

Emma Pattee

NO MORE BODIES OF WATER

Annie has been waiting forty-two minutes for her husband to come into the bedroom and say he wants a divorce. She's lying on the bed, on top of the comforter. Her Birkenstocks sit on the floor like a patient dog.

Down the hall, Annie can hear Ryan reading Carson his favorite bedtime book, *Dinosnores*. Annie knows every word by heart: *When the sun has gone down, and the blue stars appear. Then the Dinosnores know that their bedtime is near...* Ryan's voice so untroubled. How can you look at your spouse with such bile on your face and then look at your child and smile like you've never had a nasty thought in your life? Before having a kid, Annie wouldn't have thought it was possible. Now it was just as unremarkable as being out of oat milk.

She went to such great trouble to design this bedroom. The bedside lamps are little bronze cages guarding a lightbulb. The rug is from Morocco and the rug pad is wool and doesn't outgas. A massive macramé hanging on the wall that Annie made herself, carefully follow-

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ing a Pinterest tutorial, unknotting and unwinding each time she made a mistake. A curved bamboo hanging chandelier from Nepal. Hours she spent at the paint store. Swatch after swatch in little rows. Searching for the bluest gray she could imagine. Or the greyest blue. A color like the ocean when it's raining. Like that part of the evening when you walk into a room and forget to turn on the light and for a moment you are floating in between hours, you've fallen out of your life and into that little pocket between day and night. That is the color of Annie's walls. That is why she spent so many weeks trying to get it just right.

What an awful day, Annie thinks to herself. Maybe even the worst day of her life. She wonders if she should post that on Facebook. *So I just had the worst day of my life . . . Or maybe, worst day ever.* With that very crestfallen emoji. She imagines a Facebook post explaining the whole situation; how she'd taken Carson to the reservoir because she'd wanted to get outside and enjoy the sunshine. How she'd worn a giant floppy sun hat, the kind of thing she'd have been too self-conscious to wear before having a kid, but now, who gives a fuck anymore? How they'd found a beautiful spot under a poplar tree right by the reservoir, sunny but under the cover of the branches and leaves, with a breeze that kept them cool but wasn't rough enough to steal hats or rumple blankets. For at least an hour Annie had lain there, throwing Goldfish for Carson like he was a little puppy.

How a couple had been sitting a few feet away having their own picnic and the man had been explaining to the woman in the most convoluted way that he thought he didn't smoke an excessive amount of weed. "I feel like for some people, it would be a lot, but when I think about my own personal capacity, and my own mental state, I just feel like it isn't, and like I'm not saying that somebody on the outside might not, like, look at how much I'm smoking and have a different perspective, and I would say that I'm open to that perspective, if they did think that, I'm just saying that when I . . ." How the woman just sat there nodding. As if she was being paid to listen solemnly. Why was that woman wasting such a beautiful day with a man so awful? What had happened to that poor woman that she thought this was the best she could get?

How Annie had laid there in the sun and let the man's words turn into dandelion feathers and drift down around her. How lucky she was to have Ryan, who didn't smoke weed and didn't talk endlessly and made nearly six figures and also did the dishes every now and then.

Good man, healthy baby, new car, beautiful house. She had nothing, nothing, to complain about. What a dream, this life! She hadn't felt this relaxed in God knows how long, not in the ten months since Carson was born, or the nine months she was pregnant. Her body was so tired, like an old dog that's spent its whole life being a good dog and now just wants to sleep and be left alone. She was only thirty-one. Thirty-one! It seemed like somebody should have told her that when a baby exits your body, it is holding in its tiny bloody hand the most alive part of you. That sharp iridescent flicker.

How after a while Carson had gotten bored and started crawling off the blanket and plucking blades of grass between his fat little pointer finger and his fat little thumb and then stuffing them into his mouth. For once, she had dressed him in an actual outfit. An organic hemp romper with polka dots and tiny white Chuck Taylors. She wasn't the kind of mother who controlled what her child ate, she was very *baby-led*, but with the kinds of things they spray on these park lawns, you just couldn't risk it.

