

## Orbits

It was only July 1 and the fireworks had begun, Eve thought with dismay, as she entered the kitchen. Anne and Drew—Anne’s fourteen-year-old son—were going at it with typical ferocity. Although Eve was tempted to bypass the argument in the living room, she resented her urge to do so. The house was half hers, more than half, although by physical possession and personality, Anne and Drew seemed to dominate the indoor real estate more each day.

She poured a lemonade and sat at the kitchen table where she could keep an eye on the situation.

“Oh, come on, Mom! Everyone’s going.”

“I don’t care who’s going, Drew. You’re not.”

“You never let me do anything I want!”

“Yes, I do.” Anne was just home from work, hanging her raincoat in the hall closet and trying to ignore the harangue.

“I’ll pay you back...really!”

“With what? You don’t get an allowance for another month because of the mess you and your friends made during that party two weeks ago.”

“That wasn’t my fault! I told you...it was Kevin who broke the stereo speakers.”

“Drew, those speakers cost Eve three-hundred dollars to fix. Who paid for them? I did.”

Drew’s face flushed with anger. “I don’t care about your girlfriend’s goddamned speakers!”

Anne wheeled around to face him, her lips tightening. From the kitchen, Eve watched with rising concern. Gale storm warnings were definitely up. “Well, you better care,” Anne replied, her voice growing rigid. “We’re all living here together. You have to respect her things.”

“No, I don’t!” He grabbed his mother’s shoulder. “I want to go to the concert. Come on...we need to call right now or else it’ll be sold-out. Mom, just this once!”

“Take your hands off me. That’s the end of it!” She attempted to push past him, but he blocked her path.

“I’m going!” he screamed.

“No, you’re not.”

“Mom!” He cocked an unblinking eye at the ceiling. “Why not?”

“I don’t have to give you reasons. I’m not talking any more about it.”

“Yes, you are!” He punched her arm.

Anne shoved his hands aside, her face tight with anger. “Drew, stop it!”

“You have to let me go!”

“No, I don’t.”

“All my friends are going…”

“I don’t care! That’s it!”

“You don’t care about anything! Just your girlfriend!” His voice was taunting, nasty.

“That’s not true.”

“Mom!” he wailed, “Come on!”

“No, that’s it.”

Drew was nearly as tall as his mother and so similar in features—both blue-eyed blondes with Norwegian good looks—that it was difficult to believe Drew had received any genetic contribution from his father. Now, as Anne tried to walk away from him, Drew grabbed her around the neck, locking their two heads together.

Eve studied the scene nervously, wishing that these two handsome people had less explosive tempers. She knew it was prudent to stay on the sidelines since her presence would guarantee a heating up of the conflagration. When Drew began pounding his mother and cursing at her, however, Eve found herself suddenly upright.

“I’m going!” he screamed, reaching for Anne’s pocketbook that lay on the couch.

Anne snatched it away from him.

Incensed, Drew popped a blow to the side of his mother’s head, which sent Anne’s silver eyeglasses flying against the coffee table.

That was too much for Eve. She ran in and pulled Drew off, encircling his chest and arms. Drew struggled to get free, but Eve was taller and stronger. “Easy does it, Drew,” she said quietly. “Let’s just talk this over, okay?”

Drew was having none of it. “You bitch! I hate you! Leave me alone!”

Slowly, Eve relaxed her hold and finally let him loose, hoping he'd be less crazy. Instead, he kept yelling at her. "You ugly lesbian! Don't touch me!"

"Drew, that's enough!" Anne warned.

He turned on his mother. "I'm going tonight. You have to call Ticketmaster!" His lips were pale, his fists clenched.

"No, and that's the end of the conversation." Anne tried to step around him, but Drew punched her shoulder and smacked a fist into her back. Then he threw his arms around her throat.

Without hesitation, Eve took him to the floor, pinning him face down against the carpet. "I want you to apologize to your mother right now, or we're going to stay here like this all night."

Drew struggled, screaming obscenities, but he couldn't get free. He started to cry, frustration mixed with fury. "You're hurting me!"

"Drew, apologize."

"No! Leave me alone, you bitch!" He tried bucking, but Eve had his arm pulled up behind his back. "Mom!" His voice was a drawn-out scream.

