

Soap

It has been raining for five days straight in Philadelphia. The gloom has settled into Megan's bones, her DNA. She thinks one more commute to the tower she works in, and she'll jump in the Delaware. Maybe she should ask her primary care for Prozac. She's already gotten two phone calls from Aurelie, her daughter's nanny, wanting to know where Sophia's homework is. And her husband's administrative assistant has called to tell her to please pick up her husband's dry cleaning, a non-liberated request which, Megan is sure, has no ironic resonance for his administrative assistant, who is only twenty-four.

Rain continues to assault the windshield, splattering in gray dribbles that remind her of executions, orphan trains, and the short life-spans of the pioneers who settled in this area. Nothing here is good.

She parks in the underground parking garage, gets her good pumps wet walking to the elevator with her briefcase, and prepares for another day in the corporate offices of the software giant where she works. Wondering, in the elevator, if she has enough time to Google "seasonal affective disorder" before her eight-thirty meeting.

That afternoon, her boss lets her off early, because he wants her to go to Chicago for him in two days, and he's assuaging his conscience by giving her the afternoon off. "I know how it is with a kid," he says. Since Megan gets a call from Sophia every day at three-thirty, and has for years, since she was in day care. And Megan often feels tormented, after these calls. As if she's doing something wrong, when Sophia doesn't want to hang up, or when Sophia pleads with her to come home, and Megan has to say, "We're going skiing in three weeks, did you forget?" or

“I’ll see you in four hours, honey. Mommy has to work.” And then hang up feeling some mixture of dread and guilt in her stomach. Possibly anger.

This afternoon, when she gets home, Aurelie is watching a soap opera on the big TV. Megan plops down on the sofa next to Sophia and tries to pay attention, even though she’s also thinking about what she has to bring to the meeting in Chicago. Suddenly her eyes lock on an actor on the screen: it’s Larry, her old boyfriend. It’s him! From when she lived in Los Angeles a million years ago. It’s the cheekbones, the voice, the high forehead that always made her think of his Dutch ancestors getting off an East India Company brig in New Amsterdam. It’s definitely Larry, and he’s got a two hundred dollar haircut.

Her heart pounds in her throat. Feelings overwhelm her. He’s beautiful. She sits on the beige sofa with her hand on her chest. The segment is too short; it’s just a tease. He’s distressed over someone’s amnesia; he’s chewing out a woman doctor in a lab coat. The segment ends. She is shocked. How long has he been in this soap? Is he new? She feels as if the wallpaper has just started talking.

His life must be studios, producers, agents, all the things he longed for when she knew him in LA. The screen shows a commercial for a sleeping pill. Then pre-mixed pie crust. A laundry detergent that makes a shirt, which a woman has poured wine on, come so clean that she looks like she’s just had sex. The images are orgasmic. Splashes and twirling thunderbolts of desirability. Megan stares, waiting for Larry to come back on.

And he does have a short segment, on the phone with a woman he used to love, who tells him she is the mother of his love child. He doesn’t believe her, as it will screw up his engagement to someone else, whom he just (Megan is piecing this together) rescued from a

terrorist attack in a restaurant. Possibly he is dating his own love child, who grew up in a convent in France.

“You know what it is,” Aurelie says, from her side of the couch. “These people are all so pretty. But they don’t learn nothing. They fall in bad love over and over.”

“Bad romance,” Sophia says. She’s wearing her after-school silver glitter pop-star pants, which Megan hasn’t been able to talk her out of. Larry and the brunette, Vivian, are in a deep, tonsil-sucking kiss, that she thinks she should cover Sophia’s eyes for, except that Sophia is probably watching worse things on the Internet. Amelie says, “I think Sophia got hay-fever.”

Megan looks at Sophia’s eyes, which are red and wet. Swollen. Sophia says she doesn’t feel like eating, and kicks the edge of the sofa. She says she doesn’t want to go to school tomorrow, there’s no point.

