

Flat Diane

By Daniel Abraham

His hands didn't tremble as he traced his daughter. She lay on the kitchen floor, pressing her back against the long, wide, white paper he'd brought, her small movements translated into soft scratching sounds where the cut end tried to curl down into the floor. His pen moved along the horizons of her body—here, where her wrist widened, and then each finger; down her side; rounding the ball of her feet like the passage around the Cape of Good Hope; up to where her wide shorts made it clear this wasn't a work of pornography; then back down the other leg and around. When he came to her spilling hair, he traced its silhouette rather than remain strictly against her skin. He wanted it to look like her, and Diane had thick, curly, gorgeous hair just like her mother had.

"Just almost done, sweetie," he said when she started to shift and fidget. She quieted until the pen tip touched the point where it had started, the circle closed. As he sat back, she jumped up to see. The shape was imperfect—the legs ended in awkward thalidomide bulbs, the hair obscured the long oval face, the lines of the tile were clear where the pen had jumped.

Still.

"Okay," Ian said. "Now let's just put this on here, and then..."

"I want to write it," Diane said.

Diane was eight, and penmanship was new to her and a thing of pride. Ian reached up to the table, took down a wooden ruler with a sharp metal edge, and drew lines for his daughter to follow. He handed her the pen and she hunched over.

"Okay, sweetie. Write this. Ready?"

She nodded, her hair spilling into her face. She pushed it away impatiently, a gesture of her mother's. Candice, who pushed a lot of things away impatiently.

"Hi," Ian said, slowly, giving his daughter time to follow. "I'm Flat Diane. My real girl, Diane Bursen, sent me out to travel for her. I can't write because I'm only paper. Would you please send her a picture of us, so she can see where I am and what adventures" (Ian stopped here to spell the word out) "I'm having?"

Ian had to draw more lines on the other side of Flat Diane for the mailing address, but Diane waited and then filled that out too, only forgetting the zip code.

Together, they rolled Flat Diane thin and put her in a mailing tube, capped the end with a white plastic lid, and sealed it with tape.

"Can we send Flat Diane to see Mommy?"

He could feel his reaction at the corners of his mouth. Diane's face fell even before he spoke, her lower lip out, her brown eyes hard. Ian stroked her hair.

"We will, sweetheart. Just as soon as she's ready to let us know where we can mail things to her, we will."

Diane jerked away, stomped off to the living room, and turned on the TV, sulking. Ian addressed the package to his mother in Scotland, since it seemed unlikely that either of them would be able to afford a

transatlantic vacation anytime soon. When the evening news came on with its roster of rapes and killings, he turned off the set, escorted his protesting daughter through her evening rituals, tucked her into bed, and then went to his room and lay sleepless until after midnight.

The photograph shows his mother, smiling. Her face is broader than he remembered it, the hair a uniform gray but not yet white. She holds Flat Diane up, and behind them the half-remembered streets of Glasgow.

There is writing on the back in blue pen and a familiar hand:

Flat Diane arrived yesterday. I'm taking her to my favorite teahouse this afternoon. It was designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh—one of the best architects ever to come out of Glasgow, and the scones are lovely. Tomorrow, we are going to work together. My love to Ian and the real Diane.

Mother Bursen

Diane was elated, and Ian was both pleased that the plan was working and saddened to realize how rare his daughter's elation had become. She had insisted that the picture go with her to school, and while she promised that she would care for it, Ian was anxious for it. It was precious, irreplaceable, and therefore fragile.

After work, he went to collect her from her friend Kit's house, anxiety for the picture still in the back of his mind.

"Today," Kit's father Tohiro reported as they drank their ritual cup of coffee, "everything was Scotland. How the people talk in Scotland. How the tea is made in Scotland. Whether you have to share tables at restaurants in Scotland. Diane has become the expert in everything."

"It's my mother. She sent a picture."

"I saw. She told us about the ... what? The drawing? Flat Diane? It's a good idea."

"It gives her something to look forward to. And I wanted her to know how many people there are looking out for her. I haven't much family in the States. And with her mother gone..."

A cascade of thumps announced the girls as they came down the stairs. Diane stalked into the kitchen, her brows furrowed, hair curled around her head like a storm cloud. She went to her father, arms extended in demand, and he lifted her familiar weight to his lap.

"I want to go home now," she said. "Kit's a butthead."

Ian grimaced an apology. Tohiro smiled—amused, weary—and sipped his coffee.

"Okay, sweetie. Go get your coat, okay?"

"I don't want my coat."

"Diane."

His tone was warning enough. She got down and, looking over her shoulder once in anger at the betrayal of insisting on her coat, vanished again. Ian sighed.

"She's just tired," Tohiro said. "Kit's the same way."

They drove home through a rising fog. Though it made Ian nervous, driving when he couldn't quite make out what was coming, Diane only chattered on, stringing together the events of her day with "and after

and after and.” No matter if no two facts led one to another—they were what she had to say, and he listened half from weariness and half from love.

An accident of timers turned the lights on just as they pulled into the driveway, as if someone were there to greet them. There was nothing in the mailbox from Flat Diane. Or from Candice.

"Daddy?"

Ian snapped to, as if coming awake. Diane held the screen door open, frowning at him impatiently. He couldn't say how long she'd been there, how long he'd fallen into dim reverie.

"Sorry, sweetie," he said, pulling keys from his pocket. "Just got lost in the fog a minute."

Diane turned, looking out at the risen gray. His daughter narrowed her eyes, looking out into nothing.

"I like the fog," she said, delivering the pronouncement with the weight of law. "It smells like Scotland."

And for a moment, it did.

The photograph isn't really a photograph but a color printout from an old printer, the ink shinier than the paper it stains. On it, Flat Diane is unfurled between a smiling couple. The man is thick, wide-lipped, graying at the temple. He wears a yellow polo shirt and makes a thumbs-up with the hand that isn't supporting Flat Diane. The woman is smaller, thinner. Her smile is pinched. She only looks like her brother Ian around the eyes and in the tilt of her nose.

