

CLOSER

Michelle Herman

There were two things the magician couldn't tell his wife, to whom he told everything. The first was how much he liked being on the road, and the second was how guilty he felt about it.

To enjoy being away from her—from her, from their son, from the life they'd made together—was bad enough. That he continued to take pleasure in it, knowing that he oughtn't, might be unforgivable.

But it was a principle between them to tell even what was hard to tell. Caroline did not conceal from him her deep unhappiness about his frequent travel or what she thought of his obduracy (what she called his obduracy, what he considered simple self-defense) where his father was concerned. And he had never thought of keeping from her his distress about her invitation to his father to come home with them after he had his surgery (“and stay as long as you need to—or just want to,” he had been alarmed to hear her say as she held

the old man's hand from the chair beside his hospital bed) or how much he detested watching her wait on him hand and foot—*hand and foot and dick* was what he'd said, because it was she, those first weeks after the surgery, who cleaned the catheter they'd sent him home with; she who walked backwards, just ahead of him, holding the tube and the bagful of urine steady as he shuffled, grimacing and cursing, to the bathroom for a shower.

And yet he could not tell her this.

There had been a time—the whole time, in fact, before he had met Caroline—when he had hated traveling, when it was the necessary evil he pretended it was now. As he walked through unfamiliar streets, as he sat in his anonymous hotel room with the TV on for company, as he ate solitary meals in haste, his misery was thick. A bleak cloud of loneliness formed at the instant he set off on a trip, as he boarded the train or bus (or, later, plane, once he'd left home for good and could accept an invitation to perform halfway across the country—or the world—without consulting anyone). The cloud would lift as soon as he stepped onstage to perform. As soon as he stepped off, it would re-form itself.

He spoke of this to no one until he met Caroline. He believed, he told her—and it was true that he had tricked himself into believing—that it was

unseemly to complain. He was afraid of sounding like his father, grumbling about book tours and too many interview requests and invitations to give talks or readings from his work.

This was in the beginning, when he told her everything. And so he told her on the eve of a trip he had been dreading, the first since they had started dating, junior year of college. She didn't like him any less for it (indeed, she petted and pitied him and made him promise to call her as soon his plane landed in Seattle, then as often as he needed to over the weekend he would be away) and he understood the smaller, less attractive truth: that he'd been embarrassed—mortified—to speak of his loneliness before this. Before her.

But something unexpected and extraordinary happened after his confession. As if she'd cast a spell on him—or broken a bad one: that trip to Seattle, to perform and lecture at a conference for magicians, was the first one in his life that he enjoyed.

He'd marveled over it all weekend; he kept marveling on his return. You'd think, he told himself, that leaving would be easier when you were leaving nothing and no one behind. Or when what you were leaving were your crazy, inattentive parents. But it turned out that leaving something was much easier than leaving nothing, or leaving what was disagreeable. Not only easier but

easy. With Caroline in his life, waiting for him to return and crying, “Oh, it’s you! Hooray! Now tell me every single thing about your day” when he called her each night, it became a pleasure to go off alone for a few days, to walk on streets he knew only from previous short visits or on streets he didn’t know at all. The cool impersonality of a hotel room, which had once depressed him, didn’t faze him anymore: he’d lie on the bed after a show, still in his tuxedo, talking to his girlfriend on the phone. She had dispelled the cloud—she’d changed the weather.

And he couldn’t tell her. How could he? *I’m so glad I found you—you’re so easy to leave.*

He had never told her and, as time had passed, it had become more complicated. He’d gone from lonely to not lonely to *please, God, just give me five minutes alone*. Now what he marveled over were the days and nights when no one asked for anything from him except for magic; nights when no one woke him before dawn (not his son calling from his crib, not his father banging into something as he stumbled from the fold-out couch into the kitchen or the bathroom, not his wife saying, “Go check on him, would you? I’m too tired, I don’t think I can”); nights in a room that had no clutter and no character—a room in which there was no object that had any meaning to him. At home,

everything meant something: he was surrounded by his things and his wife's, by everything they had accumulated since they'd first moved in together, by their son's things (he was so small and already had so many things!), and now by his father's, too—for nearly every day he'd ask for something else to be brought over from his condo: a book or a record or a DVD of some grim foreign film or ancient screwball comedy that Jacob couldn't sit through but that Caroline would watch with him.

It was good, Jacob thought but did not tell his wife, to leave home knowing that while you were loosened for a little while from all that bound you, everything that mattered remained fixed, was *still*, was waiting for you to return. For a few days, he *liked* being loosened from his life. He liked being (no, not being—playing at, pretending to be) what he had so hated being, before Caroline: alone in the world.

Just himself. No one's husband, no one's father. Nobody's nice son-in-law.

No one's son.

No one in the world but *Jacob Lieb, Right Before Your Very Eyes*.

§

Her mother told her she was out of her mind when she said, over the phone, that she had made an appointment with a marriage counselor. “You

know what those people do, don't you? They escort you—they *waltz* you—right to a divorce.”

“Oh, that's ridiculous. Where did you hear that?” Caroline kept one eye on Harry, edging ever closer to his grandfather, who was napping on the sofa. At least Martin had been willing to let her fold *up* the sofa after breakfast. That was progress.

