

KATHRYN KULPA

Mine

He's old, fifty-two years old, and has two kids, nine and eleven, but you want him and think every day about how you want him and how you're waiting for it to happen. This is the terrible part, the waiting, but you're smart enough to wait and keep your mouth shut, you won't push it, and around his friends who know more than you and laugh at his jokes without trying you smile, nod your head, say a long, considered "mmmm" and look down more often than not but it's okay, quiet can pass for smart and shy is good, shy is virgin little plaid-uniform convent girls: not quite what you're going for, not exaggerated like some phone sex trick. That's not a part of your life he knows about or ever will. When he asks about Florida you just say you worked in telemarketing. No, you do shyness like someone who might have really been the convent girl fifteen years ago—or twenty; you're not so young, and he's not so old although he says he is, laughs about it, the old man needs his rest!, hair pale and waning as a half-gone moon.

In the year of his birth men wore hats to work. Mothers smoked, holding their children, and no one told them not to. In the year of your birth he was eighteen and on his way to Vietnam, but never saw combat, he says; he was a tech and besides they'd pulled out combat troops by then so he missed the worst parts, he says, only funny barracks stories he tells his friends and if there was more than that you don't think about it. You tried to watch *The Deer Hunter* once but had to stop, you can't watch anything with blood or people being hurt, even his kids tease you about being more squeamish than they are, covering your face at the cheesiest old horror movies they love. You cover your face but watch those movies with them anyway because they're his kids, and you can see how he's made his life theirs, taking the teaching job so he can be on their schedule: soccer games, chess club, Boy Scouts, he does it all and you want it all, ready made. You're so tired of waiting but you wouldn't have to wait. You could slip into the empty place beside him and become something more than you are. It won't be hard, he knows so much he can fill in the gaps of all the things you don't know, the fairy tales no one read you, and his friends won't guess, they'll think you came from a normal family with lunch boxes and baby-sitters and Christmas at Grandma's, and you can get there, you can be that.

You like watching him with his kids, the small things he does but does precisely, like when he made peanut butter and fluff sandwiches and folded the waxed paper over and under so it stayed shut and you asked was it origami and he laughed and said no, just a basic mom fold. Dad fold, in his case. You practice alone later, adding it to your list of skills that everyone should know. A thing that mothers do: you fold the crinkly paper, flip, fold again.

You want him to see you in that empty place, you want to show him your domestic ways, and so at the Christmas party (Dutch apple pie, cinnamon-fingered) you fold yourself into the female ring around the woman with the new baby, a blond baby boy, could have been yours, could still be, although a guy on TV said blonds are dying out and will be extinct soon. You didn't stay to see why, something about the ozone layer maybe, but never mind: right now the baby has blond hair, like you; has blue eyes, like you; and you want that man to see you holding that child, so you touch the mother's shoulder, lean close, it's got to be brave and quick: "Can I? Oh, he's so sweet!" You've got him now, you're holding him,

Christmas card Madonna and child pose, jiggling like you've seen mothers do, walking over to him so he can see how good you are with kids, what a natural mother, but the baby is scrunching up his face and you turn around so the man won't see, you jiggle harder, twisting your body back and forth—it's no good, the baby is crying now, screaming, exposing you as the false mother, the not-mother. You feel sweat breaking through under your arms and the real mother is there, arms not just stretched out but enfolding the baby, pulling him close.

"I've got him," she says, taking back what's hers.