

EVIDENCE

It was a year ago last July, the sixteenth. A Tuesday. I was still working at the bank, in collections, and Frank and I were still together. I was returning from my lunch break, which I'd spent at the lumber store buying a pine board he had promised to cut into shelves, when I found the memo on my desk. It said Frank had called while I was out, and that he had called from the hospital. It had to do with our son. Frank had asked that I drive directly over. Although the memo didn't say it, I think I knew what it was, that Jeremy was dead.

But no, I didn't really believe that. I knew it was what all mothers do on the way to the hospital to see their children. I was setting myself up, giving myself the worst possible news, so that when I saw him with a skinned knee or strep throat, there would be that sudden joy. But when I arrived, I was stopped by a doctor outside the room the nurse had solemnly directed me toward. The doctor was a small man, with a lot of black hair on his neck and on the backs of his hands. He said, "Mrs Karen Asher?" and I nodded. Then he took me into another, empty room. Although I resisted at first, the doctor's pressure on my shoulder kept me moving.

It had happened at school, on the playground. He told me there had been no warning signs. One moment our son was waiting impatiently in the hot outfield for the kickball, the next he was on the ground, not moving. It took a while to understand. The doctor was talking about blood vessels in the brain, a rupture. "A stroke?" I asked with a calm that would have surprised me if it hadn't been for the numbness. "Seven years old and a stroke?" It wasn't making sense. No, the doctor said. A brain aneurysm. I nodded, wanting to make it clear that I understood. I'm not sure why, but what I wanted was clarity above everything. When I first

saw the doctor, my fingers had trembled against my slacks, but as he talked the shaking slowed and became dense in my blood, like lead—that was the numbness. The doctor emphasized again that there were no previous symptoms, nothing anybody could have done, and I continued to nod, hardly hearing, but thinking to myself: This is what shock is like. I said, “Thank you,” but I was thinking, Later, when all this sinks in, I’m going to wish for this empty feeling again, I’ll want to be empty. And then I noticed the sound from the next room, where they were holding Jeremy’s body.

Still guided by the doctor’s hand on my back, I stepped into the room and saw Frank. His face was buried in the white wrinkled sheets that covered our boy to the neck, and his shaking body looked like it wanted to climb up, and over the bed. I could hear the muffled sounds of his crying, like a soft humming, and from behind, a nurse paging someone. Past his shoulders I saw Jeremy’s face. His eyes were closed and his red mouth had gone purple, and hung half open. His white hair blended into the white pillow. I remember standing there beneath those buzzing fluorescent lights, staring at Jeremy, and Frank on top of him, and all that came to me was that I didn’t like his mouth open like that. It was something I had told him, that if he left his mouth hanging open, the flies would land on his tongue. And when he got older I told him it made him look stupid. And standing there in the hospital, I thought, That boy of mine looks stupid. I wish he’d close his mouth.

Since we had brought separate cars, I drove home from the hospital alone. I was thirsty. Because of that board Frank had wanted, I hadn’t eaten anything, and it stretched from the hatchback door to almost the windshield, balanced against the headrest. Whenever I accelerated I saw the wood tremble to my right, above the empty passenger’s seat, and I tried to decide if it was a dangerous thing, this board shaking beside my head. But I could not make up my mind.

I got home before Frank, and I remember balancing the board awkwardly against my hip as I jiggled the key in the front door, and then getting in, leaning the board against the couch,

and rushing to the kitchen for a glass of water. Only after gulping for a long while did I stop and set the glass down, and really think about what had happened. My son was dead. I had seen the evidence: his body in the hospital, those purple lips. Not everyone has that privilege. I walked into the living room and looked around, and found a few of his toy cars, half hidden beneath the couch. I took them to his room. The late afternoon light was angling through the window, and the floating dust glowed in a way seemed all wrong; it didn't work with what had happened. So I threw the toy cars onto the bedside table and pulled the blinds, bringing on the dark. I left the room and closed the door behind me. I sat in the living room waiting for Frank, and then got more water. I wanted a cigarette. I hadn't smoked since I was twenty, when I first found I was pregnant, but I wanted it all over again, and the urge was like it had been those eight years ago. I drank my water instead. And then Frank showed up. His heavy eyes were swollen and red, and his cheeks were scarred by old tears. He stood holding his arms out, as if he were wet, and I remember thinking he looked like a child just in from a thunderstorm. When I went to hug him, he began to cry again, and I walked him back to our bed, took his clothes off, and gave him some aspirin that he washed down with a beer. I stroked his head until his shaking had subsided, then left the bedroom, closing the door behind me.