Anne placed a hand on Eve's shoulder. "Let him up."

"Why? My god, he'll just hit you again!"

"No, he won't."

"Let me go! Mom, help me! She's hurting me!"

Eve was trying her best not to lose her temper. "Anne, he needs to learn to apologize. He can't go flying off like this, hitting you whenever he becomes frustrated. He's getting too big—"

"I know, I know!" Anne retorted. "Just let my son go, will you?"

Eve did as she asked. Drew sprang off the carpet. "You goddamned bitch!" His eyes sizzled with sapphire-blue anger.

Eve gave up and turned to go in the kitchen. As she did so, Drew punched her in the back of the head. Now furious, Eve spun around and went after him, but Drew ducked behind his mother, holding onto her arms.

"Mom, help me!" he wailed.

"Drew, stop it! Just calm down!" Anne shouted, trying to free herself.

Drew retreated, grabbed one of Eve's art books, and threw it against the wall, breaking the glass on one of her etchings. Eve started to run after him, but Anne intervened. "Leave him alone!"

"What do you mean? He just hit me! And look what he did!" Eve was shocked.

"It's all your fault! He's upset because he has to live here with you."

"And that's my fault? He started this. Going on and on about the stupid concert ticket. This argument has nothing to do with me."

"Yes, it does!" Drew yelled. "I want to go back to our old house! Mom!"

Adrenaline was pumping through Eve's system, with no place for it to go. "Good! Leave! I don't care."

"Don't you talk to my son like that!" Anne's face was stiff with rage.

Stunned into momentary silence, Eve stood still. This encouraged Drew to continue calling her names, all delivered from behind his mother's back.

"He's upset with everything that's happened," Anne said. "He can't bring his friends home."

"He could tell them the truth."

Anne put an arm around her son. "You wouldn't understand."

"I understand all right...he—"

"No, you don't. Apparently." This was delivered with a heavy coating of frost. "Come on, Drew, let's get out of here."

"Where're you going?"

"It doesn't matter to you," Anne snapped.

"It doesn't matter?" She was speechless.

"No, obviously not."

"What about dinner?"

Anne opened the closet door and took out her raincoat. "That's all you care about."

"I just asked you a simple question."

Anne slammed the louvered door but said nothing.

“Oh, I know. You’re probably going to the mall.” Eve said. “That’s where you always go. I should have your mail sent there.”

“Come on, Drew. Get your shoes on.” Anne picked up her purse from the floor.

“What? You’re supporting his behavior? I can’t believe it!”

“I should have called the police,” Anne snarled as she walked into the kitchen.

Eve followed her. “Maybe you should have. Maybe they would give him a scare—”

“Not on Drew! On you! Don’t you ever lay a hand on my son again!” Her eyes were dangerous.

Eve sat down on a chair as if she’d been shoved. “On me? This is absolutely nuts. I pull your son off of you because he’s using you as a punching bag, and I’m to blame?”

“Yes, you are. If you hadn’t come in, everything would’ve been fine.”

Eve shook her head. “This is really, really sick. You never set any boundaries for Drew.”

“I just took away his allowance!”

“Forty dollars to pay for three-hundred? He doesn’t even do anything for his allowance. He never takes out the garbage or cuts the grass—”

“I like cutting the grass!” Anne retorted.

“That’s not the point, Anne. He always gets what he wants, or else he goes out of control. You need to put some limits on him. Christ, he’s grown six inches in six months! He’s not a little boy any longer.”

“Don’t you tell me how to deal with my son!” Hostility laced her voice. “You’re just a spoiled only child! What do you know about raising children!”

“Apparently more than you. Drew needs professional help,” Eve said evenly, trying to stay on point and ignore Anne’s “spoiled-only-child” goad.

“No, he doesn’t!”

Eve was itching to argue, to blow up—a luxury everyone else in the house seemed to have except her. Instead, she gave Anne a disgusted look and went into the bedroom, her hands shaking.

Anne followed. “I’m not through yet.”

Eve lay down on their queen-sized bed. “Fine, but I am.”

Anne stood over her. “Go ahead. Run away like you always do. You can’t take criticism—you can only dish it out.”

