

RULES OF BIOLOGY

Dale Bailey

Dale Bailey has a novel, *In the Night Wood*, coming out from John Joseph Adams's line at Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in October. The book is a dark fantasy that's contemporary in setting. Naturally, Dale is at work on a new book and penning disturbing stories—like his latest SF tale, which offers a disquieting look at alternate . . .

RULES OF BIOLOGY

There came a time when he thought that he should have felt it differently than he had, more powerfully—surely the moment when a man's life skidded irrevocably beyond recovery ought to be marked by a flash of high drama.

But of course it was nothing like that.

Esterman felt only a chill tightening of flesh, as if his vitality and warmth—his essential self—had retreated deep into some internal huddling place, leaving his arms and legs, the tip of his tongue, momentarily icy. In the space of a single breath, all of it—spirit, energy, that sense of history that made him Anthony Esterman and not some other man—*all* of it fled inward, pell-mell along the knotted paths of ganglia and through the aqueducts of veins, withdrawing at last into an ephemeral bubble at the center of his being.

He exhaled.

The bubble burst, and he flowed back into himself, swift as thought. That quickly it was over.

And why not? he had thought at the time. Why should he be disturbed? What had he seen really?

Nothing.

Just a single strand of dark hair, a black thread woven through his daughter's disorderly blonde tresses.

Nothing.

Leah said, "Daddy, are you all right?"

"Fine," Esterman said. "I'm fine."

"The light's changed," Leah said. Behind him someone was blowing a horn, and

Esterman touched the gas harder than he had to. The car—black, foreign, expensive—surged through the intersection, silent and powerful as a shark; jazz flowed out of the wraparound sound system in a waterfall of crystal notes. Esterman fingered a switch, and the driver's side window slid away without a sound. An October breeze, warm and smelling of late-cut grass and a faraway leaf-fire burning, swept into the passenger cabin. A mix of suburban houses rolled by, a changeless panorama of brick and sandstone and vinyl siding, and he thought: *My God, how happy I am to be out of here.*

He had not known how tired he had been of it all—the cookouts and the block parties and the endless mind-numbing drudgery of lawn work. Thank God for the city, just forty minutes to the north. Thank God for Kendall.

Now, thinking this, Esterman felt easier. It was a dark hair, yes, but he hadn't been much older than Leah when his own hair had begun to darken. It didn't mean a thing.

He glanced over at the seven-year-old, gangly and pale against the leather seat, and he said, for perhaps the sixth time that afternoon, "School okay, kid?"

"Fine," she said.

And then he wheeled the car around the final curve and into the driveway like he had done a thousand times before. They hadn't gotten out of the car before Dee was at the door.

When she lifted her eyes to meet his own, he could not help but think of Kendall—tall, blonde Kendall—and he could not help but compare them. Dee brushed a wisp of mousy hair from her eyes, and maybe she saw something in his eyes too—anxiety, or just a touch of fear, as if she had been silent witness to his unsettling moment in the car.

"Are you okay, Anthony?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he said, "just fine." He smiled down at Leah. "You," he said, "I'll see you next Saturday, right?"

Esterman drew the girl close and bent to kiss the crown of her head. The heady apple scent of her shampoo enveloped him—and there it was again. That single dark hair. A chill tingled through him.

Dee said, "Anthony—"

"No, really," he said. "I'm fine."

A moment later he was in the car again, heading north, away from Leah and Dee and the life he had known, to Kendall and the city.

* * *

Five years previously, Esterman would never have dreamed of the life he led now. He could have imagined it, no doubt, and in his bleak midnight hours, unacknowledged even to himself, perhaps he had. But he didn't think so. How he had come to this place, whether suddenly or through some process of long and subconscious deliberation, he could not say.

