I say I will buy the Jiffy Markers myself.

For Kate, the office assistant who sometimes helps me, has her work cut out for her, and none of the students who had volunteered to help with the campus peace crusade have turned up this morning. It’s eleven thirty-five and I’m done my morning honours seminar in classic novellas. Notes from Underground depresses them all, and I can no longer remember why I put it on the syllabus. It was certainly a mistake to put it last. Classes are done this week, and students are focussed on exam anxiety already. Dostoyevsky is tipping them over the edge, and I feel responsible. My one dependable Student Peace Movement member, Jee-Anne, is coming at twelve thirty to pick up posters to put up around campus. Except they aren’t made yet.

At eleven forty-five I find myself on my hands and knees on my office floor, getting high on Jiffy Marker fumes, wondering how many years I will be making posters to stop violence against women, to start drinking fairly traded coffee, to get cracking on raising funds for refugees and generally to pretend to put the kibosh on the screwed-up behaviour that makes the notion of a civilized world so laughable. I’m less into this than I was in the fall. April is tough: I can visualize the towers of exams that will await marking very soon, and am already feeling guilty about the fact that only large amounts of chocolate and caffeine, both frowned upon by the Weight Watchers commandant who runs the weekly meeting in our neighbourhood, will get me through.

I have a nice stack of Bristol-board posters for Jee-Anne
and I slow down, taking stock, rather belatedly, of my pen-womanship. Jiffywomanship? Hector always says I have a “fine teacher’s hand,” but he usually says that when he wants me to write a particularly difficult sympathy card or something. Today my heart is not in it, and my lines, announcing the information picket at the consulate tomorrow, slant towards each other in a decidedly unprofessional manner. Whatever. Where is Jee-Anne? Hector is picking me up for lunch at twelve thirty and we have an unvoiced plan to take off, somewhere, for the afternoon. I am done teaching for today. It is Friday, the Friday of one of the busiest weeks of term for both of us. At breakfast, before dropping Little Max off at daycare, we consulted our calendars and made the date for lunch. The way Hector said “lunch” made me look at him closely. He raised his eyebrows over Little Max’s brown head, shovelling Cheerios into him but looking intently at me the whole while. I met his eyes, large and brown, often partly obscured by a flopping mass of brown hair that will tumble down over his face when he is active or distracted. This morning I saw his eyes clearly, because he has accidentally got a short haircut that is causing him a good deal of chagrin.

“You don’t have any appointments?” I asked. “It’s your office hour on Friday afternoon.”

“I’m cancelling it.” He looked at me. No smile. The eyebrows were returned to standard placement. I looked back at him, tried to make my face as enigmatic as his. This was hard for me. I have no acting skills.

“What time do we have to p-i-c-k u-p the b-a-b-y?” I spelled all the words that might set off Little Max, who loves his daycare but pretends to get upset at any mention of it. Unless he mentions it, at which point it is okay to discuss it: his favourite daycare workers, the spray-paint-macaroni crafts, the sandbox, the exotic snacks, the fabulous field
trips to petting zoos, the waterplay table (what skill does this teach?).

“How about the very latest time possible?” Hector was on his feet, getting the dishcloth to wipe the milk from his good dark green shirt. He fetched a clean baby washcloth from the basket on the wall and wiped up Little Max, who shouted his disapproval. Little Max skittered off into the living room, crashed into his new junior drum kit, kicked a Frisbee and several *I Spy* board books under the couch. The cats, not accustomed yet to the noise of the drum kit, leaped for the stairs and disappeared around the landing.

We put the finishing touches on Little Max’s lunch: pudding (vanilla, never anything else on pain of death), little chunks of bread and meat in separate containers (large sandwich-like articles are treated with disdain), a cheese stick (expensive, sometimes hated, sometime revered by Little Max, impossible to predict which on any particular day), grapes cut precisely in half, crackers. Would it all come back again untouched, attended by an extremely pale three-year-old exhausted from refusing to eat or rest or drink all day because we’ve had the temerity to go to work at the university and leave him with the daycare workers he adores? The child is baffling. His personality is huge, his will stronger than ours by far.

