

PRAISE FOR JOE DUNTHORNE

“He’s an elegant, accessible, and interesting comic novelist, whose work, I suspect, will provide a great deal of pleasure to a great number of people for many years.”

—NICK HORNBY, *The Believer*

“[Dunthorne is] the British Dave Eggers.”

—GQ

“His precocious talent and cheerful fondness for the teenage male are showcased in *Submarine* . . . funny and dead-on.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*
(an Editor’s Choice)

“Preternaturally wise, slightly devious and highly entertaining.”

—*USA Today*

Copyright © 2018 Joe Dunthorne

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information, contact:

Tin House Books, 2617 NW Thurman St., Portland, OR 97210.

Published by Tin House Books, Portland, Oregon and Brooklyn, New York

Distributed by W. W. Norton and Company.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data TK

Interior design by Diane Chonette

www.tinhouse.com

THE ADULTERANTS

JOE DUNTHORNE



TIN HOUSE BOOKS / Portland, Oregon & Brooklyn, New York

PART ONE

“...AND I THINK IT’S A PROBLEM WITH OUR IDEA of innocence,” she said, and it was clear by the changeable volume of her voice we were having one of the most engaged conversations at 10b Longford Close. My wife, Garthene, was not at the party. She was not about to emerge from the bathroom and discover her husband reaching a windy philosophical plateau with an unmarried woman who, from a distance, seemed to be wearing a lot of poorly applied lipstick but in reality just had an unusual lip upper lip transition.

“You should speak to my wife,” I said. “Garthene loves this kind of thing.”

It is terrific to have a partner with the name Garthene. Just the mention of it brings decorum to a conversation.

“Funny,” she said, “you don’t look married.”

I spotted Dave Finlay and waved him over. Dave, one of the top focus pullers in the UK film industry, was travelling back from the kitchen with a pile of crisps in his cupped left hand, a full glass of wine in his right. The accuracy of movement required by a focus puller is incredible. Garthene and I reckon Dave Finlay for a very precise lover. It is okay for us to joke about this because Garthene could never find Dave attractive on account of one of his habits. When he drinks wine, small beads of it become trapped in the thick hairs of his moustache and Dave is aware this happens, so after each sip, he draws his bottom lip up over his top lip and pulls down remnants of, in this instance, Picpoul de Pinet. What I’m fairly certain Dave doesn’t know is that this creates a flick-back whereby his moustache, as it regains its shape, spritzes a very fine, near-imperceptible mist of what we can safely assume is a mix of wine and mouth juices. The spray does not so much land on anyone as just *become one* with the atmosphere in the room, reminding us that the air we breathe is full of each other’s fluids and innards and skin. In the abstract, I have no problem with knowing this. When we smell something we absorb tiny bits of that smell’s source. Fine. But Garthene and I agree that, in the moment of a conversation with Dave Finlay, becoming aware that your next in-breath will be, to a greater than normal extent, rich in his DNA, is a pretty

profound turnoff. I wondered whether the situation would get easier if Dave kept a neater moustache, but before that could happen, he would need the self-respect engendered by an active love life, and before that could happen, he would need a neater moustache, and so on.

The unmarried woman shook the raised pinky of Dave's wine-holding hand, introduced herself, then touched his elbow, which was my cue to drift away. I went into the bathroom and composed a message for my wife. *The stench of death, Garthene. The stench of death overwhelming this whole charade. Every clinked glass, every hollow laugh, every rewind—the more noise we make, the easier the black wing finds us in the dark. The canapés also, bullshit. 6/10.*

We don't have friends who make canapés. The gap in meaning would be obvious to my wife. Garthene would want me to have a good time but would appreciate my pretending not to, since she was working nights. She texted back: *Drink more x*. That felt good because my wife did not *x* lightly.

Back in the corridor, Michael Bonner was dabbing at his phone, waiting to go into the toilet after me. Nobody resented Michael for still being into cocaine but there was definitely a sense that the bathroom, for him, was a kind of time machine. He would come out a few minutes later looking startled, having visited himself at a house party from five years ago, before he had children. I knew from

experience to avoid Michael until much later on in the evening, when his drugs had run out and he hated himself a little. Then he became quite likeable.