It hadn't been Kendall. In fact, Esterman hadn't even known Kendall then. He'd simply found himself scrolling through online apartment listings (why?), and it came to him abruptly that he had decided to leave Dee. It never occurred to him to ask for custody of Leah, or to try to take the house. He often thought that those were the very things he had hoped to escape. Home. Child. The long drudgery of attachment. It wasn't personal, though Dee would never believe that, and he didn't mind the alimony or child support or keeping up the mortgage payments. Dee had been there for him through the grinding days of law school and the endless hours before he made partner, and he didn't mind taking care of her now. He had plenty of money.

It was simply that he was tired.

"Tired?" Kendall said that Sunday.

They were having dinner at her place, a third-story loft downtown. Kendall made

good money as a corporate headhunter, and the apartment showed it: oceans of space interrupted here and there by islands of post-modern furniture, windows that ran the length of the loft, beyond them a view of the skyline.

“What do you mean tired?” Kendall said.

He hesitated, uncertain why he had brought the subject up. Not for the first time, Esterman suspected he might be boring her. And what would he do then?

But Kendall pressed him.

“Just tired,” Esterman said, and when that would not satisfy, he said, “Just tired of that life, you know—the commute, the sixty hour weeks, lawn work. Swim lessons, art classes, the whole thing.” He waved his fork vaguely.

Kendall laughed, with him or at him, he could not say. “Sounds like a dreadful little mid-life crisis to me.” She lifted her eyebrows. “Hope you don’t miss it.”

When they finished dinner she gave him a reason or two not to, and afterward they lay beneath the long windows with the light of the city raining down on them.

“What are you thinking about?” Kendall asked.

“Leah.”

“What about her?”

“I don’t see her as much as I ought to.”

Kendall propped herself on her elbows and rested her chin atop her hands. Light and shadow drifted over her long face.

“Feeling guilty?” she said.

“Maybe.”

“Guilt is unproductive,” she said.

Esterman did not speak.

“What else?”

Still, Esterman said nothing.

“I mean there has to be something, Esterman, you’re not in the habit of thinking about Leah that I’ve noticed.”

“A hair.”

“What do you mean a hair?”

“I mean I saw a hair—a dark hair. We were coming up to the intersection right near the house, and I happened to glance over at her, and the sunlight caught it. A dark hair.”

“So?”

Esterman didn’t say anything. He let her come to it on her own, unwisely he realized.

Kendall said, “So Dee’s seeing someone, is that right?”

She flung the sheets away and propped herself against one of the big pillows, unashamed of the light against her body in a way Dee would not have been. He could not help but compare them, however uselessly, for Dee was gone, a year and three months gone and nothing would change that, not that Esterman wanted to. But he saw now that they even grew angry differently, that where Dee was hot, Kendall was cold.

“Well, you’re seeing someone, too,” Kendall said.

“It’s not that. It’s Leah.”

“You had to know this could happen.”

“I guess. I tried not to think about it.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Try to spend more time with her. I can see her every weekend.”

“Not this weekend,” Kendall said.

Esterman glanced at her, feeling torn. They had planned a getaway together: a few days at the shore, a bed-and-breakfast.

She said, “It’s probably nothing, right?”

"My hair started to change when I was about her age."

"There you go."

Esterman said, "I still want to go away with you."

She relented a little then, and they made love again in the soft glow of the city. It was everything he wanted, but later, when she dozed, Esterman stood in the dark loft and began to dress.

She surprised him as he tied his shoes. "Esterman?"

"Yes?"

"You're not staying?"

"I need to be alone," he said. "Nothing personal."

Esterman let himself out of the apartment. A chill had come into the air. Esterman could hear the racket of the factories upriver; a sour stink drifted in off the water. He stood by his car for a moment and thought about that single dark strand interwoven with his daughter's blonde, blonde hair. It was just like Kendall had said, no doubt. It had to be. It was almost certainly probably nothing.