Behind them is a simple living room, the light buttery yellow and somehow dirty.

The bottom of the page carries a message typed as part of the same document:

Dear Ian and Diane,

Flat Diane is here with us in Dallas. She's just in time for Valentine's Day. She's coming out to our special dinner with us tonight at Carmine's Bistro—Italian food. Yum!

Hope everything's good with you. See you soon. Much love.

Aunt Harriet and Uncle Bobby

In two weeks, Diane would be nine. It was a foreign thought. So little time seemed to have passed since her last birthday until he realized that Candice hadn't quite left then. This, now, was his first birthday as both of her parents. He had demanded the day off, and his manager had acquiesced. He had arranged with the school to take her out for the day. A movie, a day with him, and a party that night with all her friends. Kit's parents Anna and Tohiro were helping to drive them all.

He knew he was overcompensating. He hoped it would be enough, and not only for her. There was a loneliness in him that also had to be appeased. Over the course of months, the traces of his wife—still his wife, still only separated—had begun to erode. The last of her special toothpaste used up; the pillows no longer smelling of her hair; the foods that only she ate spoiled and thrown away. In their place were the toys Diane didn't put away, the homework left half-done on the table, the sugared breakfast cereals too sweet for Ian to enjoy except as candy.

But Diane's things were all part his—hers to enjoy, and his to shepherd. Nothing had to be put away unless he said it did, nothing had to be finished unless he insisted, nothing was too sweet, too empty, too bad for you to be dinner except that Ian—big bad unreasonable mean Daddy—said no. Daddy who,

after all, couldn't even keep a wife.

It was Friday, and Kit was sleeping over. The girls were in the back—in Diane's room—playing video games. Ian sat on the couch with a beer sweating itself slick in his hand while a news magazine show told of a child drowned in the bathtub by his mother. The place smelled of order-out pizza and the perfume from the beauty salon toys that Kit brought over; costume jewelry spread out on the carpet, glittering and abandoned.

Ian's thoughts were pleasantly vague—the dim interest in the tragedy playing out on the television, the nagging knowledge that he would have to pretend to make the girls go to sleep soon (they would stay up anyway), the usual pleasure of a week's work ended. Kit's shriek bolted him half across the house before his mind quite understood what the sound had been.

In the bedroom, the tableau. Kit sat inelegantly on the floor, her hand to her cheek, her nose bloody. The controllers for the game box splayed out, black plastic tentacles abandoned on the carpet; the electric music still looping. And Diane, her hand still in a fist, but her eyes wide and horrified.

"What in Christ's name is going on in here?" Ian demanded.

"Sh ... she hit me," Kit began, her voice rising as the tears began. "I didn't do anything and she just hit me."

"Diane?"

His daughter blinked and her gaze flickered at her friend, as if looking for support. And then her own eyes filled.

"It was my turn," Diane said, defensively.

"So you hit her?"

"I was mad."

"I'm going *home!*" Kit howled, and bolted for the bathroom. Ian paused for a half second, then scowled and went after the girl, leaving Diane behind. Kit was in the bathroom, trying to stanch the blood with her hand. Ian helped her, sitting her on the toilet with her head tipped back, a wad of tissue pressed to her lip. The bleeding wasn't bad; it stopped quickly. There was no blood on the girl's clothes. When he was sure it wouldn't start again, he wetted a washcloth and wiped Kit's face gently, the blood pinking the terrycloth.

Diane haunted the doorway, her dark eyes profound with confusion and regret.

"I want to go home," Kit said when he had finished. Her small mouth was pressed thin. Ian felt his heart bind. If Diane lost Kit, he'd lose Tohiro and Anna. It was a fleeting thought, and he was ashamed of it the moment it struck him.

"Of course," he said. "I'll take you there. But first I think Diane owes you an apology."

Diane was weeping openly, the tears gathering on her chin. Kit turned to her, and Ian crossed his arms.

"I didn't mean to," Diane said. "It's just that when people get mad, they hit each other sometimes."

"Diane, what are you thinking? Where did you get an idea like that?"

"Uncle Bobby does, when he's mad. He hits Aunt Harriet all the time."

Ian felt his lips press thin.

"Really. And have you seen him hit her? Diane, have you seen Bobby hit anyone, ever?"

Diane frowned, thinking, trying to remember something. The failure emptied her.

"No."

"Did anyone tell you a story about Bobby hitting Harriet?"

Again the pause, and confusion deep as stone.

"No."

"And?"

Diane stared at him, her mouth half open, her eyes lost.

"I think the words we're looking for are 'I'm sorry,'" Ian said. It was the way his father would have said it.

"I'm sorry, Kitty. I'm sorry. I thought...," and Diane shook her head, held out her hands, palms up in a shrug that broke his heart. "I'm sorry, Kitty. I won't do it again ever, I swear. Don't go home, okay?"

Kit, sullen, scowled at the white and blue tile at her feet.

"Please?" Diane said. He could hear in the softness of her voice how much the word had cost. He paused, hoping that Kit would relent, that she would simply take the blow and accept it, that she would believe that Diane would never do it again.

"Kay," Kit said. Ian's relief was palpable, and he saw it in Diane. His daughter ran over, grabbed her friend's hand, pulled her out, back to the room. Ian looked in on them. Diane was showering Kit with affection, flattering her shamelessly, letting her play as many times as she cared to. Diane was showing her belly. And it worked. Kit came back from the edge, and they were best friends again.

