This depresses me.

I push aside the plate containing the uneaten portion of my half of the salad. There were times Karen Caruso came into my office I could swear I smelled food clinging to her. Spiced garlicky food, sauced food, delicious Italian food — the kind you want to roll around in while you're eating. An aberration — those food smells had to be. Karen always arrived for her session looking pristine.

I stab some tagliarini and twist it around the fork and shove it in my mouth. Tonight Luigi's food tastes flat.

As I'm signing the credit card receipt I ask Marcy: "What did you think of the pasta?"

"Wonderful."



On the average we have sex twice a week. Not bad for a couple edging toward fifty, with two grown daughters and a son, a couple who have cohabitated for most of their adult lives. Marcy keeps herself open to me,

though three babies and time have stretched her considerably. I can be in there, and feel lost. Lost in space. A single molecule pushing through a dark and limitless universe.

Karen Caruso told me that her body had closed to her husband, Rick. That she'd become like a virgin again. At the time I found myself silently humming that LIKE A VIRGIN song — Madonna being the last of the pop artists to get into my unconscious; and, then, only because she was a favorite of our younger daughter, Shelley; who around that time had moved back home for a while, moving out again the same week Karen Caruso left therapy. I miss my daughter. Both my daughters.

Karen had brought up sex pretty early in the game. Almost eager, I'd say, to discuss her unwillingness to have intercourse with the unfaithful Rick. If ever a guy picked the wrong woman to cheat on! A lousy one-night-stand, but Karen obsessed over it, as she obsessed over the question of reality, as she obsessed over her newly acquired virgin status. Totally aware that she was making it extremely difficult for Rick to get inside her, and despite her intense suffering over it, she was getting off on it. No question.

For Rick to enter me, was how she so primly put it. Across from her, I could hardly keep a straight face. And there she sat — so damned gorgeous. And all I could picture was Karen flat out naked taking it every which way. For chrissakes, I had wanted to yell, let your husband fuck you!

That she alone was making it practically all out impossible for them to have intercourse alternately disturbed her and didn't. Her split reaction concerned me. Yet it elated me! Karen as a virgin! Something men my age don't normally experience in the course of meeting adult women. An offering from the gods!

Half-heartedly, I tried to convince her to take WELLBUTRIN but Karen was dead set against taking drugs. And, I'll admit, in her particular case drugs worried me also. But only on the one score — that she would gain weight. I wanted Karen coming to me reed thin and beautiful.

She did. Summer's extreme heat and humidity seemed to call up her more unadulterated side. She arrived in skimpy shorts that were often flesh-colored, blending with her lanky legs which she crossed and uncrossed, restless as a colt. To not stare was difficult. The nipples of her compact breasts pushed against tight, pastel tee-shirts while Karen continued to talk about her body as a virgin body. How she wanted Rick yet couldn't stand the thought of him inside her.

Then around mid-summer she brought more news. News of another man — some lawyer Rick had consulted on a business deal, who had shown more than a passing interest in her (why not!) and to whom Karen had reciprocated this interest; letting the guy know he stood more than a fair chance.

As that information spun out of her she looked coy and animated. I had to rein myself in tight. It was one thing to have Karen with Rick; Karen with her husband was one thing. That I could deal with. But Karen with a new man — I forced my face to remain blank despite the upheaval going on inside, the tidal wave in my chest.

I tried talking her out of the lawyer but Karen was operating more out of her ego than ever. She had built up this fantasy of an incredible life once she extricated herself from the unfaithful Rick. And, so on.

Wagging a finger I had told her: Pride and anger are two of the seven deadly sins. Pretty transparent stuff. She saw right through me and she looked pissed. I winked trying to make a joke of it, saying: Anger is also known as wrath — you know, like *The Grapes of Wrath*. Another pathetic attempt to appeal to her artistic nature. The whole thing fell flat.

A month went by, Karen continuing the ping pong game in her head. With the lawyer occupying her mind it was three-way: ping-pong-ping. Ambivalence driving her. She was split. But I don't like labels. Even now — now that Karen has left me, I will not classify her schizophrenic.



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Back home from Luigi's, in bed, Marcy presses against me from behind. I beg off, telling her, "The pasta is burning a hole in my stomach." I can feel her body go tense against me.

"You said the pasta tasted flat."

"It did. It did taste flat. But they must've snuck in some spice that doesn't agree with me."

I have to turn around now and face my wife or risk being exposed. When she's feeling threatened Marcy will tell you the truth. Tonight I'm not in the mood to be called a liar.

