

elliott
perlman

seven types of ambiguity



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Seven Types of Ambiguity

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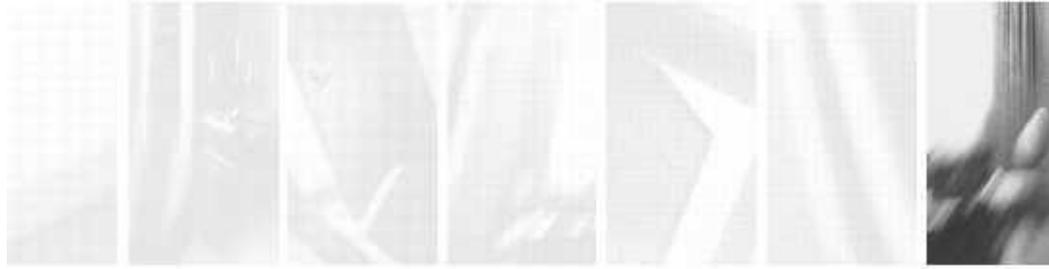
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For Debt

God has pity on kindergarten children. He has less pity on school children. And on grownups he has no pity at all, he leaves them alone, and sometimes they must crawl on all fours . . .

YEHUDA AMICHAI



1. He nearly called you again last night. Can you imagine that, after all this time? *He* can. He imagines calling you or running into you by chance. Depending on the weather, he imagines you in one of those cotton dresses of yours with flowers on it or in faded blue jeans and a thick woolen button-up cardigan over a checked shirt, drinking coffee from a mug, looking through your tortoiseshell glasses at a book of poetry while it rains. He thinks of you with your hair tied back and that characteristic sweet scent on your neck. He imagines you this way when he is on the train, in the supermarket, at his parents' house, at night, alone, and when he is with a woman.

He is wrong, though. You didn't read poetry at all. He had *wanted* you to read poetry, but you didn't. If pressed, he confesses to an imprecise recollection of what it was you read and, anyway, it wasn't your reading that started this. It was the laughter, the carefree laughter, the three-dimensional Coca-Cola advertisement that you were, the try-anything-once friends, the imperviousness to all that came before you, the chain telephone calls, the in-jokes, the instant music, the sunlight you carried with you, the way he felt when you spoke to his parents, the introductory undergraduate courses, the inevitability of your success, the beach houses, the white lace underwear, the private dancing, the good-graced acceptance of part-time shift work, the apparent absence of expectations, the ever-changing disposable cults of the rural, the family, the eastern, the classical, the modern, the postmodern, the impoverished, the sleekly deregulated, the orgasm, the feminine, the feminist, and then the way you canceled with the air of one making a salad.

You would love the way he sees you. He uses you as a weapon against himself and not merely because you did. He sits in his car at traffic lights on his way out sometimes and tries to estimate how many times he has sat here, waiting at these traffic lights on his way somewhere without you, hoping to meet someone with the capacity to consign you to an anecdote, to be eventually confused with others. He thinks of you when the woman lying next to him thinks he's asleep. It would not surprise you that there are many women. Do you remember you thought him beautiful? You never told him. He had to assume it. He was beautiful and is now, some nine years later, even more so. The years have refined him so that once-boyish good looks have evolved into a clean, smooth charm. Not always, though. First thing in the morning or after he's been drinking the charm disappears. The drinking is not really the problem at the moment though, not right now. Of late it has been no more of a problem with him than it is with your husband, which is to say, of late the quantity itself is no cause for alarm. But there is a secret need in both men to have their inhibitors inhibited. In Simon's case this is merely the tip of an older and more fundamental iceberg.

It is often almost too much for Simon to undertake even basic daily tasks: to shower and shave,

dress, to wash his clothes, to feed himself and Empson. He runs out of all but the most essential foods and doesn't do anything about it until there's nothing for the dog to eat. You couldn't know Empson. Simon got him as a puppy. He would be about three and a half now. He used to take him to school with him. This was the sort of thing he would do. The children loved Empson almost as much as they loved Simon. You loved him, too. I can imagine he was a wonderful teacher. You might remember that Simon's father, William (or did you call him Mr. Heywood?), was disappointed that Simon was going to be a teacher, particularly a primary-school teacher. He felt that this was not a sufficiently manly occupation for his son and that Simon would be wasted. Ironically though, had Simon still been teaching, William may not have felt the need to contact me.

It was very late one night. I could tell by his voice that William was embarrassed. He was at home and I was, of course, in my office getting the last little bit of my dinner from the bottom of a cup. I don't know why he thought I'd still be there. He almost whispered into the telephone that he was calling on his son's behalf but without his knowledge. For all his embarrassment, and I have since learned that this is characteristic of him, he very soon got to the point. He told me he had a thirty-two-year-old son who lived alone with a dog in an apartment by the sea, in Elwood. He told me that his son, always obsessed with poetry, seldom went out since losing his job in the first wave of the downsizing epidemic. In getting directly to the point, William missed so many others. Simon has said that the reason his father has no time for poetry is that he is afraid of the messiness of life. Poetry feeds on all that spills over the boundaries of the usual things, the everyday things with which most people are obsessed, so William has no time for it. He cannot think of anything more unnecessary. What about you? What's your excuse?

2. The conversation must have lasted about half an hour—most of it taken up with William's examples of his son's lack of interest in things other than poetry and perhaps "the damn dog." He seems to have had no idea of Simon's continuing interest in you and everything about you. He told me that Simon was severely depressed, from which I concluded nothing much except that William wanted me to think that he thought his son was severely depressed. He told me that I had been highly recommended to him by someone or other and that he was willing to pay for Simon to see me. I found that an interesting way of putting it. He was willing to pay for Simon to see me—as opposed to his being willing to pay *me* to treat Simon. His wife knew nothing about all this, and he asked me in advance to forgive him if she came into the room unexpectedly and he was forced to hang up suddenly, without saying good-bye. William has spent much of his time planning to cope with people doing things *unexpectedly*. He would probably not recognize that he has ever done this, let alone the futility of doing it. He certainly would not recognize the utility of preparing for the *expected* just that little bit more—and planning for the unexpected just that little bit less. His wife didn't surprise him at all, not then.

At first there was nothing to be done because, as I explained to William, Simon had to *want* to see me. I couldn't call him up and say, "Your father thinks you're disturbed in some way. How about Wednesday at four?" Since he had never broached the subject with Simon, I really didn't know what he thought I could do. We said good-bye and that, I thought, would be the end of it. Clearly, it wasn't.

