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FREEDOM

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Go together,
You precious winners all; your exultation
Partake to everyone. I, an old turtle,
Will wing me to some withered bough, and there
My mate, that's never to be found again,
Lament till I am lost.

—Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*

GOOD NEIGHBORS

The news about Walter Berglund wasn't picked up locally—he and Patty had moved away to Washington two years earlier and meant nothing to St. Paul now—but the urban gentry of Ramsey Hill were not so loyal to their city as not to read the *New York Times*. According to a long and very unflattering story in the *Times*, Walter had made quite a mess of his professional life out there in Washington. His old neighbors had some difficulty reconciling the quotes about him in the *Times* (“arrogant,” “high-handed,” “ethically compromised”) with the generous, smiling, red-faced 3M employee they remembered pedaling his commuter bicycle up Summit Avenue in February snow; it seemed strange that Walter, who was greener than Greenpeace and whose own roots were rural, should be in trouble now for conniving with the coal industry and mistreating country people. Then again, there had always been something not quite right about the Berglunds.

Walter and Patty were the young pioneers of Ramsey Hill—the first college grads to buy a house on Barrier Street since the old heart of St. Paul had fallen on hard times three decades earlier. They paid nothing for their Victorian and then killed themselves for ten years renovating it. Early on, some very determined person torched their garage and twice broke into their car before they got the garage rebuilt. Sunburned bikers descended on the vacant lot across the alley to drink Schlitz and grill knockwurst and rev engines at small hours until Patty went outside in

sweatclothes and said, “Hey, you guys, you know what?” Patty frightened nobody, but she’d been a standout athlete in high school and college and possessed a jock sort of fearlessness. From her first day in the neighborhood, she was helplessly conspicuous. Tall, ponytailed, absurdly young, pushing a stroller past stripped cars and broken beer bottles and barfed-upon old snow, she might have been carrying all the hours of her day in the string bags that hung from her stroller. Behind her you could see the baby-encumbered preparations for a morning of baby-encumbered errands; ahead of her, an afternoon of public radio, the *Silver Palate Cookbook*, cloth diapers, drywall compound, and latex paint, and then *Goodnight Moon*, then zinfandel. She was already fully the thing that was just starting to happen to the rest of the street.

In the earliest years, when you could still drive a Volvo 240 without feeling self-conscious, the collective task in Ramsey Hill was to relearn certain life skills that your own parents had fled to the suburbs specifically to unlearn, like how to interest the local cops in actually doing their job, and how to protect a bike from a highly motivated thief, and when to bother rousting a drunk from your lawn furniture, and how to encourage feral cats to shit in somebody else’s children’s sandbox, and how to determine whether a public school sucked too much to bother trying to fix it. There were also more contemporary questions, like, what about those cloth diapers? Worth the bother? And was it true that you could still get milk delivered in glass bottles? Were the Boy Scouts OK politically? Was bulgur really necessary? Where to recycle batteries? How to respond when a poor person of color accused you of destroying her neighborhood? Was it true that the glaze of old Fiestaware contained dangerous amounts of lead? How elaborate did a kitchen water filter actually need to be? Did your 240 sometimes not go into overdrive when you pushed the overdrive button? Was it better to offer panhandlers food, or nothing? Was it possible to raise unprecedentedly confident, happy, brilliant kids while working full-time? Could coffee beans be ground the night before you used them, or did this have to be done in the morning? Had anybody in the history of St. Paul ever had a positive experience with a roofer? What about a good Volvo mechanic? Did your 240 have that problem with the sticky parking-brake cable? And that enigmatically labeled dashboard

switch that made such a satisfying Swedish click but seemed not to be connected to anything: what *was* that?

For all queries, Patty Berglund was a resource, a sunny carrier of sociocultural pollen, an affable bee. She was one of the few stay-at-home moms in Ramsey Hill and was famously averse to speaking well of herself or ill of anybody else. She said she expected to be “beheaded” someday by one of the windows whose sash chains she’d replaced. Her children were “probably” dying of trichinosis from pork she’d undercooked. She wondered if her “addiction” to paint-stripper fumes might be related to her “never” reading books anymore. She confided that she’d been “forbidden” to fertilize Walter’s flowers after what had happened “last time.” There were people with whom her style of self-deprecation didn’t sit well—who detected a kind of condescension in it, as if Patty, in exaggerating her own minor defects, were too obviously trying to spare the feelings of less accomplished homemakers. But most people found her humility sincere or at least amusing, and it was in any case hard to resist a woman whom your own children liked so much and who remembered not only their birthdays but yours, too, and came to your back door with a plate of cookies or a card or some lilies of the valley in a little thrift-store vase that she told you not to bother returning.

It was known that Patty had grown up back East, in a suburb of New York City, and had received one of the first women’s full scholarships to play basketball at Minnesota, where, in her sophomore year, according to a plaque on the wall of Walter’s home office, she’d made second-team all-American. One strange thing about Patty, given her strong family orientation, was that she had no discernible connection to her roots. Whole seasons passed without her setting foot outside St. Paul, and it wasn’t clear that anybody from the East, not even her parents, had ever come out to visit. If you inquired point-blank about the parents, she would answer that the two of them did a lot of good things for a lot of people, her dad had a law practice in White Plains, her mom was a politician, yeah, a New York State assemblywoman. Then she would nod emphatically and say, “Yeah, so, that’s what they do,” as if the topic had been exhausted.

