

BABY TEETH

Grace stood on the brink. Knobby, scarred knees braced, toes worrying the groove between asphalt sidewalk and recycled-tire *faux* mulch, she leaned toward the playground like a swimmer awaiting the starting gun. She took a deep breath; the delicate scaffolding of her clavicle rose, fell.

Grace should stand up straight — but that was nothing that Jane, daughter of a woman whose gospel had been that one’s posture indicated one’s success or failure in life, a woman who’d found in her daughter such a slumping cross to bear, would tell her. Grace was only seven! There were so many years ahead in which she could learn not to slouch.

Jane already had laid claim to one of the two benches facing the playground, letting the bulk of the diaper bag, the snacks, the water bottles, the accorded length of folded umbrella stroller take up what was probably more than their fair share of space. She walked over to Grace, let the flat of her hand linger between Grace’s shoulder blades in a gesture that could be construed as either one: maternal reprimand or caress.

“Momm,” Grace said, shrugging off the hand, the inflection of the teenager she would someday be in her voice. She stood at the edge of the playground, her eyes fastened on the latticework of yellow steel struts that stretched between a platform that sketched out a fort’s bare bones and another, meant to be treehouse, where a girl in a purple dress about her own age was swinging hand-over-hand unconcernedly, with what Jane thought was a great disregard for safety.

“Mom,” Grace repeated, twisting away from her. “There goes Jeremy. Up the hill. You better get him!”

The park was called Woodlands. The columns that held up the play structure were simulated wood made from plastic; the playground itself sat at the bottom of a bowl of land grown thick with light-starved trees.

Jane made her way halfway up the incline, which smelled of urine, the trees mostly serving as a screen behind which mothers took their young sons to relieve themselves. Woodlands Park had no public restroom.

“Jeremy?” she said. He looked at her agreeably, then stood up and tucked his hand into hers without speaking.

By the time they reached the bottom of the hill, Grace and the girl who had been swinging on the monkey bars had parlayed and forged an alliance. A single red sequin-covered shoe lay in the rubber mulch beneath the fort.

Seeing it, Jane made one of the split-second judgments she always then spent minutes having to erase. *That kind of child*, she found herself thinking. *That kind of mother*.

For red-sequined shoes had high heels like tap shoes, offered no traction. Every pair came from the same place, where they cost 9.99. Grace had just finished traveling through the stage of life when she would *die* to have some.

Grace and Monkey-Bars Girl sat down in the fort. Pulling his hand from Jane's, Jeremy began to toil once more up the hill.

"Swings, Jeremy?" Jane called to him. He turned, looking at her somberly, waiting for her to catch up. Beyond the urine-smelling grove of trees lay the tennis courts sewn with spangles of broken glass, where no one ever played. To the left snaked the ravine, tree limbs fallen athwart it like hatch-marks, that the City did not maintain.

"Swings," he agreed.

Jane hoisted him into the middle one's rubber harness. They were flanked by what appeared to be a stay-at-home dad and daughter on one side and a woman who only had eyes for her charge on the other.

Stay-at-Home Dad eyed Jane hungrily.

— *Swings!* The woman on the other side enunciated, pushing energetically. *Does Owen like the swings?*

"Higher!" Jeremy demanded, as if sensing in Jane's first push an unwillingness to commit to business. He *needed* her: he didn't know how to pump yet. Grace of course had mastered pumping long before she was his age.

How awful a fate it must be, Jane thought as she began to push him, to be a mother's second child, subject always to comparisons of such little importance. She pushed automatically, forcing from the heart of the swing set itself — *arc, sweep* — a loud industrial clanking.

— *Lovely swings!* the woman beside her called out suddenly. Jane turned in time to see her lean forward to mock-kiss her baby's stiffly outstretched feet. She hadn't been talking to Jane. *Beautiful Owen!* she added.

On the other side of Jane, the little girl grasped the chains holding up her swing. Unlike the baby named Owen, she and Jeremy, being older, rode their rubber seats facing out, toward to the slope, the straight, spindly trees.

Grace was bored by swings these days, unless she could tease from the welter of children on the playground with her a partner-in-crime her own age to swing with her. Another little girl, like-clad in bold stripes, pastel leggings, sturdy purple jersey.

Without meaning to, Jane and the stay-at-home dad had found the same rhythm.

Push — step, push — step.

Over and over; it required a little from them but not much, mimicked the movements of labor, the way long-ago gleaners might have stooped to a field.

"Do you think it'll rain?" Stay-at-Home Dad ventured.

