

## 11. BOISTEROUS IN THE PLAYROOM

“You look great.”

“It was those exercises that I did while I was pregnant. I got this DVD. And I just kept on after Erin was born.”

“That bikini bottom hugs your ass tighter than when you were in college.”

It plays to her vanity. She wants to pretend that nothing had changed. And in a way, it hasn't.

“Hush, Erin. She just doesn't know when to shut up. I hate to think what she is going to be like when she grows up.”

“How can you take it all day like that?”

“I don't think that I can.”

“You don't... drink, do you?”

“Not at all. Although I feel a little driven at times. I can tell that guys still stare.”

“Of course, they do. And they should.”

Erin keeps screaming in fits and starts. But her mother hardly takes notice. That's just how it is. Erin is learning her first lesson of life. She will be ignored when her mother sees fit, and this will create the worst confusion for the child. She will wonder if she has to make more of a racket to even be noticed. Or will she be permanently ignored? At times, she will believe that an unmotivated ruckus is just the demonstration that is needed. At others, she will hold her tongue even if things are a little desperate.

Beth will only see the mischief. She will hardly be able to read beneath the surface. She will never observe the revolution brewing in the playroom. She will only observe the noise as it emerges cacophonously. The well-composed symphony of Erin's making will entirely elude her. At her most extreme moments, Beth will wonder what had gotten into the poor girl.

Such neglect might leave Erin to fend for herself. But she is ensconced in a world where she barely has a material care. She might easily mistake this for motherly love if her demands weren't a little more precise. When she is served, she takes what she can get. She is not a brat. That belief is one only supported by her mother. Ultimately, the poor child is nothing but a rival for the attention that the mother feels she so richly deserves. If little Erin is a blessing, it is primarily because Beth allows her to grace the sunnier climes. Beth has done everything necessary to bathe her daughter in the requisite spotlight. It is only more evidence to the world of her concern.

As she holds her child, she is checking herself out in a mirror. She tries to adjust the swimsuit with her free hand. If exploring eyes catch her at her task, it is only an act of flattery that adds to the mother's concentration. This is barely the stage in life to give up on the game. She believes that she is in the thick of things and admits as much to herself.

Obviously, there is something a little hard about Beth's demeanor. This is not at all a resentment borne of the rigors of child-rearing. Rather, it is simply more envy with regards to poor Erin. Erin is a natural, and she cannot help but aspire to the public eye. Beth tries to crowd the child out of her rightful place. There is already a little palace intrigue going on.

“You don't ever give guys your phone number?”

“Heavens no. Although they ask. That's what marriage is for. To give us a basis for our

fantasies. That's how I hold Simon in check. He has to realize that he's not the only one in my life. He can be led to think that Erin is a yoke around my head."

"You've never cheated on him."

"I don't have. Just a little lust in my heart is enough to let him know who's boss."

"I'm sure that girls come on to him all the time."

"Just because he's married. It doesn't really matter what kind of catch he is. I let it all go in stride. Because he realizes that if he just strays an inch, that he will have hell to pay."

"You know it girl. It's tough having to depend on such a fine balance of the heavens."

"That's how I snared in him in the first place. I forced him to recognize the prize that he had. I don't exactly come cheap."

"It sounds as if he is slaving away just to remain in your good graces."

"You could say that."

"I guess that you are so wicked."

"I can't help it. I was born this way. Otherwise, I'd lose my essential charm."

"You mustn't do that. Don't you think it might be fun just to test the waters?"

"There is really no testing. You can't get a little bit wet."

"You never know what it's like."

"As long as Simon is devoted to me, that seems enough."

"Devoted, you make him sound like a puppy."

"I toss him a treat now and then. That's what it's all about."

"I'm sure that he treats you well."

"I really have no complaints in that department."

"So the deal has worked out well."

"You could say that!"

Beth clutches Erin to reassure herself. She feels as if she has been giving an interview to a fashion magazine. It gets her wondering if the rewards are really worth it. She's going all day. At the same time, she tells herself that she has accommodated herself to a life of leisure. What could that mean? She needs to be wined and dine a little more. It's simply not enough to be mistress of the manor.