Flipping onto my side, yawning, I tickle her stomach playfully through the pink nightgown. I can feel her bloat. Once again Marcy feels pregnant but there's no nostalgia involved. Her belly is the round of the moon — I've touched it and been burned by its heat.

I say, "Well how do you feel?" This comes out weak-sounding, what I didn't want to happen.

She purses her lips. They look chapped.

"Okay," she says. "Whatever it is that's going on with you."

"A break here, please! Can you give a guy a little break tonight!"



Every morning I have my coffee out. I drive a couple of miles past the spread of open land belonging to the community college, past the next big tract at the school for the deaf, then up and down a grid of tree lined roads that lead me into the small, town center.

Kirby's is a counter arrangement with coffee and doughnuts and plastic-wrapped muffins — no big deal. Probably I should have my breakfast at the diner, something hot and substantial like oatmeal, or a poached egg.

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However I don't trust myself at the diner. Undoubtedly I'd order eggs-over-easy, sausage, hash browns, a toasted bagel and shmear. Washing the whole thing down with a pot of black coffee. Never mind poundage — I'd be dead in a year!

Mornings at Kirby's counter it's mostly the same people that gather, including three men and a woman who apparently know each other well. One guy is a postal worker. The other two men dress in paint-splattered clothes. The woman, Babs, is curly-blondish, middle-aged and dumpy. Babs wears nylon running suits in deep shades — today's is a savory, egg-plantish purple that glistens unpleasantly under the florescent lighting. The four of them spend a good deal of time bantering, though occasionally something of merit pops into their conversation. As for me, they simply nod and go about their business. I'm never encouraged to join in.

I take a stool at one end, leaving a few empties between myself and the guy called Dan. Dan's complaining about his wife, telling the others that they argue continually about every small matter. Because the luncheonette is chilly I'm keeping my jacket buttoned, sipping black coffee that the waitress knows by heart and pours automatically. A small thing — yet it endears her to me, this automatic giving of sustenance. Hunched over the counter I give her a grateful nod. In my woolly brown jacket I'm feeling like a bear. A bear who stands on its hind legs and must forage for its food. Thank god the coffee is starting to heat me up. I yank at the buttons on my jacket tearing it open. But that doesn't do it, I'm too warm now, I want to tear off my shirt as well, I want to stand like this in front of Karen, upright like a hungry bear — my chest exposed in all its hairy glory. Look at me, I want to tell her in bear lingo — look at my chest, which I offer to you.

Hunkering down even further over the counter I'm thinking: Boy if Marcy could hear this she'd say I've flipped.

Raising his voice, the postal worker says to Dan, "You love your wife?"

"Yeah?"

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Dan's yeah sounds more like a question to me.

"Why do you fight with her?" asks the postal worker. "If you love her, just say yes!"

The two men stare each other down a moment. Dan is scratching his chin. "You mean I should just give in to her demands?"

"If you love her," the other man says. "And you want to keep the peace. It's the only way."

Bravo I'm thinking, wishing I could clap to the sad truth of it. Bravo.

But Dan's not so sure. Neither is the third man, Paulo. Babs, however, is greatly in favor and pounds on the counter saying, "That's what I call using your noggin!"

Marcy flits across my mind. Marcy. Basically undemanding. Practically an angel. All the years the kids were growing up, I screamed and hollered through the house, while Marcy kept them in line with rational sweetness.

And Karen — the biggest total ball-buster ever to cross my threshold. Karen Caruso. I slump on my elbow saying, "There it is."

"Huh?" Babs shoots me a quizzical look. The first time any of them has made any kind of overture, though five mornings a week I inhabit a stool at that counter, a few feet from them. My clothes certainly don't give me away as a shrink — Marcy commenting more than once on my rather unconventional (translation sloppy) clothing for a psychiatrist. For a doctor Marcy says, putting a bit of a snobby twist on it. She is prideful of the fact that I am a doctor, though she'd like me to look more the part. Whatever the hell that might be.

I know she compares me to our son, Marshall, twenty-five now and living on his own. Marshall dresses in expensive sports wear, and recently bought himself a vintage MERCEDES. Because of my oldish

clothes, and the fact that I drive a BUICK purchased a decade ago, our son worries that I'm secretly strapped for cash. Recently offering to lend me some. I was touched. Remembering brings tears to my eyes. I was so touched. And because of that I was tempted to accept.