* * *

Esterman drove without clear direction, knowing only that he could neither return to his own empty apartment nor stay a moment longer in Kendall's, which had grown suddenly suffocating. A vast, formless apprehension had arisen in him, a discontent he could not name or solace. And so he drove. At first, he stuck to familiar streets, where cabs idled curbside in clouds of white exhaust and weary revelers drifted in knots out of late-night clubs. But gradually he made his way into unfamiliar territory. A police cruiser sped by in eerie silence, blue lights whirling shadows over the façades of crumbled buildings. Dangerous-looking men slouched in doorways and watched him pass, and now and again sullen-looking packs of boys, ragged and disheveled as animals, paused to jeer him. At last, Esterman came to a region of the city he had never seen before, a bombed-out grid of streets that unfolded before him like a derelict labyrinth. Broken windows gazed blindly from the skulls of decayed tenements. Junked cars lined the sidewalks, stripped of every salvageable part.

It was no place for a man like Esterman, yet he felt strangely fearless, as if he had become a wraith here, as insubstantial and isolate. It was nearly dawn by the time he pulled to the curb before a run-down park where a single desiccated tree grew atop a barren hill. Esterman watched as the sun rose behind a deteriorating elementary school across the street. Shadows slipped over the broken pavement. The hard-edged mesh of the school's chain-link fence printed a cage of diamonds across the windshield of his car.

Teachers began to arrive, most walking, a few driving beat-up cars. They crossed the street to the school without looking at Esterman. When the students began to show up, emerging from the warren of graffiti-strewn slums, he opened his door and stepped out onto the cracked pavement.

He could not say what moved him to do so. By all rights he should have been exhausted, and yet a strange energy animated him. He felt in some obscure way that he needed to stand among these children—that as alien as they were to him, in wealth, in color, in class, they could somehow help to reestablish a link between the man he had been and the man he had become, the father he had hoped to be and the stranger he feared becoming.

"Yo, whitey!" someone called, and Esterman whirled, but he could isolate no one. He saw only a cluster of dark grinning faces, heard only a few whispers and hushed giggles, and then the little crowd broke apart, like a flock of wind-swept birds.

A bell began to ring, and the children streamed through the gates to the school. The sun stood well over the massed buildings now.

Esterman leaned against his door and gazed across the street to the park. He

closed his eyes, feeling the burden of the night all at once descend upon him.

“Hey.”

The voice came from behind him, to his right. Esterman turned.

“Hey yourself,” Esterman said.

The kid must have been nine or ten years old—fifth grade, Esterman figured, maybe fifth. A little older than Leah. He wore a blue coat, his features shadowed by an oversized hood. Esterman took a step forward. The kid didn’t move.

“What’s your name?” Esterman said.

“Give me some money.”

“Why should I?”

The boy didn’t answer. Esterman felt a flash of emotion race through him as he reached into his hip pocket and pulled a five from his wallet.

Esterman held out the five. “What’s your name?” he said again.

No reply.

“Do you want the money? Let me see your face, and you can have it.”

The kid reached up. He hesitated. Then he threw back the hood.

Esterman took an involuntary step back, the money slipping from his suddenly nerveless fingers to seesaw through the air. The breeze quickened, catching the bill up. It whipped past the kid and blew away. Esterman tried to follow it with his eyes, but he couldn’t wrench his gaze away from the boy’s face. He did not want to look. He had to.

He felt his skin grow cold, his arms and legs, the tip of his tongue, felt once again all the essential elements of his being—vitality, warmth, energy, all of it—flee inward, pell-mell along the pathways of his body, withdrawing into a hard knot at the center of his breast. Real panic. Not a bubble, a knot. When he exhaled, the knot did not burst, it tightened, constricting, so that he could not breathe.

Esterman took a step back.

The boy just stared at him, his face wrecked by the change, genes at war within him, his nose twisted and one furious eye enlarged, his skin a patchwork of conflicting shades as his father and the interloper battled it out within him.

Esterman fumbled the door open, thinking of that single strand of dark hair, hating Dee and hating himself, searching blindly for someone, anyone to blame.

The kid glanced down the empty street, seeking after the lost money perhaps, and then he looked back at Esterman.

“Asshole,” he said. He reached out, grasped the car’s hood ornament, and twisted it off. He spat on the pavement and strolled away toward the school. Esterman just stood there. He had eyes only for a still internal image: Leah, that single dark hair interwoven among the strands of blonde, that single dark hair that maybe meant the start of something, and maybe—just maybe—the end of everything.

