



Melanie  
Tem

The  
Ice  
Downstream

A Short Story Collection

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*Melanie Tem*

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First e-reads publication 1999  
[www.e-reads.com](http://www.e-reads.com)  
ISBN 0-7592-3301-2

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# The Ice Downstream

# *The Ice Downstream*

**D**ownstream, the ice on French Creek was starting to break up. It rumbled and rasped all the way up past Torey's house. It shook the world.

"Ice breaking up downstream," her father warned, as if she didn't know.

Torey frowned and nodded, kicked restlessly at the rungs of her chair. She'd finished her supper a long time ago, but if she left her father at the table alone he'd forget to eat. She knew his food must already be cold.

The leafless grapevines on the arbor outside the kitchen window screeched across the glass, a cold sound that set her teeth on edge. "Ice breaking up," her father said again. He mumbled and was hard to understand these days, but she could see his breath in the chilly air of the kitchen, and she imagined that she could see his words and even his thoughts, no two of them alike and all of them about Ryan. "Sure sign of spring." His tone made spring this year sound dangerous, and Torey understood why.

Her father pushed his chair back stiffly and stood up, leaving most of the food on his plate untouched. Torey resented that, even though she cooked as much to get warm as to please him. She stood up, too, and scraped the leftovers



into the pan. She would throw them out onto the snow for the birds, who couldn't possibly be finding enough to eat when this winter had gone on so long. Earlier, her father had objected to her doing that, saying the birds had better get used to winter weather. Now he didn't seem to notice.

"It's hot in here," he said, and turned the thermostat down even more. Torey heard the click of the furnace shutting off.

She wanted to yell at him but since Ryan had died she didn't dare. Instead she said, almost under her breath, "I'm freezing."

"We don't need the heat on so high at night," he said, and Torey was surprised that he'd heard her. "There are plenty of blankets."

She put more blankets on her bed and was, in fact, warm enough, but still she didn't sleep well. The ice kept waking her up, and her father's cries for Ryan. She wished the dreams would come to her instead. All she could dream about was the ice breaking up downstream, when she should have been dreaming about Ryan.

She'd expected him to haunt her. He must still be mad at her for that time last year when, just to bug him, she'd sneaked into his room and messed up his baseball card collection; Dad hadn't believed that somebody almost fifteen years old would do something so mean and childish to an eight-year-old, and so she never had been blamed, except by Ryan, who knew. He must still be mad at her for not having been the one to fall through the ice that morning, even though she'd yelled at him that it was stupid to go so far out so early in the winter. Her father was mad at her for that, too, although he didn't say so. They must both still love her; she was still, after all, her brother's big sister and her father's daughter. They must both, she thought, have a lot left to say to her.

So she kept waiting for one of them to say her name again. She braced herself for Ryan to shove past her and race ahead up the long snowy road to the schoolbus stop on the highway. She searched for his little-boy ghost in the thin swirly frost that every morning had formed on her bedroom mirror. The frost would have been pretty if it hadn't been so cold; at first, Torey had traced designs in it with her fingertips or cleared away patches so she could see her reflection, but lately she hadn't wanted to get that close to the radiant closeness and, anyway, she hadn't wanted to see herself in the glass.

Ryan had been dead all winter now, and she'd seen no trace of him, not even in her dreams. He was gone. He really was dead. All she seemed able to dream about was the violent melting of the ice downstream, and then French Creek flowing full and fast and rich with life again. Because they were warm dreams, she didn't tell her father about them; they made her feel like a traitor.

Her father stood in the doorway now, looking out through the locked storm door. He hadn't been out of the house since they'd found Ryan's body under the ice. He didn't go to work anymore. He didn't shovel snow. He didn't build snowmen or slide down the hill; Torey was too old for such things, but she'd have done them with him if he'd asked. The cold sunshine lit up the edges of his silhouette, making the white tips of his hair look golden. He kept rubbing his hands, but not very vigorously, as if really he didn't care whether they warmed up or not. Beyond him, through the glass in the door, she could see that it was still snowing, even though the sun was out.

The ice on French Creek boomed, and her father said, maybe to her, "With the ice this thick, we'll have floods." He backed away, shut the heavy inside door that kept that much sunshine out of the house, and went to sit in his chair.

On Saturday mornings, her father used to read to them. Torey had been getting restless; she was too old to be read to, too old to do anything with her father and baby brother. The last few Saturdays, she'd sat sullenly on the hassock clear on the other side of the room, watching the fire in the fireplace, half-listening, while Ryan still squeezed in beside their father in the big warm chair.

Now there was plenty of space on either side of her father, as if he'd shrunk from the cold, and the chair was coated with rime. Torey thought maybe she could fill in the space. Maybe—although she was shivering herself and the tip of her nose was numb—she could warm her father up.

The chair was still surrounded by stacks of books, dusty now and sticky with the cold. She hadn't seen her father read anything since Ryan had died, and certainly he never read to her anymore. She picked up a book at random, opened it at random, held it out to him. "Read to me, Dad?"

She had to say it twice before he gave any sign that he'd heard. His eyes were like snowpack in his gray-white face, and she was sure he didn't see her. It was as if she'd interrupted something, or asked for something outrageous. Finally, he rasped. "It's too cold."

"I'm cold, too."

"It's the dead of winter." His words changed shape after he'd spoken them and then froze in place, like icicles.

Cold radiated from him, and Torey didn't know whether to try to combat it with her own body heat or to stay as far away and keep herself as warm as possible. "But spring's coming," she insisted. "You said so yourself. The ice is starting to break up." She almost said, "Whether you like it or not," but stopped herself in time.

"It'll be cold for a long time yet," he said.

"Winter can't last forever," Torey said at once, stubbornly.

She saw for the first time that a paleness, like frost, had formed over her father's cheeks and chin and around the outline of his mouth, like a double beard. She imagined his throat freezing shut, and his diaphragm, and maybe his heart. "Floods," he managed to whisper. "There'll be terrible floods. We'll all drown."

"I miss Ryan," Torey heard herself say.

Her father gasped as if she'd struck him, and lowered his head.

A gritty film of ice lay like a shawl across his shoulders. Torey put her hands over her mouth, then forced herself to touch it. What little warmth there was left in her hands dislodged the ice from her father, caused it to melt enough that it peeled away in glittering shards and fell to the floor at her feet.

He didn't seem to realize that she'd saved him. He moaned, or maybe it was the miniature protest of his ice.

Over the next few days, the house got colder and colder, while Torey could tell from looking outside and listening to the ice that the weather was getting warmer. Her father sat in his chair all the time now. He slept there. He took his meals there, what little she could get him to eat. He wore his heavy winter jacket, fur cap with earflaps, boots, lined gloves, but ice crystals whitened his beard and coated the backs of his hands until Torey brushed them away. She was afraid to leave him. She was afraid to stay.

Defiantly, expecting him to object and rehearsing what she'd say if he did ("I'm *tired* of being cold!"), Torey went to the thermostat on the kitchen wall and turned it up to 80. There was no answering click of the furnace coming back on. She frowned and with her thumb turned the thermostat up as high as it would go. Nothing. "The furnace isn't working," she told her father without turning, though she suspected he knew. When he didn't say anything, she said flatly, "You disconnected something," and he didn't respond to that, either.

Torey pushed past him to the fireplace at the far end of the living room. She crouched in front of it, struck match after match from the several books in her pockets and held them to the crumpled paper and kindling she'd surreptitiously laid in. The fire wouldn't start. She checked the flue, stirred the firebox with the poker, tried again. The tiny, brief, nearly heatless flame of each match went out before it could make any difference at all in the chilly air.

The fireplace was made of stones from French Creek, roundish stones and thick flat ones, gray and brown and almost pink. There hadn't been a fire in the fireplace since Ryan had died. Torey sat down in front of it and forced herself to remember: In the crawling and leaping flames, she and Ryan used to try to find creatures who had lived in the creek, creatures who had somehow

been mortared into the fireplace and would come back to life if they could just get warmed up enough.

Except when French Creek froze during particularly hard winters—and this one had been the hardest; the creek had frozen solid—it was always full of life. When spring really came and even this thick ice melted, the creek would teem again with squishy brown mud puppies that you never saw until you stepped on them, hard-shelled flickering waterbugs and long-legged spiders, quick little snakes the same gray-brown as the water itself. Torey's father used to say that French Creek was so deep and wide and ran so fast that in northern Michigan where he came from they'd certainly have called it a river.

Torey's parents had built the fireplace themselves. When they first bought this little house for eighteen hundred dollars. When they were first married. Before Torey was born. Before Ryan was born. Before their mother left. Before Ryan died. Before this long cold winter. A lot of things had happened; thinking about that sometimes made Torey breathless. Things she had no idea about, things she knew about only because she'd been told, things she remembered only vaguely, things that were as clear and fast-running in her mind as French Creek when they hadn't frozen up. A lot more things would happen, too, come spring.

Her father shuddered as another muffled boom rattled the house. "Ice breaking up," he said again. At least, she thought that was what he said; his chapped lips moved so little when he spoke now that he was hard to understand. Torey imagined his lips and tongue as cold and hard as the creek stones in the unlit fireplace, as cold as ice. The ice groaned.

These years, when the winter had been cold enough to freeze the creek all the way across and when spring warmth came suddenly, the ice always started melting at a particular place about twenty miles downstream, where the creek widened and slowed past the town of Cochranton. Torey had often wished she lived in Cochranton, so she could be standing on the bank at the instant the first crack appeared, so she could understand melting. As it was, she woke up every night and every morning to the noise of the ice melting downstream.

When she lay in bed that night, the ice thundered, and she heard her father calling Ryan's name. She knew she should go to him, but she was curled up tightly under heavy layers of blankets and she was afraid to move. In the morning the frost on her mirror had started to melt in long strings, pooling onto her dresser. The sky through her window was hazy blue, and she thought she saw faint green-yellow tips on the long-dead branches of the trees along the road.

Fearfully, she went out into the living room. Still in his chair, her father was hugging himself and rocking. His clothes were wet, and water on the floor around him made his boots glisten. Tears ran freely down his cheeks and puddled inside his collar.

Torey held out her mittened hands. "Come for a walk with me. Let's go see if the ice up here by our place has started to melt yet."

She couldn't tell whether he'd heard her, whether he even knew she was there. He was sobbing. The twisting of his body in the chair sent flakes of ice and drops of water spraying, and all around him the faded upholstery was damp.

It would be kinder, she decided, and much easier just to leave him where he was, sitting in his cold damp chair that would freeze up again when the sun set or the weather changed, grieving the rest of his life for his lost son, grieving the rest of her life. She would inspect the ice herself. She turned away from him and started quickly toward the door.

He got up and came after her. The ease and fluidity with which he moved, after so much time immobile in one cold place, surprised her. They both left wet tracks across the carpet; Torey imagined the strings of frozen puddles that would form here later.

When she opened the door, her father winced at the inrush of warm air. Torey hesitated, then took off her mittens, scarf, and heavy jacket and left them in the hall. It had been a long time since she'd worn so few clothes, only a sweater over her sweatshirt and jeans; she felt both freed and exposed. Her father kept his coat and boots on, ears covered and gloved hands in his pockets, but she watched him leave all his blankets and quilts behind in a soggy heap.

They made their way across the rutted road and through knee-deep snow that crusted inside Torey's sneakers. Losing their balance and sliding—but without any of the whooping and laughing she remembered from sliding down this hill with Ryan—they climbed down to where she thought the edge of the creek was. Their tracks blended behind them into one long precipitous trail. Torey's hands and feet were wet and her jeans already soaked through, but she was only a little chilled; her father was panting, as if this first real spring day was too warm for him.

One continuous gray-white surface stretched from where they stood to the island in the middle of the creek, and picked up again on the other side. Torey couldn't tell for sure where land stopped and water or ice began; it was important to know, so that she and her father wouldn't fall through the ice themselves.

She considered taking the dark line of trees as evidence of the edge of the creek bank, but they were uneven and unpredictable. They leaned at odd angles, and their ridged trunks dripped with icicles that somehow made them look both larger and smaller than they were. Torey wondered if it was possible that their roots had broken off inside the frozen ground, so that when the spring thaw came in earnest they'd topple into French Creek, which would be flowing full-force by then and would carry them off.

The ice downstream boomed, and Torey saw movement, a softening and shifting, in the ice at her feet. She crouched, leaned far forward, rested her palms on the snow-covered ice, and put her weight on her hands. The surface was not quite solid, although it held; she could feel the water flowing underneath, and life stirring.

She sat down in the wet snow. She stretched her legs out onto the frozen creek, then lay back and wriggled her whole body flat onto the ice. She was shaking with the pulsing current.

"I miss Ryan!" she shouted, and the ice downstream rumbled.

"Oh, God!" her father roared behind her. "Ryan!"

Suddenly, the ice under her split. Torey felt the crack grow in a split-second from her groin to her throat, and she managed to roll away just as the whole cold, gray-white section broke apart. Icy water seeped, then poured out, drenching her, making the packed surfaces of the creek and the land glisten.

Torey rolled onto her hands and knees and looked for her father. He was farther away than he should have been and at a different angle, confusing her. Then she realized that she was now on an ice floe that was starting on its own separate journey downstream.

Her father didn't seem to notice that she was in any danger, or that she was drifting away. He crouched well up on the creek bank, poking at the edge of the ice with a long thick branch. She heard him sobbing, keening, above the bass growling of the ice breaking up right here, no longer downstream.

Knees and hands slipping out from under her again and again, Torey finally managed to scramble to her feet. Without thinking much about it and without taking aim because she couldn't tell where she was in relation to anything else, she leaped.

She landed in six-inch-deep bitter cold water; there was solid ground underneath. Her father was a hundred yards upstream, still crouching, still wailing, and up to his waist in the frigid water. All around them, the ice boomed, and overhead the sun shone warm and dangerous in the soft blue sky.

Torey sloshed toward her father, fighting the strong current, the slippery footing, and her own strong desire just to plunge headlong into the creek and become part of its traveling, teeming life. The water—still with heart-sized chunks of ice in it—was rising around her father.

They made it back to the house ahead of the flood, which was rising at an impossible pace. The moment she entered the cold house, Torey felt her wet clothes begin to stiffen, and she hurried into her room to change. When she came out her father was sitting in his chair, and through the picture window behind him she saw the flood waters rising.

"You should change into dry clothes," she told him. "You'll catch your death."

He looked at her as if he didn't know her. "I don't want to be any warmer."

"Spring's coming, Dad. Spring's *here*, whether you like it or not." Suddenly angry, she went and stood in front of him, in his line of vision. He didn't turn his head away or close his eyes, but she still wasn't sure he saw her. "I'm here, whether you like it or not, and so are you."

"Ryan is—*dead*," he gasped.

"I know Ryan's dead!" she cried, and, daringly, leaned down to put her hands on her father's shoulders. The fabric of his jacket was starting to ice over again. "Daddy, don't do this! Ryan's dead, but you and I are alive!"

"I—can't—stand—it," he whispered. Torey backed away from the crystals of his breath in the air between them.

By noon, the water had risen above the foundation. By mid-afternoon it was almost to the bottom of the windowsills, and a film of ice as thick as her hand had formed. When Torey looked out any window toward French Creek, she saw layers: gray-white ice sparkling in the spring sunlight on its top surface and glimmering on its underside as the still-liquid water struggled to break free, then darker and darker gray layers filled with frantically swimming and swirling creatures, debris, ghosts, down to the frozen and saturated ground.

By evening, Torey was wearing every dry piece of clothing she could find in her closet and drawers, and she was still trembling so violently that it was hard to catch her breath. The water hadn't risen much higher, but the ice had descended, and in the thin spring twilight she could see almost no movement at all either inside or outside the house.

Her father sat in his chair. His clothes had frozen solid. His hair had stiffened into a glittering cowl, and the patches of ice that had formed over his mouth and eyes looked like silver coins.

Torey went to him. She was so cold that she could hardly walk, and her thoughts were sluggish. Everything was very quiet; the ice downstream was no longer breaking up, and even sound seemed frozen.

She bent over him. He seemed to be breathing, slow and shallow, but otherwise he didn't move. She kissed him, and her lips stuck to the cold skin of his cheek, hurting when she pulled them away. "I love you, Daddy," she said aloud; every word formed a cloud between them. "I love you, and I love Ryan, but it's too cold here for me."

At first she thought he wasn't going to respond at all. Then she saw and felt the frost spreading rapidly up over him. She backed away, turned, ran.

Ice was pressing against the door from the outside, and she couldn't get out. Frantically, she ducked inside the cold fireplace, reached up into the short chimney for footholds and handholds, and pulled herself out onto the roof of the house. It was a short drop to the rising ice.

Sliding, falling, struggling to her feet again, she hurried around to the picture window for one last look at her father. He was completely encased in a translucent and impenetrable drape of ice.

Trembling, afraid of the floods but far more afraid of the ice, Torey put her head down and fled.

END



## *Sitting with the Driver*

Abigail followed the man across the muddy street, past a horse that tossed its head at her, over the wooden sidewalk, under the writhing shadows cast by the flame of the streetlamp in front of the big red house. There was a sign: Kate McKinley's Scarlet Slipper. The letters were made by naked, bending female bodies. Abigail stared at the alien forms. The man rang the bell.

"Welcome, sir," came a cheerful voice in the yellow rectangle of light from the open door. "Come in."

"Ain't here for pleasure, Kate. I got trouble." The man pushed Abigail by the shoulder till she couldn't help but stand in front of him in the light. She heard voices from inside the house, music. He kept his hand on her and all she could do was make herself as slippery as possible, think of herself as some other thing that he wouldn't dare touch. "I got this here girl. I'm going out West, can't take her. Gotta leave her with you."

The woman regarded Abigail for a while, then turned her gaze back to the man who'd brought her and observed, "She's young."

"Old enough."

"How old is she?"

The man shrugged. "Hard to say."

*I'm thirteen*, Abigail thought fiercely, but she wasn't absolutely sure that was true.

"Doesn't seem right," the woman named Kate said. "Just leaving a child with a stranger like this."

"Lady, she was just left with me."

*You won me*. The memory prowled through Abigail's head with all the others like it. *In a saloon. In a poker game. But I didn't turn out like you thought*. She smiled.

"Pretty little thing," Kate said, staring at Abigail again. "Different-looking. Exotic. Where'd she come from?"

The man shrugged again. He was already moving toward the door. The fancy mirror in the hallway, taller than Abigail, caught his reflection. She would not remember his name, but she wouldn't be able to forget his body, which would always be bigger and stronger than she was. "Hard to say. Not from around here, though. Or anyplace else in the States, most likely."

"What makes you say that?"

"Like you said, she looks different. And she acts—foreign."

"Were you born in another country, dear?"

Abigail took a step backward, surprised and frightened by Kate's sudden direct regard. Her thoughts, never fully her own, swarmed. *Woods*, she was remembering, although not in words. *Woods bushes sunshine moonlight a cave in the side of a hill a thicket. And a man's smell a man's hands capturing me taking me inside, holding me pushing inside me actually inside me hurting loving giving me away*. She didn't say anything.

"Don't talk much," the man said, well on his way out by now. "Don't eat much, neither. Business like yours, she'll more than earn her keep."

"What's her name? What's your name, dear?"

*Jane Martha Julia Susannah Mary Eliz . . .*

"Abigail," the man called over his shoulder from the hitching post in the street. Abigail had been afraid up on that tall horse, and her thighs still ached from trying to spread so far and to hold on, and the man's bulk had been right behind her, pressing against her, keeping her with him until he was finished with her.

"Abigail," Kate repeated, smiling at her. "That's a good, strong name." She held out her hand. Every finger wore a ring, and they all flashed.

Abigail backed as far away from the woman as she could, knowing it wouldn't do any good, knowing she could never get away.

Kate walked up to her and put her hands on her shoulders. Abigail clenched her fists and closed her eyes, but the woman was still there and so was she, Abigail. "Poor little thing," Kate said, matter-of-factly. "No place to call your own."

*Susannah you're beautiful Jane you're a bad girl her name is Julia you can have her for a good horse her name is Elizabeth she'll do anything you want but watch out she can change on you she can be dangerous her name is Abigail*

"Well," Kate sighed. "I guess you can stay here. Young and pretty and different-looking as you are, there'll be plenty of call for you."

She pulled Abigail to her, put her arms around her, wouldn't let her break free. *Run hide attack* Abigail struggled to turn her head and sink her teeth into Kate's high breast, but the woman was too strong.

#

A few years later, lifetimes later, Abigail herself rides west, toward Texas. Mrs. Kate McKinley's Scarlet Slipper is no more or less real than the endless flat prairie. The only thing real has ever been Nathaniel, the only reality is that Nathaniel is dead.

She understands that the prairie is flat, but after she's been staring at it for hours and miles out the dusty window of the rattling, swaying stagecoach, it takes on the appearance of rolling. Her eyes play tricks on her, or the land does, or the land and herself traveling on it are simply not what they seem on the surface to be.

Gray-green sagebrush dots the gray-brown plain. Everything she read about the West before she came seemed to mention sagebrush. Now that she's seen it, crouched beside it, broken off pieces, touched and smelled and even tasted bits of it on the tip of her tongue, she can scarcely believe that it's a living thing. But it grows everywhere.

In the library she found a thin book by a Mrs. Asa Ames called *The Holy Hunter in the American West*. It talked about sagebrush, of course, sagebrush and sky, but mostly Mrs. Ames devoted her colorful prose to persuading the reader that Indians really did have immortal souls and to detailing the ongoing hunt for them. "I never thought I would become God's huntress," Mrs. Ames wrote, "nor that the souls of wild Indians, which surely must exist in forms far different from ours, would become my life's prey."

The lady on the coach seat next to her, wrapped in a heavy shawl, taps her arm. "Do you intend to give us all the Wild West Pneumonia?"

Abigail looks at her, uncomprehending.

"Close the window, dear, would you please?"

Abigail shuts the window and faces inward again. Now the prairie and the sagebrush and the sky so blue it isn't blue anymore but some other nameless hue could just as well be only in her imagination. Many things in her life could just as well be only in her imagination, but they are not.

"Where are you headed, dear?" the lady in the shawl wants to know.

"Texas."

The lady frowns at her as if she didn't believe her. "By yourself?"

"I'm going to be married," Abigail tells her.

"Oh, my, you must be one of those mail-order brides I've heard tell about!"

The lady lays a hand on Abigail's knee. The shawl falls open. The fingernails are long and curved. The lady leans close; her breath is overpoweringly sweet. "Why don't you come home with me instead, dear? My mother and I live alone, and it is a struggle, and we could use somebody young and strong. You don't want to go all the way out there in the wilderness to marry some stranger."

"Little River!" calls the driver, saving Abigail from having to reply. The stage slows.

#

"Where were you last night?" Kate demanded.

"I went walking."

"In the middle of the night?"

Abigail shrugged. "Nobody was asking for me. It was too late for more customers."

"It isn't proper for a sixteen-year-old girl to be out at night unescorted."

"Proper? This is a brothel. No matter what we do, we're not proper."

"That's not so. The people of this town have always expected me to run a proper establishment, and I intend to do so. In any case, it's not safe, and I'm responsible for you." Kate touched Abigail's hair. Abigail sat very still and held her breath so the petting wouldn't stop, but Kate took her hand away and said quietly, "You more than the others."

"I can take care of myself," she said. *Whoever that is.*

Kate shook her head. "You're a strange girl, Abigail."

"Good for business," she retorted.

"Yes. Yes, it is."

The doorbell rang and Abigail went to answer it, glad to be out of Kate's affectionate scrutiny. On the doorstep were three young men, two regulars and a very young one, trying his best to look tall and virile.

"Abigail! This here's our little brother Nathaniel. He wants to meet you."

"Little Miss Abigail here will teach you everything you need to know, Nat."

They whooped and clapped him unsteadily on the back and staggered off down the street, leaving behind them the odor of whiskey and the transformation of Abigail's heart. She and Nathaniel stared at each other for a moment over the threshold. Then she held out her hand and said, as she'd been taught. "Welcome, boys. Come in."

## #

She'd ridden the train for the first several days; it went unnaturally fast through the countryside, which seemed right to Abigail. Then, somewhere in what they called Indian Territory, her written instructions said to take the stage.

Since then, she's shared a succession of noisy, cramped stagecoaches with a variety of fellow travelers. This thin cold lady not speaking to her now, primly collecting her things. A bearded man who, asleep or awake, hissed and whistled through broken teeth. An old man reeking of grease, eating plump greasy sausages one after another out of the pockets of his dirty coat. A salesman who'd convinced her she'd need good brushes to keep house in Texas just like anywhere else, and wedged three of his finest into her traveling bag in exchange for more money than she should have parted with from her pouch. These people might as well be sagebrush, for all she understands of their lives, but it's clear they all would use her for their own purposes if they could.

"Vinita!" comes the call, and the stage rattles to a stop. Its weight shifts as the driver jumps down, and Abigail hears him exchange shouts with the stationmaster.

Vinita. Yet another stage stop with a picturesque name and, most likely, a history worth knowing. Abigail stands again at the side of the straight, dusty road. It's midday in October; the high sun is warm enough that she loosens her shawl, wishes she could shed her skin. She's tired, and the dust makes her eyes water.

The fresh team of horses moves into place without anyone driving or leading them. Their harnesses jingle and their flanks shine black and brown. Land and sky stretch out on all sides, toward the west where she's going without knowing what will be there or who she will be, toward the east where she's come from without knowing, either. Tumbleweed stirs. In one of the newspaper accounts she read about the West before she came, the traveler wrote about tumbleweed, but Abigail hardly believed it then.

A new driver climbs up onto the high seat. Abigail looks around; apparently she's the only passenger. "Let's go, miss. Gotta keep to a schedule here."

Abigail gathers her skirts, raises one foot onto the step, pauses. To the stationmaster she says, "Could I sit with the driver?"

The stationmaster guffaws. Abigail feels her face flush, but she folds her hands primly at her waist and waits. "Hey, Sam, the lady wants to sit up with you!"

Finally the driver shrugs. "Hell, why not? Gotta get outta here." He reaches down a hand, the stationmaster braces her foot, and she is pulled and hoisted aloft.

Before she's fairly settled, the driver slaps the reins and the horses are off. Abigail catches her breath, grips the splintery rail across the end of the seat, and gives herself over to the sensations of this time and place: high swift motion, bright sun and bright sky and bright wind.

#

Before long, Nathaniel was coming almost every night. Abigail tried to keep herself free during the hours he was most likely to come, but it wasn't always possible; if she was busy, he'd wait, shyly at first but with a growing attitude of proprietorship, sitting on the brocade loveseat in the front foyer, his hat on his knees. She'd come down the stairs with the previous customer and let him out, maybe even discuss arrangements for the next visit, and she'd try not to look at Nathaniel, but his profile would be reflected in the tall beveled mirror anywhere she cast her gaze.

Late one night as he was getting dressed and ready to leave, she said from the bed, to keep him. "Let's go walking."

He glanced at her sharply. "What's that? Something you didn't teach me yet?"

She was surprised by the edge in his voice. Up and dressing, she grinned at him. "This is only for preferred customers."

"I ain't got money for walking," he said sullenly.

Half-dressed, she crossed the room to him, took his hands. "Nathaniel, stop it. You got what you paid for. Business is slow. All I want to do is go for a walk with you." That was not all she wanted, but she wouldn't have known how to tell him the whole truth even if she'd thought to.

She had checked; there was no moon. They stepped carefully along the dark sidewalks, their heels rumbling on the narrow planks. No one else was out so late. Abigail felt no restlessness, no desire to be something else, no fear pulling her away. She held onto Nathaniel's arm. "Kate doesn't like me to go walking at night," she told him. "Says it's not safe."

"I'll protect you," he said, automatically and with perfect seriousness. Believing him, she squeezed his arm.

"She also says it's not proper for a young woman to be out unescorted at night."

"Proper?" His laugh was too loud. It echoed and proliferated in the silent town. He pulled his arm away from her; she thought for a desperate moment that he was going to leave her there unprotected in the middle of the night. But he merely adjusted his hat, then put his hands in his pockets. "What difference does it make if you're proper? You're nothing but a whore!"

"Whore is *one* thing I am," she tried to tell him. The moon broke through the clouds, absolutely full. She had miscalculated. She had lost track of the phases, because she'd been with Nathaniel almost every night.

"Whore means you can't be nothin' else." Moonlight etched his face, threatened to wipe it clean.

*Sarah Jane Elizabeth you are who I say you are you are what I need you to be until I don't need you anymore Martha Abigail*

She would leave him then she would fly away she would pluck out his eyes and swallow them into herself she would—

He strode toward her and put his arms around her. The very full moon shone down on them, together. "I love you," he said out loud, and she stayed. Somehow fused, this time she didn't change.

#

Her hand is bleeding from the blade of a yucca plant she didn't realize she'd touched. Surreptitiously she sucks at the blood, standing in the hot prairie sun by the side of the road until the driver calls impatiently to her. Then she climbs back up onto the high seat, ignoring his outstretched hand. Some of her blood is left on the yucca plant. She doubts anyone coming along after them will even notice.

#

Business was very slow. Kate was cranky and Abigail worried. Kate said the problem was Kansas was slipping out from under them, all the lively young men with money to spend were heading out West for fortune and adventure. She started talking about moving the Scarlet Slipper out to Denver, where she'd heard white women were still scarce enough to be valued.

"I won't go," Abigail said.

Kate looked at her and laughed, the harsh, mirthless laughter that always made Abigail wish she would turn at will into someone or something else who wouldn't know what that kind of laughter meant. "And how will you support yourself?" Kate wanted to know. "An aging whore with no talent but whoring?"

"I can cook and clean and sew and tend a garden," Abigail protested. "I could be a wife." *Nathaniel's wife*, she thought, but she hadn't seen him now for such a long time that she'd begun to suspect he'd gone out West, too, seeking fortune and freedom and adventure and other things he didn't think she could give him when in fact she could give him anything he wanted.

Kate put her hands on Abigail's shoulders. "You and I are whores, honey. Nobody makes a wife out of a whore."

"Nathaniel will," Abigail said out loud before she could stop herself. Just the saying of his name steadied her.

"Oh, dear, you've fallen in love with a customer."

Abigail nodded firmly. "Nathaniel."

"And he's promised to take you away from all this."

"No, he hasn't promised me anything. He doesn't need to. I trust him."

Kate shook her gently. "If there's one thing I've learned about surviving in this business, it's that you dare trust nobody but yourself."

"I do trust myself. When I'm with Nathaniel." *Or when I'm waiting for him. He hasn't been here for a long time.* She stopped herself from counting the days and weeks.

The doorbell rang then, and Abigail pulled away from Kate to answer it. On the doorstep and spilling over onto the sidewalk, the heels of their boots loud on the wooden planks, were half a dozen rowdies.

Abigail sighed. "You boys got money?"

They yelled and whistled and showed her rolls of bills, pouches full of coins. Been West, they boasted. Struck gold. She let them in.

It took every girl in the house and Kate herself to entertain them all, and they had enough money to stay all night. The one in her bed had just rolled over to bargain with her again when the front door crashed open and there were shouts and footsteps pounding up the stairs. She heard him calling her name again and again before she was even completely aware of what it meant.

