

FLETCHER

A GOOD MAN

He hasn't seen Cassandra since the night they kissed. Sometimes he worries about that. But she's taken to calling him sometimes in the evenings, late-ish, after she's put Leander to bed, so he worries less. In these conversations they talk about what they're reading; they complain about whatever annoyance they encountered in the day; they remark bitterly on the latest war news. He imagines that they're the kind of conversations they'd have if they were living together. Sometimes he will hint at the potential breadth of his affection for her. To this she usually responds guardedly, with a not-displeased-sounding *hmm*.

He has come to expect her evening call, to look forward to it. When it gets to be around nine o'clock he has taken to pouring himself a scotch and sitting in his easy chair, with a book of poems in his hand, and the cordless phone in his lap. The nights when she doesn't call he feels somehow thwarted, as though something has been left unfinished. One those nights he usually begins to think that he's not going to hear from her around ten, although he keeps thinking *she could still call* until around midnight. Sometimes he'll carry the cordless to bed with him, although he wouldn't admit that to anybody. He knows he could call her but he worries about waking the kid, worries about seeming needy. He knows she's busy; he wants to respect that.

You're a good man, she said to him that night at the subway station.

Tonight they're talking.

—So, he asks, —are you talking to Leander much about the war?

—Ugh, she says. —Not as much as I could be, or should be? This—this sort of thing happens all the time, actually. Before you actually *become* a mother you have all these notions about the way you'll raise your kid? You get to be all like *I'll totally teach my kid the right things about war*, or whatever. I'll be this rad mom and I'll raise this rad kid, blah de blah de blah. Then the kid actually *comes* and then the war actually comes and you don't have the foggiest *notion* of what to say, or even the faintest *memory* of what thought you were *going* to say back when you thought you were going to be the rad mom. You just end up making it all up as you go along, and of course it never turns out as well as you'd hope. I just say something like—

God, I don't know—*sometimes our government can't solve a problem so we decide to kill people*. Ha! Go mom! Way to make your child feel like the world is a safe place that makes sense!

—But the world isn't a safe place that makes sense, Fletcher says.

—No, Cassandra says. —No. It isn't. In fact, it can be a real absurdist hellhole. But that's not something you really want to say as a *mom*.

—No, Fletcher says. —I guess it isn't.

They're both quiet for a minute.

—So when will I get a chance to meet the little guy? he says.

She holds her silence, for long enough that he begins to think that he might have said the wrong thing. —I mean, he begins—

—I don't know, she says. —When I got divorced I made myself a promise; I promised that I wouldn't let my kid grow up with like this perpetual *parade of dads*. That can be really hard for a kid. So I just want to be *sure* before I bring a guy over here, you know? I just want things to be *right*.

—Do you think, Fletcher says, —Do you think that things between you and I— I mean, do you think they might have the *potential* to be—?

—I don't know yet, she says. —Don't ask.