* * *

“Nonsense,” Kendall told him. “You said yourself your own hair changed color at about her age. That’s all it is.”

Esterman wanted to believe her.

She said, “You just need time. You’re upset, and I’m sure Leah can sense that. It’ll do you both some good to spend a little time apart.”

She said, “Come with me.”

He went.

The bed-and-breakfast was everything Esterman had hoped it would be: rustic and charming, virtually abandoned in the off-season. They slept in most mornings and spent afternoons shopping in the quaint, over-priced shops or walking along the beach, chill water lapping at their bare feet. They ate dinner by candlelight in restaurants Esterman could not have afforded a decade ago. At night he flung open the windows in their bedroom, and they made love in the salt-smelling air to the

rhythm of the ocean gnawing at the edges of the world. On Saturday Esterman thought he might be falling in love with her; by Tuesday he was certain.

The next weekend they went to the theater, and the one after that they spent holed up in Esterman's apartment, watching old movies and eating buckets of popcorn.

Esterman began to feel guilty. Unbidden, an image of the boy from the school loomed up before him: those furious eyes, that wrecked face. Esterman thought of Leah; he thought of that single dark strand of hair, its implications.

"I thought you had forgotten her," Dee said when he picked Leah up, and Esterman could not help but notice the way she said it. *Her*, she said, when only a month or two ago she would have said *us*.

Dee looked good, her hair freshly cut, her face unmarred by weariness or tears. She was dressed for an afternoon out, her perfume like a breath of summer beneath the gray November sky.

"I've been busy," Esterman said.

He took Leah to a restaurant that catered to children. Clowns served the entrees and performed miraculous pratfalls and stunts without ever spilling a drop.

Leah was unimpressed.

"How's school?" he said.

"Fine."

"Mrs. Eugenides giving you any problems?"

"That was last year," Leah said around a mouthful of pizza. "This year is Mr. Mitchell."

"Well, how's Mr. Mitchell? Is he a good teacher?"

Leah shrugged, and that was how it went.

Afterward, in the car, he said, "So is your mom doing okay?"

"She's all right."

"She seeing anyone?" He tried to say it nonchalantly.

Leah didn't hear him or affected not to; either way, she didn't answer.

Dee was waiting for them in the driveway. She looked fresh, and she smiled when she saw them.

"Have fun?"

"I guess," Leah said.

"Well," Esterman said.

They talked like that for a time and then Esterman knelt and drew his daughter into an awkward embrace. He pressed his face into the crook of her neck and shoulder, trying to inhale her very scent and texture, to coerce her soft flesh, her smell of powdered skin and perspiration into the template of his need. Once again, the tortured features of the boy from the school sprang into his mind. Esterman blinked back tears. He hugged Leah to him fiercely, and then, standing, he did what he had avoided doing all day.

He looked down at the crown of her head.

Black hair. Like a nest of vipers, black hair.

* * *

Esterman drove Kendall to the elementary school in the blasted depths of the city. It was ten o'clock, a chill November evening, when he parked by the denuded park and its single dying tree. Across the street, beyond the imprisoning fence, the playground stretched black and empty. Esterman could close his eyes and see it as it must have been earlier, two or three teachers clustered watchfully together, a whirl of screaming children bundled up against the cold.

And how many of them would be changing? he wondered. How many of them would soon be lost, irretrievably lost to the men who had fathered them?

"Christ, Esterman, what are we doing here?"

He had surprised her.

“Where are we going?” she had asked.

“Close your eyes,” he had said. “It’s a surprise. I’m not saying.”

Now, staring out at the desolate school, he said, “I came here a few weeks ago, the night I left your apartment. Remember?”

“I remember.”

“There was a kid that morning, nine, maybe ten years old, and he asked me for money. He was changing, you could see it, his features were all twisted up, his skin was mottled. He looked like the fucking Phantom of the Opera. He looked like a burn victim.”