Abigail sat up, clutched the blanket in front of her. "Nathaniel!"

He flung open the bedroom door and pointed his gun at her and the man. "Whore!"

"Nathaniel!" Naked, Abigail dived for the floor and rolled partway under the bed. "Nathaniel, I love you!"

It took only a few seconds. Shots shattered the air, shattered the mirror above the bed, shattered Nathaniel's reflection. Blood obscured the worn pattern of the carpet. Abigail crawled across the floor and was kneeling with her hands on Nathaniel's warm body when the last breath went out of him, and she couldn't hold it in her hands. It took only a few seconds, and both she and Nathaniel shattered into some other form, countless other forms, shards and slivers of other forms forever beyond her reach.

The man in her bed blew on the barrel on his gun, then laid the weapon on the table beside the bed. "Lousy claim jumper," he complained. "Hey, lady, I still got time comin', bought and paid for."

Abigail observed her body—in which she no longer fully resided—rise from beside Nathaniel's empty body and climb back into bed. Her body was shivering and sobbing. Her body was being kissed and stroked, and was responding. She was not there.



## #

They stay that night at a rude, rambling, one-story hotel which, together with the building where the stagecoach stops and the horses are stabled, makes this "town" twice as big as the last one. A buxom woman with few teeth in her ready smile feeds them surprisingly meaty stew and surprisingly fluffy biscuits, aided by a boy about the age Nathaniel was when his brothers first brought him to Abigail.

Abigail asks the boy his name, but he won't talk to her, won't even let her catch his eye. He serves awkwardly, handles the dishes roughly, looks to the woman for direction. He doesn't speak to anyone.

Warned by the driver of an early departure the next morning, Abigail goes immediately after supper to the sleeping room she's to share with an animated young lady heading east who tells her a perfectly ordinary life story as though it were high adventure. While she chatters on, Abigail partly undresses in the dark and lies down on the narrow bed. Perhaps she can rest a little: she knows she won't sleep.

She gazes out the dirty little window at the full moon in the very black sky, savoring the quiet now that her talkative roommate has fallen asleep and wondering about the lives she'll be living in Texas. Then she hears a sharp yipping descant not far away and, although she's never heard the sound before, she thinks at once *coyotes*, remembering a reference from the newspaper. Her blood stirs. The soles of her feet and palms of her hands itch. She knows she'll be hearing coyotes every night now under the full Western moon, feeling the pull and throb of their muscles and the sinking of their teeth. The newspapers also mentioned eagles, bobcats, giant scorpions. Out West, there are many choices.

The sleeping room opens directly off the dining room and so, when a bow scrapes across a fiddle string and whines up and, down a ragged scale, the music might be right beside her, might be inside her chest. The eastbound young lady gives a gay shriek, makes much noise and flurry getting dressed, and hurries out to join the dance, which by now is in full swing. Booted feet stomp and rough voices raise in happy disharmony.

Before long, Abigail gives up entirely on the idea of rest. She dresses quickly and without much care, bloomers and petticoat, waist and jacket, all the layers of a lady's clothing, all the buttons and clasps and bows, but leaves her hair free. Then, holding her breath as if fording a cold stream, she steps out into the dance room.

The eastbound lady sees her and calls, "Abigail! Come dance!" A short man grabs her hands and swings her into the moving circle. She learned how to dance at Kate's, one of the requirements of the job, but this is different, freer and more complicated. The music inhabits her for a few minutes, a few steps,

and she cries out. But then the pattern changes in incomprehensible ways, her partner moves on to another lady in a feathered hat, and Abigail allows the music in its strident new key to sweep her out into the Western night.

Walking away from the buildings, she hears coyotes but doesn't see them. In the moonlight, the sagebrush looks like rock. The boy from the dining room is walking beside her. "It's late," she says to him. "You should be asleep."

"You're the one traveling in the morning." The timbre of his voice surprises her. He's younger than he looks, a child.

"I couldn't sleep," she tells him. "Between the music and the moon."

"And the coyotes," he says, shivering a little. Abigail thinks to put her arm around him but doesn't. "Did you hear the coyotes?"

Abigail nods. "Does your mother know you're out here?" she asks, for form.

"Ain't my ma."

"Your aunt, then, or your cousin, or whoever she is to you."

"Ain't nothin' to me. I'm an orphan. Come out from Philly three weeks ago on a orphan train."

Abigail has read about orphan trains, some philanthropist's idea to bring homeless children from Eastern cities out West to be raised by families. Christian charity, most people pronounce it. Slave labor, some critics protest.

It doesn't matter why this boy is here. What matters is that he is beside her in the moonlight when she needs him. Abigail knows to accept what is presented to her, not as offerings and not as signs but as things the way they are. Her blood rises. Her hands and thoughts claw. Behind them, the rhythms of the dance are building.

The boy has climbed atop a rail fence and is pulling off slivers of wood and tossing them into the air. They catch the light and fleetingly become something different—stars, dream images, unimagined forms of life—before they fall among the rocks and dust and sagebrush. In the relentless moonlight, the boy's form wavers.

She goes to him, sees his eyes widen, knows that the change in her is well underway. "Kiss me," she murmurs, not sure the words will be there. But they must sound enough like words for him to understand, for he does as she says, leans precariously from the fence and presses his young open mouth on hers, spreads his teeth. She lays the flat of her hand between his thighs, rubs, sinks her claws in, howls at his pleasure and pain.

#

The man in the red bandana rode slowly on a sleek brown horse, stopping in front of each house. He carried a long stick. At each front door he leaned from his saddle and poked with his stick, tapping and knocking until the housewife

came. Then he sat erect, tipped his hat with the hand that held the stick, and addressed her politely. "Good morning to you, ma'am. Are you married?"

Caroline Whitman said she was when she wasn't. Mathilde Pope threw a basin of washwater at him and yelled that if he didn't get away from her door this minute she'd have her husband put a bullet in his place of business. Tess Leighton announced her engagement to Ben Stearns, which was the first Abigail had heard of it, and, of all the girls in the neighborhood who didn't work at Kate's. Tess was the one she might have called friend.

Each time, the stranger tipped his hat again, nudged his horse with his heels, and rode the few steps to the next front door, Mexican spurs jingling and stick at the ready. Abigail thought for sure he'd pass by the Scarlet Slipper. *Stop*, she thought frantically. *Ask me*. When the tapping did come at the door, she raced downstairs to answer it, though she needn't have worried that someone else would get there first, for it was morning and Kate and the other girls were still asleep.

"Good morning to you, ma'am. Are you married?"

"No, sir," she answered firmly. "I am not."

He grinned and dismounted. She pulled the door to her but didn't shut it altogether. All up and down the street, the eyes of the ladies were upon her: she imagined dainty hands over mouths, gossip taking form like butter in a churn.

"Allow me to introduce myself, ma'am." The stranger tipped his hat again, this time to her. "My name is Andrew Merrit, marriage agent, and I have come to offer you a new life in the great American West."

The Kansas moon that night was gibbous, hunched like the shoulders of a beast. Abigail walked, thinking of course about Nathaniel. *Nathaniel is dead Nathaniel is dead*. The streets ached, shimmered. All she was was pain. The trees bent, became other than trees. Nathaniel's presence was everywhere, and so completely beyond her comprehension that it was of no use to her. Pain, fury, terror had swelled inside her for so long that they had a life of their own; she had no self. In a month she'd be heading West, somebody's mail order bride.

She caught sight of her own hunch-backed reflection in the gutter. She heard herself hissing through her tears, felt the steady deep growling that paced behind her teeth. Shadows flitted. There were no words. There was swift motion, the scent of blood. She stalked, chased, killed.

In the morning, the taste of blood was still on her teeth, and from under her nails she cleaned the skin of the man who'd killed Nathaniel.

#

As day settles in over the prairie, it seems that there has never been nighttime and never will be again. Abigail feels as if she's never been anywhere else, will

never be anything else but a mail-order bride on her way to Texas, where men want women for their civilizing influence, forever on her way, sitting with the driver in a futile attempt to see where she's going.

In the middle distance she sees brown movement. She shades her eyes and half-rises from her seat but can't make out what it is. She points, loses her balance and grabs for the railing. "What's that?"

"Cattle," the driver tells her.

She repeats incredulously, "Cattle?"

"Got no cattle where you come from, miss?"

"But they're *tended*."

Whether the stagecoach route takes them through the roving brown herds or whether the cattle approach the stage, Abigail can't tell, but suddenly they are surrounded by dirty, shaggy beasts, some with huge horns and some with drooping udders, some with hairless sores on their backs and some with fat heaving sides. A few try briefly to keep up, but their lumbering is no match for the swift, knowing strides of the horses, and one by one the cattle fall behind.

Then she notices dead cattle, bloated shapes in the distance and along the road. "How do they die?"

"Like anything else." The driver is a man of few words, but he does add, "Like you and me."

"There's another one."

"Yep."

"But what kills them?"

"Flies."

"Killer flies? Oh, come now. I find that hard to imagine." She doesn't, actually, and the image of it crawls inside her throat and chest. But she hungers for details. "How could flies kill cows?"

The driver shrugs. "Single out the weak ones."

His narrow, stubbled face seems actually to have tightened around his words. He spits them out carefully in a row, like seed. "How?" she persists.

They pass by another bovine corpse and another clump of live, milling animals before he answers. "Single out a weak or sickly one from the herd, keep after it till it falls. Then it's theirs." Abigail understands, and shudders.

For miles and miles then, neither of them says anything more. Wherever Abigail looks on the prairie are forms of life she's never seen before: plants that look like bones but with brilliant brown leaves; birds with enormous wingspans and ragged blue cries; swarming carcasses, rotting or skeletal, by far the most conspicuous objects in the landscape.

The horses plunge straight into a narrow, shallow creek, barely slowing their pace, and the stagecoach tips. Although Abigail holds onto the railing

with both hands, she can't stop herself from sliding partway off the seat. The horses' hooves and the stagecoach wheels make paltry splashes; the water in the creekbed isn't more than a few inches deep and hardly seems to be flowing. They lurch up the far bank and then are thundering along the dusty road again as if they've never left it. Abigail safely resettles herself, without help or notice from the driver.

Along the creek are trees, a whole green grove of them, startling and lovely although there are only five or six. The driver points off to the right. Abigail twists in her seat to follow the line of his whip, nearly losing her balance again.

"Cemetery," he says, and then she makes out the mounds, three of them, dirt still bare among the prairie grasses, and the outsized, weathered trio of crosses. "Family," says the driver. "Mother and two children. Made it this far."

"How do you know?"

"I knew them," he says, and will say no more.

#

Business picked up a little, as though the shooting had piqued interest in the Scarlet Slipper. Men asked for Abigail; she did what they wanted. In the morning, in the evening, in the middle of the night, whenever his time was up, a customer would waken to the shadow of an owl's wing across his throat, the hardening of a snake between his thighs, the brushing of barely sheathed claws at his eyes.

Abigail was still there, because she was expected to be. But soon she was heading West.

#

"Dry Gulch!"

Nothing much marks this one as a stop; it's just a low brown building and a lone cottonwood tree. The four exhausted, sweating horses are exchanged for another fresh team, and three men in neat dark suits—missionaries, they tell her with sincere smiles—arrange themselves on the two seats, politely leaving space for her.

The relief driver won't allow her to sit outside. "No place for a lady. Might be Indians. Might be a twister. Never know." So Abigail rides the last long leg of this day's journey inside, trying to sleep, trying to think about Mr. Merrit and the husband who supposedly awaits her in Texas, having no choice but to listen to the missionaries earnestly discussing souls. She is sure she doesn't have a soul. She doesn't think Nathaniel had one, either. If he did, it's gone

from her as surely as his body. She doesn't say that to the missionaries, though the handsome one is obviously eager to talk to her about the price of her own immortal soul.

They are to arrive in Greenwood sometime tomorrow. Mr. Merrit will meet her. He wrote that several other brides will be arriving at about the same time from Indiana, Ohio, Missouri. The bachelors of Greenwood and surrounding camps who don't want to be bachelors anymore—which is most of them, Mr. Merrit wrote happily; his business is booming—will already be there, ready to choose and claim their brides. Mr. Merrit took pains to assure her, as if she'd been wondering, that he's reserved all the rooms in Greenwood's one hotel and one boarding house, and that the Reverend Mr. Wright, an old friend, is standing by.

At this last stop on the journey to Greenwood. Abigail has a sleeping room all to herself, but she doesn't undress or even lie down. The still-full moon shining in the window will keep her awake, but total darkness would have kept her awake tonight, too, or a crescent moon. When she hears no stirring from the rest of the house, she wraps her shawl around her and lets herself out into the chill prairie night.

Nathaniel is dead, and she doesn't know who she is. Even in this vast land with all its possibilities, she is not one thing or another or another, and she never will be again. Nathaniel is dead, and that is the one truth.

Wind buffets her, alters her course. The muscles at her shoulder blades strain. There is a coppery taste in her mouth, and what she can see of the western night has become faceted, made of many layers. There are countless stars, each bigger than she is, and there is the moon, swelling like hot grief. *Nathaniel is dead.* Something buzzes beside her, surrounds her. *Flies*, she thinks, without thinking the word. She is not touching the ground.

"Stage leavin', Miss," comes the call at four o'clock in the morning, accompanied by a loud quick knock on her door. Abigail starts out of buzzing half-sleep. "Ten minutes." The voice is already receding. She hastens to change her dress, re-pin her hair. Her arms ache, and the weak breakfast coffee won't penetrate the metallic taste in her mouth.

There is an unexpected delay in starting; one of the horses is dead, its body covered with tiny swollen places and dried drops of blood. "Never known flies to attack at night before," observes the stationmaster, and his wife tells about the kitten she found last spring, open wounds infested, eyes swollen shut. One of yesterday's team is pressed into service, and by five they're on their way.

The man who shares the coach with her pulls his hat down over his eyes, folds his arms across his chest, and is snoring before they've even gained full speed. But she knows he's watching her, and she doesn't take her eyes off him for very long. A long thick roll of leather has been propped diagonally across

the seats; it cramps the cramped space even further, and smells slightly rancid. Abigail falls asleep, too, and wakes when the motion of the coach slows and she is pressed sideways against the seat as the horses take a corner.

It's nearly midday, the sun bright in her eyes as she steps out of the coach, her neck stiff. She's slept, and, as always, her first waking thought—the one reliable fact around which the rest of her consciousness is organized—is *Nathaniel is dead*.

Two more gentlemen, one of them quite portly, join the journey after the midday meal. Each tries gallantly to wait for Abigail to precede him into the coach, but she holds back, feigns distraction, pretends to have some woman's business to attend to. As the new driver climbs up onto the high seat and gathers the reins, Abigail suddenly realizes that he is perfectly capable of leaving without her, not noticing that she isn't aboard, not even knowing that she should be. What recourse would Mr. Andrew Merrit have then, she wonders. Surely he must lose some of his investment money like that: brides never reaching the bachelors, being claimed by someone or something else along the way.

"Sir." Having seen how it's done, she appeals directly to the driver this time. "May I sit outside?"

He looks down at her quizzically. The horses make restless preparatory noises, even move out a few steps before he reins them in.

"Sir," Abigail repeats. "Please, may I ride outside with you?"

He grins. "Well, why not, little lady? I'll be glad of the company."

"Careful, Jake," the stationmaster interjects. "She's one of Merrit's ladies. Bought and spoken for."

"Put her on up here."

Hands are at her waist, too familiar, and before she's quite ready she is propelled up onto the seat. Her bag is already inside; the stationmaster holds the coach door shut while somebody latches it from inside. The driver slaps the reins, the harnesses suddenly jingle, and the horses set off briskly.

They speed again along the straight brown road under the flat and deep blue sky. Abigail holds onto the railing with one hand and her bonnet with the other, and shouts to be heard over the clatter of the wheels. "How much longer till Greenwood?"

"Nightfall!" yells the driver, and for some reason winks at her. She's glad that the noise and his need to attend to the road limit conversation, because now, abruptly, thoughts of the husband awaiting her flood her mind. She sees him—visions of him, faceless, but with hard hands and body—in the shadow of every rock and cactus; shadows here are so acute they seem to have substance of their own. She hears him—voiceless, but saying her name—in the hoofbeats of the horses, the jangling rhythms of the harnesses and the driver's songs, the screeching of a bird so high and big it casts its own shadow over them, the hissing of the huge snake that without warning is stretched across the road.

*The bachelors are waiting for me they need me desperate for me they will tear me devour me change me with their teeth and hands and emptiness and eyes to see in the night and blood that runs warm or cold if I am there.*

"Got 'im!" exults the driver, and Abigail manages to brace herself enough to glance over her shoulder. On one side of the road writhes half of the thick, diamonded body, fangs bared; on the other side zigzags the tail end, rattles pointlessly whirring.

They pull into Greenwood on schedule: sunset is cold orange and red across a purple sky in front of them, and the moon is rising at their backs. Night falls so quickly here. The station is like a long low outcropping of the red-brown rock, and figures crisscross lamplight, throwing distorted shadows, making tangled sounds.

The moment the stage stops, Abigail gathers her skirts and starts to climb down. Rattles at her back sound a futile warning. Moonlight and lamplight fall in diamond patterns across her sleeves and the backs of her hands.

A man's cheerful voice at her shoulder, the businesslike rustle of papers. "Abigail McKinley?"

"Yes." This must be Andrew Merrit. She wouldn't have recognized him, but he does bear some resemblance to the man on the horse who tapped at the front door of the Scarlet Slipper as if it were any other.

"Gentlemen." Mr. Merrit turns and she turns with him, skirts still bunched in her diamond-backed fist. Lined up in front of the station now are half a dozen or more men; with their backs to the lamplight and hat brims stopping most of the light from the moon, she can't see any face. "Gentlemen, may I present Miss Abigail McKinley, just in from Kansas."

Some of them repeat her name; she understands that much, although her ears seem to be shutting off sound. Then they begin to move toward her, and she sees what, for this night at least, they are:

A thin gray-haired man with a pointed snout and long canine teeth, pacing, fixing her with yellowish eyes.

One who looks too young to be here, sleek, cocky, laughter like the mating wail of a cat.

One with a beak of a nose, arms akimbo like wings, high-stepping toward her on taloned feet.

One squarish, furred, with hunched shoulders and a thick sharp odor.

*Nathaniel is dead Nathaniel is dead Nathaniel is dead*

Abigail coils and strikes.

END



## *The Rock*

**L**ike a creature in heat, the rock lay exposed on the muddy hillside above John Paul Clarke's luxury housing development. Years ago he'd designed and built this community, and he and Charlotte had raised their family in the flagship house. Now this huge rock had made itself known; he could feel its threatening and promising weight.

The rock had appeared a week ago, after exceptionally heavy spring rains had washed away the dirt around, over, and under it. That meant it had been there all along, under the surface, and John hadn't known. He liked that.

The rock was bigger than his daughter's Toyota and, after he'd been looking at it for a while, multicolored, multifaceted. It was obvious that the thing could come crashing down the slope at any time, but John had a hard time imagining it anywhere but where it had always been. He had a hard time imagining that anything in his life could fundamentally change; even Mara hadn't really changed his life, any more than the rest of them ever had.

With what John considered gratuitous attention to detail, the authorities had estimated that the rock weighed well over four thousand pounds, and that the paperwork to get it removed would require at least two weeks to complete. He regarded it now from his custom-built house directly downslope.

Sleep deprivation, overlaid with the mild state of sexual excitement that was constant these days, made him fantasize, briefly, that something important actually might happen to him in the next two weeks, something that would hold his interest.

The window in front of him was, of course, spotless. After thirty-six years of his pipe smoke, the fingerprints of children and grandchildren, and Los Angeles smog, Charlotte was an expert at keeping things clean. John respected and admired that. As he sipped at the drink in his hand and looked some more at the rock, it was possible to pretend that Charlotte's clear, clean glass wasn't there at all.

Since the emergence of the rock above his house, John had been hopefully noting freakish natural phenomena happening everywhere: blizzards in Texas, floods in Iran and drought in the Ukraine, tidal waves and earthquakes, meteorites and hurricanes and long-dormant volcanoes suddenly erupting. Faintly, he kept hoping that all this *meant* something, that the world might be building up to some great change, cataclysmic and miraculous. He'd lived long enough to have taken note before of unsettled times like this, and nothing had ever come of them, but he always hoped.

"We live in exciting times," he'd said to Mara just last night. He said that to all the girls—not a line, exactly, but a way of intensifying their interest in him and his in them.

From this angle, the rock nearly filled the window. Another drop of rain, another breath of ocean breeze, some mysterious shifting of its lover earth, and John thought the rock might come tumbling down. The authorities weren't willing to predict who exactly would be in danger; they were, in fact, refusing to admit that there was any but the most infinitesimal possibility of danger at all. But John calculated, and calculated again, that his house lay directly in its path.

The west side of the house, at his back now, faced the ocean. In fact, it was built out over the beach, and by now fully a third of it was supported by nothing more than heavy steel stilts with the sand steadily eroding under them. Observing and measuring the erosion of the foundation of his house made John feel as if he were standing at the edge of a cliff or just now discovering another pretty girl.

Years ago—long before Mara had started coming to him in the night, long before he'd met Susan; the name of the girl then had been Denise: lank blond hair, gray eyes, rose perfume—John had had the entire west wall glassed, to bring the ocean right into the house. He'd known Charlotte would hate it, and she did. She'd always despised the ocean. Like him, she'd been born and raised in Ohio, where things for the most part stayed *still*; unlike him, she hadn't wanted to leave. And, besides, she was the one with all that glass to clean.

Lately, she would hardly go into that part of the house at all, except to clean. She'd moved her bedroom into their sons' old room in the northeast corner of the house, where it was most tucked into the hill. John visited her there once a week or so; when he woke up in her room he always felt vaguely claustrophobic and bored. He hadn't been to her room now since the rock had appeared, Mara had started coming to disturb his sleep; he knew Charlotte was hurt, and scared by this demonic thing that had emerged from her safe hills, but he was just too tired all the time.

Mara had appeared the same day as the rock. He'd been standing in the twilight rain on the east side of his house, looking at the rock, thinking how the landscape had fundamentally changed in the last twenty-four hours, and wondering how long it would be before the rock became so familiar that no one noticed it anymore. A drink in one hand and a joint in the other, he'd been just starting to get high and enormously missing Susan, when he saw the rock move.

Then he saw that it was a lovely young woman coming toward him down the hill. From this distance she was imposing—very tall, it seemed, very broad-shouldered. He was directly in her path. She was running, sliding in the mud; through the slight haze of the booze and the weed, John thought for a moment that she'd fallen and was rolling down the slope, as if the rock itself had dislodged. He squinted quickly and assured himself that the rock was still there, silhouetted against the darkening sky, and the girl was standing close to him, warm, smelling of earth and musk.

"Hi," she said. "You're John Paul Clarke."

"Hi," he said. "Yes."

He hadn't asked her name, but she said anyway, "My name is Mara."

"A pretty name for a pretty lady," he said, which was what he always said, and, to some degree, it was always true. John had never met a young woman he didn't find attractive.

Up close, Mara was no taller than he was, and only ordinarily pretty. She was wearing almost nothing, some sort of coarsely woven, diaphanous thing that seemed to dissolve when he touched her. And he touched her right away because she demanded it; she stepped up to him, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him deeply. Her skin had an odd, gritty texture that John found extremely erotic. Her tongue coaxed him as if she'd known him for a long time, and as if she'd always be a stranger. She had large, firm breasts with wonderful nipples as sharp as chips of mica; he'd always been a tit man.

That first time, they'd made love at the foot of the hills. He'd never done that before. He'd seduced lots of girls on the beach, of course; it was so romantic. And so risky: Charlotte could look out the glass walls and see them—for that reason among many others he'd been disappointed when she

moved her bedroom—and it would have been a little distressing for a man of his position to be arrested by the beach patrol for indecent exposure or contributing to the delinquency of a minor. Sometimes he thought about getting his picture in the paper because of some young girl instead of a housing development or a philanthropic project, and it made him grin.

Making love with Mara among the hills had been a totally new experience. Other girls were attracted to him, because of his money or because he knew how to treat a lady, but Mara was hot for him, nearly insatiable. Afterwards he must have fallen asleep in the mud and loosening brush, because he'd awakened hours later confused, nauseous, and still aroused; Mara had been gone then, but she had come back.

The ocean was one of the things that had drawn John out of the Midwest to Southern California. Other lures were the San Andreas Fault and its less famous tributaries, the summer canyon fires and spring mudslides, the La Brea tar pits where saber-toothed tiger fossils had been neatly landscaped into Hancock Park behind the L.A. County Museum, the imported palm trees and channelized rivers that locals now took for granted as part of the natural landscape. And under it all, the lulling, deceptive, ironically pleasant climate.

John couldn't imagine a better place to live, although he'd been tempted by the Pacific Northwest after Mt. St. Helens. Now, finally, this boulder had worked itself up out of the ground to threaten everything he'd worked for, and at the same time Mara had emerged in his life.

There she was now, walking toward him along the beach. She was naked. Her breasts were magnificent; the aureoles glowed. Her pubic hair grew in two wonderful wings across the tops of her inner thighs, and it glistened like the undergrowth on the hills after a rain.

John set his empty glass down and went outside to meet her. By the time he got there she was already up on the deck, leaning back over the railing as close as she could get to the exposed edge. In fact, he saw suddenly that both her feet—perfectly curved, the toenails painted silver, sand glittering silver in the hollows of her ankles—were dangling in midair, so that she was supporting herself only by her elbows and her bare hips against the redwood rails. A breath of wind, a subtle shifting of the structure under her, and she might fall.

He rushed to catch her. Her body filled his arms, more than filled them, and her mouth ground along the vulnerable hollow of his clavicle, making him think of the trenches that appeared on the surface of the hill after a mudslide. Those marks never lasted long.

Heart thundering, John turned his head and gasped for air while still holding her as close as he could. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you."

"But my wife—"

"Might see us," Mara whispered. She was rubbing herself so hard against him that his chest hurt. "Might find out. Yes." She laughed.

Clutching each other, her hand around his penis and his under her breast, they half-tumbled down the open stairway and rolled in their own small avalanche among the stilts that kept John's house from washing into the sea. The sand gave way. Mara lowered herself on top of him. The muscles of her vaginal canal tightened around his penis; she pressed her fists against his chest as she moved herself more and more rapidly up and down, up and down. When she came she wailed, then flung herself forward and covered his open mouth with hers so that he couldn't breathe, couldn't cry out, was hardly aware of his own orgasm except as a sudden and nearly total draining. He was sure he heard Charlotte moving around in the house over his head.

Mara removed her mouth from his, released his now limp and sore penis, crawled out from under the house, and was gone. John missed her already and, at the same time, was relieved to see her go. This time he followed her a short distance and tried to watch where she went; she ran easily up the muddy hillside to the crest where the rock was, and then he couldn't see her anymore.

It took enormous, almost painful effort to get himself out from under the house, dressed, and back up the swaying stairs. There was no sound from Charlotte's room, and, when he went into the living room and peered anxiously eastward, the rock was still there.

Early that first morning of its appearance, before the mini-cam crews and the tourists had found it and before the authorities had taken steps to protect the public by putting up a chicken-wire fence, John had climbed the slope. It had been years since he'd done anything so physical, other than making love. It took him a long time to reach the rock; he was quickly winded, and his feet kept slipping in the mud, and there were no firm handholds.

Up close, the rock wasn't especially imposing. When he'd laid his palms on it, the surface had been wet and gritty. When he'd leaned against it, even pushed at it and kicked around its base, it had given no signs of wanting to move. But John noticed scores of smaller rocks scattered below him, and the slope was trenched. He'd shivered pleasantly, patted the rock as if it were a pretty girl's rump, clambered and slid back down, and gone on his way to work.

"Hey, Mr. Clarke." The girl Tammy had approached him again that morning. "You said you'd get me into school."

Tammy worked in his Santa Monica office. He'd noticed her right away, and both Charlotte and Mara had noticed that he'd noticed; Charlotte pouted, and Mara had been visiting him several times a night with a furious sensuality that had almost drained him of any interest in anybody else. But Tammy had long red hair and fine legs which she showed off to every advan-

tage; he guessed he was a leg man, too. And she treated him as if he were powerful, as if he could do things for her, some of which he probably could; he could not be expected to resist a pretty girl in need.

When he put his hand on Tammy's shoulder, he saw the quick hard light in her eyes and interpreted it as a signal of mutual understanding and respect. Each of them had something the other wanted; John never had seen anything wrong with that. Over the years he'd made a sort of study of the signs of respect, so he could never be accused of misinterpreting.

John respected respect, and he respected the girls he got involved with. He tried never to think of these exchanges in terms of barter and price, although he knew, sadly, that other people did. Sometimes—his hand on the belly of a girl he'd watched and wanted for a long time, his head between the legs of a girl he'd barely met—John's gratitude would be so intense and his excitement so fervent that he was impotent.

He never had that trouble with Mara; she wouldn't allow it. Often she woke him out of a sound sleep and then stayed with him the rest of the night; sometimes, waiting for her, he couldn't fall asleep in the first place. Even when he was so tired and spent that he could barely feel his body or hers anymore, even when he begged or ordered her in all seriousness to stop, he'd never once failed to respond to her. To her kisses, her tongue and teeth. To her touch, long sharp nails and slender fingers that stroked, massaged, pinched. To her moist labia and engorged clitoris and strong striated muscles contracting around him and pulling him in.

He'd been impotent more than once with Susan; at the time he'd thought it didn't matter. He'd thought both their love and their lovemaking were pure. He'd imagined that, when they walked together in public without touching, or when they sat up all night just talking over wine or hot chocolate, they were making love as surely and completely as when their bodies joined. Believing that he and Susan wanted nothing from each other but each other, he'd felt both free and compelled to promise her the world; it had never occurred to him that she would expect him to deliver.

"Why don't you and I go somewhere after work and talk about it?" he suggested now to Tammy, allowing his fingers to stray from her shoulder into her lovely hair. Maybe it was their hair that he noticed first. "I'm sure we can come up with something."

There was a silence, which John read as a deliberate pause for effect rather than a hesitation. This girl knew what she was doing, which pleased him as much as innocence in other girls had pleased him. When she said, "I can't tonight," he was surprised and disappointed, and he removed his hand from her hair. Then, quickly, she added, "But here, let me give you my home phone number. Maybe we can get together later in the week."

The rock was driving Charlotte crazy. She would sit for hours at her window and stare out at it, listen simultaneously to the radio and TV news updates, and periodically call the authorities to tell them they had to do something. She said it to John, too, repeatedly and with increasing bitterness which, he thought but did not say, did not become her. "Damn you, John Paul Clarke, you've got to *do* something."

"There's not a thing I can do," he pointed out with considerable satisfaction.

"You don't care about me! Our house will be destroyed! We'll be killed! That disgusting thing has no business in our lives!"

"Look, honey, there's no reason you should have to go through this. Why don't you go stay with your sister till it's all over?"

"I'm not going anywhere without you," she informed him grimly, and turned back to the window.

