

# The Book of Right and Wrong

This is the kind of town Fairport, CT, has become: Besides the landscapers and tree specialists, you can hire a team of guys just to come and pick up all the dog shit from your lawn. When Bobby Benoit grew up here, there was no such thing. Now there are three companies with brightly logoed pickup trucks roaming around town. (One is called Doggy Doods.) Bobby wonders if, given his prison record, he could even get hired to do this job.

It's after-school time on the preschool playground, the best and worst hour of Bobby's day. On this sunny April afternoon, he sits at the front of the picnic table by the pre-school building, reading the *Fairport Gazetteer*. His four-year-old son, Cyrus, runs around playing some kind of imaginary baseball game, swatting invisible balls from every angle. As usual, Bobby is the only dad on the playground.

The town paper is full of announcements about committees and zoning regulations, disagreements over moving the YMCA. Fairport wasn't always this businesslike. In Bobby's day, a high schooler could make extra money dealing pot to his football teammates, and later to the guys he worked with on building sites. Then people started moving up from the city, bringing along serious incomes. Bobby got caught the very first time he sold weed to someone who hadn't been born in Fairport. The guy, a hedge-fund manager, got off with an \$800 fine. Bobby, who was married and had a new baby, went away for four years. When he came home, it was to a town where the streets and addresses were still the same, but the houses had all changed.

Cyrus comes jogging up to the picnic table. He rests a hand on the corner while panting dramatically. His long bangs stick to his forehead. He's already much shorter than the other kids in his class, and the long hair somehow makes him look smaller.

"Whatcha doing?" says Bobby.

Cyrus glares at him, pissed at the interruption. Cyrus will occasionally speak to Bobby in public, and not at all at home. At home, the four-year-old speaks only to his grandmother. Father and son are still getting to know each other. "Killing zombies."

And here Bobby had thought baseball. Instead, his son has been swinging an invisible machete, beheading the children of Fairport. That'll do a lot for their image around here.

"Dude," says Bobby. "How about something where you play with the other kids? Like tag."

Cyrus looks at him, then runs off again, leaving Bobby to sit there feeling stupid. He will probably do this again -- risk the lash -- just as he keeps packing a peanut butter sandwich for Cyrus every day even though every lunchbox comes back bearing the same pleading note: Their classroom is next door to the nut-free classroom, says the teacher, and she doesn't want to take any chances. But one of the few things Bobby knows about his son is that Cyrus loves peanut butter. The sandwiches will continue.

There are three picnic tables on the sandy playground. Two are filled with moms, cramming in their adult conversation for the day; at the other table is a pair of

Serbian nannies and Bobby Benoit.

A woman walks up: Miranda Lees, a mother he's noticed since September but never spoken to. Looking past her, Bobby sees the women at her picnic table doing a poor job of not watching them. He wonders who dared Miranda to go talk to the big ex-con. "Mr. Benoit?" she says. She pronounces it in the proper French, like *Ben-wah*.

"It's Ben-oyt."

"Word has it you did some work on the school's wireless network."

"Little bit, yeah." What happened was this: The school director asked if Bobby knew anything about computer networks. Bobby said yes. What he didn't say was where he'd learned it.

"Do you think you could come by and look at our setup?" says Miranda. "It's not working, and Jason can't be bothered to look at it himself."

He feels bludgeoned by this tumble of words. What setup where? And who is Jason and why is he being such a dick? Bobby glances up at Miranda, grateful for his sunglasses as he takes in her long neck, her tanned shoulders, her toned arms. She is a person who wears workout gear nearly every day: Tight Lycra pants or shorts, thin tank tops. In his own sweatpants and t-shirt, Bobby feels, somehow, underdressed.

"What say you, good sir?" says Miranda. "Help a gal out! I'll pay in cash."

"I'm your guy," says Bobby.

At home, the afternoon routine begins. Bobby makes himself a sandwich at the counter while his mother complains about Fairport and Cyrus silently plays with action figures at the table.

"They passed that new zoning law," says Mrs. Benoit.

"Yeah?" Bobby saw this in the paper, but couldn't be bothered to read past the headline.

"Yeah. Now if you want a shed that's any bigger than an outhouse, you have to have X amount of space between your house and the shed. Oh, but get this: It also can't be right up against a fence or anywhere on the edge of the property line."

"Isn't that kind of where a shed goes?"

"That's what I say!"

"So we couldn't have a shed is what this means?"