He put them both to bed, making them promise unconvincingly not to stay up talking, then went through the house, checking that the doors and windows were all locked, turning off the lights. He ended in the living room, in the overstuffed chair he'd brought from his home when he and Candice first became lovers. The cushions knew the shape of his back. Sitting under a single lamp that was the only light in the house, he closed his eyes for a moment and drank in silence. The book he was reading—a police procedural set in New Orleans—lay closed on his knee. His body was too tired to rest yet, his mind spun too fast by Diane and his isolation and the endless stretch of working at his desk. When he finally did open his book, the story of grotesque murder and alluring voodoo queens was a relief.

Diane walked in on bare feet just as he was preparing to dog-ear the page, check the girls, and crawl into bed. She crossed the room, walking past the pool of light and receding for a moment into the darkness before coming back to him. In her hand was the scrapbook he'd set aside for Flat Diane. Without speaking, she crawled onto his lap, opened the book with a creak of plastic and cheap glued spine, and took out the page they'd just gotten. His sister, her husband. The meaty hand and sausage-thick thumb. His sister's pinched smile. The filthy light.

"I don't want this one in here," Diane said, handing it to him. Her voice was small, frightened. "I don't like Uncle Bobby."

"Okay, sweetie," he said, taking it from her.

She leaned against him now, her arms pressed into her chest, her knees drawn up. He put his arms around her and rocked gently until they were both near to sleep.

It was the moment, looking back, that he would say he understood what Flat Diane had become.

There are over a dozen photographs in the book now, but this latest addition commands its own page. In it, Candice is sitting at a simple wooden table. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail that even where it is bound is thick as her forearm. Her eyes slant down at the corners, but her skin is the same tone as Diane's, the oval face clearly the product of the same blood. There is a spider plant hanging above her. The impression is of melancholy and calm and tremendous intimacy. It is not clear who operated the camera.

Flat Diane is in the chair beside her, folded as if she were sitting with her mother. A small, cartoon heart has been added to the paper, though it is not clear by whom.

The real Diane has outstripped her shadow—taller, thinner, more awkward about the knees and elbows. This silhouette is already the artifact of a girl who has moved on, but this is not obvious from the picture. In the scrapbook, the only sign of change is a bend on one corner of Flat Diane's wide paper, a design drawn in the white space over the outlined left shoulder, and the lock of white hair across Candice's forehead.

The letter reads:

Diane—

Flat Diane arrived yesterday. I have to tell you she makes me miss you. You can see she's here with me in my apartment.

I love you very much, Diane. I know that it can't seem like it right now, but please believe me when I say it's true. There is no one in the world more important to me than you are. And I hope that, when your father and I have worked out the paths our souls need to take, we can be together again. Whatever happens, I will always be your mother.

It is signed Candice Calvino, her maiden name.

The other letter is not in the scrapbook. It reads:

Ian -

Christ, Ian, I really don't know what to say. I thought that I could just sit down and write this to you rationally, but I am just so goddamn pissed off, I'm not sure that's possible.

This stunt is *exactly* the kind of emotional extortion that made it impossible for me to stay near you. What were you thinking? That you could hold her up, maybe wave her around like a flag, and make me come trotting back—we could just stay together for the children's sake? Our daughter should be more than just the easiest tool for you to get in a dig at me. How could you do this to her?

If you wanted to make me feel guilty or shamed or selfish, well nice job, Ian. You did.

Never use her like this again. If it isn't beneath you, it goddamn well should be.

C.

The hallway outside the school's administrative offices had white stucco walls, linoleum flooring worn by millions of footsteps from thousands of students, harsh fluorescent lighting. An old clock—white face yellow with age—reported twenty minutes before the noon bell would ring, the press of small bodies filling the halls like spring tadpoles. When Ian walked in, straightening his tie, swallowing his dread, his footsteps echoed.

The secretary smiled professionally when he gave her his name, and led him to a smaller room in the back. The placard on the door—white letters on false wood grain—said that the principal's name was Claude Bruchelli. The secretary knocked once, opened the door, and stepped aside to let Ian pass through a cloud of her cloying perfume and into the office.

The principal rose, stretching out a hand, establishing for Diane that the grownups were together, that they had special rules of respect and courtesy. It was the sort of thing Ian remembered with resentment from when he'd been her age, but he shook the man's hand all the same.

"Thanks for coming, Mr. Bursen. I know it's hard to just leave work like this. But we have a problem."

Diane, sitting on a hard-backed chair, stared at her feet. The way she drummed her heels lightly against the chair legs told him that this was not resentment, but remorse. Ian cleared his throat.

"All right," he said. "What's she done?"

"Mr. Bursen, we have some very strict guidelines from the city about fighting."

"Another fight?"

The principal nodded gravely. It had been at morning recess. Her friend Kit had been adamant that the other girl had started it, but the teacher who had seen it all reported otherwise. No, there had been no injuries beyond a few scratches. This was, however, the third time, which meant a mandatory three-day suspension.

Diane, stone-faced, seemed to be staring at a banner on the wall that blared We Aim For Excellence! We Expect The Best Of You!

"All right," Ian said. "I can get her homework for her and she can do it at home."

The principal nodded, but didn't speak. He looked at Ian from under furrowed brows.

"Mr. Bursen, I have to follow the guidelines. And they're good as far as they go, but Diane's anger problems aren't going to go away. I wish you'd reconsider letting Mrs. Birch...."

"No. I'm sorry, no. I've had a certain amount of counseling myself, one time and another. It doesn't do any good to force a child into it."

"Perhaps Diane would choose to," the principal said, as if she wasn't there, as if her dark, hard eyes weren't fixed on his wall. Ian shrugged.

"Well, what of it, Diane? Care to see Mrs. Birch?" He'd meant to say it gently, but the tone when it left his mouth sounded more of sarcasm. Diane shook her head. Ian met the principal's gaze.

All the way back home, Diane pressed herself against the car door, keeping as far from Ian as she could. He didn't try to speak, not until he knew which words were in him. Instead, he ran through all the people he could think of who might be able or willing to look after Diane for the duration of her exile.