Hector drew a cat on a Post-it note and wrote the word “Love” in different languages all over it. He slipped it into the lunch kit and zipped it up. “The very latest time possible,” he repeated. “How about that?”

There was, apparently, nothing in his voice out of the ordinary, but I stood closer to him, letting the shoulder of my superscary academic power suit touch his shoulder. I bolted my vitamins and looked at the clock. “We don’t normally need that long,” I said. “But that sounds very good to me.”
Now, at noon, he is late, but only by a few minutes, and the student has not yet arrived to collect the posters anyway. I check my email again. I’m looking for a message from the editor of a journal I sent a paper to ages ago, and nothing is happening. I no longer even remember what the paper was really about, but found my research notes in a file folder the previous day and was reminded of the pending nature of this project. I sent them a query. I could use some good news but am doubtful. What did I call it? “Heart (Attack) of Darkness: Myocardial Infarctions and Other Afflictions in High Modernism.” Perhaps a mistake. I let my friend Tom in History talk me into that one. We were in the faculty club and it seemed perfect at the time. Well, it’s not his career that’s being ruined, is it? He’s had tenure for years and has already started to wear bedroom slippers to class.

There are only emails with subject lines like “You too can have multiple Orgazzzmmm” and “Be a Backgammon Master!” Is this really a burning need, I wonder? I briefly try to picture all the potential backgammon addicts that this spam will attract, but fail. Is backgammon mastery really up there with the need to gamble, have penis extensions and find deep discount pharmaceuticals? I hesitate at the subject lines “Big Conference” and “Super Milton.” They could be legitimate. I open the first one, holding my breath, waiting for some vicious virus to devour my computer. Nothing happens. The message is gibberish. I delete it.

A moment later, Jee-Anne collects the posters and then Hector calls. “I’ll be down in a minute,” he says. His office in the Music Department is two floors above mine in the English Department. “Think about where you want to go for lunch.”

“I thought that was settled.” I try to say it in a manner both provocative and neutral, but he is already gone. I could hear the tension in his voice. He doesn’t get along with the
head of his Department, and there is a leadership review ongoing, in which Hector has taken an unaccustomed stand, bold and assertive. He doesn’t want to be head, but I can see that the younger members of the Department are ready to line up behind him if he chooses to stand for the position. He feels responsible for their well-being, but doesn’t want to do the administrative work. Something is up.

He is distracted when he arrives at my door, but he doesn’t want to talk about the Music Department. When I ask if he is sure he can take the afternoon off, he obliquely reminds me that he is conducting the university choir tonight at the final game of the regular season for the Badgers, Winnipeg’s semi-pro hockey club. They will sing “O Canada” before the puck drops, and, at the end of the first period, a short medley of Neil Young and Guess Who songs, in awfully tasty arrangements that Hector has somehow concocted. “Do you want to bring the baby?” he asks. Little Max is not a baby, but somehow speaking of him in this way gives us a peculiar joy. I’ve never analysed why. Perhaps because we talked about having a baby for so long, and when it finally happened it was such a stunning thing for us that we can’t leave the idea alone, even though Little Max is now a toddler.

Thinking of Little Max, now supposedly settling into “rest time” at daycare (but more likely demanding that the workers read T. S. Eliot’s “Growltiger’s Last Stand” to him over and over again), gives me a twinge of guilt and regret. It always does. Even when he’s with me I feel guilty that sometimes he isn’t. I almost ask Hector if he doesn’t think that maybe we should go pick him up and all go home together early, and then I catch a glimpse of Hector’s face at my side as we head down the hall, past the bucket catching the ceiling leak near Biology, towards the parking lot. I clamp my lips together, and we go home.
I often feel low in April, but it has not yet hit this year. I am still in the last week of classes, and although I am tired of teaching and the constant running from appointment to meeting to class, I also find it exhilarating. And meaningful. Most of what I do is still new enough to me that it actually feels like it means something. Hector has been at it longer, and sighs more about Department meetings and committee meetings and Senate meetings and gruesome end-of-year windups that are meant to be fun and end up being, well, gruesome. Later in April, I know, depression is likely to hit, and I need to formulate a plan. Without the structure of classes, without those faces waiting for me in English 100 or The Short Story, I flounder for a while. I have no particular interest in furthering my career or doing something for myself. I like doing things for them, the students. If someone asked me to write a book, I would be galvanized to do it because someone pretended that they needed me to do it. But no one ever asks academics to write books, unless their names are Harold Bloom or Noam Chomsky or Camille Paglia (but is she a real academic, I wonder?). But the rest of us, toiling away in places that are absolutely not Duke or Harvard, or even St. Francis Xavier, don’t exactly have publishers and editors beating our doors down with offers to illuminate the world about our thrilling research into “The Saskatchewan Bildungsroman,” or “Homoerotic Tropes in Early Dickens.”