John sighed and took her in his arms. After a while, as always, she relaxed and leaned back against him, and he tenderly kissed her ear.

John Paul Clarke loved his wife. After thirty-six years of marriage and seven children, they had a lot in common, and he still recognized in her the comfort of the high school sweetheart waiting for him back home. He loved her. He was grateful to her. But she wasn't enough for him. He'd always considered that to be one of his virtues, although, since Susan, he'd become aware of a worrisome tinge of desperation.

"They're making fun of you!" Charlotte had yelled at him after his break-up with Susan, the pain of which still took his breath away. He had needed her support then and eventually she'd given it, but he'd had to be patient. "These girls, young enough to be your *granddaughters*! Everybody's laughing at you, John! And at me!"

"I didn't expect this to happen," he'd protested miserably. Charlotte had known about Susan from the beginning, as she'd known about all the others. While he didn't show home movies, he did believe in honesty. For some reason, he hadn't yet seen to it that she found out about Mara. "Not that I wouldn't have done it anyway. Not that I wouldn't do it again."

"She's young enough to be your granddaughter!" Charlotte had repeated furiously, as if that mattered. "For God's sake, John, what *did* you expect?"

So many times Susan had told him, "You're the best thing that ever happened to me," taking his face in her hands, burying her curly head in his lap.

After a while he'd worked up the courage to say, "I'm old enough to be your father. Your grandfather, actually. Doesn't that bother you?"

"*Bother* me? John Paul Clarke, don't you know that's one of the things I find so exciting about you? One of the reasons I love you so much?" And Susan would hide herself in his arms.

"What Susan and I had," he told Charlotte when it was over, "most people will never understand."

"Oh, I understand perfectly. You think you're the first middle-aged man to make a fool of himself over girls young enough to be his granddaughters?"

Then, and again now, John put his hands on Charlotte's shoulders and looked deeply into her eyes. She'd never been able to resist that for long. In her bed on the hill-side of the house, whose stability had now been proven a ruse, John made sweet, silent, familiar love to his wife, thinking of her, thinking of Susan, thinking of Mara and of the red-haired girl Tammy. He'd have enjoyed a glimpse of the rock through Charlotte's window, but she had her curtains drawn.

When they were finished he held her for a while, his thoughts pleasantly wandering. He'd always found it hard to think about Charlotte for very long at a time, but he did love her, and he told her so. When he kissed her good-night and left her, she was peacefully asleep.

Mara was waiting in his room. Moonlight and reflected moonlight highlighted her erect nipples, the undulation of her hip, her teeth. The longer he stared at her, the more he saw; her skin was multicolored, multifaceted, each facet catching the light in a subtly different way. He thought of her somehow as metamorphic: an amalgam of many different substances, taking on the properties of each and making them her own.

She came at him, fists upraised and legs spread. "You stay away from her! You belong to me!"

She pressed her open mouth hard over his and wrapped her arms and legs around him; her arms and legs were like stalactites and stalagmites, growing up and growing down. The force of her turned him around and pushed him against the glass wall, which bowed and creaked but held. Her mossy hair was matted across his face, so that he could breathe nothing but her, her sweet fragrance and faint foul odor.

His erection was immediate and huge. Although it had been a long time since Charlotte had entirely satisfied him, no other woman had ever been able to arouse him like this so soon after he'd made love to his wife. He was gratified, and a little taken aback.

The odd reflections off water, through glass, off Mara's many surfaces were making him dizzy. He tried to hold her head still so he could kiss her but she flung his hands away, then grabbed his wrists. Fleeting, John was afraid of her, which increased his excitement.

"You stay away from that woman, you hear me? All you'll ever need for the rest of your life is me!"

Assuming she was talking about Tammy, John said what he always said to Charlotte. "Honey, she's just a kid. She's no threat to us." Until Susan—until Mara—Charlotte had always believed that, and it had always been true.



"She's your *wife*!" Mara hissed. "Of course she's a threat to me, and you damn well better believe I'm a threat to her. You stay the hell away from her!"

John was shocked. To all the girls, he'd made it absolutely clear that he'd never leave Charlotte. His marriage and family were sacred to him, inviolable. His relationship with his wife was a thing apart from any relationship with anybody else. Even Susan had known that.

But he couldn't think of how to make it clear to Mara. His mind was full of her, hot and slowly swirling, as if she were lava. His body was full of her and aching to explode. He came and cried out, couldn't free himself from her, came and cried out again. He wasn't entirely sure when she left him or how; he knew she'd be back.

The next day he was sick, exhausted and achy, with upset stomach and pounding head. He stayed in bed and watched the syndicated talk shows, which periodically were interrupted by local news updates about the rock; the authorities were still debating whether the rock was really a danger to anyone, and if so what should be done. Charlotte brought him tea and soup, felt his forehead. He was vaguely grateful for her ministrations.

By late afternoon his head had cleared enough for him to get out of bed. Barefoot and in pajamas, he crossed to the glass wall of his room. The ocean looked the same as it always had; its very unpredictability was becoming predictable. Hazily, John worried—not for the first time in his life—that he'd missed something, was at this very moment missing something important and fascinating.

He fumbled into his robe and slippers and stumbled through the house to a west window, where he could see the rock. It looked unremarkable, as if it had always been part of the landscape—as, indeed, it had, although neither John nor anybody else had been aware of it. The sky was overcast, but it wasn't raining. He wished it would rain. He called for Charlotte but she didn't answer; he didn't know what he wanted from her anyway. There was no point in calling for Mara; she'd let him know when she was there.

Looking for his pipe in his coat pocket, he found instead the phone number for the girl Tammy, and, hardly thinking about it, dialed. Her father answered. "Good afternoon, sir," John said pleasantly. "This is John Paul Clarke. May I please speak to Tammy?" It took her a while to come to the phone. When she finally answered, John tingled with sudden renewed awareness of her youth and availability. "Hi, honey, how are ya?"

"Who is this?"

"This is John Paul Clarke." He'd expected her to be waiting for his call, to recognize his voice right away. He was pleased by this little surprise.

"Oh, Mr. Clarke."

"How are ya?"

"Fine."

"That's good, honey. I'm glad you're fine. Listen, I have a few ideas about your education that I'd like to share with you."

"Oh, really."

"Why don't you meet me at the Blue Room later tonight and we can discuss them. See if we can come up with anything we both find—interesting."

There was a pause. John guessed she was figuring, and he liked that about her. Thinking he heard footsteps close behind him, he turned eagerly, but Mara wasn't there yet. The girl Tammy said, "I can't drink yet, you know."

He chuckled knowingly. "No, not legally."

"I'm only nineteen."

"No problem. The bartender's a friend of mine."

"I don't want to get in trouble."

His resourcefulness was as hardy as ever. "Tell you what. There's no age limit on getting high. And I've got some fine weed." She said nothing, and he understood he was to take that as assent. "I'll meet you at nine o'clock at the Blue Room. You know where that is? You can get there okay?"

"Yeah."

He would try to be home when Mara came tonight, but if things progressed nicely with Tammy he had to be free to see them through. He'd missed kids' school concerts and business appointments that way; any number of times he'd been late for dinner. Charlotte and the kids got their feelings hurt sometimes, but they always accepted him for who he was. Business associates got annoyed, and he'd lost some money that way, but they also envied him his priorities. Mara would be furious. John was tired, and still a little sick, and more than a little uneasy, but he was also invigorated.

He had supper with Charlotte, a pleasant little interlude which she almost spoiled by pouting. He didn't let her spoil it. She was a good cook, if somewhat unimaginative; he complimented her on the roast, the potatoes, the peas, the pie, and told her how nice her hair looked since she'd had it done this last time. Everything he said was true; he respected women too much to lie to them. By the end of the meal she was giggling like a girl.

A shadow of worry crossed her face, aging her, when he turned on the TV after supper in the middle of a news break about the rock. Several jurisdictions were arguing now over whose responsibility it was, and rain was in the forecast. He told her not to worry. Her eyes glazed with tears when he told her he was going out. He kissed her and said he wouldn't be late, and she smiled a little. Charlotte was a good woman, a good wife. She knew he loved her very much.

Whistling, John strolled along the beach toward the Blue Room. The sky was dark blue, the darkest it ever got this close to the city. There were lights

everywhere, houses in the valley and up all the hills, planes across the sky. But from here and in the dusk he could no longer see the rock, not even its outline or its impression.

Thinking about the countless other times he'd walked this way to meet a young lady at the Blue Room—all of them before the rock, before Mara—he found himself unwillingly thinking of Susan. "You promised!" she'd accused him many times during the last painful, bewildering months of their relationship. "You promised you'd set me up in my own store."

"I meant to, honey. I still do. Things just haven't quite worked out yet." The truth was, he'd forgotten he'd ever said that.

"I think I've already paid you pretty well in advance for any favors, don't you? I don't think I owe you anything." She'd never again let him make love to her, directly or indirectly.

Tammy stood him up. He sat alone for a long time in the lounge of the Blue Room, drinking Scotch neat and chatting with the bartender, whose name he didn't know but who'd been there for years. They talked about whether there was really any threat from the rock. They talked about women. The bartender had seen him in here with Susan, of course, and with some of the others, even a few times with Charlotte. Never with Mara. When John finally sighed and got up to call Tammy, he and the bartender exchanged a knowing, comradely shrug.

The lobby was noisy and dim. He had to stand in line for the phone. As he dialed, he found himself glancing furtively over his shoulder and rehearsing what he'd say if Charlotte or even Mara appeared.

Tammy's father answered. It pleased John to be talking on the phone to the father of a pretty girl whom he wanted to bed, whom he also wanted to help. "Good evening, sir," he said pleasantly. "This is John Paul Clarke. May I speak with Tammy, please?"

"Just who the hell do you think you are?"

John blinked, and his heart speeded up. "Pardon?"

"You're old enough to be her grandfather, for Chrissake. You just leave her alone, Jack, you understand? If you call here again I'll call the cops."

"I don't understand—"

"Tammy tells me you've got daughters older than she is."

John said proudly, "Three of them."

"How would you feel if some dirty old sonofabitch asked them out?"

Stung by the man's continual and unnecessary use of the word "old," John nonetheless thought about the question, trying his best to be reasonable. He'd never considered it before. "I don't think I'd mind," he said truthfully. "It's up to them—"

"Where'd you get this number, anyway? It's unlisted."

"Tammy gave it to me."

"My daughter tells me you got it from her personnel file. Those files are supposed to be confidential."

"I'm afraid there's been some kind of misunderstanding here. This is John Paul—"

"I know who you are. Everybody knows who you are. My daughter's crying in her room right now because of you. She's afraid to go to work. She's afraid to walk home at night. Does that make you feel like a big man?"

"Afraid?" John was dumbfounded, and his voice broke. "There's certainly no reason—"

The man was shouting now. "Listen, you dirty bastard, you stay away from my daughter or I'll call the authorities and plaster your filthy name all over the papers. You think you're such a hot shot, how'd you like a little free publicity? Huh?"

"I don't—"

Tammy's father hung up. John stood there for a moment with the receiver in his hand. Then, somewhat dazed, he went back to the lounge for another, stronger drink.

His friend the bartender must have finished his shift. The man who served him his double was thirtyish, gay, and chatty. He flirted a little with John, and John felt himself responding to the attention and the possibility of adventure, but he retreated instead to a far shadowy corner of the lounge and settled down to think about rocks and women.

He had totally misread this girl. She had wanted something from him and had never intended to give him anything in return. She'd led him on. She hadn't respected him. He was losing his touch, couldn't trust his instincts anymore. He was getting old.

During those last desperate weeks with Susan when he'd known he was losing her, he'd sent her flowers every day. Yellow roses, pink carnations, orchids that looked artificial or inbred even when they weren't. Frantically he'd imagined how they must be filling her apartment with fragrance and color, and with sensual, unavoidable thoughts of him.

Susan had left him anyway, and he had no mementos. He'd burned all her letters and photographs, given away or returned all her gifts, and he hadn't seen or heard of her now in years. She could be married, for all he knew. She could have left town. She could be dead.

Suddenly aware of himself, a balding and brooding old man sitting alone over too many drinks in a singles' bar on a rainy night, John managed to finish his drink and stand up. The fatigue and fuzzy-headedness were nearly overwhelming. He left a generous tip, even though the handsome bartender had virtually ignored him all evening, and made his way between tables,

smiling and nodding in case there was anyone he knew or anyone he might care to know in the future, some pretty girl.

It seemed a long walk now to get home. He was sick with fatigue, and his thoughts and impressions were distorted—from the drinks, he supposed, although he'd always been able to hold his liquor. Another sign of age. The beach sand shifted all the time, making it hard to keep his balance and hard to tell whether he was making any real forward progress in any particular direction. One spot on the beach looked like any other—the scallops of waves, footprints opening and closing, an indistinct pattern of land and water and land becoming water. Many lights had been turned off, apparently at random, so he couldn't use them to orient himself. He couldn't quite make out his own house, or the tasteful arrangement of streetlights he'd designed into the development. He couldn't tell where the edge of the ocean was; no matter how far he moved to his left, which he was sure was away from the water, his shoes kept getting wet. He couldn't see the rock at all.

Frightened, lonely, so tired he could hardly move, John yearned to be home. He would sleep all night tonight with Charlotte, his beloved wife.

Hands came around his neck from behind. John gasped, struggled to pull them away, and knew it was Mara. The instant he recognized her—strong rough hands with those erotically long nails, husky voice whispering fiercely, "I told you, you belong to *me*!"—his body responded. His breath came short and heavy. His flesh tingled. His penis hardened and rose. Through the fatigue and nausea and confusion which still enveloped him, the only urge of which he was fully aware was desire for her, desire for Mara. He wanted her. He yearned for her. He needed to be inside her, surrounded by her, possessed by her. He could not live without her.

She was riding him, like a child or a monkey, like a demon; her long legs clutched his pelvis, her long arms encircled his chest. She was kissing and biting the back of his neck. She was arching her back and pressing her groin into his spinal column; he could feel the electrical warmth and wetness of her through his clothes, through his flesh.

He cried out and collapsed under her. She was thrown off him. In the split second before she lunged at him again, muttering his name like an imprecation, he thought wildly of Charlotte, thought of passersby, of the police, of the rock.

Then Mara was on him, and she was all there was. "You are *mine*!" she breathed, hot and sweet into his open mouth.

She tore off his clothes with her teeth and nails and flung them aside to be eroded with the sand. She broke his skin. She sucked his fingertips, his nipples, his penis until they ached, and she bit into his tongue. He ejaculated onto the sand, then turned his head and vomited. Waves lapped all around

him, washing away what he'd emptied, and he heard Mara panting and laughing. Then she was on him again.

"You don't need anybody else! You aren't *fit* for anybody else! I've marked you for my own!"

Without much effort she pulled him over on top of her; she was strong, and by the time he thought about resisting it was too late. She raised her pelvis hard into him. Although he'd have sworn he had no strength or energy and little desire left, he found himself thrusting. Her breasts and buttocks swelled in his hands, their surfaces gritty. When he climaxed this time, he buried his face in her exquisite, monstrous breasts. Salt water and wet sand seeped into his mouth and nose and ears, into all his body orifices, until he knew he was drowning or being split apart.

"You're *mine*," she told him again, and he believed her. Her tongue filled his mouth until he was sure he would choke, and then she was gone.

Eventually John's senses cleared enough that he could use them, and enough strength returned to his muscles that he could crawl out of the water, find his torn and dirty shirt and pants, and struggle into them. Peering dazedly around, he finally realized that he was under his own house. The steel stilts stood around him like distortions from a nightmare, neither their shapes nor their function clear. The ocean lapped, and, behind and above the opacity of his house, where he couldn't see it, the rock was still there.

Unless it had come down. If it had let loose and come crashing down its slope while he was making love with Mara just now, he might well not have known. As far as he could tell from here, his house was intact, but he had a terrifying detailed image of the hidden east wall ravaged, Charlotte crushed alone in her bed.

Swaying dangerously, missing more than one step, John climbed the teetering stairway and let himself into the house. The floor seemed stable enough, but that could be an illusion; he tried to be careful where he stepped and how he distributed his weight. "Charlotte!" he called, but there was no answer.

He made his way cautiously through the halls and rooms. The house seemed oddly skewed now; he wasn't sure where steps would be, which room came next, or where there would be windows. Lights had been left on for him, and he was grateful. He caught sight of his reflection again and again in all the dark glass, looking different every time, and when he tried to avert his eyes from it the vertigo was so intense that he nearly vomited.

In the far northeast corner of the house, tucked into the traitorous hills, Charlotte's room was dark. She'd long ago stopped waiting up for him, and now he was sorry about that. As always, though, her door was ajar, a signal for

him to come in if he wanted to. Dizzy now from the relief of being almost home, he pushed her door open without knocking.

Someone was with her. A shape loomed over the bed. In the bed.

His first thought, ludicrously, was that the rock had in fact hurtled off its hillside and somehow lodged in Charlotte's bed.

Then he thought of Mara. She could well be waiting for him here, in his wife's bed, determined to make her possession of him complete. She could have hurt Charlotte. He could be too late.

But then, as he forced himself into the room, he heard the raspy breathing and his wife's panting, smelled the male musk, saw the enormous erect penis and her spread legs, and knew that Charlotte had taken a lover.

"You belong to me!" the intruder was shouting at Charlotte, murmuring to her. The voice was deep, rough, masculine, a stranger's voice but oddly familiar to John. "You'll never need another man for the rest of your life! You'll never be fit for another man! You're mine!"

John cried, "No!" and lunged forward. The room tilted, there was a roaring in his ears like an avalanche or an orgasm, and he was on Charlotte's bed at the moment her lover entered her. Sinewy hands kneaded her breasts not inches from John's eyes. The hungry mouth sucked at her ears, at the hollows of her neck. The engorged penis thrust in and out of her so close to John that their tangled pubic hair brushed his own penis, which was uselessly erect again and hurting. The room reeked of all their odors. Charlotte moaned as she came, a long shuddering orgasm unlike any John had ever known her to have.

The intruder took his hand away from Charlotte to caress John. The rough fingers lid down the slopes of his body, making the flesh tingle as if it had been trenched. John was horrified to find himself aroused, hard, pushing himself as close as he could. The intruder took his mouth away from Charlotte to whisper John's name. The intruder turned his face so that John could see, and it was Mara's face.

John passed out. Charlotte must have fallen asleep, satiated or unable to make sense of what had happened except by calling it a dream. They awoke to gray morning light and the chatter of news on Charlotte's clock radio, reporting on the unchanged status of the rock. They lay silently in each other's arms; John thought of many things to say, but was afraid of them all. They heard the rain when it began again and held each other closer.

By nine o'clock the authorities were declaring that the required paperwork had been completed ahead of schedule, permits would be issued momentarily, and the rock could now be moved. By noon a crane had arrived at the foot of the hill. Workers in yellow slickers like uniforms were attaching guy wires

around the rock's girth and to any protrusions that might hold. Wrapped in a quilt, his head and groin throbbing and his stomach queasy, John watched, while in her bed behind him Charlotte turned her face to the wall. The odor of Charlotte's lover was still thick in the room, and John smelled Mara heavy and sweet all over him.

The rock refused to budge. In the steady drizzle the workers pulled and pried, the crane spun its wheels, the ropes and guy wires strained and creaked, and nothing moved except a few clots of mud careening foolishly down the slope. Newscasts began reporting that unexpected complications had developed.

Charlotte refused to get out of bed. Finally, dragging his quilt behind him, John went barefoot to the phone. "This is John Paul Clarke. I'd like to speak to someone in charge of the rock." He was put on hold. When the next girl finally came on the line, he tried to imagine her sweet, young face as he repeated, "This is John Paul Clarke. I'd like to speak to someone in charge of the rock, please."

"Which rock, sir?"

John was amazed. "The two-ton boulder that has been threatening Ocean Hills. Surely you've heard of it."

"Maybe I can help you."

"Are you in charge of the rock?" he asked skeptically. She sounded so young.

"No one is really *in charge* of it, sir, but a number of departments are involved. May I help you?"

"I want to buy it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"When they finally get it off the hill, I want to buy it. Whole or in pieces." Charlotte had turned over to stare at him. He smiled at her.

"Well, sir, I'm not sure it's for sale. I mean, it's a *rock*. It's probably public property. *Buy* it, sir?"

"Money is no object."

"One moment, please." He was put on hold again. The next girl sounded a little older. He cleared his throat. "This is John Paul Clarke. I want to speak to someone in charge of the rock, please."

"Well, Mr. Clarke, of course no one is exactly *in charge* of the rock," she told him. He could practically hear her taking notes. "If you can tell me a little more specifically what you need, maybe I can direct you to the right department."

It took him a long time to get through. Nobody wanted to take responsibility. Once he had to hang up to run to the bathroom and vomit, and then he had to start all over again with the girl who answered the phone first and who didn't remember having spoken to him before. Finally he spoke with



someone who gave him an appointment with someone who might know something about the rock, and wearily he left his name and hung up and went back to Charlotte's bed. Charlotte welcomed him silently, put her arms around him.

The rock finally came down the hill as the cloudy sky over the ocean was darkening for the night; the hillside was already in shadow. Intact, it wouldn't budge; they had to break it up to get it loose, and John's house trembled on its stilts.

Once begun, the rock's descent was quick and simple. In just a few minutes, its pieces lay at the foot of the hill as if they'd always been there, and the drizzle had already smoothed the crest of the hill and the slope so that there were no scars.

When John started to put on his raincoat and hat, Charlotte said, "You're not going out there."

"The rock's gone, honey. There's no danger anymore."

"It's rainy and dark. You'll get lost. You'll catch your death. Stay here with me. Let the authorities take care of the pieces in the morning."

"I'm not going far. I won't stay out long."

"At least put your boots on." He smiled gratefully at her and did as she said.

By the time he got out there, most of the workers had left. Two men, their yellow hats and slickers faded to gray in the gloomy twilight, were unrolling a chicken-wire fence. John hailed them and one looked up while the other kept pounding a stake into the soft ground.

"Excuse me!" John called again. His feet slipped as he hurried toward them, and he was glad he'd worn boots. "Excuse me, what are you doing?"

The stake wouldn't hold in the mud. The worker swore and pulled it out, tried again a few inches away. "Fencing it off," said the worker nearer John. He tested the give of the wire against his partner's stake. When it held, barely, he began to back up, with the wire unrolling crookedly in front of him.

John followed him. "Why?"

The man shrugged. "Don't ask me. Keep people away from it, I guess, till somebody decides what to do with it."

"What damage could anybody do to it now?"

"Hey, I just work here, ya know?"

Some chunks of the rock had scattered very close to the east wall of John's house. He couldn't remember precisely where his property line was, but he was sure the pieces of rock and the fence were in his backyard. He was suddenly aware that his right foot was damp; it made him feel sorry for himself and very vulnerable to imagine a hole in his boot. "My name is John Paul Clarke," he began. "I live here. I built this development. I have—made arrangements to buy the rock."

The man shook his head impatiently, spraying drops of rain from his hat brim into John's face. "I don't know nothin' about that. All I want to do is get this fence up and get outta here."

"It's not a very solid fence," John said unhappily.

'Yeah, well, I think it'll probably keep the rock from escaping, ya know?"

By the time John had trudged the short distance back to his door, his foot was soaked. Charlotte helped him get his useless boot and wet sock off, and tucked him into her bed with pillows, the paper, and hot tea. He was drowsy. Outside, the workers kept calling to each other longer than he expected, and he decided they probably were dreams by now. Whenever he was aware of dozing off, he pulled himself awake, afraid that Mara or Charlotte's lover would appear. It wasn't until Charlotte came into bed and put her arms around him that he let himself fall asleep, as though they could protect each other.

He slept through the night, and was awakened by the telephone. Bright sunshine outlined Charlotte's heavy curtains; it had stopped raining. He remembered the harmless chunks of rock, remembered the fence, reminded himself that Mara had not come in the night. He answered the phone quietly, trying not to wake Charlotte, but cheerily. "Good morning. This is John Paul Clarke."

"Hi, Mr. Clarke."

It was the voice of a young girl, and John grinned. "Hi there. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"This is Tammy. Don't you recognize me?"

"I'm sorry, honey. It's early in the morning."

She giggled, a nice sound. "It's almost noon."

He giggled, too. He didn't remember the last time he'd slept with Charlotte till noon. "How are ya, honey?"

She took an audible breath before she answered. "I'd like to see you. I miss you. Could we get together tonight?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Oh, I'm sorry, but my wife and I have plans."

"Well, how about some other night this week? My parents are out of town."

He felt the excitement low in his belly, but ignored it. Charlotte looked to be still asleep, but he suspected, fondly, that she was pretending. "I'll be in to work tomorrow," he said as gently as he could to Tammy. "Why don't you make an appointment to see me? Say about ten o'clock, if I don't have something else on my calendar. Check with my secretary in the main office."

There was a silence. Then she said in a small, furious voice, "Sure," and hung up.

He felt bad that he'd hurt her feelings. He regretted the obvious opportunity he was missing. But as he got out of bed and made his way very quietly

to the windows, parted the curtains a little and squinted into the sun, he also felt freed.

Pieces of the rock were scattered all over the hillside. There were many more of them than John had imagined, all different shapes and sizes and colors. The wire fence had sunk onto its side, and two of the rock chunks—one the size of a beachball and nearly orange, the other considerably smaller and mottled orange and gray—had worked their way the last few inches downslope and were resting against the east wall of his house.

He caught his breath. He saw movement where the rocks lay against his foundation. A hand reached up between them, silhouetted against the sunny sky: long fingers, erotically long nails. Waving at him. Beckoning him. Closing threateningly into a fist.

John dropped the curtain, and the room dimmed again except for the streaks of sunlight under and between the curtains. Charlotte stirred, pulled a pillow over her head. John stood there uncertainly for long minutes, watching her, then pulled on his robe and left the room.

He went out the east door and stood in the narrow space between the wall and the collapsed fence. The two orangish chunks of rock he'd seen from Charlotte's window were at the far end of the house; he saw no movement there now, no hand, and he let out his breath and shook his head at the tricks of an old man's mind.

"John."

John started and looked around, saw no one. But the hoarse, broken voice came again, rattled his name from a pile of rubble just on the other side of the bowed wire. He squinted in that direction and saw a head heave itself out of the pile and splat into the mud. Long thick hair like uprooted brush. Rough skin catching the sun on many fractured planes. It was Mara's face, and the face of Charlotte's lover.

Taking a few unwilling, unsteady steps toward the head, John slipped and fell onto the fence. Wire scratched his flesh like fingernails. He peered at the ground and saw a penis hard as granite, labia like veins of ore.

He struggled to get to his feet, but the ground was slippery and shifting, and the fatigue had returned. He crawled frantically toward his door, then realized he wasn't headed in the direction of the house at all, but eastward, toward the rock-strewn hills, up the slope. He couldn't stop himself. A tooth lodged in his palm. A pebble like a tongue had entered the fly of his pajamas and was caressing his scrotum.

He forced himself to turn around. He was sure he was going downslope, back toward his house, when Mara's call confused him again. "Don't go away, John. You belong to me."

Mara's magnificent breasts swelled out of the slope just ahead of him, aureoles glittering and nipples erect. He cried out and collapsed between them.

Then there was a rumbling like the building of an orgasm, and the ground quivered under him. John managed to lift his face from Mara's breasts enough to see the rock—intact, huge, multicolored and multifaceted—rolling down the hill. His penis hardened in anticipation.

"I love you, John. You're *mine!*"

END

## *The Co-op*

**T**he din of the children in the basement rec room had been a white noise in the middle ground all afternoon, with occasional thunderous white-water surges like this one. Somebody was wailing, and two or three other piercing little voices were threatening to *tell*.

Outside was real water, rain in the streets, and more voices like water. A crowd was filling Cascadilla Street and, Julie supposed, the other streets of Ithaca, and flood waters were rising.

Steadying the baby against her body, where even in sleep she nuzzled for the breast, Julie started to get up to investigate the commotion in the basement. It was her house, and she'd noticed that up to a point everyone in the co-op parented everyone else's children. She liked that sense of community; it was one of the things, along with a need to be with other mothers who knew what she was going through, that had made her join the babysitting co-op the minute there'd been an opening.

But Diane, swearing, beat her to the basement door. Diane was tall, broad-shouldered, and obese, yet somehow she seemed emaciated; the many cracks and crevices in her flesh looked deep and gray, and there was always a sour odor about her. Three of the kids downstairs were Diane's, Julie thought, or

four; unsuccessfully, she tried to remember their names or even which ones they were. Diane's voice carried even when she was engaged in ordinary conversation, and just now she was shrieking at the kids before she was even fully out of her chair, competing with their noise but not noticeably diminishing it.

Julie frowned. She didn't like the way Diane talked to children, her own or anyone else's. That wasn't the way mothers should be. Mothers should be like Julie's mother: loving their children, loving motherhood, tired and cranky only once in a while. That was the kind of mother Julie wanted desperately to be, but it wasn't easy, in the middle of the night when Megan wouldn't stop crying no matter what Julie did, or when she bit her breast, Julie was sure on purpose.

Her mother had never felt about her the way she often felt about Megan. Her mother had never said awful things to her, or wanted to hurt her, or wished she had never been born. Julie would never be as good a mother as her own mother had been.

But when she looked around her, no one else was, either, and this town fairly teemed with mothers and children. Everywhere she went, especially since Megan had been born, she saw them, was pulled into the milling crowds they formed. On the streets, in the stores, in the wet green parks of this town, mothers screamed mindlessly at their children or mindlessly ignored them, and the children howled and played and scratched at windows. Julie and her sisters had never acted like that.

Linda was talking to her. "Well, all I can say is, you better enjoy her while you can."

She'd said that before. Julie smiled somewhat vaguely and put a spoonful of Diane's orange Jell-O into her mouth. She was startled to discover something gooey in the middle and for a moment was afraid to know what it was. But then she knew, and it was only cream cheese.

Cautiously, she let the Jell-O dissolve inside her mouth. It left a thick film of cream cheese on her palette, like skin. Suddenly she was imagining that the cream cheese was fleshlike, and then it was hard to swallow.

Outside it was still raining; she was constantly aware of the rain. It rained a lot in central New York state, which might be why all the mothers she knew here had such pale and wet-looking skin. Julie glanced sadly at the fading watchband stripe around her own wrist; since the baby had been born she hadn't been able to catch even what few hours of sunshine there'd been.

This house they'd moved into on Cascadilla Street was long and narrow, like a coffin. From where she sat now, Julie could sight along the pinkish-brown living room wall, which had tiny dots in it like pores; along the kitchen wall with its bulbous cream-colored flowers; and out the high windows that overlooked Cascadilla Street. The streets and the sidewalks were

slimy with rainwater; the crowds were without umbrellas, because they were used to this weather. The green of the trees was nearly black, and they dripped with coagulated precipitation; leaves curled like lips, exposing their pale undersides. There were rivers and lakes and streams and gulches everywhere around here, like exposed veins or hungry stretched mouths; it hadn't surprised Julie, though it had made her shudder, to learn that Cornell had one of the highest suicide rates of any campus in the country, particularly in the spring when the beckoning gulches were layered with heart-red and tongue-pink rhododendron.

