

"What an original, enlightening, and humane book...And what a good one."

—ANN BEATTIE

LOVE
ALL

A NOVEL

CALLIE WRIGHT

Tuesday morning Hugh crept out of the house at just after six o'clock wearing a dark fleece jacket and a wool ski hat yanked low over his brow. On Beaver Street, Eric Van Heuse, Teddy's former Bidy Basketball coach, was out collecting his newspaper, while the Erley children, three doors down, had corralled their overweight tabby on the front walk, fencing the cat with their legs and giving him a push toward their house. If Coach Eric waved, Hugh didn't see it. He'd hunched his shoulders to the sun and trained his eyes on the ground.

Normally, Hugh happily stopped to talk to every person he met. His wife and children's irritants—busybody neighbors and the absence of fast food, respectively—were Hugh's *raison d'être*. He was a long-standing member of Save Our Lake Otsego and the Cooperstown Chamber of Commerce; he faithfully attended school-board and town-council meetings; the Seedlings School cosponsored soccer and Little League teams; and Hugh rode on a float in the nearby Fourth of July parade. Today, however, he was keeping a low profile.

He had been up half the night reading about factors influencing memory acquisition in young children, and for a certain boy, visual reinforcement, in the form of Hugh's face, had to be avoided. Dressing like a cat burglar, taking a roundabout route to work, hiding in his office, and generally steering clear of Graham Pennington, age five, would be Hugh's tactical offense against the sharpening of any fragmentary memories in the child's mind. Two weeks had passed since the hospital-room incident, which would work to Hugh's advantage: with any luck, Graham had already forgotten that he'd encountered his preschool principal beneath his mother's spread legs.

Hugh unlocked the school at six thirty and was relieved to find it exactly the way he'd left it a week ago. Someone had been as careful with the rooms as he was. Lights turned off, play rugs prepped for morning play, the playground raked, and the toys put away. Everything was fresh and ready to go. Mrs. Baxter had even primed the coffeepot in the tiny teachers' room so that all he had to do now was flip the switch to set the grounds brewing.

It had been a somber week since Hugh's mother-in-law had unexpectedly passed, long days filled with funeral and interment plans; cleaning out and listing his in-laws' house; and installing Bob Cole in their guest room for what looked to be a permanent stay. It was Hugh's opinion that his father-in-law—eighty-six years old, with congestive heart failure and a walker—belonged in the Thanksgiving Home. Hugh's wife, however, disagreed. It had been a long-standing plan for Anne's mother to move to 59 Susquehanna when her father passed, and now Anne argued that they had to extend the same invitation to her dad. Never mind that Joanie, a spry seventy-four-year-old former nurse who baked and cleaned—a welcome addition to any household—had been positively winning in comparison to Bob. Never mind, too, that Anne herself could barely tolerate her father. It was the right thing to do, she'd persisted, and more to the point: What would people think of her if she didn't?

At six forty-five, the Seedlings School staff began to arrive. First was Mrs. Baxter, a retired Cooperstown Elementary School secretary who had taken over Seedlings' administrative work five years back. She drove a light-blue Oldsmobile and had light-blue hair and called all the kids Sonny or Girlie, which sent them into spasms of laughter. Close to seventy, she had ambitiously made the leap from electric typewriter to PC and now pecked out Excel spreadsheets and printed up dot-matrix birthday cards for Hugh and the teachers at the appropriate times of the year.

"Mr. Obermeyer." Mrs. Baxter nodded. "Welcome back."

"Thank you. Coffee's perfect." Hugh raised his mug to her: #1 DAD! Julia had given it to him for Christmas.

Mrs. Baxter shrugged off her blazer and hung it in the closet, then removed her brown-bag lunch—always egg salad on wheat with a bag of potato chips and a Sprite—and placed it in their compact refrigerator. "Is this yours?" asked Mrs. Baxter, holding out a half-empty yogurt cup.

"No," said Hugh.

"One of the girls," said Mrs. Baxter disapprovingly, meaning Cheryl, Melanie, or Priscilla, the teachers at Seedlings. "You should speak to them about not picking up after themselves."

"Absolutely," said Hugh, who was hardly listening.

"There is one thing I wanted to mention," said Mrs. Baxter.

"Great," said Hugh. "Let's schedule a sit-down. Maybe before lunch."