About a month later William and Simon's mother, May, were out for dinner with Henry and Diana Osborne. You may remember the Osbornes; they are Simon's parents' closest friends. Simon assured me that Henry's contempt for poetry is probably second only to his father's. It was a Friday night and the Osbornes had taken Simon's parents to a French restaurant to celebrate William's retirement from

the bank that very day. As they were leaving, having been feted by the owner, a drunk Simon literally walked into his parents, apparently by chance, with his arm around the waist of a very attractive young woman. The two older couples, seeing the short-skirted advertisement for herself that she was, guessed her occupation fairly quickly and were clearly embarrassed. William started to apologize to everyone as though he were responsible. Henry tried to make light of it, asking the young woman if she had ever eaten at the restaurant before. Simon was trying to hail a taxi and the young woman, who said her name was Angelique, told him she had eaten there many times and that the owner was a regular client.

On the Monday Simon called me. He told me the whole story and explained that it was a condition of the rapprochement with his parents that he arrange to see me. It was a brief conversation. He said that he would rather we didn't meet in my office and gave an address at which I was to meet him one evening. It was summer then, and he said to come around the back into the garden where he would be waiting. I wouldn't normally ever agree to an arrangement like this, but something in his voice, his intelligence, and the honesty with which he told the story about his parents, the Osbornes, and Angelique—a disarming honesty—made me agree. And, if I am to share the honesty I admired in Simon, I needed another full-paying private client. I still do. My wife and I have recently separated.

3. It is quite well understood that a clinically depressed person will show little, if any, interest in constructive activity concerning future events or outcomes. In this respect, Simon has only flirted with depression in its definitive or clinical form. But if that is all that depression required, then I could say without much hesitation that Simon has always been, other than for short periods, too involved in things to be clinically depressed. William really knows very little about what's on his son's mind. What he and many people don't understand is that there is more to depression than a sometimes overwhelming feeling of inadequacy and hopelessness and profound sadness. When people are depressed they are sometimes very, very angry. They are not just quietly miserable. They can be filled with great passion.

Simon was sitting on a chair under a sun umbrella in a large well-cared-for garden with an in-ground swimming pool in the center and birches and firs along the perimeter. He got up, and we shook hands and introduced ourselves. I was struck by his clean handsomeness and by his calm. One rarely meets anyone who makes a better first impression than Simon. Do you remember? He thanked me for coming, saying he realized such a meeting was probably unusual. I said something banal about having to expect the unexpected in my line of business and then he quoted someone, some verse about surprises or chance, in that soothing voice of his. I don't know why, but I was a bit nervous. He asked me questions as though he was interviewing me and making mental notes: middle-aged, separate lives in inner city, et cetera. I must have passed because he seemed to take a bit of a liking to me, albeit with some reserve. Perhaps I didn't fit his stereotype of a psychiatrist. I don't know. He told me not to completely ignore whatever it was his father had told me about him, saying his father's description of him no doubt contained what Simon called "that dangerous element of truth," just enough to make me suspect that everything else his father had said, and would ever say, was true.

He was utterly charming, witty, and seemingly quite relaxed and intelligent. I was a little surprised he hadn't offered me at least a drink, but I didn't comment. We Europeans are instinctively better hosts, whether we have personality disorders or not. I didn't know him, and perhaps he would never again be so forthcoming. It's not that I expect patients to entertain me, but the circumstances here were quite unusually informal. And I didn't want to interrupt him. Perhaps he felt a little uncomfortable offering me his parents' alcohol. I figured a place of that size with the in-ground pool, the tennis court, and the satellite dish had to belong to his parents. They must have agreed to go out for the evening as part of the deal.

"I *am* a thirty-two-year-old out-of-work teacher living on my own in an apartment in Elwood," I laughed, "but just because I don't work doesn't mean I'm broken."

Then, after some small talk, he started telling me about you. At first I didn't realize how long it had been since you had been together. It wasn't clear, so I asked him.

"It was finished nine years ago," he said, "and you want to know why I'm still talking about it, right?"

"No, I didn't say that," I responded.

"No. You didn't, but only because my father is paying you not to tell me I'm mad, or at least to tell him first. I think it's admirable what you guys do but, shit, it's embarrassingly primitive, wouldn't you say? What do you really know? And in any particular case, in my case, what do you really *want* to know? I'm afraid it won't make sense to you. I really mean that. I am genuinely afraid it won't make sense. I am not trying to sound casual or smug.

"Listen—all that she was then, all that she is now, those gestures, everything I remember but won't

or can't articulate anymore, the perfect words that are somehow made imperfect when used to describe her and all that should remain unsaid about her—it is all unsupported by reason. I know that. But that enigmatic calm that attaches itself to people in the presence of reason—it's something from which I haven't been able to take comfort, not reliably, not since her.

“It's like the smell of burned toast. You made the toast. You looked forward to it. You even enjoyed making it, but it burned. What were you doing? Was it your fault? It doesn't matter anymore. You open the window, but only the very top layer of the smell goes away. The rest remains around you. It's on the walls. You leave the room, but it's on your clothes. You change your clothes, but it's in your hair. It's on the thin skin on the tops of your hands. And in the morning, it's still there.”

4. Now can you imagine it? I am sitting in a large manicured garden at the back of someone renovated turn-of-the-century symbol of success. The sun is getting ready to call it a day, but it is still quite warm. I think I can see mosquitoes hovering over the edge of the pool. The outdoor furniture is comfortable even if it is some of the ugliest I have seen. The air is still, so it's easy for me not to dwell too much on the prospect of the umbrella dislodging from the table and impaling someone.

This charming young man is eloquently expressing his quite legitimate doubts about the science discipline that has brought me to him. He seems to have a fairly common and not necessarily unhealthy antagonism toward his petit-bourgeois father, who it appears has a somewhat authoritarian personality. They don't understand each other. They value different things but not different enough for the father's alarm bells to ring hollow with the unemployed aesthete in front of me. It gets to him. But not as much as you do. He's a romantic, focusing on some idealization of the past. He could have offered me at least an iced tea, but I was getting paid and he was, after all, the kind we dream of: one of the incurably worried-well. He was a little melancholic but not completely without some justification. There was no reason this could not go on for years. I thought he was normal, a bit unhappy—pretty much like everyone.