How Annie had picked him up and carried him, on a whim, over to the reservoir, which was a giant concrete bowl of water surrounded by one of those vintage-looking iron fences with a gap at the bottom. She had let him stand on the concrete rim and press his face up to the bars. "That's where our water comes from," she had told him, too loudly, in case anybody was listening in and might be impressed with the educational way she spoke to her baby. Today she was the mother she wanted to be: confident, relaxed, engaged. Her phone stored away in her pocket.

How, maybe because of all that confidence and relaxation, maybe because she just wasn't thinking, she had let Carson stand there on his own, on that concrete rim, with his hands holding on to the iron bars. The likelihood of him letting go, and then slipping through the gap at the bottom of the fence, was so slim. Why live in fear like that? Besides, wasn't the whole thing about Waldorf and Montessori that you have to let your kids be confident, take risks, be independent?

How she stepped back and took her phone out of her pocket, to take a picture so that she could show Ryan how grown-up Carson looked, holding onto the railing by himself. And also how tiny, a little polka-dotted polka-dot, in that tranquil landscape of grass and trees and reservoir.

How a dog had run up out of nowhere, barking. A big beautiful black dog with a long shiny coat and a kind of joyful lope. Annie turned to look. Even the weed-smoking man fell silent. And Carson, Carson clinging so tightly to the metal bars, was so startled by the sound that he turned his head and at the same time let go of the fence post with one hand in order to reach for her, and lost his balance, and slipped beneath that iron gate and down the sloped cement wall right into the water.

How the last thing she saw was his tiny head disappearing under the water. How she had frozen for a moment and a voice in her head said, "this isn't real." She made a sound like she was being stabbed, a kind of loud gasp grunt. She dropped her phone. She clawed at the metal fence, trying to get over it.

How the man who didn't smoke too much weed had vaulted the fence and rolled down the concrete side into the water, which was only thigh-deep and fallen to his knees flinging around but coming up empty. The water was splashing everywhere. People were gathered at the fence now, screaming or silent with their hands over their mouths. Even people who were sitting far, far across the park had seen it and were running, as if they could somehow do something to make this terrible thing be undone.

Annie felt like a piece of wrapping paper, ripped in half.

How the man finally lifted Carson from underneath the water, and by then many other people had vaulted the fence and were in the reservoir and they passed his little slumped body up and over the fence, everybody working together so kindly, so intently. How a woman in running shorts and sports bra declared herself a doctor and knelt over his little face. The romper was soaked and lay flat against his body, where his tiny ribs jutted upwards against all those polka dots. His white shoes still perfectly white. The sound of sirens from blocks away. The doctor leaned back and pressed two fingers into his chest with such force it looked like he might break in half. Annie jumped forward but the doctor yelled "get her back," and the woman with the pot-smoking man ran up and wrapped her arms around Annie tightly.

How finally, finally, Carson had started coughing and choking and then screaming. And still the doctor would not let Annie go to him, and instead starting moving her hands around his body like she was

blind and reading his form, and by then the EMTs had arrived with a stretcher and they knelt in the grass and cut off his romper in two quick slices and put a tiny oxygen mask over his face. Annie tried to get down on her hands and knees, to be in his eyesight. "Mommy's right here," she called out, but he just howled and thrashed his face back and forth against the oxygen mask. How the ambulance had nearly made it to the hospital when she realized she was still wearing that horrible giant floppy sun hat.

How at the hospital, Ryan had shoved by her to get to Carson, had taken Carson's tiny hand in his hand and sobbed silently, his shoulders shaking. How his shoes weren't even tied, the laces flopping around, and when she had put her hand on his shoulder, he had shaken her off, wouldn't even look at her. How she had put her hand on top of his hand, which was resting on top of the blanket that was covering Carson's foot. And after a moment he had flipped his hand to hold hers, gently at first and then harder and harder. She felt her knuckles starting to bump into each other. How she had tried to pull away but he wouldn't let her. The only sound in the room was both of them breathing hard. How when he'd finally let go of her hand, she hadn't said a word, just went to the bathroom in the hallway and flipped the deadbolt and lay on the floor, cradling her hand against her body, unmoving, like roadkill.