When, that night, he finally spoke, he did it poorly. They were eating dinner—chicken soup and peanut butter sandwiches. He hadn't spoken, she had sulked. Between them the house had been a bent twig, tension ready to snap.

"I can't afford to take three days off work," he said. "They'll fire me."

Diane shrugged, a movement she inherited from him. Her father, who shrugged a lot of feelings away.

"Di, can you at least tell me what this is all about? Fighting at school. It isn't like you, is it?"

"Lisa started it. She called me a nerd."

"And so you hit her?"

Diane nodded and took a bite of her sandwich. Ian felt the blood rushing into his face.

"Jesus Christ, Di. You can't do this! What ... I don't know what you're thinking! I am holding on to this house by a thread. I am working every day for you, and you are being a little brat! I don't deserve this from you, you know that?"

The bowl sailed across the room, soup arcing out behind it. It shattered where it landed. Diane's bowl. Ian went silent. She stood on her chair, making small grunting noises as she tore the sandwich and squeezed the bread and peanut butter into paste.

"You never listen to me! You always take everyone else's side!"

"Diane..."

"When?" she screamed. "Exactly when in all this do *I* start to matter?"

It was her mother's voice, her mother's tone and vocabulary. Ian's chest ached suddenly, and the thought came unbidden: *What has Candice said in front of that drawing?* Diane turned and bolted from the room.

When the shards of their dinner were disposed of, the salt of soup and sweet of sandwich buried alike in the disposal, Ian went to her. In the dark of her room, Diane was curled on her bed. He sat beside her and stroked her hair.

"I didn't do anything wrong," she said, her voice thick with tears. She didn't mean fighting or throwing soup bowls. She meant that she had done nothing to deserve her mother's absence.

"I know, sweetie. I know you didn't."

"I want to see Mrs. Birch."

He felt his hand falter, forced it to keep touching her, keep reassuring her that he was there, that they were a family, that all would be well.

"If you want, sweetie," he said. "We can do that if you want."

He felt her nod. That night, trying to sleep, he thought of every mean-spirited thing he'd ever said to Diane, of every slight and disappointment and failure that he'd added to her burden. Candice's letter—the private one she'd sent to him—rang in his mind. Diane would be confessing all his sins to someone he'd never met, who would be taking confidences from his daughter that he might never know.

For all the weeks and months that he'd silently prayed for someone to help, someone to shoulder part of the burden of Diane's soul, the granting tasted bitter. His fears were unfounded.

The time came, and Mrs. Birch—a thick woman with a pocked face and gentle voice—became a character in Diane's tales of her days. He waited with a sense of dread, but no recriminations came back to him from the school, no letters condemning him as a man and a father. In fact, over the weeks, Diane seemed to become more herself. The routine of fight and reconciliation with Kit, the occasional missive from Flat Diane's latest hosts, the complaints about schoolwork and clothes and how little money he had to spend on her all came almost back to normal. Once, he saw what might have been anger when Diane saw a photograph of her mother. After that he noticed that she had stopped asking when Mommy was coming home. He couldn't have said, if asked, whether the sorrow, the sense of triumph, or the guilt over that sense was the strongest of his reactions.

Everything was fine until the night in February when she woke up screaming and didn't stop.

The picture is cheap—the color balance is off, giving the man's face an unnatural yellow tint. He is in his later twenties, perhaps his early thirties, the presentiment of jowls already plucking the flesh of his jaws.

His hair is short and pale. His eyes are blue.

In the picture, Flat Diane has been taped around a wide pillar, her arms and legs bending back out of sight. A long black cloth wraps across where the eyes might be, had Ian drawn them in; a blindfold.

The man who Ian doesn't know, has never met, is caressing a drawn-in breast. His tongue protrudes from his viciously grinning mouth, its tip flickering distance from the silhouette's thigh. He looks not like Satan, but like someone who wishes that he were, someone trying very hard to be.

The writing on the back of the photograph is block letters, written in blue felt-tip.

It reads: Flat Diane has gone astray.

A new photograph comes every week. Some might be amusing to another person; most make him want to retch.

The best trick Hell has to play against its inmates is to whisper to them that this—this now—is the bottom. Nothing can be worse than this. And then to pull the floor away.

"I'm sorry," Ian said, refusing to understand. "I didn't catch that."

Mrs. Birch leaned back, her wide, pitted face tired and impassive. She laced her hands on her desk. The hiss of the heating system was the only sound while she brought herself to break the news again. This time, she took a less direct approach.

"Diane has always had an anger problem. There's no good time to lose your mother, but this stage of development is particularly bad. And I think that accounts for a lot of her long-term behaviors. The fighting, the acting out in class, but these *new* issues...."

"Child Protective Services?" Ian said, able at last to repeat the counselor's statement and plumb the next depth of hell. "You called Child Protective Services?"

"The kind of sudden change we've seen in her—the nightmares, the anxiety attacks.... She's in fifth grade, Mr. Bursen. No kid in fifth grade should be having anxiety attacks. When she went to the doctor, you and he and two nurses together couldn't get her to undress, and you say she never had a problem with it before. That kind of sudden change means trauma. Nothing *does* that but trauma."

Ian closed his eyes, the heel of his palm pressed to his brow, rubbing deeply. His body shook, but it seemed unconnected to his terrible clarity of mind, as if the tremors were something being done to him.

"The Buspar seems to be helping," he said. An idiot change of subject, and not at all to the point, but Mrs. Birch shifted in her chair and went there with him.

"There are a lot of anti-anxiety drugs," she agreed. "Some of them may help. But only with the symptoms, not the problem. And the trauma, whatever it is ... it may be something ongoing."

"Christ."

"She's graduating in a few weeks here. Next year's middle school, and I won't be able to see her anymore. With CPS, you'll have a caseworker, someone who isn't going to change every time she switches schools. And who knows? Maybe the investigation will help. I'm sorry. About all of this. I really am. But it's the right thing."