We heard someone walking along the side of the house toward us. Maybe it was more than one person. Suddenly Simon grabbed me, putting his hand over my mouth. He was quite surprisingly strong. There was a hysterical efficiency about him. I thought he was going to kill me. I didn't say a word. He dragged me behind some bushes near the edge of the garden where we both hid. He seemed to know where to hide, as though he had done it before. I was ready to jettison my first impressions of him. I was now convinced he was psychotic. We looked through the bushes at a man, your husband, entering the house with your son through the back door. It was your house.

Simon had meant to show me he was serious about you. He had been to your house many times without anyone ever knowing he was there. Bringing *me* there was his way of demonstrating that he was willing to take me seriously, or at least try. When your husband and Sam were inside, Simon and I crept out. He took me to the Esplanade Hotel in St. Kilda, opposite the beach. We went in his car. I had never been there before. We have since been there many times. That first evening was my initiation into Simon's life, the one he has kept hidden from his family. Within an hour I had witnessed a fight, heard a frenetic country singer ("rockabilly grunge," he said it was), and someone had tried to sell him what they promised were amphetamines. I had also been introduced to his friend Angelique.

When you left Simon he was angry with you. There was a tremendous sense of betrayal with the shock of your leaving. He could not understand your not wanting to share a common future in which together, you would observe the world in all its sad and beautiful guises. The way he describes it, you could have been in different rooms and been able to predict the other's response to something because it would have been your own response. You respected the same things—aesthetically, politically, morally. He felt the two of you were co-conspirators. You wanted the same things and laughed at the same things. But you ultimately needed different things. Simon was a phase. You began to find his optimism, opinions, and his touch too predictable and tiresome, stifling. You stopped wearing his T-shirts. You put them back. You pretended to be obtuse. Some nights no one could find you. Where were you? When his father, who never noticed anything, noticed your absence he blamed Simon and then, after a while, so did Simon himself. William was never so warm as he was to you when you had gone, while May would look out onto the street through the venetian blinds as though she were waiting

for you. The other sons had gone, all good men, too, now with their own silent wives and good jobs. ~~velour-clad children, and brand new axes to grind.~~

Simon tried to find comfort in his reading, but one can turn only so many pages before the anesthetic wears off. He had hoped the two of you could survive and maybe even correct a few of the world's imperfections. Perhaps his romanticism was always his biggest problem. Your inexplicable leaving was literally breathtaking.

William came home from work one night and found Simon speaking out loud to himself in his bedroom. It was nine years ago. At his desk, he was talking to himself. William stood at the door and listened:

And would it have been worth it, after all, . . .
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all."

For a man so obsessed with words and language, it is interesting that Simon remembers perfectly what it was he was memorizing that night but not what was said between him and his father that quickly led William to strike him. He remembers clearly the seconds before the force of his father's hand became a very personal heat in his lip and jaw. They said nothing more about it. He also remembers the breeze of his father's moving hand and the cold of his wedding ring. Not long after Simon left home. You met your husband at about this time.

5. It was an accepted view for many years that pain avoidance and tension reduction are the major sources of a person's motivation. This was challenged (principally by Maslow) with the suggestion that more meaningful or more subtle conclusions with respect to human motivation could be reached by examining people's strivings for growth, for happiness and satisfaction. To this end, a distinction should be made between a person's *deficit* (or lower) needs and his *growth* (or higher) needs. The *deficit* needs are the more powerful and tend to take priority over the *growth* needs. A starving person will be little concerned at the possibility of other people seeing the lengths to which he may need to stoop in order to eat. However, the identification of a person's higher needs is more revealing. Moreover, any attempt by someone to satisfy his or her higher needs will suggest a state inconsistent with clinical depression. It is only when a person has at least partially satisfied most of the lower needs that he can begin to experience the higher needs and then attempt to gratify them. Such attempts at gratification are very likely to produce tension, but this tension is constructive; it is positive.

Not long after Simon left home, he started teaching. It was his first permanent class. He was so full of enthusiasm for his new life that he sometimes couldn't sleep. He had so many plans for his students and for himself. There was very little communication between him and William, although he spoke quite regularly to May. He still thought of you, but the pain was not acute. He was contemplating a master's in either education or English. Education would have helped his career, but there was still that unrelieved passion for literature and especially for poetry. He was thinking of writing something on the work of his hero, the literary critic William Empson. You might remember Simon going on about Empson, the author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

Simon has tried to explain to me what is so fantastic about what he calls this landmark in the history of literary criticism (which, incidentally, is also the way it is described on the back of the

book), but it's all lost on me. He bought me a copy. To put it simply, or perhaps simplistically, ~~seemed to be an analysis of the effects a poet may achieve, consciously or not, through the use of~~ ambiguity. I couldn't get through the book. I suspect Simon knows this. As far as I was concerned, there were more important ambiguities than the ambiguity of poetic language that Empson talked about. There's the ambiguity of human relationships, for instance. A relationship between two people, just like a sequence of words, is ambiguous if it is open to different interpretations. And if two people do have differing views about their relationship—I don't just mean about its state, I mean about its very nature—then that difference can affect the entire course of their lives. Interestingly, this is not a subject Simon has ever wanted to talk about despite the number of times I've broached it.

In any event, what was of greater interest to me than Empson's work (everybody's got to make a living somehow) was that he published it at the tender age of twenty-four, and, more particularly, that Simon mentioned this several times. I think this is significant. But of course, as Simon told me, Empson, who was later knighted, had the constant encouragement of his supervisor at Cambridge. William denigrated Simon's efforts and early interest in teaching. His son's love of poetry was a complete anathema to him. No one in the family, with the exception of May when he was a little boy, had ever encouraged Simon. You did for a while, didn't you?

Although the longing didn't stop, he had for a time forgiven himself for whatever it was that he had done to lose you. He had left home and it was impossible to stop him from talking to his friends about his children, as he called his students. He told May and even his brothers all about them, the twenty-two eight-year-olds in his charge, the noisy ones, the naughty ones, the scraggly ones with one sweatshirt and two shirts, the fast ones in sneakers, the pretty ones with skinny legs who followed him everywhere, and the very quiet ones who still were not used to having been born. There were twenty-two hopes to encourage and foster, little *people* to surprise and delight every day, to teach and to make happy with visits from Empson and, of course, to tell stories to. Can you imagine how they loved the way he told stories, with every word a song?