Harry would not be satisfied, however, until Pop Pop was awake and playing with him.

“I hear plenty,” her mother said. “Girl in my office saw a marriage counselor with her husband for six months before, pow, game over. And she's not the only one.”

“Mom,” Caroline began, but Harry had set a large plastic model elephant on the sofa's arm, too close to his grandfather's head. “Wait—just a sec.” In the whisper-shout she had perfected, she called, “Harrison B.F. Lieb. Let your Pop Pop sleep, please.”

But Martin was awake. “It's all right, he's not bothering me.” To Harry he said, “Would you like to know four exciting facts about elephants?”

“How *is* your father-in-law? His name is on the tip of my tongue.”

“Don't start with me, Mom. Take it up with him.”

“He won’t even answer his phone.”

“Well, don’t take it personally. He doesn’t want to talk to anyone but Harry. He doesn’t want to *see* anyone but Harry.”

“And you.”

“He doesn’t have much choice about that.”

“Speaking of choice, are you *making* Jacob go to counseling, or did you give him a choice about it? Does he even know about it yet?”

“He knows.”

“But he has no choice. You gave him an ultimatum? What has he done that’s so awful? Given the way his mother took off on his father, you might try to be a little sensitive.”

“*I* might try to be sensitive? Are you kidding me?” But before her mother could tell her any more about what a terrible wife she was (like her mother, who’d never been married, knew anything about it), she said, “Anyway, you’re missing the point. He hasn’t *done* anything. I’ve never said he had. I just think we could use some help.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“Oh, that’s great, Mom. Nice way to talk to me.”

“When you’re full of shit, who else is going to tell you?”

It was not until after she'd hung up the phone, made lunch for Harry and Martin (Jacob was out of town again, due back tonight), cleaned up, and settled Harry for his nap that she remembered that the reason she'd brought up the counseling appointment was that she wanted her mother to be Martin's backup. In case anything went wrong during the brief time (she had timed it: twenty minutes there, twenty minutes back, fifty minutes with the therapist—they'd be all right for an hour and a half, wouldn't they? But it made her very anxious), she wanted her mother to be ready to race over. She wanted her to take her car to work on Thursday, just in case. She'd forgotten that it would be impossible to ask her without first running through a gauntlet. Her mother's opinions. She had so many, whether she knew anything about the subject or not.

Well, at least she'd gotten the gauntlet over with. That one, anyway. There'd still be plenty to contend with. *Why can't you see the counselor at a time when you can leave my grandson with me? When am I going to see my grandson, anyway? How the hell am I going to come to the rescue if something goes wrong if Martin won't let me into the apartment?*

Caroline sank into a chair at the kitchen table. Jesus. It was no wonder she was so exhausted.

From the family room, Martin called to her. “Caroline? Car? Could I possibly trouble you to bring me a cup of coffee?” And just then Harry cried out, “Mama! Mama, I need you! I *wet*.”

“I’m coming,” she called to Harry as she started toward his room.

“Thanks, dear,” Martin said.

“Just give me a minute,” she told him, pausing in the doorway to the family room, on her way to Harry.

“No minute, Mama,” her son cried. “No minute. *Now*.”

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In the office of the marriage counselor, they’d been asked to close their eyes and picture what their lives would be like “if you’d never met, you’d never come to love each other and then made the choice to be together.”

Caroline had closed her eyes obediently; Jacob balked. “I don’t want to picture that,” he told the therapist.

Dr. Derring said—too gently, as if Jacob were a lunatic or a stray dog—“I understand. But let’s try anyway, shall we? It’s just an exercise, a thought experiment,” and Caroline, her eyes still closed, said, “Jacob, if you’re not going to cooperate, then what’s the point?” and Jacob said, “*Exactly*.”

They had seen the therapist only twice before he had to leave for this last trip to Miami. But now he was back, and Caroline had reminded him twice since this morning that they hadn't done their "homework" yet—another exercise, this one with their eyes open. They were to look at each other without speaking, holding hands, for one fifteen-minute period each day. When Jacob pointed out that he would be away for three days of the seven before their next session, Dr. Derring laughed and said, "Yes, I can see how this would be hard to pull off from a distance. What about if you just do it on the days that you *are* here?"

It was ten p.m.—he'd been back for nearly twenty-four hours—before they got around to trying it, three days before their next appointment. Harry was asleep, and Martin seemed to be—or at least he wasn't calling out for Caroline, or bumping into things and calling out apologies. Jeanie had already phoned and Caroline had grown impatient with her, then hung up, abruptly. She'd put the cockatiel, Delirious, into her cage and covered it with the fringed blanket as Delirious protested, invisibly.

Jacob wanted to talk about the Miami shows, in which he'd tried out parts of what he hoped would eventually be an entirely new kind of show, and

they'd gone over well enough that he thought he was on the right track. Telling her about it seemed a much better use of the little time they had alone together than what Dr. Derring had instructed them to do, but he didn't say that. Caroline was serious about these counseling sessions: she'd made it clear that they were not negotiable (and both times, when they'd left for them, she'd been a nervous wreck—and when he'd said, on the way there the first time, that he wouldn't hold it against her if she wanted to cancel, she jumped down his throat, telling him he wasn't funny and had damn well better take this seriously, that it was *important*).

He sat on the bed with her, cross-legged, facing her and holding both her hands as they “gazed silently into each other's eyes.” He couldn't remember if he was supposed to (or allowed to) think while they were gazing. Was it meant to be like meditation, where the goal was to empty one's mind? Or were they supposed to be thinking about each other?

He knew better than to ask.

He gazed and kept silent, as instructed. But his thoughts were skittering all over the place. First there was the secret, guilty one that the weekend in Miami had been so great—the three shows successful, even with the new material (more talking, longer intervals between the tricks), and the rest of the

time he'd eaten fantastic Cuban food and walked on the beach near his hotel. Then there was the also secret, guiltier thought that he was already looking forward to his next trip—a series of dates around New England and the chance to try out more of the new show. And he felt guilty too about how little time he'd spent today with Harry, because it was hard to avoid his father and not end up avoiding his son too. Caroline was constantly saying, "Honey, you have to let Pop Pop rest now. He'll play with you more later on," and his father would say, "No, no, let him be. I'll rest when I'm dead." Harry seemed to think this was hilarious, and this afternoon when Jacob said, "How about we lay off on the 'dead' jokes when my kid's around, okay?" Harry cried, "Dead jokes, dead jokes! Pop Pop tell dead joke." Did he know what "dead" meant? "Joke," he knew. He'd greeted Jacob when he had come home last night with a joke: *Where do cows go on Saturday night? To the mooovies.*

Maybe he should let his son write jokes for the new show. His son and his father both. Bad puns and morbid wisecracks—that would be just the ticket.

Caroline didn't even know there *was* a new show—the beginnings of a new show. He'd written a lot on the flight to Miami, written and revised and then revised some more until he couldn't see what he had written in the first place and he had to start a new page in his notebook, writing it out clean. Then

he realized he was memorizing it as he recopied it, and he made the decision, just like that, to go ahead and try it, at least on the first night. Otherwise how would he know if he was on to something? And if he wasn't, he could just forget the whole thing. Stick with what he knew, what worked.

But the new material *had* worked. It had gone better than he had allowed himself to hope it would. So he tried out more of it on the second and the third nights—telling stories, punctuating them with tricks, changing the balance of the act. And people laughed at what was funny, and he felt the air shift in the room when they were moved—and then there'd be a trick, something he'd never done before onstage *or* an old familiar one he could do in his sleep, and either way it seemed to him that their applause was warmer than what he was used to. The longer intervals between illusions seemed to make each one more important, more impressive. Or he'd become more human to them, telling stories about his own life—so the magic was more surprising. So now he was thinking about moving ahead with it, talking to his manager about a whole new show that would be about half tricks and half . . . well, half *life*, he guessed he'd have to call it.

And he wanted to show Caroline what he'd written so far. She would be amazed, wouldn't she? She would be pleased, he hoped. She might want to

help with it. That was what he was counting on—that she would want to work with him on it.

“Okay, time’s up,” she said and dropped his hands. He was about to speak—now he could tell her about the show, ask her opinion, ask if she’d mind reading some of what he’d written, ask—

But it was too late. She was up, off the bed, halfway across the room, telling him without turning around that she was beat, it had been a long day—a long *few* days, she said, and even though she didn’t look at him when she said this, he knew it had been pointed, aimed right at him—and she was going to go brush her teeth and wash her face and get right into bed. But he didn’t have to feel obliged to go to bed yet if he wasn’t tired, she said. It was all right if he wanted to sit up.

And then she was gone. She closed the door behind her.

He was still sitting in the middle of the bed, knees splayed, ankles crossed. He thought about the other homework they had been assigned—more of what they were paying Dr. Derring a hundred dollars a session for. They were supposed to start leaving Harry at home one night a week and have a “date night,” which the therapist had suggested might be a time when they could talk about something other than Harry, other than their parents. “We can talk about this

more, but in case you're eager to get started on it, for now I want to caution you that this is not meant to be time set aside for arguing, either. This is not the time for you, Caroline, to accuse Jacob of 'never being home' or for you, Jacob, to accuse your wife of pretending that this matters to her more than it does," she said. Jacob did not say, "We've seen you for a total of two hours and you think you can tell me what I 'tend' to do?"—mostly just because he was impressed that Caroline had not objected to their marriage counselor's characterization of her as "accusing" him (when he used the word, she always protested). Instead he asked Dr. Derring, jokingly, "Well, what's left, then?" but before she had a chance to break out her reassuring, gentle laugh, Caroline said, "Wait, we're supposed to leave Harry at home one night a week? With who—with Martin?"

"Why not?" Dr. Derring said.

"Because he's *sick*."

"In point of fact," Jacob said, "he isn't sick anymore."

In point of fact, it didn't seem as if he'd ever been sick—not until after the surgery that made him "well." But it made no difference because Caroline ignored him. She told Dr. Derring that it was impossible, that it was hard enough to leave Harry at home during his naptime for the hour and a half—"or longer,

like last time when we hit traffic going home”—required to come here, but Martin wasn’t strong enough for what she was proposing. He could not move fast enough.

“Jesus,” Jacob said. “What exactly are you expecting the kid to do while we’re gone?”

