

Last Letter Home

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In October, Payton McGuire's wife decides that she wants a baby. Andrea has always known that she would one day want a child, but it is only then, on the eve of her twenty-ninth birthday she decides it is time.

"Ask me what I want for my birthday," she says to Payton in bed that night.

The lights are out. He runs his fingers lightly up and down her thigh and repeats the question. His voice is soft. "Anything you want," he tells her. "Anything under twenty dollars." Smiles.

"The moon," says Andrea. *It's a Wonderful Life* is her favorite movie and she still knows how to act young like she was when they first met. Payton tells her that he'll see what he can do, but that she might have to settle for a meteorite or a large block of cheese. Andrea kisses him and rolls onto her side.

Just as Payton McGuire is about to fall asleep, his wife asks, quietly, "What if we had a baby?"

In November, Payton smokes weed and watches the stars from a lawn chair in Jonah Scott's backyard. Jonah's wife bought the chairs from a thrift store. They can hear cars driving by, and through cracks in the fence they catch quick, fleeting glimpses of speeding headlights. The night sky seems to go on forever in ways that bother him. Payton does not draw attention to the anxiety it causes him. The sky's too big. The sky's too endless. He could not even begin to count the stars.

Among the things that cause Payton anxiety: road-kill, lips, swallowed gum, stories with unsatisfying conclusions and the mental image of how bloated and drained of color his face is sure to look after his heart has stopped. Lips in particular have always bothered Payton. They have been on mind since before his wedding, since before he even dropped out of school. "They're little slits in the mouth

that we eat and kiss and talk and vomit out of,” Payton once said to his father during a trip home from university. “They’re just weird.”

“Well,” his father said, nodding as he sipped Coca-Cola from a thin black straw. “You’re going to have to get used to it.”

Next to him, Jonah tells Payton that he has a new idea for a screenplay. They know each other from work. FedEx. Wake up real early and lift boxes on and off of trucks. They smoke weed on Saturday nights. Andrea doesn’t smoke anymore and Jonah says he gets sad whenever he smokes with Kendall and so they smoke together. They talk about their wives and about their jobs and about the Bruins. Payton has never really understood hockey and Jonah is a much sadder man than Payton ever was. Jonah never married the love of his love and he always wanted to be a father. All his life he’s had unfulfilled aspirations of being a screenwriter.

“An Abundance of Detectives,” he tells Payton. “It’d be a romantic comedy. A guy thinks his wife is screwing around on him, so he hires a private investigator to see what she’s up to.”

“All right,” Payton says. He takes a hit from the joint, coughs.

“But here’s the thing—the private investigator is the guy the wife is screwing.”

“I think that’s probably a movie already.”

“Hold up a second,” Jonah says. He disappears inside and returns with a white napkin and a blue ink pen. He mumbles something under his breath. They’re out of printer paper. Carefully, he writes out the words “Husband”, “Wife”, and “Private Investigator #1” on the napkin. He underlines each and draws arrows connecting them. “What happens though,” he says, “is that the husband and the private investigator fall in love with each other. You ever notice how nobody in movies is ever a bisexual? Well everybody here is bisexual, basically. And so anyways, when the wife notices that the husband is acting distant, she hires another private investigator to follow him around.” Jonah writes and underlines the words “Private Investigator #2” on the napkin and draws arrows connecting him to the wife and husband. “You follow?” he asks, and then he continues, going into extravagant,

never-ending detail about the boundless web of private investigators and spurned lovers. The private investigators keep multiplying and piling up until eventually there are dozens of private investigators all private investigating each other and the friends, family and loved ones of the original husband and wife couple.

“What do you think?” Jonah asks. The napkin looks crazy.

Payton coughs again and laughs. “Why are there so many private investigators running around?”

“Well that’s the thing,” says Jonah. “It takes place in Colorado. You don’t need a license to be a private investigator in Colorado. And that begs the question: what makes somebody a private investigator in the first place? That’s the whole idea of the movie, that maybe we’re all just private investigators, you know? It’s about trust.”

Payton laughs and passes the joint to Jonah. “Write it,” he says. He coughs.

“What about you?” Jonah asks. “You got any screenplays locked up in a closet somewhere?”

“Nope,” Payton says. “Nothing like that.” Which is bullshit. He still imagines himself wearing a white lab coat and holding a stethoscope to a dog’s chest. All day every day. At work. At home. With his arm wrapped around Andrea. He changes the subject. “How’s Kendall?” he asks.

