

The Other Fathers

fiction by Karen Rile

Eight months and three weeks after she met the tree surgeon, Corinne's water broke. She was with her family at Fiesta House in the booth next to the Sky Shadow machine, and her husband, Dick, already had a serious expression on his face. He'd ordered a Meat-Lover's Special with extra sausage, and the waitress had just appeared with their drinks. Corinne was wedged into the booth sideways nibbling from the supply of rice crackers she carried with her everywhere when she felt the sudden rush of warmth in her underpants. She gasped, causing a piece of cracker to fly from her lips and wobble like a seabird on the foamy head of her husband's beer.

They were leaving, now. Corrine announced it so forcibly that she startled herself. Her three boys looked up from the video machine. The steaming, untouched pizza was whisked back to the kitchen to be boxed.

Dick Berman didn't know it, but all of his sons were the spiritual offspring of other men. The oldest, Christian, bore the imprint of the rector at St. John's Episcopal Church in Indian Valley, where Corinne and Dick had lived in a butter-brick apartment complex while they recuperated from the bankruptcy of their running shoe boutique, Achilles' Heel. That was back in the eighties when everybody else was high on cocaine and Reaganomics (except, of course, the other residents of Sunken Gardens, who were mostly elderly widows and single mothers). The Bermans' little enterprise was demolished by the rise of the discount

shoe catalogs. Dick enrolled in law school that September and Corinne took a job as the secretary of the corner church. There she was given a desk beneath a framed museum poster of Jesus' head bleeding from its crown of thorns.

Corinne was not Episcopalian, which made things easier for her during her transition from entrepreneur to five-fifty-an-hour office clerk. She was not really anything, religiously speaking, having grown up in a vaguely agnostic household, but the rector, a man with grown children and gentle, dove-colored eyes, kept leaving pamphlets (Twelve Most-Asked Questions about the Episcopal Church, Becoming an Anglican/Coming Into God) discreetly on her desk. Corinne squirreled them away in her purse to pore over in the privacy of her pink-and-black tiled bathroom.

Dick stayed out late most nights studying in the law library, so Corinne typed Rector Pringle's correspondence, long past any reasonable dinner hour, in the chilly parish office beneath the crown-of-thorns poster. The face of Jesus began to seem familiar, comforting even. Corinne transcribed the rector's sermons, consolidating scribbled notes with rambling dictations, carefully correcting for grammar and style. He extolled her typing skills to his parishioners, and (although he never acknowledged her editorial hand) she blushed with pleasure whenever she overheard them praising his recently acquired eloquence.

By summer, the rector was always on her mind: his gently sloping scalp, his dove's-breast eyes, his voice as soft as felt. He had a peculiar, antiquated way of speaking. "It's close in here," he would say when the temperature climbed inside the tiny office, ventilated by a sluggish, dust-choked window fan. Corinne didn't mind

the heat; she was comforted knowing that the Rector felt “close.”

With Rector Pringle, Corinne could reinvent her life. She spent hours conjuring scenes in which they shyly, hesitantly touched lips. She ran her fingers delicately through his sparse silver hair. They declared their mutual affection. Problematic, in these fantasies, was the real Mrs. Pringle, who was usually disposed of with a quick-blooming tumor. Dick could be hit by a swerving school bus, or, depending on Corinne’s mood, escape to Bimini with his tax law professor. Corinne, although herself distraught, would be a comfort to the rector in his bereavement, the joy of his declining years. Together they would sip sherry, counsel newlyweds and mourners, plant an herb garden, organize jumble sales, play chess by the crackling fireplace with a basset hound to warm their feet.

By summer’s end she was pregnant. Dick cleared out the spare bedroom, carting away the boxes of outdated running shoes to a corrugated steel storage facility outside town. Rector Pringle made some phone calls to drum up a secondhand crib and changing table, which the real Mrs. Pringle, a cheerfully androgynous woman of sixty-five, disinfected with a toothbrush dipped in undiluted Clorox. The real Mrs. Pringle, whose name was Beryl, nursed Corinne through several months of nausea, followed by endless dead-of-winter watermelon cravings, then an entire trimester of unmitigated heartburn. It became difficult for Corinne to murder this kind woman in her daydreams.

Then, sometime between the watermelon and the heartburn, Corinne stopped loving the rector. She realized this one morning as she lay hugely across the bed waiting for Dick to finish in the bathroom. Dick took forever blow drying his hair and she generally used this time to rehash her fantasies. Lately, her favorite daydream was entitled Thin

Again. She’d begun to long for the old days when she’d owned three pairs of running shoes and an ever-changing selection of the latest Lycra jogwear, which she modeled for the customers around the shop.

She saw at last that the rector was a shabby old man with grungy sweaters. He spilled tea on himself in the same spot, day after day, and he had no muscle definition in his legs. She sat up in bed, too suddenly. The floor, littered with Dick’s running shoes and shorts, rose to greet her. Above the whirl of the blow dryer Dick was singing to himself in the mirror. He glanced down at her and smiled quizzically. The cleft in his chin deepened. At once it all made sense again. She’d hitched her wagon to the right guy after all.