The therapist offered a list of suggestions: they could go out for an early dinner, something casual and quick—“It’s not about the food, you understand. Go get a pizza, get a burger. The point is to spend at least an hour together, just the two of you, away from home, away from Martin and your son.” Or they could go out after both Harry and Martin were asleep, for a drink or a walk (“That is, if you believe your father-in-law can be counted on to wake up if his grandson cries?”). Or they could hire a sitter to come and stay with Harry *and* his grandfather, so that someone would be there to “do the heavy lifting.” They could ask Caroline’s mother instead of a sitter. They could drop Harry off *with* Caroline’s mother and let Martin rest at home, alone.

Caroline didn’t like any of these ideas. “I *can’t*,” she said.

“You can’t what?”

“I can’t leave him anywhere. With anyone.”

“What are you talking about?” Jacob looked at Dr. Derring for an explanation but she kept silent, her expression unreadable.

They’d only had five minutes of their session left, and it was like a bomb had been dropped right into the middle of it. Suddenly Caroline was crying and saying that she couldn’t stand to leave Harry, that it wasn’t fair to make her. Jacob was bewildered. He reminded her that she had let their parents take him out twice a week for the last *year*.

“And I *hated* it,” she cried.

“But why?” To the therapist he said, “Do you know why? What am I missing here?”

By the time they left her office, Dr. Derring had persuaded Caroline that the date-night homework was just as important as the sessions. “Going out with your husband is not only something you need to do for your marriage, but also for Harry. He needs to know that you can leave and will be back,” she said, leaning forward in her chair, locking eyes with Caroline just the way, Jacob thought, she wanted *him* to do. “You cannot be with him all the time. He needs to know that, too.”

On the way home after the session, Caroline had not wanted to talk about it. She was a wreck, her face so wet it was as if she had been swimming. “Are

you sure this is going to help us?” he had asked her in the car. The look she gave him in return was so filled with fury he had ducked—as if there were a chance that she might take a swing at him.

And then he'd had to leave for Miami.

But now he was back, and she still didn't want to talk—not about this, not about anything. She had returned to the bedroom, where she was pulling the curtains shut and turning away from him to change from her jeans and KSU sweatshirt into a long nightgown. Then she flipped the switch for the overhead light, and the room went black. “This is okay, isn't it? I need to sleep. You can turn on your lamp if you want to read.”

“No, it's all right.” He moved toward his side of the bed to make more room for her as she got in. After a moment, he stretched out too, beside her. His eyes adjusted to the dark, and he turned on his side and reached for her—she had drawn the blanket over her, but one shoulder and arm were exposed as she lay with her back to him, as far away as she could be and still be in the bed with him. He moved closer, past the center, and took her free hand. It was balled into a fist in front of her mouth. “Sweetheart,” he said.

She murmured something that he couldn't hear.

“Here’s a thought. Why don’t we go out tomorrow night? For dinner, just the two of us. Like we used to. Like Dr. Derring said we should.”

She couldn’t have fallen asleep already—could she have?

“She seemed to think it was pretty important.”

Silence. (But at least she wasn’t saying no.)

“If you don’t want to leave Harry alone with Martin—and I get that—let’s call your mother. He’ll just have to live with that. You don’t even have to call her. I will. You don’t have to do anything. I could even ask her to bring dinner over for them. She can feed them both and give Harry his bath and put him to bed, and then she can keep an eye on Martin. You won’t have to worry about either of them—any of them.”

He listened to her breathing. He could feel her breathing, his chest pressed to her back, through the blanket that separated them. “You know Jeanie will be thrilled. She misses both of them so much. She misses *you*—she misses all of us.”

It took too long for her to answer, but finally she said, in the smallest voice possible, “Okay.”

“Okay,” he said. He squeezed her hand. “And then we’ll get an A when we go back to Dr. D on Thursday.”

Ah—she laughed. Just a very small laugh—more like a sigh—but still, it was something. “That’s good,” she said. She sounded half-asleep. “You know how I hate getting anything less than an A.”

“When did you ever get anything less than an A?”

But she had fallen asleep. And then before he knew it, he was asleep too—still in his clothes, on top of the blanket, his teeth unbrushed, his hand over hers. Both of them on her side of the bed, the other half empty beside them, as if someone were missing.

§

In the morning, before Caroline or Martin were awake, he changed Harry’s diaper and got him fed and dressed. He was zipping him into his snow-suit—it had snowed all night, the first big snow of the year—when Caroline emerged from the bedroom in her long pink and white striped nightgown. “You’re going out? It’s still so early.”

Jacob held a finger up to his mouth—*don’t wake Martin*—and whispered, “We’re going to make our first snowman.” To Harry, as he tugged a hat on his head, he said, “Aren’t we, buddy? We’re going to go out in this beautiful snow and get out of Mama’s hair for a bit.”

“You’re not in my hair,” she said. As if to demonstrate, she raked her fingers through it. It had grown very long—she looked like Alice in Wonderland, Jacob thought. “It’s not even eight o’clock. The sun’s hardly up.”

“It’s been up for half an hour,” Jacob said. He heard his father stirring in the family room. “I made a pot of coffee. We’ll be back soon.” And he kissed her, quickly, and ushered Harry out the door.