How the social worker had asked her over and over to slow down, to say it one more time. To take a deep breath. "So, you were holding him by the railing, and then what happened?" Annie tries to speak, to explain, but every time she gets to the important part, she begins sobbing a spitty open-mouthed sob, and the words scurry back inside her.

Annie holds her hands up to show them. In her hands is an imaginary baby. She holds it up in front of her. "I just . . ." she starts. "I just . . ."

"Take a breath," the social worker says.

How Ryan, who still hadn't moved from the edge of the tiny hospital bed, who still hadn't said a word, who had kept his arms held tightly over his chest, looked over at her and said, "Pull it the fuck together Annie, goddamn." How then there was a rich fudgy silence, broken up only by the mouse whisper of the social worker's pencil writing away.

How they drove home in silence that even words wouldn't have been able to break. Like they were underwater and being pulled apart by the current, all of them. Even Carson was quiet, dazed, staring out the window at the blur of trees and street signs. And when they'd arrived at home, Ryan had been the one to pull Carson out of his car seat and Ryan had been the one to bring him inside and unsnap that horrible little hospital band off his wrist. "I can put him to bed," Annie had said, arms out, reaching for Carson, and Ryan held him away from her, closed the nursery door behind them.

Now Annie is in the bedroom, waiting like some kind of delinquent child. She feels sick to her stomach. She wonders if he'll try to choke her. Maybe put a pillow over her head and press down until she stops breathing. She's not afraid of that, not really. She'd probably do the same thing, roles reversed. Besides, he won't actually kill her. If he tried to kill her, he'd end up in jail which means leaving Carson alone with her. He's too good of a dad to do that.

Fuck you Ryan. Annie whispers under her breath. *Fuck you you fucking asshole. I fucking hate you.* Does she hate Ryan? Who knows. It just feels so good to say. She likes how it feels to press her top teeth against her bottom lip and clamp down against the force of all that angry air. She feels like a kettle pouring out steam.

Annie is still in her picnic outfit—a kind of gauzy linen blouse and cut-off shorts—and she thinks for a moment about changing into something more comfortable. But that might look to Ryan like she's forgiven herself.

It was just an accident, she tells herself. It could have happened to anyone. Some people beat their kids, leave them out on the side of the highway, won't feed them. She was just trying to take a picture. If anything, her only crime was being too focused on him, too infatuated with him.

All that for a picture, another voice says. Her own voice. You don't work and you don't have anything to do but just watch this one tiny kid and you can't even do that. All you care about is your photos and your phone and looking good on Instagram. Ryan probably wishes he hadn't dumped his college girlfriend. Ryan is probably going to try and get full custody.

Annie thinks about texting her therapist, but to say what? How can she explain this? That she did nothing. Didn't climb the fence, didn't call 911. Just screamed and screamed.

Annie reminds herself of everything her therapist has told her. Shame can paralyze the body. You have to get rid of shame, and quickly. Give yourself self-love. Lots of compassion. Annie tries. She puts her hand on her collarbone and says, you're not so bad, little Annie. She imagines herself as a little girl with an awkward braid and a kind of desperate way of smiling at people.

You're okay little Annie, she says. You did a bad thing but you're not a bad person.

Any minute now, Ryan will be finished reading, and all the little Dinosaurs will be fast asleep, snoring, and Ryan will put Carson into his sleepsack and turn off the light and play "Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star" by Raffi three times while rocking Carson and then gently lay Carson down in his crib with his pacifier and water bottle and say "Good night, Carson," and leave the nursery. Then he will walk down the hall to their bedroom and tell Annie he wants a divorce.

She won't fight him on it, she decides. She'll just gather her blanket and her pillow and head down to the couch. In the freezer is a tub of cheap ice cream, cookies and cream, and Annie imagines eating big spoonfuls in the dark, standing barefoot in the kitchen, bright flashes from the TV screen lighting up the room.

