

UNBEARABLE WEIGHTS

Declan wears glasses, a black cape, and his sister Maeve's striped tights. Today, purple, pink, and white stripes. He is obviously a superhero. He waves a plastic, telescoping saber and makes loud whooshing noises. He leaps from the highest porch steps into tall dandelions. He crushes his father's Guinness cans with one stomp of his Bob the Builder boot. There is no telling how many bank robbers and alien invaders he has stopped in their tracks, how much evil he has destroyed. On these early summer evenings, stretched out on my deck chair with my napkin of mixed nuts and a glass of red wine, and with Declan right next door, I know that the world is a safer place because he is in it.

Declan's mother may need to be saved. Every day, just before her husband comes home in his police department take-home car, she launches into a routine that no mortal could sustain for too many years of child rearing. If the trash cans are still at the curb, she brings them in. She lights the grill, then dashes through her sliding glass door into her kitchen. A moment later, she emerges with a platter of perfectly formed hamburger patties and one New York strip steak, then tongs them onto the grate.

The bulldog, Gilroy, barks at every real or imagined threat to his territory, usually the neighboring dachshund. So she pulls him by his collar down the basement steps. When she re-emerges, she is not wearing the shirt painted with Gerber peas from lunch. She is wearing a floral sundress, and her hair is brushed. Always, Maeve's striped tights are peeled off Declan's legs, leaving him in his superhero underpants. She gives Maeve a once-over, but Maeve always seems to be acceptable, always with some Disney princess accessory, usually a tiara, which somehow suits whatever else she's wearing. As the estimated time of her husband's arrival approaches, she lifts the baby into the air and sniffs his diaper. More often than not it's fine,

since she changed his outfit when she changed herself. Finally, she fishes a padlock key from a hanging pot of petunias, unlocks and unlatches the driveway gate, and flings it open.

By the time Declan's dad arrives home and slams the door of his take-home car behind him, I'm exhausted, even though all I've done is watch. All my muscles are tensed, too, as if to launch myself out of my deck chair.

Today, the dad—they're Declan's mom and dad to me, we're not chat-over-the-fence neighbors—drives through the open gate and hits the brakes inches away from the kiddie pool, where Maeve has been sitting in her Dora the Explorer swimsuit and tiara, alternately drowning and saving a naked baby doll. I check my watch; the dad is early. The gate is open, but the routine is out of whack. The Crown Vic door and then the sliding screen door slam close in successive slams, and the mom runs toward the car with the plate of raw meat in one hand and Declan, with the purple, pink, and white tights dangling from one leg, dragged along by her other hand. Maeve drops the doll face-down in the water and lets out a wail.

No "Honey, I'm home." The dad doesn't even look at Declan and the mom. He grabs Maeve by her arm, yanks her out of the pool, and plunks her onto the concrete driveway, where she stands, dripping and quiet. All I can see is the back of the man—a thunderhead in uniform. His wife is eclipsed by him, so that all I can see are arms—one jabbing a finger, one holding a rolled-up newspaper, one lifting an unsteady plate of meat, the other held palm up. Declan plops down next to Maeve and pulls the tights back up his legs.

I can't make out what they are saying to one another. His words are barked. My insides clench, and I forget to breathe. On one hand, I want to screw up my courage, casually walk down my deck steps to our common fence, and say something to diffuse the situation. On the other

hand, there's a Maeve inside me, who wants to wail but is stunned to silence. Almond pieces stick in my throat. If I speak, I'll choke.

Then his attention is drawn toward Declan, who has pulled the tights over his superhero underpants and now turns, cape flung into the wind, to fly over Gotham. But before he can leap into space, his dad catches him by his cape and yanks him back. I think of Declan's throat, how there will be a painful red spot on his neck where he tied the cape strings. I swallow the almond bits and still feel grit there.

His dad picks him up by his waist, face down, and peels the tights off. I hear more barked words but pick out only one from the words he fires at my superhero: "Girl." I hear it again. "Girl." As if "girl" is a curse word.

The tights are suddenly airborne, a slow motion flailing of empty legs. Time slows down, a superhero special effect. My heart slows. The legs scramble in air, running toward a cliff's edge, anything solid to land on, some ledge that won't crumble, a spot where the legs can get a sure footing and take off running to some safer planet. They give up running, suspended on summer wind. Then I breathe, and gravity brings them down. The tights descend into the kiddie pool and float beside the facedown baby doll.