It did not take long for the parents to come and see who it was that their children were talking about. Naturally, they fell for him too, some of the mothers quite literally. It would often begin with spurious concerns for a child's progress and end in a proposition. Simon delicately rebuffed all such offers. It wasn't that he regarded married women as sacrosanct. (Anyway, they were not all married.) It was more his commitment to the children. They were, each one of them, human beings, not devices for someone's gratification. They were the future, not theirs or his, but everyone's. You don't sully the future, knowingly.

Anyway, as you can imagine, his libido was being satiated elsewhere or, should I say, everywhere else. If one didn't know him, one would call Simon a liar, but everywhere he went, he was almost inundated with propositions from women of all ages and backgrounds, many of which he accepted. He didn't have to do anything. Indeed, it quickly got to the point where he had difficulty telling his friends what he had been doing because an honest account would sound boastful. It seems he got into conversations with women in shops, cafés, and even on public transportation. There was an exchange of telephone numbers, and the rest was usually fairly predictable and not so interesting. It is of interest, however, that he never formed attachments with these women and never permitted them to develop any legitimate expectations as to the future with him. He had a set speech, something like an emotional disclaimer, which he recited beforehand. Of course it did nothing to prevent recrimination on the part of the women, but it enabled him to stake a claim to the moral high ground and, as long as he required this (a higher or *growth* need), he cannot be said to have been clinically depressed. But, of course, it's of concern in itself that he was unable to form close emotional attachments with other women and that he needed the flattery. You remained unreplaced. You wouldn't let him move on. His self-esteem was completely immune to his carnal successes. They had no currency for him that wasn't

immediately devalued upon attainment.

~~It was both the complications from the casual trysts and a certain amount of guilt that led him~~ Angelique. You would like her. I do. They have been friends for a couple of years now. The night she met his parents and the Osbornes was their first night together. An escapee from a feud with her Lutheran family in Adelaide, she had run away to Melbourne and landed on a onetime school friend whose boyfriend was a part owner of a nightclub. Together they introduced her to the city's nightlife and when the free drinks and free passes ran out, so did her pride. She met Simon on her first night working the streets. He became a regular client, but it was very much on his terms. He told her that she was never to spend the night, never to call him without him having called her first, and always to accept full payment at the time of her visit, no credit. His conditions were designed to avoid any complications or emotional ambiguity.

Simon discussed you with Angelique from the beginning. The very first time she came to her apartment she saw photos of you and said that she thought you were beautiful. She knows all about you, even the story of how your father left his family in Italy to be with your mother. Simon recruited her as he recruited me.

She asked lots of questions about you and about William and May. She knows all about Simon's childhood, his brothers, and the family holidays with the Osbornes in Sorrento. She enjoyed hearing about his students from the days before he stopped teaching. Angelique would like to be a mother someday. As you might know by now, she has met Sam. She has met your husband too but, I'm afraid it wasn't through Simon.

Although perhaps even this, in a funny way, was through Simon. As you would expect, Angelique has had some quite terrifying experiences in the course of her work and, although Simon was trying to prevent any romance or dependency developing between them, he couldn't hide his concern. He eventually convinced her that she would be safer (marginally, in my opinion) if she got off the streets and worked in a brothel. I don't know the mechanics of this, but I could ask her. It's not important. Presumably one goes for some kind of interview. Maybe the more successful brothels use management consultants like you for this. Excuse me. I don't mean to be flippant. I really don't know. But I did learn, and this I must say surprised me, that some of the more up-market agencies are corporate retainers to certain corporations, some of them very large. It seems to be a prerequisite for being publicly listed. It is put on the company card like a meal or tickets to a tennis match. The brothel she is now attached to services several merchant banks and stockbroking firms. This is how Angelique first met your husband one busy Christmas. I am sorry, but I really must tell you everything. It was quite an incredible coincidence without which everything would have happened differently, or perhaps not at all.

6. I won't ask you how much you already know. I don't wish to deal here with the grievances you have against your husband, even the fundamental ones. He is by no means the worst of her clients. This might not surprise you. He is quite expansive. This might. You see, Angelique has no qualms about breaching your husband's confidence and we learn quite a lot more about you from him than we ever could from simply following you.

Of course, Simon did not always follow you. There was a time, a time I have spoken of earlier as a time of forgiveness, when Simon forgave himself for all that he was and all that had happened to him. He was teaching and knew he was good at it. He felt good about himself. Although he tried to fight against it, like most teachers (and parents), Simon had his favorites. Simon's favorite one year was a little boy, small for his age and very quiet. Whenever Simon brought Empson to school, this little boy was always the last to come and play with him. His name was Carlo. He was shy. Although not really disliked, he was too quiet to be popular with the other children and Simon thought he could see the beginning of a life of pain for him. He, perhaps arrogantly, thought he could change this. Simon liked to rescue people whenever he himself is not in need of rescuing. Do you remember?

Carlo's shyness made it difficult for Simon to assess accurately his reading and comprehension skills. He wasn't sure whether Carlo's slow reading was a reflection of poor ability or of his fear of reading out loud. He wanted to know what could have made this little boy so afraid anyway. He arranged for Carlo to stay after school a couple of days a week. Simon would read to him, children's stories and rhymes. Afterwards Carlo would read back to him. Sometimes he even sang to him. Slowly Carlo was improving. Simon noticed he was even slightly more extroverted with his peers during the day.

Unfortunately, Carlo's story became public knowledge after this. You may not remember his name. Simon had always stayed in the classroom with him until his mother came to pick him up. Carlo's father worked nights and slept during the day. His mother worked in a clothing factory. There were other children in the family, but because of the private tutoring Carlo got from Simon, they would leave earlier than Carlo and go home together. Carlo was the only one to be picked up by his mother after work.

One day Carlo's mother was working overtime. She instructed Carlo not to stay late with Simon that day but to leave with the other children. It will always haunt Simon. Carlo didn't leave school with his brothers and sisters but, saying nothing about his mother's overtime, he stayed after school as usual with Simon. When they had finished their reading, the two of them went to check on Empson. Carlo wanted to go to the toilet. After about ten minutes, Carlo hadn't returned and Simon thought the little boy might have had an accident and be too embarrassed to come back to the classroom. He gave it another ten minutes or so before starting to look for him. The little boy was not in the toilets or with Empson. Simon could not find him anywhere in the schoolyard. He ran around calling for him, but the whole school was empty. It had never been so empty. As you probably know from the newspapers, he still hasn't been found.