“Do you have a test, or what?” Megan says.

“I can read as well as anybody. It’s boring.”

“Tell me about it,” Megan says. “But you have to go anyway. Daddy can drive you.”

“Why don’t you?”

“I’m going to Chicago. I told you, remember? Last week?”

“Ah, Mom.” Sophia sighs.

“Come on, Mommy’s got her work to do.”

Sophia shrugs. The shrug bothers Megan when she’s in the drugstore, a few hours later, getting Sophia’s antihistamine prescription refilled. She tries not to think about it. She finds herself reading the magazine racks near the register, and there he is. Right on the cover. Smiling straight into the camera, with his blue eyes. She dawdles in the line so long, devouring *Soap*

Opera Digest, that the checkout girl, who has pierced her eyebrow with uncomfortable-looking steel balls, says, “Can I help you?”

Megan buys the magazine, and reads it in her car in the parking lot, under the yellowy lights of the store’s façade. The facts of his life are all wrong. He didn’t grow up in Minneapolis, and he was never a computer programmer and a Navy SEAL. (He grew up in LA, and he could barely swim.) His name is now Bo Fullerton. It says he loves driving his Porsche along the Pacific Coast Highway.

When she knew him it wasn’t a Porsche, it was a battered Nissan Maxima with rusted wheel-wells. He lived in a Spanish stucco apartment building off Sunset, with grass growing through the cracks in the sidewalk, and a pool the landlord underchlorinated, so the algae grew. Small frogs lived in it. He had a dog named Chippie, who used to howl when Larry shut him out of the bedroom, and when he let him in, Chippie would jump on the bed. He had a series of headshots he loved, from photographers who would cut a struggling actor a break. The windows of his bedroom, she remembers now, were louvred, and let in shade and sunshine in the afternoons, narcotic light, filled with the scent of bougainvillea, and birdsong. At night, mockingbirds sang. Water dappled the light off the pool, and you could lose your mind, in those times, when there was nothing to do. Stretch out on the bed with him, and make love, twisting together like snakes. Rest, and do it again. We never talked about it, she thinks. We just did it.

She shoves the *Soap Opera Digest* into her handbag, and when she gets home, her husband is eating a warmed-over casserole Aurelie left, and telling Sophia about the difference between selling short and buying on margin.

Sophia looks bored. “Hey,” her husband says to her. “You got home early.”

“I have to get up at four to catch the shuttle.”

“Mn,” he says. He offers her food, and Megan has three conversations going on in her head at once: Bill is hurt because she forgot they were supposed to go to the marriage counselor tomorrow night; she wants to get back in time to take Sophia to karate, because it’s her pink belt qualification; and she’s worried she may get moved to another project if the team she’s meeting in Chicago don’t like the emphasis she’s chosen for her presentation. You don’t want to be seen as a bitch. She puts her arm around Sophia’s narrow shoulders, and smells her sweet, almost salty hair.

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A week goes by. Sophia has painted her fingernails black and purple, alternating nails. She’s in the back seat of Megan’s car, still too light to sit in front, and drinking Gatorade before her violin lesson. Megan has been saving pictures of Larry off the Internet and several soap magazines that have pictures of him. He’s got a cover, where he’s stretched up over a blond, with his biceps across her breasts. Megan has been keeping all these stashed in her underwear drawer, under the tampons, so Bill won’t find them.

Sophia is drinking Gatorade and chattering.

“You’re not listening,” she says finally.

“Sorry. What?”

“I said I’m in a play on Wednesday. We’re acting out the Declaration of Independence.”

How do you do that? Megan wonders. And doesn’t Gatorade ruin your teeth? “I don’t think I can make it,” Megan says. “I’ve got a really important meeting. I may be going to Texas.”

“You were in Chicago.”

“This is a different one. It’s where all the people in my company will decide if my job will be there. Can’t Aurelie go with you?”