The unfairness of this made Eve want to break a few etchings herself. Instead, she stared out the window.

Anne stepped in the space between. “Listen, you stay away from my son, do you understand?”

“I would like nothing better,” Eve replied sarcastically.

Anne glowered at her and stamped out.

---

Since Drew and Anne didn’t return for dinner, Eve microwaved some leftovers and brought a tray into the bedroom. The bedroom and her office were the only two rooms in the house that felt safe. She flipped on the television, hoping for a small distraction.

At 11:00, she was growing concerned. The mall had closed, and nothing else was open in the area. Eve went to bed but couldn’t sleep. At 1:00 a.m., she heard noises in the kitchen. Although she was tempted to get up and check, Eve didn’t trust herself to be civil. She lay there, fuming, until the house was silent. Anne had chosen to sleep elsewhere. Probably in the guest room upstairs or maybe in Drew’s room, with Drew. That was a contemptible thought, she chided herself, but sometimes their mother/son relationship seemed pathologically symbiotic. Not for the first time, she rued her impulsive decision to buy the house with Anne after dating her for only four months. Yes, there’d been a few arguments between mother and son during that time, but nothing like the explosions that occurred with frightening regularity since early May, when they’d moved in.

---

In the morning, Eve was awakened by the weight of Anne’s body pressing down on the mattress. Eve intended to ignore her, but the next thing she knew, Anne was nuzzling the back of her neck. Surprised, Eve turned over.

“Good morning, sweetie,” Anne said, her eyes clear and blue like a happy sky. She kissed Eve as if nothing were amiss.

Eve felt like an alien in a zombie universe. Was she the only one who remembered last night?

“I have to leave for work early...sorry to say.” Anne’s hand implied what she preferred doing if she had the time.

Eve wanted to push her lover’s hand away, but she wasn’t in the mood for another fight. She gave Anne a quick hug, feeling like a traitor to her own emotions.

“Don’t forget about our dinner date tonight,” Anne reminded, as she stood up.

Eve produced a counterfeit smile, but Anne didn’t seem to notice as she kissed Eve on the cheek and hurried out of the bedroom.

Confused and feeling ill-used, Eve showered, dressed, and walked into the kitchen to make some coffee, relieved that she wouldn’t have to contend with Drew, since during the summer he slept past noon, and today she had a 1:00 conference at a client’s office. She heated water in the tea kettle and poured it through the filter. As she was about to sit at the table, she saw two bits of paper at the back of the counter. Curious, she carried them over to the window and put on her reading glasses. Ticket stubs for last night. She couldn’t believe it! Anne and Drew had gone to the concert. Eve exhaled slowly, trying to get a grip on her feelings, but she felt the sting of Anne’s disloyalty—to her, and in a way, to Drew. She wasn’t helping him by her inconsistent, enabling behavior. Talk about spoiling the child! Eve carried the coffee upstairs to her office.

---

Eve’s appointment with the accounting firm Landsdorf & Rollins had run all afternoon. After making her presentation on the Sycamore Lakes resort project at 2:00, a lengthy promo film had been shown. Finally, at 4:45, she was on her way home, battling a headache from the meeting and from her sleepless night. Her apprehension over her relationship with Anne wasn’t helping, either, as Eve had to admit that the frequent eruptions of anger between mother and son were undeniably toxic and, unfortunately, contagious.

Eve didn’t come from a family that lost its temper. Perhaps she could be accused of stoicism or coolness—she preferred to think of herself as reserved—but whatever her personal traits, this volatile atmosphere was foreign to her. Although she’d attempted to communicate with Anne on numerous occasions, each time Anne had rounded on her, transforming the discussion into a vitriolic attack. As much as she wanted to avoid another blow-up, Eve couldn’t ignore the escalation. She vowed to talk with Anne at dinner—if she could navigate the choppy water that surrounded her partner.

Every Thursday evening, the two of them went out on a date. Tonight, they had reservations for 6:30 at Henry’s, an expensive bistro in Brielle. With the shore traffic, it was a half-hour ride or longer from their house in Ocean Grove.

---

When she walked into the kitchen, Eve heard arguing. *Not again*, she thought. Since the voices were upstairs, she headed for the bedroom to avoid listening. Even with the door closed, it was impossible to shut out the dialogue.