She wishes that she could take more delight in Erin. She tries to keep her subdued. That seems more than enough. The child seems like the necessary trade off for what luxuries she has acquired. And if this is insufficient to balance off the down side, what does she have to complain about? It's not like a car that you can trade in for another model.

When she looks at Erin's face, she wants to imagine a suitable companion to share her own dreams. This can hardly be the limits to her aspirations. That only encourages her to work harder to maintain her own health. She still thinks of herself as a kid so she doesn't want to succumb the way that her mother did.

She is not being cruel. These are simply the facts that she has to deal with. All in all she finds that she is a little impatient with her daughter's pranks. It may be all a part of growing up. But Beth has little tolerance for any of it. She doesn't enjoy turning it into a game. Maybe a nanny would take some of the pressure of it all. But she can't really bring this idea up with Simon. She will simply have to be more creative for the short term.

She brings Erin over to the side of the pool and lets her splash in the water. If this were

the ocean, maybe the young dolphin could swim off on her own. She loses temporarily loses herself in her idyll. But the water begins to unsettle Erin. This only makes Beth more perturbed. After all, Erin was the one who wanted to come swimming. Now she only shows impatience with the water.

As she drives home from the pool, she notices that a nearby house is for sale. She stops to pick up one of the brochures. Beth and Simon bought their place for two-hundred thousand. Not it must be worth almost three times that.

She looks at the well-manicured lawns. Maybe her house needs some landscaping. She thinks about the doors of her house. They are chipped and looking shabby. We could use a new paint job.

“We’re OK for a few years.”

“What if we want to sell? That place on the corner is for sale.”

“I have no intentions of moving any time soon. We have enough space here. Are you unhappy?”

“Not at all.” She can feel the discussion end abruptly. She feels that there is more to say. Maybe, he no longer feels the same way towards her.

Beth had hoped that she would have been working at this point. She loved having a child to confirm the dreams of her late adolescence. Now she has accomplished those desires and wanted more. If she remains like this any longer, she will start to get depressed. She couldn’t feel more and more distance from Erin. She hopes that the child understood none of misgivings. She doesn’t want to seem like a hard mother. But she feels the need of more space for herself.

Tonight she dispatches Erin to bed early. For a while she has realized the glaring inadequacies of her husband as a lover. And she has fantasies now and then. But she loves the comforts of her life. There is an element of insecurity in that she fears that Simon will get bored and take up with another woman. She feels more motivated to do the same herself. Guys still look at her all the time. But it’s not quite the same. She stops dead in her tracks before she follows through with any of her whims. It would be just silly.

The next day Beth is busy from daybreak. She usually is not so industrious. But she feels extra motivated. Perhaps it is also because she needs to repair the shower. She really applies herself this time. This is usually something that she would depend on Simon to accomplish. But not this time.

Afterwards, she takes Erin to the grocery store. As she winds herself along the aisles, she finds that she is improvising. Erin wanders off. She has become lost amidst the brightly colored packages. Somewhere in the recesses of the store, Erin is discovering the mysteries of commerce. For the moment, she is outside the focus of her mother. Beth hardly gives it a second thought. Let the mischief begin.

If Erin had a little more experience, she could transfer her insights into new arrangements for the financial order. At present, her skills are less honed, so she has to settle for a bit of rebelliousness. Perhaps she could sample the cookies on the shelf in front of her. A further level of quality control.

Looking is almost as good as tasting. She considers the flavors in her mind and wonders if she has enough reference points to make an informed decision. What would it take to really make her a player in this economy? She has her wits about her. She knows what she wants. If

only she didn't feel the restrictions of her interfering mother.

Already, Erin contemplates the perfect menu to accompany her creative illusions. So what if it is a little heavy in the sweets department. She is going to need all the energy that she can get to conquer the demons of industry. The future of finance rests upon such a little head. What to do, what to do?

It's not enough to think about these problems. Erin realizes that experience is her best teacher.