Now it was Ian's turn to go silent, to gather himself. Speaking the words was like standing at the edge of a cliff.

"You think I'm fucking my kid."

"No," Mrs. Birch said, in the voice of a woman for whom this territory was not new. "But I think somebody is."

Diane waited for him in the outer office, looking smaller than she was, folded in on herself. He forced himself to look at her as she was, and not as he wanted her to be. She forced a smile and raised a hand, sarcastic and sad. Ian knelt at her feet and took her hand, but Diane would not meet his gaze. Mrs. Birch was a presence he felt behind him, but didn't see.

"Sweetie," he said.

Diane didn't look up. He reached out to stroke her hair, but hesitated, pulled back. It was that fear that touching his child would be interpreted as sex that brought home how much they had lost.

"It's going to be okay, sweetie," he said, and Diane nodded, though she didn't believe it. When he stood, she scooped up her book bag and went out with him. In the hallway, with Mrs. Birch still haunting the door to the office, Diane reached up and put her hand in his. It was a thin victory, hardly any comfort at all.

The clouds were close, smelling of rain. He drove home slowly, the sense of disconnection, of unreality, growing as the familiar streets passed by. Diane sat alert but silent until they were almost home.

"Are they going to make me live with Mom?"

A pang of fear so sharp it was hard to differentiate from nausea struck him, but he kept his voice calm. He couldn't let her think they might lose each other.

"Make you? No, sweet. There's going to be someone from the state who's going to want to talk to you, but that's all."

"Okay."

"They're going to ask you questions," he continued, the words leaking from him like air from a pricked balloon. "You just need to tell them the truth. Even if you get embarrassed or someone told you that you

shouldn't tell them something, you should tell them the truth."

"Okay."

He pulled into the driveway, their house—Christ, the mortgage payment was a week late already; he had to remember to mail the check tomorrow—looming in the twilight. The lawn was the spare, pale green of spring.

"You should tell me the truth too," he said, amazed by how sane he sounded, how reasonable. "Sweetie? Is there anyone who's doing things to you? Things you don't like?"

"Like am I getting molested?"

Amazing too how old she had become. He killed the engine. There had to be some way to ask gently, some approach to this where he could still treat her like a child, still protect her innocence. He didn't know it, couldn't find it. The rich scent of spring was an insult.

"Are you?" he asked.

Diane's eyes focused on the middle distance, her face a mask of concentration. Slowly, she shook her head, but her hands plucked at the seat, popping the cloth upholstery in wordless distress.

"If something were happening, Di, you could tell me. There wouldn't be anything to be afraid of."

"It's not so bad during the day," she said. "It's at night. It's like I know things ... there's things I know and things I can almost remember. But they didn't happen."

"You're sure they didn't?"

A hesitation, but a nod—firm and certain.

"The doctor's going to want to examine you," he said.

"I don't want him to."

"Would it be better with a different doctor?"

"No."

"What if it was a woman? Would that make it easier?"

Diane frowned out the window of the car.

"Maybe," she said softly. Then, "I don't want to be crazy."

"You're not, sweet. You're not crazy. No more than I am."

They ate dinner together, talking about other things, laughing even. A thin varnish of normalcy that Ian felt his daughter clinging to as desperately as he was. Afterward, Kit called, and Diane retreated to gossip in privacy while Ian cleaned the dishes. He read her to sleep, watching her chest from the corner of his eye until her breath was steady and deep and calm. He left a night-light glowing, a habit she'd returned to recently.

He sat in the kitchen and slowly, his hands shaking, laid out the pictures of Flat Diane—the ones recently arrived, the ones he hadn't shown her. He shuffled them, rearranged them, spread them out like tarot.

It had been stupid, sending out their real address. Ian saw that now, and twisted the thought to better feel the pain of it. What if this mad fucker had tracked down Diane because Ian had as good as sent out directions to her...?

But no, he didn't believe that. Or that Tohiro or one of her teachers or some evil pizza delivery man had targeted her. The photographs were too much a coincidence, the timing too precise.

He recalled vividly his art history teacher back at university, back at home in Scotland. The old man had told each of them to bring in a picture of a person they loved—mother, father, brother, lover, pet. And then, he'd told them to gouge out the eyes. The shocked silence was the first moment of his lecture on the power of image, the power of art. These were dumb bits of paper, but each of them that touched pen-tip to a beloved eye knew—did not believe, but *knew*—that the pictures were connected with the people they represented.

Ian had sent his daughter's soul voyaging. He hadn't even considered the risks. It was worse than sending only their address; he might as well have delivered her, trussed and helpless. And now....

And now Flat Diane had gone astray.

With a boning knife, he cut out the blond man's blue eyes, but he felt the effort's emptiness. Nothing so poetic for him. Instead, he took the envelopes to his study, turned on his computer, and scanned in the bastard's face. When it was saved, he dropped it into e-mail and then got on the phone.

"Hello?" Candice said from a thousand miles away. Her voice was uncertain—wondering, he supposed, who would be calling her so late at night.

"It's Ian. Check your e-mail."

The pause would have been strained if he'd cared more. If this had still been about the two of them and what they had and lost and why. Only it wasn't, and the hesitation at the far end of the line only made him impatient.

"Ian, what's this about?"

"Flat Diane, actually. I've had a letter for her. Several. I need to know who the man is in the pictures."

Another pause, but this one different. Ian could hear it in the way she breathed. Intimacy can lead to this, he supposed. Teach you how to read a woman by her breath on the far end of a phone line.

"You already know," he said. "Don't you."

"My computer's in another room. I can call you back."

"I'll wait," he said.

She was back within five minutes, the hard plastic fumbling as she picked the handset back up, giving way to her voice.