This was the beginning of Simon's decline. He was devastated by the little boy's disappearance. He felt responsible for it. If anything, and you mustn't take this the wrong way, he actually felt a certain relief when Carlo's abduction turned out to be the first of that series of child kidnappings in Melbourne. In addition to the trauma and his sense of guilt, Simon was briefly, you might remember, the subject of some pretty tacky tabloid publicity. The other teachers even began to regard him warily. What had been initially regarded as admirable enthusiasm became an unhealthy pedagogic zeal.

I found him very forthcoming about this whole period. It might have been at only our second third session that he discussed it with me. I think he was rather hoping that this would be all that I had to tell me. It was very important to him, I'm not denying that, but I think he was, in a way, glad I had it to tell me about. Have you ever expatiated on a particular experience to give a new acquaintance the impression of instant intimacy? It is not an uncommon form of flattery.

But I'm not so easily satisfied, and Simon is not so easily intimate. In addition to you, and the disappearance of Carlo, he spoke quite readily about his father. It's fashionable. Simon rarely said anything much about May. One day I told him that I *wanted* him to tell me about his mother. He said there wasn't all that much to say. We were at his place, which was not unusual during his housebound curtain-drawn days, and I insisted that he speak about her for an hour before I would listen to anything else. Simon said I was being ridiculous and that I could leave immediately if that were the case. I ignored him and got us both another beer from the kitchen and started playing with Empson. I gave him his drink and sat down. Then Simon talked for three hours. I didn't think it would work. Most theatrics and feeble threats seldom work. I'm not much of a hypnotist either.

As a child, Simon found what was happening to his mother very frightening. She could at one moment be very loving, gentle, and caring and then, seemingly quite suddenly, very angry. Or she would completely shut herself off. She just wasn't available. She would go into her bedroom and stay there. Sometimes Simon would creep in and hide under the bed or in a closet while she was asleep and just watch her, keeping his breathing as low as possible. She would not speak at these times. Her silences could go on for weeks. What happens to a child born to a mother who is depressed?

One woman in four becomes quite seriously depressed in the twelve months following the birth of a baby. But this went on well into Simon's childhood. His brothers always seemed to be outside breaking something or training for some event or else out camping. They were away. Simon was always there. He remembered, and it amazed him to remember, one summer afternoon in Sorrento with the Osbornes. William and May had been arguing fiercely. He doesn't remember what it was about. The older boys were on the beach playing cricket. William had stormed out. Simon had earlier slunk away from the screaming to take shelter in his parents' closet. He had fallen asleep there and was awakened sometime later by the sound of May's sobbing and heavy staccato breathing. He peeked through a crack in the doors and saw her lying on the bed in her half-opened robe, her face and hair being caressed by Diane Osborne. Did he ever mention this to you?

He is amazed that he could have forgotten this. He remembers not understanding, being very frightened, but not being able to take his eyes off his mother and Diane. There was, in that small space, the extreme austerity of an almost empty mind colliding with something sweetly frantic and wrong between the many breaths, and an indifference to what would happen when the breathing would quiet again. After a while, he could hear William coming down the hall. The women were with each other and didn't hear him coming. Simon didn't know what to do. He wasn't supposed to be there. He knew things were in some way wrong, but he was unable to speak. He didn't know exactly what was wrong. Wasn't everyone a friend? William pushed open the door and found the women together. He grabbed Diane by her hair, pulled her off the bed, and hit them both, May in the mouth and Diane in the stomach, knocking her to the floor. Then he picked her up as though she were a piece of furniture and placed her back on top of his frightened wife, who had fallen back onto the bed, and madly exhorted them to continue.

Simon saw all this from the crack between the doors before he passed out and everything went black. As he fell to the floor, his body pushed open one of the closet doors. He had always felt vaguely that somehow none of this would have happened had he not fallen asleep in the closet. He wouldn't have seen it, and it would not have happened. He wasn't supposed to be there. It was never mentioned. Surely, he had thought, this was what you did with things that were never supposed to have happened.

You don't mention them. Simon was crying when he finished telling me about his mother. Then he asked me another one of those questions I'm never sure I am supposed to be able to answer.——

“What is it about men that makes women so lonely?”

7. When a child feels in danger, he will defend himself, hold himself together, possibly withdraw. We do not spring fully grown into the world. We have to develop or create our own sense of self. When we have people around us who threaten us in various ways, perhaps by punishing us or leaving us, abandoning us, then our sense of self can seem to fall apart. That is the greatest, the most terrifying fear. We all experience it to some extent as small children and we grow up trying to defend against this fear. Some of us have to work harder at it than others. People won't talk about it. They think they don't have to and, unless it persists, often they're right.

Simon has tried on several occasions as an adult to reach May. He has done it as much for himself as for her. When the whole business with Carlo happened, Simon went to her. What could she say? When a child disappears. It is so obviously a tragedy for those involved. But she couldn't understand the full extent of Simon's involvement. It wasn't so much what she could have said as the fact of her saying anything. But she hardly said anything that showed even the thinnest empathy, and Simon felt rebuffed. Their relationship continued to consist of polite obligation fulfillment. One Mother's Day I included a poem by Robert Lowell with his traditional card. Not long before this, May had confided to him that, with all her sons grown and gone, she was sometimes quite lonely. She said nothing about her marriage or about William directly, but he felt she didn't have to. For Mother's Day he copied out Lowell's "To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage" and gave it to her. Do you know it?

The hot night makes us keep our bedroom windows open.

Our magnolia blossoms. Life begins to happen.

My hopped up husband drops his home disputes,
and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes,
free-lancing out along the razor's edge.

This screwball might kill his wife, then take the pledge.

Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust . . .

It's the injustice . . . he is so unjust—
whiskey-blind, swaggering home at five.

My only thought is how to keep alive.

What makes him tick? Each night now I tie
ten dollars and his car key to my thigh . . .

Gored by the climacteric of his want,
he stalls above me like an elephant.

Of course the parallels are very imperfect. The husband of the poem is almost as much one side of Simon as he is William. But Simon was hoping it might touch her in a way that could clear a new path for some kind of genuine dialogue or exchange. May never referred to it. He regretted giving her the poem. He wondered how she could say nothing about it, even if it was just to say that the husband of the poem was not her husband at all. Simon would even have been heartened by some obvious and dutiful defense of William, some acknowledgment that William did not cruise the streets for prostitutes, that the lust of the poem's husband was not William's.

Simon still has that boyhood reluctance to talk directly, even in a therapeutic situation, about his father's sexuality. I think you might know something about this from Sorrento, from that time at the

beach house. Do you? It was toward the end, early one evening. Simon had taken the car to buy a few things before the shops closed. May was in the kitchen. You had just taken a shower. It was almost sunset. Do you remember? You were in the midst of putting on a change of clothes for the evening and you looked out the window to watch the sunset. You were playing with a bracelet Simon had given you. There were problems with the clasp. Were you already planning to leave? Maybe that was what William was wondering as he watched you? The door wasn't completely closed. We know you did not know this. Obviously it was an accident, not an invitation, but it enabled William to watch you there. And through the accident of the open door and the disposition of the light, the silhouettes of both of you were visible to Simon when his car pulled up. He saw you looking out of the window and he saw William watching you; everything was still, and no one hurried to see less.

8. In the time I speak of as the time of Simon's decline, there was a change of government. The new government decided to stimulate the economy by terminating the employment of thousands and thousands of teachers. You may remember this. Your husband and William voted for them. Perhaps you did too. Simon was stimulated out of his school. Given the size of the cuts, he would have stood a fair chance of losing his job even had he not stood out within his school. As it was, after Carlo's disappearance, it was a certainty. His unemployment accelerated the decline. There were the bouts of drawn-curtain days in bed. He slept and listened to the street sounds. His friends, who had kept their jobs and were trying to keep their marriages, had nothing in common with Simon anymore. He did not have the resources to maintain these friendships. They stopped calling. May would call him occasionally, but William could no longer bring himself to talk to Simon on a regular basis.

The sounds of his neighbors talking to each other, getting ready for the day, the sounds of the dinner parties where the guests arrived with several bottles and well-rehearsed greetings—the sounds hurt him. How do they know so many people? Can you imagine, there was nowhere Simon had to be at a certain time every day, or any day. There were no *certain* times except those marked by his neighbors' sounds or by the birds announcing the end of another night he'd been unable to sleep.

Things wore out imperceptibly until they broke, one by one: the clothes dryer, a heater, the collar of a shirt. And the neighbors would not shut up. He heard them, always laughing, as his bills came in reformatted with their new corporate logos, the crowning achievement of microeconomic reform, and looking like invitations to a child's birthday party when they were really the philistine calling cards of the new society; the standard form ones and then later, the threatening ones, threatening to withhold some or other service, or else to commence legal proceedings.

You wouldn't have wanted to see him this way. You don't know anyone like this. Your husband had seen to it. In the morning Simon would add a little milk to the scotch and at first it all seemed ridiculous, staying in bed till anytime, watching TV on the couch. But there was no contrast, no friction, nothing to call for any resistance. Two bowls of cereal and scotch and ice per day can become one bowl, easily, and then just milk, scotch, and a sliver of ice before lunch. No one said a thing, and it wasn't ridiculous anymore. It became unremarkable and surely that *was* false laughter, forced semi-hysterical laughter coming from next door. He thought about you. He thought of killing the people next door. He wondered whether you would hear that he was out of work? Would *you* ever be out of work? He decided that no matter how bad the economy became, you would never be out of work. When every last management consultant was trying to get work waiting on tables or mopping floors, you would still be many floors up in the city, surrounded by glass, perfectly pleated, going to meetings and making unfounded recommendations. Was he jealous? Certainly he was jealous but more than

that, much more than that, he was lonely. He was one of the loneliest people you don't see anymore.

Again, it did not take long for him to blame himself. We spend our time watching things like that happen in other people's lives and attempting to divine what it is they have done to bring it on themselves, what it is that we would never do. So when it happened in his life, Simon was ready to accept that he had brought it on himself but he didn't know how he had done it.

It may be said that, in some sense, we create our own reality through the way we choose to perceive the external world and, like anything that is created or constructed, it can collapse. Does this mean anything to you? You think you are happily married, and then you discover that you aren't. Your whole perception of the outside world, as it pertains to you, just suddenly collapses. This is terrifying because our perception of ourselves in the outside world and our sense of self are the same thing. What was Simon in the world but a young man getting older on a couch, without a job, running out of time, running out of scotch, with all the cruelty of unrealized potential, and the bitter aftertaste of misplaced hope. Thus does he walk into furniture at two o'clock in the morning while outside the place next door there is a slamming of car doors and more wild laughter. Will they ever shut up? After a while you don't mess around. No ice. And surely it didn't have to be like this?

I should say that at least in the early days of my association with Simon it was really Angelique who kept him from taking his life. She got involved. She breached the terms of their agreement, and he was in no position to enforce it. Angelique would visit him without an appointment, without an invitation. At first he would try to send her away, explaining that she should not take it personally but he could no longer afford to see her. How can anybody not take something personally? As soon as you take it, it's personal. She didn't listen to him. She brought him food and cooked for him. She would ask him to read to her, insisting it was a new deal. He had to read to her in return for her company, not credit. She asked him questions about whatever he was reading to her and in doing this she made him, in a small way, touch his former self. She held him when no one else was even calling.

It might be easy for you to dismiss all this between them as simply Simon taking advantage of her by using her. But he had gone out of his way to institute those artificial procedures to stop her from falling in love with him, relenting only at her insistence, and so it would be unfair of you to characterize it like that. Whatever blindness or timely self-deceptions led you into your husband's arms, you did not find yourself completely without hope of anything in your life ever changing for the better, and still you chose him or allowed yourself to be chosen by him. Your membership in society was never under any kind of review, and you never opened a newspaper to find the quintessence of your despair seasonally adjusted. Look at what was denied to him: love and work. It is asking a lot of a person to maintain a healthy self-esteem in the absence of both of these. And if his self-esteem is gone, how can you expect him to muster any reserves with which to make what are, after all, fairly subtle moral judgments, and then to act on them, harming himself, perhaps fatally?

The period in a person's middle years between, say, twenty-five and forty-five, is usually the period of greatest productivity. It is then one establishes oneself in a vocation, brings up a family, and creates a reputation in the community. The ability to work effectively, along with the ability to love, of course, is a sure mark of maturity, but Simon was living part of these prime productive years at a time when society denied him the opportunity to work at his chosen vocation, chosen, it must be said, with the most noble of intentions and in the face of his father's profound derision. So, yes, he permitted her to cook for him and to hold him, to take him for walks. He never permitted himself to tell her the things she wanted to hear more than any poetry or prose. Despite this, she kept him going anyway, single-handedly, at least until I earned his trust.

One afternoon in bed, after a walk, she asked him how he could be so sure that he did not love her. Was she brave or stupid, do you think? Can you imagine you asking a question like that? Simon said that he *did* love her and that she should know it, but that he was not *in* love with her. You can forgive

her, under the circumstances, for thinking he was off on another semantic frolic of his own. If I hadn't been so forthcoming she might have taken comfort in the ambiguity.

"In spite of all that I unfortunately am now, or more accurately all that I am not, I am still far too cautious, too careful with you, to be in love with you. That's how I know, I suppose," he told her.

"You know you're in love with somebody when you wake up next to them, comfortable despite your breath smelling like week-old water at the bottom of a vase, when you are terribly excited to see them to talk to them again, having missed them after all that sleep. You can fall out of bed into the shower and, still comfortable, burp or even fart while trying out various keys in which to sing the theme to the Peter Greenaway movie that you both hated and have never seen."

When she asked who Peter Greenaway was, he could only say "Yes" more or less to the ceiling and run his fingers through her hair, all the way along her face and down until he had to alter his position in the bed. He would probably agree now that she saved his life. She loved him unconditionally, and there is nothing more sustaining than that. But for her there was nothing more dangerous. She was there for him no matter what he did and you were never there anymore, no matter what he did.

All his warnings and strategies did nothing to protect her from falling in love with what was really just his *need*, and his diminished responsibility only exacerbated his diminished sensitivity to her feelings. If I have been starving I am in no fit state to consider the needs of the hand that feeds me unconditionally and forewarned. Maybe Angelique needed to save his life, but she could have done without much of the rest. Simon will admit this. I know her well now too, and we are agreed; with her strength, all her vitality, and that mix of almost naive optimism in spite of all she has seen and experienced, she is really a very special woman. Your husband would agree. I don't doubt it. He has taken great comfort from her.

She actually loves Simon to the point where she can become incredibly frustrated that she lacks the eloquence to express it. She makes a lot of money now, working for this up-market brothel. It's aimed at the corporate sector. Men like your husband unwind in her company and with her assistance. They pay her to dress in a manner that doesn't shame them and to undress in a manner that does. She would certainly be earning more than me now, but that's not terribly hard. Please don't underestimate her. She wants to get out of it too. She wants to be, of all things, an e-commerce entrepreneur when the market picks up, and a mother. She wants to be a mother when the market picks up! She's talked to Simon about having a child with him. Don't laugh. Whatever vestiges of middle-class sensibilities have stayed with Simon, and there are many, it is not these that keep him from Angelique. It is you, the myth of you. So please, don't laugh at him or at Angelique. You have, perhaps, become shy around empathy. It makes you uncomfortable now. You can live without it in the elaborately designed artificiality that surrounds the swimming pool Simon and I have sat by. You do really live without it. Perhaps other people ought to feel with more imagination.

Even before I had started getting through to him, Angelique had gotten him out of bed, out of her room. They went for long walks together, often taking Empson. They would talk about you. She told him everything that happened to her, everything your husband said. Simon's reactions varied. She could even make him laugh. After a while he was getting out on his own sometimes, shopping a little for basic food supplies or just walking around with Empson. Sometimes he would catch a train and stay on it for a couple of hours, reading or looking out of the window. You must understand how positive this was under the circumstances.

9. The circumstances and under them: He was in a shopping center, walking by himself, when he saw

you and Sam. It was afternoon. He had never seen Sam. You had just picked him up from school, and the two of you went into the jeweler's on the corner. It is unlikely things would have turned out the way they have had it not been for his chance sighting of you and Sam that afternoon. Had *you* seen *him*, things might have gone differently. But you didn't, and this was no coincidence. He didn't want you to see him. From Sam's school uniform Simon could work out the school Sam went to, and he figured that you must live in the area to be shopping there and sending your son to a local school.

He crossed the street and looked through the window from the side street. You were explaining something to the jeweler. Sam was turning a mobile watch display. It was taller than him. Given that Simon was afraid of you seeing him, he was undoubtedly taking an unnecessary risk in looking through that window. But it was a calculated risk. He was fascinated to see you, as an adult woman, professional woman in a suit, being served by the jeweler while your little boy played with whatever was on hand. For Simon time had stood still. He had heard that you had a little boy and had wondered what he would be like. What would he look like? His curiosity gave way to a kind of excitement.

Does it sound funny? Looking through the window from the side street as you handed the jeweler your bracelet for him to examine, Simon watched you looking at your son. He was pleased to see you both together like that. The little boy came to you with something in his hand from the display, a watch. You gently admonished him and told him to put it back, all seemingly without sound in the darkened little corner shop. When Sam had done as you asked, you ran your fingers slowly through his hair and Simon thought that it must have felt good to Sam, to have done the right thing, to have known what to do and to have been able to do whatever would elicit even the briefest manifestation of your affection for him.

The jeweler took his time examining the bracelet under a lamp on the counter. He took what looked to Simon like a tiny screwdriver and began playing with the clasp on the bracelet, Simon's bracelet, the bracelet he had bought for you from this very jeweler years before. You still wear it. You can imagine the effect on him when he realized this. He was desperate enough to take something like that as a kind of omen. Maybe this strikes you as sad? Perhaps it *is* sad but before you close your eyes to him, I ask you to remember the last time you took something as an omen or saw something as a metaphor for something else. You can't remember, it was a long time ago? But you *are* functioning, aren't you? You're never in any danger. He took you, that elegant woman he saw in the jeweler's with her little boy, as hope, for him, for everyone. Sam was the future, and here was the future looking to you for warmth and for guidance. If he put the watch back in the display cabinet, there would be no uncertainty about your response. He was loved unconditionally and, at least when you were with him, he knew it, it showed. Simon knew where you had come from and it filled him with hope that you and your young son could look the way you did now. After all, weren't you born together, you and Simon, back in your early twenties, summoning up all that you could from the first two decades or so of games and rehearsals before finally inventing yourselves as adults in each other's image?

You left the bracelet with the jeweler along with your name and telephone number. Sam wanted an ice cream. We don't know whether he got it. Simon remained undiscovered. But you were fortuitously rediscovered, halo intact. I told you that you would love the way he sees you. Are you going to tell me you don't understand any of this?

Angelique said you were cold. Simon wouldn't have it.

"You wouldn't say that if you'd seen her," he said, pouring them both a drink. "You're just going to her husband's need to rationalize his own behavior. His infidelity needs a perception of coldness in her almost as much as it needs you. And the little boy, you should see the way she is with him, and the way he looks at her."

