

In the kitchen sometime before seven in the morning, after waking before sunrise to the figure of his three-year-old-daughter, their youngest daughter, pulling him out of bed by grabbing his arm and saying pull, pull, pull, he was standing in the dark, having forgotten to turn on the light, preparing to take their youngest daughter to school, thinking that he needed to put grass-fed, organic mac and cheese in a Tupperware container, then organic strawberries in a smaller Tupperware container, then organic, non-GMO veggie chips in a small, brown, compostable sandwich bag, all things he had done the morning before and the morning before that, with small variations, and which, he thought, he was about to do again now, and which he would do – feeling the almost effortless stupidity of it – for many more days after this one, disliking that he was doing it, until, most likely, he didn't have to do it anymore, until both his daughters were grown and there was no longer any need to prepare their lunches in the morning. Now, thinking of that future moment when he no longer had to make his daughters' lunches, rather than feeling relief that he would not have to devote time mindlessly to doing the same mundane thing every morning, he knew he would miss it, and not only miss it but nostalgically want that time back, want the doing of it back if not the thinking about the doing of it, and so he told himself to appreciate what he was doing, to be grateful for it. Though he wasn't. He knew he wasn't.

While he was pulling with his hands – he didn't bother to get a spoon – some refrigerated mac and cheese from a large Tupperware container and putting it into a smaller Tupperware container, his youngest daughter was running around the kitchen, yelling, Daddy, Daddy, pink yoghurt,

pink yoghurt, and he told her to hold on, he was finishing making her lunch, and when he finished putting everything in the appropriate containers, as soon as he found the pink yoghurt in the refrigerator, opened it, got a spoon from the drawer for her and handed it to her, she stopped running and looked at him plainly and directly and said, No. Veggie chips, please. He said okay, re-covering the organic Greek yoghurt with plastic wrap. He quickly rinsed his hands at the sink. Then he went to the pantry and surveyed it, boxes and boxes of non-GMO, organic, processed food. The types of snacks that he and his wife bought for their daughters had caused them to slip into a vaguely sarcastic form of joking about their own supposedly sustainable practices: they called their daughters the non-GMO-daughters because they tried to feed them organic foods, which included all of the processed foods they bought, like Cheetos and tortilla chips and gummy bears and breakfast bars. He thought of being at the grocery store one day with his wife, and while she placed ten boxes of organic, non-GMO macaroni and cheese in their cart – it was on sale – he had loudly said just as another mother and father were entering the aisle that he was really glad both of their daughters were one-hundred-percent-organic humans. I'm proud, he had said in a serious, politician's voice, that our daughters are all-natural, organic beings. Not only that, his wife had said, her face stricken with seriousness, they're certified non-GMO. They're delicious, he had said, looking vaguely in the other parents' direction and into their cart as they'd passed, smiling at their cart in mock judgement.

He smiled while he recalled this as he once again retrieved veggie chips for his daughter. He'd already packed them in her lunch and now they were out again as her

breakfast. He'd given some to their older daughter as well. She'd caught the bus, it was her first year of doing that, and he already missed her needing him, or her mother, for everything. She could get to school on her own. Though, now that she was nearly six, she often told him that she needed an extra bag of veggie chips for the ride home, which he knew she traded for candy. Now he put some veggie chips, again, in a small, compostable brown bag and handed the bag to his youngest daughter, who said, Thank you Daddy, and began running in a small circle in the middle of the galley kitchen. His thinking, he saw in this moment, was barely thinking: he understood he was barely awake and didn't want to be doing right now what he was doing but he was doing it, though he was barely awake, and was trying to be okay with doing it, and he further understood that he woke up in an awful mood, feeling pointless and confused and frustrated that he had to do this day – a day he had done over and over again – again, now, once again, but none of that felt like actual thinking, he thought. It felt like his reactive response to a situation he didn't feel like being in and to doing something he didn't feel like doing, and so his thinking felt more programmed than actual, more reactive than active, as though he wasn't really living his life but was on sleep mode and was only observing the programmed responses his mind and attention and consciousness were all making from some distant place deep behind his eyes. His patience with his youngest daughter while she ran in circles around the kitchen – sort of in his way – therefore, was not actual patience, just basic, semi-annoyed responsiveness to what was before him, an unengaged boredom, which he hated and wished he wasn't feeling. It was the same way, he thought, that he and his