Outside, he demonstrated as he talked Harry through how to make a snowball big enough to serve as the foundation for a snowman. Harry said, “No, not snowman. Snow *boy*,” and Jacob laughed and said, “All right—why not? I’ll tell you what. Let’s make a snowboy *and* a snowman.”

“Snow Harry and Snow Dada?”

“Yes. Let’s do it,” Jacob said.

They worked side by side, Harry mostly clapping snow between his mittened hands and chortling as it dispersed, and sometimes patting the snow flat and then thumping it apart and eating it. Jacob as he rolled and packed snow thought about how he would tell Caroline about the show he had in mind, how he would ask her for her help with it, while they were out at dinner. He could not remember the last time it had really been just the two of them. He

could not recall the last time they had really talked, except with Dr. Derring as their referee.

Caroline had once remarked—it must have been last summer (he'd been watching a Mets game on one of those evenings when their parents had their Harry)—that they seemed to have “skipped ahead” to middle age. “We never talk anymore,” she had said. She'd sounded so sorrowful. How had he responded? *Had* he responded? He hoped so.

Tonight they would talk. He would tell her all about the show, about Miami, about everything he had already written about life as a young magician. He'd written something funny (at least in Miami they had laughed) about his mother trailing him on bookings upstate and to Jersey when he was underage and couldn't register for a hotel room on his own: he'd devised a couple of new tricks he performed in the persona of the humiliated teenager he'd been then. He'd even created a trick that made use of the workaround he'd come up with at sixteen, when he got his own credit card and carried a notarized letter of permission from his parents. It was more joke than illusion when he produced that letter (not *the* letter, of course, but a version he wrote just for the show) and read it aloud, but the applause was enthusiastic, and he *liked* that it was mixed with laughter.

He'd started writing about his first trick, too. Everything he could remember about learning it: school closed on a day just like today—a snow day—and his mother off somewhere; his father restless, bored, and showing him the trick, no doubt, because he couldn't think of a single other thing to do with him. He was trying to write it as a sort of skit—no, more than that: a little comic play. He would be both his young father showing off for him and his own seven-year-old self showing his father that he could not (would not) be mystified by him.

As Jacob patted and smoothed snow for the base of the snowboy, he considered how this might lead into another bit—one in which he conjured himself a few years hence, and Harry at the age that *he* had been when he'd watched his father do the phoenix trick. What if his son, instead of being mystified and fascinated, as he'd been, were bored? He would once again play both roles: desperate father, uncharmed son baffled and bored by each (ever-more elaborate and more desperate) trick his father trotted out for him?

This had comic potential, didn't it? And it would give him the chance to work up some new kinds of tricks, some over-the-top comic ones, to “illustrate” the story.

And maybe there was more to say about himself and Harry—Caroline could help him with that. And more to say about his father? About the way Martin had followed him halfway across the country?

Not about his getting sick, though—that was much too dark.

Unless he could devise a trick that would lighten the darkness. (That would be interesting, wouldn't it? It might be *very* interesting to go darkly comic partway through the show—to make that shift while the audience was laughing and amazed. They wouldn't know what had just hit them.)

He thought of Caroline kneeling on the bathroom floor, cleaning the catheter, cleaning *his father's penis*.

No, there was no comedy in that.

He rolled another snowball in the soft snow at his feet. *She* thought he was heartless, but he wasn't. He had sympathy for the old man. He was relieved—of course he was—that the prostatectomy had gotten all the cancer, that there was no evidence that it had spread. That Martin would be fine once he recovered from the surgery. But having him here with them had been a terrible idea. Especially for those first couple of weeks. The moaning and the sobbing, the threatening to rip the catheter out. Caroline kept calling the doctor's office, asking if there could be something wrong—a complication of the

surgery, an infection. “Maybe they put it in the wrong place?” she whispered to Jacob as his father groaned in the next room. “There’s only one place,” Jacob told her. “Trust me on that.” But she didn’t trust him, no more than she trusted Martin’s doctor or the nurses who kept telling her not to worry, that Martin was fine, that he “must just not have much tolerance for being uncomfortable.” “Uncomfortable!” she’d said to Jacob. “No one screams like that because he’s uncomfortable.”

She didn’t know his father. She only thought she did.

And even after they got through that part, after the wailing and the cursing and the screaming was behind them, he was still weak as a baby. Caroline was still fetching and carrying for him. And when she sent Jacob to the store, the last item on the shopping list she handed him was “adult diapers for men—generic brand OK,” and that felt like the last straw.

“So he’s pissing himself now? How is it no one told us this would happen?”

“No one told *us* anything. Martin says he knew it was a possibility.”

“Excellent. How nice of him to keep that from us.”

“What difference does it make? We’d still have to deal with it.”

But why should he have to? That was what he wanted to know.

He couldn't understand how she could stand it. It had been so much worse than he'd imagined—and he had imagined that it would be bad, having his father with them. What he'd dreaded was having to listen to him *talk*, the interminable lectures and supposedly amusing and/or edifying stories—nearly all of which he would have heard before, but when his father said, “I never told you about _____,” one was never meant to say, “Oh, but you did.” It would be his childhood all over again—as if he'd never managed to put hundreds of miles between them.