About this moment, Beth realizes that Erin has run off. Tucked away in her nether world, it will be near impossible for the responsible Beth to track her down. This is the conundrum that is the challenge to Beth's ordered world. Erin is the ghost in her machine, and this ghost has acquired invisibility.

"I've lost my daughter!"

"You're sure that no one came for her."

"Mam, it sounds like a kidnaping. She's going to end up on the back of the milk carton."

The panic is humorous particularly as the child ponders over the deeper enigmas that afflict mankind. Only a clear head can offer a solution. Maybe her little heart can tap into the rhythms of the planets. What does she have that eludes the great philosophers? She doesn't let the pretensions get in the way. Even Beth cannot attain such harmony.

Somehow that winning combination goes Erin's way. It is almost like the eagle's flight. She can feel the force lift her up from her earthly constraints and permit her to soar high above in the heavens. What a blessing!

The little terror now has all her energies concentrated on such a liberating vision. And she has none of the encumbrances that seem to weigh down her parents. It's fun to pretend that she really has enough perspicacity to delve into the deep connections of the cosmos. After all, the supermarket contains its own logic. Isn't it a short step to extrapolate from such earthly orders to more complex heavenly arrangements? It all seems to turn on the same absurd dynamic. Even the grocery store subsists with that impenetrable contradictions between seduction and reality. All that is sweet may not sustain human physiology. So this architecture of sugar tempts true magnificence. And Erin's imagination finds a way to piece together this house of cards.

The more that she engages her creativity, the more desperate is the hope of recovery for the youngster. She has gone beyond invisibility to the next realm of inexistence. She now maintains herself through sheer will. In some parallel world, that flame burns so that the hidden edifice might make its effects known in actual experience. Only the true believer can ever attain such revelation. For the rest, the vision has no foundation as they struggle with their rock solid doubts. Beth can hardly admit to such a base of skepticism. But she is hardly ready to take the risks that have enticed her daughter. She is more willing to surrender herself to earthly delights.

Erin is willing to put aside the immediacy of pleasure. Even if sugary treats may have been the basis for her journey, she has become more ascetic about the tempting flavors. She has abjured substance for form and pushed beyond the limits of association. The ontological foundations have been overthrown for a new metaphysics, and her youthful exuberance is more than up to the task.

So be it that an older traveler would become lost in the certainty of physical pleasure. A

committed philosopher cannot be fooled by false testimony of the senses. She must labor on with the knowledge that all that glitters is not gold. And so she burns for the glitter inside the soul, and she has been encouraged by her abilities to bring to sight those images that can keep her centered on her search. It is a difficult undertaking, but she does not shy away from its duress.

This is about more than simple reward. The contemplative life finds its victory in the flowering of minute revelations. Erin is pure of heart. Only one who is clean in her soul can pierce the vain illusions that abound. Without such vision the supermarket is only the beginning of the path towards utter corruption.

It is not as if such wisdom is wasted on the young. Erin has been able to devise a considerable treatise that documents her investigation. Even if this tome has been recorded inside mind, she is witness to a coming transformation of the political order. Such abstruse visions serve as a spark to a rebellion of like-minded souls. No wonder the rabble has taken to more active participation in the process. The tyrants have deeply tainted the body politic, and only the pure of heart will find the principles to live on.

Erin has calmly made her declaration. So what if those around her are in a panic. They cannot feel the wonder that fills her with excitement. It pulses through her veins. She has reached paradise.

The revolution is snuffed out before it can make further inroads. Erin is a prisoner of conscience inside her mother's shopping buggy. Perhaps, her independence will rub off on the mother. But Beth seems more resistant to such incendiary dialogue. She knows that something is wrong, but she is more beset by her frustrations. She scans the fashion magazines for some dieting advice. The gossip rags help clue her into the punishments that await those who stray from the norm. Her body has become her jailer, and every admonition from the watchful press remind her of her shortcomings. This is enough of a project to distract her from the true sources of her liberation. For the moment, she will engage this battle and do what she can to put down any stirring in the playroom.