“Shit man,” says Jonah, and he shakes his head. They talk like this a while longer, watching the world pass them by from used beach chairs and feeling like much older men.

One night in late December, Payton comes home from work

before Andrea. He is always getting home first. After his morning shift at FedEx, four days a week he works part-time at an office supply company. His manager is an asshole. Not much older than Payton. Late thirties. He berates his employees for their language, lax-professionalism and occasional tardiness. This last point is particularly egregious, as the manager himself is late just as often as the employees. He always blames it on his diabetes. His blood sugar

is always too high or too low or too something. He makes it a point to publically test himself during breaks and he is always sure that his employees catch him eating a sugar cookie during lunch.

The work is easy but tiring. This is especially true on days when he works both jobs. Some nights he is so tired that he can't even get an erection. "No, I'm serious," he tells Andrea some nights, pulling back from her weird lips. "I can't get it up. I'm sorry." Since her birthday they have been having more sex than normal. Sex without condoms and birth control pills.

"It's ok," Andrea says, rolling back onto her pillow, "We can try again tomorrow. Get some sleep tonight." She is always very kind but Payton can tell she is getting impatient. Since October, Payton's successful, fertile ejaculation into her vaginal cavity is all she seems to think about. She has an ovulation calendar mapped out on the white board in the kitchen, her particularly fertile dates shaded in red.

Payton's occasional impotence evens out though, because some nights Andrea doesn't have the energy for him either. She teaches third grade at an elementary school a little ways into Rutherford. Most nights Andrea comes home happy, rejuvenated by successfully implemented lesson plans or some little victories. Those nights are the happiest, the nights that Payton forces himself to have enough the energy even when he feels like death. They drive out to the Passaic River and talk like teenagers. Lately she had been going on and on about babies; she's already thinking names. Last week, she told Payton that Henry is off the table because she has a student named Henry who is always giving her trouble, even if sometimes she really does feel like she's getting through to him.

"Or we could name him Mike," she said, "After your dad."

"Maybe," said Payton.

Some nights though, Andrea comes home and her voice is hoarse and she takes cough drops and it is all too obvious that she had been screaming at the top of her lungs and pounding on the steering wheel the whole drive home. Sometimes when Andrea gets frustrated she hits herself on the forehead.

When Payton gets home before his wife that night in December, he reads the newspaper and stretches out on the couch and cleans the second bedroom that they really only use when Andrea's mother and father visit or when Payton's whispering gets too loud for Andrea to sleep. The guest bedroom is littered with mementos and photographs and old *Time* magazines that Andrea always talks him into keeping. The *Time* magazines are stacked like Jenga tiles next to boxes of his father's old things.

When Andrea finally makes it home that evening, Payton is mouthing words into the bathroom mirror. Real slow and articulate. Playing with his lower lip. He sees her reflection through the mirror. Andrea's bright orange shirt has been covered in multi-colored handprints.

"Watercolors," Andrea says. Arts and crafts every Thursday. She drops the day's mail onto the table. "You still busy in the bathroom?" She slides past him and drops her pants. "Oh, Jesus," she says. "Long day." She pulls her underwear down over her ankles. "Mail's on the counter."

Payton picks up the pile of mail and reads off each item as he flips past it—"Cable bill. Junk mail. Letter from your mother. Sears catalogue."

His voice trails off when he sees the last letter. The return address has been smeared and he doesn't recognize the name of the sender. He's never met a Robert Carpenter. Andrea comes back from the bathroom and opens her mother's letter. Payton tears the envelope open.

The letter is written in blue ink pen on a piece of wrinkled legal paper. It reads as follows:

Dear Mr. Payton McGuire:

I was abducted from this Earth on October 17th of the current calendar year. The details don't matter. What's important is that I'm here now, held joyously upon the bridge of a flying saucer. My abductors are letting me send word to someone back home and your

name seemed as good as any. It was picked at random from a phone book.

Living conditions here are poor. I am locked in a cage and tortured at the whim of my captors. They stick needles into my veins and prod me like an animal. Everything hurts.

I will admit there are moments of reprieve, such as the hour a day during which I am allowed to meditate on the observation deck that looks out onto the vast recesses of space. They say it's cleansing for the mind and they're right. It's beautiful.

The sight of the naked universe reminds me of a trip I took with my mother and father when I was very young. We took a plane to Florida. I had never seen the ocean before. The first time I saw the Atlantic, my jaw dropped. That's what it feels like every time I stare out that window.