"No, we could. I just hate when they change the rules for no apparent reason."

He says nothing. If they lived somewhere else, it might be cheaper; but Fairport has excellent schools and, in Bobby's mother, free childcare. And she might complain, but she'll never leave. And why would she? It's her house, mortgage fully paid off with her dead husband's life-insurance money. Bobby's end is paying for groceries and taxes and miscellaneous expenses: Pre-school tuition, for instance. For this, he does handyman work: Hanging drywall, laying tile, doing light plumbing for people too cheap to shell out for licensed, bonded legitimates. When he doesn't have handyman work, he mows lawns. It's never not a struggle.

Bobby looks at the clock. If he gets over to Miranda's before three, he might return in time to squeeze in a pair of lawn jobs down the street. "Cyrus," says Bobby. The

boy leans closer to his Batman and Joker figures, whispering dialogue: *No more will you commit these heinous...*

"Hey, Cyrus," Bobby says again.

Bobby's mother steps in. "Your father is speaking." Cyrus looks up at her.

"I gotta go, bud," says Bobby.

"Did you get Mamie's call?" says Mrs. Benoit. "The yard?"

"That's where I'm going, after this first job." He wonders what will happen to his lawn clientele when all his mother's friends die off. Or sell out: Half the neighborhood changed hands last year. With land scarce in Fairport, people have started buying up older houses and knocking them down to make room for newer, bigger ones. These people don't want some guy with a lawn mower. They want a crew, a truckload of Mexicans rushing in and tag-teaming the landscape, gone in an hour, leaving no trace of themselves.

Cyrus leans up and whispers something to his grandmother. Bobby heads for the door. Mrs. Benoit calls after him. "Can you pick up some popsicles for the man here?"

That tiny exchange -- the little whisper, its loud translation -- sums up how it is, this last year between Bobby and Cyrus. How it is to have a piece of you that won't acknowledge you. Bobby feels it swelling and twisting in his chest, like a fairytale beanstalk, or a snake. He turns and looks at his son, this little stranger whom he nonetheless loves so much more than his own skin. "Tell Mr. Cyrus I would pick up a goddamn cement truck if that's what he wanted. Tell him I'd pick up the ocean. Tell him all he has to do is ask."

Cyrus grimaces at his figures, looking quietly mortified. Mrs. Benoit smiles a mother's smile: Pain, worry, pity. "I think just popsicles will do."

They are a ship of ghosts, the Benoit family. Everyone moves among the others, slipping through doorways and up stairs with as little motion and wind as possible. When Bobby went away, Cyrus was two months old. Cyrus' mother, Sheila, has been dead since just before Bobby got out. Bobby had known she was bipolar -- that one's not exactly a silent disease -- but she'd always kept on her meds for the sake of their son. One day, she went to the library by the river and put Cyrus in front of the wooden train set in the children's room. Then she went out, swallowed her entire bottle of Depakote and threw herself to the icy water.

A bipolar suicide and a fuck-up dad: Some hand, thinks Bobby. As he drives across town to Miranda's house, he wonders what would happen if he were to suddenly jerk the wheel and take on one of the huge oaks that buffer the roadside. His mother's getting old: Would Cyrus get a whole new family? Would he have a chance, then, of starting clean? Bobby puts both hands full on the wheel and tightens his fingers around the hard plastic. Dead men make no money.

Miranda's house is on the edge of town, out toward Weston. Bobby once knew a guy on Miranda's street, but like his own neighborhood, so many of these houses have been flattened and remade vast. He pulls his Cavalier into Miranda's basketball-court-sized driveway and parks behind her black Volvo SUV-thing. Miranda's daughter, Erin, is playing on the slate walkway with another girl Bobby recognizes from the preschool.

"Hey, guys," says Bobby. The girls merely blink up at him.

Inside, Miranda's on the kitchen phone. She smiles at Bobby and waves a *one-minute!* finger. She's wearing black stretch pants and some kind of pink workout top, a different outfit from earlier. It seems possible that she works out more than once a day. The only hint to her age is her neck, which is slightly rosy in a way you don't see on women in their twenties or thirties. Bobby's neck is more like a block of ham. He's not fat, exactly -- he has the well-padded muscle of a one-time high-school football player -- but Miranda must look at him and see butter coursing through his veins.

Off her phone call, Miranda offers him some lemonade. "Erin and Cassidy just made it," she says. Bobby pictures kids stirring with their hands. "I'm good," he says.