So I am trying to make a schedule of moderate academic activity to start in May. Still send Little Max to daycare most days, work on the outline of a book, maybe on Iris Murdoch, maybe on Canadian comedy. Get some exercise – walk to the university at least three times a week, or ride my bike, which has not moved from our garage in five years. And I
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will write more Amnesty International letters. And do more gardening. And teach Little Max to garden. And volunteer at that refugee drop-in centre. And work on that children’s manuscript I abandoned in 1987. And so on. Already I am starting to feel the depression. I will do none of this.

But I am not depressed enough that it hampers me this afternoon. Nor does Hector’s anxiety about the internecine struggle in the Music Department seem to bother him overly. We do not even bother with food but head up to the bedroom, stepping over already-damaged pieces of the junior drum kit on the stairs. Hector closes the curtains. “Did you hear about the big grant that Juanita Braun-Epp got, in Sociology?” I shake my head and hold up two jewel-coloured brassieres that are his favourites. I have an old worn beige one on for work and intend to change. He likes to choose, and then he likes to watch me get undressed and dressed, or dressed and undressed. He’s not fussy. “She’s doing a study of Edwardian sleeping porches in Winnipeg houses and apartment buildings. Their impact on family life. The economic status of those with sleeping porches. I don’t know what all.” He considers the transparent black brassiere and the deep magenta lacy one. He is a connoisseur of such things and takes his time considering their possible impacts on his afternoon. I like this pace. I can hear the phone ringing on the first floor but we both ignore it. I watch his eyes as he thinks about the black one, the magenta one, weighing their various assets. They have no liabilities, frankly. Even I can see that. It was Hector who introduced me to lingerie, when we first met fifteen years ago, and I am a complete convert now. But he had to school me, and a lovelier course of study I never embarked upon. I used to have a selection of solid colour cotton underpants, sensible and serviceable, and never wore a brassiere if I didn’t absolutely have to. His eyes move back and forth from the
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brassieres to me, standing half undressed by the closet. He is sitting on the bed, which we never bothered making this morning, and he pulls himself back towards the pillows, piling them up behind him, settling into what he sometimes calls his “pasha” mode.

“I don’t quite see why that’s Sociology,” I say while his eyes move over me. “But then I’ve never understood what sociology is, frankly. I’m sure there’s something wrong with someone who claims to be an academic and doesn’t know what Sociology is.”

“There’s nothing whatsoever wrong with you,” says Hector. His voice has become different. His other voice returns briefly and he says, “Yeah. Couldn’t it as easily be a Psychology study? Or politics?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Let me see your Psychology study.”


“Yes, it is,” I say. And then we stop talking.

The performance of the university choir at the Badgers game is a huge success, with the audience singing along to “American Woman” with special gusto. Hector will later say he is disgruntled by the reaction, because the choir worked all winter on their annual Bach recital and when it was performed last month the response was polite but mild. The Neil Young/Guess Who medley was something he and the choir threw together in a couple of weeks and the crowd can’t get enough. Little Max sits on my knee and claps along to “Clap for the Wolfman” but then gets restless. His hand reaches up and then, purposefully or not – I can’t tell – his fingernails rake across my cheek. I gasp and jump out of my seat, barely holding on to Max, whose body now stiffens in anticipation of reproof. “Oh, Max, how could you? Don’t
hurt Mommy.” I hiss the words into his ear and manage to hold his body away from mine as he aims a hard kick at my stomach. I have a sudden memory of lying on a hotel bed, pregnant, crooning a loving, sentimental song to Little Max. We knew his sex and had his name picked out: Maximilian Frederick Erlicksen-Des Roches. By the time I was six months pregnant, I had a half-dozen sentimental lullabies made up that I would sing to the baby, and Hector was working on a more complicated composition for him, something based on *The Goldberg Variations*. The composition process did not survive the insanity that arrived the day that Little Max did. Hector never got past variation nine. Twenty-three to go. Twenty-three that will never be written, if my hunch is correct.