The real draw for me though, is all the anal probing. I love it. They stick a probe into my anus several times a day. In and out and in and out. It feels like a big wet sloppy dick. I love it so much. I never want to leave. I can't believe that I was sticking it in Earth pussy for so long.

And now, here I am, up on a spaceship and getting anal probed and loving it like a big gay faggot. I leave you with the following words, friend, written as I stare out the window at the limitless potential of a vast and wonderful universe, waiting another half hour or so until I can finally feel the pleasure sensors on my anus get all tingly again:

Vindication is beautiful.

Yours,
Robert Carpenter

A crude drawing of an alien head is sketched next to the signature: bug-eyed, oval shaped, hastily colored in with green crayon. Payton stares at the legal paper and asks Andrea how her mother is. His voice is quiet.

"Still writing letters at least," Andrea says. She nods to the letter. "What's that?" Andrea takes it from him before he can answer. Payton sits on the couch and scratches his fingers against the fibers

of the cushion as she reads. "Jesus," Andrea says once she's finished. She almost laughs. "Who the hell pulls something like that? Probably the Jackson twins, right? God damn homophobes. Plus they're always doing shit like this. You know they lit up somebody's mailbox with fireworks just last week? Like the 4th of July." Andrea picks up the pile of junk mail and hands it off to Payton. "Would you mind tossing this?" she asks. The letter from Robert Carpenter is on top.

"Yeah," Payton says. "Crazy kids." He dumps most of the mail into the trashcan. When Andrea is not looking he folds Robert Carpenter's letter into a square and shoves it into his back pocket.

Throughout the holiday season, all Andrea talks about is children and all Payton thinks about is the letter. It is on his mind through Christmas, when Andrea's parents visit and complain about the boxes stacked in their guest bedroom and comment on the dryness of the turkey. On New Year's Eve, he and Andrea drive to New York City to see the fireworks. As the sky catches fire in an orgy of light and color, he cannot help but wonder about the logistics of mailing a letter from space. After the fireworks, they return home and open a bottle of champagne. Andrea is tipsy when she runs her hands through Payton's bushy hair. She tells him that she loves him. "Do you ever just wonder about it?" she asks, and she pushes him gently up against the wall to which they have pinned the New Jersey state flag. It was in her dorm room when they met and it has followed them ever since. Like they never stopped being college students. "What are you thinking about?" she asks later. He is always quiet after sex and she always asks this question.

"You," he says.

The letter takes over Payton's thoughts of elderly dogs and decomposing faces. Even the strange way that Andrea's lips curve together in the exact center. He reads the letter before bed each night, in the guest bedroom if he has to, just after he is done whispering to his father. He takes it with him to work and reads it over again and again. In the bathroom. On lunch breaks.

In early January, Payton sits hunched over the computer while Andrea watches the nightly news and obsesses over lesson plans. He searches the wide reach of the internet for anything concerning the disappearance of Robert Carpenter. He doesn't find anything.

Payton looks away from the computer and towards his wife and television. He thinks about how strange it is to try to teach eight year olds anything and how odd it is that anyone could rail against the liberal media. Brian Williams' voice is so calm and reassuring. It reminds him of his father. Of the voice that would talk him down before bedtime when his thoughts got in a knot. When he couldn't stop whispering to dead people. The voice that would reassure him when he called home from college, upset at his roommate for tossing used condoms in their shared trashcan. The voice that told him, repeatedly and assuredly, that it was all going to be OK.

Andrea stands from her lesson plan. She stretches. "I'm going to get some tea," she says. "Do you want anything?" She starts towards the kitchen.

Payton shakes his head no. His attention is fixed to the television.

On her way to the kitchen cabinets, Andrea stops, distracted by the ovulation calendar on the white board. "We should try tonight," she says. "This whole week, I'm fertile."

Payton turns away from the television and looks down the hall. He drums his fingers against his knee. He decides suddenly that he has to go. "I can't tonight," he says. He stands from the desk and pulls his coat from the closet. "Jonah's refurbishing his basement. New carpeting and paint job and everything. I told him I'd help tonight. Might be a while."

Andrea looks away from the conception calendar. "Do you have to?" she asks.

"I promised," Payton says, opening the drawer beneath the silverware where they keep the flashlights. "I'm sorry."

Andrea nods. "Oh," she says. "Yeah. Don't worry about it."

