

Twenty minutes can change your life forever. One phone call. One decision.

He is driving home one Friday afternoon when she calls. At first his shoulders tense. Surely it's his parents, or his brother, or me, wanting something, his help, his time, a piece of him. Everyone always wants something from him. No one wants to give.

But it's not his parents; it's not me. It's her, and he smiles.

“I have so many papers,” she tells him. “I can't get through them all.”

“I'll come by now,” he says.

At first she protests. He must be in the middle of something, or on his way somewhere. It can wait till the weekend.

“No, it's okay,” he says. “I have some time now.”

Kimiko greets him as she always does, with a small, knowing smile. “I'm sorry you had to come here,” she says, so Japanese. “It's so much trouble.”

“None at all.”

She disappears into the study. Her daughter is still at school. On the back of a kitchen chair is her jacket, purple and satiny, and at her place at the table a sparkly hair band. He could sit at the table. It's where they usually sit when he helps her, but from the corner of his eye he sees the living room, splendid with light.

What is he doing? he asks himself as he walks toward the couch. He isn't sure. All he knows is that he thinks of her, constantly. When things are bad, he thinks of her and he feels better. When he sees her, he feels better. When he sees the way she looks at him, in a way no one has in a long time, not me, not his mother, he feels like the way she looks at him: as though he can do no wrong.

The pleasure in her eyes is apparent when she finds him on the couch.

She spreads the papers across their laps. He tries to concentrate but can't. Something is happening, is about to happen. His eyes keep traveling to the whiteness of her throat, the delicate hollow at the opening of her blouse.

"Joe," she says, in protest or invitation, he doesn't know. He doesn't care. The papers are falling. He's leaning towards her. He's pressing his mouth on hers, his tongue searching and warm. He's pushing her back on the couch.

Twenty minutes. One time. Eleven years undone.