“She’s driving me.” Megan stares out the side window, and then powers it down. She dumps the bottle of Gatorade onto the ground, and powers the window up. Folds her arms and stares ahead.

“You better pick that up, Soph,” Megan says.

“Make me.”

Her lips are tight. There doesn’t seem to be any way to penetrate her rage. Somehow this is all Megan’s fault. “Won’t it be good with Amelie?” she says.

“It’s not the same, Mom, is it.”

Megan stares at the clock on the dash, and her mobile device rings as she’s about to respond to Sophia, who glares at her.

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She’s found a way to record all the episodes of *All My Yesterdays* using the TiVo, and it seems to be working well, until one weekend Bill says she’s erased all his golf matches.

“It was an accident,” she says.

“Soap operas?”

“Aurelie likes to watch it,” she says.

“You should learn how to do it right. You want me to show you again?”

She says yes, even though she knows. She’s been watching them furtively in the bedroom for weeks, and it’s too bad about the golf matches. She floats on the golden voices, the sexy lines between Larry and the blond, or the brunette named Vivian, who, it turns out, did not have his love child. Sometimes she watches a segment three or four times, hoping to understand who he is, now. This Bo.

In Los Angeles, his apartment building had sixteen units, with broken door buzzers and a pot-smoking lawn guy who eventually got a good commercial. Larry made his living working parties, a rental clown. He could juggle, and sing, and make genitalia out of balloons when things got drunk or stoned enough. He wanted to be a star. One of Megan's friend said he was a fauve, and she wasn't quite sure what that was. Except her friend said, rolling his eyes, "He's very attractive. If you get tired of him." Which had made Megan nervous. As if her friend was going to take Larry off to some club and put the make on him. And she'd thought, I know what it's like to make love to him, honey, and it's too bad for you, you never will. The next time they were together, she wanted him more, held his neck in her hands, put her legs around him.

And it was easy to be in love with Larry then, because you couldn't take him seriously. An out-of-work actor, who maxed out his credit cards, and drank himself stupid in front of the TV for weeks at a time, when his agent didn't call him with so much as an audition.

Sometimes Larry brought her on shoots, and she found she was consumed with jealousy, sexual and otherwise. Make-up girls flirted with him. The actors did stretches and passed around tins of Tiger Balm, and horsed around with each other, and compared themselves to each other behind each others' backs. They called up in euphoria, and said, "Love you, baby." The directors always fussed over Larry, and with all the actors, which allowed the actors, in Megan's view, to wallow in more infantile omnipotence than she'd thought humanly possible. Just so the director could get his perfect take.

Once it was a film about surfers who lose a buddy, and form a club in his memory. It was written by someone at UCLA Film School, and somehow it got edited all wrong, so that most of Larry's scenes were cut. After the bewildering premiere at the student film festival, he'd sat

around and watched TV for almost a month. His friends said he was fabulous anyway. “All thirty seconds,” he said.

Glum, because an actor grasped at ribbons, Megan realizes now. You needed to get your face out there, and this was the beginning of that. A bad TV pilot. A pornish movie, a commercial. You did what you had to do. She hadn’t realized that. His other film was a zombie movie that involved a Czech backer and a director who had a cocaine problem that eventually lost them their insurance. But a small beginning didn’t mean a small career. As she can see now, by his many minutes on *All My Yesterdays*.

His face seems to be everywhere lately on supermarket magazines. She buys one, one afternoon, after turning it upside down on the conveyor belt, ignoring the disdainful stare of the neat, blond, high-school cashier, who is probably going to Dartmouth.

She suspected, when she lived with him, that his looks were against him. He was too pretty. His career was refusing to take off. He made a commercial for a local phone carrier, a thirty-second spot where he mugged for the camera, but it never aired. He drove a car out of a used-car dealership and said, “I’ve got good things to say about Pete’s Quality Pre-Owned Vehicles!” which he’d practiced, with varying intonations, for a week. But that was as far as it went. “What am I doing wrong?” he said once. He was like a tragic hero, she thought; he was too hungry. Go out for audition after audition, and mess it up on the call-back. You could want it too hard. Although in LA there were plenty of hungry actors waiting on tables. He tried not to sulk when people in his acting class got bit parts in series. A kid’s program about a zoo. A pilot. A soap. A cable show that needed a singer.