I never expected to be Frank Asher's wife. All I knew about him in high school, back in San Antonio, was that he was my boyfriend's friend. Other than that, he spoke little, dressed in tan slacks and too-tight shirts, and seemed interested in nothing in particular. He did his school work well enough, had a couple friends, and hardly ever drank. He was unremarkable in every way. But he knew my boyfriend, Jim Royce, and that was how he knew me.

I'd been with Jim for the better part of a year when he introduced me to Frank at a football game. I don't remember the meeting, but Frank insists we met then, during our junior year. The first time I remember is from my senior year, after Jim had gotten another girl pregnant, and was busy making wedding plans. Only then did I notice Frank Asher, who'd had a crush on me, he said, from the moment he'd met me at the football game. So I let him have me.

He asked three times before I agreed to marry him. We were nineteen by then. A year later I was pregnant and Frank got an offer from an old friend to work at a new auto parts plant in Balaam, out in West Texas.

You can learn to live with any town if you put the effort forward. The move was not difficult for me—my mother had moved to California with her new husband, and the rest of my family is spread out across the United States—so there was nothing pulling me back to San Antonio. But in San Antonio I knew the streets like my hand, and whenever I wanted to slip away I could just drive out of town on US-90 west, to Hondo, and from there get to the middle of nowhere. But in Balaam, I began to realize, I was already in the middle of nowhere, and so there was nowhere left to go when I needed to get away. Not that I needed to do that often. Jeremy kept me busy, and when he started going to school, my job at the bank took up any extra time. When I think of it now it seems to me that those first eight years in Balaam with Frank and Jeremy were years without reflection, filled with movement and errands and responsibilities. For a while I even filled my time with community service, meeting with other mothers in the neighborhood to petition for a playground. I wasn't the organizer, but I was involved, and I kept so busy that when we finally got the word that we had the playground, I experienced a short panic attack: my breaths went shallow and the other women had to hold onto me and fan my face with official documents. They all said it was the heat, us standing on the steps of City Hall on a hot June day, but I still remember what I thought as my knees trembled on those concrete steps: What am I going to do now?

Even on that Tuesday afternoon of Jeremy's aneurysm, I was running errands, buying that ten foot length of pine for Frank's shelves. I skipped my lunch to get this piece of wood, and although it's not such a strange thing on its own, I tend to look at all those years like this. Me, filling up an hour lunch break with a trip to the lumber store. Me, skipping breakfast to get Frank and Jeremy ready for the day. Me, unable to sit still and relax even when I had lots of dead time. I still don't know how to do that.

The same thing happened when Jeremy died. Right away, in the hospital, without time to even understand what was happening, I went over to Frank and held his shoulders, trying to keep them still. He didn't say anything, only pressed his face deeper into the sheets, as if I weren't there. Later, it was me who had to talk to the funeral people, and talk clearly so that it would be done right, so that the flowers would be purple, which had been Jeremy's favorite color, and the preacher would be on time. Even though Frank beat me to despondency, I was not angry. I liked to hold things together. It made me feel useful in a way that tears would not.

I came prepared with a purse full of tissues, but the funeral passed without a breakdown. A few times, though, I did feel on the verge of tears, and I tried to nurse that feeling, but then Frank's soft, choking sobs would sound beside me and mine would vanish before they'd ever come.

Other than Frank's crying, what I remember most from the funeral is the children—maybe six or seven eight-year-olds, some of whom I'd met before, others I'd never seen. One of them, one of the strangers, was a dark little girl who had straight black hair to her shoulders, and she was crying. I watched her throughout the service, this little girl I'd never met, probably never even heard of, crying in public for my son, who she knew, if at all, then only from a distance. It really made me sick. It seemed to me that this little girl, crying away like Frank, was turning the whole service into bad theater. Who was she to grieve? Frank deserved it—I knew that—but who was this dark girl? Her mother stood behind her, patting her shoulder consolingly, obviously drawn into the ploy, but I wasn't. Frank's mother had come into town, and she was crying as well. Frank was crying. I wasn't crying, but I at least deserved to. I wanted to march over and slap that girl's tear-stained face and demand an explanation. I wanted her to admit that she had never known Jeremy, and that she was only crying for attention. What I wanted was her shame.

After the service I saw her again, a little ahead of me in the crowd and, without thinking, I hurried until I was right behind her. Her mother was farther up, and didn't see when I pressed my foot against the edge of the girl's shiny black shoe. Her next step jerked up too quickly, and

she lost balance. I continued on, hearing with satisfaction her faint moan as she hit the brown grass and called, “Mommy!”

Frank took the week off, which only made sense. I did too, but by Monday I was worn out. We were like zombies in that house, walking slowly from room to room, usually avoiding Jeremy’s, not speaking, and I think half the time Frank hardly recognized me. When we did talk, we did a lot of apologizing, like when we turned a corner and found ourselves face to face, which happened too much. The house was so small. It seemed I was always returning from the kitchen to find him slumped in front of the television, his face in his hands, or curled up on the bed, shaking. It was like he couldn’t do the simplest things for himself. He forgot to brush his teeth in the mornings, and went days without a shower. On Sunday, I asked if he might want me to draw him a bath, and he stared at me with this blank *look*, as if he’d never heard of a bath before in his life. And those tears, they were what really ate at me. No matter how far away I got, I was always close enough to hear them through the wall. And then my teeth would set, my jaw tightening. Or I’d feel sick and guilty, like a voyeur. Why couldn’t he pull himself together? There was just no point to it. So on that Monday morning, six days after it had happened, when I got up and started dressing for work, Frank looked at me, baffled, and I explained, “Something to distract me.” I don’t know if he believed me then, but I think he was too weak to question it. Partly, it was true, for what I wanted more than anything was a distraction, but what I didn’t tell him was that I was still able to function. Even during those quiet moments when I dwelled on Jeremy, evoked his white bangs and pink complexion, the death was hardly a blow at all. Frank, though, he wept when his coffee was cold, and whenever he saw Jeremy’s picture.

But at the office it wasn’t much better. Irene and Sandy and the rest of them gave me these long, sad looks and meaningful sighs, and they whispered back and forth. I heard Ted when I passed the break room, his lowered voice: “It’ll hit her sometime, it’s bound to. And when it does . . . ”

"You're not kidding," someone replied.

Later in the week, Ted stopped by my cubicle and tapped on the wall. He came in and sat across from me with a somber expression. "How're you doing?" he asked.

"Fine," I said. "I guess."

He nodded, looking around my little space, and rolled his lower lip in a thoughtful pout.

"Ted?"

"Yeah?" he said.

I opened my hands. "Did you want something?"

I'd always liked working for Ted, though we had never really hit it off. We worked together well, but beyond that, we didn't share much, and so it surprised me when he kept nodding and said, almost to the wall, "Did you know I lost a daughter ten years back?"

He said it matter-of-factly, as if it were nothing much. "No, Ted. I didn't."

He looked at me finally. "No, I guess you wouldn't. I don't tell people much, but it seemed like . . ." He shrugged and smiled.

"Sure," I said.

"Her name was Elizabeth."

"Oh."

He didn't say anything after that, just sat there in front of me, staring past me, past the wall even, and I let him. It did make me uncomfortable after a while, him just sitting there, but I thought he deserved that much. When he finally came out of it, he looked up at me and said, "You know you can take whatever time you need."

I shrugged. "Yes."

"Paid, and everything."

I smiled. "I don't need it, Ted."

He nodded again, and I saw his eyes had pinked a little. "I better go," he said.

I said, "Sure," and watched him leave.

One night, while Frank and I were in bed waiting for sleep, I listened to his breathing in the dark, that hot, insistent rhythm of insomnia, and I slid closer and laid my head on the bony peak of his shoulder. Without speaking, he turned slightly and kissed my forehead.

I heard the groan of his neck as he turned to face the ceiling again. I kept my head on his shoulder because it felt nice, and I stroked his chest, running my fingers lightly through his curly hair. Still, Frank did not move. I hadn't expected him to—I don't know what I was expecting. I nuzzled my breasts against his arm and listened to his steady breathing as I slipped my hand lower, over his belly button, to the elastic ridge of his underwear. I pushed my fingers beneath; his breathing shifted. It didn't take much stroking for him to become erect, and his breaths quickened in the darkness as he stiffened in my hand. I turned to face him and kissed his neck, tongued it, then pulled at his far shoulder until he succumbed and rolled over. He was quiet about it, and fast, and I opened my thighs until they burned in the joints and I kept pulling him deeper; his thrusts became stronger and I felt him striking my back wall. Cool sprinkles of his sweat fell on my cheeks and I opened my eyes when I felt him tremble and watched his wet, red-shadowed face contort as if his muscles had lost all control, and then it was over.

Heavily, he fell onto me, then lifted himself and dropped down beside me. We both stared at the ceiling, our breaths strong and rapid, and then he cleared his throat and moved away. There was a click, and the room was suddenly filled with light. He was up now, sitting on the side of the bed, facing away from me. His pink back glowed with perspiration. He rubbed his eyes slowly. I waited.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you mean?" I said, pulling the sheet up to my chin.

He wiped his eyes again and turned to me, and when he brought his hand away I saw that his eyelids were swollen; he shook his head. "How can you?" He was exasperated. "So soon."

I rubbed my own eyes, but only to hide my face from him. "I don't know. I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what came over me." I rolled over, so that I faced the wall, and after a

while he put out the light again and went to the kitchen. I don't know how long it took him to have a drink and come back, but it was enough time for me to see that he had misunderstood—he must have. The sex had nothing to do with Jeremy, at least not directly. It was not about him; it was about us, Frank and me. As I lay there, noticing the cold, wet spot beneath me on the sheets, I thought that I should tell him this, that he would surely understand. But when he came back to bed I let it go. It could wait until morning. The next morning, though, I was no longer sure of what he did and did not understand, and I said nothing.

Frank asked for more time off. His supervisor, as you'd expect, was understanding, and gave him another five days. I mentioned one morning in passing that he could build those shelves I'd bought the lumber for. Frank looked at me when I said that, as if he hadn't heard. "To distract you," I said. "It might help." He nodded and shrugged in the slow, confused way I'd grown used to, though he never did build them.

At the office, all the stares and whispers were beginning to suffocate me, the way they waited like impatient spectators for me to finally tear up. A couple of them put Hallmark cards on my desk, with things like *Our deepest condolences to you and yours, and God shall wipe away all tears; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain: for the former things are passed away*. They crowded around me throughout the week with their sentiments and prayers, and my steady claustrophobia began to turn into anger. And then, of course, there was Frank. He appeared so passionate beside me, with his tears and grief and all the loud noises he made—that was what made him different from me, the noises. He was a spectacle, to the point that even in the privacy of our small home I felt embarrassed by him, as if the neighbors were pressing their ears to the wall. I even wondered if he really felt as strongly as he acted. I knew he was devastated, but I was beginning to suspect that he was using the pain to draw attention to himself, like that little girl at the funeral, to draw my attention, and the attention of his mother, who he talked to daily on the phone. But then I'd see myself like my co-workers saw me, the way they had to see me, and I'd get upset with myself for not producing those tears, for being such a bitch to my husband, for thinking such horrible things. It was natural, I knew, for

me to break down in the middle of my cubicle and start bawling over the computer, but my body just wasn't cooperating.

One night, after Frank went to bed, I took a picture of Jeremy into the bathroom with me. It was a year old, Jeremy at seven, and taken from above, from Frank's point of view. Jeremy's round, dimpled face squinted up against the sun. I sat on the counter and put my feet in the sink, leaning against the mirror. I stared at his smiling face, at his shiny pink nose. I whispered to myself: “Jeremy is dead. My son is dead. My only child is dead and I'll never be able to hold him again. He'll never know how much I loved him.” I repeated this for nearly an hour, trying to concentrate, squinting sometimes, but my attention kept being diverted by my reflection, and by my own strong voice in that little room. Around midnight I gave up.

Another time, I overheard Frank talking to his mother on the phone. He was in the kitchen, trying to keep his voice low, but his words echoed along the linoleum floor and into the living room, to where I sat on a chair, leaning toward the sound.

“No, Ma,” he whispered. “Of course she loved him. Christ. What do you think she is?” Later, he added: “Ma, that's my wife you're talking about.”

I drove out to the mall in Brownwood, partly to get away, partly to get some sorely needed towels from the outlet store, and when I walked past the Young Ladies' Department I saw a ten year old red-haired girl talking to her mother in this tight, very demanding voice. Holding a pink skirt over her jeans, she said, “Helen, I am *not* about to wear this!”

I looked over to the pair, and saw the mother shrug and take the skirt away, saying, “Well honey, you just need to find something yourself.” I felt sick.

It wasn't the girl's attitude that struck me, but the way she called her mother “Helen.” It reminded me of how Jeremy, during the last year or so, had begun acting like that little girl in some ways. He always wanted to do things for himself, and sometimes he would push me away, physically, when I came to help him dress. And I wondered if maybe it was a short leap from that kind of behavior to this little girl who called her mother by her first name. And then I

remembered one moment in particular, when Jeremy's face had gone red and set, and he yelled, "*I can dress myself!*" And I realized that the time I was thinking of, the morning when I'd gone in to hurry him so he wouldn't miss the bus, was the morning of July 16, his last day alive.

I looked away from the girl and her mother, and then walked out of the store, into the bright mall. I was shaking. Mothers and fathers were pushing carriages, and an old woman in an electric wheelchair buzzed by. I went into a drug store and bought a pack of cigarettes from a teenager in a green cap, and took some matches from the container beside the register. I went back into the mall and found a bench and opened the pack. My fingers kept tripping over the plastic wrap; I grunted under my breath until I had gotten one free. I lit my first cigarette in eight years, and sucked in the smoke. But I wasn't thinking about the cigarette at all. It was as if the cigarette wasn't even there; it only existed so that I could take the news that on my son's last day on earth, he had been angry with me. He had thought me an overbearing mother. He had hated me with the absolute intensity only children can muster.

The smoke hit my lungs and burned there, and for an instant it did feel good. I could remember the sensual pleasure that cigarette smoke had given me for so long, the comforting weight in the chest—but then the burn took over and my insides itched, and I coughed and hacked and spat into my open palm until it was all out of me.

Frank went back to work, but it was obvious from his apathetic shrugs when he came home at night that he wasn't really working; he was only transporting his body to the plant each day, where he forced it to go through the motions, its imitations of work. That was when I decided to take a day off.

I got Frank's tools from the shed and cut the lumber on the back deck. I measured out three foot sections, threw away the extra foot, then sanded the rough edges. I measured to find the studs, so there would be enough support, and mounted the three pine shelves to the living room wall. By the time he got home, I had cleaned up everything and put the tools away. He came in quietly, like he'd been doing for the past weeks, took off his jacket and wandered with

it into the living room. It was then that he saw the shelves; I was standing a little behind him. He did not move. He froze right where he was.

“Did I cut them all right?” I asked him.

He said nothing, but stepped closer and ran his thumb along the edges.

“Maybe I should have stained them,” I said. His silence was disturbing.

After a while, he turned and looked at me. I saw him there at the wall, the shelves directly behind him, and I noticed how his eyes were wide, and more green than brown in the light from the windows. And then I got this feeling he was playing a game, trying to stare me down.

I leaned forward. “What?”

He walked past me without speaking and went to the bedroom. I waited. Soon he returned, buttoning his jacket, and his eyes had that look I’d seen so much of over the past weeks. Without a word, he passed me and went to the door and left. I watched from the window as he drove away.