A game could be made of trying to get Patty to agree that somebody’s behavior was “bad.” When she was told that Seth and Merrie Paulsen

were throwing a big Halloween party for their twins and had deliberately invited every child on the block except Connie Monaghan, Patty would only say that this was very “weird.” The next time she saw the Paulsens in the street, they explained that they had tried *all summer* to get Connie Monaghan’s mother, Carol, to stop flicking cigarette butts from her bedroom window down into their twins’ little wading pool. “That is really weird,” Patty agreed, shaking her head, “but, you know, it’s not Connie’s fault.” The Paulsens, however, refused to be satisfied with “weird.” They wanted *sociopathic*, they wanted *passive-aggressive*, they wanted *bad*. They needed Patty to select one of these epithets and join them in applying it to Carol Monaghan, but Patty was incapable of going past “weird,” and the Paulsens in turn refused to add Connie to their invite list. Patty was angry enough about this injustice to take her own kids, plus Connie and a school friend, out to a pumpkin farm and a hayride on the afternoon of the party, but the worst she would say aloud about the Paulsens was that their meanness to a seven-year-old girl was very weird.

Carol Monaghan was the only other mother on Barrier Street who’d been around as long as Patty. She’d come to Ramsey Hill on what you might call a patronage-exchange program, having been a secretary to somebody high-level in Hennepin County who moved her out of his district after he’d made her pregnant. Keeping the mother of your illegitimate child on your own office payroll: by the late seventies, there were no longer so many Twin Cities jurisdictions where this was considered consonant with good government. Carol became one of those distracted, break-taking clerks at the city license bureau while somebody equivalently well-connected in St. Paul was hired in reverse across the river. The rental house on Barrier Street, next door to the Berglunds, had presumably been included in the deal; otherwise it was hard to see why Carol would have consented to live in what was then still basically a slum. Once a week, in summer, an empty-eyed kid in a Parks Department jumpsuit came by at dusk in an unmarked 4x4 and ran a mower around her lawn, and in winter the same kid materialized to snow-blow her sidewalk.

By the late eighties, Carol was the only non-gentrifier left on the block. She smoked Parliaments, bleached her hair, made lurid talons of her nails, fed her daughter heavily processed foods, and came home very late on Thursday nights (“That’s Mom’s night out,” she explained, as if

every mom had one), quietly letting herself into the Berglunds' house with the key they'd given her and collecting the sleeping Connie from the sofa where Patty had tucked her under blankets. Patty had been implacably generous in offering to look after Connie while Carol was out working or shopping or doing her Thursday-night business, and Carol had become dependent on her for a ton of free babysitting. It couldn't have escaped Patty's attention that Carol repaid this generosity by ignoring Patty's own daughter, Jessica, and doting inappropriately on her son, Joey ("How about another smooch from the lady-killer?"), and standing very close to Walter at neighborhood functions, in her filmy blouses and her cocktail-waitress heels, praising Walter's home-improvement prowess and shrieking with laughter at everything he said; but for many years the worst that Patty would say of Carol was that single moms had a hard life and if Carol was sometimes weird to her it was probably just to save her pride.

To Seth Paulsen, who talked about Patty a little too often for his wife's taste, the Berglunds were the super-guilty sort of liberals who needed to forgive everybody so their own good fortune could be forgiven; who lacked the courage of their privilege. One problem with Seth's theory was that the Berglunds weren't all that privileged; their only known asset was their house, which they'd rebuilt with their own hands. Another problem, as Merrie Paulsen pointed out, was that Patty was no great progressive and certainly no feminist (staying home with her birthday calendar, baking those goddamned birthday cookies) and seemed altogether allergic to politics. If you mentioned an election or a candidate to her, you could see her struggling and failing to be her usual cheerful self—see her becoming agitated and doing too much nodding, too much yeah-yeahing. Merrie, who was ten years older than Patty and looked every year of it, had formerly been active with the SDS in Madison and was now very active in the craze for Beaujolais nouveau. When Seth, at a dinner party, mentioned Patty for the third or fourth time, Merrie went nouveau red in the face and declared that there was *no* larger consciousness, *no* solidarity, *no* political substance, *no* fungible structure, *no* true communitarianism in Patty Berglund's supposed neighborliness, it was all just regressive housewifely bullshit, and, frankly, in Merrie's opinion, if you were to scratch below the nicey-nice surface you might be surprised to find something rather hard and selfish

and competitive and Reaganite in Patty; it was obvious that the only things that mattered to her were her children and her house—*not* her neighbors, *not* the poor, *not* her country, *not* her parents, not even her own husband.

And Patty was undeniably very into her son. Though Jessica was the more obvious credit to her parents—smitten with books, devoted to wild-life, talented at flute, stalwart on the soccer field, coveted as a babysitter, not so pretty as to be morally deformed by it, admired even by Merrie Paulsen—Joey was the child Patty could not shut up about. In her chuckling, confiding, self-deprecating way, she spilled out barrel after barrel of unfiltered detail about her and Walter’s difficulties with him. Most of her stories took the form of complaints, and yet nobody doubted that she adored the boy. She was like a woman bemoaning her gorgeous jerky boyfriend. As if she were proud of having her heart trampled by him: as if her openness to this trampling were the main thing, maybe the only thing, she cared to have the world know about.

“He is being such a little shit,” she told the other mothers during the long winter of the Bedtime Wars, when Joey was asserting his right to stay awake as late as Patty and Walter did.

“Is it tantrums? Is he crying?” the other mothers asked.

“Are you kidding?” Patty said. “I *wish* he cried. Crying would be normal, and it would also stop.”

“What’s he doing, then?” the mothers asked.

“He’s questioning the basis of our authority. We make him turn the lights out, but his position is that he shouldn’t have to go to sleep until we turn our own lights out, because he’s exactly the same as us. And, I swear to God, it is like clockwork, every fifteen minutes, I swear he’s lying there staring at his alarm clock, every fifteen minutes he calls out, ‘Still awake! I’m still awake!’ In this tone of *contempt*, or sarcasm, it’s *weird*. And I’m begging Walter not to take the bait, but, no, it’s a quarter of midnight again, and Walter is standing in the dark in Joey’s room and they’re having another argument about the difference between adults and children, and whether a family is a democracy or a benevolent dictatorship, until finally it’s *me* who’s having the meltdown, you know, lying there in bed, whimpering, ‘Please stop, please stop.’”