On the counter is an open planner. Today's page has something scribbled in for every hour. He sees his name written across the 3PM slot: BOBBY B. He likes the sound of that: Bobby B. It's a little friendly, a little more-than-friendly.

The network in question is housed in the basement, a huge finished area with puffy leather couches and heavy brown pots of ceiling-high grasses. The TV hanging on the wall is bigger than Bobby's windshield. Looking for the network room, Bobby heads for the door beside the TV.

"Whoops!" says Miranda. "Nanny's quarters."

"Of course," says Bobby.

"Not that there's a nanny!" she says quickly. "I use a babysitter three nights a week, but that's it." He wonders if she tells this to everyone, or if he just makes her feel uncomfortably wealthy.

Miranda leads him to another door on the other side of the couches. Inside are two metal racks of equipment. Bobby counts three TiVos, a digital music server, various amplifiers, assorted routers, and a pair of high-end Apple computers. The racks are on casters, for easy access. Bobby had imagined he'd be working on a regular computer network, not a media system. The room hums like a nest of sleeping robots.

"Wow," says Bobby. "Where's the failsafe button?"

He worries he's just been lippy, as is his habit, but the remark brings an unexpected smirk to Miranda's face. "Jason likes to have complete control over the household media," she says. She takes a long breath and suddenly there's something unfinished about the sentence, some thought hanging back on her tongue. Bobby begins imagining what her naked back might look like.

She's still talking: "...TiVo-ing every soccer game, every Lacrosse match..."

He pictures sweat sparkling between her shoulder blades; her back arched slightly, spine like a string of pearls sunk just beneath a sandy ocean floor.

Miranda's hand appears on his arm. He flinches, and it's gone. Immediately, he wants it back on him.

"I'm sorry," she says. "Is it wrong that I'm asking about it?"

"What?" She'd changed subjects while he was making dirty little movies.

"Your time inside."

Wow, he thinks: From TiVo to prison in under a minute. His own mother hasn't even asked about his "time inside." Amazingly, he hears himself tell Miranda, "Go

ahead.”

“Was it scary?” says Miranda. There’s a light in her eyes he hasn’t seen before.

“Was it scary,” he repeats, watching that light dance and flicker. “Yes, sure, sometimes. Mostly it was kinda boring.” Her eyes are dim again, and suddenly he wishes he had a scar to show her. “Well, this one time I watched a Hispanic dude stab a guard in the lunch room. Toothbrush handle to the neck. Blood everywhere.”

“Really?” And there’s that flicker again.

“Sure.” The attack in question had actually happened a week before his arrival, but she doesn’t need to know that.

Upstairs, someone screams. Bobby and Miranda look at the ceiling. Bobby thinks: Goddammit, Cyrus. Then he remembers Cyrus isn’t here. Miranda runs up the stairs.

Bobby looks around. Should he run up, too, or just get to work? He’s unsure of his role here: Is he a fellow parent or the hired handyman? He glances into the network room, which only hums at him unhelpfully. He bounds upstairs after Miranda.

She’s in the kitchen, her back to the basement door. Little Erin sits on the counter, wailing away into her mother’s chest, gangly limbs wrapped around Miranda’s neck and ribs.

“What happened?” says Bobby.

“Sshh!” hisses Miranda.

The other little girl, Cassidy, is there. Her fingers are filthy. “I pretended some dirt was peanut butter.”

“Oh,” says Bobby. “And she ate it and it was gross, huh?”

Miranda turns partway to him. “No, she’s violently *allergic* to peanuts, and Cassidy there was using that information to scare the shit out of my daughter.” She glares at Cassidy.

“She said she was gonna put it on me,” Erin wails. She pauses to sneer at the other girl before burying her face into her mother’s bare shoulder.

Cassidy shrugs. “I thought it was funny.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see how funny it is when your mother gets here,” says Miranda.

Erin forces out a sob.

“Hey,” says Bobby, crouching down by Cassidy. “How about we go outside and wait for your mom?” He doesn’t know if, or how, the girl’s mother has been called already. Mainly he just wants to get the fuck out of the kitchen.

Cassidy looks at him, then away. “I’m not a’pposed to talk to you.”

“Oh, sure. No talking to strange men, right? I gotcha.”

“No, just to *you*. Miranda told us not to talk to you.”