Linda was still talking. "Like my mother always said, and of course I wouldn't listen to her, it only gets worse as they get older."

"I can hardly wait." The intended sarcasm was undercut by a real excitement, a real eagerness to see her daughter grow up, which made Julie feel terribly vulnerable. She managed to swallow the last of the orange-flavored cream cheese, though it left a gummy patina on her tongue and on the backs of her teeth. Gelatin, she suddenly remembered, was made from cows' and horses' hooves; she wondered whether that was still true or whether nowadays it was chemically constructed, and didn't know which she would prefer.

"This is great potato salad," Linda said. The whitish chunks of boiled potato and egg in her mouth looked like broken teeth. "Who made the potato salad this time?"

"I did," Julie admitted, almost shyly. She didn't know any of the co-op mothers very well yet, but they'd all been nice to her, and Linda especially had taken her under her wing.

"Great potato salad."

"Thanks."

"Nobody ever listens to their mamas about kids," Yolanda declared. Three-bean-salad juice dribbled from the corner of her mouth, looking like brown blood across her white lipstick and oddly colorless dark brown skin. When she wiped it off with a crumpled white napkin, it left a stain among other stains, and Julie looked away. "My mama had eight kids before she was thirty," Yolanda was saying. "She *knew* what she was talking about. But did I listen? Did any of us listen? I got six kids myself, and my oldest sister's got *twelve*!"

"Twelve children!" Julie whispered to her baby. "Twelve little monsters like you!"

In her lap, Megan was asleep, tiny fists balled at her ears and tiny jagged mouth wide open. Julie slid her index finger gently into the infant's mouth. She could just feel the minuscule ridges along the gum line where before long teeth would erupt. She'd heard that some babies were born with teeth.

Softly she rubbed at her daughter's nascent teeth, as though to push them back down. The baby opened her eyes, focused them directly on her, and

clamped her mouth shut around her mother's finger. Though there were no teeth yet for biting or tearing her flesh, the baby's sucking was so strong that it hurt, and when she took her finger back it didn't come easily. Julie felt a little thrill of maternal horror.

In a sudden panic, she yanked her hand away. Too hard: her daughter's head twisted to one side, and she howled. Julie bent guiltily to kiss her, tasted the salt tears and the sweet-sour baby flesh. Fear that she had hurt her child, remorse that she had wanted to, clouded her thoughts like the fatigue that had been with her since the baby's birth. She was, she thought suddenly and clearly, being eaten alive.

"My mama died when I was seventeen of acute anemia. Like us kids sucked the blood right out of her. Like we just ate her right up."

Linda nodded. "That's how it is when you have kids. It's a matter of survival. Them or you."

"My mama did not know how to protect herself," Yolanda said sadly. "The doctors told her to eat raw liver, but she couldn't do it."

A small red-haired woman named Kathy or Katie wrinkled her nose and made a delicate gagging sound. Kathy's skin was so fair that it seemed barely to cover her flesh, and the makeup around her nose and mouth was grainy. She had an odd, halting way of speaking, as if she could hardly remember one word after the next. Her blond hair was firmly sprayed, but it still straggled around her face and neck so that it looked as if it were falling out, and her chipping nails had been painted with thick variegated polish, as if to hold them together. Her entire face and body looked rebuilt, reconstituted for viewing. "Probably," she said in her breathy voice to Yolanda, "it was—" She paused for a long time before she could collect her thoughts. "—stress that killed her. Stress and fatigue and—" She stopped, ground her teeth across her lower lip. "—and not knowing where she stopped and her children began."

"Occupational hazards of motherhood," Annette observed, and a glob of coleslaw slid out of her mouth onto the front of her gray business suit. Apparently she didn't notice, since she made no move to clean it off. Annette had announced at the beginning of the co-op meeting that she'd have to leave early for a lunch appointment; Julie tried to imagine her making corporate decisions with coleslaw and baby spittle patterning her vest. "It's certainly done us all in."

"Not all yet," Linda said. "Julie still looks alive." She patted Julie's knee.

"I love my child," Julie said automatically. Megan was crying again, but half-heartedly now, and there were no tears, only noise.

"We all do," Linda said.

"You know all—those things you swore you'd never—say to your kids?" Kathy passed a hand over her face, jagged fingertips massaging at her own flesh as though she had a headache. She was sitting in the pale blue bar of



light cast by the fluorescent fixture over the sink, and her teeth looked fluorescent themselves, and sharp. "I can't—help it. All that—stuff just flows out of my—mouth like milk flows out of your—breast when your—when your baby's born. I—can't help it."

"She's forgetting the words," Linda explained to Julie, quietly but with no real attempt not to be overheard. "We all do that sometimes, but Kathy's been at it longer than the rest of us. She's one of the organizers of the co-op. Her children are all grown. Her mind is going."

"Sometimes I have fantasies about these awful things I'd like to do to my kids," Annette said conversationally. "So far I haven't done anything really awful, but only because they'd take my broker's license if I did."

"I swore I'd never—" Kathy closed her eyes and allowed a long painful pause before she finally managed, "spank. Or—eat. I swore I'd never do—what my mother did to me. But I do."

Yolanda nodded. "I swore none of that would ever happen to me."

"Well," someone said, "at least *you* didn't die of acute anemia, did you?"

"Close. Even though I did eat raw meat. Still do, right?" There were some knowing chuckles around the room. Julie's stomach churned, and indignantly she demanded, "Why'd you all have kids if you don't like raising them?"

Megan was regarding her with a murky blue gaze. Julie often wondered what she saw. Part of the baby's self, probably. An extension of her own mouth and her own bowel and her own lungs. A gigantic umbilical cord attaching the world to Megan.

Julie wondered if Megan would always see her like that. She thought of her own mother, emptied now by Alzheimer's, but still sometimes able to make fried chicken and chocolate chip cookies better than anybody.

Suddenly she realized that the lanky and very pregnant young woman on the sofa next to Yolanda, with even darker skin and an underlying pallor thick as chalk, must be Yolanda's daughter. Embarrassed by what she'd said about Yolanda and the others not wanting children, Julie added feebly, "I mean, six kids are *a lot*, no matter how much you love them."

"Actually," Yolanda said, "I had seven. One died."

Julie caught her breath. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, well, that's the only reason I'm here to tell about it. One more would've done me in for sure. There'd have been nothing left of me for the others. So the baby died for a good cause. 'She gave her life that others might live.' Right, Regina?"

She reached to pat the tall girl's hand, then her huge belly. Regina's coppery gaze, flat as the pennies on the eyes of a corpse, followed her mother's hand, and her lips pulled back from her teeth a little as if she couldn't control the muscles of her face. She said nothing.

Distant thunder shook the house in a regular beat like a pulse, and rained against the windows. Carefully cradling Megan against her own impulse to drop her, Julie got awkwardly to her feet and walked through the line of rooms to the windows. Cascadilla Street was filling up with water and with people; she could see that the crowd was entirely made up of mothers and children, some few of them garbed against the weather but most of them bare-headed, bare-faced, hair streaming, clothes adhering to the contours of their bodies which seemed to dissolve into the rain.

In the odd play of light between gray sky and shiny rising floodwaters, some of the mothers and children seemed to be gnawing at each other, tearing at each other's flesh or at each other's reflections. Through the thin cold glass, which was wet even on the inside when she put her free hand against it, Julie could hear them and she was sure Megan could, too, wordlessly shrieking at each other in the wind, moving closer. She shuddered and fumbled for the curtain cord, drew the heavy curtains, turned away from the windows.

She looked at the other mothers one by one, trying to decide whether they'd all known about Yolanda's sacrificed child. Probably they had, since she understood that the co-op had been going for some time, and since no one seemed surprised.

No one said anything, in fact. Yolanda's little confession lay in the room with them like the unburied corpse of her child. The mothers were eating. In the brief, companionable silence, Julie was surrounded by the wet sounds of the mothers chewing and swallowing, by the busy gurgling of Linda's digestive system so close beside her that it could have been her own, and by the blending white noises of the rain and the gathering crowd and the kids downstairs.

"It would be terrible to lose a child," Julie said aloud. Her cupped palm hovered just above her daughter's tiny head, where she could feel the hole that opened like a halo onto her brain.

"Sometimes," Kathy said, "it's either lose a child or lose—yourself. I mean, I—love my kids, but they were killing me."

"I don't think I could stand it," Julie said.

Linda looked at her, and Julie felt a chill pass through her even before Linda said, "We've all had a child die. Every one of us in this room has lost a child."

"And all our mothers did as well," Annette added.

"And all our daughters will, too," Yolanda finished. She put her arm around Regina, who tried feebly to pull away, then gave up and snuggled her enormous bulging body as best she could against her mother's scrawny one. "Guess you could say it runs in the family."

"It's one of the reasons this group formed," Linda said. "It's one of the things we have in common. It helps to be with other mothers who understand."

"How—how do you live through it?"

A look passed among the co-op members, a sisterly smile. It was Linda who said, "We don't, Julie. We didn't."

Julie laughed a little, experimentally, waiting for Linda and the others to join in, to explain the grisly joke to her. No one did. Finally she managed to say, "I feel that way sometimes myself. Raising kids is hard."

Kathy nodded. "When the baby cries all—night and you don't know what's wrong and you—know you're a terrible mother."

"When you just gave her a bath," Yolanda suggested, "and she shits all over herself again, and you're trying to get ready to go someplace."

"When she's two and you have to keep an eye on her every minute so she doesn't hurt herself or destroy your house," Linda said. "When she's six and the bully in the third grade keeps beating her up, or she's in the third grade and she bullies the six-year-olds."

"When she's twelve and failing seventh grade algebra and you have to go talk to the teacher again about her attitude." Annette shook her head appreciatively.

"When she's eighteen," Yolanda said pointedly, "and pregnant."

"I didn't like being pregnant in the first place," Julie said, her own resentment suddenly rising to meet theirs. She looked at the baby in her lap and tried to think of it as a stranger, an alien, an intruder. But the baby was part of her. As strong as the resentment was a huge hot love. "And labor was a bitch. They say you forget the pain, but you don't." She saw Regina's frightened look and was immediately sorry, but could think of no way to soften what she'd said. "I don't know why any of us have kids," she said.

"Oh," Kathy said airily. "I do. I—love my kids. You just have to—learn to cope, that's all."

"I don't know how." Julie's eyes were so full of tears she was afraid she'd drop the baby. She laid her down on the couch. Megan did not protest.

Yolanda had started talking again. Yolanda's voice was rough, as though her throat hurt. It was painful to listen to her, and she did talk a lot. "I was already way pregnant when my mamma died, and after that she didn't have much to say to me, even though she did talk all the time. I wasn't a bit older than Regina is now when I had her. Barely eighteen. Now here she is, look at her, following right in her mama's footsteps but not listening to her mama at all. Look at her. Tired all the time. Sick all the time. The baby's eating her alive."

Julie did look at Regina, and was struck by how much Yolanda and Regina looked alike, mother and daughter, how closely they both must resemble the mother and grandmother who had died at the mouths of her children and who had not died.

Diane trudged loudly up the basement steps and slammed the door behind her. The latch didn't hold, and the door swung open again; Diane leaned back

against it with all her considerable weight. Almost at once, the cacophony from the basement rose again. Julie thought uneasily of penned animals, of water in a cooking pot coming to a hard boil.

Kathy got up and, stumbling a little, made her way across the rooms to open the curtains again. Julie didn't say anything or try to stop her, though it was her house. The crowd outside was at the foot of the steps now, where the hill that the house sat on met the sidewalk. Julie held Megan up to the window so she could see, but the baby, of course, didn't look. She was screwing up her red little face and grunting vehemently. Julie felt a warm stickiness on the inside of her forearm and knew that the diaper was leaking, but didn't do anything about it. It wasn't important. It made no difference. She could clean the baby and herself, change the diaper, wash the clothes, clean the carpet, wash the windows, turn the co-op mothers out of her house, chase the crowd away from the steps, and the baby would just mess again.

Still leaning against the basement door, which gapped along the top, Diane sighed heavily. "How many times do you suppose I've done that over the years? For all the good it does."

"It would be worse if we didn't," Annette said serenely, glancing down at her folded hands as though she were consulting notes. "They'll thank us when they grow up."

"I don't know about that," Yolanda said. "My girl doesn't understand yet all the sacrifices I make for her, and here she is about to be a mama her own self."

Diane crossed to the littered table and filled a second plate. The paper of the plate got soggy almost immediately and bent around the edges; Julie watched a clot of cottage cheese fall to the floor, watched Diane step in it and smear it across the yellow and pink linoleum.

While the other mothers chatted around them, Linda said quietly to Julie, "I'm glad you decided to join the co-op. I think you have a lot to add, and I think you're ready for us."

Regina gasped and arched her back, gripped the arms of her chair, spread her legs and braced her feet against the floor. All eyes turned to her, even Megan's, and her mother said her name. "Regina? Honey? Is it time?"

"We need to get her to a hospital," Julie said, but she could see out the windows that Cascadilla Street was completely flooded and impassable now. Water was up over the curbs and the sidewalks, rain still falling so hard that it looked like viscous sheets, all of a piece. Mothers and children were so crowded and faceless that she couldn't tell one from another. Except that she saw Kathy join them, the stiff blond hair getting stiffer in the rain, the thin skin parting to expose pale flesh, and Kathy's pale blond grown son beside her, nearly indistinguishable from her.

Regina cried out. Yolanda was standing over her, saying her name. The other mothers gathered around, murmuring, and the children began to come up from the basement.

Regina's baby was born on the kitchen floor, among the stains of food and the accumulating footprints of the mothers and their children. Julie watched, clutching her own baby, not knowing what to do. Labor was long and hard. There was a good deal of blood. Rain kept falling, and voices gathered. Children and mothers milled at the windows, inside and out, scratching at the glass and at each other, making wordless mewling sounds. Julie's daughter cried and cried in her arms.

When Regina's baby was born, it tore out part of her body with it, and left part of its new body inside hers. Julie saw the tissue and the blood. Regina screamed. Yolanda said her name. Julie slid her own daughter's tiny clawing hand into her mouth and bit down hard.

END

## Secrets

When Christy didn't answer to her knock, as she'd known she would not, Grace felt justified in pushing open the door. The music struck her in the face, but she held her ground.

Still half-expecting the door to be locked and barricaded, although that wasn't possible now, she was a little taken aback to find herself actually on the threshold. At first she just stood there and said, "Christina! Answer me!" again. Despite all the times she'd been forced to come in here, it remained a private and alien place.

But she had to go on in, for her daughter's sake and her own, and certainly Christy wasn't going to stop her now. Sometimes a mother had to do unpleasant or dangerous things, even things that were morally wrong, in order to save her child. Grace had already had plenty of experience with that sort of maternal obligation, and would soon have more. Her throat tightened at the thought. When you loved someone, when you were responsible for them, you couldn't allow them to keep secrets from you.

"Oh, leave her alone, Gracie," Vic used to tell her. "You can't get inside her head no matter what you do." Grace was terrified that that might be true.

"You read my diary!" She heard Christy's voice in the music, although Christy couldn't possibly be speaking to her now. "You listen in on my phone conversations!" She hadn't denied it; she had done all those things, and she would do more.

Music, the diabolical and incomprehensible music that Christy wouldn't turn off day or night, was obscuring any other sounds from the room, if there were any. Sometimes it seemed to be blurring Grace's vision, too, and the feel of things; it left a foul taste in her mouth.

The tape playing now had been one of Christy's favorites. The name of the group was Devil's Handmaiden. Grace had made it a point to memorize their blasphemous names and to learn how to recognize one from another. She knew individual performers, too—the girls with layered faces, the boys with secret pasts. They were none of them what they seemed to be, of course, or what they wanted their audiences to think they were.

Grace could have sung along:

Bring him to me  
Suck him to me  
Semen, blood, and flame  
Make him hold me  
Make him come, and  
Tell his other name.

"Chris-ty!" Grace called again, although she knew it was pointless. "Turn that thing down!"

She could have sung along, but she didn't. The lyrics were tempting, the tune catchy, the beat hypnotic, but by now she recognized the work of the Devil when she heard it.

And anyway, the words on the surface weren't the true message of the song. The true message was always hidden, cleverly subliminal. Only people who knew the codes and were willing to take the risk could face the Enemy head-on. Grace was more than willing.

"Christy, I'm talking to you!"

Grace took a deep breath and stepped into her daughter's room. Old smoke—from incense, cigarettes, marijuana—made her cough and almost instantly gave her a ringing headache. The floor was littered with piles of clothes, tape cases, straws, long thick pins like hatpins, wads of paper. From the bookcase that hid Christy's bed from the door glowed layers of graffiti, lipstick over spray paint over grape juice, messages and designs so obscured by each other that their meanings had multiplied beyond Grace's comprehension. The heavy crooked curtains dimmed the morning sunlight. Grace

resisted the familiar urge to fling open curtains and window, knowing from long and bitter experience that the evil secrets in this room would not be aired out so easily.

The music soared from its continuous tape. It was one of Satan's many voices, intended to keep her from understanding her child. It said things to her that made her sick, things that most other people couldn't or wouldn't bear. Sometimes Satan sang in Vic's voice, or Christy's, or her own.

Frightened, Grace allowed herself to retreat. What she had to do this morning wouldn't be easy, even though she knew it was the right thing to do, her duty to her daughter. She needed more time to prepare, to gather her strength and courage.

She backed up and closed Christy's door. The music muted a little but was still louder than any other sound, including her own heartbeat and her own thoughts. Holding her breath, she pressed her ear against the door as she had so many times before, and now couldn't stop herself from swaying with the rhythm and lip-synching the brisk words:

Born to play  
Died to say  
Come again another day.

Knowledge of what lay beyond the door, beyond the bookcase partition in her daughter's room, forced itself into Grace's consciousness before she could stop it, and she gasped and pressed her palms against the door frame for support. The music didn't stop.

"It's just music," Vic had tried to tell her twenty years ago. Or, "It's a *positive* thing. It's about love and peace." She'd smoked a lot of dope, taken a few acid and mescaline trips, and even so she hadn't realized until much later—until she had a daughter who listened to a different generation of music, and whose body and mind and soul Grace as her mother was responsible for—who Jude and Alice were.

The tape ended. Before it looped over to the other side, Grace hurried into the kitchen, humming under her breath.

She switched on the radio over the counter. It was always tuned to one of the numerous oldies stations, and she came in on the middle of "Knights in White Satin." Singing loudly, half-dancing from counter to sink, she finished up the breakfast dishes. There weren't many. It had been a long time since she and Christy had eaten a meal together—a long time, for that matter, since Christy had come out of her room.

The pictures of Vic and Christy on the side of the refrigerator caught her attention. Hands in the dishwater, she stared at them one by one. From down



the hall in Christy's room and from the radio inches from her face, music poured its dark secrets; she could very nearly decipher them now just by listening in a certain way.

There were dozens of pictures:

Christy as a baby, here laughing and there crying at something forever out of camera range. Vic asleep; Grace had crawled across the bed and held the camera as close as she'd dared, hoping to capture some dream image or thought wave through his eyelids, but the flash had awakened him and he'd pushed her roughly away.

A young, bearded, pony-tailed Vic, with slightly glazed eyes and earphones on his head. Grace remembered how she, with youthful naivete, had pressed her ear against the outside of the earphones while he was wearing them, hoping to hear what he heard. Like nearly everything else in those days, it had turned into a kind of foreplay, and she never had been able to detect anything but a subaudible vibration.

Christy's high school graduation picture, posed and smoothed, her very expression looking air-brushed. Christy and Vic caught in an eternally private conversation on the front porch swing; she'd snapped the picture from the other side of the living room window, and they never did tell her what they'd been talking about.

Grace dried the last saucer and put it away. She thought she heard movement in the back of the cupboard or in the wall behind it, and when she stood on tiptoe to run her fingers back there she seemed to feel an irregularity in the surfaces that hadn't been there yesterday when she'd done her every-other-day cleaning of cupboards and drawers. Even the house she lived in had secrets from her.

The music on the radio had ended and a man was reading the news. The voice had a thick, choked vibrato, as though he had something caught in his throat, some story he was keeping to himself. Grace had known for a long time that news had hidden messages, that certain words and phrases stood for other things they didn't say. But she didn't have time now to try decoding it.

She turned off the radio, leaving herself alone with the muffled music from Christy's tape. Taking a deep breath, she reached for the butcher block knife holder, a wedding present from her sister. Over the years it had proved to be true that the knives never needed sharpening; even so, she worried now that none of them would really be sharp enough.

Hefting a long thin paring knife, her hand brushed against something and sent it rattling into the sink. Vic's bones and teeth, half a dozen small chunks she'd saved from his ashes. Because they'd come from actually *inside* him, she felt close to him when she held them in her palm or touched her tongue to them. One by one she picked them out of the drain and put them back into

their clear plastic bottle on the windowsill, where light could shine through. Her hands were trembling from this reminder of the secrets Vic must have taken with him to the grave.

He'd had plenty of secrets. One time, for instance, he'd gone out and bought himself six new white shirts, identical to each other and to the ones already in his closet; Grace hadn't known about it until days later, when she'd happened to find the tags and straight pins in the trash. Sometimes, when she got back from an errand, the TV would be warm, and when she confronted him about it he'd say, "Oh, some dumb show. What's wrong with that?" Often—at dinner, in bed, at a school function for Christy—she'd know from the look on his face that he was thinking about something else; "a penny for your thoughts," she'd say, trying to keep it light, or, directly, "What are you thinking about, Vic?" Always, he'd frown and say, "Nothing."

But even after having lived with that for eighteen years, Grace had been shocked and vindicated to discover after his death his greatest and longest-running secret, of which she had had no inkling. On her dresser—beside the jewelry box with the false bottom that he'd given her for their seventh anniversary, among the dozens of plastic sandwich bags that held nail clippings and curls of his hair and scraps of discarded clothing—was a shoebox full of his love letters to and from women whose names she'd never heard, whose existence she'd never guessed.

That was never going to happen to her again. She was not going to be ambushed. Christy had been slipping away from her for years, and now had taken the final, irremediable step. Time was running out, and she was going to find out now, once and for all, what was inside her daughter's head.

But she was not quite ready. Her heart was pounding in her ears and her hands weren't steady enough. There was one more step to take in preparation. She slipped the knife into her apron pocket and went into the living room.

This room was certainly more comfortable than it used to be. Vic would hardly recognize it. Christy wouldn't be coming in here at all anymore.

Grace veered away from that thought and anxiously surveyed the room for things she'd missed. She'd boxed up for Goodwill any books she hadn't personally read from cover to cover, including two full sets of encyclopedias; until the truck had come to pick them up, she'd still been uneasy with all those secret words in her house. She'd taken down any photographs that had her in them; staring back at the versions of herself that the camera had caught, she never could reconstruct what had been going through her mind at the time. She'd had the fireplace opened that had been hidden in the wall, not so she could use it but so that things couldn't hide in there; even so, last winter a bird had gotten trapped in the chimney and, once the fluttering and frantic chirping had stopped, Grace had kept imagining the feathers and tiny hollow bones.

Feeling reasonably safe, she crossed to the stereo, knelt, pulled *Magical Mystery Tour* from the record rack, slipped it out of its rainbow cover with the twenty-four-page picture book that never had seemed to her to have much to do with the songs. Her hands were trembling so that she had trouble finding the spindle. She'd had the turntable and LPs since college, high school, junior high. Christy, when Christy was still speaking to her, used to make elaborate fun of such old-fashioned stuff; although she'd admitted to liking some of the 50s and 60s music on the radio, she'd no more have deigned to listen to a record than she'd have watched a black-and-white movie.

Thinking about that time not so long ago, when she had known a little of what her daughter was thinking, brought tears to Grace's eyes. For most of her life, Christy had been easy to read and had welcomed the attention.

"You seem worried," Grace would offer, and that was all it would take for the child to crawl into her lap and tell her all about the dead bird on the sidewalk or the playground bully.

"Are you nervous about the test tomorrow?"

"I'll bet you're excited about the new kittens."

"It makes you mad when we won't let you do something, doesn't it?"

During those years Grace had felt terribly close to her daughter. It had been almost as though Christy had never left her body or her mind.

Then, around junior high, things had changed. Vic had died by then, taking some secrets with him and leaving others behind for her to find, and Grace was on her own, scrambling to understand the hunted look that would come over Christy's face whenever she'd say something supportive or attentive like, "You're not really upset about homework. I know what this is about. This is about boys."

"I have no private life! You know everything about me!"

"I was your age once. I remember—"

"You can read my mind! Stay out of my mind!"

Then came the silences and the absences, the cryptic messages for Christy on the answering machine from people who didn't identify themselves, the coded notes deliberately left out for Grace to puzzle over. Then came the drugs, which hopelessly muddled everything. And now Christy was dead, but that was still a secret.

Grace turned the stereo on, wincing at the labored noises it made, and lowered the needle onto the first track of side one. The record was scratchy and dusty, but it took only a few bars—" . . . coming to take you away"—before she was hugging herself and dancing around the room, which, for all her exorcisms, was filling up with secrets again.

She danced and sang along with "Fool on the Hill" and "Flying," "Blue Jay Way" and "Your Mother Should Know," remembering most of the words. But

when she heard the first few jaunty-melancholy notes of "I Am The Walrus," spreading abruptly into a stirring dissonance, she stopped still and listened.

"I am he as you are he as you are me as we are all together."

That used to make perfect, luminous sense, and anyone who didn't get it had been hopelessly straight. She remembered the high of believing that—through music, through love—people could actually come to understand each other. She remembered dancing in an intimate crowd to just this music, grooving and making love to this music in flickering multicolored darkness with lovers whose names and histories and even whose secrets didn't matter because the music said the truth.

Now it said nothing. Grace listened intently all the way through the song, and it was sheer nonsense. "Koo-koo-ka-choo." She remembered when she'd thought she could decipher the bits of conversation at the end, important messages about life and love and the future of the world. Now it was garble.

The true messages in the Beatles' music had always been hidden, waiting for those who knew and cared enough to tease them out. In the 60s, she'd dismissed that notion as establishment paranoia or acid-induced delusions of grandeur, but as her head had cleared in the ensuing twenty years she'd realized that it was true. After all, she had heard for herself any number of times the secret of "The White Album"—which, of course, had turned out to be a lie.

When she knelt again in front of the stereo, the knife in her pocket thumped awkwardly against her thigh, but for now she ignored it. She moved the needle back to the beginning of the last track and then quickly, before those first notes sounded, began rotating the record backwards.

At first she heard only unintelligible rasps and screeches and, afraid that just since yesterday she'd somehow lost the ability to hear the secret message, she fought down panic. To give herself stamina, she thought of Christy dead in her bed of a drug overdose, accident or suicide. She kept spinning the record faster and faster until the muscles of her upper arm were shaking from the strain and she had to support her right elbow with her left hand.

Finally she heard the words that had been imbedded in this song for her to discover at this time and place in her life. "Peel away," it said. "Peel away." She knew it was the voice of God.

Grace listened to the song backwards. Once was all she needed. Then, very carefully, she set the needle back on its armature and turned the stereo off. In the sudden silence, the music from Christy's room came to her like the wail of a mad infant, demanding something of her that she could not comprehend, nattering secrets to itself in an alien tongue.

Grace moved rapidly now, purposefully. This time she didn't bother with the charade of knocking on her daughter's door, and she hardly hesitated at the threshold. The smoke made her cough. Her head ached. The music

numbed her ears, tongue, fingertips. She pushed her way through the debris on the floor and around the bookcase. When she saw Christy's body on the bed, she cried out wordlessly and fell to her knees, reminding herself again and again what the Beatles had instructed her to do.

Christy's body was cold and rubbery. Things seemed to be seeping out of it; her soul, maybe, or body fluids. Christy still had secrets inside her head and her heart. Grace didn't know where to start.

Devil's Handmaiden was chanting joyously when Grace took a deep breath and inserted the point of the paring knife into Christy's temple. There wasn't much blood. She made a long slit and then, as the music spoke secrets to her, she peeled a thick strip of flesh away and rose to peer inside her daughter's head.

END

## *Daddy's Side*

**W**hen I think about my life, I think about the places I've lived. Each part of my life has definite walls, ceilings, floors, doors, and I can tell what's real when I think about it because of who lived there with me.

For the first six years of my life, I lived with both my parents in a series of houses and apartments, all in the same Pennsylvania town. In each of them were nice things, things I like remembering: a nubby red couch, pansy beds, the tall white console radio on Daddy's side of the bed. On sleepy Sunday mornings Jo Stafford would croon "Sentimental Journey" while my mother made breakfast in the kitchen clear at the other end of the house. That house was long and narrow, like a trailer with no wheels. Sometimes Daddy would be lying there with me, sometimes not. I'd stay as much as I could on his side of the bed. It was the only morning of the week I was allowed to sleep in, and then never past nine.

None of the places we lived in belonged to me or to my parents. None was ever "my house." I'd build playhouses out of couch cushions or blankets spread between the headboard and the radio, but sooner or later I'd always have to dismantle them and let their parts be used for other things. I could

find faces in the pansies, purple and yellow with fat black cheeks, but then we'd move across town.

Three hundred miles away, my grandfather's house on Bates Street was tall, dark, and narrow. I knew this was the house where my mother and her sisters grew up, learned to cook and sew in order to find husbands, did their homework, watched their young mother die of an anemia which the doctors told her might be helped if she could bring herself to eat raw liver and drink cow's blood. She couldn't.

Everything in my grandfather's house was close to everything else, and it was close to its neighbors on both sides and in back and to Bates Street in front. It was hard for me to breathe there, hard to move around. It was a crowded house, even though my slight dour grandfather had lived there alone for much longer than I'd been alive.

We went there every summer, three hundred miles through the heat and humidity of Pennsylvania, then Ohio, then Michigan. Every time, both going and coming, we took at least one wrong turn. That was my mother's fault; she was supposed to be navigating. Daddy drove. Not once did we take a real vacation.

In my grandfather's house on Bates Street was one light, bright place, so I thought there must be one place like that in every house in the world, no matter how close and crowded it was, how well-built. In one of the apartments we lived in, I used to read for hours in front of a picture window whose sides were made of glass blocks that thickened and brightened the light.

My grandfather's living room was brown and dusty. Off the oval upstairs hallway radiated five colorless bedrooms and a long bathroom, like wilted petals. The door at the far end of the bathroom would have opened onto the rickety balcony you could see from the back yard if years earlier it hadn't been nailed and painted shut. The shade on the lamp by the mirror, the only light in the room, was always grayed with cobwebs and dust.

To go from the first to the second floor of that tall, close house, you went up twenty-three stairs carpeted in worn gray-green. The banister was thin and dull. There were two landings.

I remember almost nothing about the upper landing. There might have been peeling wallpaper and a brown baseboard.

Opening onto the lower landing was a closet with a full-length mirror on the door. The beveled edges of the mirror made rainbows like ribbons in my hair. At right angles to the mirror was a window hung with sheer white curtains. The curtains glowed and glowed again in the mirror, caught sunlight or glowing gray light from a cloudy sky. They seemed to catch breezes, too, although I don't think the window opened. They drifted across my face, covered my head, brushed around my knees like a gown.