Merrie Paulsen wasn’t entertained by Patty’s storytelling. Late in the evening, loading dinner-party dishes into the dishwasher, she remarked to

Seth that it was hardly surprising that Joey should be confused about the distinction between children and adults—his own mother seemed to suffer from some confusion about which of the two she was. Had Seth noticed how, in Patty’s stories, the discipline always came from Walter, as if Patty were just some feckless bystander whose job was to be cute?

“I wonder if she’s actually in love with Walter, or not,” Seth mused optimistically, uncorking a final bottle. “Physically, I mean.”

“The subtext is always ‘My son is extraordinary,’” Merrie said. “She’s always complaining about the length of his attention span.”

“Well, to be fair,” Seth said, “it’s in the context of his stubbornness. His infinite patience in defying Walter’s authority.”

“Every word she says about him is some kind of backhanded brag.”

“Don’t *you* ever brag?” Seth teased.

“Probably,” Merrie said, “but at least I have some minimal awareness of how I sound to other people. And my sense of self-worth is not bound up in how extraordinary our kids are.”

“You are the perfect mom,” Seth teased.

“No, that would be Patty,” Merrie said, accepting more wine. “I’m merely very good.”

Things came, Patty complained, too easily to Joey. He was golden-haired and pretty and seemed innately to possess the answers to every test a school could give him, as though multiple-choice sequences of A’s and B’s and C’s and D’s were encoded in his very DNA. He was uncannily at ease with neighbors five times his age. When his school or his Cub Scout pack forced him to sell candy bars or raffle tickets door to door, he was frank about the “scam” that he was running. He perfected a highly annoying smile of condescension when faced with toys or games that other boys owned but Patty and Walter refused to buy him. To extinguish this smile, his friends insisted on sharing what they had, and so he became a crack video gamer even though his parents didn’t believe in video games; he developed an encyclopedic familiarity with the urban music that his parents were at pains to protect his preteen ears from. He was no older than eleven or twelve when, at the dinner table, according to Patty, he accidentally or deliberately called his father “son.”

“Oh-ho did that not go over well with Walter,” she told the other mothers.

“That’s how the teenagers all talk to each other now,” the mothers said. “It’s a rap thing.”

“That’s what Joey said,” Patty told them. “He said it was just a word and not even a bad word. And of course Walter begged to differ. And I’m sitting there thinking, ‘Wal-ter, Wal-ter, don’t-get into-it, point-less to argue,’ but, no, he has to try to explain how, for example, even though ‘boy’ is not a bad word, you still can’t say it to a grown man, especially not to a black man, but, of course, the whole problem with Joey is he refuses to recognize any distinction between children and grownups, and so it ends with Walter saying there won’t be any dessert for him, which Joey then claims he doesn’t even want, in fact he doesn’t even *like* dessert very much, and I’m sitting there thinking, ‘Wal-ter, Wal-ter, don’t-get into-it,’ but Walter can’t help it—he has to try to *prove* to Joey that in fact Joey really *loves* dessert. But Joey won’t accept any of Walter’s evidence. He’s totally lying through his teeth, of course, but he claims he’s only ever taken seconds of dessert because it’s conventional to, not because he actually likes it, and poor Walter, who can’t stand to be lied to, says, ‘OK, if you don’t like it, then how about a *month* without dessert?’ and I’m thinking, ‘Oh, Wal-ter, Wal-ter, this-isn’t going-to end-well,’ because Joey’s response is, ‘I will go a *year* without dessert, I will never eat dessert *again*, except to be polite at somebody else’s house,’ which, bizarrely enough, is a credible threat—he’s so stubborn he could probably do it. And I’m like, ‘Whoa, guys, time-out, dessert is an important food group, let’s not get carried away here,’ which immediately undercuts Walter’s authority, and since the whole argument has been about his authority, I manage to undo anything positive he’s accomplished.”

The other person who loved Joey inordinately was the Monaghan girl, Connie. She was a grave and silent little person with the disconcerting habit of holding your gaze unblinkingly, as if you had nothing in common. She was an afternoon fixture in Patty’s kitchen, laboring to mold cookie dough into geometrically perfect spheres, taking such pains that the butter liquefied and made the dough glisten darkly. Patty formed eleven balls for every one of Connie’s, and when they came out of the oven Patty never failed to ask Connie’s permission to eat the one “truly outstanding” (smaller, flatter, harder) cookies. Jessica, who was a year older than Connie, seemed content to cede the kitchen to the neighbor

girl while she read books or played with her terrariums. Connie posed no kind of threat to somebody as well rounded as Jessica. Connie had no notion of wholeness—was all depth and no breadth. When she was coloring, she got lost in saturating one or two areas with a felt-tip pen, leaving the rest blank and ignoring Patty's cheerful urgings to try some other colors.

Connie's intensive focus on Joey was evident early on to every local mother except, seemingly, Patty, perhaps because Patty herself was so focused on him. At Linwood Park, where Patty sometimes organized athletics for the kids, Connie sat by herself on the grass and fashioned clover-flower rings for nobody, letting the minutes stream past her until Joey took his turn at bat or moved the soccer ball down the field and quickened her interest momentarily. She was like an imaginary friend who happened to be visible. Joey, in his precocious self-mastery, seldom found it necessary to be mean to her in front of his friends, and Connie, for her part, whenever it became clear that the boys were going off to be boys, knew enough to fall back and dematerialize without reproach or entreaty. There was always tomorrow. For a long time, there was also always Patty, down on her knees among her vegetables or up on a ladder in a spattered wool shirt, attending to the Sisyphean work of Victorian paint maintenance. If Connie couldn't be near Joey she could at least be useful to him by keeping his mother company in his absence. "What's the homework situation?" Patty would ask her from the ladder. "Do you want some help?"

"My mom's going to help me when she gets home."

"She's going to be tired, it's going to be late. You could surprise her and get it done right now. You want to do that?"

"No, I'll wait."