School had started the month before. Time had settled into the lazy trough between summer and fall, that trough between hurricanes, always far enough away that here in the city they remained unaffected, save for the way each storm centered in Gulf or Atlantic opened its arms in a flourish like a twirling skater to fling fierce bands of rain their direction.

“I saw on Weather-dot-com that it might,” Jane said companionably, noncommittally.

The woman pushing the baby named Owen reached out to tweak his toes as the trajectory of his swing brought him within her reach.

Jane wondered if the woman was frightened of them. For parents like Jane and Stay-at-Home Dad, with their older children, were the top of the food-chain. They knew everyone, or at least someone who knew someone else, because of committees or soccer. They could make idle, looping smalltalk with strangers about PTA politics or math anxiety or the need for orthodontia. They cast jaded eyes over their older children, made jokes about being terrible parents.

But those who only had babies still had whole days they needed to somehow fill. They clustered on the peripheries of the playgrounds, on benches, shirts hiked up, nursing. They were afraid they hadn’t learned *how* yet. They didn’t know what to say.

“Where does your older daughter go to school?” Jane asked Stay-at-Home Dad, indicating Monkey-Bars Girl with a nod of her head. She and Grace were now huddled underneath the platform of the fort, heads close together.

“My older daughter?” he said. “I just have this one.”

“Oh!” Jane said. She squinted in the girls’ direction. They sat down *criss-cross-apple-sauce* across from each other and simultaneously lowered their heads to puff at an imaginary fire constructed from twigs. “I’ll be right back, honey,” she told Jeremy, bringing the swing to a stop with one hand.

Grace and the girl looked at her when she peered under the platform, their faces wiped clean of expression. “How’s it going?” she asked, wondering which mother Monkey-Bars Girl belonged to.

“Fine,” Grace said. “Excellent,” said Monkey-Bars Girl. “You know, we don’t need you.”

“Well, okay.” Jane said, chastened. She backed out from under the platform. “I’ll be right over there, at the swings.” The girls looked at her; Monkey-Bars Girl elbowed Grace. “If you need me.” They smiled identical sly, little-girl smiles at her, revealing their small white teeth.

“The house,” Mother of Baby Owen was saying to Stay-at-Home Dad when Jane returned to Jeremy. “It’s only a couple of blocks from three schools!” Jeremy, left unregarded between the two adults, gave her a reproachful look; in penance, she pushed him higher than she normally would.

“Underdog?” she asked. It was one of his favorite tricks. He shrieked in assent, and she grasped the bottom of his swing, ran forward, ducked her head. Now she was on the opposite side of the swing, facing Stay-at-Home Dad and Mother of Owen, breathless, feeling foolish.

“It shouldn’t be allowed,” Stay-At-Home Dad agreed.

“More?” Jeremy bargained.

“Not more.”

He had recently fallen in love with that moment when the swing reached the end of its arc, when the chains holding it pendulomed outward and then, no longer taut, began to buckle and his body separated itself from the seat, for a single swift second almost airborne.

He couldn’t reach that moment without his mother’s assistance; Jane preferred he never be able to get there. Facing him now, she reached out, hands pushing against the soles of the Converse sneakers he was dressed in.

Only in the past few months had Grace mastered pushing the swings to that same perilous place by herself. And watching her from the edge of a playground, a maternal weather-eye out for danger, had forced Jane to remember the lovely anarchy herself, when it seemed like the only thing a swing, flung heavenward, could possibly do was wrap itself over the set’s topmost bar and plunge toward the ground.

She pushed absently. Over Jeremy’s shoulder, beyond the cement curb that held in the playground, a faint track worn into the grass wandered toward the lip of the ravine. After the dry summer, there was little besides poison ivy to give the ravine its glossy green luster, and something, a tag of white, was draped from one fallen tree limb.

“I sent the email to everyone I know,” Mother of Owen was saying.

“They *should* know,” Stay-at-Home Dad agreed.

Jane caught a flicker of purple out the corner of her eye, a flag of familiar candy-like pink and white right behind it. She turned. That striped ticking was Grace, bending to the raised curbing between the playground and the ravine, where she and Monkey-Bars Girl had arranged small piles of twigs and moss that could stand in for anything. Monkey-Bars Girl held a pale stalk of mushroom in her cupped hands.

“I’ll be little Red Riding Hood now,” she said, adding it to a pile.

Jane thought: if *I* were that child’s mother, now might be the time when I’d have to pull out my wipes and apply one to those grubby hands. But then again, Grace, still a thumbsucker, was more prone to putting her hands in her mouth than the next child. “Grace,” she called, “stay on the playground, okay? Where I can see you.”