On my wife's advice, I quickly finished my large glass of wine before heading back into the lounge. There, Lee was preparing drinks. I watched him rhythmically thwack a tea towel full of ice cubes against the edge of the dining table. In the kitchen, I found his wife Marie—very beautiful, with a high forehead and good wrinkles—lighting a cigarette off the hob. I knew it was not a problem for Garthene, my talking to Marie. Marie and Lee have always carried an air of tremendous financial-sexual security. It's also clear Marie has spent her whole adult life being the attractive person and finds it not exactly boring, just unworthy of comment. She waved away the smoke as I approached.

"Ray," she said, "great you're here."

I made an exaggerated play of sucking in the second-hand smoke and she laughed silently, which made what was left in her lungs come out. Strange how different it felt, taking in Marie's exhalations compared to the mouth juices of Dave Finlay. She hopped up onto the counter to blow smoke more accurately out of the narrow window. Her bare calves on the white handle-free cabinet were pretty special. I knew that Garthene would think it weird for me *not* to notice them. Not registering them would be

a sign that I was *too frightened to look* for fear of combust-
ing with repressed lust. Her legs were outstanding. That
was no problem. She had a semicircle-shaped scar that
made her left kneecap look cheerful.

“I’ve been the pace car this evening, Ray.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“My husband sent me here to take a long slow drink of
delicious water.”

“You seem sober. I’d put you in charge of heavy
machinery.”

“Lee says I’m too old for this. Too old to make it work.”

“You have one of those faces that never looks drunk.
Try slurring something.”

She looked down at her lap. “Gnsh um chuffly.”

“There you go,” I said.

“Undla spurdoon.”

“Great. Now you’re more convincing.”

She smiled and squinted at me through the smoke. “You
are starting to seem good-looking,” she said.

This was fine, by the way. Garthene could have been in
the room with us and it would not have been an issue.

“I worry the wine has compromised an authentic sense of
your own agency,” I said. “So it’s morally impossible for us to
sleep together.”

“But what if the wine has just allowed me access to my
true feelings?”

“As a modern man, I make no assumptions. I’d need very clear signals. I will literally never assume anything about anyone, that’s how modern I am.”

“What if I dragged you upstairs?” she said.

“Well, I’d lie completely still on the bed, make no movements whatsoever, and if you chose of your own volition—”

“Then you’d let me feed on you?”

“Then I would facilitate your needs.”

“Lucky Garthene.”

The mention of my wife’s name was proof, if any were needed, that she had been implicitly in the room throughout the preceding exchange. Marie handed me her cigarette because she knows that, after a few drinks, I have a fondness for the third quarter. There was lipstick on the filter. She was not wearing lipstick that looked like she was wearing any, but here it was.

Lee came in with two drinks. “Let’s put the pace car on blocks,” he said.

Marie pulled a used pint glass from the sink, filled it with tap water and necked the lot, her throat pulsing, a dribble running into the hollow of her left collarbone. She was breathing hard by the time she brought the pint down. They had a little stare-off then he put a tall glass of a clear fizzy drink next to her thigh on the counter. I watched it release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. He gave the other drink to me.

“You’re a gent,” I said.

I had enjoyed my conversation with Marie so much I felt like staying in the kitchen and talking more. Lee watched me hand the cigarette back to his wife. He leaned against the cooker.

“Why isn’t Garthene here?” Lee said.

“She’s on nights,” I said. “Won’t finish till six in the morning.”

“That’s okay,” Lee said. “We won’t be asleep.”

“Even so, she has a thing about the way she smells after a night shift,” I said. “Toxin sweat. I try to tell her it’s the scent of dedicating one’s life to the care of others, but she says that’s exactly the sort of thing someone who’s not spent time in a hospital would say.”

Neither of them was listening. Lee watched Marie light another cigarette. She was usually just a social smoker but tonight she’d upgraded. I could hear one of the hobs hissing as Lee’s backside pressed against the dials. His head changed color as he drank. He was a few shades shy of full ripeness now. Marie blew smoke at him and he stared at her through it then turned to me and said “look after her” before shouldering back into the lounge. I reached over and turned off the hob.

“He’s a good man, your man,” I said.

Marie stopped bothering to aim her cigarette smoke out the window.

“Can I ask you something?” she said.

“Anything.”

“Has Garthene told you about mine and Lee’s arrangement?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Your wife is very discrete.”

“She sure can keep a secret,” I said, and we laughed.

The air in the room was changing color.