And in truth, she was getting bored with his trips to the gym, his yoga, the acting classes that she had to loan him money for, from her dinky job as an administrative assistant for a lawyer in Century City.

One week, his agent, tenuous at best, had dropped him, or at least wasn't answering his calls. Megan suggested he get another job besides clowning at birthday parties.

"What?" he'd said angrily. "You want to see me fail?" Chippie was dancing around Larry, who was holding the leash. Larry had kicked at the dog, and missed. Megan knew at that moment she would leave him. "And I'm not going to any more of your acting classes," she said. "Because it's pretentious."

"You and your snobby friends," he said.

"They're perfectly fine!"

"They're snobs. They're asleep from the neck down. They don't talk; they just trade facts with each other, to show how smart they are, or else they gossip. They don't really listen to each other at all!"

She'd sworn, because she was impatient. And years later, she'd realized he was right. But that was always the way, in love affairs. You got pounded for not being something, and then when you were broken up, you took the good information and carried it forward to the next person. Another time they'd argued about something, she'd even forgotten what it was, and he shot back at her, "Because. Because! Because!" Spittle had come out of his mouth. "I don't want reasons!" Which he'd learned from his acting teacher, who made everyone stop using the word "because." "I don't want to hear "why," his teacher had yelled. "I don't want REASONS!" Same drill, Megan thinks now. His teacher had been right.

Her life, it seems to her, has become a mesh of reasons.

“Mommy,” Sophia says to her one day on the phone in her office, “I think I broke my finger in karate. I think Aurelie is driving me to the hospital.”

Aurelie gets on the phone and says that this is so. Megan looks at the time on her cell, and it’s four-thirty. The Chicago team leader will be calling. Her boss will want her to wait for the call.

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Sophia’s hand is in a cast, which her friends at school have signed in colored markers. It looks like they won’t be going skiing any time soon. Megan helps her by writing out her homework, and typing on the computer for her. Sophia is soldiering on, she tells Bill, when he gets home late most nights. She reads a trade journal in bed, and he kicks off his shoes, and goes to take a shower. He’s sweaty from the plane, he says. The shuttle flight from Detroit. Megan watches him change, his strong back and his solid, no-nonsense stride into the bathroom. He flips his undershirt over the back of the chair, and she wonders if he sleeps with other women. How could you know? He’s still irritated with her for missing another appointment with the marriage counselor.

When she rests her head back against the pillows, she thinks about Larry. His character on *All My Yesterdays*, which the tabloids shorten to AMY, is caught between his love for his daughter, the ingénue Kari, a surgical resident, who he doesn’t know is his actual daughter, and her mother, Crystal, who rejected him years before to marry an oil tycoon, who has since died and been frozen. Megan watched the last three episodes this afternoon, with Aurelie and Sophia. She wonders if Bill is faithful, and likes to think he is. But how would you know?

When he gets out of the shower, his hair is wet in little spikes, and she throws the covers back and crosses the room to him, although they are both tired, and puts her arms around his

comforting sides, his neck. He is surprised. And though they are too tired to go really crazy, here, and he doesn't make a lot of noise because of Sophia, they make love. Megan falls asleep against him, afterwards, enjoying the fact that he's warm, and dutiful, and a good man.

A few weeks later, he finds the stash of photos torn from magazines, and the printouts of Bo's entry on Wikipedia, and he asks her what it means. He stands there in his bathrobe, with a towel around his neck, and his hand full of papers. "I was looking for a safety pin," he says. "What is this?"

"I don't know," Megan says. "Maybe it's better if you just don't ask me about it."