"You'll be asleep when I get back," Payton says.

This is when he starts leaving most nights.

It is two weeks later when Payton and Andrea finally conceive.

After she has urinated on several pregnancy tests, she cries and wraps her arms around Payton. "I could tell," she says. "I could just tell while it was happening. There was just something about it. There was just something about you." Payton agrees. He does not tell Andrea that as he ejaculated inside of her, the only thing on his mind was the way Robert Carpenter described space.

Jonah and his wife Kendall invite Payton and Andrea over for dinner. Kendall says over the phone that she has been meaning to invite them over for some time, but has never gotten around to it somehow. She says that congratulations are in order. As good an excuse as any for dinner.

Kendall and Andrea do not know each other very well, but both are friendly and sociable. Andrea purchases a medium priced bottle of wine from the grocery store. She presents it upon their arrival. "I want to make a good impression," she tells Payton as they wait in line at the self-checkout. It seems so silly.

Payton and Andrea arrive at exactly 7:30. The door opens and Kendall seems surprised by the bottle of wine. Jonah shakes Payton's hand. It is obvious that he has gone to some lengths to make himself presentable. He has shaved his facial hair and he is even wearing a long-sleeved, button-down shirt. Sitting around the dinner table, Jonah looks uncomfortable in his skin. He keeps laughing nervously and making forced but well-meaning attempts at small talk.

"So, your father died about a year ago?" Jonah asks. He chuckles nervously at Payton's uncomfortable affirmation and immediately apologizes.

Kendall serves lasagna. She and Andrea listen politely as Payton and Jonah retell the story of a co-worker who accidentally sent a crate of blow-up sex dolls to an elementary school. It's the thousandth time they've heard it. Andrea answers an accusatory set of questions about the state of the public education system and Kendall goes on at length about the stresses of managing a small business.

She owns an antique store on the far side of town. It is kept barely afloat by the bored, affluent septuagenarians who frequent it.

"I swear to God," she says, chewing. "I don't know what I'm going to do when they all drop dead."

Jonah pushes scraps of lasagna back and forth across his plate. "Shoot for a younger demographic," he says.

Kendall gives a fake sounding laugh. She wipes her mouth with her napkin. "Shoot for a job that pays more than eleven dollars an hour," she says, folding it back onto her lap.

Jonah gets quiet again and looks back down to his plate. Silence falls over the table but Payton barely notices it. He puts his fork down, wipes his hands and checks his back pocket to make sure the letter is still with him. He is always worried about losing it.

Andrea gives Payton an uncomfortable look and she searches for something to break the silence. "Oh!" she says, affecting enthusiasm. "We got the strangest prank in the mail not long ago." Andrea leans forward and makes pretend like she is sharing some great secret. "From a gay spaceman."

Payton is suddenly very aware of his own expression and tries not to look too engaged.

"From this guy who said he was—" Andrea's voice trails and she snaps her fingers. "What was his name again?"

"Robert," Payton says, not looking up from his plate. "Robert Carpenter."

After dinner, Payton and Jonah load plates into the dishwasher while their wives discuss children in the other room. Kendall says that she and Jonah wanted a kid way back when. She says that they got pregnant even, but that it ended in miscarriage. Andrea looks mortified.

Payton loads the last plate into the dishwasher, and says, "I have to show you something."

"All right," Jonah says. He nods towards the backyard. On the

way out, Payton catches the last snippets of his wife's conversation before stepping out of earshot:

"The worst part is telling everyone that they should stop being happy for you."

"Like your parents?"

"Parents, friends, co-workers. Everybody. You tell everybody when you're pregnant."

"Oh God. I'm so sorry."

"It's all right. It's been a while."

"What was it like?"

"The miscarriage?"

"Yes—sorry. The miscarriage."

"Painful. Painful and bloody."

"Why didn't you try again?"

Payton closes the sliding glass door behind him. Their voices disappear. It is colder than Payton had been anticipating. There is no snow on the ground but the air is bitter. "So what's up?" Jonah asks. "I'd offer you a seat, but one of the beach chairs is missing."

Payton doesn't say anything. He reaches into his back pocket and feels the letter.

"So what are you hoping for?" Jonah asks. "I always wanted a boy, myself." He digs the heel of his toe into the grass. "Never told Kendall that—I would have been happy with whatever she squeezed out. I always wanted to teach a kid to throw a ball, you know?"