But it wasn't like that at all. Even now, it wasn't. He was both cancer- and pain-free, and his strength seemed to be returning—he no longer held on to the wall on both sides of him when he made his way down the hall—but still he was not himself. He spoke only to Caroline—and only to ask for things—or to Harry, who would climb up on the sofa next to him and put his arms around his neck. “There's my boy,” Martin would murmur. “What a good boy.” He napped, he read the local newspaper (since when did he do that?), he watched TV. He played with Harry if it did not require moving around or talking very much. He refused to see Jeanie (well, he would have to, now—it was no longer up to him). He didn't even want to talk on the phone.

The self-aggrandizing, the jokes, the bluster of the old days, his father's old self, were all gone. Gone for good, or just for now—who could tell? And you wouldn't think he'd miss it, would you? Well, he didn't miss it, Jacob told himself. It was just puzzling, strange. Confusing.

Oh. He paused, a snowball as big as his own head in his hands.

This was why he'd cut off contact with his father, freshman year of college, when his mother left. He hadn't understood it at the time. It had not seemed like enough, somehow, to be hundreds of miles away. He had to protect himself from *this*—this diminishment. He must have always known, without knowing he had known, how pathetic his father could become, just given the chance.

“Put snowdada head on!” Harry shouted. “Come on, Dada, do it!”

“I was just about to,” Jacob told him. He set the taller snowman's head atop its belly and stepped back to look it over. “What do you think, son?”

Harry was flinging fistfuls of snow into the bushes. He stopped to cock his head thoughtfully. “Good,” he said.

The two snowmen did look like father and son. The smaller one was less than two feet tall, the larger nearly twice that size, and they were standing too close to each other to be strangers. But they had no faces. “What do you say

we find some sticks and stones to make our snowguys' eyes and mouths and noses?"

Harry abandoned his pelting of the bushes and flung himself toward his father. "Noses!" he cried. His face was flushed, or frozen.

"Oh, Har, you're so cold. We should go in. We can give them faces later."

"No!" Harry wailed. He let go of Jacob's legs and sat down in the snow. "Not *yet*." *Yet* was a new word. He looked up at Jacob, his hat askew. "We need snowmama, too." *Too* was also new, thought Jacob.

"Ah, a snowmama—of course we do. And we'll make one, but later on, or else tomorrow. It's going to stay cold all week. These guys aren't going anywhere."

"*No*," Harry said again. "*Now*."

So together they made the base and rolled it toward the other two. The mother was a good three feet away from the two snowguys. More like the family he'd come from than the one he'd made himself, thought Jacob.

That observation gave him pause—but it was true, wasn't it? It had become true. He and his father were together; his mother was somewhere else.

He hardly ever thought about his mother anymore. He'd conjured her up as a comic figure in the bit he'd written about her traveling with him—but he

never let himself really remember her. If he started to, he caught himself, and stopped. He never thought about the mystery of her decision to leave, not anymore. He could hold his father responsible—he *had* held his father responsible—but after all, he'd come to think, his mother had chosen his father, chosen to spend her life with him, just as he had chosen Caroline. Was she not paying attention to who he was? Or had she supposed that he would change? Or had *she* changed, and then woke up one day and thought, for the first time, *I don't have to put up with him. Why should I stay?*

At first he had spent too much time thinking about this. Trying to figure it out the way he'd always been able to figure things out—taking it apart the way he took apart a trick to see how it was done. At some point it struck him that his father must have been as unhappy with his mother as she'd been with him. But he would not have left—Jacob was sure of it. And that didn't make him “better” than his mother, he had once told Caroline. It just meant that he had more to lose.

“Or maybe he just has a greater tolerance for being unhappy,” Caroline said.

He had supposed for a long time now that he would never hear from her again. That final letter—those few lines that told him nothing—seemed to him

now to have landed in the life of someone else (that angry boy who had stopped speaking to his sad, bewildered father; the boy who had not yet met Caroline and started a new life—whose life had not yet changed as much as he had hoped it would, simply by leaving home). But as he and Harry rolled another snowball, he felt this supposition become knowledge, and the sorrow of this knowledge filled him. He *let* it fill him. Just for a moment, all the grief he hadn't even known was in him to feel.

She had left them both, for good.

She might not even know herself why she had left. Was it not possible that some things happened and there *was* no explanation, no real reason? It was only someone doing what seemed like the next thing to do.

There had been three of them, a family, and then there had been just three separate people, each doing whatever the next thing was. But now there were two of them again—two and the new family he'd made, with Caroline. And because of her, his father was a part of that one, too. She held them all together.

By now both he and Harry were cold and wet. "Let's give it a rest, buddy," he told his son. "Mama misses us, I bet. Maybe later she can help us make the snowmama."

Harry agreed. Either he was tired or he missed his mama, Jacob thought. Or else he understood: these guys weren't going anywhere.

§

Martin had fallen asleep again after breakfast. Caroline had insisted he come sit at the kitchen table—it was good for him, whether he wanted to or not, she told him, to get up and walk around and to sit up in a chair—and have some fruit and cheese and bread with her, but right afterwards he had gone back to the sofa bed with the newspaper, and soon she could hear him snoring.