wife had been interacting lately. With a kind of basic disinterest, the same unengaged boredom, which he thought was just a phase, and which he thought was because she was in one of her depressive modes, in which she ate less, was often quiet, and seemed to view him as an annoyance in her life, and which he knew there was no real remedy for. It would pass or go away or whatever. She had told him recently, apropos nothing, that they needed to stop being robots. He'd looked at her and pretended to move his head mechanically and inquisitively, like he was an android who didn't understand her statement. But she'd said, Seriously, we're on autopilot, it sucks. Standing in the kitchen, he could barely even see the real thought beneath all this, but it was there, a small creature in the grasslands of his mind, with this moment in the kitchen packing his youngest daughter's lunch as evidence: he was bored with life, and what was worse, what made him feel worse, was that he didn't think he was a person who should be bored with life, and at the same time, he had no idea how that feeling had begun nor how to stop that feeling, how to feel something else.

Above the sink, the sky was just lightening, the trees and leaves and misty morning seeming to come into existence as though some great being were undimming the inner light of all things, those things becoming more and more real, as though in the dark out the window only moments ago the things of the phenomenal world hadn't been there at all. It was the sun rising. He didn't notice this. Though of course, that was not an accurate description of what was actually occurring: the sun was rising only in relation to certain beings on the surface of the planet at this particular moment in time, and in reality the sun

was neither rising nor descending, though it was moving, moving around the centre of the galaxy, orbiting the centre of the galaxy in the same way the earth was orbiting it, and the sun, in the same way the earth spins on its axis, was also rotating on its axis. What it was doing was only what it was doing, not rising, not falling, but moving, being what it was, sending energy to the surface of the planet unwittingly, just doing what it did, and while momentarily, in this particular city in this particular part of North America, the sun was not obscured by cloud and the day would be clear for a while, to the east of the city a large storm system was moving, itself caused by the sun and many other factors, and would arrive in some hours, the start of two weeks of steady rain that arrived each year and signalled the end of summer.

In the kitchen, putting a Tupperware lid on the container with the organic strawberries, he didn't see the morning, didn't notice the light out the window, but he heard the girl's mother doing something in the bathroom. She was putting on makeup, combing her hair, and was, he knew, late for work again. She yelled something, then he realised she was talking to him, she was asking where her keys were. There was a clear frustration in her voice, an almost easy-going annoyance, like clearly it was his fault that her keys were missing, though she never put them in the same place, and he yelled back that he was getting lunch ready, and her coffee, and he didn't know where her keys were. Maybe she should try putting them in the same place, though he said the last part quietly so that she couldn't hear, because he knew that if he said something like this to her directly, though it was the truth, it would prompt an argument in which she accused him of always

pointing out her flaws, accused him of looking for ways to blame her, which he sometimes did, and after which she would refuse to engage with him for the rest of the day and night and possibly for the next day or so as well. It was like this, he thought: they could make jokes, watch movies, smoke pot, but they could not talk seriously about what they saw as each other's shortcomings without devolving into some sort of soap opera-ish argument. Even the world, he thought, would suddenly become melodramatic in those moments, with a Vaseline haze blurring the edges of their lives, and as they began arguing he'd so feel he was in some role that he didn't want to be in that it was almost as though he could perceive his hair becoming lacquered in the style of a narcissistic banker while her jeans and T-shirt would be replaced with a gaudy pink dress suit and pearls, and they'd yell stupidly at each other's faces, only to come out of it hours or days later, apologising but never knowing what the actual problem was. Not only this, but lately he had located some irritated narrator in his unconscious mind taking control of the track of his thinking, whispering to him almost without him knowing: the thing about her is that she can't take responsibility for certain things, this voice would say, she can't take responsibility for her mistakes, her mistakes aren't mistakes in her mind, see, they're things she uses to blame you for, which means that she uses her own feelings to blame you for how she's feeling or failing to be feeling, which of course means that she uses her feelings as weapons to defeat your feelings, that is, she uses her feelings to show you how wrong you are not only about her, not only about yourself, not only about your daughters but about everything, everything. Not only this, but she can't clean up after herself, can't decide anything