When exactly Connie and Joey started fucking wasn't known. Seth Paulsen, without evidence, simply to upset people, enjoyed opining that Joey had been eleven and Connie twelve. Seth's speculation centered on the privacy afforded by a tree fort that Walter had helped Joey build in an ancient crab apple in the vacant lot. By the time Joey finished eighth grade, his name was turning up in the neighbor boys' replies to strenuously casual parental inquiries about the sexual behavior of their schoolmates, and it later seemed probable that Jessica had been aware of

something by the end of that summer—suddenly, without saying why, she became strikingly disdainful of both Connie and her brother. But nobody ever saw them actually hanging out by themselves until the following winter, when the two of them went into business together.

According to Patty, the lesson that Joey had learned from his incessant arguments with Walter was that children were compelled to obey parents because parents had the money. It became yet another example of Joey's extraordinariness: while the other mothers lamented the sense of entitlement with which their kids demanded cash, Patty did laughing caricatures of Joey's chagrin at having to beg Walter for funds. Neighbors who hired Joey knew him to be a surprisingly industrious shoveler of snow and raker of leaves, but Patty said that he secretly hated the low wages and felt that shoveling an adult's driveway put him in an undesirable relation to the adult. The ridiculous moneymaking schemes suggested in Scouting publications—selling magazine subscriptions door to door, learning magic tricks and charging admission to magic shows, acquiring the tools of taxidermy and stuffing your neighbors' prizewinning walleyes—all similarly reeked either of vassalage ("I am taxidermist to the ruling class") or, worse, of charity. And so, inevitably, in his quest to liberate himself from Walter, he was drawn to entrepreneurship.

Somebody, maybe even Carol Monaghan herself, was paying Connie's tuition at a small Catholic academy, St. Catherine's, where the girls wore uniforms and were forbidden all jewelry except one ring ("simple, all-metal"), one watch ("simple, no jewels"), and two earrings ("simple, all-metal, half-inch maximum in size"). It happened that one of the popular ninth-grade girls at Joey's own school, Central High, had come home from a family trip to New York City with a cheap watch, widely admired at lunch hour, in whose chewable-looking yellow band a Canal Street vendor had thermo-embedded tiny candy-pink plastic letters spelling out a Pearl Jam lyric, DON'T CALL ME DAUGHTER, at the girl's request. As Joey himself would later recount in his college-application essays, he had immediately taken the initiative to research the wholesale source of this watch and the price of a thermo-embedding press. He'd invested four hundred dollars of his own savings in equipment, had made Connie a sample plastic band (READY FOR THE PUSH, it said) to flash at St. Catherine's, and then, employing Connie as a courier, had sold personalized

watches to fully a quarter of her schoolmates, at thirty dollars each, before the nuns wised up and amended the dress code to forbid watchbands with embedded text. Which, of course—as Patty told the other mothers—struck Joey as an outrage.

“It’s not an outrage,” Walter told him. “You were benefiting from an artificial restraint of trade. I didn’t notice you complaining about the rules when they were working in your favor.”

“I made an investment. I took a risk.”

“You were exploiting a loophole, and they closed the loophole. Couldn’t you see that coming?”

“Well, why didn’t you warn me?”

“I did warn you.”

“You just warned me I could lose money.”

“Well, and you didn’t even lose money. You just didn’t make as much as you hoped.”

“It’s still money I should have had.”

“Joey, making money is not a *right*. You’re selling junk those girls don’t really need and some of them probably can’t even afford. That’s why Connie’s school has a dress code—to be fair to everybody.”

“Right—everybody but *me*.”

From the way Patty reported this conversation, laughing at Joey’s innocent indignation, it was clear to Merrie Paulsen that Patty still had no inkling of what her son was doing with Connie Monaghan. To be sure of it, Merrie probed a little. What did Patty suppose Connie had been getting for her trouble? Was she working on commission?

“Oh, yeah, we told him he had to give her half his profits,” Patty said. “But he would’ve done that anyway. He’s always been protective of her, even though he’s younger.”

“He’s like a brother to her . . .”

“No, actually,” Patty joked, “he’s a lot nicer to her than that. You can ask Jessica what it’s like to be his sibling.”

“Ha, right, ha ha,” Merrie said.

To Seth, later that day, Merrie reported, “It’s amazing, she truly has no idea.”

“I think it’s a mistake,” Seth said, “to take pleasure in a fellow parent’s ignorance. It’s tempting fate, don’t you think?”

“I’m sorry, it’s just too funny and delicious. You’ll have to do the non-gloating for the two of us and keep our fate at bay.”

“I feel bad for her.”

“Well, forgive me, but I’m finding it hilarious.”

Toward the end of that winter, in Grand Rapids, Walter’s mother collapsed with a pulmonary embolism on the floor of the ladies dress shop where she worked. Barrier Street knew Mrs. Berglund from her visits at Christmastime, on the children’s birthdays, and on her own birthday, for which Patty always took her to a local masseuse and plied her with licorice and macadamia nuts and white chocolate, her favorite treats. Merrie Paulsen referred to her, not unkindly, as “Miss Bianca,” after the bespectacled mouse matron in the children’s books by Margery Sharp. She had a crepey, once-pretty face and tremors in her jaw and her hands, one of which had been badly withered by childhood arthritis. She’d been worn out, physically wrecked, Walter said bitterly, by a lifetime of hard labor for his drunk of a dad, at the roadside motel they’d operated near Hibbing, but she was determined to remain independent and look elegant in her widowed years, and so she kept driving her old Chevy Cavalier to the dress shop. At the news of her collapse, Patty and Walter hurried up north, leaving Joey to be supervised by his disdainful older sister. It was soon after the ensuing teen fuckfestival, which Joey conducted in his bedroom in open defiance of Jessica, and which ended only with the sudden death and funeral of Mrs. Berglund, that Patty became a very different kind of neighbor, a much more sarcastic neighbor.