There aren't any windows here. There is no light, bright place in this house, this long dark place in my life. Here everything is close and tightly made. This is Daddy's side.

This is the house that Daddy built bit by bit over the years, out of wood and metal and desperation. All those times when I didn't know where he was, when my mother would say without looking at me that he was away and he'd be back soon, this is where he was, building this place, living hours and mornings and nights in it as he built it around himself, planning to bring me here.

Now Daddy is dying, and I keep thinking about my mother's voice in the distant kitchen of her father's house on Bates Street, the house she could remember living in when she was a little girl. I think about rainbows and ribbons in my hair, and about the last time I saw the window, any window.

I was kneeling on the rough carpet of the landing with the curtain floating over my neck and shoulders, gazing out at the house next door through the lace that was dirty but warm and bright from the setting sun. My thoughts drifted. I wondered about children who might live in the white house, and about me over here visiting under the warm white veil. Then Daddy said behind me that we were going for a walk.

He could have been calling me for a long time, but I hadn't heard him until he was right behind me and the curtain was floating over his head and shoulders, too. Frowning, he brushed it away. Daddy doesn't shout. Instead, his voice thins like a blister, until I think he'll die on the spot, burst open so I'll have to see what's inside him.

"Hurry up," he said, thinly. "Let's get out of here."

Now that he's dying, he's telling me to come with him again. I sit so close beside his deathbed that I don't even have to lean or stretch to keep my hands on him. Around us, the walls shimmer, changing pattern and consistency. Every word he speaks to me and every unspoken word echo and echo until their meanings have thinned altogether and they are nothing more or less than Daddy's voice, telling and telling his side.

I don't want to go with him.

I didn't want to go with him then, either.

"Emry," he said.

My name is Emory. Daddy gives it only two syllables. I love the way he says my name. It's the most intimate thing he's ever said to me. When he dies, I'll be left with no name at all, two syllables or a million, loud voice or thin.

I sat still. I didn't want to go. I'd never even been on the other side of my grandfather's block. I supposed my mother had played over there, walked down those other streets on her way to school, gone through alleys when she



and her sisters had sneaked out to meet boys (not my father, though; he'd been a child somewhere else, in another tall dark house I'd never seen, where he'd learned to build things out of wood and metal and desperation).

Mama should have shown me those places, mother to daughter. Mama should have taken me for a walk. If I'd stayed on Mama's side, even if we'd lived in a place of our own, I'd have learned other things. To cook and sew, maybe. Maybe to sing, which neither of my parents could do. I'd have found the courage to knock on the door of the white house with all the windows, to meet whoever lived inside.

Someday another man might have said my name in two syllables. At first, of course, I'd have corrected him: My name is Emory. But he'd have persisted because, like Daddy, he'd have loved me very much, and loving me would have given him the right and the power to call me anything he chose.

"Let's go, Emry." Daddy was already moving away from me. I had to go with him. I was seven years old.

"It's hot," I protested feebly. "It's too hot."

"It's hotter in the house than it is outside." I didn't know whether to believe him or not.

Every summer when we visited my grandfather, every morning we were there, Daddy played a trick on me. The same trick every day, every year, and I suppose it was harmless enough.

Between Pennsylvania and Michigan, we crossed a time zone, so that it was an hour earlier at my grandfather's house than it was at home. Every morning Daddy would bang open the door of whichever petal-like bedroom I was sleeping in and exclaim, as if it mattered, "Emry! Wake up! You overslept! It's nine o'clock already!" Only after I'd caught my breath from being startled awake, washed my face, dressed, gone downstairs for breakfast, would I realize that it was only eight o'clock Michigan time and I hadn't overslept, hadn't done anything wrong after all. Daddy would chuckle, every time, and Mama would smile at us affectionately as though this were a loving little game.

If I determined not to fall for it, if I put the pillow over my head and went back to sleep convinced it was only eight o'clock, it would turn out that Daddy had reversed the trick this time and it really was nine o'clock Michigan time. Then he'd sternly tease me all day for being lazy and sleeping in.

Either way, Daddy was telling the truth. It was eight o'clock, or it was nine o'clock, whatever he said.

Sitting very still under the fluttering curtain while he waited for me to join him for a walk, I heard voices coming from the kitchen on the other side of the stairway. My mother's voice, my grandfather's much less often, and

another man's that I'd never heard before. "I don't want to go for a walk," I said, well under my breath.

"We're going for a walk. Right now. Come on."

He left the house without me. I remember the four sounds made by the two doors opening and closing, one from the dark living room out onto the dark porch, the other from the porch out onto the heavily shaded sidewalk.

I scrambled to my feet. The curtain tangled around me, and many times since then I've imagined it falling, me falling with it down the rest of the stairs, my mother and my grandfather and the stranger rushing in to save me. But as I straightened the curtain on its rod and made my way carefully after Daddy, none of the voices in the kitchen even said my name.

I made door sounds of my own going out. The green metal glider took up one whole end of the porch; on sweltering summer nights it made a rhythmic whooshing sound against the backdrop whine of mosquitoes. The metal got hot during the day, and the fabric on the cushions was scratchy. I don't have any way of knowing what it was like in fall or spring, or when ice filled in the mesh of the screens.

"Where are we going?" By the time I caught up with Daddy, I was breathless, and he would already have been out of my sight if he hadn't stopped and waited for me.

"Just for a walk."

When we walked together I always held onto his finger like a strap on a bus, there to keep me from falling. When I was very small, I'd had to raise my arm straight over my head, and in just a few steps my shoulder would be tingling. By this time, my head came up to his waist and my hands were big enough to have held his whole hand, but he still offered me his thick index finger and so I still took it.

We walked so quickly along Bates Street that I had trouble keeping up. I didn't notice the names of the cross streets. Here, on Daddy's side, there are no street signs or house numbers. There's no need to memorize an address or phone number. It's impossible to get lost. Daddy's always known where I am.

Now he hardly seems to know where I am even though I stay right beside his bed. I hold onto his finger sometimes, but it doesn't keep me from stumbling on the sagging, dissolving floor.

That muggy evening in Michigan, Daddy and I passed houses I'd seen every summer, probably, and hardly noticed. Daddy pointed them out, as if teaching me something; I didn't understand what he wanted me to learn. Disloyally, I kept thinking about the house we'd left, sunlight gone by now from the stairway window, but the curtain still warm and still holding the

impression of me among its threads. Lights would be on in the kitchen, and there might be the good smell of coffee. My mother would still be talking to that man I didn't know. In a little while my grandfather would painfully climb those twenty-three steps to bed, leaving my mother and the stranger alone.

Sometimes I think my mother has never stopped talking to that man. Maybe she's never thought about me at all since that hot twilight when Daddy led me away; maybe she never noticed we were gone. Maybe some other little girl sits in the stairway window on Bates Street now, wraps herself in the warm floating lace, thinks about me even though she doesn't know who I was. Pretty soon her daddy will come up behind her and take her for a walk, whether she wants to go or not.

*Don't go!* I want to tell her. *Stay where you are!* But I don't know where she is, and neither does she. And if she doesn't take that walk with her father, where will she live her life?

"Look at that!" my father commanded.

I looked where he was pointing and saw nothing remarkable: a house, a tree, the sun setting behind them.

"Roots growing right up through the foundation," Daddy said indignantly. "Planted too close to the house. Damn fools."

I peered. I saw no roots.

"If they don't cut that thing down it'll crack the sidewalk and the foundation."

"Then would the house fall down?"

"It might."

The thought astonished me. The house and its tree were silhouetted together against the fading sunset as we moved past. I kept looking but could not see the danger. It was a good thing Daddy had pointed it out to me, or I'd never have known it was there.

He showed me what was wrong with other houses we went by. This one needed painting; the white walls and green trim looked fine to me in the dimming light. The rose bushes growing over this one's front windows ought to be trimmed back; I loved the idea of pink and red blooms crowding right through the glass. High in the peak of the brown house on the corner was a boarded-up window; Daddy said caustically that it had been like that for years, and secretly I thought it just right.

We turned the corner. All of a sudden I remembered being here once; my grandfather had bought me an ice cream sandwich at the store in the middle of the block. That had been a long time ago; he couldn't walk this far now, and he paid less and less attention to me. The store was closed now, whether for the night or for good I couldn't tell. Wrappers littered the concrete apron in front of it. Daddy steered me to the edge of the sidewalk as far from the store as we could get without walking in the gutter.

"Slum," he muttered.

Then I saw that this really wasn't a very nice place. I drew closer to him, farther from the store and its rustling trash, and said experimentally, "Yuck!" With his other hand, Daddy patted my hand that clutched his finger; he smiled down at me.

We crossed a street and I stumbled on the curb. "It's *hot!*" I whined. "I'm *tired!*"

"It's cooler out here than it would be inside," he reminded me sternly, and in fact I felt a slight breeze.

We cut across a vacant lot. The sun was completely down by then, the chirping of crickets made a warm lace curtain around us. Not long before, I'd asked my father, "How do crickets make that noise?"

"They rub their legs together."

I'd been sitting in the big chair with him, and now I'd struggled free, to stand in front of him with hands on hips. "That's not true. You're tricking me, Daddy. Tell me the truth."

He'd chuckled. "That is the truth, Emry. They rub their knees together to produce the chirping sound."

"I don't believe you," I'd told him brazenly. "I'll go ask Mama."

"She won't know."

I'd stood there helpless, not believing him because what he was telling me was at odds with what little I knew about the world, believing him because he was my father and he taught me what was real.

Finally he'd shrugged. "We'll look it up."

He'd told me which of the black and gold encyclopedias to get from the shelf, and I'd brought it to him, impressed by its bulk. I'd crawled up to sit beside him again and together we'd looked up "Crickets": "The characteristic chirping sound is produced by rubbing of the 'knee' joints together."

We were still walking. At the far edge of the vacant lot was a drooping fence. Daddy stepped easily over it, and for a scary moment he was on one side of the fence and I was on the other. Then he lifted me across.

Whenever we walked, we talked about things. It's been a long time since we've talked about anything; here, we hardly need words, and, anyway, Daddy's don't make much sense anymore. That night, we talked about stars. Daddy said that stars were really huge balls of fire, billions of miles away, and that the sun was really a star, too, only a lot closer. There was a secret, stubborn part of me that didn't believe him. I'd always thought of stars as jewels, eyes, signal lights from behind a lace curtain. If I accepted what Daddy told me, I'd both gain and lose something valuable.

He taught me names for the stars. I knew stars couldn't really have names, and so this must be his wonderful idea, he must have just made them up. "Alpha Centauri," he said. I knew I was supposed to say it after him, but I was

out of breath from walking so far and so fast. "Alpha Centauri," he repeated in a slightly thinner voice.

"Alpha Centauri," I said hastily, not quite pronouncing it right.

"Betelgeuse. Aldebaran."

"Betelgeuse," I giggled. "Aldebaran. I'm *tired*, Daddy. Let's go back."

He didn't answer. We just kept walking. We walked and walked. We went down uneven brick steps, through a kind of tunnel made by tall buildings, past a lot more houses and stores. We were walking faster and faster, and finally Daddy said to me, as if in reply, "I never wanted to get married, you know."

The instant he said it, I could see that it was true, and that I'd never look at him or Mama or myself in the same way again. My legs were trembling. My hand was starting to cramp from holding onto his finger. He was taking bigger and bigger steps, so that I was skipping to keep up.

"I never wanted children, either."

Wind whistled in my ears from the speed of our movement, and my own blood roared. I tried to let go of his hand, but all his fingers curled around mine now and I couldn't get loose.

"You and your mother trapped me."

"Stop!" I cried. "Stop walking!"

But he walked even faster. I was running and jumping and stumbling as he pulled me along; my feet kept leaving the ground. His voice was stretched tight, a skin around both of us that any minute would burst, a skin around the world he was creating as he said, "Your mother was married before. That's who she's talking to in the kitchen. Her other husband. Nobody was supposed to know—"

I tried to match his voice. "I want to stop! I want to stop walking! I want to go back!"

By now he was nearly chanting. "We're never going back! We're never going back!"

I repeated what he'd said, although I didn't want to, and when I heard myself say it, sobbing and panting, I had to understand that it was real. "We're never going back!"

"You belong to me!"

"I belong to you!"

It was true. I was Daddy's. I was on Daddy's side.

Now he had loosened his grip on me, but I held on with both hands, not to be left alone. I listened hard to his voice, which was like the thin spewing wind. "He's your father. The man in the kitchen is your father. He didn't want you. He abandoned you. So you belong to me."

"You're my father!" I shrieked, saying what I knew he meant. "I belong to you!"

And then we were here.

As if we had burst through a thin taut membrane, we were here. On Daddy's side. In Daddy's house, which I knew instantly was the only real house in the world.

Daddy put himself into this house. Sweat of his brow, blood of his hands stained the wood. His knuckles drove the nails; the roughened soles of his feet brought up the grain. His face is in the corners where the walls and the ceiling meet perfectly. His voice is in the hinges of the door.

There are no windows. There has been no need to see out or in.

I've been happy here. I've grown up the way Daddy intended me to. Everything I've needed has been built into this house, anticipated and provided by Daddy, worked in for me to discover little by little.

A few times over the years, I've thought I heard scratchings at the roofline, saw shadows around the edges of the door, felt body warmth and breath through the tight walls. I used to think it might be Mama, come to claim me. Daddy said it was just my imagination, because there's nobody here but us. I think what he said was both true and not true like the real time in Pennsylvania or Michigan. But even if it had been Mama, I wouldn't have gone with her. I made my choice a long time ago. I'm on Daddy's side.

When Daddy and I took that last long walk together, away and away from Mama and the faceless stranger she couldn't stop talking to, I was seven years old and Daddy was the same age I am now. Now he's very old, and dying. I hold his hand. He can't grip; his hand lies in either of mine, unresisting and undirecting. The chair I sit in, which Daddy made and which has always been like his arms around me, is loosening now, softening, so that it hardly supports me, and my thigh muscles ache from the strain of holding up my own body weight.

I cradle his pale head in my arms. His eyes stay neither open nor closed, and I can scarcely tell if he's breathing. All he's been able to say for a long time now is my name: "Emry." If it had more syllables, he wouldn't be able to say it at all.

"Emry."

"I don't want to go."

"Emry."

"I don't want to go with you, Daddy!"

If I don't go, he will explode, and I will see what's inside him before he dies. It will hurt my Daddy if I don't go with him. "Emry!"

I spring to my feet on the separating floor, and the chair sinks behind me. I take my hands away from Daddy's sides as he falls apart. I force the door open as the hinges shatter, the wood and metal panels split. And then I am somewhere else.

I don't know where I am, except that I'm not in a house. I don't even know if I'm still on Daddy's side, but I don't think so, because everything is formless and nameless here, dark and blank.

Daddy is dead. I can't imagine what that means, to him or to me.

Frantically, I think about flowers, and colorless petals insinuate themselves among the folds of my skin and clothes. I want music, and a tune suggests itself, a few notes of a tune. I think about crickets, and their chirping starts up around me; about stars, and they come into focus, minuscule and without particular pattern, but nonetheless there where they weren't even a moment ago.

Encouraged, I imagine that I must be standing on some sort of walkway, and the merest hint of concrete or stone materializes under my feet. Very cautiously I take a step, and then the next step shows itself to me. Before I know it, I'm running, and the exhilaration of making my own way propels me faster and faster.

Suddenly there is a light, bright place ahead of me. I knew there'd be one here; it's here because I thought of it, because I willed it, because I knew it would be here. From a distance it looks like a star, then like the sun, but as I get closer I see that it's a dome. A huge dome of glass and light, and inside it flowers and plants I've never even imagined, and at my side out of the dimness a man's voice saying my name. "Emry. You're late. I've been waiting a long time for you."

It's a greenhouse. Full of growing light, as if the window in my grandfather's house had expanded to fill the world. After all these years of living in the darkness of the unreal place Daddy had built for me, I've finally found my real home.

I don't know who this man is, but he's handsome and strong. I correct him: "My name is Emory."

His arm is around my shoulders and his lips are on mine. "I love you, Emry. I love you very much." In all my life, Daddy never said that to me. As the handsome stranger leads me toward his greenhouse, I can still feel his tongue and teeth forming the two sweet syllables of my name.

The air under the dome is so thick and moist that I can hardly get it inside my body. All the walls and the ceiling are windows, and through them even the dark sky looks light and bright. Green stems climb and curl; red and yellow and black-faced blossoms open and close to my touch, to just my thought of touching them. "Do you *live* here?" I ask the stranger.

He nods, pleased. "I've been building this house for you. I know you like flowers."

I'm sweating, and my throat feels clogged. "It's hard to breathe in here."

"This is the healthiest kind of atmosphere possible," he informs me, with a hint of sternness. I don't know whether to believe him, but I take the deepest breath I can, and the good rich air seeps into the tiniest pockets of my lungs.

"Have a seat, Emry," the man says eagerly, proudly. "I made this chair just for you. Nobody else has ever sat in it."

The chair is in the center of the light that is gathered by the greenhouse, in the heart of this house which is nothing but a light bright place. The seat of the chair has been fashioned from some porous, pliant wood, and the arms and back are parts of a growing tree.

I hesitate. Determinedly, he ushers me toward my chair, one hand on my arm and the other sweeping through the air. His movement seems to leave ripples. The air feels good in my lungs now, just as he said it would.

I sit down. The chair is extraordinarily uncomfortable. I fidget, start to get up, sit down again. The handsome stranger beams at me. "Isn't it a wonderful piece of furniture? The perfect fit for the human form."

"I can't seem to get comfortable," I admit.

He frowns a little. I've disappointed him. "You'll get used to it," he tells me, and already I feel my body adapting to the requirements of the chair he's made for me, my back curving, my arms stretching, my feet no longer trying to stay flat on the floor.

"It's nice," I say. "This is a nice house."

"I've lived here all my life, building and planting around myself, waiting for you. It will be so much nicer now that you're here with me."

I smile and settle into the chair. Everything is light. The handsome stranger comes to kiss me. I don't know whose side I'm on.

"I love you, Emry."

"I love you, too," I tell him, his lips still on mine. I don't know whether that's true or not, but he'll let me know.

END



# *Loving Delia*

*by Melanie Tem*

**D**elia's small fingers had wandered the soft folds and tunnels between her legs. Her labia felt pink. Her clitoris was like a berry. When her mother had come in to kiss her good-night, Delia had stopped touching herself and given the touching to him. He lived inside her. Maybe he had always lived inside her, but that night—his fingertips sliding into places of herself she didn't dare touch, her arms safely around her mother's neck—she'd been aware of him for the first time.

Now she was an old woman, beautiful, the object of his intense desire, and dying.

He was there, stroking the inside of her thigh, when she heard and then understood the news. While they tried to tell her, he kissed her, distracted her, protected her.

First, her daughter, having spoken to the doctor on the phone while Delia herself kept busy baking bread: "No, you talk to him. *You* talk to him. The dough's ready to be kneaded." Her daughter coming into the kitchen and just standing there. Not touching. He knew Delia would have liked her daughter to rest her hands on her shoulders or take her in her arms. But then the younger woman would have known he was there, and Delia would have

stiffened and pulled away to get on with her kneading, to keep him secret, captive, hers alone.

Her daughter took a breath and said, "Mom." The name sounded, as always, stiff and artificial; Delia and her daughter and never quite known how to address each other. He and Delia, though, had countless little names for each other, some affectionate and others bitter but all of them fundamentally terms of endearment. Now that it fell to the daughter to say to the mother, "You have cancer," she began with, "Mom," and it wasn't the right name, "let's go in the living room and sit down."

Delia glanced into her daughter's face. Not for very long. Not ever for very long, but with such sharp openness that it startled them both and shocked him. He and Delia often gazed into each other's eyes for long, long periods of time, but he'd seldom known her to look directly at anybody else. Then she floured her hands again and said testily, "Wait'll I get this dough set to rise. You can just wait."

"It's cancer, Mom. You have cancer." The daughter had to say that to the mother. Recognizing it as a gift she dared not accept, Delia passed it hastily along to him.

He'd been there when her mother died. Delia was sixteen, and he had been obsessed with her small young breasts. Once, when her daughter had asked, Delia had said she didn't remember being terribly upset—"after all, I was almost grown"—and he'd treasured the secret knowledge she'd given him of her desolation. "I don't remember," she'd declared. "It was a long time ago." Rebuffed, her daughter hadn't asked again.

He was there at the oncologist's office, through whose tinted tall eleventh-floor windows they watched clouds, black and gold, teardrop-shaped, and separate from each other, puff across the mountains and plains. Delia joked about the size of her bust: "If you can even find them to examine, doctor."

Youthful, the doctor blushed, and found it even harder to tell her what he had to tell her, what he told people day after day. "I'll take good care of you. I won't allow the pain to get bad. This thing will get you in the end, but until then I'll see to it that you can live your life."

Not easily embarrassed, her daughter had blushed, too. The joke had not been intended to put the doctor or the daughter at ease. It was not for the sake of politeness, though to anyone but him Delia would have insisted it was.

Caged beneath her breasts, he still found them lovely, small and sagging now, so soft. "Thank you, doctor," she said. While she and her daughter waited outside for the cab to take them home, he held his breath like the black and gold breeze that blew over them both and waited to be let out. But he was not. They talked about the weather, about what they would each fix for their separate dinners.

He'd been there when she was a very young woman and the world seemed to offer itself before her. She'd danced. She'd loved to dance, and he'd danced with her, closer than any other partner. She'd loved pretty clothes. She'd had many suitors; they sat out on the front porch swing, walked in the park, danced. She, her father's favorite, ran off with the one her father most disliked, and it was years before she and her father spoke again. He went along, keeping her company as her husband did not.

He'd been ready to sacrifice himself in order to serve her, to run loose and tell her father when the marriage started to go bad. When the handsome and exciting husband didn't come home nights. When she had to send someone to fetch him, or go herself, from the whorehouses down along the river. When there was no money.

She wouldn't let him out. She would talk to no one but him. From inside his cage he touched her while she cried, and he was aroused to painful tenderness by the drifting of her hair across his fingertips, but the bars kept him from putting his arms around her.

Once she said to him with teeth and fists clenched, as if it were his fault, "Life's not fair. Life didn't keep its promises to me." He tried to tell her how sorry he was. He pledged to make it up to her. He pressed himself into her wherever she would let him, his tongue to the back of her mouth, his fingertips among her ribs and around the inward swelling of her breasts, his flank along the corridor of her vagina before it ever opened to anyone else in the world.

Then something else was inside her, crowding him, threatening to displace him. Naive, he didn't know what it was, and he cowered. Only when she'd had called her aunt who ran a pharmacy, took the morning-long train ride there and the afternoon-long ride back, and swallowed the bitter contents of the small brown bottle did she allow him to understand. By morning the baby was gone, flushed away with Delia's tears and bitter brown vomit and with his thin ejaculate sprayed into her hurting hidden places.

It was their secret; Delia never told anybody else. But when she lay in her bed in the evening after work, waiting for the whoring husband and then not waiting anymore, she loved the infant who would never be born as much as her mother who had died, which was more than Delia would ever love anyone alive.

He was under the sheet with her on the hospital gurney, waiting for the needle biopsy. The woman on the gurney ahead of them was weeping, steadily and almost without sound. Delia didn't cry. He cried.

Her daughter said, "I love you."

Startled and offended, frightened, Delia knew this was only because she was sick. "I *know*," she snapped.

Her daughter couldn't find a place to sit or stand where Delia would know she was there from flat on her back on the gurney at such an awkward height. Not awkward for transporting, but awkward for looking at each other.

Delia knew perfectly well that she was there. She felt her daughter's yearning to speak to her about what was happening to them both, even to touch her, and she cringed away into his arms. She was more beautiful to him than she had ever been; he kissed the nape of her neck. She spoke only to him. "I'm scared," she told him, peevish as a child, and his heart, going out to her, encountered hers. Both of them caged, their tender exposed surfaces brushed back and forth across each other with every beat, calming Delia, arousing him.

He'd been with her when she allowed herself to be courted again, by a man distant and difficult but steady. They sat on the porch together in the twilight. They held hands, the man's fingertips playing distantly along the lines of Delia's palm. They kissed, lips steadily touching, lingering until the proffered intimacy had softened into a gentle distance between them.

The suitor made him both frightened and curious: If she could love this man, maybe she wouldn't need him anymore. Maybe she would let him go. He thought he and Delia might not have lives apart from each other; he also thought they might.

Delia never mentioned him to her new husband. He was affronted, both by Delia's slight and by the fact that her husband couldn't tell he was there. In their marriage bed. Mouth on Delia's nipple before her husband's was, hand cupped under her chin keeping her face just slightly turned away. Stretched taut inside her to receive her husband's entry and to repel him.

Delia's babies were born dead. One, two, three, and the doctors didn't know why; a fourth Delia didn't tell anyone about except him. She knew why. The dead babies, the bloody tissue in the toilet bowl were her punishment. For drinking from the bitter brown bottle. For being intimate with the wrong man. For being such a bad child that her mother had left her. For loving anyone.

After the fourth dead child, she refused for many months to have relations with her husband and turned instead to him. Every night and often during the day she came inside to him, slipped between the bars of his cage, and took him to her. He was helpless with adoration of her. All the time he quivered in anticipation and fear; fervently as he loved Delia, he was also afraid of her. She hurt him sometimes, clutching him in her fierce passion, moving his mouth and hands and penis where she wanted them. She pinched his scrotum. She called him foul, erotic names. She pledged herself to him again and again, and he emptied himself into her, and she pushed him farther inside. Whenever she left him alone he pined, not trusting that she would come back.

The more adamant Delia's frigidity, the more outrageous became her husband's suggestions. Aghast at the very idea of taking a man's private part into her mouth, of being entered from behind, of simply lying naked together with no specific intent, she at last allowed the normal sexual act, but only if he—unbeknownst to her husband, unidentified, at least—came, too, and so he was entered by her husband and pushed more deeply into Delia, and he received both her passion and her shame.

This baby lived. This one grew, thrived, and for a while he thought, with both trepidation and eagerness, that Delia would have to set him free in order to make room for this child. When the baby was born and Delia fed her, he thought he would starve. But she fed him her shame. Confined in a shrinking space, he grew bigger and bigger between herself and her daughter. He could have brought them together, one long hand stretching to each of them even through the bars, but Delia wouldn't let her daughter so much as glimpse his shadow. For fear he would hurt her. For fear he would frighten her. For fear she would take him away.

He took baths with her. She wouldn't touch herself. Using a very thick washcloth, she treated her body like a sinkful of dirty dishes. He longed for her to touch him; her touch was rough and wonderful. She let him slide with the soapy washcloth between her labia and over the tip of her clitoris, which she had never seen and of whose contours she had no inkling.

After the cancer, her daughter gave her bath oil, but the thought of smoothing and sweetening a body with a tumor in its belly the size, now, of a grapefruit seemed to her obscene and made him swell up like a tumor himself. She dumped a little of the bath oil down the toilet and later told her daughter, "That felt so *good*. That was so *nice* of you," in rather the same sociable tone she'd used with the neighbor who'd brought her an endless stream of ceramic creations that stayed in boxes in the back of her closet.

Her daughter, more a stranger to her than anyone else, did not, all the same, believe her. Dirty and sour-smelling, he made a small noise, and the daughter heard him. But Delia beat him back, beat her daughter back, and was far more stern and determined and practiced than either of them.

When the pain started, and the gold and black clouds from the morphine they gave her from the stopper as if she were a naked baby bird, and still the pain though not for long and not yet very bad—the fear of the pain far worse than the pain itself—he thought then she'd have to let him go. He thought she wouldn't be able to keep up either her guard or her strength. He lay in wait, held himself rigid and absolutely still until he couldn't stand it anymore. Then he paced. Then he rattled the cage, banged his head against the stone wall of her, howled.

Without warning, Delia cried out to her daughter, "It's like I've always had the devil in me!" He was not the devil, but he knew she was talking about him, and proudly he drew himself up, waiting to be introduced.

Taken aback, her daughter asked, "What do you mean?"

But Delia wouldn't say any more. She closed her eyes, rolled onto her side, and moaned.

He was there when her husband shuffled in to lie down beside her. The old man didn't remember from one minute to the next that Delia was sick, Delia had cancer, Delia was dying. But he loved her. "I love you, Delia, you are so beautiful, you made me the man I am, we've had a good life, haven't we? Let me hold you. My sweetheart. I love you."

He longed for her to kiss him. His lips stuck to the cold metal bars. She shrank away from them both. He wrapped his arms around himself.

When the tumor exploded, he thought it would burst his chains. He called out when she did. He begged, like her. The roof collapsed. The walls imploded. His cell blazed. He became so full of fire that he could not bear to touch himself from the inside out. But Delia still would not let him out.

After one long searing morning, the pain melted. Delia pushed herself up on one elbow, fixed her daughter with a look and a smile, flashed the OK sign with circled thumb and forefinger, and fell into a coma. Stunned, her daughter said good-bye. Delia didn't.

He crept out then, through the rubble of her, and didn't know what to do without Delia. He lowered himself onto her on the bed, slid his penis up into the poison that burned through her perineum, settled the hollows of his pelvis into the hollows of hers, covered her mouth with his, and took her last breath.

END

## Aspen Graffiti

**H**e shrugged, a peculiar stiff hunching of the shoulders that looked as if it hurt.  
He said my name. It sounded brittle, like paper crumpled across his lips.

He looked at me because he had to, then looked hastily away as though he couldn't stand what he was seeing. His eyes were crowded with shadows like gossiping strangers.

He smiled, a smile so quick and sure of itself and so out of place that I barely caught it behind the beard and mustache he'd painstakingly grown that winter. They'd turned out to be a deep red. His hair had always been blond; it hung over his collar now and was further lightened by streaks and strands of gray which had surprised us both and openly distressed him, even though I have plenty of gray in my hair, too.

The beard and mustache and the longer hair really did make him look younger. Not much; a few years, maybe. I'd told him so, repeatedly, thinking he'd like that. But, for some reason, he'd never seemed especially pleased to hear it from me.

"I don't love you anymore," he said.

Stinging little memories swarmed at me then, so precious and painful that I didn't dare speak them aloud. I remembered dancing in the kitchen. I remembered the double-lemon pie he'd wanted instead of a cake for his thirty-eighth birthday, how the candles kept slipping into the yellow meringue so that we never could get all of them lit at once. He had seemed a trifle disappointed that night, as though wishing he'd stuck with chocolate cake and fudge icing after all.

I remembered the aspen, papery white bark carved and peeled as high as a tall man could reach, all around the mountain grove. One graffito in particular had caught my eye: two sets of initials, enclosed by a heart and pierced by an arrow, a good fifteen feet high and so deep that the frayed bark hung down like thinning hair. CM + DF., it said.

I played with possibilities: Claudia Moore + David Fernandez. Charles Mueller + Diana Feldman. Carl Masters + Darryl Floyd. I stared up at the carving until I was finally a little giddy from tipping my head back so far in the thin mountain air.