Mrs. Baxter frowned, started to speak, but Hugh was saved by the arrival of Melanie and Priscilla, who commuted together and looked so much alike—blond highlights, capacious laps—that the parents constantly confused them. The kids didn't: Miss Melanie was the nice one; Miss Oak, the meanie.

"Hugh!" said Melanie, wrapping him in a hug. "How're you holding up?"

“Pretty well,” said Hugh. Then, “Anne’s father moved in.”

Priscilla grimaced, and Mrs. Baxter gave her a tut-tut.

Last to arrive, always late, dashing in closer to seven than Hugh would’ve liked, was Cheryl Landon, whom Hugh had hired away from the Wallace School, in Manhattan, to teach Seedlings’ pre-K. She was the illustrious engine of the Seedlings train, while a rotating cast of sweet assistant teachers—local college students receiving course credit for interning at Seedlings two days a week—were the bright red caboose.

“One minute,” said Cheryl, sailing past the teachers’ room with a plastic storage bin and three wrapping-paper rolls. “I just have to drop off my stuff.”

Hugh tracked her with his eyes, alert for signs of disbelief, disappointment, even disgust, because if Graham Pennington had told anyone about his principal’s untoward appearance during hospital visiting hours, wouldn’t it have been his beloved prekindergarten teacher? Not only was Mrs. Landon warm and affectionate, capable and fun; she was also host to a weekly show-and-tell, with a progressive emphasis on the *tell*.

Cheryl reappeared in the doorway with an apology for her tardiness and a kiss for Hugh’s cheek.

“We missed you,” she said, squeezing his hand.

Hugh and Cheryl fell in line behind Melanie and Priscilla as they all made their way to the main entrance. It was almost time for early drop-off, almost time to greet the children.

“Anything happen while I was gone?” Hugh fished.

“Nothing,” said Cheryl. “Your school is a well-oiled machine.”

At seven o’clock, they stepped into the bright sunshine to greet a carpool line that was ten deep and already snaking around the block. Priscilla directed traffic, waving mud-splattered Subarus and Toyotas and Tauruses up to the curb, while Melanie and Cheryl helped the boys and girls out. The early-drop-off program featured an alternative

start time for children with working parents, moms and dads who were mid-commute and didn't have time to bend Hugh's ear about his personal leave. Not so with regular drop-off. In an hour and a half, Hugh would be mobbed by stay-at-home moms lingering in the Seedlings hallways for the chance to shell Hugh with prying questions. What exactly happened to poor Joanie? Was Anne just devastated? And would his kids eat a tuna noodle casserole? Massive stroke; she is; and unlikely; but these were not the questions that had been keeping Hugh awake at night.

Last week Hugh had been summoned home to care for his bereaved family just as Graham Pennington returned to school from his convalescence. Now there were only ninety minutes left until Hugh came face-to-face with Graham and his mother. Would the boy remember what he'd seen? Had Caroline told anyone what she and Hugh had done? In the two weeks since Hugh had pushed her Indian-print skirt up over her hips and slipped her cotton panties down, he'd thought of little else but Caroline straddling his lap, the sunlight glinting off her unshaven knees. But as much as Hugh wanted to revisit the moment, he was also frightened by it—he could lose his school, his family—and even as he smiled at the early drop-offs and waved goodbye to their parents, he was mentally scouring his past, wondering how it had come to this.

* * *

Hugh had not explicitly set out to teach preschool. After college, he'd studied for a master's in education with an eye toward lecturing high school honors students at elite private schools in Boston, New York City. True, he had been drawn to education, but how, precisely, he had ended up running a preschool was a bit of a mystery even to him. He'd had plenty of time to plumb his psyche for an answer—during every school tour, at least one parent asked him why he'd wanted to “open a day-care center.” The best he'd come up with so far: “I thought I'd get in my two cents early.”

A more honest answer might've been that it had taken Hugh a long time to grow up, and he could still access those childhood feelings of being utterly lost in the social jungle of a school playground. There were clear rules in Hugh's preschool. No hitting, no spitting, no throwing the sand. Be nice to your friends, use your words, and always wear your listening ears. Seedlings' rule book was a blueprint for blossoming—kids needed all the help they could get, and Hugh remembered how hard it could be to choose a direction and go.