“Oh, Connie, yes,” her tune went now, “such a nice little girl, such a quiet little harmless girl, with such a sterling mom. You know, I hear Carol has a new boyfriend, a real studly man, he’s like half her age. Wouldn’t it be terrible if they moved away now, with everything Carol’s done to brighten our lives? And Connie, wow, I’d sure miss her too. Ha ha. So quiet and nice and grateful.”

Patty was looking a mess, gray-faced, poorly slept, underfed. It had taken her an awfully long time to start looking her age, but now at last Merrie Paulsen had been rewarded in her wait for it to happen.

“Safe to say she’s figured it out,” Merrie said to Seth.

“Theft of her cub—the ultimate crime,” Seth said.

"Theft, exactly," Merrie said. "Poor innocent blameless Joey, stolen away by that little intellectual powerhouse next door."

"Well, she is a year and a half older."

"Calendrically."

"Say what you will," Seth said, "but Patty really loved Walter's mom. She's got to be hurting."

"Oh, I know, I know. Seth, I know. And now I can honestly be sad for her."

Neighbors who were closer to the Berglunds than the Paulsens reported that Miss Bianca had left her little mouse house, on a minor lake near Grand Rapids, exclusively to Walter and not to his two brothers. There was said to be disagreement between Walter and Patty about how to handle this, Walter wanting to sell the house and share the proceeds with his brothers, Patty insisting that he honor his mother's wish to reward him for being the good son. The younger brother was career military and lived in the Mojave, at the Air Force base there, while the older brother had spent his adult life advancing their father's program of drinking immoderately, exploiting their mother financially, and otherwise neglecting her. Walter and Patty had always taken the kids to his mother's for a week or two in the summer, often bringing along one or two of Jessica's neighborhood friends, who described the property as rustic and woody and not too terrible bugwise. As a kindness, perhaps, to Patty, who appeared to be doing some immoderate drinking of her own—her complexion in the morning, when she came out to collect the blue-wrapped *New York Times* and the green-wrapped *Star-Tribune* from her front walk, was all Chardonnay Splotch—Walter eventually agreed to keep the house as a vacation place, and in June, as soon as school let out, Patty took Joey up north to help her empty drawers and clean and repaint while Jessica stayed home with Walter and took an enrichment class in poetry.

Several neighbors, the Paulsens not among them, brought their boys for visits to the lakeside house that summer. They found Patty in much better spirits. One father privately invited Seth Paulsen to imagine her suntanned and barefoot, in a black one-piece bathing suit and beltless jeans, a look very much to Seth's taste. Publicly, everyone remarked on how attentive and unsullen Joey was, and what a good time he and Patty

seemed to be having. The two of them made all visitors join them in a complicated parlor game they called Associations. Patty stayed up late in front of her mother-in-law's TV console, amusing Joey with her intricate knowledge of syndicated sixties and seventies sitcoms. Joey, having discovered that their lake was unidentified on local maps—it was really just a large pond, with one other house on it—had christened it Nameless, and Patty pronounced the name tenderly, sentimentally, “our Nameless Lake.” When Seth Paulsen learned from one of the returning fathers that Joey was working long hours up there, cleaning gutters and cutting brush and scraping paint, he wondered whether Patty might be paying Joey a solid wage for his services, whether this might be part of the deal. But nobody could say.

As for Connie, the Paulsens could hardly look out a Monaghan-side window without seeing her waiting. She really was a very patient girl, she had the metabolism of a fish in winter. She worked evenings busing tables at W. A. Frost, but all afternoon on weekdays she sat waiting on her front stoop while ice-cream trucks went by and younger children played, and on weekends she sat in a lawn chair behind the house, glancing occasionally at the loud, violent, haphazard tree-removal and construction work that her mother's new boyfriend, Blake, had undertaken with his non-unionized buddies from the building trades, but mostly just waiting.

“So, Connie, what's interesting in your life these days?” Seth asked her from the alley.

“You mean, apart from Blake?”

“Yes, apart from Blake.”

Connie considered briefly and then shook her head. “Nothing,” she said.

“Are you bored?”

“Not really.”

“Going to movies? Reading books?”

Connie fixed Seth with her steady, we-have-nothing-in-common gaze. “I saw *Batman*.”

“What about Joey? You guys have been pretty tight, I bet you're missing him.”

“He'll be back,” she said.

Once the old cigarette-butt issue had been resolved—Seth and Merrie admitted to having possibly exaggerated the summerlong tally of butts in the wading pool; to having possibly overreacted—they'd discovered in Carol Monaghan a rich source of lore about local Democratic politics, which Merrie was getting more involved with. Carol matter-of-factly told hair-raising stories of the unclean machine, of buried pipelines of slush, of rigged bids, of permeable firewalls, of interesting math, and got a kick out of Merrie's horror. Merrie came to cherish Carol as a fleshly exemplum of the civic corruption Merrie intended to combat. The great thing about Carol was that she never seemed to change—kept tarting up on Thursday evenings for whoever, year after year after year, keeping alive the Neanderthal tradition in urban politics.

And then, one day, she did change. There was already quite a bit of this going around. The city's mayor, Norm Coleman, had morphed into a Republican, and a former pro wrestler was headed toward the governor's mansion. The catalyst in Carol's case was the new boyfriend, Blake, a goateed young backhoe operator she'd met across the counter at the license bureau, and for whom she dramatically changed her look. Out went the complicated hair and escort-service dresses, in came snug pants, a simple shag cut, and less makeup. A Carol nobody had ever seen, an actually happy Carol, hopped buoyantly from Blake's F-250 pickup, letting anthem rock throb up and down the street, and slammed the passenger-side door with a mighty push. Soon Blake began spending nights at her house, shuffling around in a Vikings jersey with his work boots unlaced and a beer can in his fist, and before long he was chainsawing every tree in her back yard and running wild with a rented backhoe. On the bumper of his truck were the words *I'M WHITE AND I VOTE*.