He stares at her, and she wishes he'd do something else. "Okay," he says finally. She has an overwhelming urge to giggle. She picks up a book, from her bedside table, and starts reading. This is a stone wall. Later, in a day or so, she will feel as if a door has slammed between them. It's a discomfort. An embarrassment. She throws away the pictures unwillingly. Shreds them in the growling shredder, feeling bereft.

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Fifteen years before, when she and Larry were breaking up, the signs were everywhere. They, too, had gone to a couples' counselor, on La Cienega, in an old building with palm trees around the parking lot. She and Larry had had a fight about Dungeons and Dragons. He played with his friends on Friday nights, and they sat around screaming and exclaiming at each other, drinking beer, and she'd read *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and not talked to them. He grumbled on the way home in the car, that she thought she was better than they were, just because they were enjoying themselves.

"No," she said. "I just can't relate to fantasy castles."

"It'd do you good," he said. "To stop intellectualizing, like all your snobby friends."

“They’re just normal people.”

“They’re snobs. Don’t you see? They don’t have any heart. They don’t even tell each other the truth. They bullshit each other.” His voice fell, as they stopped at the light at Franklin. “When you’re with them, you’re like that. You could use some compassion, Megan. You should learn from me.”

Dragons? she thought. This is what I want to learn? He seemed hopelessly stubborn, with his friends with the crappy cars, the acting classes where they read scenes and wept and shouted. Sometimes he just seemed to eat his emotionality like food. “It’s all about the here and now,” he said. “That’s what you don’t get.” As if she was an idiot. “Most people are worrying about what’s going to happen, or they’re thinking about what already happened. They aren’t in the now.”

Oh, please, she’d thought. But this was so temporary. You didn’t get married to an actor who juggled tennis balls at kids’ birthday parties in Laurel Canyon. After that night, she didn’t want to sleep with him. They coupled, but it was boring to her. The birds continued to trill, like water, like light, in the hedge outside the window, in the fragrance of the jasmine and bougainvillea. But she was done. The light reflected up into the leaves around the swimming pool. But lying beside his sleeping form, she felt impatient and lonely.

He wasn’t fooled for long. “What’s the matter?” he said to her.

“Nothing.”

“Come on. You’re about to leave me.”

She hadn’t wanted him to know, because she needed to find a place to live, a friend who would be a new roommate. But she told him, yes, she was leaving. He sulked, and then disappeared in the Nissan, and didn’t come back all night. She’d had to walk Chippie twice

herself, and one of the neighbors in the building, a petroleum engineer who'd moved there with his wife from Texas, tried to keep her in conversation in the hallway. When Larry finally came back, after noon the next day, he brought a vase of red roses from a florist in Bev Hills, and she could only think it was money better spent on paying down his credit cards. His neediness made her feel as if she couldn't breathe.

"You can't even look me in the eye," he said.

That was when they had the emergency meeting with the therapist. But it turned out the therapist was getting a divorce, so all he could talk about was his family, and how difficult it was for his children. Afterwards Larry and Megan stood in the parking lot on LaCienega, and Megan thought how those palm trees were not really trees at all, but spongy false trees, invasive from Florida. It's like us, she thought. We're not really solid at all.

"You know what it is," Larry was saying. "He's a therapist getting a divorce, so he has to make it the most perfect divorce anyone has ever had." He leaned against his car, his long legs crossed at the ankles. "You know why he does that?"

She shook her head.

"Because he doesn't want to feel pain." She nodded impatiently. He asked did she want to get something to eat, and she said no.

He said, "You've shut me out. You're already gone."

"No I haven't. We're just not compatible."

"You just don't get it." He seemed to get teary, but she only felt uncomfortable. It was, she told one of her friends later, like slipping out of a skirt that was way too tight. Slipping out of a sleepingbag you'd been zipped up in. Later, her friends, at various times, told her they were surprised she and Larry had lasted as long as they did. But her new roommate said, "He's not so

bad. He just needs a lot of support.” Which made Megan depressed, for a couple of days, as if she was guilty of something. But it was a question of survival, really. And she’d packed all her things in cartons when he was at acting class, and emptied the apartment, barely stopping to say goodbye to Chippie, who was hungry, as usual.