There is a moment of quiet before Gilroy starts barking at the basement door. The dad frees him and knuckle-rubs the dog leaping on him and licking his face. I hear "boy" now, like "good boy" and "that-a-boy." Happy boy words. Man and his dog, wrestling, scratching, rubbing, patting, a playful newspaper swat. Beside him, this tableau: the mom with a plate of meat, one raw burger sliding toward the edge, Maeve dripping pool water, her tiara askew, the sinking striped tights and naked baby doll, and Declan, with his black cape drawn over his face and around his shoulders, his legs eaten by the tall dandelions.

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“To protect and to serve” may be the motto of police departments, but it works just as well for young mothers, although “to serve” often comes first, in bold and italics, with “to protect” trailing off in a smaller font, to the uncertainty of ellipsis dots. As if serving, by itself, somehow erects a force field around children. It doesn’t. And serving wears you down. Pinholes in the force field expand to the size of black holes, and swallow everything.

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I served my daughter Madeline too long, far beyond the tiara stage. Picking up wadded tissues from the floor, collecting sticky spoons from desk drawers. I was stripping her bed when I found the knife. At 14, Madeline was old enough to wash her own sheets. She certainly knew how to change the settings for colors and whites, and she knew where the detergent and dryer sheets were kept. Laundry isn’t rocket science. But the smell from her room was beginning to waft into the hallway. An animal smell. The smell of someone who didn’t bathe. So I pushed the window open to let in some air, rolled up my sleeves, and worked my way through the jeans, T-shirts, panties, socks, and bras on the bed toward the bedding below.

The outer clothes were familiar. I had driven her to the Hot Topic store at the mall and made myself as inconspicuous as possible while she looked through the leather jackets with rivets and zippers, and flirted with the pierced and mohawked sales clerks.

Her tiara had been exchanged for skull earrings and fishnet stockings. I’d been a teenager. I remembered. So I stood near the entrance, ready to produce my credit card if she found something she had to have right at that moment or she would die. Hate or love, nothing in between. A drama queen. After a year of escalating intensity, I wilted in counterbalance, becoming beige with weariness. The purchase was worth the few moments of love.

The panties and bras on the bed, however, weren't so familiar. They weren't the Fruit of the Loom flowered bikinis or Maidenform teen bras I had bought for her at Caldor. They looked Fredericks-of-Hollywood. Several notches below Victoria's Secret. I remember picking up a lavender panty by its lacy waistband, seeing streaks of blood in the crotch, and thinking that they should be soaked in Woolite and cold water right away, before the stain set. How many times had I told Madeline that? And the bras—they were skimpy, lace, black, and wired. Where had they come from?

The knife was in the pillowcase, under the pillow. When I lifted the pillowcase by its corners to shake the pillow out, the knife fell onto the sheet. It was a steak knife, one of a set of eight, and it had been missing for some time. I was happy about having a complete set of steak knives again; I hated—still hate—incomplete sets of flatware, glasses, towels, anything. But I felt off kilter about finding the missing knife in Madeline's pillowcase, and then even more off kilter about that first response to having a complete of steak knives again. That satisfaction. I thought, I have counterbalanced myself to an unfathomable equilibrium. It's a wonder I'm still standing.

I sat down among the clothes with animal smells and menstrual stains and considered the knife. I ran my fingers over it to feel for any texture, sniffed it for any scent. It was clean. Would she actually use it? Was it only for show? She was so full of sound and fury signifying damned little beyond hormonal changes. Would she cut someone? I imagined how my own hand would feel as a blade pierced skin and entered flesh, encountering bone, the meaty parts inside the body with their varying resistance. I couldn't. My imagination stopped at the surface.

Was Madeline afraid? Had the loss of her father, and then her stepfather, made her that way? I didn't even count those as losses, more a shrugging off of unbearable weights, as I would someday shrug off the weight of Madeline's teenage self and regain my sense of balance.

I wondered if I should feel afraid of Madeline myself. I placed the knife on the dresser, alongside her Goth necklaces and school supplies, so that she could tell I had done this, so that she would know I was aware and giving her "her own space," as the magazines said we should do. Then I pulled out the four corners of the fitted sheet, bundled up the bedding and the bloodied underwear. I carried it to the basement doorway, where I kicked at it as hard I as I could, sending all of it, unraveling, down the stairs and into the dark. Later, I soaked what needed soaking. I bleached, I washed, I served.