Christian turned out to be a flat-cheeked, slender child with manila-colored hair. He looked exactly like his father except for his eyes, which were a curious shade of gray. Corinne and Dick traced their respective family trees for three generations and could find no flannel-colored eyes. Perhaps, suggested Dick, Christian’s eyes were actually blue.

On the eve of Christian’s half-birthday, Rector Pringle christened him, along with eleven other squalling infants, in the St. John’s baptistery. Corinne stood beside her husband in the pew with the other parents, unable to fathom the closeness she’d felt to the rector a year before.

Three months later the Bermans moved to Mojave Hills, to a spanking new townhouse with plastic moldings. Dick made Law Review and after graduation was offered an associate position at Brittleberg, Plotnick, McClannahan and Overcash. They were back on track again.

Except not really. At Achilles’ Heel, Dick and Corinne had been partners, side by side twelve hours a day. Now he went off each morning in a six-hundred-dollar

suit while she sat around the house in workout tights stuffing Cheerios into the baby. It wouldn't have been so terrible, if only she could have exercised. She tried popping aerobics tapes into the VCR or strapping Christian into the gigantic three-wheeled jogging stroller that Dick gave her on Mothers' Day, but ever since she'd gained weight with the pregnancy, her knees had been killing her. By the time Christian was six months old, Corinne could barely walk across the kitchen, let alone keep up with Jane Fonda's high-impact leaps. Would the insurance pay to fix Corinne's knees? Of course it would. The orthopedist bobbed his head. He handed her a scribbled slip of paper and instructions to report to the Physical Therapy Center at Mojave General Hospital. Yes, her therapist would be a fellow runner, she was assured by the appointments secretary. Naturally, Corinne was expecting a woman after studying the nameplate in the reception area—Jan Blockenmeister—but instead she was led into the office of a muscular, flaxen-haired man. This was the man who would touch her in ways that no other man had even approached. He kneaded her muscles in his firm fingers, exclaiming at her strength, at the boniness of her prominences. "It's nice to work on an athlete for a change," he confided. "Mostly, I see whiplash and strokes." His accent, unlike his name, was pure Minnesotan. Yahn.

At month's end her doctor shrugged. The knee continued to throb, and now her hips ached, too. "We won't consider you a physical therapy failure without a trial of at least six months," Jan said. He wrote the new prescription with a flourish. Corinne continued to visit him every morning at ten. He strapped her into machines. He stroked her with ultrasound, stimulated her with electricity, wrapped her in heat, numbed her with ice. Jan was a compact man. He wore Nikes and a warm-up suit to work.

("Probably queer," whispered Dick after they were introduced the day Corinne's car was in the shop.) But Corinne thought not. Jan had a way with his hands, a distinctly heterosexual touch. And he had a way with children—little Christian adored him. He sat through every session strapped into his jogger, an angelic smile spread across his face. With their Teutonic looks and placid temperaments, Christian and Jan might have been father and son, as the other therapists and patients sometimes pointed out.

Another month passed. Corinne's knees had not improved and her hips were growing worse. The orthopedist shook his head and wrote a third prescription, but Corinne was secretly glad. Pain brought her close to Jan; it legitimized their relationship. When she received the dozen thin blue envelopes from Blue Cross, forwarded in a bundle from their Sunken Gardens address, she was devastated: "Code 51-N. Policy does not include coverage for outpatient physical therapy." Corinne went to see Jan one last time. What was another hundred or so dollars added to the thousands that they now owed the hospital? He seemed genuinely sorry to see her go. "It isn't very often that they send me a real runner," said Jan, fingering the fringe on Christian's blanket. The child beamed at him. "Take care of yourself, sport," he said, avoiding Corinne's eyes.

Her second son, Jimmy, was born eight-and-a-half months after Jan jogged down the corridor one final time. Jimmy was a squat baby with tufts of colorless hair. He was always hungry, feeding every half hour for half an hour at a stretch. While he nursed he pinched and kneaded the skin on the back of her arms, her breasts, her face—wherever she was most tender. For the first six months Corinne held Jimmy constantly; he hollered if she set him down. Pregnancy and its complement of hormones seemed

to have cured her bursitis. But with Jimmy always attached to her she had no time to keep up with household chores, let alone exercise. She felt suffocated, and she worried that she was neglecting Christian, a quiet child content to spend hours sorting through his bins of plastic cars and airplanes.

Meanwhile, Dick's salary as an associate at Brittleberg, Plotnick barely covered payments on the townhouse and their cars; his student loan was coming due; and they had begun to get dunning phone calls from the hospital's collection agency. They needed more income, and fast, but how was Corinne to go back to work with Jimmy, her little albatross, clamped onto her nipple? And how were they to pay for childcare?

