

The Institute

by Mary McMyne

Maggie doesn't mean to fall asleep on the porch swing. She makes no *decision* to give herself over to exhaustion. What happens is as involuntary as breathing. It's steaming hot, almost 110 degrees. Their A/C unit isn't powerful enough to cool their house in this heat. It's probably ninety degrees in the shade, but there's a breeze because of the house being up on stilts and the storm brewing out in the Gulf. It feels good out here compared to indoors. Relaxing. If she closes her eyes, the only things she can hear are the soft sound of Lu-Lu nursing and her three-year-old son Davey rolling his firetruck down the slide in the yard. It's almost as if things were back to the way they were when she was little, before the Vermilion River threatened to swallow the grocery store every time there was a storm.

Her husband Jim has been working overtime at the Institute again. Last night, Jim didn't come home, and Davey woke up with nightmares. Davey kept coming into her room every hour or so, crying inarticulately about the mask man again until she pulled him into bed with her. The problem was when Davey was in her bed, she couldn't sleep. The boy fidgets, and these days, she's afraid to let her mind wander when he's around. Jim has warned her. She is very expressive, and for a three-year-old, the boy is very good at reading her.

Lack of sleep has given the day a strained quality: she has been lightheaded, perpetually hungry, exhaustion pulling at the edges of her eyes. This morning, the minutes kept slipping away from her, and she couldn't for the life of her account for where they've gone. She lost consciousness in the middle of washing dishes, while making Davey's lunch. Now she's overcome by a sense of well-being as she nurses Lu-

Lu, a sense that things could end up all right. Maybe the grocery store's crowdfunding campaign to raise itself on stilts will succeed. Maybe she and Jim's money troubles won't matter quite as much as they fear.

After a moment the noise of her son on the swingset recedes—telescoping, as if her mind is moving very far away—and she finds herself falling into the pocket of spacetime she enters when her children are occupied and her eyes are closed. It's a featureless place, still, its only quality the silence that surrounds each of our minds, preserving our privacy and sanity, allowing us to know ourselves as individuals.

When she opens her eyes, she is startled to see the light on the porch has changed. Her daughter sleeps at her breast. The noise on the swingset is gone. She rises from the porch swing. "Davey," she calls, making her way down the wooden stairs to the small hill where the swingset sits, her clothes sticking to her skin. Where is he? The sun beats down on the rusty slide, its rays inhumanly bright. Their property goes on for an acre in every direction, and the marsh is home to alligators these days, snakes, and nutria. There's nothing on either side of their lot but neighbors, the old crabapple orchard, and the swamp. Near the pond, an alligator has been hanging around a heap of vegetation that is probably a nest. None of it is safe anymore for a child. "Davey!"

The baby stirs in her arms as she hurries toward the rotting barn, water sloshing at her feet. He must've gone in there. Where else would he go? She peers inside, almost running into the spider web glinting in the doorway. The barn is a relic of the past. She and Jim, like most people who live south of Erath these days, can't afford livestock. With the floods, they're nearly impossible to keep. Almost all of the meadows where

her maw-maw said cows used to roam have turned to marsh, dotted with raised gardens and rice fields. Here and there, down the highway, the most you'll see are chickens.

The strands of the spider web in the doorway sparkle in the early afternoon light as if they were made of gold. A huge spider darts down the web toward her; she jumps. The spider is the kind her mother would call a golden orb weaver, but Maggie thinks their gray skull-faced bodies make them look like demons. Her mother always said all the creatures of the Earth are part of God's plan, but privately, Maggie suspects that with some creatures, the Devil interfered.

She ducks under the ghastly thing and checks the shadowy stalls one by one. The storm. What if she can't find him before it hits? "Davey!"

Outside, the grass in the marsh is shoulder-high. High enough for Davey to hide in. She will need her wading boots. The weeping willow's branches are thick enough to hide him at the trunk. This boy! He has been behaving strangely ever since Jim started taking him to work. He's hidden from her like this in the house before, but he's never hidden outside. Where would he go? Into the marsh? To the neighbors'? She remembers seeing him stand at the French doors yesterday, staring through the cracked glass at the marsh that rolled toward the swamp. When she asked him what he was doing, Davey said, "Lookit the quiet," his eyes brimming with tears.