“Well, Lee and I have this thing where we’re both allowed to sleep with one stranger a year,” Marie said.

“You’re kidding.”

“I am not kidding,” she said. “And basically that means—”

“Hang on,” I said, holding up my hand. “*Every* year?”

“Well because the way—”

“What if you’re together for, like, thirty years?” I said. “That’s two football teams and all the coaching staff.”

When I think of a decent joke I just have to make it.

Marie was silent.

We could hear Michael Bonner in the next room making a strong case for something.

“Ignore me,” I said. “I’m a terrible listener. So you can sleep with anyone you want to?”

“Not exactly. There *are* rules. It can’t be a friend and it has to happen outside London.”

“Makes sense,” I said. “Because anything that occurs

beyond the M25 has no consequence, ethically or emotionally.”

“There you go,” Marie said.

“How do you keep track of it all?” I said. “A spreadsheet?”

“Oh no,” she said. “The whole point is that we don’t tell each other what we’ve done. We made a solemn vow to lie.”

I shook my head in awe. “You two are so futuristic.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” she said.

In the lounge, we could see Lee picking up and putting down beer cans on the coffee table until he found one he liked the weight of.

I had not noticed Marie finishing her drink but it was finished.

“Let’s go upstairs,” she said.

At Marie and Lee’s parties, the spare room tended to be an overflow space, but tonight it was empty. There was a prince-size bed in the middle of the room, a dresser to one side, and a winged armchair to the other. Marie propped up the pillows and got under the duvet with her back against the padded headboard. She lifted the edge of the covers and I went round the bed and got in beside her. We didn’t take off our shoes, which made a difference, morally. The room was well lit and the built-in mirrored

wardrobe allowed us to observe ourselves. It was an amusing sight, Marie smoking luxuriously, fully clothed in bed. I enjoyed the situation. On one wall there was a clip-framed architectural blueprint. On my side the ceiling slanted down with the roof. Marie's right hand held the cigarette while her left hand rested under the covers, next to my leg.

I made an attempt to imagine Garthene in the room with us. Garthene, sober and returning from the night shift, smelling of bacterial emissions, putting one hand on the doorframe for balance as she slipped off her shoe. Her husband and her oldest friend's wife smoking in a small double bed. I realized that the situation was defined by my feelings about it. If I regarded this moment as sexually meaningful, that's what it became. But if my main concern was how my wife would interpret these circumstances, then the situation was not inherently hurtful and only worrying because of how it might be misconstrued. I was able to disarm the whole enterprise with the power of clear thinking.

Marie passed me her cigarette as it got toward the good bit. In the mirror, we looked post-coital but sad, as though we'd started having sex but one of us had encountered a problem—*I just can't do this, sorry*—so we'd given up and were now merely running through our private neuroses in silence.

“Do you want to know what else?” she said.

“Very much,” I said.

“Lee *thinks* I sleep with other people but I don’t. I don’t sleep with anyone except for him.”

In the mirror I watched my eyebrows rising. “Oh,” I said.

“So there you go,” she said. “Shame on me. I have been utterly faithful.”

“You mean you made the arrangement but you haven’t ever actually...?”

“That’s my dark secret. And I just can’t seem to enjoy him fucking other people.”

Through the floorboards there came the bark of Michael Bonner laughing.

The door opened a fraction, Dave Finlay’s head appeared, then he apologized, retreated.

Marie looked into my eyes via the mirror. It was comfortable this way; we could look at each other with only the slightest adjustment of our normal gaze. It meant that we weren’t turned toward each other in bed, which would have crossed a line, I decided, since our eyes and mouths would have been too close together. Even with clothes and shoes on, turning toward each other in a prince-size bed was a definite line. The duvet cover’s pattern was the flag of Japan, a country famous for youth suicide. When I passed the cigarette back to Marie, she reached for it

awkwardly with her right hand. She kept her left hand where it was, under the duvet, gently knuckling my thigh. I could feel her wedding ring.

I looked into her eyes in the mirror while she blew smoke out and, for a moment, we both looked black-and-white. We travelled through time. When Marie first arrived in our friendship group, there had been a little jousting among the single men, until she and Lee got together. I was not one of the guys involved. I just can't get excited about someone who doesn't have some pretty prominent flaws.

From downstairs, we could hear the gush of nitrous balloons inflating. The evening was transitioning to its next stage. In the early days of our romance, Garthene used to steal canisters of Entonox from work and bring them to parties. There was the thrill of the drug itself and, equally powerful, the thrill of wasting public health resources.

We heard Lee coming up the stairs. He was talking to the unmarried woman. She was saying, "I'm getting a whiff of aspiration from your art collection, Lee."

"Glad to hear it. Wouldn't want Marie to have spent all that money and have nobody notice."

Lee paid Marie rent. He was a tenant husband, which was very modern. Marie was the only one of our friends who owned property, though Garthene and I were trying. Just the month before, we'd had our hearts broken,

gazumped on a nasty little duplex in the dead land at the edge of the Walthamstow marshes. Now we were waiting to hear about our asking price offer on a horrible maisonnette beyond the Leabridge roundabout.

I felt the mattress shift as Marie yelled for her husband. “Leebo!” she said. “Leebo!”

“Yes, dear,” he called through the door.

“Ray and I are in bed here and absolutely parched.”

I thought it was important to be part of the joke. Some jokes only carry if everyone gets behind them. “It’s true, big man. Me and your wife have got a major thirst on.”

“I’m just showing my new friend your flat,” he said. “She wants to judge you and it can’t wait.”

The woman spoke through the door: “Lee’s right, Marie. I’ve been putting off these generalisations for quite long enough.”

It was good that everyone was getting on board.

As we heard them go upstairs, Marie’s hand moved on top of my thigh and nudged the edge of my crotch. She blew smoke up toward the paper lampshade. As long as I did not turn toward her, it was fine. I was helping Marie and Lee through a difficult moment in their marriage. If Garthene was here, I would fully expect her to be letting Lee cry on her shoulder and put his lips against her neck. And with that thought, I brought Garthene into the room with us. Garthene, who knows more than most about

putting herself in challenging situations for the health and happiness of others, was in the room, wearing her purple nurse's tunic, and she gave a solemn nod.

You cannot blame a body. That was one thing her job had taught her. You cannot blame a body for its response.

Marie was looking at me without use of the mirror—she had turned her head. Her hand was on my crotch which had responded without my say-so.

“You dream about me, don't you?” she said.

“I do,” I said, “absolutely.” It was important to work through this.

“You dream about me.”

“It's true.”

My sex dreams were unique because if I made love to a woman who was not my wife, I would usually experience in-dream remorse. I would seek to apologize, in the dream. I felt Marie's hand tighten and she yelled up at the ceiling. “Lee, thirsty work down here.”

We listened to the conversation upstairs stop. Their voices lowered then carried on.

“How's Garth?” Marie said.

It was good to know we could still bring my wife into the conversation.

“She's great.”

“I bet she looks fantastic naked right now, doesn't she?”

“She does.”

Then the door opened and Lee came in. His face was its deepest color and he had a bottle of rum in his hand. I let my left leg slip out from under the cover just so he could see I had my shoes on. It was too deliberate, I now realize.

“He-ey, party in here,” he said, and he stepped up to the bed and unstopped the bottle. He handed the rum to his wife then his face came swooping down and he kissed me on the lips and laughed. “We’re lucky you’ve got things under control,” he said, then he tried to kiss me with tongues but my mouth wasn’t fully open so his tongue hit my teeth. Then he laughed harder, with his head thrown back. I tasted rum. His neck was bright pink and showing the cords beneath.

“Wahey!” he said and took the bottle from his wife and drank.

I slipped out of bed sideways and stood where the ceiling of the room slanted down. I had to crouch slightly, which was a useful position for me. Lee crawled over the bed into the warm patch where I had been and kissed his wife. His shirt rode up. We were not the kind of friendship group who valued muscles which made his commitment to them all the more impressive. He kissed Marie and reached under the covers between her legs. Then he came over to where I was crouching and put his hand toward my face and I thought he might hit me so I

wincing. He just dragged the wet side of his finger along my upper lip.

I slid along the wall, my back hunched over, mouth-breathing. I understood that to take in the smell would be to receive Marie's private secretions. The line would be long gone if I inhaled through my nose.

Lee reached down and prodded the lump in the crotch of my trousers. He pressed it like a doorbell. "Ding-dong!" he said.

If Garthene were here.

"Ding-dong!" He poked my crotch-lump then laughed.

Marie was watching herself in the mirror.

I maneuvered along the built-in wardrobe toward the door. In all likelihood I was absorbing tiny Marie particles anyway, becoming minutely contaminated, so I wiped my upper lip with my sleeve. Lee saw that and his jaw hardened. I thought he was going to hit me which he did. The first was in the mouth and, although he punched in a way that didn't seem especially powerful—because Lee was standing a little far back, had to take two steps as he swung, had to carry his fist across the room—he still connected and my mouth filled with the taste of coins. Then it made sense that Lee, having felt, I think justifiably, that the first punch had not been satisfying, took a wide stance, set his feet, bent his knees, and—with his wife behind him saying something along the lines of *oh come on*, as though his behavior

were nothing more than a little impolite, like hogging the binoculars at the opera—had another go. I believe the phrase is *I saw it coming from last week*. Time slowed or, to be more accurate, it gained texture. We retain more detail about traumatic events. No surprise that those few seconds between the first punch and the second have come to stand in for probably three months of my thirties. That I had never been punched in the face before seemed faintly ridiculous. How could I claim full maturity without ever having jumped through that life hoop? There were the obvious feelings you'd expect—pain, shock, fear that my average looks could not carry off a characterful nose—but also pride that I would no longer carry this innocence, this virgin face, and relief, too, at being damaged, because that was realistic, that was something to build on, and so I hoped for minor disfigurement, not anything massive but a cute little scimitar-shaped blue-white ridge of scar tissue working with the shape of my cheekbone, something to mark my arrival in adulthood, and I remember thinking I could have dodged the second punch, could have ducked or weaved so that he would have hit the mirror, which would have cracked, and he would have been left looking at a fractured vision of his wife and himself, sliced into thirds by a knife so sharp they could not feel the blade pass through and it might have been the kind of metaphor that can save a marriage—seeing himself with bleeding knuckles, Marie trapped in a web of

shattered glass—and things might have ended differently, but he connected sweetly, and in that moment before I blacked out, I knew there must have been great satisfaction in finding my left eye socket, which I should say was a tremendous home, shapewise, for the adult male fist.

If you have ever walked in public covered in blood you will know it is a wonderful feeling. I drank from the bottle of rum and texted my wife in the bluegrass style: *Walkin' the streets /?taste o' blood in my mouth?/?on my way to see my wo-man.*

I entered Homerton hospital with the bottle in my sock. In the busy waiting room, there was a young couple crying and holding hands on the easy-wipe chairs. He was so tall and she so tiny I couldn't help feeling they had got together not from any profound attraction so much as an instinct for the perverse. Everyone else was sitting politely with their avoidable injuries waiting for a free dose of medium-grade healthcare, completely unaware that outcomes go way downhill on the weekend.

"Head wounds," I said, stepping up to the reception desk, "always look worse than they are."

"Name please?"

I gave her my details, knowing, because Garthene had told me, that now I was registered with the receptionist a communal file would be created with notes on my

condition (*query: drunk?*) and if her colleagues recognized my name, they might contact her and, if she found me in A&E, I would have to explain myself in public, which would invoke her terrifying professional voice. I knew that in order to give my wife a fair and nuanced picture of why I was bleeding from the face, I would need to speak to her alone, deploy the full range of irony, theater, special pleading. That meant getting out of A&E and visiting her ward.

At the edge of the room, I located an ethanol gel dispenser. Garthene had taught me the correct way to clean one's hands—concentrating on the tips of fingers, not the palms—and I felt this motion lent me authority. I moved toward the double doors that lead into the hospital proper, pretending to take interest in the painting hanging nearby. Local artists donated their work, this one a sunny acrylic of the Mare Street bus depot. There was a clear sense the artist had enjoyed creating it, which I found embarrassing. In the reflection in the plastic glass, my bloody lip and half-closed eye brought a needed sense of conflict to the work.

Omar Badji. Carla Montemaggiore. Nurses kept calling unusual names.

As the receptionists turned to look toward a sharp cry of agony from the woman in the mismatched couple, I took my chance—pushing through the rubber-edged

doors into the corridor beyond, into the hospital smell of bleach and potatoes. Many parts of the building, I knew, were empty at this time, and security understaffed. A few weeks ago they had found students on temazepam jellies riding tricycles through the diabetes center. I walked with purpose over the pale linoleum, finishing off the rum, following the signs to the Intensive Care Unit. I know it's not a competition, but I like to tell people my wife works on the scariest ward. Heart failures, pneumonias, road accidents, suicide attempts. *ICU makes A&E look like a fucking wellness spa* is the sort of thing I say. Once the bottle of rum was empty, I dumped it in a red pedal bin marked *Warning Medical Waste*.