Grace obediently stepped over the curb until she was, nominally at least, on the playground. Monkey-Bars Girl did not. “And this here, this will be Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother’s house, right?” she asked Grace.

There were certain fairy tales Jane had avoided reading to Grace when she was younger, and Little Red Riding Hood had been one of them. Such terrible things happened in fairy tales! How had she never before noticed it, the way eyes were poked out by thorns and people were always being eaten by wolves.

These days, whenever Jeremy pulled the big book of fairy stories from the shelf, Jane was usually too tired: it was only after she finished reading that she would realize she’d forgotten to censor. Besides, Grace knew how stories ended by now; stockpiled her nonchalant knowledge. *He eats them*, she shared with Jeremy, matter-of-factly, over their breakfast cereal. *Then they break the door down*.

“Want to show me how you go down the slide?” Jane called to Grace. “I can watch while I push Jeremy.”

“Maybe in a minute,” Grace said carelessly.

Jane positioned herself once more behind Jeremy. As she stood between Mother of Owen and Stay-at-Home Dad, their rhythm once again become hers.

“There was that article in the paper,” Stay-at-Home Dad said, turning to include her. “Did you see it?”

There had been so many articles in the paper lately. About the hurricane, almost as destructive as the last one, and the upcoming election. The price of gas at the pumps. But the hurricane was already old news, and elections were seldom discussed on the playground.

But Jane had received the same email message Mother of Owen and Stay-At-Home Dad had. Had received it, in fact, more than once, along with its link to the site where the photograph of the hangdog, hollow-eyed face was. As well as the link to the link where the confession had been posted.

BOLLO, the email had been headed, *Person of interest in Renee Marie Rouse slaying is living less than a mile from YOUR house!!!!* It seemed an imperative, but after Jane read the message, she disliked herself for clicking from link to link, for thinking that she had to.

“He’s not even on the registration list,” Mother of Owen said. “Word about him has to be gotten out! People don’t know he moved here.” She paused. “I’m on a committee.”

The swings arced and clanked. “But he didn’t actually *do* anything, did he?” said Stay-at-Home Dad uncertainly. “That confession wasn’t real.”

None of it was real, as far as Jane could tell, except for the fact of the poor little long-dead beauty queen that had begun it so many years ago, before Jane even dreamed of having children, when her only thought had been one of judgment made as she stared at the newspaper photograph of the little girl’s face. *What horrible things people do to their children!*

“That he could even think up those things he wrote!” Mother of Owen said heatedly. “Besides, I don’t think you can make up things like that.”

“Mom,” Grace interrupted. She and Monkey-Bars Girl had abandoned their small piled offerings atop the curb and come to stand beside the swings. Grace grinned at her brother; then, remembering Monkey-Bars Girl beside her, she became off-hand and started making faces. Monkey-Bars Girl hung back, twining her arms around one swing set support. “I want to do the bars now. Will you lift me?”

“In a second,” said Jane. “Let me give Jeremy one last push first.”

The truth was that she wanted to hear what they said. She turned back to Jeremy, to Stay-at-Home Dad and Mother of Owen.

“We’ve emailed the two preschools and the elementary school,” Mother of Owen said. “I was the one who made sure the message went out to the parenting groups, and the neighborhood watch lists.” She paused, thinking. “The Zoo.”

“The Zoo?” Stay-at-Home Dad said.

BOLO meant *be on the look out*. At first Jane had not known what the initials stood for — and then, suddenly, she had.

“Security at the Zoo is not good,” said Mother of Owen.

The week before, when Jane had told her husband about the emails, he had decided that the way BOLO was being used meant someone in the neighborhood must have a scanner. *Scanner?* Jane had asked. Well, scanners — they all did. Didn’t they? It was how they sent grandparents photographs from their digital cameras. *Police scanner*, her husband amended.

“Security?” Stay-at-Home Dad asked.

“It would be so easy for a child to get snatched there.” Mother of Owen said. “The crowds!”

“Would it?” Jane said. She kept her eyes fastened on Jeremy’s back as his swing carried him upward, away from her outstretched hands. She opened her mouth to say more.

Jeremy shrieked with joy at his second of airborne freedom; the swing began its descent. Who was Jane, to think this woman’s worry trumped up, just because it was one she refused to have? She stepped forward and stopped the swing’s motion with one hand, ignoring Jeremy’s crestfallen look.

“We’ve got to go,” Stay-at-Home Dad leaned toward the swings to say to his daughter. “Mommy will be home soon, for dinner.” Whether he scoffed at the idea of security or wanted to thank Mother of Own for thinking of it, Jane could stand here at this swing set a lifetime and never know.