She glanced at the kitchen clock. Jacob and Harry had been outside much longer than she'd thought they would be. Harry must be soaked through, frozen stiff. But it was good that they were playing together outside—good that they were together anywhere, doing anything, just the two of them. She knew this, but she still had to remind herself of it. There was something wrong with her, she thought. She shouldn't have to work so hard at this. (And Dr. Derring was on to her, she knew. She'd say things like, "You let Harry spend time with his grandparents because you know it's the right thing to do." Or, "I can see that you know when to pay attention to your instincts and when to fight them off." It was a way of tricking her, a way to encourage her to resist wanting to keep Harry to herself.)

She decided to make a fresh pot of coffee. When Martin woke up, she'd make him get out of bed and walk again, come into the kitchen and sit upright in a chair. She would make cocoa, too, so that when Harry came in and she stripped him out of his wet snowsuit and his hat and mittens and put him in dry clothes, he could have "coffee" with his father and his grandfather.

Poor Martin, she thought as she heated milk for cocoa. Sometimes, as she helped him get comfortable with pillows stacked behind him, and she saw how tired and sad he looked, she said it aloud. But then he would say, "Poor *Caroline*. You're the one who's got it hard."

He might be coming back to himself. This morning at breakfast he had made a joke—his first since the morning of the biopsy, when his conversation on the drive there had been nothing but bad puns and stupid jokes ("so they tell me they'll be probing my rectitude this morning, searching for evidence of moral failings"). But at breakfast he'd suggested that it might be time for him to start thinking about going home: "That's where the heart is, is it not?" But she could not imagine him at home alone. He still seemed so fragile.

Jacob, she knew, would suggest hiring a nurse. It was what he'd argued for in the first place—sending Martin home instead of bringing him here, getting

someone from a visiting nurse service to stay with him, “which might be covered by his university insurance and then even if it’s not, he can afford to pay for it.” They’d fought and she’d won. But if she told him now that it wasn’t nursing that his father needed anymore, only company and someone to look out for him, he’d say they should hire a student, then (he’d say, “Get one of his own students—God, think how thrilled one of those kids would be”), but she knew Martin wouldn’t want one of his students around—for godsakes, he didn’t even want Jeanie, his *machateynes*, around. He wouldn’t even talk to his agent on the phone.

She’d have to be firm with both of her husband and her father-in-law: he wasn’t going anywhere. Not yet.

In the meantime, though, it was nice—she had to admit it—to be almost alone in the apartment, which for once was quiet. Not silent, but quiet enough. Martin was snoring softly, and on her shoulder Delirious was making her own soft noise, the *gritch gritch* of her beak-grinding, which she did when she was sleeping, a sign of bird-contentment. The last time she had actually been alone in the apartment was the last time Martin and her mother had taken Harry for the afternoon while Jacob was out of town—the weekend before Martin’s biopsy—and she had been so anxious she could hardly catch her breath. Not

even an hour into the afternoon, she had called Natalie and asked her to come over, hoping that her chattering about some man or another (there was always at least one) or her dissertation research (there was always a problem with it) would keep her distracted. But at some point while Natalie was telling her about a fellow grad student in social psychology who might have a crush on her, she had begun to cry, and because she was not permitted to tell her about Martin's urology appointment—and she damn well wasn't going to say anything about Harry (she'd once made the mistake of mentioning that it made her "just a little nervous to be away from him" and Natalie, whose dissertation project, improbably enough, was on "self and identity in the family," had started talking smugly about "separation anxiety" and "failure to differentiate")—she said the first thing that occurred to her, the sort of thing she used to talk about with Nat: that she'd had a fight with her mother. Which was when Natalie had given her the name of the marriage and family therapist she'd taken a course with. "You and your mom will love her," she said. "It's never too late to work on these relationships, you know."

She should have just said that she cried all the time since Harry was born. It wouldn't be that far from the truth.

As she measured cocoa and sugar into the mug with a blue dinosaur on it, pouring hot milk into the mug, stirring—she told herself to try to just enjoy the time alone. *Your son is with his father—he's fine, having a good time.* No one asking you for anything. No one reminding you of anything you promised you would do. No one wondering aloud. No one crying, flying, shrieking, whispering, asking you to keep a secret, proposing the hiring of a nurse or an adoring student, demanding an evening out.

She was trying not to think about that—about going out and leaving Harry. About how angry Martin would be when he learned that Jacob had invited Jeanie over to keep him and Harry company. If Jacob was still planning that. If he had not thought better of it—or forgotten that he had suggested going out at all.

What would she and Jacob talk about tonight if they couldn't talk about their son or their parents? They had already told each other every story about themselves there was to tell.

She put animal crackers in a dish; she cut an orange into smile-shaped sections. She glanced at the clock once more, put napkins on the table, played a game with herself: What do you need more? Time alone—or time with someone you can talk to about anything? A new friend, or a way back into the old

friendship with Natalie, when it was possible somehow to say everything you felt—or the guts to let Jill Rosen know that your life was not as perfect as you made it out to be?

Or what about this: Not having to part with Harry, or being able to be all right—calm, even happy—when you do?

Or this: Martin to get well and go home without your having to be worried about him, or Jacob making peace with Martin here?