Hugh's capacity for decision-making seemed to have shorted out around the age of ten, when his brother, George, had slipped through the ice in the creek behind their rented ski cabin, and Hugh's parents had more or less followed their firstborn down. Reeling from the loss, they'd sent Hugh to boarding school, then summer camp, then college, until eventually he'd found comfort in the predictability of it all. Hugh was used to school: syllabi, reading lists, and course catalogs; orientation, registration, reading periods, and final exams. He was accustomed to the schedule of Labor Day to Memorial Day followed by summer internships and peppered with brief Sunday-night phone calls home. Hugh had even stayed on after his college graduation to work in the admissions office, conducting information sessions for potential applicants, until the dean politely informed him that he was no longer a recent graduate and it was time to move on. So to complete the circle Hugh had gone to graduate school for a master's in education, but even he could see that something was missing, that he was missing something—adventure, chance, hunger, thirst. He was on a conveyor belt of September to September and he was too afraid to get off.

* * *

When Hugh met his wife, at a party in Cambridge during his final year of graduate school, he'd been impressed first by her self-confidence, then by her beauty. Newly single—having recently broken up with a cellist who waited tables—Hugh had accepted an invitation from an

old boarding-school friend to a wine tasting at his apartment, and the night of the party Hugh showered and shaved and put on his best outfit, then headed across the Charles with a bottle of Cold Duck. He hadn't been thinking: when Hugh saw that he was the sole hippie element in a sea of blue-blazered men, he quickly returned to the entryway to ditch his belted cardigan.

"You're not leaving," he heard behind him—less a question than a command—and he turned, flustered, and found himself looking into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen.

"No, I'm just—this sweater." Hugh tried to shrug it off his shoulders, but the belt had knotted.

The woman extended her hand, introducing herself as Anne Cole, and Hugh reached to take it. She wore a striped oxford shirt tucked into a tweed skirt, and brown boots with platforms so high she rose to meet Hugh's eyes. Silently, Hugh admired her manicured nails against his olive skin.

"I like your sweater," said Anne. "You should wear it. Unless you're hot. Then you should take it off."

Hugh smiled. After weeks of hemming and hawing with the cellist, he appreciated Anne's straightforwardness. "I'll wear it," he said.

Hugh offered to get her a drink, and at the self-tended bar he filled two glasses with red wine, then joined Anne in the corner she had carved out for them.

"Are you at HBS?" she asked, accepting her glass. "I haven't seen you at the law school."

"BU," said Hugh.

"Law?"

"No," said Hugh. "Education."

Anne smiled and said, "I always loved school."

Anne was a second-year law student at Harvard (where Hugh had failed to gain admission both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student, despite his meandering legacy—maternal uncle, paternal

grandfather) and seemed destined for litigation. Having known him for less than five minutes, she argued that a master's was a half degree; that he should immediately switch to a doctorate program; that he should rethink his "inchoate" thesis; that he should call her friend at Harvard, who would be happy to talk to Hugh about careers in education—and then she opened her purse and flipped through a tiny black book, rattling off the home phone number of the adjunct professor.

Hugh felt alert, shocked to life. In a matter of minutes, Anne had more assiduously evaluated his professional goals than any guidance counselor who'd come before her. Five more minutes with this beautiful woman, and he'd have his whole life sorted out. He nodded attentively as she told him about her plans for internships and the fields of law she liked best.

"What are you doing next summer?" she asked.

"Isn't it November?" said Hugh.

"Right," said Anne. "Sorry." She blushed, tugging at her ear, and Hugh realized suddenly that this woman with the straight black hair and blue eyes of Superwoman was attracted to him. An editor of her law review, and she was trying to impress *him*.

Usually, Hugh relished a slow pace with women. Unlike most of his friends, who went straight to bed with their dates, Hugh had enjoyed the antiquated ritual of selecting a time, picking a place, presenting a lady with flowers, and taking her out for dinner. But after the party, Hugh led Anne back to her apartment on Central Square, where she let him undress her and turn her this way and that. He had never been so aroused. Through Anne's eyes, Hugh appeared confident and strong, more sure of himself than he could ever remember being. He knew things she did not, and she was willing to be taught.

From that first night they were always together. Within a month, Hugh had moved out of his apartment and into hers, called her adjunct-professor friend, and applied to Harvard's PhD program for the fall.

Weekends, they explored the city, just the two of them, riding the T to the North End for lasagna or to the waterfront for clam chowder and beer. Anne picked the movies, while Hugh picked the restaurants, then at night they had hungry, possessive sex, each of them feeling lucky to have found the other.

But by late January, Hugh was ready to see some friends. They were in bed reading—Anne with a mystery, Hugh with a magazine and a six-pack of beer—when Hugh found himself skimming, flipping the pages without seeing the words. It had suddenly occurred to him that he and Anne had not yet been out with another couple. Was that possible? In three months? Most of his friends had gone home for Thanksgiving and Christmas, while Hugh and Anne had spent the holidays together in Boston; then there were papers, exams. But now they were nearly asleep at nine o'clock on a Saturday night, and if ever there was a time— Hugh looked up from his magazine to discover three empty beer bottles on his nightstand, the fourth in his hand.

“Hey,” he said, flopping onto his stomach. He reached under the covers and ran a hand up Anne’s naked leg.

Anne scooted down toward him without taking her eyes off the page.

“You know what we should do?” asked Hugh.

“Hmm?”

“Throw a party.”

Anne glanced up from her book.

“A Valentine’s Day party,” Hugh went on, slipping his fingers under the leg band of her underwear.

“Valentine’s Day?” asked Anne. She blinked, then quickly looked back down at the page, and Hugh realized he might have hurt her feelings. He was her first real boyfriend; maybe she’d been hoping for dinner à deux.

“Yeah,” said Hugh. He climbed on top of his girlfriend and she

had no choice but to abandon her book. "Like for lovers." He kissed her, feeling hugely turned on, but Anne only pecked his lips.

"You don't want to?" he asked.

"Have sex or throw a party?"

"Right," said Hugh, smiling, and before Anne could argue, he lifted her shirt over her head and kissed her again.

Anne capitulated to the party but let Hugh handle the arrangements. Over the next two weeks, he sent out invitations and collected decorations, cleaned the kitchen and the bathroom, straightened his desk and paid two outstanding bills. Hugh had always wanted to host a party but secretly he'd doubted that anyone would show. Now, with Anne in his corner, Hugh hardly cared if theirs was a flop. He'd drop Jim Croce on the turntable and they'd slow-dance alone.

The morning of the party, Hugh presented Anne with a dozen long-stemmed red roses, and the smile on her face and the brightness of her clear eyes buoyed him. He believed he knew how to make her happy, and she him. But later, while Hugh ran around topping off their guests' champagne glasses and passing plates of heart-shaped brownies, Anne only watched from the couch.

"Aren't you having fun?" he'd asked, circling by.

"I am," she said. She held out her empty glass and let Hugh refill it.

"Did you meet Albert and Linda?" Albert's girlfriend was a lawyer and Hugh had thought she and Anne would hit it off.

"I think so," said Anne. "The blonde?"

Hugh took her by the hand and pulled her into the mix. He introduced her to his classmates, to his friend from the record store, to an old girlfriend who was now dating a hairstylist. He presented Anne to a social worker in need of legal advice, then watched with pride as she settled in, found the rhythm of her legalese, and appeared to enjoy herself. But ten minutes later she was in the kitchen, getting a jump start on the dishes.

"Anne," said Hugh irritably when he tracked her down.

“What?” She plunged her hands into a sink full of suds.

Maybe he should’ve asked her what was wrong. Maybe she should’ve told him. Instead, Anne remained with her back to him, her black silk skirt gently sweeping her knees. It was their first real fight and neither of them seemed to know what to do, so they did nothing. Anne finished the dishes while Hugh waltzed back out to his party, and in the morning Hugh put away the dishes while Anne vacuumed, and all was apparently forgotten without either of them having said a word.

In March, Hugh was again rejected from Harvard, but by then he was nearly finished with his master’s program and had been offered a one-year fellowship in the mayor’s office. It was as good a place as any to spend a year. Anne’s job would take precedence when she graduated next spring, and Hugh hoped for San Francisco or London, someplace he had never been. Tokyo, Beijing, Kuala Lumpur. He’d teach English as a second language. They’d ride bicycles to work.

Then Anne was pregnant, and their choices narrowed considerably. From the outset, there was no question in Anne’s mind that they would keep the baby. Such an ambitious and strong-willed woman (with tens of thousands of dollars in student loans) might not have seen this as the right time to procreate, but Anne was nothing if not convincing. She was twenty-six; he, twenty-eight. They were financially stable, living together, and likely to marry. A baby had always been part of the larger picture, Anne argued, and Hugh—whose larger picture had recently included the possibility of living in a tree house in New Zealand—agreed fatherhood could be considered an adventure, too.

Before Anne began to show, she was lobbying to move home to Cooperstown. Her father had a close friend who was a partner at a small law firm in nearby Oneonta; she could be running the firm in ten years, she said, and without all the clamoring and grinding and face time normally required of new associates. Plus, in Cooperstown

they'd have her mother, Joanie, a former nurse, to sit for the baby, and Hugh would be free to take a job. Although Hugh couldn't imagine what he would do in an upstate New York town of two thousand people, he did like the idea of living near the Hall of Fame.

The single possession that George had bequeathed him was an autographed 1957 Ted Williams card, and the fog that enshrouded Hugh's memory of his brother—indeed, of his entire early childhood—seemed to lift when Hugh thought about baseball. He pictured the two of them seated at the right and left hands of their mother for the Red Sox home opener, an afternoon game, mid-April, and a workday, certainly, or their father would have been with them and they would not have been forced to wear their jackets on that almost-warm day. George—eleven years old and with only eight months left in this world—held his prize baseball card in his sweaty hand. Their father had warned him that an autograph would devalue it, but George was ready with his ballpoint.

Red Sox versus the Yankees, a pitchers' duel; both teams went scoreless until the bottom of the fifth, when the wooden 0 was finally pulled inside the Green Monster and replaced with a triumphant 1. Between innings, George darted to the left-field line to peer down at Ted until the usher tapped him on the shoulder and sent him back to his seat. Two more scoreless innings, then a home run, Yankees, who added two more runs in the ninth to go up 3–1 and ensure another at-bat for the Sox. It was George's last chance, and without asking permission he bolted from his seat and charged the wall. "Hey, mister," he called, cantilevering at the waist and stretching out his arms like an angel, pen and card in hand. "Would you mind?" And maybe because Hugh had it all wrong—it wasn't the middle of an inning; it was batting practice, it was warm-ups, it was the last out of the game—or maybe because Ted sensed what Hugh and his mother could not—that this boy was ethereal and his brief life must be made great—the Splendid Splinter jogged over to the wall and reached up with his left hand and signed.

Hugh would take this card to Cooperstown, a shrine to a shrine.

In May 1976, they rented a two-bedroom apartment across from Clancy's deli, where Hugh stopped every morning for coffee and doughnuts before strolling Teddy the quarter mile to his grandparents' house. Joanie and Bob, soon to be rechristened Nonz and Poppy, waited at the kitchen door to swoop out and take over the handles on Teddy's stroller, rocking him backward up the three-step stoop and sucking him into their rich-smelling kitchen. "Have fun," Joanie would call. "Good luck," she'd say, as though there was some enterprising thing that Hugh was off toiling at. In fact, he would often just return to the apartment and watch TV until it was time to collect Teddy at three. He tried to see his situation as a phase—*When your mother and I first moved to Cooperstown . . . When you were just a baby*—but really he had no idea what came next.

It was Joanie who sold Hugh on the one-story brick building with an abandoned playground out back and a FOR SALE sign in front: the old community center that had burned two years before and been rebuilt elsewhere. A new house had gone up on the lot where the gymnasium had once stood, but the separate property of the rec hall, less than a tenth of an acre, was still on the market.

"You should buy it," Joanie said, jiggling Teddy on her hip. "You need something to make you happier here."

Anyone could see that Hugh was floundering. He'd had friends in Boston, and Anne to occupy his time. Now his wife worked up to six days a week, ten hours a day, and when she was home, she wanted only to curl up in their apartment and watch TV. Mornings, when Hugh dressed Teddy for the day, stuffing the baby's chubby legs into his tiny denim overalls, Hugh could not find himself in the room. He saw the changing table, the hamper of dirty laundry, the diaper pail that needed emptying; he saw Teddy's tonsure, a ring of light-brown fuzz circling his pate; he saw his son's cornflower eyes, bright and expectant—but where was Hugh in this scene? "People

get married and have children,” Anne had said. “That’s what they do.” And Hugh had agreed, and here he was, except that he wasn’t really. Not really.