I think now about what I didn't think then. Not about my own equilibrium, not about what it's like to want a leather jacket so much you could die, but what it is to be young and in a room full of blood and bras and knives.

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On Saturday, I am potting begonias on my side of the fence; Declan's mom is yanking out ivy on her side while Declan and Maeve leap around the yard in capes, waving enormous bubble wands, with Gilroy chasing them. The bubbles blow for several feet behind them, like Chinese paper dragons, until they finally pop, drenching them all with bubble soap. When they are slick all over, they yell "To infinity and beyond" and splash down in the kiddie pool. They dare each other to put their faces underwater and hold their breath for a hundred minutes. I stop my potting and count. They must be so slippery. There are so many things in the pool, things that are metal and wood, and children don't think. When Declan puts his head underwater and Maeve sits on his back, holding him down like she holds down her naked baby doll, I panic.

Throwing aside my trowel and a begonia trailing naked roots, I run to the fence. “Hello. Hello there. I don’t think that’s safe. You’d better not sit on your brother.” I call in the mom’s direction. “Excuse me, but that’s not safe.” The mom spins around, and I step up on the lower fence rail and haul my body over. No Wonder Woman move, but I get to the pool the same time as the mom. She takes each of them by the upper arm and stands them up.

“I held my breath for 99 minutes. I could have made it to 100!” Declan says this with his chest puffed out and hands on his hips, and then drops back down under water.

“Do not, repeat, do not, sit on your brother in the pool. Understand?” The mom squeezes Maeve’s arm. She says, “Ouch, OK,” then sits down and pushes her baby doll under water, releases it, and laughs as the doll springs up and falls back into the pool with a splash.

I hope I didn’t over-react, cause anyone to be punished. I think of the dad with his barking voice, Declan hooked under his arm, and Maeve with her tiara askew. “I didn’t mean to scare you. But you know kids.”

She isn’t paying any attention to me. Instead, she looks off into space, then shields her face from the July sun with her forearm. “I know. They make me crazy. All of it makes me crazy.” She lowers her arm and looks at me. “I’m sorry. What I should say is, thank you.”

Off in the grass, near the mound of ivy, the baby is lifting a fat hand to his mouth. He could be feeding himself pebbles or ants, sticks or ladybugs, I don’t know. Nothing good for him. Gilroy lies nearby, twitching in dog dreams. Not a guard dog with good radar. I walk over to the baby and scoop him up in my arms. “Hey there.” He’s a heavy little guy. A blade of grass protrudes from his lips and I pinch it and flick it away.

“Three.” The mom looks at me and shrugs, palms up. “I don’t know what I was thinking.” She’s smiling, but she looks like she could cry, too.

“Maureen.” I shift the baby to my hip and extend a hand. “We’ve never been properly introduced.”

“Jennifer.”

“Not a good Irish name like the kids?”

“No. A plain old American name for me.” She nods toward the driveway gate. “But their dad is Dillon.” In an Irish accent, a tired one, she says, “Now there’s a good Irish name.” Then, like the local girl she is, “But I’m only Irish by marriage. I go along with it.” She reaches toward the baby, but I’m reluctant to return him. He’s a solid little fellow, heavier than he looks, but I love the smell of him. Peaches and grass. And something sweeter I remember from a past that’s faded away to barely there.

Something in Jennifer’s tired voice, that “going along with it,” reminds me of Madeline in that brief space when she was fatherless for a second time, before she began to swing back and forth from love to hate, from love to hate. A metronome beating down my days. My breath held for a million minutes, until she could tick herself back to the middle. I want to pick up after plain old American Jennifer, to let her know that I understand, to give her balance, to let her know she’ll get through it. When she takes the baby from me, I look at the tender inside of her arm.

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Not too many female superheroes come to mind. After Wonder Woman, I have to think hard. They’re all voluptuous, cartoons. Honestly, I don’t remember them doing much at all, besides bursting the seams of their costumes with their breasts. It’s sad. Given a couple of superpowers, I think I could have been better.