It wasn't a very good game. The answer to every question was *I don't know*.

She took out the half-and-half and three more mugs. She thought of her mother, the only one of them who was at work. Her mother at the desk she was so proud of, reaching for her ringing phone as others jangled all around her, the receiver balanced on her shoulder as she typed, lit up by a patch of too-bright light from overhead, as if each day were an interrogation. The constant hum and buzz of people talking. And then, after work, in her dark, silent house—a shock after the fluorescent glow, so many people, so much noise. What must that be like?

Caroline heard her husband and son coming up the stairs. They were making a lot of noise, laughing and possibly (but could that be?) singing. And now

they were inside, stomping their feet and still laughing and—yes—singing. It was a made-up song, something about *stout snowmen and good snowboys and sweet, smart, nice snowwomen*, to the tune—mostly to the tune—of “The Happy Wanderer.”

“*Tweedledee, Tweedledum*,” Jacob sang as Caroline came to meet them in the foyer. Delirious had awakened but remained on her shoulder, chirruping into her ear. “*Tweedledee, Tweedle*”—Harry joined in—“*dum dum dum dum dum dum*,” but then Harry stopped, his mouth wide, to stare at his mother as she sang along with Jacob on the next “*Tweedledee*.”

“How does Mama know our song?” he asked Jacob.

“Mama knows everything. I thought you knew that.”

“I don’t know the words, sweetiepie,” she told Harry as she got on her knees to unzip his wet snowsuit. “I know the tune because it’s an old one, but I don’t know how your version goes. Sing the rest of it for me.”

Jacob and Harry sang the end of their song together:

“*Tweedledee, Tweedledum*”—they shouted the last line—“*my snowfamily’s all here*.” On “*here*,” hey both grabbed her—Harry hugging her knees and Jacob hugging the rest of her—and now Delirious shrieked and flapped her wings and lifted off to swoop down the hall, back toward the kitchen. Harry

yelled, “Hi, Leery. Bye, Leery,” and Martin called from the family room, “What’s going on?” and her husband and son were dripping snow on her and on the floor—and Caroline was laughing, the three of them were laughing, and she thought, *Why can’t it always be this way*, and Jacob released her and they looked at each other as he stood there dripping and she felt as if she could see him thinking the same thing.

He unwound his scarf, one she’d made for him back when she was doing “projects”—knitting had lasted just long enough for her to make this one, long, lumpy, pale gray scarf—and steadied himself against the wall as he pried off his boots. “Where should we put all this wet stuff?” he asked, but what he was thinking was, *If I don’t do something, fix something, figure out how I can make things right, she’s going to leave me*. It came at him now with the force of a universal truth, a fact of life.

And if she left him, she wouldn’t leave her son. She’d take his father, too. Her mother. Everyone.

“Let’s hang everything that’s hangable in the bathroom,” she was saying, as if all were well. “I’ll go get some hangers from our room. And we can put the gloves and hats and boots on the heat registers.”

He tried to catch her eye, to communicate telepathically: *I'll do whatever I have to do. I love you. Don't go.*

But she wasn't looking at him. She was talking to Harry. "Let's get everything off you and get you into a warm bath, just a quick one, and then we can put you in dry clothes and have some cocoa, okay?"

And his father was calling, "Caroline? Jake? Harry? The bird is circling this room like a vulture. Do you think she's trying to tell me something?"

"It's okay," Caroline called back—she hoisted Harry onto her hip and headed to the family room—"I'll get her and put her back in her cage. She's just excited." And, without turning, "Don't just stand there, Jake. Come get warm. I made coffee. We'll have coffee and cocoa."

Harry sang, at the top of his lungs, "*Tweedledee, Tweedledum,*" and Martin said, "That old rhyme! *Tweedledum and Tweedledee/agreed to have a battle.*"

Harry said, "No! That's not the song."

And Caroline said, "You must be feeling better if you're quoting verse."

"Hardly verse," said Martin. "A nursery rhyme! Did you know that Kipling referenced it in one of the stories in *The Jungle Book*?"

“I didn’t know that, no,” Caroline said. She was coaxing Delirious down from a high shelf, her finger extended: “Come on, sweetheart, come to me. It’s okay.”

“Joyce once referred to Freud and Jung as Tweedledum and Tweedledee,” Martin said. “Did you know that?”

Delirious leapt onto Caroline’s finger. “Good girl. Sweet girl. Let’s take a rest now,” she cooed as she brought her to her cage.

“No rest,” Harry said. “Cocoa.”

“No rest for you. Only for Delirious. No rest for any of the rest of us.” She said it cheerfully. “Martin, I want you up and walking around. We’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

“Meet you in the kitchen, meet you in the kitchen,” Harry chanted as his mother carried him off to the bathroom.

“Okay, Dad, let’s do as she says,” Jacob told his father.

“We’d have to be fools not to,” his father said.

Michelle Herman has long made her home in Columbus, Ohio, where she teaches in Ohio State's MFA program in creative writing and directs an interdisciplinary program in the arts. Her most recent book is the novel *Devotion*, her third. She is also the author of a collection of novellas, three collections of essays, and a book for children. A new story is forthcoming in *Ploughshares* Solos series. "Closer" is excerpted from a new novel in progress.