Ideally, each section of this fiction, except for this one, should be separately reproduced, black text on white, in an appropriately large size (say three feet wide by four feet tall) and hung in an appropriately large, twenty-eight sided room, one reproduction on every other wall, and entrances at the remaining fourteen sides. Upon entering, readers may choose to begin anywhere and proceed to read the pages in any order they see fit. Alternatively, these reproduced panels could be hung at various intervals (preferably in visual range of one another) within a two to three city block radius around the corner of Eldora and Hillside Streets in Boston, Massachusetts.

That’s ideally, of course. As it stands, you will need a pair of scissors. Cut, shuffle, read.
He’s been calling everyone she knows who knows her father. Her mother, her brother, her older sister, all her father’s relatives, all his five sisters and their husbands. No one knows. He seems to have just up and disappeared.

Not a big deal, she tells herself, not a big deal at all. He’s done this before – he forgets, or something comes up, or he ends up on the QE2 with some woman he’s not sure he knows who claims that they’re engaged. Weird things happen to him. People have told her stories about how he just appears in their lives out of nowhere, is around for an hour or a week and then he’s gone again.

One time he just showed up at lunch: She was eating by herself in this little café and he walked in through the door, sat down, picked up a menu, and started up a conversation like he’d been there all along and was just now coming back from the restroom.

“Dad,” she’d said, “What are you doing here?”

“I thought I’d come by.”

“From Arizona?”

“Yeah. It seemed like a good idea. What’re you having?”

Then he stayed at her place for a month.

Still, she couldn’t find him and she wanted to. She didn’t need to. She just wanted to and couldn’t, which for her always spiraled into an obsessive quest. If she wanted something bad enough, or to find someone bad enough, she would, regardless. And at the moment she wanted to find her father. Just to say hi. The world revolved around this phone call; everything else could go to hell.

She wanted to tell him stories about work, about school, about her neighborhood. She wanted to tell him about the woman always looking for her dog. She just wanted to tell him something.

He is trying his best not to think about her under him. He refuses to look at her, and looks just to the left of her left ear, down at the pillow. He is naming the states and their capitals, in alphabetical order. If he screw up or gets distracted, he starts over.

He is up to North Dakota. Bismarck.


The bed is creaking, the headboard, so he grabs it with one hand. He moves the other to the small of her back. California. Sacramento.

This is a struggle; everything around him wants to break his concentration on this one thing, this rote memorization that he’d learned in elementary school music class to some disorganized tune written expressly for the purpose of having children know all the states and their capitals. There’s a dog barking outside and a woman calling after it. He almost says Maryland, Annapolis out loud, but doesn’t. Goddamn dog. Massachusetts. Boston. She’s saying things to him. She’s making wonderful sounds. Michigan. Lansing.

It’s working. And the states are flying by now, all the knowledge is somehow there, he’s tapped into that song, he’s almost humming it. He gets all those N states without even missing a beat.

They’ve found a good rhythm together, strange but good. He gives up on holding the headboard. His shoulder hurts. He puts his hand on the mattress and shifts all his weight onto that straight arm.

He almost flubs Texas because she’s coming.

Vermont. Montpelier.

Finally he is at the end, to the fiftieth consecutive state and its capital. He lets go, his body strains, and he groans: “Wyoming. Cheyenne.”
He’s got all the toy soldiers split into two armies, one of blue plastic and one of green. They’re nearly equal forces, although the green army may have a soldier or two more. The armies face each other in the sand, awaiting orders.

A little while ago a dog ran past, barked at him, and then ran off. He doesn’t like dogs, although he’s been told there’s nothing scary about them, and there wasn’t anything really scary about this dog, except that it appeared out of nowhere and surprised him, interrupted his battle plans, and then ran off. The dog may come back, but he won’t be as surprised as he was the first time. And therefore not as scared.

He rocks forward on his feet and falls down on his knees. Then flops onto his belly. He’s at eye level with the soldiers, and they are soldier-still, still awaiting his orders.

There is no air cover in this war, no artillery, no napalm or gas. This is two sides picking each other off with rifles; the smart ones hunkered down against the sand, the brave ones standing with their rifles aimed, ready to take on the enemy.

He already knows how this battle will end. The green army has lost some ground recently, but they are gutsy and no doubt will triumph today. He knows, but will play things out anyway. Who knows what might happen in the middle of the fight? Especially with that dog running around.

The casualties are heavy on both sides. Soldiers fall with an inelegant flick of the index finger. The blue soldiers have retreated, leaving their fallen comrades on the field, in the sand. There are only a few more green soldiers left standing than blue, but that is enough for the smaller army to run and enough for a victory to be declared.