on her own, you live with another child, that's what's occurring here, you live with another child, and, like a child, she's incapable of considering anyone else's feelings unless that other person's feelings are positive, and if something occurs that she doesn't like, especially if you've done it, then her anger is both beyond reasonable and, for her, justified, which makes you angry, and yet your anger is then your fault and just another thing that is frustrating to her, like a child. This little hum of thought occurred in the background of his mind, running right below his more obvious conscious thought and lived experience, like it was now: of course she was once again annoyed at him to start the day, of course there was something that he had nothing to do with that she was finding a way to make his mistake, finding a way to blame him for: he'd lost her keys, was what she was saying. He stood blankly at the sink, drinking his coffee, noticing the way he was thinking. He had been noticing it more and more. Standing in the kitchen with his coffee, he thought that thinking in this way had become so rote in the last month that he would almost not notice it, and then suddenly, as he just had, he would take note of it and feel awful that it was a part of him. He took a sip of coffee and thought that he didn't even really believe these were *his* thoughts: he didn't want to think them, he didn't like them, and he didn't actually feel this way about her. It was almost as though he'd feel some frustration from her – as he just had with the keys thing – and this annoyed dialogue would bloom into life of its own accord, his thinking thinking itself, rather than him being in control of it. Though he knew that wasn't true. He knew that was an excuse of some kind. These *were* his thoughts, he thought in the dim kitchen. He knew what was true was that his own

frustration engendered the thoughts, that his frustration brought the thoughts into being, and whenever he noticed he was having them, as he was now, he tried to silence them with other things he felt about her, in order in some way to take control of his thinking: she gave him time, he thought now, she gave him time to work, and over the past six months in particular, when he'd begun the new series of paintings for his first large gallery opening, she'd given him time for the quiet and silence he needed to create, a much more important kind of time, which she understood he needed, which meant, he tried to think on these occasions, that she was understanding, that not only was she understanding, she understood, and what she understood was *him*, and she supported him and his painting – she took the kids to the pool or the park or the museum while he painted, and in turn he made them all dinner and cleaned up afterwards, and then he was back at it while they watched a movie late into the summer night – and he knew, he tried to think on such occasions, as he was thinking now, that she was not trying to annoy him by being messy or by seeming to outsource all of the housework to him, she wasn't trying to frustrate him, she was just messy and that was nothing to be annoyed about, and additionally, he tried to make himself think, she was a caring mother but also busy, two kids were not easy, and also, he thought, she was the only person he could openly talk to, be fully himself with, and she accepted everything about him, or almost everything, mostly everything, though she could get resentful that he needed to be alone to work, that he needed to be alone, that he had always needed it, it was a part of him she refused, though she tried, he thought. Also, she could get upset that they didn't have much money, that, even with

two children, they were living paycheck-to-paycheck, on teachers' salaries, that he had never done what she'd thought he'd do, which was become a teacher who was paid well, an artist whose art was actually sought after, and so they constantly felt the pressure of not having enough money, of always barely having enough, though she didn't blame him, except when she got very angry. In actual fact, she supported him, had supported him for years while he was paid much less than her, and he needed to consider that, needed to consider that she did these things for him, things that were not easy – he was not easy, he knew, and his lifestyle did not make things easy for them, and there was the constant worrying in the back of their minds that they were not putting nearly enough away for their daughters, that they weren't providing for them in the right way, not providing for their children's futures let alone their own – and yet she was there for him, she had been there for him, he needed to be aware of that. He washed his hands at the sink, though as he did so he realised he had just done it a few moments earlier after putting his youngest daughter's lunch together.

He picked up his coffee and took another sip. It was warm, steam rising out of the blue glazed mug that a student had made him as a gift. The student had made one for his wife as well, though his wife had at first been jealous rather than grateful, and she rarely used the mug. He thought that the reason this attempt at a shift in thinking towards something less negative didn't really work, and why he always ended up thinking in the other way, was that the shift itself had become boring and rote, as though he were seeking some antidote but didn't know what the poison was. In his mind, he just saw two opposing things: