

NEW FAMILY PET

► JENNIFER CARR

YOU TELL A simple lie: Dad's at work. It slips off your tongue so easily you almost want to hold it there, see what it tastes like, remember how it felt to say those words and know them as truth.

Your children believe. Your lie gives them something to pin their hopes to, and they think they will be rich from so much work. They have started circling bicycles and dolls in the Sears catalog. The oldest is practical, wanting a sitting lawn mower, convinced somehow that it will ease Dad's workload.

So it becomes the new family pet. Though late winter now, it seems possible that the mower will work. You take the children to pick it out—red and shining, a gel-cushioned seat. You bring the kids to visit it each week at Sears, let them take turns popping up on the seat, take turns steering. Lately they see the lawn mower more than their father.

What they don't know: there is a studio apartment where their father sleeps; there is a credit card bill with charges on it. You can track the new relationship like a meteorologist tracks a storm, map its inception: dinner (of course), Tara Sheraton (how economic of him to stay where his company gets a discount), a comedy club (how cute). But what gets you is the Marineland charge. Niagara Falls in January. With a man who wouldn't even eat at McDonald's; who thinks, in general, the color red is tacky. Imagine that this woman is young enough, exciting enough, to tame your husband into a lapdog of experience. All the things you'd suggested the last two years—the Ethiopian restaurant, the community theater group doing *The Tempest*—things he'd gradually learned to raise his hand to, palm flat, aimed at your face. Meaning the sarcastic word he meant but did not say: Please.

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The children (three, he had wanted three) like him to come to dinner, and so he does. Sporadically, showing up after work at his usual time, tugging at his tie, hugging the children to his leg. You don't discourage this; in fact, it is with a bit of pride that you set the table for five, as you used to, as if this proves that you can keep him coming back. As if this proves he has been at work all along, and here he is, finally, at dinner. You don't discourage the phone call he makes after dinner, the cord stretched clear to the den, where his hardcover books collect dust on the shelves. You bribe the children to remain in the kitchen with you, and while it breaks your heart to see your middle child, a daughter, playing quietly in the kitchen doorway, the oldest son silently dries what you wash and puts it away.

The oldest is a full advocate of the mower, and the other children are swept up in the plan. They plan how they will make more money in the spring—the conventional lemonade stand, maybe a tooth under the pillow. The oldest sells a matchbox car at school for a dollar; the girl sells a rock she found in the driveway for a dime. They bring all the money to you, and you establish the Fund from an old mayonnaise jar with the label scraped off. You keep it on the shelf by the stove. Each child writes "Daddy" on paper, and you tape these on the jar. You yourself write it three times; the oldest writes it five, each time with a different color, but the same stock letters.

It becomes your secret with the children, and each time their father returns—now once a week for Thursday dinner—the children smile at him over the pork tenderloin or chicken alfredo. (You are running down his list of favorites, ticking them off, week by week.)

Tonight is lamb chops with mint jelly. It is obvious that their father has noticed the smiles and winks among children and mother, but has chosen not to say. You swallow. It is so sweet, so special that his children have this plan to keep him, you want him to know. You want the pain of recognition to seep across his face. Surely the woman couldn't mean as much.

“Go on and tell him.” Those are your words, prodding the youngest, the most likely to talk. But he does not let rip; he looks to his sister and brother, who smile in fear and delight then shake their heads no. This is the anticipation, the thrill of a carefully laid plan. The prospect of Daddy is the part they will keep.

The next day, the oldest is concerned they're not saving money fast enough. Without words, you lead him to the den, to the hardcover books, the leather recliner, the antique pocket watch on the desk—the things that keep your house living with a man, even in his absence. The things that will not let you live without him. The child helps you pack books in grocery bags.

Now you're paying for the lawn mower with books and tools and even his clothes. Anything you can sell for a dollar a pile at the local salvage center. On Thursday he notices, but again refuses to say. He goes to the den and the lengths of shelves are flat with air. Finally he goes to the attic and pulls a suitcase, filling it with the rest of his clothes, telling the children as he kisses their hair that now, now is very important work. He must go away for quite a while. They let him go without crying, but after he's gone they don't turn to you. That night, as you pick through his dresser and the clothes he left behind, noticing the T-shirt from the college where you met, you can hear the children—quiet whispers of ache through the closed playroom door.

The day you bring the lawn mower home he tells you he will not come back. It is a Thursday in spring, and the kids have decorated it with yellow and blue bows, ribbon on the handles. It is his big surprise; the one thing you have kept from him. You know what he has come to say in the same way that birds sense it will rain, first chirping loudly, wildly, then as the storm grows closer, falling into hush.

The mower makes it hard on him, and he sits on the black gel seat, puts his forehead in his hand and cries, big sobs that jerk his shoulders forward. The children stand and watch, frightened and

amazed and understanding more, you realize now, than you ever thought they would, than you ever wanted them to. They don't move to you or their father but stand close to the middle, close to themselves. It makes you want to grab them, prove to him, to yourself, that you can hold something worthwhile. That maybe this woman can make him feel real because she's only holding together herself, laughing the way a woman without children laughs. She is brazen, intelligent; able to make the tiny aspects of life roar, then accept your husband, new with love. They order draft beer at diners, make love in heart-shaped jacuzzis. He tells her about his kids and she smiles that she'd love to meet them, love to love them, for an afternoon at least, for movies and ice cream. She has a way of living in the moment, making this old world shine. She is you without kids.

The children are near their father now, picking at the creases in his slacks, letting him pet their hair. You want him to see that they are in it just as raw, just as unsheltered as he'd feared. But you hear him telling them that now they have two houses they can go to, and on weekends they can come live at the house in the city, where they can walk to get hot dogs or go to the zoo. The children smile, ask questions you can't hear. Their father nods, starts to get off the lawn mower, and the children back up, giving him room, ready to follow.

"Wait," you say. "Why don't you spin around the lawn just once." You pause, then add, "For the kids." But you know it isn't true. *For me*, you want to say. He's looking at you; they're all looking at you, as you are the last to realize the lawn mower has already worked. They got their father back.