Now Joanie said, “Picture it. You could have a little school. Maybe not a *high* school, exactly, but something.” She passed Teddy to Hugh, as though she were introducing them. “Like for this guy,” she said.

Hugh slipped his hands under Teddy’s arms, felt the weight of the boy on his shoulder; he touched his child’s chin with his finger, wiping a bubble of drool from Teddy’s soft skin.

Hugh borrowed the money for the down payment from his father-in-law, who was only too happy to see Hugh gainfully employed. When Seedlings opened, in September 1978, Teddy’s baby sister, Julia, was the same age Teddy had been when they’d first moved to Cooperstown—a fact Teddy proudly repeated to his new classmates, six “twos and threes” comprising the first class at Seedlings. Back then Hugh had been head teacher, assistant, and principal all in one.

With a new sense of purpose and an expanding group of friends, Hugh began to feel settled in Cooperstown. Where he had grown up in the ersatz community of dorm rooms and dining halls, Hugh delighted in knowing that Teddy and Julia would come of age organically, roaming the village on their bikes, learning to swim in the lake, with grandparents and neighbors and friends acting in loco parentis to make sure they didn’t get lost along the way. This small-town safety net stretched beneath all of them: not only did Hugh and Anne have each other for guidance, they had Bob and Joanie; their neighbors at the Cooper Lane Apartments; Sheila McMann, the real estate agent who had found 59 Susquehanna Avenue for them when they’d outgrown their two-bedroom apartment on Brunlar Court; Pat Byrne, their contractor, and his wife, Nancy, a maternity nurse at Bassett Hospital, who had helped deliver Julia.

But while Hugh was falling in love with Cooperstown, he did wonder if, for Anne, moving here hadn’t been a mistake. She wouldn’t

reach out to her high school classmates, many of whom still lived in the village. She wasn't eager to accompany Hugh to their neighbors' cocktail and dinner parties. She argued with him about joining the country club—Anne hadn't been a member as a child, why did they need it now? She worked ungodly hours in a town twenty-five miles away, and Hugh couldn't understand why she'd suggested moving back if she was only going to spend all her time running away.

"It wasn't my idea," Anne confessed. "My mother asked me to."

This was just after Julia was born. Teddy was having a sleepover at Nonz and Poppy's house, while Hugh and Anne, exhausted, had gone to bed before twilight with Julia breathing softly in her bassinet at Anne's side.

Anne rested her head on Hugh's chest and traced his ribs with her finger. "Maybe we could go back to Boston," she said, "or try somewhere new." Virginia. California. She poked him and said, "Kuala Lumpur."

Hugh could feel her wet cheek against his skin and he wiped her tears but hesitated to respond. The truth was, he didn't want to leave. Even Anne would have to agree that their lives here made sense. The Seedlings School was growing and Anne was set to make junior partner that year. Without Poppy and Nonz to care for the kids, Julia, at least, would have to start day care. And in some ways Anne *was* happy here—that very morning, she'd let Teddy play "jungle gym" on their bed, then helped him hold a bottle for Julia while all three of them leaned against Hugh, cradled in his arms.

But in other ways, Hugh knew something was wrong. His desire for an extended community, outside their home, beyond their nuclear family, upset her. It had been the same way in Boston. Anne didn't need to host parties or join clubs, and she seemed to resent that Hugh did. But in Hugh's experience it was risky to have only one person to depend on—what was so wrong with making friends? Anne brushed off these kinds of questions. *Nothing's wrong with it*, she'd said, though

clearly something was, because the more Hugh reached out, the more Anne withdrew, until sometimes they went entire days—early to school, late home from the office—without even seeing each other. In the mornings, Teddy and Hugh dropped Julia at Nonz and Poppy’s house, then walked to Seedlings while Anne drove to her office in Oneonta. Whenever one or the other still asked, they always agreed that they were happy in their work, happy with their children. Good, good. Everything was good, but not really, not entirely, because now Hugh had done the unthinkable—the thing he had vowed never to do—and he couldn’t defend it because he couldn’t understand it. Hugh thought of himself as an upstanding family man, a devoted father, and a good husband, but Hugh wasn’t the same person he’d been when he married his wife.