Bobby can feel Miranda’s eyes on his back now. He stays in mid-crouch, frozen, looking past little Cassidy. If he stays, he might as well be telling Miranda to go ahead and treat him like a slave. On the other hand, he could say screw the gig, just walk out the door. Finally, he stands and heads for the basement stairs. Over at his house, they could use the cash.

At home that night, Bobby finds his mother at the kitchen table, going through a cardboard banker's box. Their kitchen, which he's seen now for 37 years, has never looked so dark. Over at Miranda's the cabinets were light, lovely wood, the color of butter. Mrs. Benoit's cabinets are the color of pine bark. What little light gets thrown by the chandelier over the table gets swallowed up by all this dark wood.

Bobby makes a bowl of Corn Pops, grabs a Budweiser, and sits down at the table. "Cyrus found this stuff," Mrs. Benoit says. "We were cleaning the attic."

She's got a jumble of papers in there, all colors and shapes; here and there, pipe cleaners and straws stick out like arms and legs trapped under rubble. All too familiar, this box. It's the third time he's seen it in the past year. "Cyrus found this," Bobby says.

"Yup," she answers, but she won't look at him. She keeps it in her closet, he knows, for trotting out whenever she wants Bobby and Cyrus to realize how similar they really are, how they need to build a bridge across the missing years.

"Look at this," she says. "You remember this?" She reaches in and plucks out a little booklet of folded-over paper. "I asked Cyrus what was bothering him, and he said he was worried he wouldn't be smart enough for Kindergarten. Him -- can you imagine? So I showed him this." She pushes the booklet across the table to her son. In ugly block letters, it says THE BOOK OF RIGHT AND WRONG. Inside, each of the pages has one line of huge, leany kid-printing:

*There was a man and he fell asleep in spectacular dirt.  
When he woke up God said Write a book.  
So he did and it was called The Book of Right and Wrong.  
Everyone loved him and he was the smartest man in the world.  
Everyone still knows his name!  
The End.*

The back cover is a drawing of a man with balloon-like arms and legs. Brown splotches blot his face and hands: The dirt he'd slept in. He is smiling and waving at the reader. Bobby has a vague memory of writing this in pre-school, the day after a Sunday School argument about who might have written the Bible. It was the first and last time he ever got anything out of church.

"He's so nervous about September," says Mrs. Benoit. "These next four months are going to be excruciating for him."

"And you were hoping to inspire him by my example?" Bobby says.

She points a finger at him. "You had the stuff. This was very advanced for a four-year-old. What kid that age knows how to write 'spectacular'?"

"I didn't even know what it meant," Bobby says, but even he has to smile at the word.

"Well, when your pre-school teachers saw this, they wanted me to petition to get you skipped right to first grade."

"Then I'm glad you fought them on it." He's still smiling, but no longer in such a

nice way.

"It's what I thought best at the time. I didn't think you were ready for the pressure."

Good thing I was kept sheltered from pressure, thinks Bobby. He gets up from the table, scraping his beer bottle along with him. "Well, you always used to say you hoped I had one just like me one day." She used to scream it, actually, when he was sixteen. "Maybe your wish came true, Ma."

The next afternoon, Bobby sits at the front of the playground picnic table. Miranda slides in next to him. Behind his sunglasses, he closes his eyes. She smells like lemons.

"I am so sorry," she says. "I *never* told Cassidy and Erin not to talk to you."

"Whatever. I would."

"No, see, stop. What I said was, 'Don't bother Mr. Ben-wah.' Sorry -- Ben-oyt. Because you'd be working, and they'd be crawling all around asking questions. The system works perfectly now, thank you." She pats his hand.

She looks off toward the far corner of the playground, so Bobby helps himself to a good, long gawk at her small, pretty breasts, which nestle -- not bulge -- inside her ribbed tank top.

Miranda turns back to him. "Erin lives in terror of having another allergic reaction," she says. "It's crazy, I know, and I'm sure I sound like one of those allergy moms." She waves her fingers at the other picnic table, her usual group of women. "But you'd understand if you'd ever seen your kid writhing on the floor with her face swelling up."

"I'll bet." Instinctively -- it is instinct now, he realizes -- he looks for his own son. Cyrus is by the front fence, holding a stick. He's up on tiptoes, trying to knock a bee out of the air.

"Oh, plus," says Miranda, "something like that happens, guess who gets blamed? 'Well, it was on *your* watch, Miranda.'"