"I'm sorry, Ian," she said. "This is my fault. His name is Stan Lecky. He ... he was a neighbor of mine when I came out here. A friend."

"A lover?"

"No, Ian. Just a friend. But ... he started saying things that made me.... We had a falling out. I got a restraining order. He moved away eight or nine months ago."

"He was the one who took the picture of you, wasn't he? The picture of you and Flat Diane."

"Yes."

Ian considered the envelope that had contained the latest atrocity. The postmark was from Seattle. Stan Lecky in Seattle. And a photo of him, no less. Certainly it couldn't be so hard with all that to find an address.

"She hasn't seen that, has she?" Candice asked. He didn't know how best to answer.

Ian slept in on Saturday, pretending that the dead black sleep and the hung-over exhaustion of his body were related somehow to luxury. It had been years since he'd been able to sleep past six a.m. He had Diane to feed and dress and shuffle off to school. He had his commute. His body learned its rhythms, and then it held to them. But Saturday, Ian rose at ten.

Diane was already on the couch, a bowl of cereal in her lap, her eyes clouded. Her skin seemed paler, framed by the darkness of her hair. Bags under her eyes like bruises. Ian recalled Victorian death pictures—photographs of the dead kept as mementos, or perhaps to hold a bit of the soul that had fled. He made himself toast and tea, and sat beside his daughter.

On the TV, girls three or four years older than Diane were talking animatedly about their boyfriends. They wore tight jeans and midriff tops, and no one thought it odd. No one wondered whether this was the path of wisdom. He found himself wondering what Diane made of it, but didn't ask. There were more pressing issues.

"How'd you sleep?" he asked.

"Okay."

"More nightmares?"

She shrugged, her gaze fixed on the screen. Ian nodded, accepting the tacit *yes*. He finished his toast, washed down the last of his tea, smacked his lips.

"I have to go out for a little while. Errands."

"Want me to come too?"

"No, you stay here. I won't be long."

Diane looked away and down. It made his heart ache to see it. Part of that was knowing that he'd once again failed to protect her from some pain, and part a presentiment of the longer absence she would have to endure. He leaned over and kissed the crown of her head where the bones hadn't been closed the first time he'd held her.

"I'll be right back, kiddo," he murmured, and she smiled wanly, accepting his half-apology. And yet, by the time he had his keys, she was lost again in the television, gone into her own world as if he had never been there.

Tohiro was sitting in his driveway, a lawnmower partially disassembled before him. He nodded as Ian came up the path, but neither rose nor turned back to his work. Ian squatted beside him.

"I don't know why I think I can do this," Tohiro said. "Every time I start, it's like I don't remember how poorly it went the time before. And by the time it comes back to me, it's too late, the thing's already in

pieces."

"Hard. I do the same thing myself."

Tohiro nodded.

"I need a favor," Ian said. "I have to go away for a bit. Diane's mother and I ... there are some things we need to discuss. I might be away for week, perhaps. Perhaps less. I was wondering if...."

It choked him. Asking for help had never been a strong suit, nor lying. The two together were almost more than he could manage. Tohiro frowned and leaned forward, picking up a small, grease-covered bit of machinery and dropping it thoughtfully into a can of gasoline.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Tohiro asked. "The timing might look...."

He knew then. Diane had told Kit, and Kit her parents; nothing could be more natural.

"I don't have the option," Ian said.

"This is about what's happening to Diane?"

"Yes."

Ian's knees were starting to ache a bit, but he didn't move, nor did Tohiro. The moment stretched, then:

"It might be better if Kit invited her," Tohiro said. "If it were a treat—a week-long slumber party—it could mask the sting."

"Do you think she would?"

"For Diane? Kit would learn to fly if Diane asked her. Girls."

"I'd appreciate it. More than I can say."

"You are putting a certain faith in me."

Tohiro met his gaze, expression almost challenging.

"It isn't you," Ian said, softly. "I'm fairly sure I know who it is."

"I see."

Ian shrugged, aware as he did so that it was a mirror of his daughter's, and that Tohiro would understand its eloquence as Ian had understood Diane's.

"I'll let you know when it's going to happen," Ian said. "I can't go before the CPS home visit, but it won't be long after that. And if you ever need the same of me, only say so."

The man shifted under Ian's words, uneasy. Dark eyes looked up at him and then away. Tohiro stuck fingers into the gasoline, pulling out the shining metal that the fuel had cleaned.

"That brings up something. Ian.... Anna and I would rather not have Kit stay over with Diane. I know it isn't you, that you wouldn't ... but the stakes are high, and I can't afford being wrong."

Ian rocked back. A too-wide rictus grin forced its way onto his face—he could feel the skin pulling.

"I'm sorry, Ian, it's just...."

"It's the right thing," he forced out, ignoring the anger and shock, pushing it down. "If I thought for a minute that it was you ... or even if I only weren't certain, then...."

Ian opened his hands, fingers spread; the gesture a suggestion of open possibility, a euphemism for violence. It was something they both understood. Men protected their children. Men like the two of them, at least.

Ian pulled himself up, his knees creaking. Kit, in the window, caught sight of him and waved. She was lighter than Diane, but not as pretty, Ian thought.

"I'll call later," Ian said.

"Do. I'll talk with Kit. We'll arrange things. But Ian? Diane needs you."

"I know she does. I don't want to leave her. Especially now, I just...."

"I didn't mean don't go," Tohiro said. "I meant don't get caught."

The home visit was less than he expected. Two women in casual businesswear appeared at the appointed hour. One took Diane away, the other asked him profoundly personal questions—Why had his wife left him? Had he been in therapy? Did he have a police record? Could he describe his relationship with his daughter? Only the last of these pushed him to tears. The woman was sympathetic, but unmoved; a citizen of a nation of tears from innocent and guilty alike.

