The Commander knocks at the door. The knock is prescribed: the sitting room is supposed to be Serena Joy’s territory, he’s supposed to ask permission to enter it. She likes to keep him waiting. It’s a little thing, but in this household little things mean a lot. Tonight, however, she doesn’t even get that, because before Serena Joy can speak he steps forward into the room anyway. Maybe he’s just forgotten the protocol, but maybe it’s deliberate. Who knows what she said to him, over the silver encrusted dinner table? Or didn’t say.

The Commander has on his black uniform, in which he looks like a museum guard. A semi-retired man, genial but wary, killing time. But only at first glance. After that he looks like a midwestern bank president, with his straight neatly brushed silver hair, his sober posture, shoulders a little stooped. And after that there is his moustache, silver also, and after that his chin, which really you can’t miss. When you get down as far as the chin he looks like a vodka ad, in a glossy magazine, of times gone by.

His manner is mild, his hands large, with thick fingers and acquisitive thumbs, his blue eyes uncommunicative, falsely innocuous. He looks us over as if taking inventory. One kneel-woman in red, one seated woman in blue, two in green, standing, a solitary man, thin-faced, in the background. He manages to appear puzzled, as if he can’t quite remember how we all got in here. As if we are something he inherited, like a Victorian pump organ, and he hasn’t figured out what to do with us. What we are worth.

He nods, in the general direction of Serena Joy, who does not make a sound. He crosses to the large leather chair reserved for him, takes the key out of his pocket, fumbles with the ornate brass-bound leather-covered box that stands on the table beside the chair. He inserts the key, opens the box, lifts out the Bible, an ordinary copy, with a black cover and gold-edged pages. The Bible is kept locked up, the way people once kept tea locked up, so the servants wouldn’t steal it. It is an incendiary device: who knows what we’d make of it, if we ever got our hands on it? We can be read to from it, by him, but we cannot read. Our heads turn towards him, we are expectant, here comes our bedtime story.