I place my lips around the rim of the coffee cup so as to suck the coffee down into my stomach in one steady stream. Doing this requires the most minute intake of air. I'm imagining people being force fed, a strange appeal to the idea; though my mind is telling me otherwise.

What would Karen think of Marshall? My son, with his young handsome face, strong athletic body, cool clothes and classy car? Would he turn her on? Marshall is an architect drawn to beauty in all its forms — Karen would be right up his alley. This makes me feel old; tired. I catch my reflection in the window of the pie case, and through cloudy glass see a pinched-face man with jowls; a rather hang-dog expression. A hungry-looking man. What man isn't?



Right away, right from the beginning, I knew. Coming in from out of the cold (literally), I stepped into our common waiting room that smells of camphor to keep down the mice, picked up my pile of mail from the table and there she was. Karen. The only patient in the waiting room. Technically she could have been for Jerry or Saul, or Ella Whitby. I knew she was for me — my new patient. I remember thinking: Here is a woman whose effect will be everlasting.

Forcing myself up off the stool, I pay for my four cups of coffee then head outside, shielding my eyes against strong glare. Giant snow mounds, pushed by the plows, have made a backdrop of white mountains in the parking lot. Almost painful. I squint into the distance, toward a stand of spruce, curving and green, as if hugging the low buildings. And I'm trying to figure out which way *south* is — based on where the highway dumps into town. *South* — where Karen has fled.

Choking on too much saliva I climb into the car saying, "I was fair to her."

The Buick starts up easily. "No reason to dump it for a newer model," I say. Who am I trying to convince? Myself or my son? When suddenly I picture Marcy and Karen in a face-off: the old model and the new. And I shudder, the car moving forward on icy pavement.

The days... the days have become tedious again. Nobody wants psychotherapy anymore. Ninety-nine percent of patients come strictly for the drugs — I've got a closet full — the drug reps keeping me well stocked. I give out samples and if it's tolerated I'll phone in a prescription. Easy. Easy work.

"Too easy," I say, veering onto the main road.

Thursday was her day. Every Thursday. And Karen enjoyed talking about her life. Even the worst of it. And I enjoyed listening to it spill out of her — all that cream. I told her: *Pearls. You bring me pearls.* And watched her flush with pleasure.

Out of habit, every few seconds I glance through my rear-view mirror. Habits being hard to break. Marriage is a habit for most people. People want to get out of their marriage, now there's a nifty habit that's hard to break. A lot can't do it. Miserable together seems to beat out miserable alone.

Behind me, the town is receding. As seen through the rear-view mirror, it grows smaller and smaller till it ceases to be. I pass acres of white pasture fencing holding back snow fields sparkling under winter sunlight.

There was a time, not long ago, when such scenery could lift my spirits practically to the level of nirvana. Corny, but true. Before Karen — No! No, that isn't entirely true! Before Karen *left*, before she left me, a bright clear day, the quietude of empty fields, the solitude — all of it fostered a kinship with the living and non-living. And I would go to my work feeling a sense of peace and harmony. Convinced, however stupid or erroneous, that all was right with the world. All was right.

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Rarely did her husband Rick tell her she was beautiful. Karen stuck by him, though. Threatened to leave him, session after session, then stuck by him. While, I, on the other hand, told her she was beautiful. Told her at every imaginable turn.

It got so that I would look for places to insert those words — and it got so that she waited to hear. Hungry for them. Her lovely ass wedded to the chair, straining herself toward me, unconsciously flicking her tongue, wetting her lips, Karen hungry for those words. Hungry to hear them coming out of my mouth.

The moment her sessions were over, the door closed firmly behind her, I needed to masturbate, before I could see my next patient.

Then toward the end of summer Karen arrived with more news. She had told Rick that it was over between them. And he had some kind of seizure, or stroke, she said, after starving himself for a couple of days plus loading up on tranquilizers and whatever. Apparently he'd fallen down unconscious. She had tried to revive him using *mouth-to-mouth*. An ambulance came. It was then, she said, that everything became clear. She had prayed for his recovery, prayed harder than she ever prayed in her life. She loved him, she said. Despite everything, she loved him deeply.

Absorbing all this, I had sat back in my chair watching the color rise in her face. Heat. Moving under the flawless skin. Her sexuality toward her husband reawakened. The way he had reawakened from his unconscious state.

Then almost in a whisper I'd told her: *And you hate him, too.*

Maneuvering the car around a sharp bend in the road I'm thinking *Da Vinci*. That fevered, ecstatic expression on Karen's face as only Da Vinci could. I can see her in a painting by Da Vinci — *Karen The Immortal One*.