The Paulsens, having recently completed a protracted renovation of their own, were reluctant to complain about the noise and mess, and Walter, on the other side, was too nice or too busy, but when Patty finally came home, late in August, after her months in the country with Joey, she was practically unhinged in her dismay, going up and down the street, door to door, wild-eyed, to vilify Carol Monaghan. "Excuse me," she said, "what happened here? Can somebody tell me what happened? Did somebody declare war on trees without telling me? Who is this Paul Bunyan

with the truck? What's the story? Is she not renting anymore? Are you allowed to annihilate the trees if you're just renting? How can you tear the back wall off a house you don't even own? Did she somehow buy the place without our knowing it? How could she do that? She can't even change a lightbulb without calling up my husband! 'Sorry to bother you at the dinner hour, Walter, but when I flip this light switch nothing happens. Do you mind coming over right away? And while you're here, hon, can you help me with my taxes? They're due tomorrow and my nails are wet.' How could this person get a mortgage? Doesn't she have Victoria's Secret bills to pay? How is she even allowed to have a boyfriend? Isn't there some fat guy over in Minneapolis? Shouldn't somebody maybe get the word out to the fat guy?"

Not until Patty reached the door of the Paulsens, far down on her list of go-to neighbors, did she get some answers. Merrie explained that Carol Monaghan was, in fact, no longer renting. Carol's house had been one of several hundred that the city housing authority had come to own during the blight years and was now selling off at bargain prices.

"How did I not know this?" Patty said.

"You never asked," Merrie said. And couldn't resist adding: "You never seemed particularly interested in government."

"And you say she got it cheap."

"Very cheap. It helps to know the right people."

"How do *you* feel about that?"

"I think it sucks, both fiscally and philosophically," Merrie said. "That's one reason I'm working with Jim Schiebel."

"You know, I always loved this neighborhood," Patty said. "I loved living here, even at the beginning. And now suddenly everything looks so dirty and ugly to me."

"Don't get depressed, get involved," Merrie said, and gave her some literature.

"I wouldn't want to be Walter right now," Seth remarked as soon as Patty was gone.

"I'm frankly glad to hear that," Merrie said.

"Was it just me, or did you hear an undertone of marital discontent? I mean, helping Carol with her taxes? You know anything about that? I

thought that was very interesting. I hadn't heard about that. And now he's failed to protect their pretty view of Carol's trees."

"The whole thing is so Reaganite-regressive," Merrie said. "She thought she could live in her own little bubble, make her own little world. Her own little dollhouse."

The add-on structure that rose out of Carol's back-yard mud pit, weekend by weekend over the next nine months, was like a giant utilitarian boat shed with three plain windows punctuating its expanses of vinyl siding. Carol and Blake referred to it as a "great-room," a concept hitherto foreign to Ramsey Hill. Following the cigarette-butt controversy, the Paulsens had installed a high fence and planted a line of ornamental spruces that had since grown up enough to screen them from the spectacle. Only the Berglunds' sight lines were unobstructed, and before long the other neighbors were avoiding conversation with Patty, as they never had before, because of her fixation on what she called "the hangar." They waved from the street and called out hellos but were careful not to slow down and get sucked in. The consensus among the working mothers was that Patty had too much time on her hands. In the old days, she'd been great with the little kids, teaching them sports and domestic arts, but now most of the kids on the street were teenagers. No matter how she tried to fill her days, she was always within sight or earshot of the work next door. Every few hours, she emerged from her house and paced up and down her back yard, peering over at the great-room like an animal whose nest had been disturbed, and sometimes in the evening she went knocking on the great-room's temporary plywood door.

"Hey, Blake, how's it going?"

"Going just fine."

"Sounds like it! Hey, you know what, that Skilsaw's pretty loud for eight-thirty at night. How would you feel about knocking off for the day?"

"Not too good, actually."

"Well, how about if I just ask you to stop, then?"

"I don't know. How about you letting me get my work done?"

"I'd actually feel pretty bad about that, because the noise is really bothering us."

"Yeah, well, you know what? Too bad."

Patty had a loud, involuntary, whinnylike laugh. “Ha-ha-ha! Too bad?”
“Yeah, listen, I’m sorry about the noise. But Carol says there was about five years of noise coming out of your place when you were fixing it up.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I don’t remember her complaining.”

“You were doing what you had to do. Now I’m doing what I have to do.”

“What you’re doing is really ugly, though. I’m sorry, but it’s kind of hideous. Just—horrible and hideous. Honestly. As a matter of pure fact. Not that that’s really the issue. The issue is the Skilsaw.”

“You’re on private property and you need to leave now.”

“OK, so I guess I’ll be calling the cops.”

“That’s fine, go ahead.”

You could see her pacing in the alley then, trembling with frustration. She did repeatedly call the police about the noise, and a few times they actually came and had a word with Blake, but they soon got tired of hearing from her and did not come back until the following February, when somebody slashed all four of the beautiful new snow tires on Blake’s F-250 and Blake and Carol directed officers to the next-door neighbor who’d been phoning in so many complaints. This resulted in Patty again going up and down the street, knocking on doors, ranting. “The obvious suspect, right? The mom next door with a couple of teenage kids. Hard-core criminal me, right? Lunatic me! He’s got the biggest, ugliest vehicle on the street, he’s got bumper stickers that offend pretty much anybody who’s not a white supremacist, but, God, what a mystery, who else but me could want to slash his tires?”

Merrie Paulsen was convinced that Patty was, in fact, the slasher.

“I don’t see it,” Seth said. “I mean, she’s obviously suffering, but she’s not a liar.”

“Right, except I didn’t actually notice her saying she didn’t do it. You have to hope she’s getting good therapy somewhere. She sure could use it. That and a full-time job.”

“My question is, where is Walter?”

“Walter is killing himself earning his salary so she can stay home all day and be a mad housewife. He’s being a good dad to Jessica and some sort of reality principle to Joey. I’d say he has his hands full.”