“Oh, Mom! Come on! Give me ten bucks—”

“No, Drew. You’re not getting any money from me. Remember—your allowance is cut off this month.”

“Just because of that stupid stereo?”

“Yes. Now listen, hurry up and get dressed. We’ll drop you off at Matthew’s house.”

“Mom, I can’t go to Great Adventure without any money!” His voice was a whine.

“You’re going to Matthew’s, not Great Adventure,” she corrected.

“Yeah, but Matt and I want to go. His dad will take us.”

Downstairs, Eve ran the water in the bathroom sink, trying to drown out the words. She felt winded and tight, like she’d been punched. Her watch said 6:10. It was apparent that Anne had promised to drive Drew into Asbury Park—which was ten minutes in the opposite direction. Sighing with frustration, she wiped her face with a wash cloth, noting the shadows under her eyes. Why was she putting up with all these conflicts?

Eve’s initial attraction to Anne had been physical. Compared to her own quiet looks and demeanor, Anne was a bright and vivacious beauty. In addition to this superficial appeal, during their first months of dating, Anne had seemed to epitomize stability and normal American family values—as unappetizing as that phrase had become in current times: she maintained a house and garden, managed an exciting job, raised a son, and found time for the PTA. Although Eve now admitted the terrible irony of her misjudgment, she excused herself in part because the beginning of their relationship had been idyllic, full of passion, the excitement of buying things for their new house.

Eve also blamed herself for misjudging Drew, who in many ways she liked. The difficulties with him had intensified when he realized the extent to which his life would change with the consolidation of the two households. The move, occurring near the end of the school year, left him at a distance from his friends, without many distractions. Eve was sympathetic with his frustration, but the anger that zoomed between Drew and his mother was frightening.

The romantic idea of having home, hearth, and child—even if a difficult teenager—had been as seductive as Anne herself. Eve applied bronze lipstick and shook her head in disappointment. What a price to pay for an illusion.

—

Henry’s was crowded as it always was during the summer months. Eve had ordered oysters, and Anne was working through a bowl of Manhattan clam chowder. A bottle of Sancerre was cooling in an ice bucket; the first two glasses poured.

Last night’s argument stood between them, unmentioned. That was how Eve felt, at any rate. Anne seemed content to rattle on about her day at the theater, her promotional plans for the coming season, and fundraising efforts—always a significant part of her job. Eve tried to perceive how her partner was really feeling, but the walls were up; Anne’s eyes diverted to the soup, the view, the waiter, anywhere but on Eve.

After Eve's salmon and Anne's filet mignon arrived, the silence was more excusable since they were both eating. Halfway through, however, Eve found her appetite diminished because of the anxiety over the unresolved problems.

"Anne?" As soon as Eve began, she wished she hadn't.

"What?"

"Could we talk about last night?"

Behind her silver-rimmed glasses, Anne's eyes froze. "Why? Everything's fine. We're here having a nice dinner."

The reproach was clear to Eve. She was riling up calm waters again. "I know..." she replied, "...but I'm concerned about what happened...that we keep having arguments like this." Eve used "we" when she meant "you and Drew." Why was she so willing to include herself in what was going on? Was it safer to displace the blame three ways?

"I'm not happy about the arguments, either," Anne said, causing Eve to have a second of hope. Then she continued: "But I really can't have you acting that way with Drew."

Shocked, Eve laid down her fork and watched in stunned silence as Anne took a long drink of Sancerre.

"He's a teenager. And a male in a female household—a lesbian household. He naturally feels shunned," Anne explained.

"I completely agree. I've been asking for us to go to family counseling since May. You said yourself Drew had issues with your divorce, with his father abandoning him. This is a lot for him to deal with during a difficult time in his life. I'm ready to go right now."

"Well, I'm not. I don't think it's necessary. He just needs some time to get adjusted. If you want to go to counseling, maybe you should. Maybe it would help you."

The implication came across the table like a slap. *Nothing is wrong with me or my son, just you.* Eve drank some water, feeling like the Titanic hitting a berg, a much larger and more lethal berg than it first appeared.

"What if you and I went together?" Eve suggested.