Madeline was not afraid of anyone, I thought, not anymore. The men who could hurt us, who could haul us up by our arms, who could break our tiaras and paper dragons, were long

gone—I had seen to that. Superpowers were not required; one overpaid attorney and a couple of underpaid police officers were. And I had no need to fear for my own safety. She would not use the knife on anyone else. She wasn't a child to hurt others.

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With an armload of laundry, I elbow-knocked on Madeline's door before pushing it with my shoulder. It was shut tight.

"Madeline. Open the door, please. My arms are full, of your laundry, by the way." I leaned against the wall outside her room and sank my face into the mound of clean clothes and bedding. All the stains had been bleached and scrubbed away. Everything smelled of softener, Arm & Hammer flowers. "I'll help you make your bed up. With two of us—faster than a speeding locomotive." I elbow-knocked again, harder. "Now, please."

There were sounds on the other side of the door. Something metal or wood hitting the floor, her closet door latching closed, drawers slammed shut, paper crinkling.

"Madeline, you are obviously in there. Open the door please. My arms are full."

"Just leave it. I'll get it later." There were sounds of things dropping and closing all around her words.

"No, I do not want to just leave it."

"I don't need your help." This, screeched out, as if saying, help me, please.

I put the laundry basket down and turned the door handle. Locked.

"Unlock the door, Madeline. Unlock it, or I'll get the awl from the basement." I had learned long ago how to unlock doors that children lock by accident or otherwise.

After a minute more of clothes rustling on the other side of the door, she opened it. She leaned down, grabbed the basket, and swung it inside her room, toppling the neatly folded clothes and sheets onto the floor.

“I’m not trying to intrude on your privacy. I just want to help.” I pulled the fitted sheet out of the mound and snapped it open over the bed. “We can make this in two shakes.”

It was July then, like now. Hot and humid. But Madeline wore a long-sleeved shirt over a sheer camisole, with a black bra showing through. At first, all I noticed was the black bra, how it made Madeline look cheap.

“I think a white bra would be more appropriate with that top, or a heavier-weight tank top. Unless you’re going to button that shirt. But it’s too hot for that, isn’t it?”

She took her two sheet corners and lifted them over her side of the bed, then yanked the sheet out of my hands. She was shaky and pale.

“OK, sweetie, let’s try this again.” I reached across the bed toward my corners, and that’s when I noticed the blood seeping through the cotton shirt sleeves.

The steak knife.

“Madeline, what happened? What did you do?”

Where was it? My knife that was part of a set. The knife I shouldn’t have left behind.

“Take the shirt off so I can see.”

“No.” She grasped the cuffs in her fists and held them so that both sleeves were stretched away from her skin. “Let’s make the bed.” She shrugged. “It’s just a little cut.”

“So let me see.”

“No.”

I took her wrist and pulled the shirt off one shoulder, but she shoved me away. I tried to hold her close to me, to calm her, but she struggled. She clawed my arms, gouged the skin so that blood beaded up in the lines. I shoved back, still tearing at her shirt, until it ripped. We didn't fight well; we fought like girls—scratching, squeezing, pulling hair. Squealing like little girls. Pinching. But I was heavier. I pushed her onto the stripped bed and sat astride her, shifting my heavier weight up her thighs to her chest, letting her choke for breath. Still, she fought me. No more counterbalance. No more tipping love to hate, hate to love. I pinned one of her hands under me and rolled the bloody sleeve down. A hundred little nicks in various stages of healing. Some new. Tally marks the length of her forearm. "Oh, my baby." I slid down so that she could breathe and hugged her in my arms until she went slack. I twined my fingers with hers, blood to blood.

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She had wanted the castle, the singing birds, the royal parents, all her wishes granted. She should have known the kings in Grimm either die or sleep. Or give everyone riddles. And the queens try to stay beautiful from the ending of one tale into the beginning of the next. They never see the poison in the apple's heart. I tried again and again to make us Nickelodeon lives, however, and still got Grimm. She couldn't forgive me. Twelve years later and several states between us, we talk from safe distances. We're both still marked.

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Declan yanks on my blouse. "Are you a grandma?"

"Not yet, but someday I hope to be."

Jennifer looks embarrassed by the question. "Declan, remember what Mommy said about personal questions. That's a personal question."

"Oh, I don't mind." I yank Declan's cape. "Are you a superhero?"

He grins, yells “Yes!” and flies off into the yard. Maeve chases after him, holding on to her tiara.

