

He places his hands on the edges of the sink, leans forward a little and examines his reflection in the bathroom mirror. His skin seems paler than it used to be, almost translucent. He imagines he can see the blood pumping red beneath. He's starting to age, he can see it. He's not a young man anymore. The whites of his eyes are yellow. He closes them so as not to have to look at himself and lets out a deep cry of pain as he grips the marble even tighter. A memory dissolves into his head. The first time he saw his father slap his mother. He was only a child at the time, with curly brown hair that grew so quick and wild that the barber always said *not you again* with a laugh whenever he came in for a cut.

Curly Sue, his father had called him, staring at his son across the table and shaking his head in disgust. That's who you are, Curly Sue. Pretty little daughter, I got here, not a son.

Don't say that to him, said his mother quickly. You'll give the boy a complex.

The boy? his father asked, laughing and shaking his head. Some boy. Can't even throw a ball straight. Is it any wonder he can't stand up for himself? Is it any wonder the other boys pick on him? I should take my razor blade and shave all his hair off once a week, that's what I should do.

Over my dead body, said his mom.

Come on boy, he said, pulling him off the chair by the arm, pinching the bone tight. I'm gonna do it right now.

Take your hands off him, she said, stepping forward and dragging the boy away.

Don't tell me what to do with my own son, he said. He's my boy and if I want to shave his hair off then that's what I'm gonna do.

He grabbed him again and this time the boy nearly fell over on the floor but he recovered quickly and found his footing just as his mother took his other arm and tried to haul him back the other way. Goddam it, woman, shouted his father, spinning round then, pulling his free arm back and hitting her across the face with such force that she fell backwards, halfway across the kitchen, her back to the wall, her palm to her cheek, staring at him as if she couldn't believe what had just happened.

He opens his eyes to dismiss the memory and unlocks the bathroom door, stepping back into the bedroom where his wife sits on the edge of their bed crying, retreating a little on the mattress when she sees him approaching, shaking her head tearfully when he tells her how sorry he is, how he didn't mean it, how he'll never do it again as long as lives.