Hurrying inside, she grabs her wading boots and diaper bag and hurries back out into the marsh, the baby babbling in her sling. There is no sign of him having come through here, no swatch of cloth stuck to the cattails. In a muddy patch she looks for footprints and finds only the slithery path of a snake.

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She and Jim had a whirlwind courtship. She grew up in Erath, had been working at the diner since she got pregnant with Davey and dropped out of high school. One morning, Jim showed up at one of her tables and ordered breakfast. When

she found out he worked at the Institute, she was taken aback. The other waitresses whispered about the kind of research they did there. Spooky psychological studies. You could get paid good money for taking part, but they messed with your mind, and the Institute took advantage of the fact that no one understood the contracts. The studies *changed* you, the other waitresses said, and they made you sign release forms so you couldn't sue. A few of the people who did the studies just up and disappeared. But she'd never met anyone who did them personally, and rumors were no match for the man at her table, who didn't even flinch when she mentioned she had a son. Brooding blue eyes, olive skin, a strong jaw and shoulders. Maggie couldn't keep her eyes off him. He seemed to have no trouble providing for himself. He took care with his appearance, she could see; he was clean-shaven, his shirt unwrinkled even though it was threadbare. He didn't wear a wedding ring. He chatted her up, left her the largest tip she'd ever gotten. The next morning, she took her time getting ready, hoping that she would see him again. Maybe he would be their ticket out of her mother's trailer.

The next morning, when Jim appeared at one of her tables again, she asked if he wanted the same thing as the day before—eggs over easy with toast, fresh-squeezed juice—and he was delighted that she remembered. I could marry this man, she thought, and the conversation took off so quickly they had to ring the bell in the kitchen five times for her to notice.

Jim offered to take her out that night after he clocked out, and she called her mother to see if she could keep Davey. "A man?" her mother said over the phone. Maggie hadn't dated for years because of what happened in high school. "Are you sure?"

She told her mother she was sure.

That night, Jim drove her all the way into Baton Rouge, paying for dinner and drinks, and they hit it off again. If their conversation was a dance, Jim was a masterful dancer, anticipating her every desire and interest, the hours flying by

until suddenly it was time for him to take her home. She'd heard people say when you know, you know, but until she met Jim, she never quite believed it.

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The marsh is empty except for the alligator sunning herself in the rushes at the edge of the pond. A nearby rock is crawling with gators so small they look like lizards. Little black things with yellow bands striping their bodies. There are almost a dozen. As she turns her head from the baby gators, there is movement in the pond. The mother gator opens her mouth and lets out an unearthly call that is somewhere between howl and hiss.

"Davey!" Maggie shouts. Her voice echoes around the pond, under the featureless white sky. The rain will come soon. Her waders stick in the marshy ground as she circles around the gators, giving them a wide berth as she hurries to check under the weeping willow. That was where the boy's gaze was directed when he was looking out the window. She pulls the branches aside like a curtain. There is no one within.

At the edge of the swampy tree line, she sees an indentation in the mud that looks like a footprint. A small tennis shoe about the right size as Davey's foot, the toes pointing in the direction of their neighbors' lot.

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The day after her first date with Jim, Maggie floated from table to table at the diner, glowing with anticipation of their next date. When she passed the mirror, her eyes seemed larger, somehow, sparkling. The way lovers looked in movies, the few times she was able to afford to drive into Lafayette to see them. The latest waterline on the wall of the diner, the beat-up red vinyl of the booths seemed suddenly affecting. It's finally happening to me, she thought, looking around at the customers talking, drinking coffee out of chipped ceramic mugs. One day, I will remember this diner only as the place where I met my husband.

When she told the other waitresses about her second date, they started gossiping. "You better be careful," one waitress said. "Old Mr. Plauché did himself in, last week, and his sister found a signed contract with the Institute in his trailer."

"He kept talking about hearing voices, the last time he came in," the other waitress said.