The obvious solution was for Corinne to find a job at a day care center, never mind that she was not very fond of other people's babies. She had been her own parents' last-born, and when she was a teenager she had never hired herself out as a babysitter, preferring instead to bus tables in a greasy pizzeria for pocket money. She'd had no interest at all in babies until about two months before Christian was born, when she began to do some preparatory reading. A good researcher (she had majored in history), she sped through Dr. Spock, Penelope Leach, Bruno Bettelheim, so that she soon became a walking recitation of infant developmental milestones and contradictory theories about breastfeeding, sleep schedules, and potty training.

And so, while her affection for babies didn't extend beyond Christian and Jimmy, and while her education was in a subject that seemed almost antithetical to the Early Childhood Development degree mentioned in the ad, Corinne decided to call Rector Pringle to ask about the position at St. John's Nursery.

Of course he remembered her. She was the best office administrator he'd found in

his fifteen years at St. John's. His first impulse was to offer Corinne her old job back, even if it meant paying unemployment on his current secretary, who didn't know a comma from a semi-colon and couldn't keep his counseling appointments straight. But Corinne seemed to have her heart set on working in the nursery so she could be near her own boys. Rector Pringle understood; he was a father himself. He and Beryl put in a good word for her and the day care director, who remembered Corinne from her pre-Christian days, and offered her the job. It paid five seventy-five an hour.

If Corinne did not exactly hate working as an assistant in the day care center, that is because "hate" is too strong a word for what one believes to be a transient state of being. She gritted her teeth and endured. She spent her days wiping up apple juice, wiping and powdering bottoms, wiping noses, and by five-thirty she was wiped out. But unfortunately, five-thirty in the afternoon was only the middle of Corinne's day. When the last parent had bundled the last child into the last minivan, Corinne and the director vacuumed, straightened, wiped a bit more, dragged out huge trash bags stuffed with diapers, then locked the building and walked together to the bus stop. (A few months after the physical therapy bills rolled in, Dick and Corinne had sold the second car.) The director, Alice, was now Corinne's best and only friend. Alice carried Christian, who was two but light for his age, and Corinne carried Jimmy, who never let anyone but his mother hold him unless she was out of sight, and then only grudgingly.

Unlike Corinne, Alice adored other people's children (she had two of her own who were monstrously large and sophisticated beings in junior high .) Alice had never wanted to do anything except work in a day care center, and in order to do so had sacrificed a lifetime of material wealth and comfort. She rode the bus only

as far as Squaw Plains, a drab post-war neighborhood at the foot of the Mojave development.

As the bus rolled away, Corinne and Christian waved out the window. Alice always waved back before starting the six-block hike to the brick bungalow where she lived with her family. Alice's husband was an electrician, and sometimes he would be waiting for her at the bus stop in his maroon truck, the vehicle Christian adored most in the world. It was only later that Corinne realized that there were no car seats on the bus, either. Daily she risked her children's safety in a way that would be unthinkable to the upper middle class parents at St. John's Nursery.

The bus stopped only a few doors from the Mojave townhouse, a lucky coincidence, since it was nearly impossible for one woman to drag two tired, hungry babies even a few steps this time of day. Corinne and her children were the only ones who got off the bus—no one else who lived in Mojave Hills used public transportation; that was for the housekeepers, who commuted in the opposite direction.

When she first began to take the bus home, Corinne sometimes felt like the hired help of her own life. Her mother had been a housewife; she hadn't even wanted a job besides a little volunteer work and had never had nor wished for a housekeeper. The suburban ranch house Corinne grew up in had always been clean and bright with seemingly little effort on the part of her mother, who washed the floors, sewed the curtains, and baked the brownies while the children were at school.

Corinne's townhouse was a jumble of cookie crumbs, juice stains, newspapers, and toys. Its sour smell hit you as you walked through the door; it said, this place is out of control. All day long, as she changed diapers and cleaned up spills, Corinne longed to go home, but the

moment she got there she wished she could be anywhere else in the world.

The children, of course, needed immediate attention. They were exhausted and starving, and their diapers were wet. But how was she to fix their dinner (let alone clean up the breakfast dishes, take out the recycling, pick up some of the toys underfoot, and do a load of laundry) when they wouldn't give her a moment's peace? Particularly Jimmy, who clung to her like Velcro.

Often as not, Corinne plunked Christian in front of a video while she breastfed Jimmy. Often as not, she and Christian ate Cheerios and yogurt for dinner. She rarely cooked anymore. What was the use? Dick worked later and later and usually ordered take-out from his office. He brought the leftovers home to her in cardboard boxes, which she opened carefully, almost reverently, in the incandescent midnight kitchen. She warmed the food in the microwave—morsels of Thai, Italian, Chinese—then sat with her plate beside Dick as he read the day's newspapers at the kitchen table, nursing a beer. She always offered Dick a share of the leftovers he'd brought her, and often as not he accepted, sometimes finishing off the whole plate. He needed his strength; his days were long and tomorrow was only six hours away.

Halfway through her second year at St. John's Nursery, Corinne fell in love again. This time it was no aging minister, nor corn-fed jock. Peter Erasmus was an artist, a professional folk singer whose picture Corinne had seen in the newspaper and on a flyer on the bulletin board in St. John's parish house. He was slim as a teenager, and tall, with silver-framed glasses atop his bony nose. His head was so large that, from a distance, it looked disproportionate to his body. Up close, his most prominent feature was his wooly black hair, which sprang up from

his scalp, as if in excitement. His daughter, Chloe, was in Corinne's group of two-year-olds. She was a precocious little girl who talked circles around Christian, could draw representational figures, and recognized half the letters of the alphabet. Unlike the other kids in the group, she was completely potty-trained. According to Peter, she was already studying violin. Perhaps it was Chloe, with her rosebud lips and dark curls, whom Corinne was in love with first.

She began to look forward to the end of the day when Peter would come to gather up his daughter along with whatever information he could glean about Chloe's day. Corinne kept a log of bowel movements and ingestion—that was a state requirement—but soon she began to include extra details for Peter. The cute phrase, the adorable gesture, the evidences of her brilliance. Of course Peter ate it up, and Corinne, worried that the other parents would become jealous when they overheard her gushing over Chloe, began to dole out pick-up time anecdotes about their offspring to every parent.

It was not long before Corinne was among the most popular of the staff at St. John's Nursery. When the head teacher of the two-year-old group decided to go to dental hygiene school, Alice promoted Corinne and found an assistant to fill Corinne's old job. Her salary shot up to eight dollars an hour.

The assistant's name was Roger; he was a redheaded college kid majoring in Early Childhood Development with clear skin and a sense of humor. He was an indefatigable diaper-changer and lightning quick with a string mop or a wad of paper towels. Roger had a physicality, a sense of his body in space, that first startled, then fascinated Corinne. He moved with grace and speed, and the children were always all over him, tumbling, rolling, laughing, and bouncing. At naptime they draped their

little bodies across his long legs until Corinne gently lifted them to their mats.

Corinne's group had never been so much fun, and the fun infected her. She was beginning to enjoy her job, and, not coincidentally, Jimmy was growing more relaxed and manageable. When they got home in the evening he would sit in front of the television beside Christian for as long as half an hour while Corinne tidied up. Sometimes she even fixed a hot dinner, pasta or macaroni and cheese.

One Friday night in March a senior partner at Dick's firm gave him a pair of tickets to the symphony and Roger came over to babysit. Dick drove to Roger's dorm to pick him up. When the two of them came through the door into the townhouse they were laughing and thumping each other on the back as if they were old friends. Corinne had not seen Dick act this animated in years, not since before the running shoe store went under.

It was ages since they had gone anywhere alone together, and during the car ride on the way to the symphony Corinne studied her husband's profile. The tilt of his nose, the sweep of his hair, the cleft of his chin. None of it seemed familiar. This man whom she slept beside every night, he was like a stranger. Or perhaps it was she who was strange, in her borrowed dress with her blown-dry hair and lipstick. She had borrowed a dress from Alice because her pre-Jimmy wardrobe was still too tight. The dress wasn't exactly her style (a knee-length floral print that tied in back) but at least it fit.

Dick let her off at the door of the symphony hall and drove away to find on-street parking. Corinne gave the usher her ticket and was personally escorted to one of the private boxes at the front of the hall. There she sat with her back very straight against the seat and watched the orchestra members wander onto stage, find their chairs, and begin tuning. The

hall was filled almost to capacity with well-dressed men and woman. Their eyeglasses winked at her and the huge chandelier overhead twinkled. When Dick appeared, seconds before the conductor walked out onto stage, he was rubbing his hands together with glee.

"I found free parking!" he whispered, then paused to take in the fabulous location of their box. "Hey, these are great seats." This was what partnership at Brittleberg, Plotnick brought. This, Corinne could live with.

The orchestra played Ravel. The music was so dense and sweet, it was almost cloying. Listening to it was like eating too many Godiva chocolates. Corinne glanced at Dick who was studying the program notes with a frown on his face. She tried to keep her eyes diligently on the orchestra; she had a sense her behavior was being monitored, which was probably correct, given the high visibility of box they were sitting in. Nonetheless, she could not help letting her eyes wander now and then to the faces of the audience. Men and women who were for the most part better off than they were, at least financially, at least for the time being. Were they happy? Were they at least satisfied? Were they in love?

Her thoughts drifted like clouds and slowly reconfigured in the image of Peter Erasmus. He had come to school a few weeks ago to perform for the children. He'd played a banjo, a dulcimer, and then a guitar, and he'd sung. His voice was not beautiful, but it was clear and tuneful, and before long all the children, even the babies, and all the teachers were clapping and singing along. This land is your land, this land is my land. ... When the concert was over he'd hoisted little Chloe onto his shoulders and followed Corinne's group back to their room. There he'd presented Corinne with an autographed copy of his CD. On the cover was a photograph of him standing on a beach in exactly the same pose—with Chloe on his shoulders.