For the rest of that evening I moved from the bedroom to the living room, where I peered out the windows into the darkness, and then returned, following the same path Frank had endlessly followed during those first two weeks. I checked the shelves every now and then, to make sure they were still stable, and when it became clear that Frank was going to spend most of the night out, I sat in the living room and watched television. There was the last of the news, a forecast of showers, and then a sitcom I’d heard of, but never watched before. It was a family show, except there was no mother. There were three men who raised four children, ranging from toddler to teenager. How they came across those four children, I don’t know. I turned off the television and tried to go to sleep.

Frank returned after one in the morning, smelling of liquor and cigarettes, and fell heavily into bed beside me. I pretended to be asleep until he started snoring, and then I got up and went outside.

“Evidence”—by Olen Steinhauer

The day’s heat had mostly disappeared and a cool breeze from across the plain that surrounds Balaam followed me into the car. I drove out of town and took 190 farther west. When you’re that far away from any major cities, the highway turns black and headlights can only do so much. I rolled down the window and just drove into that darkness for a long time. I thought about all of it—Jeremy, Frank, even my job—without coming to any decision. I didn’t even know if there *was* something to decide. And then I remembered Jim Royce from high school, and how much I’d loved him. He’d been the first boy I’d ever slept with, and was kinder than most, even though he wore a wide white Stetson and strutted around like a cowboy. He would bring little gifts to school for me—Hershey bars, country tapes, sometimes even flowers—and he had the most clear skin I’d ever seen, with just enough Mexican in him to keep it permanently tanned; his shoulders were broad and he had a strong nose. And then I remembered the time he told me he had gotten Shirley Hubbard pregnant. It was between Geography and Gym, and he pulled me out one of the side doors so we could be alone. I only nodded quietly as he touched my elbows and said he was sorry. Then, after an awkward pause, I cursed at him loudly, turned, and walked back into the school, dry-eyed and furious. And that was all I did, until I got home. Then I cried on and off for the next three weeks; there was no way to know when it would start or stop. I felt so out of control during those weeks, like an empty sock being tossed by the wind.

I couldn’t help but compare that to the way I was acting now. For a teenager who had gone out of his way to get someone else pregnant, I could experience that complete shattering, where your insides shake like they’re breaking apart, and wave after dark wave of misery takes control of your eyes and thoughts and shoulders. Why not for my son? I knew I was a good mother, I’d always been. I’d read to Jeremy at night while Frank watched television. I’d taken him to soccer and baseball while Frank worked late; I’d cleaned his cuts.

There were no reasons that made sense. For a while I thought it had something to do with my own mother, absent throughout my high school years, chasing down new husbands, or my father, who had left when I was two, before I’d had a chance to know him. But these were

excuses, not reasons. And then I thought that it had to do with the time Frank and I were first trying to conceive. It took a long time, half a year, and then it happened: I missed a period. Almost two weeks passed, and it was a day-by-day thing, our excitement building, Frank getting home each evening with that eternal question—“Today?”—and me smiling and shaking my head. But then the period did come, and it was a painful bleeding, heavy; and sitting on the toilet with my head in my hands, the cramps rippling through me, I was sure that our child had gone with the blood into the toilet. I believed it though I never saw any proof, only the blood. I thought that perhaps this or my parents was why I could not cry for my dead son, but neither made any sense, and they still don’t. And when I got rid of those reasons, it occurred to me that if there was a reason I was not grieving, then maybe it was something I did not want to know.

By the time I got to Bakersfield it was three in the morning, a light rain was falling, and the 24-hour gas station on the outskirts of town was closed.

Frank was already gone when I returned later that morning. I called in sick, and spent the day cleaning up. I vacuumed the whole house and dusted and aired it all out. I went to the grocery store, pushed my cart through the bright aisles and blinked at the people who passed me. When I looked at them I had the feeling that none of them understood anything. None of these strangers knew what pain I had in my life.

I bought some flowers for the dining room, and some leafy plants to use as bookends on the new shelves. I made a large lasagna, and got an expensive Portugese red wine Frank once said he liked. By five, everything in the house was clean and the wine was breathing, and the whole house smelled thickly of lasagna.

