this is how it starts

There is a boy and there is a girl. Jane sees the girl on Tuesdays and Fridays and she sees the boy on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The other three nights she sleeps by herself in her big, firm bed.

She gathers the dogs each morning at six. This requires both the boy and the girl to leave her apartment and refrain from preparing her breakfast. Given the chance, the boy would make eggs benedict. The girl would make cheese omelets. On Jane's mornings alone, she eats cold cereal with sugar.

The girl is fond of her strap-on. The boy is fond of cunnilingus. This is satisfying to Jane. Plus, Jane can say this to the girl: "It would be nice if your dick were bigger." Jane would not make this statement to the boy, though it may be slightly true.

Jane goes to art school in the afternoons and walks dogs six mornings a week and again at night. She realizes this is a cliché, the student dog-

walker, but such is her life and she can't help it. She lives in an apartment that has been occupied since 1948 by a member of her immediate family. In New York, you treat rent control like an heirloom.

Outside her window there are identical brick buildings surrounding a courtyard with mature elms and a well-maintained playground. Jane grew up on those swings. Twenty-five thousand people in a half-mile radius live in apartments identical to Jane's, with their metal kitchen cabinets and square pedestal sinks in the bathrooms. She is comforted by this sameness, and by her place inside it. Eight years ago, Jane's mother moved to Boca Raton in a nest emptying role-reversal, as per family tradition. Unless Jane produces a child, the corporation that owns the buildings will quadruple the rent when she moves out. Her mother takes for granted that Jane will prevent this from happening. So, she supposes, does Jane.

The girl often gets lost in the maze of buildings when she comes to see Jane. She calls from her cell phone. "I'm at a fountain," she says. Sometimes there's no landmark other than a mound of daffodils. Jane comes down to find her.

The girl is a doctor. The boy is a lawyer. If they were married to one another they'd have kids who resent their ambition. They'd live in Upper Montclair and commute to Manhattan. The boy, in fact, does live in Upper Montclair. The boy is someone's father but the girl isn't anyone's mother. Jane is not necessarily reminded of her own mother when she looks at the girl, but nevertheless the girl frowns in a disapproving way from time to time that makes Jane feel like lying to her.

Jane calls the girl at the hospital and says she'd like to play nurse. The girl is a feminist and reminds Jane that patriarchal power trips do not turn her on. Jane takes the number six train uptown and waits for the girl in her office, and when the girl's shift is over Jane crawls under the desk and performs some oral tricks she learned from the boy.

In his law office on East 52nd Street, the boy represents children with chronic health conditions caused by lousy medical treatment. Jane doesn't know how he can bear to spend so much of his day with heartbroken people.

The girl is shorter than Jane and has beautiful breasts. They are small and oval, with very pink nipples. A tuft of turquoise hair sprouts from the left side of her head, and her ears have many piercings. Her eyeglass frames came from the 26th Street flea market. In the emergency room where she works, teenage patients tell her their secrets. It is not uncommon, she tells Jane, for adults to ask for a different doctor. Despite Jane's status as an art student and its accompanying expectation of hipness, she cannot match the girl's effortless bohemian chic.

The boy is tall. He has two children, a son and a daughter. They attend a private Montessori school on the Upper West Side. His daughter plays the oboe in a junior symphony, which is unusual for a child of eight. His son plays soccer, which is not unusual for a child of any age. Sometimes Jane goes to Upper Montclair on Sunday afternoons to watch the boy's son run around the field with other four-year-olds. The boy's enthusiasm for his son's team is endearing. When the boy spots his ex-wife at the game, he puts his arm around Jane's shoulders.

In her big, firm bed, the boy is huge, a 240-pound sandbag. Jane likes the feel of his heaviness; likes to know she can handle the weight of his body without gasping for air. On Fridays, the girl, who is considerate about such things, brings paraphernalia in different sizes. She is a hundred pounds lighter than the boy.

The girl and the boy know about one another. Jane sometimes considers introducing them. The next part of this fantasy involves Jane floating a proposal that they both occupy her bed, maybe on Thursdays and Sundays. Jane knows the girl would not go for this. The boy, it goes nearly without saying, would.

The boy surprises Jane with expensive tickets to see a famous lesbian comedian. The show is on a Tuesday, which is the girl's night. Jane calls the girl.

"I need to reschedule," Jane says.

"This is how it starts," the girl says.

Jane's apartment has two bedrooms. In New York, this is sometimes more space than entire families occupy. She makes her art in the spare bedroom, painting on panes of glass purchased at the hardware store. The paintings are meant to be viewed in reverse, through the smooth surface of the glass. To accomplish this, she must paint her foregrounds first, top layers before bottom. She must put the blush on a cheek before she paints the cheek. Sometimes she sits for an hour, looking out the window at her slivered view of the East River, planning her layers.

Jane has always been this way with boys and girls. She likes boys for their size and for their crudeness, the way they bumble through life thinking they're in control. She loves girls for their strength but mostly for their skill in the sack. She doesn't like the way that girls talk so much, the way they sit and talk cross-legged and shirtless on the couch or sit and talk in the recliner by the window or sit and talk on the bed, straddling Jane.

The girl is a talker. Often when the talking mood strikes the girl, her lips are pink and maybe still slightly puffy from her vigorous interaction with Jane's. Jane makes sounds to signify that she's listening.

Jane's mother calls from her duplex in Florida. She wants Jane to find a photo of her grandfather she believes is located in a cardboard box in the hall closet. Jane conducts the search holding the phone with her shoulder. Dust stirs.

"The house next door finally sold," her mother says, "to a couple of women."

"I'm not finding it, Ma," Jane says.

"Don't make me come look for it myself!"

In her retirement, Jane's mother has become a smart aleck.

"I hope you aren't harassing them," Jane says.

"They told me they're cousins. Such bullshit. Seventy-year-old cousins buying a house together? What do they think, I'm Anita Bryant?"

"The picture isn't here," Jane says, and sneezes. "They're afraid. Bring them a cake."

"God bless. With a frosting yoni, how about."

Jane is the only dog walker in the eleven thousand identical apartments outside her window. Her mother started the business when Jane was seven years old. The complex has an economy of its own, a closed system, of which Jane is a part. Hardware stores nearby sell fans that go neatly in the small horizontal windows, shelves that fit in the dead space between the coat closet and the front door, replacement kitchen cabinet knobs. Jane does the math: there are 198,000 cabinet knobs in her complex.

Jane has twenty-five dog-walking clients. She takes the first group at six a.m. and the next at eight. She repeats the pattern at four p.m. and again at six. The dogs are grateful. The humans are in fact technically her clients, but she knows she works for the animals. She picks up the dogs' warm shit only because they can't do it for themselves.

"Let me come to work with you," the boy says. His kids are at their mother's house. It's a bright Sunday and the boy's lips are still slippery from his adventure down below and she feels in no position to deny him. They get dressed and fetch the dogs.

In each building's lobby, he holds the leashes while she runs upstairs to collect more clients. This makes the work go faster. "I'll leave the law," he says, "and be your doggie boy." His hair stands up in back, pillow-mussed. The bill of his baseball cap is frayed, the cardboard showing through. His T-shirt says *Vito's Pork Shop*. He hasn't yet shaved.

"No you won't," Jane says.

"Dare me." He pants a little, sticking out the tip of his tongue.

"The pay is lousy, my friend," Jane says. She takes the leashes from his hand and pushes past him, to the next building.

The boy walks behind her, all the dogs at her side. There is silence, during which she assumes his thoughts have moved on to football or food. But at the next doorway he says, "Lousy pay is why they invented rent control." His eyes flicker upward, in the direction of her apartment.

In evolutionary terms, her job at this moment is to encourage him. Her girl instinct is clear about this. She is supposed to say something to spark further comments regarding shared domesticity.

To make her art, Jane is required to know everything about the image before she starts painting. She cannot paint a table then put an orange on it later. She must paint the orange first and then form the table around it. She enjoys the puzzle of this technique. Her teacher frowns at her work. He says if she insists on preventing the painting from emerging of its own accord, her art will have no depth. He cannot see that flatness is the entire point. She will probably fail his class.

The girl does not appreciate animals. This is unusual for a lesbian. She plants her bare feet in Jane's kitchen and prepares a vegetable upside-down cake with organic carrots and fresh dill and basil. Jane drinks wine at the dinette table left behind when her grandmother moved to Phoenix in 1981 and watches the girl through the kitchen doorway. The fluorescent lighting makes the girl's short blonde hair glow like the wood fairy in a picture book belonging to the boy's oboe-playing daughter.

The girl scoffs at Jane's paltry collection of spices.

"I've survived so far with no sage in my life," Jane replies.

The girl removes her blouse and finishes her cookery performing an impersonation of Emeril on ecstasy, topless. Jane pours more wine for the

girl and holds the glass to her lips. She is wildly attracted to feminine women with an edge.

"I love you," says the boy.
"I love you," says the girl.

The boy has purchased a society-building computer game for his daughter. The child constructs a virtual room with no doors and places her avatar inside. The avatar pees in the corner. She grows depressed and lonely. After two weeks she curls up and dies. The boy makes an appointment with a child psychologist, who advises him to ask his daughter how much she really enjoys the oboe. As he tells this story to Jane, he cries.

The girl has deeply green eyes. She asks Jane to leave the boy. She says this, and then is silent. Against this self-assuredness the boy doesn't stand a chance. Lying in the girl's arms, Jane should be thinking about what to say next, but she ponders instead the unfair advantage of girls over boys. Their adaptable body parts and their ability to say what they mean. She falls into a bewildered silence.

In the subway car, the boy sits with his knees spread apart. Jane compensates by pressing her legs together, sideways. Other men on the train sit this way, too. She points it out to the boy. "It's a physical thing," he says into her ear. "One mustn't constrict the package." Also the boy has a loud voice. He doesn't mean to occupy all that aural space, but it happens. Often she feels a great need to tell him to pipe down, especially in restaurants.

She calls the girl at the hospital to cancel their Tuesday. "I'm sick," Jane says. "I think it's the flu."

"Drink fluids," the girl says. Being a girl and a doctor, she knows a lie.

"I'll see you next week," Jane says.

The girl doesn't say anything more. The girl is figuring her out.

Jane's clothing accumulates on the floor around her bed. At six a.m., she roots through the pile for jeans and a T-shirt. There is a faint smell of dog shit. She collects the dirty pants and shirts and piles them into the wicker laundry basket that has lived in the hall closet since before she was born. When members of her family abandon the apartment, they buy new household items upon arrival in their retirement communities. She imagines her grandmother breezily pushing a modern lightweight iron over her housedresses. Serving poolside cocktails in tropical drinkware made of plastic. Objects in Jane's kitchen have vintage value: a mirrored toaster shaped like an egg, a set of Flintstones jelly-jar glasses, a pale yellow Fiesta Ware butter dish.

The laundry room in the basement is empty. She pushes quarters into the slots and starts a load. When Jane was twelve, her mother sent her downstairs to bring up the whites and she walked in to find a man she recognized from the elevator fucking a woman who wasn't his wife. The woman sat on the washer containing the bed sheets Jane had come to collect. It made a vibrating, spin-cycle racket. With great earnestness the man pumped away, his pants around his ankles. The woman's blouse was off her shoulder, her skirt bunched around her waist. Her head was thrown back, an unselfconscious expression on her face. Jane stayed rooted to the cement floor, looking at the woman. "Run along, now, honey," the woman said to her, and smiled. She panted, as though she'd been running. She didn't cover herself or jump off the washer. Jane smiled back and went outside and sat on the swings.

She leaves her laundry to its cycles and collects her clients from their sleepy owners. She walks them through the silent green grounds between the red brick buildings. There is so little sky in the city.

It is part of her routine to leave the kitchen light on so she can find her window from outside. She notices the harshness of the fluorescent bulb, and the way that her window stands apart from the others. She's supposed to walk the dogs briskly, give them some exercise. She is aware that some

of the owners watch from their windows. She sits on a bench outside the playground where in the third grade she kissed Sissy Hirshfeld. It was St. Patrick's Day, and Sissy had a four-leaf clover painted on her cheek. Sissy's brother, Donny, whose Valentine to Jane had a picture of Minnie and Mickey Mouse holding hands, watched them.

Jane is painting a pair of women on barstools. One wears red sneakers. She hasn't done the background yet, but when she does it will be an outdoor scene, with a river flowing behind them and dark clouds in the distance. The woman being watched has heavy-lidded eyes, which Jane didn't intend. She was going for a detached gaze, but has ended up making her look sleepy. She works on the figure in red sneakers, who seems to have lost interest in participating in the scene. She looks like she'd prefer a naked run along the beach. Jane stares at the picture for thirty-eight minutes. She finds a pair of pliers in the drawer and using the handle cracks the glass neatly in half with one firm tap. The two heads look out at her. One is distracted, the other just tired.

The boy buys Jane a puppy. It is inordinately cute. "What am I supposed to do with this?" Jane says.

The boy is crestfallen. "How can you deny this face?" he says, cradling the dog. "She's purebred. She's smart."

"I have plenty of animals in my life already," she says.

"But you love dogs," he tells her.

"Other people's," she says, and kisses him. He's just come from work; his tie is loosened. She pets the short hair at the back of his neck. He puts the dog down and carries Jane to the kitchen, where he plops her on the counter and removes her jeans. Over his shoulder Jane watches the puppy sniff around the closet door, where she keeps leashes and poop bags. The puppy whines and scratches at the floor. The boy moans. Jane thinks about the girl.

At two o'clock in the morning, Jane's doorbell rings. The boy is sound asleep in Jane's big, firm bed.

"How did you get into the building?" Jane asks the girl.

"I fucked the doorman," the girl says.

"There is no doorman," Jane says.

"I have something for you," the girl says, grinning seductively. "In here." She brandishes a leather backpack, and eyes the closed bedroom door.

"You're a little bit drunk, aren't you?" Jane says.

From inside the bathroom, the puppy scratches. Jane lets him out and he bounds over to the girl, butt wiggling. The girl doesn't bend over. "What's this?"

"I'm not keeping it," Jane says.

"It's cute," the girl says. "Maybe I'll take it home."

"You hate animals."

"I'm starting to come around. What's it called?"

"A golden retriever."

"I know that much. What's its name?"

"Untitled," Jane says. "You don't want this dog."

"Why not?" the girl says. She hasn't touched it. "It's growing on me already."

"For one," Jane says, "it's a boy dog."

"And for two?"

"For two." Jane pauses. "I haven't decided whether to keep it yet."

"I thought so," the girl says.

They sit together on the couch. It's a small couch, upholstered in horses and carriages and ladies in hoop skirts. Their knees are touching. The puppy slinks to the corner. The girl puts her hands over her face and cries. Jane hadn't expected this.

"You aren't sick," the girl says. She takes her damp hands from her

face and puts them on either side of Jane's neck. "Your glands aren't even swollen." Her voice is louder than usual.

"I'm sorry," Jane says.

The girl looks at her through red eyes. The girl begins to talk. In her speech there are references to needs, to respect, to truth. She talks for nine minutes. The clock on the VCR is just over the girl's shoulder. The girl curls and uncurls the strap on her backpack. She winds down with a mention of survival, then intimacy. Jane watches her face, which is beautiful.

There is a pause, during which Jane does what she always does when the girl finishes talking. She searches for something relevant to say, some piece of information, something that will not require her to form a sentence containing any of the same words the girl has just used. She looks for a small fact, a clarification. What she ends up with is this: "The dog was a gift."