"This is for you," he said. "I'm leaving Alice some copies for the classrooms, but I want you to have this yourself." On the box insert he'd written, To Corinne, our favorite teacher with love from Peter and Chloe. That night Corinne played the CD for the boys while they ate dinner. Christian tapped a rhythm with his spoon and Jimmy gummed his macaroni thoughtfully. She had played the CD every evening ever since—children thrive on repetition and Corinne was far from tired of Peter's plain, soulful voice. The energy from her love for him filled her, filled the kitchen, filled her whole house.

Now the same energy seemed to be filling the huge concert hall. The Ravel swirled around her and she reached over to touch her husband's arm. He squeezed her fingers once, firmly, and let go. His eyes were on the orchestra now, she noted with approval.

Two days later, Monday morning, Alice called her into the office.

"I wanted to tell you first," she said. "It isn't good news." Corinne stared anxiously, dreading whatever was to come. She suddenly remembered Alice's borrowed dress, which she had washed and pressed but had accidentally left hanging in the backseat of Dick's car when he dropped them off a few minutes ago on his way downtown.

"I forgot to bring the dress," she began, distractedly.

"It's Roger," interrupted Alice. "I had to let him go."

"But—!"

"I'll find you another assistant, and for the time being Beryl Pringle has volunteered to fill in. The ad will be in the papers by Wednesday."

"But why, Alice?"

Alice leaned forward and lowered her voice to a whisper. "We've had a complaint from a parent," she said. "An abuse complaint. It's a risk you invite when you hire male staff. I chose to take that risk, but that's beside the point.

Whatever happens, it's done. Roger will have to finish his practicum elsewhere, if he finishes at all."

"It must be a mistake. Roger's a very physical person, but he would never, never hurt a child."

"I'm as fond as you are of Roger, Corinne, but we have to take these complaints very seriously. The allegation is sexual abuse, and—"

"Oh, come on!"

Corinne and Alice looked at each other and for a moment neither spoke. You could never be sure. You could never really know the heart of another person.

"You have to tell me," Corinne said finally. "Who is the parent who complained?" Alice bit her lip.

"Peter Erasmus," she said.

Corinne never saw Roger, or Peter Erasmus, or Chloe again. Peter transferred Chloe to a different day care center across town, and the suit was eventually dropped. Roger (Corinne learned from one of the other student teachers who, it turns out, had been dating him) graduated in May and moved back to his parents' house in Ohio. In May Corinne discovered that she was pregnant again. Beryl, who had missed Corinne's second pregnancy, was thrilled and decided to stay on in her job as Corinne's assistant. As a secondary mission, Beryl set about hunting down a compact crib and an extra car seat for the Bermans' too-small townhouse and too-small car. Dick was already working fifteen hours a day, and in any case, had a no-moonlighting clause in his contract, so he set about increasing their credit limit. Only four more years until his first shot at partner. And so, for the second time in their lives, the Bermans were leveraged to the teeth.

To everyone's surprise, not the least of all his mother's, the baby, Eric, was born

with a shock of straight, stick-up-in-the-air red hair.

"Reminds me of Roger," said Beryl. She had been fond of Roger and always tried to think the best of people, on principle. But, thought Corinne, this was not the way it was supposed to go. She had not been in love with Roger, so why should the baby bear his imprint? She'd loved Peter Erasmus.

No more, however. When a relative mailed her one of his CD's as a baby gift, she unwrapped it with a little shock. An ugly man, she realized. And such an ordinary little girl.

Baby Eric was no ordinary child, though. He was small for his age, which intensified the perception of his preciousness. At six months, the size of a two-month-old, he could sit upright in a shopping cart and strangers would stare in wonder. At eight months, the size of a four-month-old, he could walk. At thirteen months he spoke in complete sentences and knew the words to half a dozen Barney songs. With his red hair and elfin features (he, too, had a cleft in his chin) he looked like a leprechaun. Books were his passion. At two-and-a-half he was beginning to sound out words; by three he was reading more proficiently than Christian, who was by then in first grade at the city magnet school a few blocks from St. John's.

A few weeks before Eric's third birthday, one of the parents in Corinne's group handed her an announcement clipped from the local paper. They were holding auditions downtown for a TV sitcom pilot, and they were specifically looking to cast a redheaded little boy. As fate would have it, an even smaller, more precocious child, a four-year-old, landed the part, which was just as well because the sitcom never actually went into production. But a local director spotted Eric at the callbacks and gave Corinne his card. Within the month Eric was starring

in his first commercial, for a regional supermarket chain.