She tries to imagine being a single mom. Doing bath time alone. The middle of the night wakeups alone. Buying groceries alone. For some reason, she gets stuck on the groceries. How exactly would she carry them in? She could bring them in first but then would have to leave Carson in the car parked in the driveway, and that was exactly the kind of thing that everyone agrees you shouldn't do. But if she brought Carson in from the car first, then she'd have to leave him in the house to go back out and get the groceries. If she leaves the front door open, she could hear him crying. The problem with that is if she is by chance killed or raped by a passerby, then Carson is defenseless and the front door is wide open. But if she closes the front door, then she can't hear him crying. And if she is killed or raped by a passerby, who would know to check inside her locked door for a tiny little baby, crying on the floor?

Finally she decides that she'll pull into the driveway, take the stroller out of the back of the car, put Carson in the stroller, load one bag of groceries on top of the stroller, and stroll the groceries into the house, one bag at a time. That way he'll never be left alone, not even for a second.

Things have to change, she tells herself. No more risks, no more looking at her phone. She got lucky today but luck never holds. What if that pot-smoking man hadn't been there? What if that doctor hadn't been running by? What if Carson had never woken up, and they had all stood there as that doctor pumped away at him? As punishment, Annie makes herself imagine them zipping Carson's tiny body inside their big black bags. How they would have to place his arm by his side, his tiny little fingers loose. That image so acidic that Annie rolls over, thinking she might throw up all over their linen duvet. No more picnics, she promises, no more rivers or lakes or even swimming pools.

Down the hall, she can hear the opening bars of "Twinkle Twinkle, Little Star" starting up. She still has gripped in her hands a bunch of the linen duvet cover. Five, six hours at least she must have spent researching linen duvet covers. Where to find sustainably sourced linen. Which companies hand-stitch their covers in the US versus China. Ordering fabric swatches to hold them up against the wall color. She wanted an icy light blue like this beach in Destin, Florida that they went to on their honeymoon. Now it looks to her like the color of a drowned child's foot.

Last week Annie was talking to a friend about interior design and the friend said, "The only thing that you should never ever ever do in a bedroom is a bold color. There's just no good way to do a bold color in a bedroom that doesn't scream three-star hotel room."

Annie had just stared. It was so obvious; whenever you try to be cool, it's automatically not cool. But what can she do about it now? Besides, it wasn't a friend. It was reality TV.

She hates everything in this bedroom, Annie realizes. Herself most of all.

There's this terrible churning in her chest and when she tries to take deep breaths, tries to calm herself, it only gets worse. It starts with a

little heave, and then a soundless giggle, like a boat engine flipping over. She bites her lip to stop but the giggle has had babies, more giggles, and she presses her face into the duvet cover to shush the sound.

The nursery door shutting. Footsteps in the hall. Annie sits up and leans back against the headboard so it doesn't look like she was just lounging in bed. She crosses her arms but that's too defensive, so she uncrosses them and intertwines her fingers. She tries to position her mouth contritely. She bites her lip but that only makes her laugh more. It's a loose wild laugh, full of air and gusts like a balloon deflating. She rubs her hands over her arms, to try to soothe herself.

Take this seriously, she tells herself. She forces herself to imagine Carson underwater. Thrashing out for her. She replays how he cried out as he slid down the concrete chute into the water, his tiny head disappearing, all pale and hairless like a knee in a soapy bath.

But that wild spiral of laughter is working its way up through her ribs and spine. The more she laughs, the more she has to laugh. Annie clamps her hand over her mouth and laughs frantically into the darkness of her palm.

This is the end, she thinks. You can never come back from this. She imagines Ryan on the witness stand, explaining through tears how he walked in to find his wife laughing just mere hours after her son had almost drowned. How the judge and jury would look over at her, with some horror, such recoil. "You will never see your child again!" the judge would yell at her, and for some reason, she imagines herself sitting in a jail cell, naked and completely alone.

When she hears the rattle of the bedroom door knob, she knows her only option is to pretend that she is not laughing but crying, and she covers her face with her hands and gives in to it, until she is barely breathing with how hard she is laughing and gasping for breath, and the tears and saliva are mixing together and running down her wrists and forearms and she is shaking uncontrollably, leaned forward in bed, nearly the perfect picture of suffering.