How had David or Diana or Carl reached so high? I created scenes, some sillier than others. An extension ladder, lashed under somebody's backpack and clumsily carried in. One stretching, knife-wielding lover on the shoulders of another. Neither that tree nor any of its neighbors had branches low enough or strong enough for climbing.

In the middle of a bitter night last February or March, I had awakened suddenly and been badly startled by the sight of Adrian, sleeping beside me as always, his face turned in my direction, his neck exposed in the blue-white glimmer of the streetlight on snow through our bedroom window. With the patchy whiskers on his skin, the hollows under those high cheekbones that I'd always admired, and the sinewy pulsing of his long throat, he looked ancient.

I was drenched with sweat. I'd been dreaming vague dreams of captivity and loneliness. Irritably, I realized that my sleep had been disturbed because it was so stuffy in the room; since early in the fall, Adrian had constantly complained of the cold, and he wouldn't let me open a window even a crack to let in fresh air.

I threw off my side of the electric blanket, taking care to keep his side tucked in around his shoulders and hips. Without really looking at him again, trying to keep myself from waking up so thoroughly that I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, I turned over and snuggled against him, even though I knew it would be too hot.

I couldn't sleep. I kept fighting the urge to turn over and stare at him in his sleep. I pushed the soles of my feet along his thighs and calves, trying to get a feel for his contours, his substance. He stirred and moved a little, moved away. His breath made my shoulder blades itch.



We had been together a long time. We'd slept together uncounted nights. But, half-asleep and sweating, I had now become infested with the idea that I was sleeping with someone I didn't know, someone who looked like Adrian but did not, who could have been Adrian but was not.

Finally, exasperated, I roused myself. I got up and went to the bathroom. The whole house was lit by the thin lovely light off the snow, and, although every window was shut tight, the sounds inside were different, too—muted, blurred. When I came back to bed, Adrian was sleeping on his back, and the cold blue light edged his profile, made his skin look silver and lined. He had rolled up in the covers, so that there were hardly any at all on my side of the bed; that was an old, familiar habit. I smiled and tugged gently at the sheet. He didn't move.

I bent and passed my hand over his face, brushed my palm across the prickly ends of his hair and beard, touched his eyelids. His face twitched and he turned his head, but he didn't wake up. I traced the tip of my index finger in the air above his profile, may a centimeter away from his skin, as though sketching his aura; I had always loved to touch him like this. I slid my hand under the wrapped covers at his neck and very lightly massaged his chest, the hollow at his throat, the hard plate of his sternum. My fingertips traced loops, scallops, the letter B on every part of his body that I could reach.

He jerked into consciousness and opened his eyes. "What are you doing, Bonnie?" His voice was still thick with sleep.

"Shhh. Nothing. You've got all the covers again."

He brought his hand up and brushed peevishly at my fingers. "Stop that. I don't like that. What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I told him again, soothingly. "Just playing. Just touching you."

After that, I'd noticed a change in him. He'd been more and more irritable and jumpy. If I touched his arm in passing, he'd scowl and pull away. When I kissed him good-bye in the mornings, he'd hold his breath. It had seemed to me that he was feverish much of the time, and he often complained of a spreading ache behind his eyes. He'd refused to go to the doctor, made jokes, ignored my nagging. He'd begun to spend days in bed.

Now he said to me, "I don't love you anymore. I guess that's what it comes down to. I just don't love you anymore."

He spread his hands and curled his fingers in a gesture unfamiliar to me. We'd been married almost seventeen years, and now, as he left me, Adrian was using a gesture I'd never seen him use before; of course, I had no idea what it meant, what he was trying to convey to me. I think now that that gesture was a missed clue, a symptom masked until then by bogus symptoms of health and normalcy, a warning too early or too late.

Seventeen years. Closer to twenty, actually; we'd made sure to take our time, to understand each other's moods and layers and idiosyncrasies, before we got married. It wasn't fashionable in those days, but both of us had insisted on regarding marriage as a permanent commitment. We kept no secrets from each other. I knew everything there was to know about Adrian; he knew me better than anyone ever had or ever will. And still, I hadn't seen this coming at all.

"But why, Adrian? Why are you doing this? Why are you willing to give up everything we've worked for—"

"I don't know why. I can't help it."

"Surely we can work this out, together, whatever it is."

"There's nothing to work out."

"Then let's just—give it some time."

"I don't have time. I'm losing myself. I can't tell anymore what's you and the kids and what's me. I feel invaded. If I don't get away now, I never will."

Although the things he said were desperate in their meaning, his voice was almost without emotion, and the words and syllables came out measured, even, one by one.

"I'll die, Bonnie," he said, and my name was another wound.

Adrian had lifted me against the aspen tree. I'd wanted to feel it, like Braille. He's never been a big man or especially strong, so I couldn't stand on his shoulders. I'd braced myself against the scaly trunk and stretched, but couldn't reach the letters. The bark had peeled away like dead skin under my palms and clung to the cuffs of my sweatshirt as I'd slid down out of his arms.

"What about the kids? This will scar them for life."

"I'll be there for them. I'll take them places on weekends. To games and things. Eric is starting to like wrestling."

"They need a father."

"They'll have one. I haven't stopped loving them."

"I need you, too!" I was crying.

"I'm sorry, Bonnie. I don't mean to hurt you."

He left. I couldn't stop him. The boys couldn't stop him, although Glenn put his fist through the closet door and Eric sobbed.

For a while he did show up every weekend. He took Eric to the zoo and to a pro wrestling exhibition, Glenn to a football game, both of them out to dinner a few times and to a movie or two. Then he started missing. He'd call to say he was sick or he had to work. Sometimes he just didn't come.

When I complained to him about it—the boys never would; I think they were afraid of losing him altogether—Adrian didn't change expression, as if I hadn't spoken or he couldn't hear me, as if I weren't there. By then I couldn't get him to engage with me at all; he had become smoothed, featureless,

without toeholds for me to grab onto. Glenn told me that the last time they'd gone out to dinner his father hadn't eaten a thing, hadn't even ordered.

I was a mess. I couldn't sleep. I ate constantly. I went to work every day, but I couldn't tell whether I was accomplishing anything; I'd burst into tears in a sales meeting or into hysterical laughter during a long-distance conference call. I couldn't read; words frayed off the page, and their meanings were insubstantial and pointless. I couldn't watch television; the sappiest sitcoms, the most gratuitously violent cop shows, even the news had story lines about relationships. I couldn't stand for my sons to touch me and I couldn't stand for them not to.

My friends gathered round me, as women will. They pointed out other women this had happened to, other men who, at a certain age, had deserted wives and children and careers—though not so often careers. Patrice's husband John had run off with his twenty-year-old secretary. Marge's husband Walter had started racing everything he could get his hands and their money on: stock cars, thoroughbreds, boats, planes; he didn't like Marge to go with him to the races, said it was a man's world, and so she hardly saw him anymore except when he needed her signature to withdraw more money from their joint account. The day Ted had moved out, after living with Susan for six years, he'd said earnestly to her, "I don't know what kind of relationship you thought we had here. I hope there hasn't been some sort of misunderstanding."

John had come back; it hadn't taken him long. "I don't know what she did to him," Patrice said, tossing her head, "but it looked to me like he was hollowed out. There was nothing of him left, nothing of the man I married. He came skulking back home with his tail between his legs, and I was supposed to take care of him. I threw him out."

Marge had stared at her, unbelieving. She expected Walter to come back any day, having run out of money or friends or energy. Whatever he'd done, she said, her face almost radiant, she'd welcome him home with open arms.

When my grandfather Jan was a boy in the Old Country, his father Pavel had abandoned his family—the young hardworking wife, the half dozen small children, the enormous stone house that had once sheltered the whole village after a fire. He ran a long way: to America. There is no evidence that anyone in the Old Country ever heard from him again, although he lived out a whole life well away from them.

He settled, we think, in a little Pennsylvania mill town in the Monongahela Valley, not fifty miles from where my grandfather Jan was to settle a few years later. But as far as we know, the two of them never saw or spoke to each other once they came to America.

My father doesn't know many details of this old story. He doesn't like to talk about it, and when he does the veins in his temples throb. His dis-

gust for men who in any way abandon their families borders on the obsessive. For my father, there is not much difference between love and obligation. He told me once that he never wanted to get married, he never wanted to have children.

I think about Pavel, my great-grandfather, and about my great-grandmother, whose name I've never known, abandoned in her big stone house that could shelter all the people in the village but could not shelter her. She lost her eldest son, too; though my grandfather Jan wrote and sent money, he never went home.

I wonder what she would have made of that aspen grove, where lovers' initials had been cut—for eternity, I thought—into the layered bark. I had liked that grove. It had made a sudden, sweet little space in the high woods. I had gazed at the fuzzy white lines the trunks made against the denser dark green of the juniper and fir, the kind of green that people mean when they say "forest green." Each yellow-green heart-shaped leaf was suspended from its branch by a long slender stem, so that the leaves flickered like old-fashioned motion pictures even when I could feel no breeze. I fancied I could see images in them, poetry, meaning.

I liked the feeling of enclosure, of community. I felt safe there, and understood. I was with Adrian, and we were in love. The aspens stood like fellows in an approximate circle around us. Heart-shaped leaves flickered like pretty words. At night, when we lay holding hands from adjoining sleeping bags, there was the companionable rustling of small life in the woods, very close by. I'd pretended they were communicating something about love and symbiosis, and that I could understand.

"I saw Dad today," Glenn said.

"Where?"

"In the mall."

"Did he say anything? Did you talk to him?"

"No. He didn't see me."

"Well, how did he look?"

"He looked really good."

The admiration in my son's voice was so strong that I looked at him to see if he was mocking. He did not seem to be. "What do you mean?" I asked cautiously.

"He looked cool. His hair's longer, and he's got it dyed so it isn't gray anymore. He was wearing an earring, and great clothes."

"An earring?"

"He was playing, sort of."

"Playing?" I felt like a fool, repeating his words, but I couldn't imagine Adrian like this.

"He was running around the edge of one of those fountains in the mall, you know? And dancing. Like this."

Glenn stood up to demonstrate, and I saw that in the past few months, since his father had left, he'd grown to be taller than I was. Now he made his lanky, healthy adolescent body move spastically, as though propelled by an erratic energy he couldn't predict or control. His mouth was contorted into a grin like rictus. He flung out his hands in playful, frightening gestures.

I shivered and told him, "Don't do that!" But he kept it up anyway, as if there were a perverse pleasure in pretending to be diseased.

His back to me, Glenn said more loudly than necessary, "He was with somebody. A girl I know."

"Who?"

"She graduated last year or dropped out. A real airhead, you know? A real bimbo. Likes to party. Likes to get high and stay that way. Sleeps around." He cleared his throat. "Likes flash, you know? Flashy clothes, flashy cars, flashy guys."

I laughed painfully and wiped at my eyes with the back of my hand. I was already tired of crying over Adrian, and it had barely begun. "I never thought of your father as flashy."

"He is now," Glenn said. "Had on purple pants."

"I guess that means he won't be wanting the rest of his clothes out of the closet."

"He was loud, too. You could hear him all over the mall. Everybody was looking at him, you know? She had on earphones, so I guess he was trying to talk to her over the music."

"What was he saying?"

He hesitated, scuffed his feet.

"Glenn," I said.

"I hate this," he said. "I hate this place. No wonder he split."

"Tell me."

"Shit!" My son stormed out of the room, shouting over his shoulder at me. "He said he loved her, okay? He kept saying he loved her!"

Not long after that, I saw Adrian myself. Eric and I were shopping for school clothes, and we'd been arguing all afternoon about the \$75 Reeboks he insisted he needed. Both of us irritable, we were leaving the crowded shoe department of K-Mart where I'd been trying to show him that a cheaper brand would do just as well, when suddenly I saw Adrian in the stream of shoppers moving toward and past us along the aisle. "Eric, look, there's your father!" I cried, and then wished I hadn't.

Eric didn't even pause. He was ahead of me, so I couldn't see his face, but his fists clenched at his sides. "That's not my father," he declared. "My father is dead."

Adrian was still there. His body moved as if he were moving with the flow of the crowd, but he hadn't passed us. He was staring at me, his face rigid. He was so close I could have touched him, but of course I didn't. This was not the animated man Glenn had described; there was almost no energy about him. In the fluorescent lights he looked sallow, and under the ragged beard I saw great pocks in his cheeks, as though the flesh of his face were collapsing inward.

"Here," I said hastily to my son, and fumbled in my wallet for some bills. "This is the money I set aside for your school clothes. Spend it however you want. I'm tired of arguing."

His eyes widened. "Are you serious? I can buy the Reeboks?"

I waved him off impatiently, afraid I'd lose sight of Adrian as carts wheeled around him, children raced and shrieked, shoppers absentmindedly pushed past. Adrian, the love of my life, was close to me and standing still, but I had no sense of his presence other than that I could see him there: I could not feel his body heat, or hear him breathing. "Go finish your shopping," I told Eric, "and then go on home. You know which bus to take. Tell Glenn I'll be there when I can."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to talk to your dad."

"My dad is dead," he insisted again, flatly. He held the money in both hands like a bouquet of limp flowers, and he looked much younger than he was.

"Just go!" But he was already gone; head down and shoulders squared, he tunneled through the crowd as though he were headed for the end zone. I took a deep breath and turned back to my husband. "Adrian," I said.

He said nothing. His eyes were dull and didn't focus. I saw now that his hair—badly dyed an odd sandy blond—had receded at both temples so that his forehead was high and very pale. He started to move away.

"Oh, wait."

He led me along the center aisle, past the lavender and turquoise shoulder bag display, through Domestic where towels and washcloths made colorful rolled-edged towers. A man with a cartful of toddlers got between us once, but Adrian waited for me to catch up. He went out the back door of the store, which was marked "Emergency Exit Only." I hesitated only slightly before I followed him. No one stopped us and no alarms went off.

He led me across the parking lot that spread around the store like a shroud come loose. The pavement was heavy gray with rain; the sky was a lighter gray, and gray mist rose between the two. Adrian was a wraith. I worked hard to keep up with him, my feet slipping, my shoes wet; I was afraid I'd lose him altogether among the grays, and I was equally afraid of where I might be letting him lead me.

At the far edge of the parking lot was a row of trees, and beyond the trees was the channelized river that flowed through the city. Adrian vanished over the edge of the embankment. I started to run after him, slipped on the wet grass, fell, got to my knees. From there I could see down to the silver-brown river and the careful green ribbon of park on either side. I thought I saw Adrian. The man standing directly below me had the stiff bearing, the slightly gaping mouth that I had come to associate with the man I loved.

Then I thought I really had lost him forever, for I saw that the banks of the river, the entire greenway, were dotted with men just like him. There must have been hundreds of them: gray, almost fluid in their teeming, and absolutely silent.

I lowered myself flat onto my stomach and slid as close to the very edge of the embankment as I dared. The longer I watched, the more of these men I recognized, the lovers and husbands of my friends.

John was there, looking like a wooden caricature of the man I'd seen with Patrice at company parties for the last ten years. The lines in his face were so deep now that they looked to have been carved; his jowls hung down like scaling bark.

Walter lay on the grass between me and the river. At first his flesh looked stippled, and then I realized that I was seeing blades of grass, motes of dust through his body. His torso was bare, and even from this distance I could see him shivering. Across his chest was a network of angry red scars, like knife wounds, many of them not yet healed.

Under a spindly planted tree, holding onto it with both hands, crouched an old old man with a face like a wooden doll's. He looked so much like my father and grandfather that I knew who he was even though of course I'd never met him before.

Suddenly Adrian was standing before me. He didn't speak. He didn't touch me. He made no gesture or movement of his thin, rigid body. But clearly I knew what he wanted me to do. I was to leave him. I was to leave him there.

I raised my hand and lowered it again, aching to touch his skin with my fingertips, thinking that with hardly any pressure I would be able to leave my fingerprints there. "Adrian," I said hopelessly. "Come home with me."

He spread his thin, shaking hands in the gesture that had by now become familiar to me; I gave it my own interrelations, though I didn't want to.

"You can't just stay here."

He opened his mouth, and after a moment the thin ribbon of his voice reached me. "This is only a gathering place. We'll be leaving as soon as everybody gets here."

"Where are you going? Oh, Adrian, don't leave."

He shook his head and backed away. The outlines of his body shimmered like the mists. The noise and motion of the river current flowed through him. He raised his hand to his lips and blew me a kiss; that was the last I saw of him, that jaunty, affectionate, bone-chilling gesture.

When I got home, Eric met me at the door. His new shoes looked very large and white on his feet, making his ankles look frail. "Glenn says he's gonna run away," he told me, and then went to watch television, leaving it to me.

Heavily I climbed the stairs to Glenn's room. I knocked. He didn't answer. I knocked again, and went in anyway. He was lying on his bed with his back to the door, and he didn't acknowledge me. "Glenn," I said. "What's going on?"

He rolled over. His face was strained, long shadows into the eyes. In a low voice he said, "I gotta get out of here."

"Why?"

"I can't stand it. I can't stand Eric and I can't stand you." He looked at me hastily because he had to and then looked away. "I'm sorry, Mom. Nothing personal. I don't want to hurt you. I just want to go live with Dad."

I thought of that crowded, misty valley. I shuddered, gripped my son's shoulder, and said, "You can't."

He pulled away. He was trembling. He was shouting at me, although his voice was very quiet. "Someday I will. You can't tell me what to do forever. Someday I'll go find him, and I'll be just like him. You just wait."

In the mountain clearing, long enough ago that it seemed a lifetime, I had especially liked the graffiti carved carefully, joyously, playfully into the bark of the aspen trees, which had been soft and pliable enough to accept the cuts of the knives. I'd fancied I could hear the murmurs of all those people, could in turn tell them how happy Adrian and I were, could feel the comings and goings, the passing through, of all our love and whimsy.

Until Adrian, who used to know about trees, had told me: "It kills them. When you enter the bark like that, get under its skin, break its seal, you make a point of entry for a certain type of fungus, and that fungus kills the tree. The rangers up here have to rotate campsites, to let the aspen recover. If they can catch it in time and get the people away, sometimes the bark will grow back over the graffiti and the tree will heal itself."

It had made me feel guilty. "I guess I won't carve our initials then," I'd promised, and snuggled closer to him.

But after we'd made love again and I was sure he was asleep, I did anyway. AR + BY, cut with the tip of a paring knife about waist-high into the bark of a sturdy tree on the side facing away from the clearing, where I hoped Adrian



wouldn't notice. He didn't. We were in love. I couldn't bear to leave that beautiful place without leaving some small record of us.

Now I wonder whether that tree died, or whether it was able to heal itself, grew its bark back over our initials and over the deadly fungus our love allowed inside.

END

## Chameleon

The night before I started school I was afraid to go to sleep. My three older sisters had been in school for what seemed a long time, and I'd been the only one home; if I let myself fall asleep this last night would be gone and the morning would come and the moment that I clearly perceived as the beginning of an enormous change in my life would be upon me. Not for the first time I considered begging my mother to change reality for me, to make it so I didn't have to go. I was five, and I knew she had that power.

I could hear my parents talking in the other room. "She's the baby," my father said. "After tomorrow she won't be a baby anymore."

I clutched my teddy bear and wrapped his short arms as far as they would go around my neck. I was hurting my daddy. Was it my fault I was growing up?

"Oh, Wendell, I don't know what to do." My mother sounded as if she felt guilty, too, but that seemed right to me: She was responsible for all of us, for my father and my sisters and me, for our happiness and our pain.

"What makes you think you can do anything about it?" My father's voice had the mean tone it had so often when he talked to my mother.

"We could have another baby."

"No."

"We could keep her out of school another year."

I was shocked. I was furious. I felt sacrificed for the sake of my father, who, I understood clearly, hadn't even sanctioned such a thing. I pulled at the dangling pink tongue of my bear and it came loose out of his head.

"No," my father said.

"Wendell, please." My mother sounded scared, and that scared me, too. I held onto my bear, who was never mean unless I wanted him to be. "Tell me what to do to make you happy."

"You can't make me happy."

"But that's what I'm here for," my mother said. "That's the whole point."

I buried my face in my bear's fur and willed myself to fall asleep. When I woke up I wore my new dress and my new shoes to the first day of school, and I carried my new Mickey Mouse lunchbox. And I had been right: from that day on, my life changed.

All my life people have been calling me my father's daughter, as though we were very much alike. My mother used to say it all the time when I was growing up. Fondly: "You really are your Daddy's little girl, aren't you, sweetheart?" Petulantly: "I swear, Adele, you're just like him!" Self-deprecatingly: "Half the time I don't even know what you two are talking about. It must be nice to be so smart."

There are stories about the two of us, told so many times that now they have the verisimilitude of family legend: how he was the only one who could get me to eat when I was a baby; how when I was a toddler I followed him around and mimicked his speech and his walk; how close we've always been. It's not true. It hasn't been true since I was old enough to have a mind of my own.

They say I look like him, and so I have studied the two of us in photographs and mirrors. Beyond the nondescript brown hair and brown eyes, there is no special physical resemblance.

My mother's eyes are an odd hazel color that changes to blend with whatever she wears. Throughout my infancy and early childhood she must have worn mostly brown, for I experienced a distinct shock the day she wore a sky-blue blouse and I climbed into her lap and saw for the first time that my mother's eyes were not, after all, the same color as my father's and my sisters' and mine. My mother was dressed up that day and smelled of flowers. Later I thought that she must have been away from us, in the company of someone who preferred sky-blue to brown, and that she had just come home.

I can't say whether I look like my mother or not, because I don't really know what she's like. She changes. She's adept at scuttling and at protective

coloration. In all our albums there aren't many pictures of her; apparently she usually held the camera. The ones there are are so fuzzy that I never could check the accuracy of my memories.

Her hair, for instance, is gray and cut short now. But it used to be blond and straight to her waist, kinked in tight red curls to her head, coiled into thick black braids. I don't remember her ever cutting or curling or coloring her hair, but, of course, she must have.

And her size. Since I've known her my mother has been short and squat, considerably overweight. But she's told us that she could have been a professional dancer, that she had the body for it and the talent. My father didn't approve. Vociferously. And so she gave it up. She has given up an enormous amount in order to please him, and she never did succeed. Somehow she had even made a drastic change in her physical appearance, so that there would be no temptation for her to be something he didn't want her to be. I have never seen my mother dance.

Since my father died and my mother moved in with me, I've been hearing it more and more: Adele, you are truly your father's daughter. I don't know what they mean. They say I've inherited his quick mind, his strong will, his sensibilities. But my father was brittle and prismatic and cruelly defended, like a prison tower made of glass. I'm not like that at all.

My sisters even used to accuse me of treating my mother the same way he did. I know that's not true. He worked hard to mold her and train her to be what he wanted her to be, and I doubt he ever was aware of what he was doing. I know myself better than that. All I want is for her to be herself.

While I was happy to have her move in with me, I was also a trifle uneasy because I couldn't imagine what it would be like to live with her. Since moving out of my parents' home for the last time I hadn't once seen my mother without my father. Her alliance was clear. I'd tried. I would invite her to lunch, but she was always too busy baking bread or piecing another quilt. I'd stop by when I thought he'd be at work, only to find him home sick or taking the day off to fix the roof, my mother crouched fearfully beside him to hold the flashlight and the nails.

They had been married forty-eight years when he died, and by that time my mother had no ideas of her own, nor even any interests he had not initiated. Having taught all of us to abhor the fallout-shelter mentality that surrounded us while we were growing up, he came as he aged to espouse an aggressive national defense; she said so, too, whatever he said, although in incomplete sentences with dangling modifiers and misplaced referents that destroyed the sense. She baked bread twice a week because he liked the idea of home-baked whole wheat bread without dough conditioners or preservatives; a crack in the crust or an undue heaviness to the loaf could bring her to

apologetic tears, and my father meted out his approval judiciously, like single leaden coins.

I've never liked whole wheat bread, and I avoid any discussion of politics. I'm not at all like my father. Still, it was obvious that, of the four of us, I was the only one who could take my mother in. I had the room and the time. All three of my sisters had children.

I don't have children. Ever since I was old enough to understand what babies were, I've desperately wanted one of my own. It's a grief I thought I'd come to terms with, but since my mother moved in it's back: I want a baby more than anything in the world. I want a baby so much that sometimes I imagine I have one. Flesh of my flesh, soul of my soul. Someone I would have the right—even the duty—to prune, like a lovely bonsai tree.

It didn't take long to move her in. A few hours, half a dozen trips in the car, and all her possessions were emptied from the house she'd lived in all her married life. Though she doesn't drive and was moving some distance away, there was nobody to whom she wanted to say good-bye.

That first day, when I showed her to the sunny little room that will no doubt be hers for the rest of her life, I realized how much a child's room it still was: clowns in the wallpaper, frothy peach-colored curtains tied back at the windows with bows. I'd bought the house from people with numerous children and hadn't had the time or the money—or, for that matter, the inclination—to redo all the rooms. I said to myself that it was just as well; this was to be my mother's room now, and she is should do with it as she pleased.

She never did anything to it, and now she never will. It's still a baby's room. I don't think my mother has ever actively influenced her environment. It's always been the other way around.

Except, of course, that at heart my mother is really in charge. My mother knows how to get what she wants, and what she wants isn't always what it appears to be. Once when I was a teenager, my mother confessed to me—haltingly, with a tenderness that embarrassed and touched me despite myself—that I'd always been her favorite child. I held that between myself and my sisters for a long time. Years later, during one of our infrequent late night wine-smoothed conversations, my sisters and I discovered that she'd said the same thing to each of us. Haltingly. With touching tenderness. As if she were, literally, giving a gift of herself.

That first day, I set down the last stack of boxes on the floor beside her bed. She crossed the room carefully with her armload of clothes, taking tiny steps as if to find her way. The books and bars in the closet had all been installed child-height, but they didn't seem much too low for her. "Welcome home," I said, and liked the sound of it.

"It's pretty," she said. When she turned to say it again, her eyes were wide and her cheeks flushed, like an excited child's. "Oh, Adele, it's so pretty!"

We moved toward each other and embraced in the middle of the room. Astonishingly, maddeningly, I was missing my father, and I knew she was, too. It had been a long time since I'd hugged anyone. Once my hurts were more complex than could be fixed by a Band-Aid and a kiss, I hadn't been able to find much comfort anywhere. But now there was an odd kind of comfort for me, standing there with my little mother in my arms.

It seemed to me that she was smaller than I remembered, frailer, more childlike. I thought it was probably because I felt more like a grownup, welcoming my mother into my own home. I thought that most adult children must feel that way about their parents at one time or another, and that it was both an unsettling and a triumphant feeling. I settled my arms around her and smiled at my own suggestibility. I didn't want to let her go.

"Adele," she whispered, her head on my shoulder. "I don't want to be a burden to you."

"You're not."

"I'm an old woman. No use to anyone."

I reassured her. I dried her tears. I helped her put away her few things in the nooks and crannies of the little girl's room.

There was never a time when my mother didn't give in to my father. I was very young when I noticed it, and it outraged me, the price she paid for what wasn't even love. It was something else, though. Control, I think. My mother wins.

When my sister Renee was nine or ten she wanted a horse. A lot of girls that age love horses, but Renee was obsessed and miserable. There wasn't any good reason why she couldn't have had one; we had the place for it, and the money, and no one doubted that Renee would take care of it. But my father said no. Having a horse was silly and extravagant. Case closed.

It became an extended family crisis. Renee cried and pleaded. My father raged. Renee tried obsequiousness; he accepted all her favors grim-faced and became more and more intransigent. The rest of us chimed in, a rare display of sibling unity. My mother said, in her mealy-mouthed way, "Wendell, maybe we could consider it." None of it made any difference. My father had made up his mind.

By this time Renee, a strong-willed child, had made herself sick with grief and fury and desire. Late one night I saw my mother coming out of her room, looking worried and, I thought, determined. I was sure she saw me watching her from the bathroom door, but she didn't acknowledge my presence; it was as if she didn't recognize me. I was afraid to go back to sleep, afraid I'd dream Renee had died and then it would be true. Renee and I never did get along very well.

I finally did fall asleep, of course, and Renee didn't die. The next day was Saturday, so all of us were home. Except my mother. My father said she'd gone shopping, but I don't think he knew where she was; once in a while my mother would be gone for several hours and would come back looking content and tired, and she was evasive if you asked her where she'd been. Our lives weren't much affected by these little disappearances: dinner was always on time, and twice a week our clean laundry was folded and sweet-smelling on our beds. So we scarcely noticed she'd been gone. But it must have made my father crazy.

That Saturday morning when I woke up there was a horse in our backyard and Renee, in her pink nightgown, was riding it. A black horse with the sun on its mane, flying over the bright green grass.

I was young, and my memories of what happened next have always been inexact. I know that my father stormed out of the house and pulled Renee off the horse's back. I know that he spanked her and sent her to bed for the rest of the day; later she told me that it was worth it and more, to ride the wonderful golden horse. She said it was a golden horse; I remember that it was black. I know that by lunchtime my mother was quietly back, and the horse was gone.

"Adele," my mother said brightly, "haven't you ever wanted a family?"

"You and Bridget and Margot and Renee and their kids are all the family I need, thank you."

It was a few months after she'd moved in. We were sitting in the living room after the evening news. She had been acting more and more nervous and fidgety lately, peering at my face as if trying to understand something there. She sat on the couch, her fluffy white slippers with the cat faces tucked up under her and her soft robe pulled down over her knees.

We hadn't had this conversation before, though I'd been anticipating it for years. Once I realized that I would never marry and have children, I kept expecting my parents to express their disappointment. They never did. Instead of feeling relieved or grateful, I tried to stay wary. Now her first words on the subject, blunt as a child's, snapped my defenses up again, brittle and colored like the rainbow.

"But a baby of your own, Adele. They're so *cute*. Wouldn't that be *fun*?"

"It's a little late for that."

"Maybe not."

She was looking mischievous, I thought. Playful and secretive. It occurred to me that maybe she really wanted to talk about herself, as I understood old people often did, so I tried: "Did you enjoy being a mother? When all of us were small?"

She didn't even acknowledge the question. She was playing with the belt of her robe, twisting it into knots and bows around her hand. She was making

shadow-faces on the wall with her fingers and fists: a duck, a dog, a creeping spider. She cocked her head, peered at me coyly, and said, "You don't even have any pets."

"I don't have room for a dog. Cats claw the furniture."

"You could get a bird. Or fish, maybe." Her face lit up. "I know! A rabbit! A cute little bunny rabbit with a white tail!"

I shut myself in my room until I heard her go to bed. I felt violated. How dare she bring up the subject of a baby when I couldn't have one, no matter what she said? When my sisters started having their babies it was all I could do to think their names. I sent money because I couldn't bear to shop for baby gifts. I hid their first pictures away unless they were coming to visit. In recent years it's been easier, as the nieces and nephews have been growing up. Apparently it isn't a *child* I yearn for, but a *baby*. A blank slate. A creature without ideas of its own. Who would need me absolutely. Who would have no choice but to love me.