Payton doesn't answer. He takes out the letter and unfolds it.

"You know, I was scared shitless," Jonah continues, "when Kendall first started talking about kids. She brought it up when we were at her parents' cabin for the weekend. A hundred miles from anything! We weren't even married yet. It got less scary though, for a while."

Payton interrupts Jonah and holds out the letter. "Here," he says. "It's the letter about the spaceman."

Jonah smiles. "Why didn't you say so?"

“Read it,” he says, and as Jonah’s eyes fall upon it, Payton looks up at the sky. He looks at the stars and the darkness. The overwhelming everything. He wonders if Robert Carpenter is up there sitting in an observation deck meditating or journaling or massaging his nether regions.

Jonah finishes. “OK,” he says. “What about it?”

“What do you mean what about it?”

“This is a very strange prank,” says Jonah. “It would make a decent premise for a screenplay. What do you want me to say?”

“No. No, no, no,” says Payton. “It can’t be a prank. It’s too specific. It’s too weird for it to be a bunch of fifteen-year-olds.”

Payton,” Jonah says. He looks down to the letter. “It feels like a big wet sloppy dick,” Jonah says, reading it aloud. “I love it so much. I never want to leave. I can’t believe that I was sticking it in Earth pussy for so long.” He laughs. “Come on,” he says. “Teenagers.”

“Teenagers won’t talk about the ocean!” Payton says. The volume of his voice surprises him. “They’ll try to make you think there’s an invasion coming or that you’re being watched by little green men. They won’t talk about the Atlantic Ocean. It’s too weird. It’s too specific.”

Jonah says Payton’s name again and asks if he is OK. “Are you high right now?”

Payton takes the letter back and folds it. “Your screenplay ideas are terrible.”

“Come on.”

“No, I’m serious. They’re awful.”

“You don’t have to be an asshole.”

“Someone has to tell you.”

“I’ve been sending them out,” Jonah says suddenly. He sounds so vulnerable.

“You have?”

“Yeah. Well, I mean, just the one. Just one right now, to a couple of agents.”

Payton’s voice lightens, “The private Investigator one?”

“The one about the man eating rainbow,” Jonah says. “From a few months ago.”

“You actually wrote that?”

“Yes.”

“Have you heard back on it?” Payton asks.

“No.” Jonah says. “No, not yet.”

“You know they’ll never take it.”

“Fuck you.” Jonah says. He laughs. “Fuck you, I know that.”

“Then what’s the point?”

Jonah shoves his hands in his pockets and looks up at the stars. The moon is bright and full and there is not a cloud in the sky. “You know what they say,” he says. “You shoot for the moon and miss, you hit the stars.” He gives a weak smile and laughs.

When the two men return inside, Kendall and Andrea are still in the living room discussing interior decoration.

Two nights later, the first night of February, Payton interrupts

a quiet evening at home to announce that he is leaving. Again. To Jonah’s house. It is the twelfth time he has told Andrea this. He says that they are painting the basement walls. “Bright red,” Payton says. “Like blood. I’ll be back late.” Andrea says OK, and that she is going to the supermarket. He says goodbye and Andrea leaves right after he does.

Payton does not notice that Andrea follows him.

And so it is funny then, that as he drives he thinks about all the little things that his wife does not know. She does not know that he still has the letter. She does not know where he goes most nights. She does not know that he is no longer working at the office supply store. Payton has not yet divulged the story of how he came in late one day and when his diabetic boss asked why he had not shown up on time, he replied that he had been on a spaceship. “A million miles away,” he had said. “Looking out over everything like little specks of dust.” His manager fired him right then and there and took a bite out of his diabetes cookie.

Payton parks at the usual spot by the Passaic River where he and Andrea go on the good nights. They started parking there his junior year of college. It was a semester before he dropped out and it was still during the early stages of their courtship. Back then they'd stay up late in her dorm room, passing a joint back and forth and watching *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* from the top bunk. They never watched much past the opening monologue. Naked by the time the first guest came out. Andrea thought that Payton never smelled better than when she could taste the marijuana on his lips. He never liked her better than when they were watching alternative comedy.

"You taste good," she would tell him, breathlessly.

"You look good," he would say back.

For the longest time he wasn't sure about her. Some nights he thought he was in love with her and some nights he thought he hated her and some nights he just thought he was just happy to be sharing a bed with someone. There was so much about her that he found weird. "Dad," he said, that holiday he went home for break, "I've met this girl. She has the strangest lips. They sort of curve together in the exact center. Lips are weird, Dad. They're these little slits in the face."