Walter's most salient quality, besides his love of Patty, was his niceness. He was the sort of good listener who seemed to find everybody else more interesting and impressive than himself. He was preposterously fair-skinned, weak in the chin, cherubically curly up top, and had worn the same round wireframes forever. He'd begun his career at 3M as an attorney in the counsel's office, but he'd failed to thrive there and was shunted into outreach and philanthropy, a corporate cul-de-sac where niceness was an asset. On Barrier Street he was always handing out great free tickets to the Guthrie and the Chamber Orchestra and telling neighbors about encounters he'd had with famous locals such as Garrison Keillor and Kirby Puckett and, once, Prince. More recently, and surprisingly, he'd left 3M altogether and become a development officer for the Nature Conservancy. Nobody except the Paulsens had suspected him of harboring such reserves of discontent, but Walter was no less enthusiastic about nature than he was about culture, and the only outward change in his life was his new scarcity at home on weekends.

This scarcity may have been one reason he didn't intervene, as he might have been expected to, in Patty's battle with Carol Monaghan. His response, if you asked him point-blank about it, was to giggle nervously. "I'm kind of a neutral bystander on that one," he said. And a neutral bystander he remained all through the spring and summer of Joey's sophomore year and into the following fall, when Jessica went off to college in the East and Joey moved out of his parents' house and in with Carol, Blake, and Connie.

The move was a stunning act of sedition and a dagger to Patty's heart—the beginning of the end of her life in Ramsey Hill. Joey had spent July and August in Montana, working on the high-country ranch of one of Walter's major Nature Conservancy donors, and had returned with broad, manly shoulders and two new inches of height. Walter, who didn't ordinarily brag, had vouchsafed to the Paulsens, at a picnic in August, that the donor had called him up to say how "blown away" he was by Joey's fearlessness and tirelessness in throwing calves and dipping sheep. Patty, however, at the same picnic, was already vacant-eyed with pain. In June, before Joey went to Montana, she'd again taken him up to Nameless Lake to help her improve the property, and the only neighbor who'd seen them there described a terrible afternoon of watching mother and son lacerate

each other over and over, airing it all in plain sight, Joey mocking Patty's mannerisms and finally calling her "stupid" to her face, at which Patty had cried out, "Ha-ha-ha! Stupid! God, Joey! Your maturity just never ceases to amaze me! Calling your mother stupid in front of other people! That's just so attractive in a person! What a big, tough, independent man you are!"

By summer's end, Blake had nearly finished work on the great-room and was outfitting it with such Blakean gear as PlayStation, Foosball, a refrigerated beer keg, a large-screen TV, an air-hockey table, a stained-glass Vikings chandelier, and mechanized recliners. Neighbors were left to imagine Patty's dinner-table sarcasm regarding these amenities, and Joey's declarations that she being was stupid and unfair, and Walter's angry demands that Joey apologize to Patty, but the night when Joey defected to the house next door didn't need to be imagined, because Carol Monaghan was happy to describe it, in a loud and somewhat gloating voice, to any neighbor sufficiently disloyal to the Berglunds to listen to her.

"Joey was *so* calm, *so* calm," Carol said. "I swear to God, you couldn't melt butter in his mouth. I went over there with Connie to support him and let everybody know I'm totally in favor of the arrangement, because, you know Walter, he's so considerate, he's going to worry it's an imposition on me. And Joey was totally responsible like always. He just wanted to be on the same page and make sure all the cards are on the table. He explained how he and Connie had discussed things with me, and I told Walter—because I knew he'd be concerned about this—I told him groceries were not a problem. Blake and I are a family now and we're happy to feed one more, and Joey's also very good about the dishes and garbage and being neat, and plus, I told Walter, he and Patty used to be so generous to Connie and give her meals and all. I wanted to acknowledge that, because they really were generous when I didn't have my life together, and I've never been anything but grateful for that. And Joey's just so responsible and calm. He explains how, since Patty won't even let Connie in the house, he really doesn't have any other choice if he wants to spend time with her, and I chime in and say how totally in support of the relationship I am—if only all the other young people in this world were as responsible as those two, the world would be a much better place—and how much more preferable it is for them to be in my house, safe and re-

sponsible, instead of sneaking around and getting in trouble. I'm so grateful to Joey, he'll always be welcome in my house. I said that to them. And I know Patty doesn't like me, she's always looked down her nose at me and been snooty about Connie. I know that. I know a thing or two about the things Patty's capable of. I knew she was going to throw some kind of fit. And so her face gets all twisted, and she's like, 'You think he *loves* your daughter? You think he's *in love* with her?' In this high little voice. Like it's impossible for somebody like Joey to be in love with Connie, because I didn't go to college or whatever, or I don't have as big a house or come from New York City or whatever, or I have to work an honest-to-Christ forty-hour full-time job, unlike her. Patty's so full of disrespect for me, you can't believe it. But Walter I thought I could talk to. He really is a sweetie. His face is beet red, I think because he's embarrassed, and he says, 'Carol, you and Connie need to leave so we can talk to Joey privately.' Which I'm fine with. I'm not there to make trouble, I'm not a troublemaking person. Except then Joey says no. He says he's not asking permission, he's just informing them about what he's going to do, and there's nothing to discuss. And that's when Walter loses it. Just loses it. He's got tears running down his face he's so upset—and I can understand that, because Joey's his youngest, and it's not Walter's fault Patty is so unreasonable and mean to Connie that Joey can't stand to live with them anymore. But he starts yelling at the top of his lungs, like, **YOU ARE SIXTEEN YEARS OLD AND YOU ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE UNTIL YOU FINISH HIGH SCHOOL.** And Joey's just smiling at him, you couldn't melt butter in his mouth. Joey says it's not against the law for him to leave, and anyway he's only moving next door. Totally reasonable. I wish I'd been one percent as smart and cool when I was sixteen. I mean, he's just a great kid. It made me feel kind of bad for Walter, because he starts yelling all this stuff about how he's not going to pay for Joey's college, and Joey's not going to get to go back to Montana next summer, and all he's asking is that Joey come to dinner and sleep in his own bed and be a part of the family. And Joey's like, 'I'm still part of the family,' which, by the way, he never said he wasn't. But Walter's stomping around the kitchen, for a couple of seconds I think he's actually going to hit him, but he's just totally lost it, he's yelling, **GET OUT, GET OUT, I'M SICK OF IT, GET OUT,** and then he's gone and you can hear him upstairs in Joey's room, opening up