When I got to ICU, I looked through the strip of reinforced glass. There were two nurses at a low-lit station in the middle of the ward, facing each other, like a dinner date. I buzzed the intercom and positioned myself so the camera would only see the good half of my face, the unswollen zone.

"Who's that?" the nurse whispered.

"It's Ray. Garthene's husband."

"Oh, Ray. The man of the moment. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"A spontaneous act of romance," I said.

"Aw, young love," the nurse said.

"I'm nearly thirty-four," I said.

“Aw, middle-aged love,” she said. “But you know she’s on her sleep break.”

“Darn,” I said. “I’ll just wait.”

“That’s sweet,” the nurse said, sounding impressed, then presumably talking to her colleague: *“He’ll wait.”*

I went down the corridor and stood outside the staff coffee room where Garthene and her colleagues took naps. I put my ear to the door but could hear nothing. It was bad form to disturb her but it felt vital to deliver the news now while the wounds were still bleeding. I ran my tongue around the hatch of split flesh inside my mouth. Everything in there seemed massive. Since I probably still had some residual Marie microbes on my upper lip, I used another ethanol dispenser and smeared a little in the space where my moustache would grow, if I could grow one. Inhaling through my nose, I enjoyed the lightheadedness, and while that feeling was with me, gripped the staff room’s door handle. I made a point of turning it fully so that the bolt did not clip the escutcheon. I was careful in that loud way of drunk people trying to be quiet. I slipped through narrowly, closed the door, then stood in the dark and the warmth, listening to the sound of breathing, the spooky low hoot of my wife’s congested sinuses. There was the scent of bad coffee and hot shoes and, deeper than that, sick people’s night sweats and particulates being exhaled, death gusts swirling the room.

As I was waiting for my eyes to adjust, a phone shone in the darkness. It was Garthene's, vibrating silently. I had told her to keep the handset's microwave radiation away from our unborn child but it was right beside her. It up-lit her bump. I saw a backlog of texts. There was my message in the bluegrass style and then three from Lee: *need to speak to you / it's finished with marie / i'm fucked up please help xxx*. There was voicemail, too. In the phone's diffuse blue glow, I could see she was on her side on a low sofa, had a pillow under her head and another between her thighs.

I wanted to wake Garthene in a peaceful way. If her body produced adrenaline it would travel down the umbilical cord and create panic in the foetus. Stressed mothers produce stressed babies. Some pregnant women avoid current affairs altogether, delete the newspapers from their phones. Happily, Garthene and I had always maintained a high level of political disengagement.

I got out my phone and rang Garthene, at the risk of increasing local radiation. One of those moral compromises for which parenthood is famous. Her phone lit up, shuffled beside her on the sofa cushion, and she shifted in her sleep. I could just make out two other nurses, one man, one woman, lying across padded chairs on either side of the room. The man, I noticed, was very tall, unable to stretch out on the seats, resting his head on his hands. It

occurred to me that he had given his pillow to my wife and I felt a mixture of gratefulness and rage. It seemed important to know whether his pillow was the one under her head or the one between her legs. I rang her again and watched her shoulders stiffen, her fingers contract. She was swimming up through layers of consciousness.

They had these sleep breaks every night shift and if she always clamped *his* pillow between her thighs, let it marinate there, soaking up the gonadotropins, then did that not cross a line? I tried to make myself outraged. If she was having a full-blown affair then that made my indiscretion with Marie laughably slight. *To think I came here to apologize when in fact you are the evil one* was a pleasant sentence and I let it bob around behind my eyes a moment before calling her number again.

On the sixth ring, I watched Garthene reach for the phone, look at it, her eyes half closed, puffy and luminous in the screen light. It was a unique experience to see her unguarded expression while receiving my call at three in the morning. She squinted at the phone as it rang two more times before placing it gently on the floor, facedown. Perhaps it was not even my child, I thought. Perhaps it was the lovechild of my wife and her colleague.

“Garthene,” I whispered. “Garthene.”

•