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At dinner, in Philadelphia, Sophia is chewing on her steak. Megan is thinking about the difference between Bill, who is working late and not home yet, and Larry.

“Mom,” Sophie says, “you’re not listening.”

“Sorry.”

“I said, Did you know that Aurelie moved here from Haiti? With her family?”

“Yes. I knew that.”

“They came because they didn’t have any money.”

Megan nods. “It’s a tropical country. That’s why Aurelie is usually cold.”

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The next afternoon, Megan is watching the soap with Aurelie and Sophia on the couch in the den. Larry’s character has had a terrible car accident, and he’s lying in a hospital bed. He’s bandaged, and has several monitors, but his handsome face is intact and highly pained, in close-up. He has flashbacks, which take up almost half the program. His mistress and his fiancée get into an argument in the hospital waiting room, but Larry is still unconscious. He has flashbacks about his previous life as a doctor, and before that as a racing-car driver, who lost his first wife when she was kidnapped by a drug cartel when they were vacationing in Mexico.

Aurelie, who is watching this and eating potato chips, finds the dream sequences disturbing, and complains that they don't make sense. "Shh," Sophia says. "He's really sad about his first wife."

The cameras stay close on Larry, who yearns and twists in his drugged sleep. Suddenly he wakes up, and looks at the nurse, who, being middle-aged and plain, will probably not be a permanent character. Tears stream down Larry's face. He reaches for the nurse's hand. "She understood," he says feverishly. "She was the only one who understood!"

"Now, Mr. Saint-Pierre," she says. "You must rest. You need your strength."

"No," Larry says, obviously heartbroken. He weeps for millions of people, Megan thinks, including the overseas feeds. "The first one you love," he says. "It's always the deepest. It never goes away." He weeps more. Even Sophia and Aurelie have stopped fidgeting, shocked by his manly crying on daytime television. They watch him, rapt. "It was always you, Megan. I'll always love you," he says. "Megan, my darling." He says it with all the weight of tragedy and loss. "Megan, wherever your happiness has taken you, I will always love you."

Megan, on the beige couch, feels as if he's reached right out of the wide-screen monitor and touched her. She's become an actor's material. Or maybe she's being too harsh, here. Whatever she remembers is not what he remembers at all. She watches Aurelie and Sophia go off to make peanut butter sandwiches, because Sophia is hungry. Larry has said this, she thinks. I am alive to him. The afternoon that seemed so familiar and so terrible, this room so claustrophobic in its darkness, are suddenly radiant with some large sense of love. There is a rich life, with laughter and and bright colors, that she is not part of. But it remembers her. He has said this to me, she thinks. A blessing and a secret. Even knowing I might not listen.

Sophia is chattering in the kitchen, asking for a knife from Aurelie. In her pop-star outfit she returns, with bright red lipstick on her childish mouth, holding out a yellow plate with a peanut butter sandwich on it.

“Nice lipstick,” Megan says.

“It was in your bathroom.”

The sandwich’s crusts have been removed; its outline is irregular. “Okay, Mom. I made it for you,” she says. She seems suddenly so small, so determined to be heard. Hunching the plate, to give it up. Hunching her shoulders. Waiting for Megan to take a bite.

Megan thanks her, and takes the uneven and beautiful sandwich she offers. When Bill gets home, late that night, she is awake, waiting for him. He, too, stoops, she thinks, more than she remembers. In spite of the racquetball and the visits to the personal trainer. He carries his duties like gray fat in the air surrounding his Italian suit. Like desperation. His face stolid like a soldier on a long march. A horse in harness, pulling a carriage around Central Park forever.

“Come here,” she says, holding her arms out for the briefcase, the laptop case she will put on the floor. “Come here.”