"Ah," the girl says.

"I'm giving it back," Jane says.

"Don't," the girl says. "Give it to me." She glances at the bedroom door. "I dare you."

"You don't want this dog."

Outside, a window across the courtyard goes dark.

"Right," the girl says, and leaves.

"I'm going back to my wife," the boy says. They are sitting at the dinette table. Normally he would be gone by the end of her first dog shift but today she comes home to eggs on the table.

She pushes her plate away. "This is my great-grandmother's china. It's antique."

"It was on the top shelf," he says. He gestures vaguely toward the kitchen.

"Don't tell me," Jane says. "It's for the sake of the children."

"Right, that's about right."

"Yeah. You owe it to them."

"No need to get bitchy, Jane. I needed to do this"—he gestures to the space between them—"to figure myself out."

"Glad to be of service."

The boy stands, picks up the puppy. "You never really wanted him."

"No," she finally says. The dog licks his plate. "Give it to the kids."

"Jill is allergic."

"Jill. Christ. What's your mother's name? June?"

"All right, then." He puts the puppy down and takes their plates to the kitchen. "Say what you will. I deserve it, I guess."

It's a trick of the modern boy, Jane thinks. Show us the best of yourself on the way out the door.

"So the dog was a consolation prize."

He stands in the kitchen doorway. "I get it," he says. "You're pissed."

She stands up and removes her pants. "I'm getting in the shower." She moves toward the bathroom. With her back to him she takes off her shirt, then her underwear. She does not turn to face him. "Do the dishes before you leave. Chip a plate and I'm giving my grandmother your phone number."

She sits on the bathroom floor, which is chilly against her naked skin. It is tiled with ceramic octagons the size of a quarter. They need re-grouting. Oyster crackers, she thinks they're called. While she waits for him to leave she does the math: in the bathrooms of her apartment complex there are 3.2 million oyster crackers.

She must turn in something for art class, which won't do much good for her grade but will at least represent having taken a stand against professorial interference. In her newest painting, a woman in a black cocktail dress sits on a large empty box in the middle of a prairie. She is barefoot. The

prairie grasses are long, and bent by the wind. In the distance are fat white clouds. The woman's head is thrown back, taking in the sun. Her legs hang over the side of the box, whose black interior is the only stillness around.

Jane rents a storage room roughly the size of her kitchen in a twelve-story building near the docks on the West Side. The location is inconvenient, which is probably for the best. The hallways are carpeted and lined with padlocked doors. The view from the stairwell window is magnificent. She wonders how many years it will take for the owners to install plumbing and rent the units as studio apartments.

She calls a moving company, which sends two large men to her apartment. They take away her grandmother's table, the couch, the boxes in the closet. She wraps the jelly glasses and the china in newspaper and packs them in a wooden crate. The men haul it all away, wordlessly. Vacated by her mother's needlepoint, the walls are spotted with clean squares. Jane's footsteps echo. She puts her mattress in the middle of the bedroom floor and hangs her art in the living room windows. Through the painted glass, the light throws muddy, deformed images against the bare parquet tiles.

After two weeks the girl hasn't called. Jane is pregnant. She calls her mother, who is pragmatic about such things.

"You're not ready," her mother says. "Live a little, I say. I'm sending money. I'm doing it now." Jane can hear her mother licking the envelope. "Don't go to the place in Queens, whatever you do. Helen from 4C went there and the nurses were bitchy."

Jane sits on the kitchen counter with the phone to her ear and is silent. Her mother talks, filling up space, which is good.

"Call the doctor," her mother says.

At first Jane doesn't know what she means. There's a silence. "She isn't in the picture anymore, Ma."

"I'm walking to the mailbox with this check," her mother says.

"How about you bring it here yourself?" Jane says.

Jane is pretty sure her mother is crying. "Tell the doctor you need her, is my advice. She'll come along, she'll drive you home afterward, feed you soup." Jane hears her mother's footsteps on the gravel driveway. She pictures an open sky and palm trees.