"How do you know the study caused it?" Maggie asked, annoyed. "That man was always crazy as a loon."

The next night, she left Davey at home with her mother again, and Jim picked her up at their trailer to take her out dancing. She was surprised at first—who could afford to go out *dancing*?—but he said he knew a bar that didn't require a cover. A middle-of-nowhere dive outside Port Allen with an ancient jukebox that still worked. The machine had nothing but late-20th century country. Hundred-year-old songs set in a cooler South, a South without floods and the persistent hurricanes that wrecked everything so bad, hardly anyone could recover. She didn't understand why Jim brought her there until he pulled her onto the dance floor. He was graceful, lithe, fluid on his feet. He had an uncanny ability to anticipate her steps.

He took her out each night after he clocked out. By the fifth date, they were talking marriage. On the sixth, she went home with him. His trailer was a double-wide with sturdy walls and mood lamps, the bed beautiful and soft with white sheets. He responded to her every desire.

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As she hurries toward the clearing in which her neighbors' two-story house sits, a knot of fear rises in Maggie's throat. It's difficult for her to get satisfaction from breathing. She doubles over, gasping, but the inhalations don't seem to make it deep enough into her lungs. Lu-Lu wakes in her sling, starts crying. Maggie straightens and rocks her back and forth, forcing herself to breathe through pursed lips, so she can soothe the child. "*Shhh*," she says, when she's regained control of her breathing. "*Shhh*." The house

rises above them, pretentious even for the twentieth century when it was built, raised on an extended concrete foundation instead of stilts, completely impervious to floods and hurricanes. Maggie isn't even sure her son could climb all the way up those stairs to the door. Davey is nowhere to be seen, and there aren't any cars in the drive, but what if the wife is home sick? What if he knocked and she let him in?

Thunder crackles nearby as Maggie makes her way up the front steps. The brass knocker clangs against the heavy wooden door. Maggie has never gotten along with these neighbors. She doesn't trust them. They both work at the Institute. They don't have kids. They don't even cut their own lawn. They pay landscapers to come by once a week and push the marsh grass and shrubs and wilderness back. A few weeks ago, Maggie ran into the wife at the store and asked—only to make conversation—if they were planning to have children. The woman widened her eyes. "Bring a child into this world?" she scoffed. "We're counting on people like *you* to continue the human race."

No one answers the door. Maggie shifts her weight, controls her breathing. "God-damn it," she says, after a minute. She tries the knocker again.

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She'd only known Jim for a month when he asked her if she wanted to make things official. Her initial reaction was one of relief. She'd already missed her period, and she was afraid to tell him. They were sitting across from one another in a booth at the diner, drinking old-fashioned shakes. Her thighs stuck to the vinyl seat of the booth beneath the skirt of her uniform. She'd just clocked out. In her hand was the ring with the tiny diamond Jim had offered, glittering silently in the artificial light. She was almost afraid, for some reason, to put it on.

"I gamble," Jim explained carefully, watching her face. "Sometimes I get lucky. I've won enough at the casino to put a down payment on a house."

Maggie wanted to believe him. Tears filled her eyes, and she smiled. As she opened her mouth to answer, her thoughts raced. He was in love with her. She was sure of that. She had unanswered questions about his work, but every time she voiced one—in a small voice, usually, late at night in bed—Jim went uncharacteristically quiet. What exactly did he do all day at the Institute? How had he qualified for a position that paid so well without a college degree? Jim had led her to believe he held an entry-level assistant position that required him to run errands and complete menial tasks. When she asked for more details, Jim would say he didn't want to talk about it, crossing his arms and leaning back like that settled it. What was he hiding? He wasn't private about his personal life. He had told her enough about his family that she knew what his childhood was like. He'd grown up in the trailer park slums outside of Baton Rouge. His parents had not been kind to him. He had no plans to introduce her. He'd escaped the slums by saving up for a suit, then showing up for an interview at the Institute, and he didn't want to go back.

"There's an old farmhouse up for sale close enough to work for me to walk," Jim said. "The house is raised. There's a hill in the yard where we can put a swingset for Davey, concrete under the house where we can park the stationwagon."

It had only been a month. Did she know him well enough? Something told her he was hiding something, that there was something important she didn't understand. But a voice in her head told her not to push for answers, that pushing for answers now would push him away.

"Please." He took her hands in his. "Marry me."

The ring glinted in her hands. The moment stretched out.

"Yes," she said finally, putting on the ring. "Of course."

The justice of the peace who'd officiated over marriages at the courthouse on the corner forever didn't ask questions. He only raised his caterpillar-eyebrows, looked over their paper-

work, and asked if they wanted to have the ceremony now or later. Now, she thought desperately, waiting for Jim to turn to her so she could mouth the word. Jim answered without looking at her, as if she'd spoken aloud. "Now."

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The rain starts as she makes her way back through the marsh. Maggie doesn't mind it much—the water is cooler than the air—but the rain makes Lu-Lu wail. Maggie turns her so she's as protected as possible in her sling and keeps going. In the twenty minutes it takes her to reach the other side of their property, Lu-Lu falls back asleep and the Vermilion River spills over its banks, covering the marsh with muddy water. Maggie knows she needs to find Davey before the real flood starts, before the marsh fills with sewage and who-knows-what debris. She frowns at the crabapple trees shining wetly between her house and that of the neighbors who live on this side, a tiny log cabin on stilts. Her friend Paulette lives there with her two kids—three-year-old twins—and her husband who works at the Institute with Jim.

"Davey!" she calls, but the only answer is a sudden rush of rain.

The back door of the cabin is open, but no one answers. Maggie peers inside. The kitchen is a wreck, but it's cool. Filled with brand-new appliances. A toaster. A microwave. A brand new air-conditioner that roars in the window. "Paulette?"

"Back here!" a voice calls. "Maggie? That you?"

"Yes—"

She rushes down the hall, hoping perhaps that Davey is back there with them. How else would Paulette know it was her? Did she recognize her voice? Her footsteps echo on the floor. She has only been here once. There. An open door. The sound of splashing. She hurries in, the words *have you seen Davey* on the tip of her tongue.

Paulette is kneeling on the bathroom floor, facing the bathtub. Her curly blonde hair pulled

up into a bun. As Maggie steps through the threshold, two identical naked children stop in mid-laugh, their slick blonde hair as wet and dark as seal fur, their eyes wide as they turn in unison to meet her eyes. A chill runs down the back of her neck.

Paulette turns to look at her too, following the kids' gaze. "Maggie. What is it?"

The twins open their mouths to speak, knowing looks in their eyes. Their voices echo in unnerving unanimity: "He's not here."

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Their first argument was about money. The stationwagon broke down three months after the ceremony, before she had a chance to start a subsistence garden, before they finished saving up to buy chickens. Maggie thought they should borrow her mother's car once a week to go to the grocery and her obstetrician appointments, but he thought he should take the extra money from his next paycheck to the casino. He tried to tell her he was very good at cards, unbelievably so—that was how he got the money for a down payment, after all—but Maggie couldn't bear the idea. "I don't want to take chances," she sobbed, thinking she might have to leave him if he started going to the casino behind her back. He looked at her, really looked at her then, as if he was truly listening. And when she said, "*please*, Jim, let's *not*, Jim," he backed off.

When she told Paulette how difficult things had become, her neighbor offered to take Davey a couple times a week and let Maggie borrow their car to drive to work in town if the roads were good. When her phone rang a couple hours into her shift at the diner, the second day Davey went to Paulette's, Maggie's heart sank into her belly like a stone.

"The twins are having some difficulty adjusting," Paulette's voice crackled over the telephone line, encoded with a hardness that Maggie didn't like at all.

Trouble adjusting, she thought. It was only the second day. But when she picked Davey up that day, it became clear that the arrangement

wasn't going to work. One of the twins had *bit* Davey during naptime.

That night, Jim took Davey into their room and talked to him for nearly an hour with the door shut. That was the night Jim offered to take Davey with him to work a couple times a week, so that Maggie could ride her bike to the diner. He finally told her his actual position at work—janitor, he was only a janitor—and said that it would be good for Davey to give him a hand.