What was I doing in a hotel room, singing to a fetus? I try to remember as I swing a backpack, Little Max’s coat and rubber boots and Little Max himself up the steep stairs of the hockey arena. Too late, I remember Hector and turn to look down at the ice where the choir has been singing, hoping to be able to catch his eye and motion towards the door. But the choir is already dispersing, and I can only see Hector’s brown head moving through the gate in the boards. Little Max has stopped kicking now, and I see one of my first-year students watching me from the back row of this section of seats. I compose my face, trying to erase all traces of anger and shame. It was a wedding, I remember, but I don’t remember whose, and we had to travel out of town. Staying in a hotel was and is such a novelty for us, such an exercise in hedonism, that I was loathe to leave the room, and while Hector visited with relatives I stayed on the gigantic king-sized bed as long as possible, singing to a child who, I now think bitterly, was not worthy of any of the sweet sentiments we expended upon him. I think back to our longing for this child and then am recalled to the less sentimental
present by Little Max’s current silence. It is a tense and devious silence, I believe. He is plotting something.

He arches his back as I try to buckle him into his car seat, making it impossible to accomplish. I prevent myself from swearing and step back for a moment, breathing deeply and deliberately, trying to will myself into the actions of a loving and responsible parent. “Hey, honey,” I say. “Knock knock.”

His back relaxes and he automatically responds. “Who’s there?” I quickly move in and finishing the buckling, kiss him on the check and step back before he can swing at me again. “Dwayne,” I say, climbing into the front seat. I have to prompt him to say, “Dwayne who?” and only a parent could understand his enunciation anyway. “Dwayne the bathtub, I’m drowning,” I say, and start the car. He is new to knock-knock jokes but is fond of them. He does not laugh at this one – who would? – and I wonder if the concept of drowning has ever come up yet in his world. Probably not. Does it figure in any Maurice Sendak or Margaret Wise Brown books? No, I don’t think so. Although Margaret Wise Brown was one weird dame. Drowning is the least of the mayhem in Roald Dahl stories, but Little Max hasn’t encountered Dahl yet. Little Max is a Roald Dahl story, I decide.

Things are quiet, and apparently equilibrium is returning to our wounded mother-toddler relationship as we drive home. I briefly wonder about Hector’s mode of return, but this sort of thing has happened often since Little Max was born, and both of us are used to it, accustomed to asking colleagues for emergency rides or catching the bus. Once, as a baby, Little Max vomited profusely all over Hector just as we were walking into the keynote address of a conference that both Hector and I were interested in. We had fantasized that the baby would sleep peacefully through it and let us be. What fools we were. Without a word, Hector and Little
Max turned, and I entered alone, briefly ashamed at the relief I felt to be on my own. Then I was caught up in the activity of the conference, and only at lunchtime did I realize that my wallet was in the baby’s diaper bag and I had to beg money from an acquaintance to get some food. Now we are careful to have a few dollars, our keys and a bus token with us at all times, in case the other is swept away in Little Max’s Imperium. I hear Little Max’s voice now, and look back at him in the rear-view mirror. It is dark, and I mostly see big brown eyes, like Hector’s, but when the street lights sweep over him I also see the mop of brown curls and the mark on his cheek where we have unsuccessfully tried to remove a Wile E. Coyote tattoo.