“They’re great kids. I love watching them play. I miss that.” Jennifer looks so tired, and she is still in her Gerber pea clothes. I touch her arm. “If you need to take care of anything inside, I can keep an eye on these two.” She shifts the baby on her hip, looking both hopeful and doubtful. “Really. It’s not a problem. I’ll keep the forces of evil at bay.”

“Thanks. If you insist.” She grins, like Declan, and reaches up into the hanging petunia for the padlock key to open the driveway gate. Her arms are tan and unscarred. I want them to always be that way. She unlocks and unlatches the driveway gate.

“Will your husband be home soon?”

“Yes, and I like to look nice. He works hard. He likes his little steak, the kids cleaned up. Not much.”

“I understand,” I say. But I don’t. My exes, they weren’t so simple.

Jennifer goes through her sliding door into her house, leaving me with Declan and Maeve. To be on the safe side, I drag the pool away from the driveway and onto the grass. This isn’t an easy job, since there are several inches of water in the pool, as well as an assortment of metal and wood objects—spoons, sieves, blocks, mallets—but once I manage to heave the pool off the cement, it slides.

They are safe from daddy’s take-home car, and from daddy. Declan wears his glasses and black cape, but today he’s not wearing his sister’s striped tights. He is obviously a superhero; he is wearing superhero underpants. He waves his plastic, telescoping saber and makes loud whooshing noises. He leaps from the highest porch steps into tall dandelions with Bob the

Builder boots. He doesn't battle the forces of evil like a girl. Neither does Maeve. She still wears a tiara, but she carries a Super Soaker that's almost as big as she is. I am protected.

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Dillon isn't the first one through the driveway gate. Instead, a large dog lopez in. Declan sees him first. He points with his saber and tells me, "Look, a 101 Dalmations dog." It's true. The dog looks just like the dogs in the Disney movie, tongue and tail wagging, leaping up in the air, with a cartoon animation smile on its face. First, it leaps on me. It's a heavy dog, bigger than Dalmatians appear in the movie, and its paws shove me off balance. I raise my forearms up to cover my face and say, "Down, down," but the dog doesn't obey. Gilroy barks from the screen door, but it isn't open wide enough to let him out. This only excites the Dalmatian.

Already, my wrists are throbbing. The Dalmatian has drawn blood. I watch the dog barking at Gilroy through the screen door, and suck at my hurt skin, my heart all out of whack. When I think to look at the children, Maeve has her arms around Declan, and his cape has come untied and slipped over one shoulder. His eyes are wide, and he is sucking his thumb.

I run to them, but I don't know where to take them, what to do with them. The Dalmatian is blocking the entrance to the kitchen. If I move quickly toward the open gate, he may follow. So I go nowhere. I gather Declan and Maeve to me, and we huddle, heads bowed, none of us able to look at the Dalmatian. I tell them, "Stay still and quiet as a mouse. Maybe the noisy dog will go away if we ignore him."

We huddle while the two dogs bark on and on, punctuated by the Dalmatian's nails tapping across the deck floor and Gilroy's nails tearing at the screen door. We grasp each other's clothing and cape as if we could wish an invisible shield around us. After a few minutes, the barking stops, and I remember to breathe.

That is, until the Dalmatian bounds from Gilroy to the three of us. It begins to jump, throws his weight against us, his jaw at my jaw. I scoop both children up off the ground, holding their faces close to mine, but I don't know where their legs are, I can't feel them. I can't feel their arms, where their hands are, if they hold some part of me, or if they hold their arms high in the air, above the dog's nails and jaw and teeth. I don't know, I only feel their weight in my arms, heavier each time the dog pounds us. They whimper. I listen for cries that mean a bite, all the shades of injury, of fear. I whimper, say "shh," hoist them higher, feel for their arms and legs, wish them close. I hold my breath, wish us invisible.

Then doors open. First, the kitchen screen door, freeing Gilroy, who rams the Dalmatian while his paws are scrambling at my back and shoulders, pulling my hair. All of us so tightly bound, we almost topple together, but no, we tick back to the center. Then the door of the take-home car slams, and other hands pull at the children in my arms, but I am unable to let them go. I must be choking the life out of them, but I don't know where the dogs, the children, and all the parts of me begin and end. I hear "shh" coming from someone else, and hands pry my fingers from the children and pull them out of my arms. I tremble, tremble, fall, bereft of all this weight.