She arranged a time and place for Diane to see a doctor—a woman doctor and Ian hadn't even had to ask. He promised that Diane would be there, and she explained the legal ramifications if she were not. The other woman appeared with Diane at her side. Diane's face was gray with exhaustion. Ian shook their hands, thanked them explicitly for coming, implicitly for not taking his child from him.

When they had gone, Diane went out to the back steps, looking out over a yard gone to seed—long grass and weeds. Her head rested in her hands. Ian sat beside her.

"Not so bad, was it?" he asked.

"She asked me a lot of questions," Diane said. "I don't know if I answered them all right."

"Did you tell her the truth?"

"I think so."

"Only think?"

Diane's brow furrowed as she looked at the horizon. Her shoulders hunched forward.

"She asks if things happened. And sometimes I think they did, but then I can't remember. After a while I start getting scared."

"It's like you're living a life you don't know about," Ian said, and she nodded. He put an arm around her shoulders, and she leaned in to him, trembling and starting to cry. Her sobs wracked her thin body like vomiting. Ian, holding her, wept.

"I'm not okay, Daddy," she wailed to his breast. "I'm not okay. I'm not okay."

"You will be, sweetie. You will."

The picture is cropped. In the original, things had been happening as unnatural to paper as they would be to a child. In this version, only the man's chest above the nipples, his shoulders, his face, his smug expression.

These are all the details that matter. In this photograph, he could be anyone, doing anything. It is a head shot, something to put down on a bar or store counter, the sort of photograph that seems to fit perfectly with the phrase "I'm looking for someone; maybe you've seen him."

The original photo has obscenities and suggestions written on it. There is no writing on this copy, no note to accompany it. Nothing that will tie it back to Ian, should the police find it and not him.

He had driven to Seattle—a two-day trip—in a day and a half. Flying would have been faster, but he'd taken his pistol out of storage. Driving with a handgun was easy; flying impossible or, if not impossible, not worth doing.

He arrived in the city late at night and called Diane from a payphone using a card he'd bought with cash. She was fine. School was boring. Kit was a butthead. Her voice was almost normal—if he knew her less, he might have mistaken it. He was her father, though, and he knew what she sounded like when things were okay and when she only wanted them to be. They didn't talk about the nightmares. He told her he loved her, and she evaded, embarrassed. With the handset back in its cradle, the gun in his jacket pocket pulling the fabric down like a hand on his shoulder, Ian stood in the rain, the cool near-mist soaking him. In time, he gathered himself together enough to find a hotel and a bed to lie in while his flesh hummed from exhaustion and the road.

Finding Lecky took all the next day and part of the night, but he did it. The morning sun gave the lie to the city's gray reputation—clouds of perfect white stretched, thinned, vanished, re-formed against a perfect blue sky. Nature ignoring Ian's desperation. The kids spare changing on the street corners avoided his gaze.

It was early, the morning rush hour still a half hour from starting. Ian didn't want the beast to go off to work, didn't want to spend a day waiting for the confrontation. He wanted it over now.

The house was in a bad part of town, but the lawn was trim, the windows clean. Moss stained the concrete walk, and the morning paper lay on the step, wrapped in dewy plastic. Ian picked it up, shaking the drops from it, and then rang the doorbell. His breath was shaking. The door opened and the beast appeared, a cup of coffee in one hand.

There was no glimmer of recognition, no particular sense of confusion or unease. Here, Ian thought, was a man with a clear conscience. A man who had done no wrong.

"I need to talk to you," Ian said, handing the man his newspaper.

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

"No. But we have business in common. We have people in common, I think. May I come in?"

The man frowned at Ian and put down the paper.

"I'm sorry," the beast said, smiling as he stepped back, preparing to close the door. "I have to get to work here, and really I don't want whatever you're selling. Thanks, though."

"I've come for Flat Diane."

The man's expression shifted—surprise, chagrin, anger, all in the course of a single breath. Ian clamped his hand on the butt of his pistol, his finger resting against the trigger.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about," Ian said. "I have the pictures."

The beast shook his head, defensive and dismissive at the same time.

"Okay," the man said. "Okay, look, so it was a bad joke. All right. I mean, it's not like anyone got hurt, right?"

"What do you know about it?"

Something in Ian's voice caught his attention. Pale blue eyes fixed on him, the first hint of fear behind them. Ian didn't soften. His heart was tripping over as if he'd been running, but his head felt very calm.

"No one got hurt," the man said. "It's just paper. So maybe it was a little crude. It was just a joke, right? You're, like, Diane's dad? Look, I'm sorry if that was a little upsetting, but...."

"I saw what you did to her."

"To who?" The eyes were showing their fear, their confusion.

"My daughter."

"I never *touched* your daughter."

"No?"

It was a joy, stripping his certainty away, seeing the smug, leering face confused and frightened. Ian leaned in.

"Tell you what. Give me Flat Diane," he said, "and I might let you live."

The panic in the pale eyes was joyous, but even in his victory, Ian felt the hint that it was too much; he'd gone too far.

"Sure," the beast said, nodding. "No, really, sure. Come on, I'll...."

And he tried to slam the door. Ian had known it was coming, was ready for it. His foot blocked the closing door and he pulled the gun from his pocket. The beast jumped back, lost his balance, toppled. The coffee fanned out behind him and splashed on the hardwood floor as Ian kicked the door closed behind him.

The beast was blinking, confused. His hands were raised, not in surrender, but protection, as if his fingers might deflect a bullet. A radio was playing—morning show chatter. Ian smelled bacon grease on the air.

"Please," the beast said. "Look, it's going to be okay, guy. Just no guns. All right? No guns."

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Flat Diane!" Ian yelled, pleased to see the beast flinch.

"It's not here anymore. Seriously. Seriously, it's gone. Joke over. Honestly."

"I don't believe you."

"Look, it's a long story. There were some things that happened and it just made sense to get rid of it, you know? Let it go. It was only supposed to be a joke. You know Candice...."