There were periods throughout my childhood when my father wasn't home. We understood that he was away on business, that he was working hard to better his position in the company. When I was very little I suppose I missed him. As I grew older and saw that he left my mother with four little girls to take care of—and the house, and the land, and the animals, and the cars—I grew resentful. I felt guilty. My sisters and I worked hard to help her. It was never enough. When my father came back—we'd come home from school or we'd wake up in the morning and he'd be there, as if he'd never left, as if he had a right to inform our lives again—nothing had ever been done well enough. There was dust on the windowsills, or the pickup's oil was low, or the back corners of the lawn hadn't been mowed close enough. Or my mother was ironing and had clothes hanging in the living room, like shanty town, my father said.

He yelled. He sulked. Or he walked out again. My mother went behind the barn to throw her apron over her head and weep. I grew increasingly angry with him and ashamed of her. I completely stopped trying to help, partly out a fear of complicity, partly because I hoped it would force her to stand up for herself.

As time went by my father's absences grew longer and his returns more difficult. As far as I knew he never hit her, but he might as well have; his abusiveness was there, and her desperate dependency that fostered it. Bridget and Margot got married and moved away. Renee did everything she could to help my mother and berated me for refusing to. I grew more and more offended, not only by my father's unreasonableness and my mother's passivity but also by the increasing disorder of the household. My mother seemed impervious to me. Renee started saying I was just like our father.



Then once when my father was gone my mother left, too. I was studying for a chemistry midterm and spent practically all of Friday night closeted in my room, sweating over formulae that made no inherent sense and trying not to think about anything else. When the alarm went off early Saturday morning and I stumbled down to the kitchen, I found a woman there I didn't know. Olive-skinned and broad-shouldered. Her voice brisk and heavily accented. Something familiar about her downcast eyes. Wearing a uniform out of a situation comedy: black dress, frilly apron, cap. A maid, she said. Come to take care of our house.

"Where's my mother?" I asked this woman.

She laughed, but she didn't answer. She was busy at the oven, scouring, and the bottles and brushes of her cleaning supplies were arrayed on the stove top above her.

Hurriedly, feeling displaced from my mother's own kitchen, I got my juice and went back up to my room. The chemistry made less sense than ever, but I pored over my notes for a full hour by my desk clock before I let myself take a break.

The maid was gone. The kitchen was sparkling, and a fresh pot of coffee stood on the shiny counter. I took my coffee irritably out onto the patio and came upon a man I had never seen before, down on his hands and knees among the peonies. A gardener, he told me pleasantly enough. Come to tend the garden.

"Where's my mother?" I demanded.

He was whistling. His head in its broad flat hat was bent low under a peony bush. Perhaps he didn't hear me. I drank my coffee slowly in a chair in the sun, reciting formulae in my mind. The fatigue and test anxiety would have been bad enough, but I was also feeling bleary from the absence of my mother and the appearance in our house of the gardener and the maid.

And, one by one throughout that day: A mechanic on his back under the station wagon. A chauffeur to take Renee to band practice. A chimney sweep in top hat and tails twirling a long-handled brush inside our chimneys. A chef. And even, finally, a chemistry tutor for me.

I got an A on the midterm, in a class I'd been on the verge of failing outright. When my father came home he apparently was satisfied; for the first time, I heard no apologies or recriminations, saw no tears. The extras had vanished by then and my mother was back, looking smug, placidly brewing my father's favorite tea-with-honey in her spotless kitchen.

Now my mother was living with me, and I could see how powerful she was. I felt used. I stayed in my room a long time. When I finally heard my mother go to bed, I came out to close up the house for the night. I never

could rely on her to remember. I was straightening up the living room, turning off the lights, drawing the drapes, when I looked out the front picture window and a rabbit was sitting on the porch swing.

At first I thought it was the neighbors' yellow cat. I'd never seen a rabbit in the city; all the damage to vegetable gardens around here is done by cats and birds and by squirrels so confident they seem half-tame. But as I stared at it the creature raised itself onto its hind legs and stared back. Its long ears wiggled. Its nose and whiskers twitched. Its front paws bobbed. We must have regarded each other for a good ten seconds. Then it hopped away, its white tail disappearing into the autumn-brown foliage of the tiger lilies around the porch.

I pulled the drapes shut and locked the front door. Then I went to check on my mother. It was part of my nightly routine now, but that night it seemed to have a certain urgency that I didn't fully understand. She wasn't there. Her bed hadn't been slept in: the ruffled spread was still neatly tucked in under the rolled pillow, and the rag doll with her vacuous smile still sat spread-legged in her place.

Breathing hard from a kind of panic and from an irritation so enormous that it bordered on fury, I stood helplessly for a moment in her empty doorway. Then I shrugged and went to the bathroom to get myself ready for bed. I left the door to her room wide open and the bathroom door ajar. I took my time.

When I had finished with the cold creams and curlers and dental floss, I went down the hall again in my pajamas and slippers to check in her room again. I hadn't heard her come by, and I would have, but I didn't know what else to do.

She was there, curled up in her bed with the covers pulled up to her chin, apparently sound asleep. The rag doll sat primly in the little chair by the bed, smiling flatly out over the room. In the glow from the streetlight outside her window, my mother's hair and skin looked a warm golden brown.

In the morning she said she'd just gone out for a walk, it was such a pretty night. She cried when I scolded her for not letting me know, and I was harder on her than necessary. She spent the day being obsequious and getting on my nerves. I spent it trying to stay away from her and feeling guilty and manipulated.

Later she baked bread. For some reason the thought of it softened my mood a little, even though I don't like whole wheat bread. At first I could hear her clattering and singing in the kitchen. Then for a while there was silence. I was reading in my room; she appeared hesitantly in the doorway and, when I didn't look up, knocked on the jamb. I scowled. "What?"

"This doesn't make sense."

"What are you talking about?"

She held the cookbook out toward me in both arm, as if it were too heavy for her. "I can't—I don't know what it says."

I stared at her for a moment and then sighed. "Come here." I took my feet off the stool and had her sit there. She wrapped her arms around her knees and kept the cookbook open precariously in her lap. I moved my chair so that I was looking over her shoulder. "Read me the recipe."

She couldn't. She didn't seem to recognize half the words, and the measurements obviously were too complex for her. When she looked up at me her cheeks were wet and rosy and her eyes were half-closed, so that I couldn't really see their color or their expression.

Together we made the bread. I read her the recipe step by step, helped her to measure the ingredients in the big glass measuring cup, even kneaded the dough for her when it seemed she didn't have the strength. The kitchen turned warm and homey; the bread baking in the oven smelled wonderful. When the loaves came out they were perfect; we cut thick slices and spread them with honey-butter and stood in the kitchen to eat them together, my arm around her shoulders.

Her mouth full, she turned her face into my chest and murmured, "I'm an old lady, Adele."

"You're not an old lady," I told her, and then, wondering why I'd said that, I kissed her baby-fine hair.

Since then we've been through a winter, a cold and snowy one during which neither of us went outside very much except twice to build snowmen taller than she was. I remembered building snowmen with my daddy; I remembered the flat black button eyes. Weekends we baked cookies together; she patted the dough flat with her open palms. We had our first Christmas together, and both of us loved the lights.

At night I cradled her head in my lap. Or I rocked gently and sang quiet songs. "Adele," she would whisper, "tell me how to make you happy." I would smooth her cheek and tell her over and over again that she was making me very happy just the way she was.

My sisters called every now and then. Renee and her family came once to visit. She said my mother was failing. She said I was treating her just like my father. I don't know what she was talking about. We're doing fine.

In the spring I could hardly wait to show her the pale new leaves against the pale blue sky. She exclaimed, and I held her hand. Lovingly. Impatiently. Desperately wanting the time to pass.

Now it is summer. She goes to work with me every day; I don't like to leave her with strangers. She's good. She cries only when she needs something and, though she can't tell me, I always seem to know what to do. She plays in

her chair. People come in to see her, and they all say how beautiful she is. I try to be modest, but I know they're right.

Sometimes I wonder what has happened to me. Sometimes, when I get up in the night to tend to her, I am totally disoriented. I don't know who I am anymore, except in relation to her. She dominates my life. Her needs are so basic and so clear that they always take precedence over mine.

But always I can remind myself: It's worth it. She's everything I ever wanted. My life is full and comforted and safe now for the first time since I was old enough to have a mind of my own.

And I hardly think about my father at all anymore.

END

## *The Better Half*

Kelly opened the door before I'd even come close to her house. The opening and closing of the red door in the white house startled me, like a mouth baring teeth. I stopped where I was, halfway down the block. Kelly was wearing a yellow dress and something white around her shoulders. She stepped farther out onto the porch and shaded her eyes against the high July sun.

For some reason, I didn't want her to see me just yet. I stepped behind a thick lilac bush dotted with the hard purplish nubs of spent flowers. A small brown dog in the yard across the street yapped twice at me, then gave it up and went back to its spot in the shade.

I hadn't seen Kelly in fifteen years. I'd thought I'd forgotten her, but I'd have known her anywhere. In college we'd been very close for a while. Now that I was older and more careful, I'd have expected not to understand the ardor I'd felt for her then; it distressed me that I understood it perfectly, even felt a pulse of it again, like hot blood. Watching her from a distance and through the purple and green filtering of the lilac bush, I found myself a little afraid of her.

Later I learned that it was not Kelly I had reason to fear. But my father had died in the spring, and I was afraid of everything. Afraid of loving. Afraid of

not loving. Afraid of coming home or rounding a corner and discovering something terrible that I, by my presence, could have stopped. I cowered behind the lilac bush and wished I could make myself invisible. I wondered why she'd called. I wondered savagely why I'd come. I thought about retreating along the hot bright sidewalk away from her house. I could hardly keep myself from rushing headlong to her.

Slowly I approached her. It was obvious that she still hadn't seen me; she was looking the other way. Looking for me. I was, purposely, a few minutes late. Then she turned, and I knew with a chill that something was terribly wrong.

It wasn't just that she looked alien, although she was elegantly dressed on a Saturday morning in a neighborhood where a business suit on a weekday was an oddity. It wasn't just that I felt invaded, although her house was around the corner from the diner where Daddy and I had often had breakfast, the park where we'd walked sometimes, the apartment where we'd lived. It was more than that. There was something wrong with *her*. I stopped again and stared.

It was mid-July and high noon. Hot green light through the porch awning flooded her face, the same heavy brows, high cheekbones, slightly aquiline nose. She looked sick. The spots of color high on her cheeks could have been paint or fever. She was breathing hard. Even from here I could see that she was shivering violently. And around her shoulders, in the noonday summer heat, was a white fur jacket.

I have told myself that at that point I nearly left, but I don't think that's true. I stood there looking at her across the neat green of the Kentucky bluegrass in her north Denver lawn. Sprinklers were on, making rainbows. I was drawn to her as I'd always been. Something was wrong, and I was about to be drenched in it, too.

She saw me and smiled, a weak and heart-wrenching grimace. I wished desperately that I'd never come but the impulse toward self-preservation, like others throughout my life, came too late.

"Brenda! Hello!"

I opened the waist-high, filigreed, wrought-iron gate, turned to latch it carefully behind me, turned again to walk between even rows of pinwheel petunias. "Kelly," I said, with an effort holding out my hand. "It's good to see you."

Her hand was icy cold. I still vividly recall the shock of touching it, the momentary disorientation of having to remind myself that the temperature was nearly a hundred degrees. She leaned toward me over the porch railing, and a tiny hot breeze stirred the half-dozen windchimes that hung from the eave, making a sweet cacophony. Healthy plants hung thick around her, almost obscuring her face. I could smell both her honeysuckle perfume and the faint sickly odor of her breath. She was smiling cordially; her lips were

pale pink, almost colorless, against the yellow-white of her teeth. There were dark circles under her eyes. For a moment I had the terrifying fantasy that she would tumble off the porch into my arms, and that when she hit she would weigh no more than the truncated melodies from the sway of the chimes.

Her voice was much as I remembered it: husky, controlled, well-modulated. But I thought I'd heard it break, as though the two words she'd spoken had been almost too much for her. She took a deep breath, encircled my wrist with the thin icy fingers of her other hand, and said, "Come in."

#

I had last seen Kelly at her wedding. I'd watched the ceremony from a gauzy distance, wondering how she could bring herself to do such a thing and whether I'd ever get the chance; my father had already been sick and my mother, of course, long gone. Then I had passed through a long reception line to have her press my hand and kiss my cheek as though she'd never seen me before. Or never would again.

Ron, her new husband, had bent to kiss me, too, and I'd made a point to cough at the silly musk of his aftershave. He was tall and very fair, with baby-soft stubble on his cheeks and upper lip. His big pawlike hands cupped my shoulders as he gazed earnestly down at me. "I love her, Brenda." He could have been reciting the Boy Scout pledge. "Already she's my better half."

Later I repeated that comment to my friends; we all laughed and rolled our eyes. Ron was always terribly sincere. He could be making an offhand remark about the weather or the cafeteria food, and from his tone and delivery you'd think he was issuing a proclamation to limit worldwide nuclear arms proliferation.

Ron was *simple*. Often you could tell he'd missed the punchline of a joke, especially if it was off-color; he'd chuckle good-naturedly anyway. He had a hard time keeping up with our rapid Eastern chatter, but he'd look from one speaker to the next like an alert puppy, as if he were following right along. He was such an easy target that few of us resisted the temptation to make fun of him.

Kelly, who was brilliant, got him through school. At first she literally wrote his papers for him; he was a poli sci major and she took languages, so it meant double studying for her, but she didn't seem to pull any more all-nighters than the rest of us. Gradually he learned to write first drafts, which she then edited meticulously; you'd see them huddled at a table in the library, Kelly looking grim, Ron looking earnest and genial and bewildered.

She taught him everything. How to write a simple sentence. How to study for an exam. How to read a paragraph from beginning to end and catch the drift.

How to eat without grossing everybody out. How to behave during fraternity rush. At a time when the entire Greek system was the object of much derision on our liberal little campus, Ron became a proud and busy Delt; senior year he was elected president, and Kelly, demure in gold chiffon, clung to his arm.

We gossiped that she taught him everything he knew about sex, too. That first year, before the mores and the rules loosened to allow men and women in each other's rooms, everybody made out in the courtyard of the freshman women's dorm. Because Kelly said they had too much work to do, they weren't there as often as some of the rest of us; for a while that winter and spring, I spent most of my waking hours, and a few asleep, in the courtyard with a handsome and knowledgeable young man from New Jersey named Jan.

But Ron and Kelly were there often enough for us to observe them and comment on their form. His back would be hard against the wall and his arms stiffly down around her waist. She'd be stretched up to nuzzle in his neck—or, we speculated unkindly, to whisper instructions. At first, if you said hello on your way past—and we would, just to be perverse—Ron's innate politeness would have him nodding and passing the time of day. Kelly didn't acknowledge anything but Ron; she was totally absorbed in him. Before long, he had also learned to ignore us, or to seem to.

Kelly was moody, intense, determined. Absolutely focused. I knew her before she met Ron; they assigned us as roommates freshman year. There was something about her—besides our age, the sense that we were standing on a frontier—that made me tell her things I hadn't told anybody, hadn't even thought of before. And made me listen to her self-revelations with bated breath, as though I were witness to the birth of fine music or ferreting out the inkling of a mystery.

In those days Kelly was already fascinated by women who had died for something they believed in, like Joan of Arc about whom she read in lyrical French, or for something they were and couldn't help, like Anne Frank whose diary she read in deceptively robust German. I didn't understand the words—I was a sociology major—but I knew the stories, and I loved the way Kelly looked and sounded when she read. When she stopped, there would be a rapturous silence, and then one or both of us would breathe, "Oh, that was *beautiful!*"

After she met Ron, things between Kelly and me changed. At first all she talked about was him, and I understood that; I talked about Jan a lot, too. But gradually she quit talking to me at all, and when she listened it was politely, her pen poised over the essay whose editing I had interrupted.

Ron seemed as open and expansive and featureless as the prairies of his native Nebraska. I was convinced she was wasting her life. He wasn't good enough for her. I could not imagine what she saw in him.



Unless it was the unlimited opportunity to play puppeteer, sculptor, inventor. I said that to her one night when we were both lying awake, trying not to be disturbed by the party down the hall. She was my best friend, and I thought I owed it to her to tell her what I thought.

"What is it between you and Ron anyway?" I demanded, somewhat abruptly. We'd been complaining desultorily to each other about the noise and making derogatory comments about *some people's* study habits, and in my own ears I sounded suddenly angry and hurt, which was not what I'd intended. But I went on anyway. "What is this, a role-reversed Pygmalion, or what?"

She was silent for such a long time that I thought either she'd fallen asleep or she was completely ignoring me this time I was just about to pose my challenge again, maybe even get out of bed and cross the room and shake her by the shoulders until she paid attention to me, when she answered calmly. "There are worse things."

"Kelly, you're beautiful and brilliant. You could have any man on this campus. Ron is just so *ordinary*."

"Ron is good for me, Brenda. I don't expect you to understand." But then she assuaged my hurt feelings by trying to explain. "He takes me out of myself."

That was the last time Kelly and I talked about anything important. It was practically the last time we talked at all. For the rest of freshman year I might have had a single room, except for intimate, hurtful evidence of her—stockings hung like empty skin on the closet doorknob to dry, bottles of perfume and makeup like a string of amulets across her nightstand—all of it carefully on her side of the room. The next year she roomed with a sorority sister, somebody whom I didn't know and whom I didn't think Kelly knew very well, either.

I was surprised and a little offended to get a wedding invitation. I told myself I had no obligation to go. I went anyway, and cried, and pressed her hand. To this day I'm not sure she knew who I was when I went through the reception line. I spent most of the reception making conversation with Kelly's parents, a gaunt pale woman who looked very much like Kelly and a tall fair robust man. They were proud of their daughter; Ron was a fine young man who would go far in this world. Her father was jocular and verbose; he danced with all the young women, several times with me. Her mother barely said a word, seldom got out of her chair; her smile was like the winter sun.

At the time I didn't know that I'd noticed all that about Kelly's parents. I hadn't thought about them in years, probably had never thought about them directly. But the impressions were all there, ready for the taking. If I'd just paid attention, I might have been warned.

And then I don't know what I would have done.

#

Since college, Kelly and I had barely kept in touch. For a while I had kept approximate track of her through mutual friends and the alumni newsletter. I moved out West because the dry climate might be better for Daddy's health, got a graduate degree in planning and a job with the Aurora city government. Left Daddy alone too much, then hired a stranger to nurse him so I could live my own life. As if there was such a thing.

From sporadic Christmas cards, I knew that Kelly and her family had lived in various parts of Europe; Ron was an attorney specializing in international law and a high-ranking officer in the military, and his job had something to do with intelligence, maybe the CIA. I knew that they had two sons. In every communication, no matter how brief, Kelly mentioned that she had never worked a day outside the home, that when Ron was away she sometimes went for days without talking to an adult, that her languages were getting rusty except for the language of the country she happened to be living in at the time. It seemed to me that even her English was awkward, childlike, although it was hard to tell from the few sentences she wrote.

Last year I'd received a copy of a form Christmas letter, run off on pale green paper with wreaths along the margin, ostensibly composed by Ron. It was so eloquent and interesting and grammatically sophisticated that at first I was a little shocked. Then I decided—with distaste, but also with a measure of relief that should have been a clue if I'd been paying attention—that Kelly must still be ghost-writing.

For some reason, I'd kept that letter, though as far as I could remember I hadn't answered it. After Kelly's call, I'd pulled it out and re-read it. The letter described the family's travels in the Alps; though it read like a travel brochure, the prose was competent and there were vivid images. It outlined the boys' many activities and commented, "Without Kelly, of course, none of this would be possible." It mentioned that Kelly had been ill lately, tired: "The gray wet winters of northern Europe really don't agree with her. We're hoping that some of her sparkle will return when we move back home."

I'd thought there was nothing significant in that slick, chatty, green-edged letter. I'd been wrong.

#

Kelly's house was very orderly and close and clean. She led me down a short hallway lined with murky photographs of people I didn't think I knew, into a living room where a fire crackled in a plain brick fireplace and not a speck

of ash marred the dappled marble surface of the hearth. Heavy maroon drapes were pulled shut floor to ceiling, and all the lights were on; the room was stifling.

Startled and confused, I paused in the arched doorway while Kelly went on ahead of me. I saw her pull the white fur jacket closer around her, as if she were cold.

"We haven't lived here very long," she said over her shoulder. She was apologizing, but I didn't know what for.

"It's nice," I said, and followed her into the nightlike, winterlike room.

She gestured toward a rocker-recliner. "Make yourself at home."

I sat down. Though the chair was across the room, the part of my body which faced the fire grew hot in a matter of seconds, and I had started to sweat. Kelly pulled an ottoman nearly onto the hearth and huddled onto it hugging her knees.

I was quickly discomfited by the silence between us, through which I could hear her labored breathing and the spitting of the fire. "How long have you lived here?" I asked, to have something to say.

"Just a few months. Since the first of April." So she knew it was summer.

"How long will you be here?" I knew it was sounding like an interrogation, but I desperately needed to ground myself in time and space. That was not a new impulse, though I hadn't been so acutely aware of it before. I was shaking, and the heat was making my head swim. It seemed to me that I had been floating for a long time.

I understand now, of course, how misguided it was to look to Kelly for bal-last. She had almost no weight herself by that time, no substance of her own, so she couldn't have held anybody down.

Abruptly, as often happened to me when I was invaded by even a hint of strong emotion—fear, pleasure, grief—I could feel the slight weight of my father's body in my arms, the web of his baby-fine hair across my lips. I closed my eyes against the pain and curled my arms into my chest as though to keep from dropping him.

Almost tonelessly Kelly asked, "What's wrong, Brenda?" and I realized I'd covered my face with my empty hands.

"You remind me of somebody," I said. That surprised me. I wasn't even sure what it meant. Self-stimulating like an autistic child, I was rocking furiously in the cumbersome chair. I forced myself to press my palms flat against its nubby arms, stopping the motion. "Somebody else who left me," I added.

She didn't ask me what I meant. She didn't defend against my interpretation of what had happened between us. She just cocked her head in a quizzical gesture so familiar to me that I caught my breath, although I wouldn't have guessed that I remembered anything significant about her.

Absently she picked two bits of lint off the brown carpet, which had looked spotless to me, and deposited them into her other palm, closing her fingers protectively. I noticed her silver-pink nails. I noticed that her mauve stockings were opaque, thicker than standard nylons, and that the stylish high-heeled boots she wore were fur-lined. I wanted to go sit beside her, have her hug me to warm us both. I was sweating profusely.

I think I was on the verge of telling her about my father. I think I might have said things to her that I hadn't yet said to myself. I'm still haunted by the suspicion that, if I'd spoken up at that moment, subsequent events might have turned out very differently. The thought makes my blood run cold.

But I didn't say anything, for at that moment Kelly's sons came home. I flinched as I heard a screen door slam, heard children's voices laughing and squabbling. It was as if their liveliness tore at something.

Daddy died while I was out. He hadn't wanted me to go, though he would never have said so. He hadn't liked the man, any man, I was with. When I came home—earlier than I'd intended though not early enough, determined not to see that man again—I'd found my father dead on the floor. If I'd been there I could have saved him, or at least held him while he died. I owed him. He gave me life.

Struggling to stay in focus when the boys burst in, I kept my eyes on Kelly. The transformation was remarkable. Many times after that I saw it happen to her, and I was always astounded, but that first time was like witnessing a miracle, or the results of a spectacular compact with the devil.

She filled out like an inflatable doll. Color flooded into her cheeks. Her shoulders squared and she sat up straight. By the time her boys found us and rushed into the living room, bringing with them like sirens their light and fresh air and energy, she was holding out her arms to them and beaming and the white fur jacket had slipped from her shoulders onto the hearth behind her, where I thought it might burn.

#

I stayed at Kelly's house for a long time that first day, though I hadn't intended to. When Kelly introduced me as an old friend from college, Joshua, the younger child, stared at me solemn-eyed and demanded, "Do you know my daddy, too?" I admitted that I did, or used to. He nodded. He was very serious.

We had a picnic lunch outside on the patio. I watched the children splash in the sprinkler and bounce on the backyard trampoline, watched Kelly bask like a chameleon in the sunshine. She was a nervous hostess. She fluttered and fussed to make sure the boys and I were served, persistently inquired

whether the lemonade was sweet enough and whether the sandwiches had too much mayonnaise, was visibly worried whenever any of us stopped eating. She herself didn't eat at all, as if she wasn't entitled to. She didn't swat at flies or fan herself or complain about the heat. She hardly talked to me; her interactions with the children were impatient. She watched us eat and play, and the look on her face was near-panic, as if she couldn't be sure she was getting it right.

I was restless. I wasn't used to sitting still for so long without something to occupy me—television, a newspaper, knitting. At one point I got up and went over to join the boys. I tossed the new yellow frisbee, spotted Clay on the tramp, squirted Joshua with the sprinkler. I was clumsy and they didn't like it; my intrusion altered the rhythms of their play. "Quit it!" Josh shrieked when the water hit him, and Clay simply slid off the end of the trampoline and stalked away when he discovered I'd taken up position at the side.

Somewhat aimlessly, I strolled around the yard. Red and salmon late roses climbed the privacy fence; I touched their petals and thorns, bent to sniff their fragrance. "Ron likes roses," Kelly said from behind me, and I jumped; I hadn't realized how close she was. "That's why we planted all those bushes. They're hard to take care of, though. I'm still learning. Ron buys me books."

"They're beautiful," I said.

"They're a lot of care. He's never here to do any of it. It's part of my job."

Clay appeared at my elbow. He was carrying a framed and glass-covered family portrait big enough that he had to hold it with both hands.

"Clay!" his mother remonstrated, much more sharply than I'd have expected from her. "Don't drop that!"

"I'll put it back," he said lightly, dismissing her. "See," he said earnestly to me. "That's my dad."

I didn't know what I was supposed to say, what acknowledgment would be satisfactory. I looked at him, at his brother across the yard, at the portrait. It had been taken several years ago; the boys looked much younger. Kelly was pale and lovely, clinging to her husband's arm even though the photographer had no doubt posed her standing up straight. The uniformed man at the hub of the family grouping was taller, ruddier, and possessed of much more presence than I remembered. "You look like him." I finally said to Clay. "You both do." He grinned and nodded and took the heavy picture back into the house.

I sat on the kids' swing and watched a gray bird sitting in the apple tree. It was the wrong time of the season, between blossom and fruit, to tell whether there would be a good crop; I wondered idly whether Kelly made applesauce, whether Ron and the boys liked apple pie. "My dad put up those swings for us!" Joshua shouted from the wading pool, sounding angry. I took

the lemonade pitcher inside for more ice, although no one who lived there had suggested it.

Being alone in Kelly's kitchen gave me a sense of just-missed intimacy. I guessed that she spent a good deal of time here, cooking and cleaning, but there seemed to be nothing personal about her in the room. I looked around.

The pictures on the wall above the microwave were standard, square, factory-painted representations of vegetables, a tomato and a carrot and an ear of corn, pleasant enough. On the single-shelf spice rack above the dishwasher were two red-and-white cans and two undistinguished glass bottles: cinnamon, onion powder, salt, and pepper. Nothing idiosyncratic or identifying. No dishes soaked in the sink; no meat was thawing on the counter for dinner.

I remember thinking that, if I looked through the cupboards and drawers and into the back shelves of the refrigerator, I'd surely find something about Kelly, but I couldn't quite bring myself to make such a deliberate search. Now, of course, I know that there wouldn't have been anything anyway. No favorite snacks of hers secreted away. No dishes that meant anything special to her. No special recipes. In the freezer I'd probably have found fudgsicles for Clay and Eskimo Pies for Josh, and no doubt there was a six-pack of Coors Lite on the top shelf of the refrigerator for Ron. But, no matter how deeply I looked or how broadly I interpreted, I wouldn't have found anything personal about Kelly, except in what she'd made sure was there for the others.

I set the pitcher on the counter and moved so that I was standing in the middle of the floor with my hands at my sides and my eyes closed. I held my breath. It was like being trapped in a flotation tank. I could hear the boys squealing and shouting outside, the hum of a lawnmower farther away and the ticking of a clock nearby, but the sounds were outside of me, not touching. I could smell whiffs and layers of homey kitchen odors—coffee, cinnamon, onions—but I had never been fed in this room.

I opened my eyes and was dizzy. Without knowing it, I had turned, so that now I was facing a little alcove that opened off the main kitchen. A breakfast nook, maybe, or a pantry. I rounded the multicolored Plexiglas partition and caught my breath.

The place was a shrine. On all three walls, from the waist-high wainscoting nearly to the ceiling, were photographs of Ron and Clay and Joshua. Black-and-white photos on a plain white background, unlike the busy kitchen wallpaper in the rest of the room. Pictures of them singly and in various combinations: Ron in uniform, looking stoic and sensible; Clay doing a flip on the trampoline; Joshua in his Cub Scout uniform; the three of them in a formal pose, each boy with his hand on his father's shoulder; the boys by a Christmas tree. I counted; there were forty-three photographs.

I couldn't bring myself to go into the alcove. I think I was afraid I'd hear voices. And there was not a single likeness of Kelly anywhere on the open white walls.

Later, a grim and wonderful thought occurred to me: it would have been virtually impossible for a detective to find out anything useful about Kelly. Or for a voodoo practitioner to fashion an efficacious doll. There was little essence of her left. There were few details. By the end, it would have been easy to say that she had no soul.

#

For the rest of that summer and into the fall, I spent a great deal of time at Kelly's house. It started with lunch on Saturdays, always a picnic lunch with the boys on the patio, sandwiches and lemonade and chips. She never let me bring anything; she seemed to take offense when I tried to insist.

"Why don't you and I go somewhere for lunch, Kelly? Get a sitter for the boys or take them to the pool or something."

"The pool isn't safe. I don't like the kind of kids who go there."

Kelly and I never seemed to be alone together. Her sons were always there, in the same room or within earshot or about to rush in and demand something of her. I chafed. I didn't much like the boys anyway; I found them mouthy and rude, to me but especially to their mother, and altogether too high-spirited for my taste.

"It's nice to see a mother spend as much time with her kids as you do," I said once, lying, trying to understand, trying to get her to talk to me about something.

"We've always been—close," she said, a little hesitantly. "They both nursed until they were almost two. Sometimes Josh will still try to nip my breast. In play, you know."

A little taken aback, I said, "You seem to enjoy their company." I didn't know whether that was true or not.

She shrugged and laughed a little. "I think I've inherited my father's attitudes toward children. They'd be fine if you could teach them and train them and mold them into what you want. Otherwise, they're mostly irritating." She laughed again and shivered, hugged herself, passed a hand over her eyes. "But I don't have to *like* my kids in order to be a good mother, do I?"

For a long time, I didn't see Ron. He was always at work when I was there, and, no matter how late I stayed, he worked later.

"Come with me to see this movie. I've been wanting to see it for a long time, and it's about to leave town, and I don't want to go alone."

"There's a movie that the boys want to see. One of those kung fu things. I promised I'd take them this weekend."

Kelly's roses faded, and the marigolds and petunias and then chrysanthemums came into their own. The apple tree bore nicely, tiny fruit clustered all on the south side of the tree because, Kelly speculated, the blossoms on the north side had been frozen early in the spring. That distressed her enormously; her eyes shone with tears when she talked about it. The boys went back to school.