Anne sighed, annoyed. "I don't know. How am I going to explain it to Drew? He's already been through the divorce. He'll think we're having problems."

Surprised by this unexpected reasoning, Eve simply said. "But we *are* having problems."

Anne ate some garlic mashed potatoes and shrugged. “I think you’re having trouble dealing with Drew, but then again you’d probably have trouble with any child. You want me all to yourself and that just can’t be.”

There was a tiny amount of truth in this statement, but also a large amount of inaccuracy. Eve believed she’d made an enormous effort with Drew—going to his games, taking him shopping, picking him up from school when he was sick. She found herself bristling with irritation at the unfair accusation but also realized at the same time this was Anne’s *modus operandi*, to deflect any criticism away from herself at all costs. Not once had Anne ever apologized for any argument or made the smallest amends. Eve was suddenly exhausted, tired of absorbing the incessant anger that careened around the house.

“Well, maybe I’ll think about seeing someone,” she said quietly, although it was anathema to leave Anne with the impression that she, Eve, needed to consult a therapist alone.

They sat in silence while Anne finished her steak, then ordered and ate a piece of pineapple cheesecake.

—

The weekend passed peacefully, primarily because a college roommate of Anne’s was visiting for three days over the Fourth of July holiday. Drew hid out in his room, Anne entertained, and Eve made every effort to be pleasant and helpful. On Tuesday night, after the departure of their guest, Anne had a board meeting at the theater and left after an early dinner.

Eve was tempted to retreat into the bedroom but was partly curious to see what Drew would do once his mother was out the door. After washing dishes and folding laundry, she spread the household bills on the kitchen table and began writing checks.

A half hour later, Drew came downstairs, his blond hair disheveled. In white gym socks, he padded over to the refrigerator and poured himself a tall glass of Pepsi. He snuck a sidelong glance at Eve.

“When’s Mom coming back?” he asked.

“About 9:00, I think.” Eve looked up from her paperwork. “Why? What are you up to?”

He took a long gulp of soda. “Oh, nothing much. TV.”

“Baseball game?”

“Yeah.”

“Yankees against Tampa Bay?”

“Yeah. Really slow. The pitchers are taking hours to throw the ball.”

Eve laughed. “And the batting gloves need constant adjustment.”

Drew nodded, moving into the light. “And they have to get out of the batter’s box to do it.”

“So who’s winning?”

“Tampa Bay.”

“Now that’s ridiculous.”

He smiled. “Like I said, a lousy game.”

“Better than paying bills,” Eve said.

“Not much.”

“Hey, how about a game of Scrabble or Ping Pong?”

Drew mulled this over, trying to decide if he wanted to capitulate so easily, and then shrugged.

“Oh, Scrabble, I guess.”

“Can you get the box while I clear off the table?”

Drew nodded and went over to the closet. Eve pulled out the dictionary and poured herself iced tea. They divvied up the tiles, determining that Eve went first since she’d drawn a letter closer to the beginning of the alphabet.

Do you want a handicap?” Eve teased, knowing that Drew was as competitive as she and was also capable of winning if he had a particularly good run of tiles.

“Hell, no!” he laughed. “Save that for Mom.” They both could beat Anne on any day, with or without luck.

Eve chuckled, realizing with mild surprise that she preferred playing a game with Drew to playing with Anne. He focused better and liked a challenge. Anne liked to win in more circumspect ways, Eve thought, admitting to herself that she was feeling rather negative toward her lover.

After playing a high-scoring word, Drew asked: “You’ve been to Egypt, right?”

“Yeah. A few years back.”

“I’d like to go there. I mean, ride a camel or something.”

“They’re rather nasty creatures. They bite and are covered with flies.”

Drew made a face. “Maybe just see the Pyramids.”

“You’d be impressed. Each block is several feet high.”

“I know. I saw a program about them.”

“If you’re so interested, why don’t you ask your mother about going?”

Drew stared at her with his clear blue eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding? She wouldn’t go anywhere. I mean, where’s she been? The Poconos? A convention in Vegas? And she wouldn’t have gone there except she had to—for her job.”

“She hasn’t traveled much, no,” Eve agreed, trying to gauge the depth of his criticism. “But she had to work her way through school, get a job right after—”

“Get married and have me. Yeah, I’ve heard it all before. All about my loser dad and how he kept her from getting ahead. If she’d wanted to, she could have done all kinds of things—like you did.”