The dead are being buried an inch or so in the sand, deep enough so you don’t have to look at them anymore. Sometimes they surface and fight again.

The green men bury their own, then cross over to bury the enemy dead.

They are sitting on opposite ends of the couch, watching the news. Neither of them has eaten dinner because neither of them has prepared or bought dinner. They are waiting. The other will crack, each thinks. And then they’ll know, it will be very clear to each of them, who has won and who has lost and how angry the loser is at having lost.

All of this depends on who gets up to make/go out and get dinner, and whether they offer any to the other person. It all falls from there.

This has been going on for a while and it doesn’t look like it’s going to end any time soon. The meteorologist is coming on next with his five-day forecast.

Still looking at the TV, she says to him, “I’ll bet you he calls for rain.”

He looks out the window. “What?”

“Rain. I’ll bet you he calls for rain.”

“When?”

“Three out of the five days. Or more than that. I bet you. Dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Meteorologist calls for rain on three or more days out of the five and you make dinner. Less than that, and I do.”

“Dinner?”

“Yes. Are you in? He’s coming back on. Thirty seconds.”

“Two days of rain or less and I win, right?”

“More than that, you make dinner.”

He looks out the window again. “Okay, you’re on.”

The air fills with energy and they lean forward off the couch and wait for the meteorologist’s five-day forecast. The commercials take forever. They fidget. She adjusts her shirt collar. He lights a cigarette and drums his fingers along the table.

There’s something about this vantage point that he likes, something about being suspended, in his basket, above everyone else. It’s comforting, in the same way as leaving a party just as everyone gets there. It has to do with distancing yourself, he thinks, setting yourself apart from everything else that’s going on.

The branches he’s cutting down are endangering the power lines. With all the recent storms, he was sent out to cut down the overhanging limbs so as to prevent a power failure in one of these storms. It’s work he enjoys, particularly when he’s up high in the cherry picker, looking down on everyone else. He hums to himself and watches every person that goes by until they’re out of sight. So this is taking him longer than it would take someone else, someone afraid of heights or someone who felt, for some reason, that work should be done as quickly and efficiently as possible.

He’s thinking about parties again as he snips another branch and listens to it pop and crash its way to earth. He dislikes parties in general; they were always too much for him, always too many people talking at once. The noise is unbearable. He can’t understand why anyone would want to host a party. You’ve gotta clean the place up to begin with, before anyone gets there, and you spend all that money on drinks or food or whatever and people mostly just eat or drink half of whatever they’ve taken and then leave the rest sitting on a table. And then, at the end, you’ve gotta clean up.

One time his wife threw a party, years ago, when they were young. He refused to help set up. He stalled on taking a shower, or getting dressed. He invented errands to run. He started drinking before anyone got there.

Later in the evening, as the party was in full swing, he said to his wife, “Hosting a party is just like being a guest, except you can’t leave.”

She was drunk. She told him that he could leave if he wanted to. So he did. When he came back, the guests were gone. He looked around, sighed, took a garbage bag from under the sink and started picking up the cups and plates.
He’s trying to ride a bike. He hasn’t ridden a bike in about twenty years, not since he was in college and pedaled onto campus every day. He’s reminding himself of that saying about how once you learn how to do certain things, like riding a bike for instance, you don’t forget how, you just temporarily misplace the set of muscle commands and the sense of balance necessary to perform the activity. Once you get going it all comes back to you.

Of course, it doesn’t help that he’s drunk. He’s been drinking since around one or two, so even with his ridiculously high tolerance he’s still pretty gone. He’s stumbling. He’s tripping. He’s swearing with abandon and jocularity. The bicycle almost gets away from him and rolls down the hill passsengerless, but he catches it just in time and starts the whole process of getting on the bike over again.

A car goes by. Too fast, everybody drives too fast, he says, and stumbles a little ways back against the house. He leans back against the bricks and rests. He lets go of the bike and it falls over, smacking and hopping a little when it hits the ground.

He sighs and looks at the sky and the sun setting over the buildings at the bottom of the hill. He shakes his head to clear it.

He picks up the bike again, lifting it by the handlebars, grunting, Okay. Here we go. He swings a leg over the seat and stands straddling the bike. Putting a foot to one of the pedals he pushes himself up and back onto the seat. The bike moves forward. He puts his other foot to the other pedal and starts pushing, starts pedaling his way down the street, downhill.