Bobby doesn't say anything. He doesn't seem to be part of this conversation. Then her hand appears on his arm again.

"Why didn't we have all this when we were kids?" she says. "All this allergy stuff, peanuts and gluten and whatnot."

"Aw, we were protected," he says. "All that asbestos and lead paint kept our bodies shielded from the glutens."

She laughs. "Jason says it's because our diets have gotten so refined. We're so removed from true nature, he says, that our kids are literally weaker than we were. He says we're going to civilize ourselves into extinction."

Bobby pictures Jason, or who he imagines Jason to be -- long chin, slender hands, neatened eyebrows -- in post-apocalyptic rags, trying to subdue a wild boar with his last remaining TiVo.

"Hey," Miranda says. "Do you get a lot of work?"

He leans back and looks at her. "It's seasonal," he says. "People typically need more help with their technology in the spring and fall." Which might be true. Mainly, he'll

say anything to avoid mentioning his lawn work. Suddenly it seems very important that she not know about his lawn work.

"I used to do print layout," Miranda says. She rolls her eyes. "In my old life. Pre-*here*, I mean. What if I made business cards for you?"

Miranda's business cards make a little magic. Bobby gets a half-dozen new clients within a week, and eight more over the next week. They're all quickie jobs, but that's the name of the game, according to Miranda: Volume. Become known as reliable, a fixer of people's stuff, and soon, says Miranda, you're indispensable. This sounds good to Bobby. He pictures himself getting to the point where he's a real company, maybe with a logoed pickup truck of his own, like the dog-shit guys. He'll hire someone to keep his books. The accountant will say, "The books look good this month, Mr. Benoit. Why don't you take a vacation?" He pictures his mother, Cyrus, and himself standing on the deck of a big, white cruise ship.

Miranda herself takes up a good part of his schedule. Since that first job in her basement, he's been at her house almost daily, doing everything from helping her hang clusters of family photos to setting up an invisible fence for the new dog that's arriving any day now from the breeder. Miranda makes him sit down for coffee before getting to work, and as she prepares their drinks he always finds himself lingering on those shoulders, tan and exposed. Bobby has yet to see Mr. Miranda, who does something financial in New York.

The third week in, Bobby stops mowing his mother's friends' lawns. His days, outside of Cyrus' school schedule, are filled with appointments for school moms, or friends of school moms. The cards Miranda made for him say:

*WIFE SUPPORT*

*Robert M. Benoit*

*Fixing Everything Your Husband Can't  
(or Won't!)*

At the bottom corners, there are little tools: A hand-saw in one, a crescent wrench in the other. Frankly, they make him cringe. The layout is nice, but *Wife Support?* It makes him sound like a gay best friend. Worse, it pits him against the husbands, who are not likely to let such a thing pass. He remembers the preschool auction, back in February, when these guys were whipping out their checkbooks to outbid each other on their kids' classroom artwork. One guy at Bobby's table paid \$1,200 for a mirror decorated around its borders with glued-on bottle caps. Bobby later saw the same mirror, minus the bottle caps, at Target for \$40.

His clients have strikingly similar setups: Media room, networked TiVos, house wired for sound in every room -- and a husband who had some batshit system installed and didn't explain any of it. Often, it's something simple: A universal remote that just needs its codes reset, or a wireless router needing a quickie firmware upgrade. Bobby becomes proficient with all sorts of things he could never have in his own house.

Sometimes it's too simple to possibly be true. One time Bobby finds a server

unplugged at both ends, the power cord lying coiled, neatly, on the carpet in a roomful of blind, humming witnesses. It reminds him of the little rope piece from the game Clue. Was it Mrs. Peacock in the library with the power cord? Or was it Colonel Mustard spending all his time in the city?

On the playground, Bobby is no longer the husky interloper. He's welcomed into the picnic-table conversation, greeted at the door, smiled at. Sometimes the ladies touch him on his shoulder. When Bobby ditches his sweats-and-t-shirt outfit for a decent pair of jeans and a button-down, they fuss over him like he's a handsome new exchange student at their high school. Or, more realistically, the slow kid on picture day: It's condescending, but he'll take what he can get. He thinks of them, late at night, faces and bodies flashing by as if reeling through a slide carousel.