“Well, Drew, you know I didn’t have as many responsibilities. My parents also helped me out financially.”

He shook his head. “Even so, you wouldn’t have stayed home.”

Eve couldn’t argue with him there. “No, I suppose not.”

“And look at all your books upstairs—the paintings and stuff you have. All my mother ever bought was some dumb prints of flowers at a Chinese auction.”

“You sound a little down on her, Drew,” Eve said softly.

He contemplated this as he moved tiles around on his rack. “Oh, she’s all right I guess.”

“But you want more in your life? When you get the chance?”

Drew smiled sadly. “Yeah. I don’t want to be like her.”

This lack of respect for Anne was both disturbing to Eve but also a back-door compliment from Drew since he was implying he respected her more.

“You’re smart enough to do whatever you want,” she told him.

He studied her to see if she was flattering him, then seemed to decide she was being honest. “I hope so.”

“No doubt about it, Drew. I know it’s tough on you right now—living here. I’m sorry that you don’t feel that it’s okay to tell your friends about Anne and myself, but I understand. I’d probably react the same way.”

“Really?”

Eve nodded.

Drew took in this show of sympathy obliquely, disguising how he felt by pretending to concentrate on his next move.

“And if you want to visit Egypt, ask your mother. At least she can get you a passport so you’re ready if an opportunity comes along.”

He was silent for a moment, fiddling with his tiles. Then he looked up. “Would you go?”

It was Eve’s turn to study her letters. Was he asking about a specific trip with her alone or with the three of them? Or was there something else he was fishing after, like whether she was going to break up with Anne? Something about his tone seemed to connect to the latter. As she was searching for an answer, the garage door began to crank open.

Abruptly, Drew stood. Hesitating for a second, he picked up his glass and went quickly upstairs.

—

When Anne came through the door, Eve was dumping the wooden Scrabble tiles into the box. Anne set down her briefcase next to the sliding glass door.

“So, you’re practicing your Scrabble game?” she asked.

What should she say? That she’d spent a pleasant and sociable evening with Drew, that he’d behaved perfectly, and that some real communication had occurred, as compared to the non-communication between Anne and herself? It was odd, but Eve realized the time spent with Drew had been fun.

“No, not exactly. Drew and I were playing.”

Eve watched Anne’s eyes narrow. “Well, where is he, then?”

“Upstairs.” Was it inflammatory to explain that her son had bolted when he’d heard the garage door? Instead, Eve replied, “We just finished. He wanted to watch the end of the baseball game.”

“Oh, are the Mets playing tonight?” Anne asked, pouring herself a glass of red wine.

Eve flinched. Drew hated the Mets; loved the Yankees.

“I’m too tired to play Scrabble tonight, dear,” Anne added, as she rummaged around the cabinet for pretzels.

Eve hadn’t asked. “That’s okay. One game is my limit.”

“I think I’ll run up and see how Drew is. Be back in a few minutes. Shall I meet you in the bedroom?” This was delivered with a flirtatious cut of her eyes.

“Sure,” Eve agreed, although the bedroom was the last place she wanted to be with Anne.

---

Ten minutes later, Eve stacked the paid bills on the counter, turned off the kitchen light, and walked through the foyer toward the bedroom. From above, she heard Anne’s voice raised in anger.

“No, you can’t have a new skateboard!”

“Ah, Mom, come on!”

“Drew, that’s it. I don’t want to hear any more.”

Eve closed the bedroom door behind her, wearily acknowledging that she, too, didn’t want to hear any more. As she hung up her jacket in the closet, she stared at her suitcase on the top shelf and reached up to feel the soft leather handle. It would be so easy to leave, to outrun her shame over her impetuous commitment to Anne. But then Drew’s question—both the one he’d asked about going to Egypt and the one he hadn’t asked came to mind. Confused, she withdrew her fingers, walked out of the closet, and sat on the chair by the window. As she unlaced her shoes, Eve looked out at the moonlit forest and watched one brown oak leaf traipse to the ground. Even though it was only early July, Eve knew the falling leaf marked the beginning of autumn.

---