Eric's TV career took off. He did commercials for a bank, a department store, and a spot on one of the 11 o'clock news montages. Strangers recognized him on the street. Corinne hired him an agent and soon found herself taking off more and more time from work for Eric's auditions and shoots. At first she brought the other children along whenever she could, and even ordered headshots for Christian and Jimmy. But neither turned out to be photogenic; they hated the glaring spotlights and went stiff at the sight of a camera. And they were whiny and impatient, and distracting for Eric. So Corinne was relieved to leave them with a sitter. (Alice took them home with her on the bus after school and her older daughter watched the boys until Corinne picked them up in the minivan she'd bought with a down payment from Eric's first paychecks.)

Alice loved Corinne's sons and she loved Corinne—they had been working together for five years now—but she also needed a reliable head teacher for the two-year-old group. The strain of caring for ten incontinent children with a combined vocabulary of fewer than two hundred words was more than Beryl had bargained for. Not that Beryl complained, but Rector Pringle had approached Alice privately with his concerns. Alice reluctantly invited Corinne into her office.

They were friends, she said, and she wanted whatever was best for Corinne. But it seemed as if Corinne's interests were broadening, moving beyond the cozy little world of St. John's Nursery. The two-year-olds needed a teacher whose heart and head were in the classroom, Alice said. Corinne said, "I see." Jimmy stayed on at St. John's because he needed an extra year to be ready for public kindergarten. Meanwhile, Christian mastered the Easy Reader series and

moved on to second grade. Eric stayed home with Corinne, who was concentrating on his television and modeling career almost full-time.

The Mojave Hills townhouse was as cluttered and dirty as ever. Corinne did her best to ignore the chaos and concentrate on the tidy black binder where she kept track of Eric's appointments, auditions, and jobs. Each of his paychecks represented more than a week (and sometimes more than a month) of what she'd earned as a nursery school teacher. Add that to the almost guaranteed probability that Dick would make partner, and Corinne began to wonder about trading up to a larger house. That autumn, when they weren't otherwise busy, she and Eric spent their mornings cruising the suburbs, checking out the real estate market.

Custer Estates was a development so raw that its lawns were clay and gravel. Most of the houses were mere skeletons; a few but holes in the ground (of particular fascination to a four-year-old boy.) Lot #1-A had the only old-growth tree in three square miles: a majestic black locust tree. A good tree for climbing if you got a boost, said Eric, who was still quite small for his age and did not know that the tree bore thorns. It was November when the Bermans toured the property with a real estate agent, and the tree stretched its branches out against the white sky like elegant scaffolding.

#1-A sat at the top of a gentle rise. It was the most striking setting in the development, and the first house completed by the builder. There were bedrooms for each boy, a guest room, a master suite with a Palladian window. There was a room for exercise machines, a room for watching television, and a California kitchen with more square footage than the townhouse they'd been

living in for eight years.

"We're getting a lot of inquiries," warned the agent.

It would certainly be a stretch, at least for the near future, but when Dick saw the new house his eyes brightened. How could they pass up such an opportunity? This was the life they had been straining toward all along. As the kids darted from room to room, their voices bouncing off the living room's cathedral ceiling, Dick flushed with anticipation. For sure he'd be partner within six months. After Eric's next paycheck, another supermarket commercial, they would have enough to cover a down payment. They made an offer.

How odd, how lonely, to live in a half-built neighborhood, like being pioneers, except for the creature comforts. The boys loved watching the construction going on around them. Someday, Dick promised, they would build a treehouse in the black locust and sleep in it on balmy summer nights. But meanwhile the boys still slept piled together in one bed, in Christian's room. They were lonely for their old friends. Particularly Jimmy, whom they had to transfer from St. John's to a day care center closer to the new house.

In the meantime, when she wasn't managing Eric's career, Corinne was so focused on the new house that she barely missed life at St. John's. That spring she found a landscaper to install grass in the yard and groundcover on the slope that led to the driveway. Theirs was the only living lawn in the development, and it stood out like an emerald embedded in dirt. On warm evenings, after the boys were asleep, she would venture barefoot onto the carpet of grass, to feel its cool life against her toes. She had to be careful, though, not to step on any twigs or thorny locust runners. More than once she missed one lying in a shadow and a spike of pain burst her reverie. One night Dick came home even later than usual and found her standing beneath the locust

tree, peering through its branches at the moon. He ran to her, in slow motion it seemed, with his briefcase flying out to the side like a man in a shampoo commercial. She stepped lightly onto the tops of his polished shoes, and they waltzed to a silent, invisible orchestra.

Harvey Bengal, their landscaper, was a baby-faced man with a truck bed full of oversized, carnivorous-looking lawnmowers. Corinne enjoyed watching through the windows as the landscaping team tended her green oasis, cutting concentric circles around the stately locust. After Dick was promoted, she decided, she would plant dozens of trees, flowering trees. When she asked the landscaper advice about trees he handed her his brother's card: Lionel Bengal, Landscape Architect and Tree Surgeon. Corinne tucked the card into her black binder and went back to daydreaming. Underground sprinklers. Flowerbeds in front and a vegetable garden out back. A trellis for roses.