Our last session, in late September, our very last, she arrived swathed in

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pink. Some kind of pink top. The afternoon had been damp and gray, and the pink top covered her arms and had this soft hood into which her long hair tumbled. Karen chose a chair across from me. As she lowered herself into it, the pink seemed to stream into her face. Different from that fevered color her face took on the day she talked about loving her husband again.

Quite frankly she took my breath away. It had been over a month since we'd met. First I was off on vacation, then Karen didn't come for a couple of weeks for unspecified reasons (she wasn't telling). And knowing full well that I shouldn't, but throwing caution to the wind, I told her: *I've missed you.*

Karen looked blank. I persisted saying: *That's very beautiful.* Motioning at her top and saying, *That pink top you're wearing, what's it called?* She had kept silent; expressionless. Though I thought I detected a glimmer of annoyance.

Or, arrogance?

Switching on the heater in the Buick I'm thinking: A woman like that — a woman like that should be well fucked. Case closed. And her case is closed. I have closed the file on Karen Caruso forever.

I reach down adjusting my erection to a more comfortable position in my pants. My wife is being cheated. Cheated out of her needs. Unfair. It can't be helped. I can't help everyone. One of the first things I learned as a doctor was perspective.

"Lose that and you're a goner," I say out loud, my breath steaming in the cold car.

And I picture Marcy some night sticking the cold barrel of a gun against my forehead while I pretend to sleep.

"Christ!" And I raise the heater as high as it will go.

My office is less than a mile down the road and over the ridge. At the

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last minute I detour onto Pond Road, stopping the car, scanning the pond for skaters. A few geese trail its banks; otherwise the pond is deserted.

"Too early for skaters," I say. And Karen. Too early. Karen has left me much too early. Blasting the horn, I watch the geese scatter, too.

I don't know about love, anymore. Over the years I've heard it bandied about so many times by so many people. All this talk about love — a lack of love, too much love, the search for love, the disappearance of love, the misunderstanding of love. I pound the steering wheel then rest my head in my arms. Love and all its myriad complexities. The mystery of love.

Did I love Karen Caruso? I don't know. About love, I can only say this: I do not know.

Sure there were some slip-ups. I may have made some mistakes. Once, when she said that she wanted to talk about sex, I shot right back with: Sex between you and me? Straight ejaculation — the way it shot out of me. And, truthfully, I was only half sorry.

Acting nonchalant Karen had answered: Sex between me and Rick.

I might have thanked her for saving me, but of course I couldn't. Probably I was too candid with her. I probably shouldn't have mentioned that mafia princess who'd been my patient. The one who still owes me money. Quite a lot of money. Forgetting myself, I blurted out how I planned on going to the girl's father if she didn't cough up the cash. I said: He'll beat her, he'll beat that money out of her. In retrospect, I probably shouldn't have mentioned it.

Lifting my head off the steering wheel, I maneuver the car back to the main road. Probably I shouldn't have mentioned that girl at the mall. That blonde kid — all of thirteen. Younger, maybe. Talk about virgins! Perfection! Untouched-looking, that girl. I suppose I was trying to make Karen jealous. Testing her; at the same time testing myself.

Both of us, we're up for grabs, I was trying to convey to Karen. What are

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your limits? Do they match mine?

Probably I shouldn't have mentioned how I was tempted to follow the girl, follow her through the mall.

Karen just laughed!

I told her: But I stopped myself, I didn't follow the girl, I have daughters! Two daughters.

Karen went on laughing.

What was so damned funny? That I wanted to follow the girl? Or that I lost my nerve? Or that I have daughters? Daughters — the last temptation of Christ. No matter what the Catholics have to say.

Up ahead the road is clear with sunlight streaming in shafts that seem to pierce the blacktop surface.

Almost at my office, the last moment I swing the wheel and take the turn off to the left. A pebble road leading to the reservoir, where poachers slip behind protective fencing to shoot deer. Nobody minds anymore. The deer having taken over yards and gardens, spreading their lousy disease. People today hardly remember BAMBI. I feel this truth in the pit of my stomach. Karen Caruso would remember BAMBI. It's the sort of thing a poet remembers. Once she brought a few poems to the session — luscious poems that she left for me to keep. Poems I devoured like food.

"I can't help you," I say into the empty car. Tears well in my eyes. "I can't help anyone."

Driving the pebble road I lean on the gas, bearing down, rock crunching under my tires — an altogether satisfying sound. Then stepping harder, I aim for a tall and substantial tree.