“This is about Leah.”

“I guess.”

“You’re certain of it?”

“There’s more dark hair,” Esterman said, “but that’s not all. Dee’s different too, she’s seeing someone, I can tell. She’s more energetic, more . . .” *Beautiful*, he started to say, and then he said nothing.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. What can I do?”

She reached out and took his hand. It didn’t help.

He said, “This place reminded me. When you were in high school, did you do that experiment?”

“The mice?”

“Yeah, the mice.”

“Sure.”

“I remember after we did it, our teacher stood at the front of the room. ‘These are the rules of biology,’ she said, and then she explained what had happened, how the developing mice from one litter would mutate if they were moved to a litter by another male, how they would gradually adopt the genetic identity of the dominant male. Protective adaptation, she called it.” He laughed bitterly. “That bitch.”

“Don’t,” Kendall said. “Anthony, don’t.”

“I mean what the hell am I supposed to do? Some bastard is stealing my daughter and I don’t even know who it is.”

“Shhh.”

“When I saw that boy, all I could think about was that experiment. There was a kid in our class then, his parents were divorced, and his mother had remarried, and you could see it, it was *physically happening* to this poor kid, and this stupid teacher stood there talking about mice, like it didn’t even matter.”

Kendall had turned now to look him full in the face. The glow from the dashboard lights made her skin look pale, ghostly. She reached out for him, to hold him, but Esterman shook his head. And once again, he was choking back tears.

“No,” he said. “Please. I’m sorry. Please, just leave me alone.”

* * *

After midnight, Esterman woke from uneasy sleep. He opened his eyes to a darkness so impenetrable that he might as well have kept them closed.

“Kendall?” he said.

No answer.

“Kendall?” He extended a hand to her, found her warm, sleeping body.

“Kendall?” he said again, this time almost whispering, not expecting or even really wanting her to awaken. He fell silent then, stared sightless into the weighty dark, feeling that old despair gather fathoms-deep within him.

How long? he thought. Christ, how long?

Twenty-seven years, or maybe twenty-eight, it was hard to say. There was so much he could not remember—How old had he been then? Eleven? Twelve?—but now the fear and sadness of it rolled over him in leaden waves.

He had lied to Kendall, not out of any conscious intent or will to deceive, but out of simple weakness, an inability to face the reality of the thing:

The kid—the kid at the run-down school—had reminded him of no one more than himself.

The rules of biology, his teacher had called them, speaking willfully and callously in the face of his pain, and these were the rules as Esterman understood them, rules as bitter and unrelenting as any he had come to know as a lawyer, rules arbitrary and utterly impervious to appeal:

The male who is separated from—

—*who abandons*—

—the child will lose her.

The male who is present—

—*who cares, the man who cares*—

—who is *present*, nothing more, will, through sheer proximity, become her father at last.

And the child itself, dear God, the child itself . . .

It had been him. No stranger in the back of the class who could be ostracized or ignored. It had been him.

Now, almost three decades later, Esterman remembered virtually nothing of the man who had fathered him, the genetic relic his own body had spontaneously rejected during that long ago year, without his will or volition, shaping itself instead to the stranger his mother had taken into their home.

The interloper.

Frank, Esterman had insisted on calling him, as if by refusing to accept this new man as his father he could deny the simple biological truth of the change.

Five years ago, Esterman's mother and Frank had died in a car crash. Esterman had returned home warily, a stranger to the house where he had grown to be a man, the house he had abandoned as soon as he was old enough, and able. Even now, he could not say why he had made that decision—not because he had been mistreated, that was certain, and not out of any real hatred for Frank, who had always behaved with decency and kindness. Simply out of bitterness, Esterman supposed, bitterness and a sense of loss for a father he could no longer remember, to whom he owed nothing, from whom he had gained not a solitary gene.