He got home a couple hours late, and from the way he blinked when he came into the house and swayed, and held his head as if with a headache, it was obvious he was drunk. But he was quiet.

“Would you like something to eat?” I asked him.

“Evidence”—by Olen Steinhauer

He looked at me only momentarily before going to the shelves. He stood in front of them for about a minute, his eyes scanning the green plants and the books, as if he were reading titles. And then, with an unsteady arm, he swiped each shelf clean, throwing plants and dirt and books in a shower to the carpet. I stepped back. One at a time, he gripped the sides of each shelf and yanked hard, ripping each one out of the wall. The nails pulled against the studs and screeched when they came out. It was terrible. He twisted and pulled, breathing heavily, until they had all come free, and then he collected them under his arm and walked out the front door. I stared at the wall, at the open sores where pieces of wall had been torn out, and then I went to the window again. He was throwing the shelves into the back seat of his car. And then he was driving away. His wheels actually made a noise when he took the corner.

I have not seen Frank for a long time now. I hear through mutual friends that he’s moved out of his parents’ place and has his own apartment again. And I’m glad for him, since it shows he’s making headway. When he left Balaam, he told me to keep the house for myself, but the size of it without people troubled me, and when I sold it I sent Frank half the money, in an envelope addressed care of his parents.

We did finally talk things over. He apologized for the mess he made and I apologized for my mothering. He looked up at me and said, “What?”

We were in a diner at the time, and he had spent the last week at a motel.

“My mothering,” I repeated.

“Honey,” he said, moving his hand to my side of the table. “You were a great mother. That’s not the problem here.”

“But it is,” I said calmly, because I’d had a while to think it all through. I had dwelled on it for so long that I was able to finally see what I’d been hiding from. “I didn’t love him,” I said slowly, so that he wouldn’t make me repeat it, but it didn’t work.

“What?” He pulled at his lip with his thick fingers. “What are you talking about?”

“Evidence”—by Olen Steinhauer

I forced a smile, felt it shiver there on my face. “I just finally understood,” I said. “It wasn’t really love.” The smile was withering.

How do you explain to someone that you’ve followed a series of clues to your own crime? Over the weeks, I had watched the evidence accumulate and turn against me. The lack of tears, my mother-in-law’s suspicions, and especially the stares from everyone—they all gathered together during the week Frank spent in his motel room, and they convicted me. By that afternoon, I had accepted their verdict.

It was not that I hated or disliked my son—I just could not find any evidence of love. I reached deep inside myself for a long time, trying to defend my case, but there was nothing. And the lack of evidence became proof of the opposite. In courts they have it backwards: we are guilty until proven otherwise.

Frank stared at me for a long time, and when he finally did speak, it was to the waitress: “Can we get the bill?” The next day he began moving his things out of the house, to San Antonio. I helped him pack for an hour or so, but after he had told me three times that he could do it alone, I took a drive out to Bakersfield again. It was early afternoon, a Sunday. People were filing out of the low Church of Christ building just off the highway, and I turned into their parking lot and watched them for a while. Men were in suits too heavy for mid-summer Texas; women pinned white straw hats to their heads. Children scurried around, finally free of the dull service, and ducked out of the way of their parents’ slaps.

I don’t know how long I was there, watching all of them greet each other and say their farewells, but suddenly a man in a suit was tapping on my window. I blinked until my vision came back. The parking lot was empty.

“You need any help?” he asked when I rolled down the window.

He looked the way I imagine Jim Royce looks now, sort of wide and proud, but broken beneath the surface, broken like Frank. He squinted down against the sunlight and I looked up at him without speaking.

He pointed a lax finger at my face, then tapped his eye. “Are you all right?”

"Evidence"—by Olen Steinhauer

I wiped beneath my eyelid, felt the dampness, then continued to stare at him silently until it was clear that he was uncomfortable. He looked up, past the car to the highway, trying to appear collected, then turned back to me. He opened his mouth hesitantly, as if to speak, but I said, "No." I started the engine and nodded at him. "I'm fine." I drove straight back to Balaam.