* * *

Back in his office after the carpool line emptied out, Hugh chased two Advil with a sip of coffee, then swiveled away from the many phone messages and unopened envelopes on his desk blotter. The picture window in Hugh’s office showed a playground teeming with children in light spring jackets already unzipped beneath warm red faces, the girls toiling at the monkey bars while the boys stormed the small grass yard, kicking and throwing foam balls. In his week away, Hugh had truly missed Seedlings. Conceived in his mind, born of his labor, his preschool was his third child, and it would stay with him long after Teddy and Julia had gone.

Hugh recalled watching his children on this very playground thirteen, fourteen years ago. He had never been totally comfortable having them as students—what if he favored them or, alternatively, gave them a doubly hard time? In fact, he’d observed them closely in the years since for signs that he’d scarred them at an early age. So far he hadn’t spotted anything too worrisome.

His recent activity with Caroline might change that, should it come

to light. Hugh could hardly bear to think of hurting his children—it would be reason enough to forget what he'd done. But Teddy was eighteen and Julia just two and half years younger. In a matter of months they'd be leaving for college, returning only on holidays and for a few weeks during the summer. It occurred to Hugh that the main act of parenthood was almost over. Soon he and Anne would be in a side tent, thinking longingly of their kids.

Teddy was affable and popular, a second-semester senior who had been recruited by Oneida College to pitch for their Division I team. Although Teddy's grades weren't very impressive, lingering in the low eighties no matter how hard a time Hugh and Anne gave him, Teddy's pitching arm more than compensated for his report cards. Even as a child, when school had been about pictures hung on refrigerators and gold stars in place of grades, Teddy had spent his energy on the playground, organizing grand competitions of kickball and kick the can. But Teddy's strengths were also his weaknesses: he knew his comfort zone and he hesitated to leave it. Theoretically, it was a good strategy—look before you leap—but because Teddy hardly ever leaped, he had limited exposure to failure, and because he'd rarely failed, he was often afraid to try. Still, Hugh couldn't help being charmed by his sought-after son, though he did have concerns about Teddy's character. He was vain, moving easily—and possibly irresponsibly?—between girlfriends. They called at night and Teddy would give muted one-word answers or, worse, make Hugh say he couldn't come to the phone.

Julia, fifteen, was wry and clever and almost nothing like her brother. She was smarter than Teddy, no question, and spurned her brother's high school grandstanding for more intimate clusters of close friends. Occasionally Hugh did worry that Julia was isolated. Her best friends, Sam and Carl, were good kids—it wasn't that—but Julia hid behind them, in a way. They had their own language, which no one understood, and parent-teacher conferences often ended in complaints that Julia and her friends were exclusive to their detriment. It was an odd thing, really. Teddy was only too happy to explain how

weird everyone thought his sister was, but you couldn't convince Julia of that. As far as Julia, Sam, and Carl were concerned, they were the only people worth knowing.

The latest Julia problem was this business about not trying out for her high school tennis team. It was a decision made more ridiculous by the fact that she continued to show up at the practices, hanging around the courts while Sam and Carl ran the drills. Hugh couldn't understand it. Julia had taken tennis lessons at the country club, been promoted through the skill groups right alongside her sporty brother, and consistently earned a spot in the club finals, losing only to a pixie whose Prince Junior was a cudgel against Julia's second serve. And now suddenly she'd given up the sport. Anne's opinion was that it was up to Julia. If she didn't want to try out, that was her choice. "You're always prodding the kids," Anne had said. "They're almost adults." Maybe so. But Julia needed a push, and Hugh had privately decided to give her one.

At eight thirty, he slunk from his office and stationed himself in the small vestibule to the side of the teachers' room—the supply closet—where he could observe the flow of traffic, unseen. It was a temporary solution. He'd have to come out eventually, but not until he was certain of avoiding Graham Pennington and his mother. Hugh watched and waited. Soon parents and students began to stream by: mostly moms, some dads; mostly with one child, some with two.

Hugh sensed Caroline before he saw her, felt his body thrill to the sound of her voice asking Graham if he'd remembered his lunch box, then to her scent—soap and turpentine and a hint of Earl Grey. She was standing less than ten feet away—the cuffs of her jean jacket turned back, her brown hair knotted loosely on top of her head. Hugh held his breath as Caroline passed, ushering Graham into Mrs. Landon's classroom, then turned back toward the exit alone.