After the funeral, Esterman had returned to the house, leaving Leah and Dee at the hotel. He went through his mother's pictures slowly, searching for an image of the father who had abandoned him, but he found nothing. His mother had weeded out the photos long ago. For the first decade of his life, Esterman could find images only of his mother and himself; Frank appeared in some of the later photos, but Esterman's first father had simply disappeared, evaporated, leaving him nothing, not even memories, just a vague apprehension of emptiness and grief.

And the wrenching agony of the change.

For that was the final rule, and for Esterman the most terrible.

Whatever biological triggers set the change in motion also interfered with the mind, the memory. Esterman remembered little of his life before the change. His first true, vivid recollections were of the change itself, how it began innocuously enough with gradual shifts in the color of his hair, the tone of his skin. Esterman remembered how his mother's explanations—how all the explanations in the world—could not assuage his dread. Most clearly, he remembered the final terrible days, a time of febrile, hallucinogenic intensity when he retreated to his bedroom as his body warred against itself, gene against gene, cell against cell, in the final apocalyptic conflict between the father who had been and the father who would be.

And now, dear God, Leah.

Now, at last—

—*too late*—

—he thought of Leah. There in the midnight bedroom, in the desolate home he had chosen for himself, with Kendall's even breathing a counterpoint to his panicked respiration, Esterman thought of Leah: somewhere on the outskirts of the city in a dark bedroom all alone—*alone*—as the change took root within her, as her bones began to crack and lengthen, as her features melted and re-formed, as her entire body began to shape itself to the pattern of another man.

* * *

On Saturday, Esterman drove to Dee's house unannounced, swollen with formless dread at what he might find there, but unable to prevent himself from seeing it through to the final tired, inevitable act. Dee looked surprised to see him, but not pleasantly. She did not invite him in. She left him to stand on the concrete stoop, shivering in a too-thin coat.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Leah," he said, not knowing what he wanted exactly, not knowing how to say it. Dee looked lovely standing in the doorway, her hair a fragrant cloud, her face scrubbed of worry for the first time in months.

"Leah's in bed. She's not feeling well."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Why didn't you call? You can't just drop in here, you know."

Esterman took a deep breath, gazed up into the flat December sky.

"It's not too late," he said.

"For Christ's sake—"

But he overrode her, the words escaping unexpectedly, without plan. "We could try again. I could move back here. We loved each other, Dee. We could try again."

He paused, waiting to see what effect this statement would have, hoping against hope, though for what response, acceptance or rejection, he did not know.

Dee laughed bitterly. "Is that the way it is, Anthony? Always it's impulse with you, you just say whatever comes to mind as long as you get what you want. Why don't you think of someone else for a change?"

"No, please, I—"

"If you came back, Anthony, you'd want to leave again in a month or two." She started to close the door.

"No, please—"

"Goodbye, Anthony."

Esterman could not explain what happened next. Simple rage, he later thought, rage and despair: rage at the father who had abandoned him and the parents he had come to hate, at Dee for moving on, most of all at himself, for the decisions he had made from the start, with his mother and Frank, with Dee, with Leah, even with Kendall.

And despair.

Despair that it had come to this.

He snatched wildly at the door. "Goddammit, Dee, you can't take her from me, you don't have the right!"

Dee took a step or two back, and Esterman flung open the door and stepped inside, babbling incoherently, crying a little, uncertain what he intended to do, sure only that now, finally, he intended to act.

Too late. Already, it was too late.

Esterman closed his mouth. He stopped just inside the door, taking in the room—this old, familiar room—with a glance, and all at once the rage subsided within him, leaving in its passage nothing, a void.

Involuntarily, Esterman stepped back.

The man, whoever he was, came through the swinging doors from the kitchen, a squat fireplug of a man, smaller than Esterman, but powerful looking, dressed casually in chinos and an oxford. And his hair. Black hair.

"Are you okay?" he said to Dee.

Quietly, Esterman said, "Is this him, then? Is he the one?"

Dee shook her head. "Anthony—"

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Esterman said.

"Carter Mitchell," the man said. Mitchell held out a hand. When Esterman did not take it, he lowered it to his side.

"Christ, Carter, let me—"

"No, Dee, really. I'll take care of this, okay?"