Joey's drawers or whatever, and Patty runs upstairs and they start screaming at each other, and Connie and I are hugging Joey, because he's the one reasonable person in the family and we feel so sorry for him, and that's when I know for sure it's the right thing for him to move in with us. Walter comes stomping downstairs again and we can hear Patty screaming like a maniac—she's totally lost it—and Walter starts yelling again, DO YOU SEE WHAT YOU'RE DOING TO YOUR MOTHER? Because it's all about Patty, see, she's always got to be the victim. And Joey's just standing there shaking his head, because it's so obvious. Why would he want to live in place like this?"

Although some neighbors did undoubtedly take satisfaction in Patty's reaping of the whirlwind of her son's extraordinariness, the fact remained that Carol Monaghan had never been well liked on Barrier Street, Blake was widely deplored, Connie was thought spooky, and nobody had ever really trusted Joey. As word of his insurrection spread, the emotions prevailing among the Ramsey Hill gentry were pity for Walter, anxiety about Patty's psychological health, and an overwhelming sense of relief and gratitude at how normal their own children were—how happy to accept parental largesse, how innocently demanding of help with their homework or their college applications, how compliant in phoning in their afterschool whereabouts, how divulging of their little day-to-day bruising, how reassuringly predictable in their run-ins with sex and pot and alcohol. The ache emanating from the Berglunds' house was *sui generis*. Walter—unaware, you had to hope, of Carol's blabbing about his night of "losing it"—acknowledged awkwardly to various neighbors that he and Patty had been "fired" as parents and were doing their best not to take it too personally. "He comes over to study sometimes," Walter said, "but right now he seems more comfortable spending his nights at Carol's. We'll see how long that lasts."

"How's Patty taking all this?" Seth Paulsen asked him.

"Not well."

"We'd love to get you guys over for dinner some night soon."

"That would be great," Walter said, "but I think Patty's going up to my mom's old house for a while. She's been fixing it up, you know."

"I'm worried about her," Seth said with a catch in his voice.

“So am I, a little bit. I’ve seen her play in pain, though. She tore up her knee in her junior year and played another two games on it.”

“But then didn’t she have, um, career-ending surgery?”

“It was more a point about her toughness, Seth. About her playing through pain.”

“Right.”

Walter and Patty never did get over to the Paulsens for dinner. Patty was absent from Barrier Street, hiding out at Nameless Lake, for long stretches of the winter and spring that followed, and even when her car was in the driveway—for example, at Christmastime, when Jessica returned from college and, according to her friends, had a “blow-out fight” with Joey which resulted in his spending more than a week in his old bedroom, giving his formidable sister the proper holiday she wanted—Patty eschewed the neighborhood get-togethers at which her baked goods and affability had once been such welcome fixtures. She was sometimes seen receiving visits from fortyish women who, based on their hairstyles and the bumper stickers on their Subarus, were thought to be old basketball teammates of hers, and there was talk about her drinking again, but this was mostly just a guess, since, for all her friendliness, she had never made an actual close friend in Ramsey Hill.

By New Year’s, Joey was back at Carol and Blake’s. A large part of that house’s allure was presumed to be the bed he shared with Connie. He was known by his friends to be bizarrely and militantly opposed to masturbation, the mere mention of which never failed to elicit a condescending smile from him; he claimed it was an ambition of his to go through life without resorting to it. More perspicacious neighbors, the Paulsens among them, suspected that Joey also enjoyed being the smartest person in the house. He became the prince of the great-room, opening its pleasures to everyone he favored with his friendship (and making the unsupervised beer keg a bone of contention at family dinners all over the neighborhood). His manner with Carol verged unsettlingly close to flirtation, and Blake he charmed by loving all the things that Blake himself loved, especially Blake’s power tools and Blake’s truck, at the wheel of which he learned how to drive. From the annoying way he smiled at his schoolmates’ enthusiasm for Al Gore and Senator Wellstone, as if liberalism

were a weakness on a par with self-abuse, it seemed he'd even embraced some of Blake's politics. He worked construction the next summer instead of returning to Montana.

And everybody had the sense, fairly or not, that Walter—his niceness—was somehow to blame. Instead of dragging Joey home by the hair and making him behave himself, instead of knocking Patty over the head with a rock and making her behave herself, he disappeared into his work with the Nature Conservancy, where he'd rather quickly become the state chapter's executive director, and let the house stand empty evening after evening, let the flower beds go to seed and the hedges go unclipped and the windows go unwashed, let the dirty urban snow engulf the warped GORE LIEBERMAN sign still stuck in the front yard. Even the Paulsens lost interest in the Berglunds, now that Merrie was running for city council. Patty spent all of the following summer away at Nameless Lake, and soon after her return—a month after Joey went off to the University of Virginia under financial circumstances that were unknown on Ramsey Hill, and two weeks after the great national tragedy—a FOR SALE sign went up in front of the Victorian into which she and Walter had poured fully half their lives. Walter had already begun commuting to a new job in Washington. Though housing prices would soon be rebounding to unprecedented heights, the local market was still near the bottom of its post-9/11 slump. Patty oversaw the sale of the house, at an unhappy price, to an earnest black professional couple with twin three-year-olds. In February, the two Berglunds went door to door along the street one final time, taking leave with polite formality, Walter asking after everybody's children and conveying his very best wishes for each of them, Patty saying little but looking strangely youthful again, like the girl who'd pushed her stroller down the street before the neighborhood was even a neighborhood.

"It's a wonder," Seth Paulsen remarked to Merrie afterward, "that the two of them are even still together."

Merrie shook her head. "I don't think they've figured out yet how to live."