She lifted Jeremy from the swing’s clutches and began to walk toward the play structure, where Grace and the girl already stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the plastic platform at one end of the monkey bars. Grace’s thin, young voice carried toward her.

Where do you go to school?

Nowhere, Monkey-Bars Girl said lazily, or at least that was what, for a second, it sounded like to Jane. Whatever she really said was muffled as she leapt for the first rung. She was a flurry of limbs; bicycling legs, purple dress, outstretched arms. She dangled, shifted weight from one arm to the other, smoothly swung herself upward onto the far plastic platform.

She pivoted; a star gymnast’s move. “Taa-daa!” she said in a reedy singsong. “Now it’s your turn!”

Jane settled Jeremy on her hip. Grace extended her arms, hung awkwardly from the first bar. Her shoulders dipped and hitched. She hesitated, reached for the next. Her momentum was gained smoothly, like the slide of yarn across loom. It was beautiful, Jane thought: the jut of the metal bars, Grace’s body pulling itself between them like strong thread. Grace reached out and sidestroked her way to the last one, one arm cleaving the air.

And then the pink-and-white dress plunged, into platform.

The thing Jane had never realized, having so far been lucky, was that accidents, when they happened, happened so quickly. Lying in bed next to Steven

later that night she would try to remember: she'd been holding Jeremy; Grace slipped; and then she wasn't holding Jeremy anymore, but the moment she set him down now escaped her.

And he, completely unlike himself, must simply have stood there. *Mommmeee*, Grace had wailed as Jane ran toward her. Her hands were clamped to her mouth, a thin thread of blood already wound around her fingers.

She had to pry Grace's hands away, crouched awkwardly beside her, the tail of her t-shirt balled up to blot away red. Then all was revealed: a gap where Grace's two upper front teeth had moments before been, the meaty pulp of a split lip. *Baby teeth*, Jane reassured Stay-at-Home Dad, who hovered; working to keep her voice even. Although even as she said it she wondered what consolation *that* could possibly be, when her beautiful daughter's face seemed so terribly marred, when Jane had been only steps away and not managed to stop it.

A trip to the hospital was proposed; cell phones produced. A clean burp-cloth was handed over, the blood from the split lip stanchied. Grace held her face up to be examined, whimpering like a puppy.

"Baby teeth, honey," Jane repeated soothingly, her hands trembling. "I promise you'll grow new ones."

The bleeding began to stop. Grace's face brightened.

"Will the tooth fairy come?" she asked around the wad of Jane's shirt still held to her mouth.

At that, Mother-of-Owen stepped forward. She opened her hand and gravely produced them, already wrapped neatly in a baby wipe. She'd picked them up out of the rubber mulch under the monkey bars, she told Jane. Monkey-Bars Girl leaned against her as she spoke, a shoulder pressed into her hip, the length of her body from flank to thigh burrowed into the motherly reassuring bulk the way only a very young girl could. Her eyes were wide. "Meredith helped," Mother-of-Owen added, passing a hand lightly over the top of her daughter's head.

"Thank you," Jane whispered to this woman she had not liked at all, clasping her fingers around her daughter's precious teeth.

As they made their way home, Jeremy's brotherly admiration worked on Grace like a balm. "There was blood," she explained to him once more, walking beside the stroller. The baby teeth, wrapped in their perfumed wipe, nestled in Jane's pocket. The stroller bumped up over a tilted flag in the sidewalk. Grace still held the folded burp-cloth — a stranger's that in a few weeks Jane would end up passing along to somebody else on the playground — to her mouth, dabbing daintily and then pulling it away to examine it.

"Blood," Jeremy agreed, reclined comfortably against the stroller's webbing. "You fell down and cried."

"But then I got up," Grace said.

“O, you did!” Jane agreed.

“Mom,” Grace said speculatively, “how much do you think the tooth fairy will leave me?”

“A whole lot.”

Jane felt reprieved, magnanimous. A silver dollar, she thought. She’d send Steven out after dinner, to find one, and that would become part of the story as well; the way he’d visit all nine check-out lanes of the grocery store one after the other for a dollar coin, the way each clerk would stir a finger through her cash drawer, brightening because something out of the ordinary was taking place. The way the elderly man standing in line behind Steven would hand over to him milk and a bag of potato chips and, digging in his pocket, come to their rescue.

O what white teeth you have, the little girls always exclaimed.

It was the beginning of a catechism they all knew by heart, as well as the rest: *the better to devour you whole, dear*. Jane was inured to the words, at night she read them to her children without thinking.

She jerked the stroller up over a bumpy lip of curb, pointed it in the direction of home. The stories, she saw, meant nothing at all, without wolves.