Too fast, he says again. He can’t remember how to slow down, or even how to turn, but he’s keeping his balance, he’s biking down the hill, secure in the fact that once he’s gotten this far, the rest will come back to him.

She’s out the door, and then she has to go back. She’s forgotten something else, her purse this time. Last time it was her keys, of all things. She keeps saying things like “Sometimes…” and “At this rate…” and never finishing her thought. “This does not bode well” is the only full sentence she gets out, and she says it as she crosses the threshold for the third time.

She stops before going across the porch, down the steps, before she gets in her car and drives to the restaurant, before she has dinner with him, before anything else that might happen tonight.

She stops and takes a breath. Her mother used to do that if she got overwhelmed. Stopped and took a breath. She smooths her skirt, runs a hand through her hair. She checks her teeth with her tongue.

She forgot to lock the door. She locks the door. “Okay,” she says. She has, she’s certain, everything she will need. Keys, money, purse, and so on. But it might get cold. And she might not be wearing the right shoes, especially if they walk anywhere at all. Which they might. He lives near the restaurant, he’s walking there, and he might invite her back to his apartment and she might accept. So maybe these are the wrong shoes. And she should probably definitely get a sweater. Are the windows closed? Did she turn the faucet off?

“This does not bode well,” she repeats.

She should call and cancel, claim some kind of disaster, familial if possible, if it’s simple enough that she can remember it if it ever came up again. Or some other obligation. Simple, plausible.

No, that’s stupid. There’s no reason not to go. Her forgetting of things is not a deep-seated fear of this new relationship; it has nothing to do with her subconscious telling her something that her conscious isn’t willing to listen to. She’s just forgetful. That’s all it is. Nothing to worry about. Get the sweater, change the shoes, and check the house. Breathe.
They're going for a walk around the neighborhood, something they do every night at exactly the same time, an hour before sunset. They pass a woman in the street, walking this way and that, shouting a name: Brutus.

“Lost your dog?” he says to the woman. “Good luck,” he says. Under his breath he mutters, “You’ll need it.”

His wife squeezes his arm. Then she mutters his whole name in disapproval.

“I hate dogs,” he says.

“I know,” she says.

They walk on in silence, past a house where inside they see a man washing dishes and scratching his head and getting dish soap in his hair, past a guy in a cherry picker cutting down branches that hang out over the power lines, then up the hill and past a child playing in a sandbox. They see a woman in a bathrobe looking at the sky. They cross the road.

“Did we mail the phone bill?” she asks.

“Did you?”

“No.”

“Then you’re asking if I mailed the phone bill?” He smiles.

She squeezes his arm again.

“Yes,” he says, “I did. I wrote the check and I mailed it. I also bought ice cream and took out the trash. Any other questions?”

“What a question. Of course. I just don’t find you as sexy as I used to. You’re sagging a little in your old age.”

She laughs, and looks at him, and raises an eyebrow. “You’re talking about sagging?” She looks at his crotch.

This is a game they play, every night. The questions are always the same, the responses too, even the jokes. But it’s not the kind of thing that either of them minds. He’s said before that he wonders what’s so wrong with routine. He’s had enough chaos for three men, he’s said, and she’s agreed.

“Brutus! Brutus!”

She’s looking for her dog. A small, black dog. Brutus. She can’t remember what sort of dog Brutus is because she can’t remember how to pronounce it. She’d know the name if she saw it written down. Her sister had told her what Brutus was when the arrangements were made that transferred him from her sister’s possession to hers, the sister living in an apartment building whose landlord came to her and said that it was either her or that dog of hers that would never shut up. Her choice.

So Brutus moved across town. And he still never shuts up, except that now, when he yips and yips, he’s let out into the unfenced yard, without a leash, and he invariably runs off somewhere when she turns her back. So she has to go calling around the neighborhood, leash in hand, find him, and then bring him back home. At which point the whole thing starts over.

Down the street, around the block, and then back to the house. Go in the opposite direction: up the street, and then around that block and back.

The whole time she’s calling his name and offering him a ride in the car, dog treats, his toys, people food, a game of fetch.

“Brutus! Brutus!”

She’s beginning to think that her sister has set her up, that there’s something more wrong with Brutus than needing attention, and that her sister has pawned this dog off on her for bigger reasons. She goes over it in her head:

“Why do you want to give me this dog?”

“He needs to have someone around more often than I am. He gets lonely and he barks.”

Which is not the case. The damn thing barks all the time, whether she’s around or not. And runs away like this. Partially my fault, she thinks. But only partially. Still, he’s cute. And I promised. It’s not that bad.

“Brutus! Brutus!”