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Maggie leaves Lu-Lu with Paulette and follows the flooded trail between their houses through the orchard, calling Davey's name so often it begins to feel strange on her tongue. More often than not, the rain drowns out the sound of her voice. Her waders slosh in the water; sometimes she has to hold on to tree limbs to keep from slipping. She looks for Davey in trees, inside bushes. There's no sign of him between their houses, in the flooding crabapple orchard.

In the swamp behind the pond, only a dozen paces past where she saw the footprint facing the wrong way, she finds Davey's firetruck floating in a puddle. He must've dropped it and forgotten it, she tells herself. Maybe he saw a gator. She speeds up her pace, finding footsteps here and there as the elevation rises, muddy tracks the size of her son's feet that tell her she is getting close.

"Davey!" she screams. She is close enough to the Institute that people would be able to hear if not for the storm. As she reaches the edge of the swamp, she can see the sterile white of the upper floors of the buildings of the Institute rising high above the concrete floodwall that surrounds the complex. Looking up at the white buildings gives her an unwelcome chill. The whole place is *unfriendly* looking. Built like a jail. It seems too large for the clearing in which it sits. Why did the towers need to be so tall? How in the world could they afford to cool it? Jim said it was like a refrigerator inside. He always brought a sweater to work. She shudders. The complex feels too perfect, too impervious to

everything, as if it would be standing here long after she was gone, even after the Vermilion River swallowed the floodplain. Why in the world would Davey come here? What did Jim do with him when he took him to work?

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The first day Davey spent at the Institute, Maggie felt nervous. Sick to her stomach. She was six months pregnant with Lu-Lu, by then, so she told herself that was the cause. With Davey, her third trimester had been brutal. She didn't want to think it was intuition. And so it was that she *didn't* call her husband to check on Davey, didn't leave work to drive all the way to the Institute to take him home.

That night, when Davey woke up in the middle of the night with a nightmare, she didn't think anything of it. Two days later, when the nosebleeds started, she told herself not to be paranoid.

A marriage is built on trust, she kept telling herself. A marriage is built on trust.

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There is no answer to her call. The storm is too loud for anyone to hear her. But as she hurries closer, she can see the small pale form of her little boy, huddled beneath an oak tree near the gate. "*Davey!*" she cries, tears filling her eyes, grateful to have found him. He doesn't respond. The rain pours down, filling her ears with a terrible white noise. Drawing closer, she sees her son is huddled in a fetal position, his knees scraped, knuckles torn, pink swaths of rain washing blood off the concrete wall above him. He has been trying to climb it. She rushes to him. "What in the world are you doing?" A second question threatens to tumble out of her lips, but she swallows it: What did Jim do to you?

Her son whips around and looks up at her with a knowing look, the same look the twins gave her, the same look her husband gave her sometimes when he could tell what she was thinking. "It wasn't Daddy," Davey sobs. "It wasn't Daddy."

She scoops him up, cradles him in her arms,
rain washing down over them through the leaves
of the oak. She has made a terrible mistake by
letting Jim take him here. Her voice breaks.

“Why did you come here?”

“The quiet,” her son sobs. “I want the quiet
back!” ▲▼▲

dark cat

by Dan Jacoby

Moon is a bit shuttered tonight
its light interrupted frequently
by passing striated clouds
ghostly irregular halo forms and fades
to the east coyotes chatter nervously
not the normal baying and barking
a continuous din like july crickets
something foreign is amongst them
an uncommon scent of fear, foreboding
can feel the hair go up on my arms
a voluntary reaction, then the back of my neck
reminding of the last time a big cat was roaming,
hunting these deep creek bottoms and bluffs
thirty years ago fox hunters would have gathered
and on a solitary narrow ridge release their hounds
putting the interloper on notice
gun happy farmers put that tradition to rest
the panther will be unopposed
unless stock is attacked
settling into a chair I begin to listen
coyotes will tell me about where he is
taking the place of walkers and blueticks,
dogs would have faced the cat straight on
their owners would have relished that cacophonous confrontation
I am left here listening to amateurs

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