Sometimes, as he's drifting off, he imagines a showdown with Miranda's husband. The fantasy is: They're at the school auction night. Bobby's dressed up; Miranda looks amazing. Miranda spends her whole night talking to Bobby. The husband gets pissed and pulls on Miranda's arm. Bobby steps in. The husband looks him up and down and says, "Who let you in here?" Bobby breaks his face with one shot. Bobby and Miranda ride off -- in her car. Later, she and Erin are on the deck of the big, white cruise ship with Bobby and Cyrus. The sun is sinking into the water's edge and it's almost time to go down for the buffet. Lying on the twin bed in his old room, Bobby plays this one over and over.

One afternoon in May, Bobby and Miranda are in her kitchen. School is ending in a few weeks. Outside, Cyrus and Erin play like old pals on the giant wooden climbing structure in Miranda's backyard. As Bobby's been brought into the playground fold, so has Cyrus: And magically, no more killing, no more zombie-talk. As a rule, he still doesn't speak directly to Bobby, but that's okay. He's a happier kid, and this is enough for Bobby.

"Got a good one for you today," says Miranda. They're drinking iced coffee at the tall, granite-topped prep island. She pulls the straw from her cup and chews on the bottom end. "Speaker in the big bathroom is out."

"Which one?"

"What, which speaker?"

"No," says Bobby. "Which big bathroom? Your bathrooms are all the size of tennis courts."

She grins and pokes at him with her straw. "Funny."

Following Miranda up the stairs, Bobby's hands are moist: He's never done speakers before, or any kind of in-wall wiring. This is where he gets found out. Even though she knows he's not an electrician or audio expert, she's come to think of him as reliable, Mr. Fixit. Once that wall behind the speaker is opened up, Mr. Fixit will vanish, leaving in his place Mr. Sort-of-Competent. And who wants to hire that guy?

It's in the master bath. Great, thinks Bobby: Something the man of the house sees every day. If Miranda doesn't catch Bobby's mistake, whatever that turns out to be, Mr. Miranda certainly will. In the bathroom, there are two speakers, compact white Boses perched in the upper corners like little white owls. The whole bath is huge: Double shower encased in glass, six-foot countertop with two basins, electronic toilet. Bobby

can't imagine shitting in this room. It would feel wrong, like crapping in the middle of a museum, or a bank.

Miranda uses the universal remote to turn on the sound system. Music funnels out of the far speaker. The one above the toilet crackles.

"Bad cable," Bobby says. That's in-wall stuff. Here comes the sweat down the back.

"You like Billy Joel?" says Miranda, nodding at the working speaker.

"Not really."

She laughs. "What, you think it's old music? Is that it?"

"More like preparing-to-be-old music. Like Sting, or Bonnie Raitt."

She smiles and gives him the finger.

"You can stand on the toilet if it'll make it easier for you," Miranda says, and he climbs up to look at the speaker. To his left is that enormous countertop, with a wall mirror that runs its entire length. To his right is the window; he can see Cyrus and Erin squirreling up and down the play structure. From way up here, Cyrus seems so normal.

Miranda moves in beside the toilet to supervise. Bobby's stretched up, feeling desperately at the back of the speaker, praying for a loose connection, something that won't require opening up the wall, or dealing with walls in general. At the same time, he is very aware that his shirt has pulled up over his gut.

"What do you think?" Miranda says. He can almost feel her grimacing at his exposed belly. With his free hand, he tugs down the shirt.

"I think you're too young to be listening to such shitty music."

"Ha ha," she says. "I meant about the speaker. But thank you."

In the mirror over the sinks, he can see her body in profile. Her workout pants, as always, broadcast that she has the ass of a twenty-year-old. He can see the dark of her nipples against the thin white tank top. Bobby feels himself hardening. Then he looks up and sees her, seeing him, in the mirror.

She's not smiling, not turning away, she's just looking at his ridiculous crotch. He forgets to breathe. She tilts her head up at him now, and their eyes meet. "I'm sorry," says Bobby. "You're just such a beautiful woman. I'm sorry."

Without a word, she reaches up and tugs at the button on his jeans. He still has a hand on the speaker overhead, and he grips it tighter now to keep his balance. He remembers the window behind him, but puts it out of his mind. By the time he manages to take a breath, Miranda has his pants open and the waistband of his underwear down, just a little, so that the tip of him is exposed. She glances up at him again, then ducks her head. He feels himself disappear into the wet warmth of her mouth. His entire body seems to vibrate.

He puts a hand on her head, sliding his fingers into her hair. He closes his eyes, having pictured this act so many times already. "That's right," he whispers.

Later, he still won't know which it was: The hand on her head or the words. But standing there, he doesn't realize it's gone wrong until the cold air swarms the damp head of his penis. Then she's gone and he's left alone in her bathroom, standing on the super-toilet with his pants open. As he climbs down, he glances out the window. Cyrus

and Erin are sitting on the top deck of the play structure. Though they're the same age, Cyrus looks like he could be Erin's little brother. They're facing the house, side by side, hands on laps. It looks a little too perfect, a little too we-didn't-see-anything.

He finds Miranda in the kitchen. She's slamming things around in the sink.

Bobby puts a hand on her shoulder. "Listen, I don't think they saw."

She stares at him a moment, eyes and mouth dropping wider, then jerks her head toward the kitchen window. "Oh my God, the *kids*?" she screams. She flings his hand back at him. "You're disgusting," she says. "You're just a..." she gestures at him, but the words don't come. For this he is grateful.

"I should go," he says.

She glares at him. "You think?"

The ride home with Cyrus is quiet, ugly -- not unlike a regular ride home from school, before father and son were accepted into society. Bobby is glad Cyrus hadn't started talking to him more even when things got good. He couldn't take it if Cyrus had become chatty and sweet and *then* given him some new silent treatment now that something bad has clearly happened with Erin's mommy. In this way, Cyrus is the reliable one.

It's the last week of school. Bobby leans against the fence, watching Cyrus run around. Only three days until the year ends. Then it's a long, silent summer before kindergarten. Bobby is nervous: Cyrus is smart, but so is every other kid in Fairport. In an average town, he'd be a star; but in an average town, you get an average education. Furthermore, when Bobby was this age, he was writing his little books and giving them to all the grownups he knew. Cyrus knows a lot of impressive words, but can't identify half his ABCs.

He glances at Miranda. She's over at the picnic table, chatting with her pals. She and Bobby haven't spoken in the weeks since the incident. It's obvious to Bobby that she's rattled. After all, he's seen something secret: Her vulnerability, her loneliness. At night in bed, trying to replay the memory, he can't seem to focus on just the good part, can't slow it down. It's too brief, and it ends so jarringly, like a DVD that suddenly skips to some other, awful scene. Still, in a weird way, it keeps him going: Someone like her wanted him enough to just break down and take him. He wonders how long she'd been resisting. And every night he wonders if she's in her bed across town, going over the moment for herself.

By the playground fence, Bobby checks Cyrus' lunchbox: Squashed, empty milk carton; baggie of baby-carrot stubs; half-eaten peanut butter sandwich.

Gretchen Hill comes over. "Do you have time tomorrow? Edward just bought this new thing that will beam your TV signal to a computer anywhere in the world."

Bobby's done one of these. It was a hive of quirks. "So he brought it home and he has no idea how to set it up."

She smiles. "That's why I'm calling in Wife Support."

He pulls out his pocket planner, flips to June. "Can't do tomorrow, but I got time Friday afternoon."

"Done. Thanks, Bobby!"

This is how it's gone lately: Business as usual -- if anything, busier than usual. He'd been holding his breath, waiting for the Miranda thing to come bite him in the ass. But she seems to have kept her silence, which is a blessing. Just as he's written his last-ever tuition check for preschool, here comes the ugly new tax situation: His mother's taxes are doubling, with July 1 as the first new bend-over date. As long as Bobby keeps getting jobs, and so long as the roof doesn't start leaking or no one has to go to the hospital, he might just be able to make that first check.

On July 1, he'll go to Town Hall, where the tall, hairy-eared guy behind the counter will ask Bobby's address. Then the guy will haul out his huge ledger book, flip it open, and move his finger up and down the pages until he finds *Benoit, Mary A.* The town's tax bills are computer-generated, but when it's time to pay up, they still use a big leather-bound book. It's probably the same book they used when Bobby's father paid his taxes years ago, back when he probably knew what was coming for Fairport but kept writing a new check every quarter anyway, sticking his family deeper into this town. And like his father, Bobby will hand over his share of everyone else's share. And on October 1, if all goes well, he'll do it again. Because that's how it's done.

Cyrus whips by. He's been getting rough again lately, playing the scary chasing games. Apparently, Miranda's house was his sole source of calm. Now that Bobby knows all these moms, he feels obliged to try and rein in the boy. He's thinking Sunday school might be a good influence. A kid can't start kindergarten acting like an animal.