Lionel Bengal arrived at the house in a car with huge fenders and scandalous curves. When he pulled into the driveway, Christian, who had been watching out the window from the top of his bunk bed, came flying downstairs, flushed with excitement. The white car with gray panels and chrome detailing looked as if it had rolled out of a black-and-white movie. When Lionel stepped out from behind the wheel and paused to scrutinize the locust with his mournful, deep-set eyes, Corinne's heart skipped a beat.

"Robinia pseudoacacia," said Lionel before Corinne could introduce herself. "She's got locust borer, carpenter worm, powdery mildew." Lionel removed his cap, drew his wrist across his forehead, and sighed.

Corinne was startled. "What should we do?"

"Surgery. Cut out her rot and lave the wound with phenylurethane. Drill the soil and inject permethrin every two feet for a

radius for twenty yards. Spray for the mildew.”

“Will the chemicals damage my new grass?” asked Corinne, instantly regretting her words. Lionel gave her a pitying look—of course, she realized, in the scheme of things a stately old tree was worth more than a thousand acres of grass.

“I’ll have to climb up into her and take out the deadwood, lighten her up,” he said. “Looks like she hasn’t been pruned in years. One good gust, with her compromised stem, and she’ll end up in your dining room. Oh, these trees have very shallow roots.”

Corinne noticed Christian standing in the shadows with an anxious look on his face.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. The tree isn’t going to fall down.” She turned to Lionel.

“How soon can you start?”

Lionel came every day for five days; twice he stayed only a few minutes, just long enough to peer inside the tree’s great wound and run his palms along her furrowed bark. Other times he stayed for hours, climbing up into her branches and sawing away at the deadwood, which he lowered carefully to the ground, bundled and tied, then spirited away in the trunk of his peculiar car.

Lionel never made any effort to seek out Corinne when he was on her property; he simply came and went as if the tree were his. As he worked, she and the boys watched him from the window. When she brought him a tall, sweating glass of ice water on the last hot afternoon, after he had been pruning for hours, he did not thank Corinne, or even acknowledge her. But he accepted the water, sipping slowly in spite of what had to have been a great thirst.

Corinne’s heart was pounding. “I need to talk to you about trees,” she blurted. “More trees.”

Lionel nodded and his sad look intensified. “A lot of people plant trees when their lot is barren.”

Corinne glanced away, unable to absorb any more of his sadness. “We’re waiting for some good news about my husband’s job. Then we’ll be able to afford some real landscaping.”

“Well then,” he said, “you have my number.”

“I’ll call in a few weeks,” she promised, and went back inside the air-conditioned house where she could watch Lionel through her Palladian window, and dream.

Except. Except Dick didn’t make partner. Five years of relentless toil, time stolen from his family, and he wasn’t asked. In retrospect, he said, he should have seen it coming. He should have been prepared, should have made contingency plans. But hints and innuendoes, the writing on the wall, the words between the lines, always seem more obvious in retrospect, in the floodlight of disappointment.

With bad news, any timing seems terrible. That very same week Corinne realized she was pregnant again. She immediately thought of the tree surgeon, and her thoughts turned tepid. Why his imprint, why now? It was early July, insufferably hot, and the still-mostly-empty house with its high-ceilinged rooms was devouring electricity. That night Dick turned off the central air-conditioning and put the boys to bed beneath plastic electric fans. He stayed upstairs in Christian’s room for over an hour reading them stories. It was the first night in months that he had been home in time to put the boys to bed. But all of that was going to change now, he promised.

Christian blinked up at him and a shadow passed across his eyes. “It’s hot in here, Dad,” he said over the hum of the fan. Jimmy and Eric were asleep beside

him, a slippery tangle of limbs.

"I know, buddy." Sweat trickled down Dick's forehead, but he didn't wipe it away. The sight of his sweating face evoked a faint, uneasy chord in Corinne's brain. She remembered the crown-of-thorns poster that had stared down at her as she typed Rector Pringle's sermons the first time she was pregnant, and she felt a tug of aching, nonspecific love.

"It's close in here," she agreed. It was so very close, worse for being pregnant in this suffocating heat.

Dick resigned his position in the firm. How else could he keep his dignity? With some difficulty, he talked his way into an entry-level position as a public interest lawyer, a huge pay reduction. And yet now he could take federal holidays and a vacation, and could cut his workday down from fifteen hours to eleven. He could spend time with his children, maybe coach a Little League team. Once they were settled. Once they learned how to play baseball.

It would be tricky to resell so soon, warned the agent. The other houses in the development were almost finished. The market was flooded, she said, and she was right. As summer wore on, dozens of would-be buyers trod through the house peering into bathrooms, bedrooms, and closets, but no one made an offer. When she was not sprawled across her bed, limp with morning sickness, Corinne neatened the house for these strangers. Eric's job offers dwindled for lack of follow-up—in this business you had to be on your toes. Besides, Eric had begun to dig his heels in at the prospect of spending long hours under hot lights. The boys grew listless; their parents turned on the central air-conditioning only for the benefit of prospective buyers. Now they were spending most of their time gazing at videos. The heat raged. The lawn, unwatered, faded to the color of oatmeal.