“Mama,” he says.
“Yes, honey.”
“Knock knock.”
He has begun to make up his own knock-knock jokes.
“Who’s there?” I ask and can’t help smiling at him. I’m never sure if he can see me in the rear-view mirror as well as I can see him.
“Tree.”
“Tree who?”
“Tree and a rock and a wolf.” Then his throaty laugh, an astonishingly sophisticated laugh for a three-year-old. I can see him throwing his head back, hurling himself into the laughter. He has now a few dozen of these, all of them nonsense. “Knock knock. (Who’s there?) Kitten. (Kitten who?) Kitten in a truck.”

It is a week later and the depression I had feared is arriving. Classes are done, and I’m marking manfully. I think of it as manly effort, for some reason. I must analyse that sometime, but am incapable of much thought just now.
I can manage marking fine, and can manage still to make love with Hector. When that goes, then I know I’m in trouble. That happens rarely, thank God. I am actually marking with more ease and contentment than Hector. He marks papers and composition and harmony exercises noisily, as if every wrong note, wrong answer is a personal affront. I can hear him in the evenings in our basement studio, working through the piles of assignments, roaring out his disapproval when he tries out a few notes of some student composition on his piano down there and then stops, as if he has tasted something rancid. He keeps hurtling up the stairs, looking for me. I look up from my Jane Austen papers by first-year students. I am in the second-floor office, next to Little Max’s room. He is supposedly asleep, but I am reluctant to believe this. I am vigilant, listening for rustling noises. In any case, I like to be close to him when he is asleep. It is one of my best working times. I don’t feel like a bad mother when he is sleeping a few feet from me, and then I’m liberated into work.

“Janey, oh Janey,” Hector breathes dramatically but very quietly. We are both obsessed with letting Little Max sleep.

I smile but shake my head. “Let’s run away,” says Hector. “Let’s go to the stupidest movie we can think of. Isn’t there one with Jennifer Aniston and Vin Diesel? That should be stupid enough. Directed by Oliver Stone? With that guy who used to sleep with Anne Heche?”

I shake my head again. I do not say that there is no one to look after Little Max. I do not say that I long to run away with Hector and that we haven’t seen a movie in six months. I look down at the paper I am marking. “Elizabeth Bennett’s pride,” it reads, “prevents her from licking Mr. Darcy when he first proposed.”

I raise my eyes to Hector’s. Now he is pretending to smash his head against the door frame. He utters histrionic
but almost soundless moans of madness and anguish. And he hasn’t even read the latest delicious sentence from the first-year papers. I try to count through the stack of them on the desk using only my eyes. There were forty when I started; my quota for the day, in order to earn a Manhattan or gimlet, is ten. I know I have marked only four.

Somewhere in the pile of papers on the desk there is a phone number. I start searching and come up with it surprisingly quickly. “Renée,” I have written. “774-9666.” Someone told me about a teenager in our neighbourhood who is a good babysitter, but I have a horror of calling babysitters for some reason I have never been able to fathom. I love babysitters; don’t get me wrong. But I hate calling them. I make Hector do it.

We have had bad luck with sitters in the last while. The most recent one, Paula, three weeks ago when we went to the symphony, turned out to be not much taller than Little Max himself. She said she was thirteen, and she certainly seemed to herd him with confidence towards the vcr as we headed out the door. But I doubted she could even lift him. He is already thirty-five pounds and clearly going to be a strapping lad. When we came home, it turned out she’d been unable to herd him further than the vcr. They were still there, Little Max wide-eyed with nervous exhaustion and delight at being allowed three straight hours of Disney classics. Paula looked slightly chagrined, but not enough in my estimation. She had tried to get him into bed, she claimed, but she thought the screaming would disturb the neighbours and they’d call the police. I am familiar with this feeling.

Before that, there was Mrs. Mapplethorpe, a widow from down the street whose near-deafness made her impervious to Little Max’s howls of rage and thwarted world domination. So we were certain that Little Max got more sleep on the evening we hired Mrs. Mapplethorpe. But the idea that
she couldn’t actually hear very much at all prevented us from calling her again, although some days, when Little Max is especially trying, we care less about such esoteric issues as basic safety. However, Hector said, there is his collection of rare Les Paul guitars and his massive CD and vintage vinyl collection to consider, and he doesn’t want them to go up in flames while Mrs. Mapplethorpe reads her Chatelaine magazine, oblivious, on the front porch.