"Sam, that's his name," she said, unimpressed.

"Does he talk about the little boy?"

“Not much,” she said.

“You’ve never said he’s said anything about him.”

“He hasn’t said much about him. Think about the circumstances in which I see him. He’s hard going to bring out snapshots of his family.”

“But he has said *something* about him to you, apart from merely that he has a son and that his name is Sam. You told me.”

“He’s six and very bright. Takes after her. He admits this,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Well, he certainly looks like his mother.”

“Simon, you saw him for a moment through the window of a darkened shop. You don’t know what he looks like. You wouldn’t recognize him in a group of kids.”

He’s right, though, isn’t he? Sam *does* look like you. We know this now. He’s a very calm little boy, calm but inquiring, always investigating. Were you like this as a child? I suspect you were. Somewhere along the way, we lose our curiosity until we accept and then expect that we don’t know that we cannot really explain very much at all. Just as he idealized you, Simon idealized your son and this is where it starts. Well, this is where the recent chronology starts, the one that leads me to you.

Simon began walking to your son’s school in time for lunch, not always, but often, just to watch him while he played. He didn’t do it every day. He wasn’t able to. The downward mood swings led him back to his bed. The near euphoria he experienced seeing you by chance in the jeweler’s was soon met with waves of an equal and opposite mood. A pedestal always doubles as a measure of sorts. You invented your adult selves together, that is to say, if you were in some sense born at the same time, why was he following you and your son in this pathological way, humiliating himself to himself and, potentially, to you. What if you did see him one day? How could he explain himself, all that he had become? Would you blame him for it? What would he do if you looked at him with horror in your eyes? The papers tell it every day, there’s no work anywhere and, anyway, teachers are just leeches on the public purse. Right? What if you bought this line, too? You dress as though you do. Forgive me. I don’t mean to be insulting. I simply want you to see yourself as he sees you.

If you weren’t inspiring him, intriguing him, and getting him up out of bed, you were destroying him, holding up to him the cruelest double-sided mirror imaginable. On one side there was the Simon as he was when you knew him, with all his promise—and on the other side, a stagnating man with a sorry taste for late liquid breakfasts.

On those days when one of us got him out, he often went to see Sam. There is a definite calm about Sam. Simon keeps coming back to this. Sam is very comfortable with himself and this probably enhances his attractiveness to other children. At an age when boys are either trying to outdo each other, trying to be the boss of the game or else simply content merely to be included, it is extremely rare for the sheer presence of a little boy to have such an effect on the others as to have them nominate him their leader. But this has happened. Simon has seen it.

From just outside the school grounds he saw some little boys attempt to arrest the natural chaos that threatened their enjoyment of a football. A boy, taller than the others, talked above the rest. Perhaps he owned the ball. He jumped excitedly as he spoke so that he seemed even taller than he was. He ignited the collective imagination with an idea. It must have seemed inspired: Leave everything up to Sam. Soon most of the other little voices were nominating Sam for captain, too. Sam, Sam. The way Simon tells it, they didn’t fully understand the concept of a captain in the context of sports since they chose only one. He was to be the captain of both teams. They were crudely electing someone to organize them, to make the rules governing the use of the ball. They chose Sam as their captain. Why? It wasn’t even his ball.

He is a handsome and capable little boy, not the fastest or the tallest, or even the smartest, but he is still tall, fast, and smart. But more than this, he is quietly assured and very curious about the world.

around him. He likes to be able to make sense of things and, usually, he can. He is used to experiencing what he expects to experience. He has received more than the usual positive reinforcement from his teacher and from you and your husband, albeit all of you variously motivated. Simon attributes Sam's balance and calm to you. He said that the combination in Sam of an absence of both fear and arrogance is what marks him clearly as your son. You see how he remembers you? I told you. There is so much to be learned about someone from the little they remember and label "the past."

You have heard Sam read. You must have. Does anything strike you? Not about his reading; he reads well. Does anything strike you about *what* he is reading, about its content? If you pick up the thin volumes from which children are taught to read, you will see short, simple sentences such as "Tom can run. Tom can jump. Run, Tom, run. Jump, Tom, jump."

Think about this: the act of learning to read. A child is being made, almost certainly to some extent against his or her will, to sit still, pay attention, and to concentrate on the symbols, the letters. The teacher, if at all successful, will have stimulated a certain curiosity in the child, the satisfaction of which both requires and is the reward for his unnatural stillness. What does the child feel if he or she is obedient? What does he or she learn from the discomfort of the stillness and the concentration? Tom can run, but he can't. Run, Tom, run. He has to feel discomfort in order to hear of someone else's good fortune. The words describe Tom being told to do something pleasurable, which the young reader is being denied permission to do by the teacher.

Simon describes this as the first dichotomy in a child's education, the dichotomy between that which is *taught* as good or right and that which the child actually knows to be true in his or her experience. Of course, for a highly motivated child like Sam, this is hardly a problem. The praise he receives merely for the mechanical act of deciphering the symbols makes the effort worthwhile. But surely, after a while, he will have to become self-motivated. One hopes his curiosity will be enough to keep him going. One day the praise won't be there.

Simon identifies another problem with these readers or primers, as they used to be called. In the socialization of a child, the first people with whom he or she must learn to interact are the mother and father. Shouldn't it be the case, then, that these texts present realistic scenarios encouraging legitimate expectations of parents in the child? What does the young reader get? There are never even the slightest differences between the parents. They never disagree. A child will know soon enough that something is wrong somewhere. There are two logically attractive alternatives. Either the stories are not true to life or else there is something wrong with the child's parents. In either case, the difficult act of reading has let the child down; it was not worth it. The child was conned.

It is also one of the earliest sources of myth, the myth of eternal parental availability. Mother is always there. She is never preoccupied. She has no job and no desire for one. Her role is a cross between that of God and a slave. She is never tired, never suspects her husband, and never thinks that another man might just bring back the zest she knew briefly, a little boy's lifetime ago before Tom could run. She sees Tom run but he sees nothing and, you see, there's another lie.

Of course, nobody can always be there for a child. We have to leave them just to provide for them—and maybe even to sneak in some sort of a life for ourselves. Please believe me, I am not being critical. If you can afford it and your housekeeper is good with children or not bad with them, even Simon wouldn't criticize you for taking some time for yourself. But, of course, it wasn't Simon or me that you were worried about.

10. Your husband doesn't always get told the whole truth. But Simon doesn't hold that against you

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