Then one day in mid-August the weather turned a corner. Corinne was

upstairs on her bed. At her feet knelt Christian constructing a small freeway among the dips and rises of the quilt, and at her head lay Jimmy, his eyes glassy from six continuous hours of television. Eric was outside in the yard, reading one of his books under the tree. At least he had been the last time she checked, an hour ago. A ruffling breeze had snaked its way through the house, disturbing the closeness of the afternoon. Corrine stared out the window at the chartreuse shadows filtering through the locust tree. There was something odd about the angle of sun through the low clouds. The altered light flooded her retina, and an image flashed on her, too quick to capture and examine. An explosion, a groan of protest, and the Palladian window was filling up with green, brilliant green, like an advancing forest.

In a single freeze-frame little Eric's image passed across the window, and then he was gone, replaced by the curtain of green.

In less time than it would take her later to describe it to Dick, the brief windstorm was over. But it seemed the moment that followed, the moment of not knowing where Eric was, would be forever frozen in time. Corrine found herself at the back door without any understanding of how she got there. Struggling it open she discovered a jungle of thorny branches, impenetrable, and empty silence. She knew at once that there was no one—no living child—beneath this mess.

There was a dog barking in the distance.

She spooled the moment backward: tree limbs springing up from the earth to salute the eerie afternoon light. Then Eric, who had been in the bathroom when the tree fell, appeared at her side.

Something stirred beneath the leaves at their feet, and Corinne bent to scoop a tiny robin flung from its nest. Too late, she remembered that the bird's own

mother would reject it, now that she'd touched it. The robin was her responsibility now, to feed from an eyedropper until it was old enough to fly away from lawnmowers and prowling cats. Wordlessly she passed the creature to Christian, who ran off with Eric and Jimmy to find a shoebox and some towels.

The robin would be dead by morning—doesn't it always happen this way? Best laid schemes, and all that. Before the boys awoke next day Dick had tipped its tiny corpse into the outside trash, covering it over with the last week's financial pages, for good measure. At breakfast, he announced the creature had revived at dawn and flown back to its mother. The boys ran to the window—the devastated lawn was lush as a jungle, filled with still-green amputated limbs. There were birds everywhere, singing, the way birds do after a storm.

The next morning, the Bengal brothers arrived with chainsaws and a chipper to clear away the branch litter and fell the snapped trunk. As the boys watched safely from inside, the Bengals ground the stump to a pulp and seeded the scar. In a few years' time there would be no evidence a tree had existed in that spot, for the lawn would have healed itself and the persistent thorny runners would be suppressed by Harvey Bengal's fierce cadre of lawn machines.

The Bermans, too, would soon be gone, not a trace of them among the gleaming hardwood floors and refreshed white walls, not a Lego, not a fingerprint. A few weeks after they settled into their three-bedroom rental back in Indian Valley, their baby was born—a surprise on a couple of levels—because the ultrasound tech had told Corrine to expect another boy, and because their daughter burst into the world a week before her due date, in the front passenger seat of their Toyota minivan, during their frantic ride from Fiesta Pizza House to Mojave General Hospital. The birth itself was a cakewalk,

thanks to Corinne's well-practiced uterus and her excellent Lamaze breathing technique. And no thanks to Dick, who was weaving through traffic, yelling, and pounding on the horn, and thus missed the sight of his daughter's slick bald head emerging between Corinne's legs on the leather bucket seat.

They named the baby Catharine, after Dick's mother. Corinne meant her to be "Cat" for short, figuring a girl with three big brothers could benefit from a nickname with a little bite to it, but the boys called her Kitty from the start, and it stuck. Despite her tumultuous birth, Kitty was a round-eyed, placid child with an excellent appetite—everyone told Corinne she took exactly after Dick.

As for the McMansion in Custer Estates, it sold more quickly than predicted, to a younger, richer couple for two-thirds the asking price, leaving the Bermans a debt they would nurse for the rest of their lives. As calamitous as all this felt in the beginning, Dick and Corinne soon grew accustomed to the burden, just another mouth to feed, just another check to write at the end of every month.

The new owners of #A-1 (since renamed "One Applegate Terrace") hired Lionel Bengal to plant a few matching river birch saplings not far from where the majestic black locust tree had once stood. One day Corinne and Dick took a detour into the development to show the kids. The three boys in the back of the van barely looked up from their Nintendos. But their little sister gazed out the window, sucking thoughtfully on her thumb as her parents reminisced about the great storm that had nearly destroyed them. In the end, they nearly missed the house (so similar to its neighbors) and had to make a U-turn on what had come to be, with the passing of time, a busy road. ♦