By this time, not getting enough reaction out of his audience, Hector has dropped to his knees in the doorway to the office, quietly miming madness. He is pretending to be a mad dog, I think. I have been standing with this scrap of paper in my hand, watching him absently while I think about what time it is and deciding how badly we need to get out of the house. I close the office door, trying not to catch Hector’s rabidly swishing hindquarters. I close him in with me and scratch him on top of his head. I dial the number and ask for Renée. “This is Renée,” says a male voice.

I am taken aback. Oh, René, I think. “This is Janet Erlicksen,” I say. “I live in the next block, and I think you’ve babysat for our neighbours, the Braun-Epps. We have a three-year-old. Maximilian.” While René confirms his identity as the Braun-Epp sitter, I consider Hector, who is now lying on his back, pretending to be dead.

“I know this is short notice, but it is Friday, and I think you’re sixteen, right, so you probably don’t go to bed too early. I have to take my husband to a clinic for a, for...ummm.” I momentarily go blank. For what? “I have to take him for an emergency injection. Vitamin B₁₂. I mean it’s not really an emergency, but it would be best if he had it as soon as possible, and I’ve got no one to stay with our son. He’s asleep already, so it will be really easy to listen for him and read downstairs or something. For a couple of hours?” I try to maintain a level, calm tone but suddenly imagine my
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tone is pleading, pathetic. Hector’s eyes are opening, and he is wiping off imaginary foam from around his whiskers. Before I am off the phone with René, Hector has leaped to his feet and is downstairs. He is looking through the paper at the movie listings and at the same time opening a beer for us to share.

“Brilliant, Janey,” he says. “What did she sound like?”

“It’s a boy. A teenage boy. He sounded very serious. He sounded more grown-up than us. He immediately asked if Little Max had any allergies or needed any special medications or interventions. He used that word – interventions.”

“Are you wearing that?” Hector eyes the long shapeless skirt I have been wearing this evening, the T-shirt that reads: “My funny T-shirt is in the wash.” He likes me in shorter skirts. He snorts whenever I trip on the long skirts I like to wear. I frequently do trip, when coming down the stairs from our room. Even as I am looking down at my clothes, considering them, and considering the nine thirty-five screening time for the Bollywood movie at the Globe that Hector has been longing to see, there is a knock at the door.

René is already nearly six feet tall, with messy, long fair hair and the thinnest arms and legs I have seen this side of a supermodel. He is wearing a System of a Down T-shirt and carrying a copy of a Hermann Hesse novel. Siddhartha. Well, I think, at least it’s not Ayn Rand. We show him around and he is the first babysitter we have ever had who actually makes a checklist as we tell him about things. He demands the phone numbers of two emergency contacts and wants to know all of the things that Little Max finds calming to eat or drink should he wake up. What are his favourite songs? Does he like his door open or closed? René’s eyes take in everything as we talk, and I imagine they are probing into the corners of the room to see if our electrical outlets have those little plastic safety covers.
“Siddhartha,” says Hector, as we make our escape. “You can never predict.”

“No, you can never predict,” I agree. “Who reads Siddhartha any more? What decade is this?” I jump into the car and yelp, “Getaway car!” It is a line from a Steve Martin routine, and often Hector fills in other bits of the monologue, usually out of order. But now he is concentrating, trying to read a map in the dim late evening light. “What are you looking for?”

It turns out he is looking for a movie theatre we have never been to before, because it is the only place showing a probably execrable new Jennifer Lopez movie. “You hate Jennifer Lopez,” I say to Hector.

“Ah, but you can never predict,” he returns. “I have decided that I don’t hate Jennifer Lopez. I just think she is more or less completely devoid of talent. She has compensating charms.” I start to remonstrate, but he interrupts. “No, not as lovely as your compensating charms, Janey.”

When we get to the theatre we find that the paper was wrong and the movie started a half-hour ago. This does not seem to bother Hector in the least. We buy two milkshakes and spend the next two hours in the parking lot of the shopping centre. It is one of the best evenings we’ve had in a long time.