Ian shook his head. He felt strange; his mind was thick as cotton and yet perfectly lucid.

"I'm not leaving without her," he said.

"It's not *here!*" the beast shouted, his face flushed red. He rolled over, suddenly facing the back of the house. Running. With a feeling like reaching out to tap the fleeing man's shoulder, Ian raised the gun and fired. The back of the beast's head bloomed like a rose, and he fell.

Oh Jesus, Ian thought. And then, a moment later, *I couldn't have made that shot if I'd tried.*

He walked forward, pistol trained on the unmoving shape, but there was no need. The beast was dead. He'd killed him. Ian stood silently, watching the pool of blood seep across the floor. There was less than he'd thought. The morning show announcers laughed at something. Outside, a semi drove by, rattling the windows. Ian put the gun in his pocket, ignoring the heat.

He hadn't touched anything, not with his hands. There were no fingerprints. But he didn't have Flat Diane. He had to search the place. He had to hurry. Perhaps the beast kept plastic gloves. The kind you use for housework.

He searched the bedroom, the bath. The kitchen where half an egg was growing cold and solid on its plate. And then the room in the back. The room from the pictures. He went through everything—the stacks of pornography, the camera equipment. He didn't look away, no matter how vile the things he found. Rape porn. Children being used. Other things. Worse. But not his daughter.

He sat on the edge of the bathtub, head in his hands, when the voice came. The house was a shambles. Flat Diane wasn't there, or if she was, she was too well hidden. He didn't know what to do. The doorbell chimed innocently and a faint voice came.

"Stan?" it said. A woman's voice. "Stan, are you in there? It's Margie."

Ian stood and walked. He didn't run. He stepped over the corpse, calmly out the back door, stuffing the rubber gloves into his pockets as he went. There was an alleyway, and he opened the gate and stepped out into it. He didn't run. If he ran, they'd know he was running from something. And Diane needed him, didn't she. Needed him not to get caught.

Ian didn't stop to retrieve his things from the hotel; he walked to his car, slipped behind the wheel, drove. Twenty minutes east of Klamath Falls, he pulled to the side, walked to a tree, and leaning against it, vomited until he wept.

"I didn't mean to," he said through his horror. "Christ, I didn't mean to."

He hadn't called Diane from his room. He hadn't given anyone his name. He'd even found a hotel that took cash. Of course he'd fucking meant to.

"I didn't mean to," he said.

He slept that night at a rest stop, bent uncomfortably across the back seat. In his dreams, he saw the moment again and again; felt the pistol jump; heard the body strike wood. The pistol jumped; the body struck the floor. The pale head, round as an egg, cracked open. The man fled, heels kicking back behind

him; the pistol jumped.

Morning was sick. A pale sun in an empty sky. Ian stretched out the vicious kinks in his back, washed his face in the restroom sink, and drove until nightfall.

He hadn't found Flat Diane, but he couldn't go back for her—not now. Maybe later, when things cooled down. But by then she could have been thrown away or burned or cut to pieces. And he couldn't guess what might happen to Diane when her shadow was destroyed—freedom or death or something entirely else. He didn't want to think about it. The worst was over, though. The worst had to be over, or else he didn't think he could keep breathing.

Tohiro and Anna's house glowed in the twilight, windows bright and cheerful and warm and normal. He watched them from the street, his back knotted from driving, the car ticking as it cooled. Tohiro passed by the picture window, his expression calm, distant and slightly amused. Anna was in the kitchen, the back of her head moving as her hands worked at something; washing, cutting, wringing—there was no way to tell. Somewhere in there, Kit and Diane played the games they always did. The pistol jumped; the body fell. Ian started the car, steadied his hands on the wheel, then killed the engine and got out.

Tohiro's eyebrows rose a fraction and a half-smile graced his mouth when he opened the door.

"Welcome back," Tohiro said, stepping back to let him in. "We weren't expecting you until tomorrow. Things went better than you thought?"

"Things went faster."

Curiosity plucked at the corners of Tohiro's eyes. Ian gazed into the house, willing away the questions that begged to be asked. Tohiro closed the door.

"You look...," he began.

Ian waited. *Like shit*. Or maybe *pounded*. The silence stretched and he glanced over. Tohiro's face was a soft melancholy. Ian nodded, barely moving, half asking him to finish, half daring him.

"You look older."

"Yeah, well. You know. Time."

A shriek and the drumming of bare feet and Diane had leapt into his arms. His spine protested the weight. Ian held her carefully, like something precious. Then, as if she'd suddenly remembered that they weren't alone, she drew back, tried to make it all seem casual.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey. You been good?"

Diane shrugged—an *I guess* gesture.

"We were just about to have supper," Tohiro said. "If you'd like to join us?"

Ian looked at Diane. Her face was impassive, blank, but at the edges there were the touches invisible to anyone else, anyone who didn't know her as he did.

"I think I'd rather just roll on home," Ian said. "That good by you, sweetie?"

"Sure," she said, upbeat enough that he knew it had been her fondest wish. He let her ride him to the car,

piggyback.

That night, they both suffered nightmares. It struck Ian, as he calmed Diane from hers and waited for his own to fade, that there would be more nights like this; screams from her or from him, then warm milk and night-lights and empty talk that gave the evil some time to fade. That if they were *lucky* there would be many more. Nothing more would happen to Flat Diane; justice would not come to call for him. It was the best he could hope for.

"It's okay," he whispered to her as she began to drowse. Curled into her blanket, her breath came deeper, more regular. "It's over. It's over, sweetie. It's all right."

He didn't add that just being over didn't mean it hadn't changed everything forever, or that some things don't stop just because they've ended. Or that a girl set voyaging takes her own chances, and no father's love—however profound—can ever call her back. Those weren't the sorts of things you said when all you had to offer your child were comfort and hope.