He clapped a hand against Esterman's shoulder and moved him out the door to the stoop, like they were old friends, compelling him without seeming to do so. They walked across the stoop and down the stairs to the driveway before Mitchell spoke.

"I'm sorry," he said then. "It shouldn't have happened like that. Dee should have told you. It's a hard thing, and we've been thinking how to do it."

"Leah—"

"Leah's fine."

They stopped by Esterman's car.

"Leah's fine," Mitchell said. "She's having the worst of it right now, otherwise I'd let you see her. I really can't, though. She's very sick. It will pass, but she's very sick right now."

Esterman sagged against the car. Abruptly, his energy seemed to drain away.

"She's my daughter," he said weakly.

"No. She's my daughter now."

"I want to see her."

"I'm sorry, you can't. You know how these things are."

"No," Esterman said. He looked at the smaller man, the interloper, seeking something—some solace or recognition, he could not say—in the other man's eyes. Mitchell returned his gaze flatly, neither hostile nor friendly. He had clear brown eyes under thick brows, and Esterman could not help but think of Leah's fine-boned face and her gray eyes, the color of the sky on a stormy afternoon.

A pang of grief and loss went through him. He started to cry, hot humiliating tears.

"You have no right."

"It didn't have to be this way," Mitchell said. "Three, four weekends pass without you and then you blow in for an hour or two and expect everything to be the same. You were the one. You were the one who went away."

"From Dee. Not from Leah, I didn't."

"From Leah, too," Mitchell said. "You could have visited, you could have been here for Leah, with her every weekend, and maybe this wouldn't have happened. But you weren't. She needed a father and now she has one. It's too late."

"You have no right."

"You're the one who has no rights. You should leave." Mitchell opened the car door, and Esterman lowered himself into the seat, trying to cry silently, with dignity at least, trying not to cry at all.

"It's better this way," Mitchell said. "It's better for Leah."

Mitchell closed the door and stepped back. Esterman backed the car into the street. He barely made it around the corner before he had to pull over; he could not see to drive. He sat there for the longest time, feeling sorry for himself, crying in spells and then pausing to gaze silently over the hood of the car, a black, shiny mirror of the sky, smooth and unperturbed but for the upthrust shard of the broken hood ornament.

Esterman saw her a final time before it ended, in a crowded mall shortly before Christmas.

He and Kendall had just emerged from a thronged store, laden with gifts, when he saw her: a small, dark-haired child, solid without being fat, with something familiar in the set of her jaw and her muddy brown eyes. The change had almost taken; soon she would possess nothing he had given her.

He cried aloud without volition, thrust his way through the crowd. Kendall grasped at him, bags and parcels tumbling across the floor.

“Leah,” he said. “Leah!”

He could think of nothing else to say to her. He could think only that she was alone here, that she was his for the taking—

—*his child, his daughter*—

—if only he could reach her.

Leah turned to stare at him, her small face stiffening. Her eyes widened, and just for a moment Esterman thought he saw something there, a brief flicker of recognition, a kind of longing.

Then she fell back, crying out wordlessly, thinking maybe, *Who is this odd man?* or perhaps remembering what her parents must have told her: *Never, never talk to strangers.*

Then he saw Dee, shoving her way through the crowd to grasp the little girl’s hand. She did not speak to Esterman as she took the child and hurried away, her face white with alarm. She disappeared among the milling shoppers.

Esterman fell to his knees among the scattered gifts. Kendall knelt beside him. She whispered to him, soothed him, coaxed him to his feet.

They went away for the holidays. When they returned, a letter from the court arrived, formally revoking Esterman’s privileges over Leah; medical tests confirmed that she had undergone the change. Esterman immersed himself in the routine of his work. He tried not to think about it, but sometimes he could not help himself. There came a time when he saw that this would be the principal tragedy of his existence, that he would never again be the same. For a month or two thereafter, he watched for Leah when he was out, though he did not think that he would recognize her and could not clearly remember her features.

He never saw her again. After some time had passed, he did not often think of her.