When she drives past the house for sale, Beth is again reminded of her dwindling possibilities. Her devotion to the prevailing order has made her more of a pessimist. So be it. It only makes her work harder. She doesn't want her rivals catching up to her. The mirror is temporarily her ally against those who lie in wait for her. She is a winner!

As Beth pulls closer to her own house, she feels as if she is watching a tracking shot in a film. All the contours are placed to remind the viewer of the meager aspirations of the occupant. She has dreams but they have become clearly delimited in this rudimentary structure. Even the need to escape is limited by the surrounding shadows. The haunting has pervaded her soul.

It was so easy for Erin to disappear. If only she could do the same. She isn't looking forward to preparing dinner. If only she could have something delivered. She knows that Simon wouldn't go for that. Besides, she hates eating from a box. She resolves to make something tasty.

Beth doesn't envision herself as much of a chef. And if she can make something instant, that seems to be satisfaction enough for her. She knows that if she is too ambitious that she may end up ruining things. She can let it get any worse.

A little ingenuity has its own rewards. A pasta dish is her savior. Simon arrives home just as everything is ready. His timing couldn't have been better. He has a drink with the salad.

It seems to smooth everything over. They have never been great talkers. It all reminds her of the absurdity of their relationship. But she does the best to cope. It's almost like waiting for the main course. There's going to be something to make it all perfect again.

She knows that she couldn't be more deluded. But the longer that she can hang on the better for the both of them. She decides not to have a drink with her meal. For her, it's only that bottomless glass that promises to make everything better. She hates being taunted by the liquor, as the twisting tail keep turning outside of her grasp. Instead she has opted for reality. It comes with its own surprises. The tangy salad dressing is perfect to insulate her from the blahs of the evening. She thanks her lucky stars that she sprinkled a little Parmesan to seal the perfection.

As dessert rolls around, Simon is coasting with a couple of glasses of wine. He doesn't want to keep the fun from ending.

She looks more attractive in the candlelight. Erin is long gone, having been put to bed an hour ago. Except for the dirty dishes, there seems little keeping them apart.

Beth's kisses seem even spicier than the meal. He feels gratified that she has resisted the toll of the years. There is something a little severe in her forehead. However, she still has all the grace of her younger years. Not only has she taken the time to make a great meal, but she has also made herself up pretty as a picture. He detects no irony in the presentation, and this may be his undoing. She is all prepared, perfumed and powdered, the dessert treat after the dessert.

He couldn't be more happy. She holds him off for a while as she cleans up. He goes through the motions but is more of a nuisance. He is getting what he wants. She feels little in the way of satisfaction. Even the physical pleasure has a little in the way of ho hum. And she accommodates.

When she can feel Simon insides her, she uses it as an excuse to drift away. She loses herself in another time and a distant place. She can feel the waves roll over her.

This is the idyll that had been reserved for Erin. And Beth gets a little taste. If there was any more, then she could claim to have a great lover. For what it is, she lets him flail away. Even his efforts at pleasing her are a little clumsy, perfunctory more than anything else. She feels a little like a stripper and wants her requisite tip. He massages her in the hopes of making the enjoyment last longer.

She is afraid that she is asking for too much. Could any guy give her what she needs? He's passed out next to her. She feels as if she needs more. What is there to ask? She almost thinks that the dishes remain undone. Why does it all seem so automatic?

It's a hot night. But she wanders outside to the porch. She collapses in a chair and stares at the fireflies.

By the time that she makes it back to bed, he is deep in sleep. He is oblivious to her. During the sex, she felt the same way. He made an effort. But it was hardly enough. What are the limits of her dissatisfaction? She has barely the courage to seek elsewhere. It's not a physical thing. She appears to resent Erin's freedom. What has happened to her?

The next day at the pool, she lets Erin head off into the water while she stretches out on a deck chair. She is trying to avoid the sun. Of course, she feels a little vain. She imagines that she is single again. One of the lifeguards is giving her the eye. She perks up in the chair. He smiles.

If she was more daring, she'd ask him to spread sun tan lotion on her body. She knows

that would be a little tacky. But it doesn't hurt to be a little bit of a flirt. She could never imagine actually meeting up with one of these kids. But it's enough to know that she's still desirable. She pats the sweat from her forehead.

Everyday when she leaves, she slinks past the lifeguard station. All the guys try to catch her eye or at least catch an eyeful. She obliges them. If she is the star of her fantasies, that is gratification enough. She takes comfort in the fact that she can still stir these young hunks into a frenzy. If she wanted to, she could rock their world.

Erin tugs at her as they head for the car. Beth is still acting as if she is independent. She is heading down the fashion show runway. None of the other women command the same attention. And she knows it. Maybe they are more caring mothers. But none of them make the boys breathless.

For Beth, this is quite a change from her high school years. She really wasn't clumsy then. However, she only attained her true charm by the time that she hit college. She wasn't all that serious a student. Perhaps, that was her downfall. But guys really flocked around her in droves. She promised herself that she would never return to the obscurity of her high school years.

Beth's commitment to her own desires has made her a little hard. That may be part of the reason that Simon has been so cold. For a while he seemed like such a catch. He provided her with all the luxuries that she expected. She never forced her to work. Since Erin was born, he has been completely understanding. After a couple of years, she felt that hollow. She couldn't give up on the marriage so Erin became her consolation. Now she realizes that she doesn't really like children. She treats Erin more like a little adult. She cares for her basic needs. But Beth essentially leaves her on her own.

Erin is such a free spirit that she hardly notices her mother's neglect. And it isn't true disregard for the child. It's more of an absent permissiveness. This is the source of Erin's rebellion. It is not as if she wants a reimposition of discipline and the iron hand. To the contrary, Erin has discovered her own logic to the universe and feels that she needs a firmer footing to stand up for her inalienable rights. Even in Beth's meager tutelage, there are still the traces of indoctrination. The pool, the grocery store, the hair dresser, all these distractions are further testament to Erin's bondage under a regime of gaudy materialism. There is nary a spiritual value in this realm. Even the appeals to religion seems merely the suspicions that gird economic speculation. How else can such misguided energies lead to such an abundance of wealth?

Erin favors the pagan side of ritual. She is in tune with the ancient rhythms of sun and sea. If she has to make her temple in the neighborhood pool so be it. When her body slips beneath the surface of the water, she is being baptized in these holy waters. There can be no blasphemy here as she gives praise to her new gods. All Beth can see is the silliness of the child. The mumbling and the restlessness. Even her words sound like a language from another planet. Either Beth is in the presence of true genius, or Erin is completely unaffected by the world around her. Will she ever learn?

As they pass the house for sale, Beth wants to take it as her cue. She imagines driving on in an effort to escape her life. If only she never had to return to Simon. He could make it on his own. Beth could find a job. Maybe in retail. She could do some modeling on the side. She did a little of that in college. She prides herself on looking almost the same.

Maybe Simon was a mistake. She had other suitors with higher dreams. It was just that his horses started to show promise sooner. He lavished her with the life of leisure. And she regaled in these treasures. Now the gold has taken on the fool's hue. The sparkle in suburbia has gone the way of the fairy tale.

She doesn't want to seem unappreciative. She can feel that she is transforming into the suburban cliché. It would be worse if she started drinking. The temptation. Other women need something to see them through the day. That is why Beth spends so much time on her own. She can see the undertow catching those other souls. For all the turbulence, Beth still rides the surface of the waves.

She gives the car a little gas in an effort to make her intention known. She has money in her own account. She has credit cards. There is nothing that Simon can do to hold her back. She could pack all her stuff in a couple of hours. He will be home much later that. He will hardly notice that she is gone.

Sure, he'll miss Erin. But Erin has been more an acquisition on his part. Beth has blessed him with a child. She has performed her primary service. For the time being, she is a suitable guardian for the child.

It is almost as if she recognizes an eventually stand off with Simon. That he will reclaim the child when the time is right. He will impeach the mother if that is what is necessary. The wicked witch cannot interfere with the destiny of a princess.

Beth wonders if Simon notices what is going on. Will he use his knowledge against her? He'd have no chance of winning a custody suit. There is no evidence that Beth is an unfit mother. She may not match his model of an ideal. But the courts aren't set up to impose an archaic standard. Simon may not understand how to use the culture to create a system of reward. Beth's approach has seemed a little lackadaisical to him. Sure, it's fantastic that she is the best looking mom in a bathing suit, but he expects for more than her ability to win a beauty contest. He had hoped for a better partner to his vision of economic success. On this count, he may be pushing her away and only make it more difficult to influence her behavior. His nightmare is that his daughter will follow the same path. Not having had a son, he has channeled all future dreams into Erin. He also realizes that Beth is resistant to having more children. So Simon will have to adjust his ideas of having an heir.

"Simon, I gave you what you wanted. I felt glorious during my pregnancy. But it's a stage of my life, of my past. It's enough just to raise Erin. You can go to work and not have to deal with her. You have no idea what it's like."

Beth had learned the litany so well. She will not yield to his further appeals on that matter. Besides, she realizes that is not the real issue. He has these antiquated ideas of child development, and Beth is not willing to oblige. It's not as if he is going to do anything on his own to make up for what he believes are Beth's shortcomings. He wonders why he didn't listen to his mother's advice. Beth was never the bastion of conservatism and moral value that the mother advocated. She always found Beth's inordinate thinness as a sign of vanity.

"The girl is a sinner through and through."

His mother could only imagine the future bride as the center of wild parties. The inevitable results only seem to have confirmed the mother's suspicions.

"Simon, we taught you to demand more from life. You see that girl shake her ass, and



you melt.”

Her mother’s observations weren’t too far off. When Simon watched Beth, he only saw a reflection of his own success. No other girl had that same glow. He could let such a treasure out of his grasp. From early on, it was clear that he didn’t know what to do with a woman of such talents. Beth loved the clarity of his vision. There was no ambiguity about his future. Granted, the boy seemed a little driven by his mother. That could be a good thing. Beth would never have to pester him about his financial dealings.

Beth’s laissez-faire approach might have been her downfall. The hands off approach only gave more licence to Simon. He never literally violated their trust. From the get go, he inhabited a different world. He only occasionally allowed her to share in his secrets. To protect herself, she built her own wall in retaliation. He seemed perfectly content with the arrangement. He could claim proper rights to her body, but she would let him have free rein with the money. At the same time, he poured all these gifts upon her. He gave her the means to be independent. She existed as a separate country in this loose confederacy. Just as he was wedded to his financial transactions, she committed her soul to her fashion. Such a covenant worked perfectly to usher in the marriage.

Now Beth, can see the house crumble around her. She is envious of that property on the corner. It does not represent confinement. It’s time to get the meal ready. Erin is upstairs taking a nap. Beth sits on the couch and stares into space. Why didn’t she take her opportunity when she had it. Simon will be home before she knows. She is waiting for the next episode of the soap opera to dawn on her. But there are no real dramatics to spur her on.

This phantom is waiting to materialize so that she can take her proper course. If dinner would only do the same. This is not a crisis; it is just today’s version of her struggle. Tomorrow will have its own challenges. Erin will never have to deal with this type of dilemma. She is not such a victim of the real world. She had already escaped the bounds of conventional behavior. Erin could be the perfect guide for the mother. The rumblings in the playroom are just the music that Beth needs to declare her independence.

Beth cannot leave her paralysis. There is silence in the house. Not a whimper from Erin’s room. Beth has long ago become attuned to the music of the child’s room. The child is not being ignored. Her needs are being met. It is Beth who is now helpless. Such incapacitation has no immediate remedy. There is not a core of vibrant activity that waits to wake up the mother. Maybe today is worse than others. If she could negotiate catastrophe, this would be the launching pad for a new life. Chaos only breeds more chaos. Beth is drowning.

She lets herself sink beneath the waters. Her body goes into a free fall. She finds that she benefits from such liberation. She is floating in the air. She just lets go. She is hardly breathing, the mystic’s inhalation. In her disharmony, she is attaining a new unity. Like a zombie, she rises from her place and goes to the kitchen to get dinner ready. She is an automaton who has accepted suggestion.

Later, Beth wakes Erin. Erin is a little bit of a monster after her rest. She has been revitalized. On another day, this would have driven Beth crazy. She takes it all in stride. She can’t let it affect her.

Once Erin has been fed, it quiets her down. A little TV, and she is ready for bed. By the time that Simon makes it home for dinner, the blue streak has passed. This is not something for

medication. That would only be submitting to the decaying order. She has seen other woman follow that route. There is nothing that you can take for a metaphysical unease. She has to wrestle the universe for her solution.

Simon struts after dinner as if he is ready to make love. He will have to be denied. It would be terrible to come to the present resolution and end up being just an excuse for his fantasy. She will have to pass on the conjugal duty for the moment.

Wouldn't the perfect little robot go along with his grunting? That would only be a minor detail in her appointed tasks. For today, even such obligations seem more than Herculean. She is clearly recovering from her date with nothingness. There is clear meaning in her every gesture. It is hardly transcendent, but it helps her get through the rest of the day. She decides to sleep on the couch. It will confirm her determination. She is not mad at Simon. It's not a fight. She is simply willing to acknowledge the distance between them. This is the power gradient. It is not something that can be talked about.

An older Erin would have the eloquence to work through the malaise. Beth has none of those skills. She fears conquest if she yields at a critical juncture such as this. Both Erin and Simon are fast asleep. She has met every commitment to the both of them for the day.

Alone, she has a restful sleep. She wakes before anyone else. There is a hazy mist covering the world. She could get her stuff and leave. No one would be the wiser. Erin would be sad for a while. But she would eventually accept her true liberation. Beth could again embrace her childhood.

She walks around the house and observes all the odds and ends, the priceless collectibles. This is the span of her reign. Does she have the will to forsake this tangible wealth for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? As the mist dissipates, Beth starts to prepare breakfast. Fortunately for her, Simon has agreed to take Erin to his mother's. The child is going to hate the rigid environment. But it will give Beth the respite that she needs.

Beth decides that she is not going to pour herself into making the house spotless. She is content with doing nothing. Usually around this time, she would be escorting Erin to the pool. She could go on her own and show off for the lifeguards. That would have suited her in her teen years. She wants a little more of challenge.

Beth has won the house from her rivals. What kind of prize has the struggle yielded. Without the storm raging in the playroom, it seems like only a Pyrrhic victory. Her heart has taken a sufficient loss in this battle.

Maybe Erin can fend for herself. Simon's mother would more than welcome the exchange. She would finally have her granddaughter released from the clutches of a n'er-do-well.

The morning now moves slowly. Beth refuses to turn on the TV. She doesn't want to get caught in that rut. She doesn't have the concentration to read. She can hardly daydream.

She considers calling a friend for lunch. She know that the meal would only turn into a confession session. She doesn't want to appear to be giving up. It is time to stand strong.

She goes up to the bedroom and opens her drawers. It would be so easy to pack a bag. The open road beckons her.

Once her dark days have passed, Beth learns to survive on the seductive nods from the bag boy in the supermarket.

“Can I carry your bags out to your car?”

“You can hop in if you find the inclination.”

He is staring at her ass as she loads the trunk.

“Are you just going to watch, or are you going show me that you’re a real man?”

She imagines getting by in his basement apartment that has just been flooded for the tenth time.

Beth continues her silent task as he looks on. She packs up Erin and head back home. Beth has performed her penance well. And she has gone back to her man and accepted her fate.

Erin is making an incredible fuss on the drive home. This is just too much for Beth to deal with.

“Can you just shut up for once?”

The very fury is more than enough. Erin retreats into immediate silence. The ride home is without further event. Beth hopes that she isn’t becoming a despot. She can’t let the power go to her head.

When she gets home, she rushes to the bathroom. Her face doesn’t bear any trace of her anger. She can’t let her feelings catch up with her.

After putting away her groceries and feeding Erin, she feels more than victorious. It is her law that hold sway. Even if Simon is not the perfect lover, she can pretend. It only makes her value the time by herself more. This afternoon, she is taking a nap too. Things will only look better when she wakes up.