"Yo, Cy," he calls. The boy stops, gives him a *Yeah?* look. But he doesn't say it, embarrassing his father. This is called progress.

"Let's cool it, man," says Bobby. "Stop terrorizing the kids, 'kay?"

Cyrus gives a little nod, then trots off in a mope. He's been Mr. Helpful at home lately, aiding his grandmother with dinner, Windexing her windows. Bobby knows it's because of the money-worry, which courses through the house like electricity. They're in a three-way race for the first ulcer. The past few nights, Bobby's been going in to look at Cyrus, just to watch him sleep. Sleeping Cyrus is the better-world version of Regular Cyrus: No one's ever looked so delicate, no one's face has ever been so smooth and unburdened. Then there'll be a sound like ice being crushed under car wheels, and Bobby will realize his son is grinding his teeth in his sleep.

On the playground, Miranda appears beside Bobby. "Hey, buddy," she says cheerfully.

"Jesus," he says. "Hi." She looks amazing: Tanner than usual, in a pink tank top and gray lycra shorts. A skinny white bra strap peeks out from beneath the shoulder of her tank top. Is he the reason she's started wearing a bra?

"Ever work with GPS systems?" she says. She speaks as if they'd just hung out the day before.

"Sure," he lies.

"Great. We just got Erin this cell phone that doubles as a GPS so the parents can know where the child is at all times. You know -- because of kindergarten? It's kind of a must-have."

Kindergarten is 8:30AM-Noon, the same hours as the pre-school.

"Friday, four o'clock?" says Bobby. "I got a thing with Gretchen just before that." If Miranda's jealous, she doesn't show it.

"Can you do six?" she says. "Erin has ballet in the afternoon."

Then why the fuck don't you wait till Monday? Bobby wants to say. Maybe he'd have plans that late. Maybe he'd be eating with his family, or maybe he'd even have a date.

"Okay," says Bobby.

"Great! Jason'll be there, too. You'll finally get to meet him!"

Cyrus lopes by, growling at some kid he's chasing. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Bobby and slows his gait.

"Um. Won't that be awkward? Me meeting your husband?"

Miranda looks at him. "Why would that be awkward?" Bobby starts to answer, but stops: She looks genuinely puzzled.

"No reason at all," he says. "Friday it is." He watches her head back for the picnic table, trying not to stare at the way her shorts cup her behind. Trying. Failing.

If she remembers what happened in her upstairs bathroom, she didn't show it. And for the first time, Bobby sees what kind of person he's been dealing with. For Miranda, their moment was a stupid mistake: Something as dumb and everyday as forgetting to pack a snack, or scraping the curb while parallel parking. Nothing to beat yourself up over. What she'd said that day -- *You're disgusting* -- wasn't even true. Disgusting is something that sticks with you. To her, Bobby isn't even that.

And he'll be there Friday. He can't afford not to.

Cyrus is by the monkey bars. He's paused in mid-chase, holding his hands out like a zombie and lunging for Erin, Miranda's daughter. Erin dodges, laughing. Cyrus notices Bobby, and he puts his hands down. He looks limp, defeated. Good boy, thinks Bobby. Then he thinks again, and beckons to Cyrus.

Cyrus trots over. Bobby takes out his half-eaten sandwich and opens it. The peanut butter glistens on the bread halves like filthy ponds. "Here," says Bobby, and he grabs Cyrus' wrists together in one hand. Cyrus flinches, but Bobby squeezes hard, pulling the little hands closer. With his free hand, he rubs peanut butter all over his son's palms and fingers. He glances over at Miranda's table. One of her bra straps has escaped from beneath the wider strap of her tank top. It hangs off her shoulder, leaning against her triceps. He wants to take that piece of shoulder, that tan round between the two straps, and take it in his mouth.

"Why am I doing this?" Cyrus says.

Bobby smiles at him. Whatever the boy's grandmother may say, Cyrus is not as smart as Bobby was at this age. A year from now they may not be able to even live here anymore. Cyrus is Bobby's sole possession, his only contribution to the world. But if he can't be as smart as these Fairport kids, or as big, or as rich, or as protected, then he can be something they can't. He can be something to fear.

Erin runs by. She looks back to see if Cyrus is watching. Bobby holds Cyrus' hands and presses them together until he can hear the peanut butter squelching between the slender fingers. Then he leans against his son's little ear, feeling his lips brush the velvety folds.

"Go get her," he whispers.