Hugh remained frozen in his hiding place for another five minutes, until he saw Barry Klawson—Julia's tennis coach—charging down the hallway with his nephew in tow. Familial duty: at the last

second, Hugh fell into step beside them, clapping Klawson's shoulder in a friendly hello.

"Mr. Obermeyer." Klawson stopped to offer his hand but Hugh steered them on. "Debbie's at her aerobics class this morning," he said.

"Right, right," said Hugh. "Jace, it must be so nice having your uncle bring you to school."

The boy buried his face against his uncle's work jeans, his legs scissoring in time with Klawson's.

"I realized," said Hugh, "I think you know my daughter, Julia, from the tennis team."

Klawson stopped outside Miss Melanie's classroom. "Jace," said his uncle, "go in and say good morning to your teacher. I'm right behind you."

Klawson stuffed his hands in his pockets. Thick, muscular arms, paint-splattered jeans: Barry was a Klawson of the overpriced Klawson's Hardware on Main Street, where Hugh had spent fifty-seven dollars yesterday on cleaning supplies for his in-laws' house.

"Julia's mother and I are concerned that she didn't try out for the tennis team," Hugh began. "I wondered if maybe she'd talked to you about it."

Klawson shrugged. "Not really," he said. "Though she keeps showing up."

"Right," said Hugh apologetically. "She has a hard time with . . . well." Julia would kill him if she knew he was having this conversation with her coach. She would see it as a betrayal, but Hugh saw it as parenting. Hugh leaned close to Klawson and said, "I know she didn't try out for the team, but I wondered if maybe—I wondered if you could ask her to."

"Well," said her coach noncommittally, "I've already made cuts. Our first match is Thursday, and the lineup's set."

Hugh nodded and rubbed his chin as though he were reconsidering. "I know this is asking a lot, and I really don't want to put you in an awkward position, but if it happens that there's an exhibition match

or something . . .” Hugh sighed. “She wants to play, but she’ll never tell you that.”

“Okay,” said Klawson, “but, like I said, I already cut people. And technically there’s an alternate who should get first chance at any exhibition matches.”

“I see,” said Hugh. Then he surprised himself by saying, “You know, not too far down the road Seedlings is going to be expanding. One or two new buildings, probably. I keep meaning to get over to the hardware store to talk to your dad about ordering supplies.”

Klawson regarded Hugh, and Hugh thought he saw the man’s eyes narrow but he couldn’t be sure. In any case, he was in with both feet. “It’d be a big order, more expensive, I know, to do it locally, but what’s it all about if we can’t help each other?” Klawson cocked his chin and Hugh forged on, wondering if he’d lost his mind. “Maybe I could come down to the store this evening and talk to you and your dad.”

Klawson’s eyes locked on Hugh’s. “Yeah?”

“Sure,” said Hugh.

“Okay.” Klawson nodded slowly. “And maybe I could talk to Julia about an exhibition match.”

Hugh nodded faintly, then whispered, “Away from her friends, if you can manage it.”

They agreed to meet at six o’clock, shook once, and Klawson left to join Jace at the tactile station, the boy’s fingers deep in a lump of Play-Doh.

Dizzy, unsure what he’d done, Hugh turned on his heel and froze when he saw Caroline standing at the main doors, waiting for him. There were still several mothers between them but by eight forty-five all would’ve cleared out, which left Hugh about two minutes to decide what to do. His stomach dropped. His pulse hammered in his ears. Anne had once called him “adecisive,” and it was an apt description, but in his mind Hugh pictured himself crossing the hallway, cupping Caroline’s breast under her jean jacket and pinching her nipple through the soft fabric of her T-shirt, a fantasy he’d spent a week trying to

squelch. He'd had crushes before, but nothing this all-consuming, nothing this potent.

Imperceptibly, Hugh began to drift: one step toward her, one step toward his office. Thirty more seconds and they'd be alone together. But just as Hugh started to speak, to say he was glad to see her, to ask her how she'd been, Caroline turned and beat a retreat. She smiled sadly, held open the front door, and followed another mother out, leaving Hugh to wonder what decision had been made.

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