So much about her was strange— her red hair, her pixie nose, her habit of urinating with the door open. "It's nothing you haven't seen before," she told him. "It's nature."

They were parked by the river the night he settled on loving her. They had been meaning to listen to rock music on radio while they pushed their weird lips together, but they ended up just talking. They almost always ended up talking. That particular night she was tripping out on something that some guy gave her in the back room of a house party. She was freaked out and sketching out and she kept touching Payton's face and telling him how happy she was. That she couldn't believe it. Sitting in the car, Payton accidentally said something to offend her. Something about their relationship. He couldn't remember. All he remembers is that she replied by saying, "I think that the biggest cause of disconnect between us is that you think that

this is a romantic comedy but I know that it is an apocalyptic romp." He never really figured out what that meant and she could never really remember, but right then and there he settled on loving her.

Payton turns off his car. He locks the door and slams it behind him. He takes Jonah's lawn chair out of the trunk. He holds it in one hand and his dimly lit flashlight in the other and marches off on the trail. He has the letter on him, like he always has it, always with him and always tucked gently in his back pocket.

Payton is sitting on the lawn chair, camped out towards the end of the trail when Andrea finds him. "I followed you," she says. "Come home."

His father had told him something similar back when he was still in college. "I can't do it, Dad," Payton had said over the landline in the common room of his residency hall. "I can't get a handle on it. It's this place and classes and it's Andrea. She's always here, it's like I live with her. I can't do it Dad, I can't handle all this." A pair of guys playing pool a few feet away began to stare as his voice cracked. It was not the first time that Payton had called his father like this.

"Come home," his dad had said, finally.

Andrea steps towards Payton. "I asked Kendall to see the basement," she says.

Payton doesn't say anything.

"She didn't know what I was talking about when I asked about the renovations. I played it off like I was all mixed up." Andrea's voice wavers. She's not dressed for the cold. "Is this where you've been going?"

"Yes," Payton says, "This is where I go at night." The letter is in his hand. It flaps in the wind. Like a dying flame. "You know I grew up a half a mile away from a beach? Five years, I spent on the coast."

"This is about the letter, right?" Payton doesn't say anything and Andrea tilts her head up. "What are you doing anyway? Waiting for a spaceship to take you out here?" Her voice cracks. "Out of New Jersey and away from me?"

“No,” Payton says. “I’m not waiting for anything.”

Andrea crosses her arms and sits next to the lawn chair. “Do you have another one of those or did you want to join me down here?”

Payton nods, lifts himself out of the chair and joins Andrea on the ground. The dirt feels cold and he can feel the moisture sinking through his jeans. He props up the flashlight by the crotch of his pants and sits with his wife. He thinks about telling her that he is longing for something that makes his jaw drop. He thinks about telling her how close he was to just up and leaving her all those years ago. He thinks about telling her how weird her lips look and how strange it will be when her pregnant belly starts showing. He feels shaky just imagining it. He thinks about telling her that he doesn’t know what it means for them that she’s pregnant. He thinks about telling her that he has lost his job, but that he still wants to be a veterinarian; that some nights he stays up, wide awake and restless, wondering how he was ever young enough and stupid enough to drop out of college to begin with. He thinks about telling her that that they can’t name the baby after his father. It wouldn’t be fair to the kid to have to live in the shadow of a dead man or for Payton to have to look at his son as a walking, melancholy reminder of the passage of time. He thinks about telling her about road kill and baseball and how much he still misses his dad some nights. He can’t believe it’s been a year. He thinks about telling her that cancer sucks and that he still can’t really talk to her the way he used to talk with his father. He thinks about telling her that he doesn’t know what she meant all those years ago when she called their relationship an apocalyptic romp but that he still likes the sound of it.

He doesn’t tell her any of that though.

The only thing Payton says, sitting like that with his legs crossed, is, “You look very beautiful, in the moonlight.”

Andrea takes his hand. Neither says anything. With his wife’s hand in his own and with babies on his mind, Payton wonders how he got there and where he is going and if there is only one definitive path

for him and if he is happy with that or if he isn’t. Payton wonders if Robert Carpenter is up there in space, staring into vast recesses of the universe from the observation deck of a flying saucer. Andrea scratches her index finger against the palm of Payton’s hand and he wonders if Robert Carpenter is asking himself the same questions.