"Now you have lots of free time. Let's go to the art museum one morning next week. I can take a few hours off."

"Oh, Brenda, the work around here is endless. Really. I have fall house-cleaning to do. I'm redecorating Clay's room. There must be a dozen layers of wallpaper on those walls. My first responsibility is to Ron and the children. You're welcome to come here, though. I could fix you lunch."

One crisp Wednesday in late September I had a meeting over on her side of town, and I didn't have to be back at the office until my two o'clock staff meeting. Impulsively, I turned off onto a side street toward her house.

I had never been to Kelly's house on a weekday before. I had never dropped in on her unexpectedly. I had seldom dropped in on anybody unexpectedly; I liked to have time to prepare, and was keenly aware of the differences between people in private and people when they met the world, even the small and confused part of the world represented by me. My heart was skittering uneasily, and I felt a little feverish, chilled, though the sun was warm and the sky brilliant. The houses and trees and fence rows along these old blocks had taken on that sharp-edged quality that autumn sometimes imparts to a city; every brick seemed outlined, every flower and leaf a jewel.

I parked by the side of her house, across the street. I opened and shut the gate as quietly as I could. I stood for a while on her porch, listening to the windchimes, catching stray rainbows from the lopsided paper leaf Josh had made in school and hung in the front window. She had moved the plants inside for the winter, and the porch seemed bare. Finally I pushed the button for the doorbell and waited. A few cars went by behind me. I touched the doorbell button again, listened for any sound inside the house, could hear none.

When I tried the door, it opened easily. I went in quickly and shut the door behind me, thinking to keep out the light and dust. I was nearly through the front hall and to the kitchen before I called her name.

"In here, Brenda," she answered, as though she'd been expecting me. I stopped for a moment, bewildered; maybe I'd somehow forgotten that I had called ahead, or maybe we'd had plans for today that I hadn't written in my appointment book.

"Where?"

"In here."



I found her, finally, in the master bedroom. She was in bed, under the covers; she wore a scarf and a stocking cap on her head, mittens on the hands that pulled the covers up to her chin. Around her neck I could see the collar of the white fur jacket. Her teeth were chattering, and her skin was so pale that it was almost green. I stood in the doorway and stared. The shaft of light through the blinded window looked wintry. "Kelly, what's wrong? Are you sick?" It was a question I could have asked months before; now it seemed impossible to avoid.

"I'm *cold*," she said weakly. "I—don't seem to have any energy."

"Should I call somebody?"

"No, it's all right. Usually if I stay in bed all day I'm all right by the time the boys get home from school."

"How often does this happen?"

"Oh, I don't know. Every other day or so now, I guess."

I had advanced into the room, stood by the side of the bed. I was reluctant to touch her. I now know that the contagion had nothing to do with physical contact with Kelly, that I was safer alone in that house with her than I've been at any time since. But that morning all I knew was cold fear, and alarm for my friend, and an intense, exhilarating curiosity. "Where's Ron?" I demanded. "Is he still out of town? Does he know about this?"

"He came home late last night," she told me, and I had no way of appreciating the significance of what she'd said.

"What shall I do? Should I call him at work? Or call a doctor?"

"No." With a great sigh and much tremulous effort, she lifted her feet over the side of the bed and sat up. I could feel her dizziness; I put my hand flat against the wall and lowered my head to let it clear. Kelly stood up. "Take me out somewhere," she said. "I'm hungry. Let's go to lunch."

Without my help, she made it out of the house, down the walk, and into the car. The sun had been shining in the passenger window, so it would be warm for her there. There was definitely a fall chill in the air, I decided, as I found myself shivering a little. "Where do you want to go?" I asked her.

"Someplace fast."

In Denver I have always been delighted, personally and professionally, by contrasts, one of which is the proximity of quiet residential neighborhoods like Kelly's to bustling commercial strips. We were five minutes from half a dozen fast-food places. Kelly said she didn't care which one, so I drove somewhat randomly and found the one with the least-crowded parking lot. She wanted to go inside.

The place was bright, warm, cacophonous. I saw Kelly wrap herself more tightly in the fur jacket, saw people glance at her and then glance away. She went to find a seat, as far away from the windows and the doors as she could,

and I ordered for both of us, not knowing what she wanted, taking a chance. There was a very long line. When I finally got to her, she was staring with a stricken look on her face at the middle-aged woman in the ridiculous uniform who was clearing the tables and sweeping the floor. "I talked to her," Kelly whispered as I set the laden tray down. "She has a master's degree."

"In what?" I asked, making conversation. It seemed important to keep her engaged, though I didn't know what she was talking about. "Here's your shake. I hope chocolate's all right. They were out of strawberry."

When she didn't answer right away I looked at her more closely. The expression of horror on her face made my stomach turn. Her eyes were bloodshot and bulging. She was breathing heavily through her mouth. Her gloved hands on the tabletop were clawed, as if trying to find in the Formica something to cling to. "That could be me a few years from now," she said hoarsely. "Working in a fast-food place, for a little extra money and something to do. Alone. That could be me."

"Don't be silly," I snapped. "You have a lot more going for you than that woman does."

Suddenly she was shrieking at me. "How do you know that? How can you know? I've let everybody down! Everybody! All my teachers and professors who said I had so much potential! My father! Everybody! You don't know what you're talking about!" Then, to my own horror, she struggled to her feet and hobbled out the door. For a moment, I really thought she'd disappeared, vanished somehow into the air that wasn't much thinner than she was. I told myself that was crazy and followed her.

The lunchtime crowd had filled in behind Kelly and was all of a piece again. I pushed through it and through the door, which framed the busy street scene as though it were a poor photograph, flat and without meaning to me until I entered it. I looked around. Kelly had collapsed on the hot sidewalk against the building. Her knees were drawn up, her head was down so that the stringy dark hair fell over her face, the collar of the jacket stood up around her ears. Two women in shorts and halter tops crouched beside her. I hurried, as though to save her from them, although, of course, by then Kelly wasn't the one who needed protecting.

#

I met Ron at the hospital. From the ambulance stretcher, in a flat high voice that almost seemed part of the siren, Kelly had told me how to reach him. I hadn't wanted to; I hadn't wanted him with us. By the time I made it through all the layers and synapses of the bureaucracy he worked in and heard his official voice on the other end of the line, I was furious. But I hadn't missed

anything; Kelly was still waiting in the emergency room, slumped in a chair. Ron did not sound especially alarmed; I told myself it was his training. He said he'd be there in fifteen minutes, and he was.

They had just taken Kelly to be examined when he got there. I was standing at the counter looking after her, feeling bereft; they wouldn't let me go back behind the curtain with her, and she was too weak to ask for me. When the tall blond uniformed man strode by me, I didn't try to speak to him, and no one else did either. I doubt that Kelly asked for him, or gave permission, or even recognized him when he came. None of that was necessary. He was her husband. She was part of him. He had the right.

My father and I had been bound like that, too. If I'd asserted the right to be part of him, welcomed and treasure it, I could have been. Instead, I'd thought it was necessary for me to grow up, to separate. And so I'd lost him. Lost us both, I thought then, for without him I had no idea who I was.

I felt Ron's presence approaching me before I opened my eyes and saw him. "She's unconscious," he said. "They don't know yet what's wrong. You don't look very good yourself. Come and sit down."

I didn't let him touch me then, but I preceded him to a pair of orange plastic bucket chairs attached to a metal bar against the wall. We were then sitting squarely side-by-side, and the chairs didn't move; I didn't make the effort to face him. He was friendly and solemn, as befitted the occasion. He took my hand in both of his, swallowing it. "Brenda," he said; he made my name sound far more significant than I'd ever thought it was, and—despite myself, despite the circumstances, despite what I'd have mistakenly called my better judgment—something inside me stirred gratefully. "It's nice to see you again after all these years. I'm sorry our reunion turned out to be like this. Kelly has talked a great deal about you over the past few months."

I nodded. I didn't know what to say.

"What happened?" Ron asked. He let go of my hand and it was cold. I put both hands in my pockets.

"She—collapsed," I told him. The more I told him, the angrier I became, and the closer to the kind of emptying, wracking sobs I'd been so afraid of. Now I know there's nothing to fear in being emptied; Kelly simply hadn't taken it far enough. To the end, some part of her fought it. I don't fight at all anymore.

"What do you mean? Tell me what happened. The details." He was moving in, assuming command. It crossed my mind to resist him, but from the instant he'd walked into the room I'd felt exhausted.

"I dropped by to see her. I was in the neighborhood. When I got there she was sick. She asked me to take her out to lunch. So we—"

"Out?" His blond eyebrows rose and then furrowed disapprovingly. "Out of the house? With you?"

I mustered a little indignation. "What's wrong with that?"

"It's—unusual, that's all. Go on."

I told him the rest of what I knew. It seemed to take an enormous amount of time to say it all, though I wouldn't have thought I had that much to say. I stumbled over words. There were long silences. Ron listened attentively. At one point he rested his hand on my shoulder in comradely way, and I was too tired and disoriented to pull free. When I finished, he nodded, and then someone came for him from behind the curtains and lights, and I was left alone again, knowing I hadn't said enough.

#

Kelly never came home from the hospital. She died without regaining consciousness. Many times since then I've wondered what she would have said to me if she'd awakened, what advice she would have given, what warning, how she would have passed the torch.

I wasn't there when she died. Ron was. He called me early the next morning to tell me. He sounded drained; his voice was flat and thin. "Oh, Ron," I said, foolishly, and then waited for him to tell me what to do.

"I'd like you to come over," he said. "The boys are having a hard time."

I haven't left since. I haven't been back to my apartment even to pick up my things; none of my former possessions seems worth retrieval. I had no animals to feed, no plants to water, no books or clothes or furniture or photographs that mean anything to me now.

Kelly kept her house orderly. From the first day, I could find things. The boys' schedules were predictable, although very busy; names and phone numbers of their friends' parents, Scout leaders, piano teachers were on a laminated list on the kitchen bulletin board. In her half of the master bedroom closet, I found clothes of various sizes, and the larger ones, from before she lost so much weight, fit fine.

The first week I took personal leave from work. Since then I've been calling in sick, when I think of it; most recently I haven't called in at all and, of course, they don't know where I am.

Ron is away a good deal. The work he does is important and mysterious; I don't know exactly what it is, but I'm proud to be able to help him do it.

But he was home that first week, and we got used to each other. "You're very different from the man I knew in college," I told him. We were sitting in the darkened living room. We'd been talking about Kelly. We'd both been crying.

He was sitting beside me on the couch. I saw him nod and slightly smile. "Kelly used to say I'd developed my potential beyond her wildest dreams," he admitted, "and she'd lost hers."

I felt a flash of anger against her. She was dead. "She had a choice," I pointed out. "Nobody forced her to do anything. She could have done other things with her life."

"Don't be too sure of that," he said, sharply. His tone surprised and hurt me. I glanced at him through the shadows, saw him lean forward to set his drink on the coffee table. He took my empty glass from my hands and put it down, too, then swiftly lowered his face to my neck.

There was a small pain and, afterwards, a small stinging wound. When he was finished he stood up, wiped his mouth with his breast pocket handkerchief, and went upstairs to bed. I sat up for a long time, amazed, touched, frightened. No longer lonely. No longer having decisions to be made or protection to construct. That first night, that first time, I did not feel tired or cold; the sickness has since begun, but the exhilaration has heightened, too.

Ron says he loves me. He says he and the boys need me, couldn't get along without me. I like to hear that. I know what he means.

## *Memento Mori*

**I**n her husband's arms, at the moment of orgasm, Ann saw the death's-head under his beloved face. She cried out, "I love you. Oh, I love you."

He moaned, as if in response, to her or to the monster. The shuddering of his climax and of her own terrified, interrupted passion dissipated the apparition and pushed it back out of sight, but not for an instant would she dare forget it was there.

"I love you," she said again after she could breathe.

Philip lay on his back, happily spent, his arm under her shoulders and his hand on the back of her head, her temple, the nape of her neck. When he played with her hair and massaged her scalp like that, the intense comfort of it could sometimes verge on hallucinogenic. But it never went on long enough. Invariably he'd stop the wonderful circular stroking well before she wanted him to, claiming boredom or muscle fatigue, and her half-playful pleas for more would be to no avail. Consequently, the pleasure was always diluted by the knowledge that it would end too soon.

"What's wrong?" he asked now.

Almost every time they made love, he asked that. Ann nestled into the hollow of his shoulder, where the illusion of safety was strongest, and as usual tried, "Nothing. Nothing's wrong."

"Ann."

"Not really wrong. I—I didn't come."

That wasn't true, but he seemed at least to consider that it might be. "Oh. Sorry." He squinted down at her. "Do you want me to do something?"

*Don't die*, she thought fiercely. *Don't leave me*. But she knew from experience that if she said that aloud he'd protest that he had no intention of dying any time soon and she should trust by now that he'd never leave her, she and the baby were his life. Sometimes he'd become seriously annoyed; a few times he'd even left their bed. So Ann pretended to be reassured, or restrained herself from saying anything in the first place, but in truth his words helped not at all because they missed the point.

The baby made a little noise in her sleep, and both Ann and Philip were instantly alert. It wasn't a cry, not even really a whimper, but it did require parental response. Ann couldn't bear the thought of lying there waiting for Philip to return and tell her everything was okay, so she patted his shoulder, said, "I'll go," and slid out her side of the bed. On her way out of the room she was assaulted by the vivid, detailed, perfectly realized vision of coming back to find Philip dead in bed. His skin would be too cool. She'd bring her cheek lightly against his lips and there'd be no breath.

The baby was fine. For now. Ann had to touch her to be sure and even then, of course, wasn't sure: some disease could at this very moment be working inside the tiny body, hidden by the thin but opaque facade of flesh and bone.

Ostensibly this was nothing but a paranoid fantasy; certainly Philip had made clear his disapproval and disdain. But Ann kept thinking about all the parents throughout human history whose infants had, in fact, died of insidious diseases; no doubt some of those children had looked fine, too, and no doubt their parents had told themselves, or been told, that they were worrying too much. They'd been duped.

Ann rested her chin on her hands folded on the crib rail to watch her daughter. One dimpled hand was curled in the teddy-bear blanket. Dark hair silked the delicate round skull. Bright red baby's-blood oozed from the soft spot on top.

Staring, Ann clapped her hand over her mouth, but not in time to stifle her cry. The baby jerked awake, wailing before she was even fully conscious, Ann heard Philip say her name, heard his feet thump to the floor and then his rapid footsteps down the hall. Quickly she reached to lift the baby so she'd be holding her when he came in. The globe of her daughter's head fit into her cupped palm. There was no blood. Not yet.

As she turned to face Philip in the doorway, he demanded anxiously, "Ann? What is it?"

"Nothing. Everything's okay." Somewhat embarrassed, Ann met him at the door with the baby, who, not having been seriously disturbed, was already asleep again. "I—though I saw something, but I didn't. She's okay." *This time.*

Philip took their child, examined and caressed her in one deft motion. "Shit, Ann." His head was bent over the baby, cuddled against his chest. "You're making *me* a nervous wreck."

"Sorry." She laughed a little to show she knew she'd been silly.

Philip laid the baby carefully back into the crib—on her side, to minimize the chances of SIDS—and covered her lightly with the teddy-bear blanket. The pink nightlight limned his hair and beard, the line of his shoulder and arm, the tender expression on his face, and Ann was profoundly, dangerously moved by the beauty of the moment. Which would pass. Which, now, had already passed; Philip sighed and straightened. He kissed her lightly, held her briefly. "Good night, honey. I'll be in later. I'm going to watch that movie I taped." Ann bit back a protest and forced herself not to cling. It was entirely possible that she would never see him again.

In bed alone, she turned onto her side and flung an arm and a leg across Philip's empty place. If he were dead, she'd stretch out like this every night trying futilely to fill the endless space, or she'd curl up like this—she brought her knees up and her arms down—in a doomed attempt to protect herself from his absence. She would miss him so much. She would be so lonely. She'd know the instant she opened her door and saw the police officers on her porch—black uniforms, glinting badges, downcast eyes and shuffling feet—that they had brought terrible news about Philip. She'd stay like this in her bed, curled up, for days, weeks. People would tell her she had to pull herself together for the sake of her daughter, and she'd say to them, "Why? What's the point? Sooner or later she'll die, too, and then it won't matter."

Ann dozed off and jerked awake several times, always with tears in her eyes and a lump in her throat and the memory or anticipation, virtually indistinguishable, of having sustained enormous loss.

Discovering Philip beside her just before dawn, not having known when he came to bed seemed a further ambush. At first she thought he wasn't breathing, and with trepidation she held her own breath to listen; then she heard, undeniably, his faint snore, and resented the tender relief that flooded through her. Someday she would listen like that and he would, in fact, have stopped breathing, would never snore beside her again.

Up before sunrise, in a clear blue morning, she put on duster, slippers, and gardening gloves. She took up her long-nosed clippers and went into the garden with the intention of cutting a rose for the white bud vase on the break-



fast table. The bush in the far back corner by the fence had just sprung into bloom, and there, at eye-level, was a perfect rose, exactly the blossom she'd imagined. But now, in its actual presence, she couldn't bring herself to be so deliberate an instrument of its destruction.

The rose was like folded tissue, she thought, but it wasn't. The rose was like a fragile nest, or the inside of her baby daughter's ear. But it wasn't. It was like nothing but itself, a perfect rose, and there was no use for the glancing description provided by simile when she had direct access to the thing itself.

The flower's dominant color was pale pink. The edges of its petals were gilded peach. Its heart and the two fat buds—one on either side of the full bloom, one slightly higher on the stem than the other—were cerise. The thorned stem, the ridged leaves, the sepals like the setting of a gemstone for each bud were emerald green. A dewdrop glittered. Moist, heady fragrance brought tears—of gratitude, of terror—to Ann's eyes.

The sweet fragrance deepened into stench. The petals, now gray serrated with crackling brown, fell off over her wrist, mesmerized, she watched as the rose disintegrated and decayed; from its center, now mushy and almost black, a pale worm reared its horned head and engorged body against her lips, which were still pursed and slightly parted in an appreciative kiss for the perfect rose.

Ann cried out, stepped back, dropped the rotted flower and wiped her mouth on her glove. The rosebush, laden with blossoms and buds and sparkling with dew, was undisturbed. The only dead flower was the one she'd broken off without meaning to. Now lying in the grass at her feet, many shades of pink and peach among many shades of green, it appeared still perfect, but she knew that was a deception, for she'd been shown how it had already begun to die.

Philip was up when she went back inside. "Good morning, honey," she said, thinking how much she loved him but managing to keep the anger out of her face and voice. "You're up early."

"I'm not up. Got a headache," he said groggily, and briefly put his pajama'd arm around her on his way to the bathroom. First his body heat and then its absence enveloped her.

"Brain tumor," Ann thought, and within a split second an entire scene had played itself out in her imagination: his increasing pain, finally the visit to the doctor, the moment when Philip would tell her the news.

Foolish, she reprimanded herself. But her friend's husband really was dying of a brain tumor, and in hindsight her friend realized that the first symptom had been headaches which he'd had for months before the diagnosis was made it happened. One of these days, Ann knew, it would happen to her, or something equally awful; like now, she'd have been

remonstrating with herself not to overreact, or, much worse, she'd have been caught completely unawares.

Philip shuffled out of the bathroom, muttering in an attempt at good humor, "At least it's a beautiful morning."

Ann agreed, but already it wasn't. Already the exquisite dawn cast of the air had thickened; already the sun was up and too hot; traffic noise from the highway blocks away had risen unpleasantly with rush hour. And someday she would lose everybody she loved, through their deaths or her own.

The baby was chuckling. Ann loved that sound. She and Philip stood still in the kitchen for a long moment, gazing at each other and listening to the happy sound of their daughter waking up to another day. Ann could not bear the sweetness of it. "I'll get her," she said, and Philip, holding his head and groaning, didn't argue.

As she entered the nursery again, the baby's delighted gurgling had changed to a whimper. Ann stopped in the doorway, afraid to go nearer, while a voice in her head exhorted, *This is it. It's happened. If not now, soon. If not soon, someday. There's no escape.* Desperately she studied the scene before her so that later, when she had lost her child, she could remember every detail of this last morning: sunlight shafting across the green and yellow wallpaper and the teddy-bear blanket, dust motes like lace, the odors of baby powder and wet diaper, the soft little noises her daughter was still making. Later, as she remembered these things, they would seem far more real and close to her than they did now.

By the time a half dozen steps had carried her to the crib, her daughter had fallen silent and Ann had anticipated in excruciating detail what it would be like to find her dead or mysteriously vanished. The mattress would still hold the impression of the small body; she would lay her fists there. She would let herself be quiet for a few minutes, in order to take it in, before screaming for her husband. She would cry, "Philip! Philip! The baby's gone!" and he'd come running—

The baby was fine. Rage swept through Ann, leaving her weak and trembling.

She bent her face low, feeling the feathery baby's breath across her throat. When the breath turned rank, she flinched and coughed but didn't turn aside.

Very softly she touched a fingertip to the tiny cheekbone. The baby laughed. The thin skin peeled away as she followed the line of the jaw, revealing the baby's skull with its hollow eye sockets and gaping toothless mouth. Ann cringed but didn't remove her hand, laid it instead flat on the small face with the heel against her child's mouth and her fingers over the nose and eyes.

The baby wiggled, tried to turn her head. Effortlessly, Ann held it. She brought her thumb and forefinger together, pinching the tiny nose so it

couldn't take in air, while pressing the heel of her hand firmly over the rosebud lips to seal them shut.

It didn't take long for the baby to grow limp and still. Breath stopped, quite as Ann had imagined. Pulse stopped. Warmth began at once to fade from the soft flesh and color from the perfect skin. The bright eyes, still blue, started to glaze over.

When she was certain her daughter was dead, Ann stood back. Her heart was racing from relief and arousal. Her nerves tingled in excited anguish, and anticipation thrilled her as she visualized what would happen next:

She would ease into bed with her husband. He would say her name. Carefully she would reach to rest her fingertips on his temple, where the tumor might be lodged, and her other hand would, just as tenderly, caress his lower abdomen, the sensitive hollows of his pelvis. Her touch would put the lie to his pain, pretend to take it away, and he would turn to her as eagerly as if neither of them would ever die, as if their child were not already dead in the next room. They would make love. He would not quite reach the core of her, decaying deep inside.

Then, spent but not satisfied, she would go to check on the baby, would find her dead as she had always known someday she would, and she would scream for him, "Philip!" But, knowing, he would already be gone.

END

# Trail of Crumbs

by *Melanie Tem*

Sleeping in the daytime always made Nora lonely, as awakening in the night always enraged her. But for many years now, her needs for sleep and wakefulness had had as little to do with cycles of night and day as did her aging with the seasons. She'd lived so long now, slept and wakened and fed and defecated and hated so much that she'd created her own cycles. She and Beatrice.

She woke up now to the cruel slant of afternoon sunshine, to the cries and laughter of neighborhood children on their innocent ways home from school, to the bent-as-a-claw silhouette of Beatrice at the front room window, and for a split-second thought she would die of loneliness. But the truth was: she and Beatrice would never die, of loneliness or of anything else. She moved her feet, her shoulders, her pelvis, and the age-old arthritis sent pain into every joint; anger, equally ancient and equally vibrant, flared with it.

"Too young," Beatrice muttered. She'd let the heavy brown curtain hang crookedly over the window again and the dim room had darkened, but she didn't move away from the window just yet. A streak of dirtied sunlight fell across the ulcer on her shin; Nora could see that it hadn't yet eaten through to the bone. "All of them, too damn young."

Nora didn't entirely understand. They'd had children before. Beatrice had baked sugar cookies; she herself had filled chocolate pumpkins at Halloween, chocolate hearts at Valentine's Day, chocolate rabbits at Easter. But all that had happened a long time ago, and, no matter how long the two of them lived, Beatrice would always be older and wiser than she. "They'll grow," she said.

Most of them would, at least. A few of them would die along the way, but she and Beatrice most likely wouldn't know which ones, or how. The rest of them would grow older and bolder. Things would happen to them. They would be beaten, mugged, raped. They would get sick. Their babies would die. Their lives would not be fair. Then—drawn by curiosity, or by twisted kindness, or by a youthful and romantic desire for camaraderie with someone even better schooled than they in life's injustice—one of them would eventually come to the door.

She and Beatrice didn't require much. One every few years would do. But it had been much longer than that now. Both of them were getting weak, irritable. Beatrice sat at the front room window nearly all day, a lonely old woman whose body was being eaten away but who would never die, spinning her web and waiting for somebody to come.

Beatrice hobbled into the kitchen. It took her a long time to get there, holding onto the wall and groaning with every step. Nora heard her struggling with the refrigerator door, heard her grunt when it finally opened.

Jennifer—the big Siamese cat who'd thundered inside one day when they'd opened the door for the mail and who since then wouldn't let them get close enough to throw him out—came yowling from his lair upstairs, demanding food. The old lady next door, with characteristic foolishness and enthusiasm, had declared that this enormous tomcat looked like a Jennifer. The old lady was dead now, died peacefully in her sleep. At first Nora couldn't imagine why Jennifer stayed. He certainly wasn't welcome. But Beatrice knew how to use him.

The flesh of Beatrice's leg ulcer was soft and wet to the touch. Remembering it, Nora closed her fist, and pain shot through her arm. It was all of a piece: this pain, and the horror of having to touch the sore, and the energy of her mind detailing all the affronts that had ever been visited upon her, and the degradation of her body in this malodorous bed in this webby and dismal house forever with Beatrice.

#

Nora had been twenty when she'd first approached this narrow green house in the middle of the block; Beatrice, of course, had been ageless. Since then, the

neighborhood had altered around them: the streets had been paved, there were cars instead of carriages and many more of them, the field on the corner where the circus used to winter had been filled in with apartments of dirty blond brick, and the sirens at the fire station a block in the other direction sounded considerably more often. But much was the same, and, sleeping or awake, Nora remembered as if it were yesterday, as if it were a lifetime ago.

Barely twenty, and already her wrists ached in wet weather. Already she'd acquired a long list of ways in which life was unfair, in particular to her. She was nervous, wending her way up Beatrice's sidewalk; it was cracked even then, littered even then with the trails of other people who'd come to this house before her and, some of them, left again. Popcorn. A shoelace. A bottle pointing haphazardly back toward the street. She stumbled. She caught a glimpse of the bent old woman at the front window—watching her, expecting her, willing her to come in.

Nora was on a half-dare, half-mission from her church youth group. Her coat pockets bulged with tracts proclaiming the imminent end of the world as we know it—which had seemed to her then both a logical and a comforting event to believe in. The tracts warned that the only path to God was through Jesus Christ, the only way to save oneself from eternal damnation was through His Word, as explicitly reported and interpreted in these pages. The path was well-defined and well-traveled, but it disappeared behind you one step at a time.

Vitriolic sentiments, from a faith enlivened and sweetened by rage. Now Nora recognized that holy hatred as both puny and self-deceptive, not at all up to the task at hand. Nothing, including the Revealed Word of God, could save anybody from eternal damnation.

She suspected she'd always known that, although it hadn't come clear until she'd met Beatrice. She must have known it—from her father whipping and caressing her for being so beautiful, from the bleak mornings during the war when her mother had made her eat every last morsel of brown rice because there was nothing else, from the times her brother and sister had pulled her hair and pushed her down and broken her toys. She'd forgiven none of that, and she never would eat brown rice again.

Approaching the tall, narrow, green house that first time, bearing home-made vegetable soup and the Word of God, Nora hadn't forgiven anything that had ever happened to her or anything that ever would. The tin of soup was warm against her belly where nobody but she and, then, Beatrice, knew that a baby was growing and would die. A gust of wind scattered some of the tracts out of her pocket and onto the ground behind her, like a trail of crumbs leading out of the forest. Thinking to spread God's Truth in any way possible, she hadn't tried to gather them up; by the time she'd been to Beatrice's three

or four times, by the time she'd stayed, most of them had blown away or been discarded by the neighbors, and those that were left were indistinguishable from all the other debris leading to and from Beatrice's front door. The trail had been lost.

Nora knocked at the door. Although she'd just seen the old woman at the window an arm's length way, although she knew she was expected, it was a long time before there was any response, and then the door with its tarnished gargoyle head and chipped brown paint opened just a crack. The stale air of the house seeped out, dusty and thick; she sneezed and wanted to rub her face, but both her hands were full. Beatrice's hand, like the frayed straws of a broom, pushed out then; although it didn't reach her, it drew her in.

Beatrice had been talking before she opened the door, words strung together like spiteful bones, and she kept talking while Nora stood confusedly in the dim foyer.

"My first husband was a gambler, don't you know, lost all my money, and then my second husband was a liar and besides that not very intelligent, I had that marriage annulled after seventeen months, and then my third husband he was a German soldier, and the law was you could not divorce a German soldier during the war, and so I moved to Canada. I told his mother, I said, 'Just you try to stop me. I'll sue you. I'll sue you *and* your precious son.'"

Her parchment face was flushed, her eyes wide and glinting through the haze of their cataracts and fixed on Nora's face. It was obvious that she didn't care about homemade vegetable soup or the Word of God, although Nora, not knowing what else to do, did finally leave both. What Beatrice wanted was somebody to talk to. She wanted Nora to stay.

That day, Nora had been able to follow her trail back out of Beatrice's house to the public sidewalk and home. But the trail hadn't held.

#

Someone was coming. Nora sat up. Pain wrenched, and her hatred—of her body, of the stranger approaching—soared.

Beatrice was in the kitchen again. Although it cost her much slow and painful effort to move, she was seldom still; even watching by the window, even sleeping, she pursed her lips, bared her teeth—all her own, arranged in a triangle like a beak—twitched her crooked limbs like a waiting, spinning, preying spider. The leg with the growing hole in it moved like all the others, and left a damp trail.

Now she was, Nora could tell by the sound, spooning honey onto white bread, pouring milk into the tall stained plastic cup. This was the meal they'd both been eating several times a day for years; neither of them had ever

learned to shop or, except minimally, to cook, and it had been a long time since any taste but one had been distinguishable from any other.

Another layer of honey would be dripped onto the counter, laying a trail for ants. Another puddle of nearly-turned milk would be splattered onto the floor. Another erratic trail of bread crumbs would scatter behind Beatrice as she ate and paced through the house. When Nora had been just visiting here, she'd fancied that one thing she could do for this troublesome old woman was clean, one service she could provide in the name of God and godliness. Since this house had surrounded her, too, cleaning had shown itself to be as point-less as anything else.

Someone was coming. A bundled figure was moving up the sidewalk. Beatrice said, "Ah!" and struggled more rapidly toward her place by the window. Nora set her feet painfully on the floor. Jennifer slunk downstairs to the first landing and readied himself, among the distinct but crisscrossing trails of spiders and mice, neatly gathered under his belly his unsheathed claws and twitching tail. Holding loosely onto the bedpost with both stiff hands, Nora dragged herself to her feet and took a few baleful steps toward the door where, surely, at any moment the knock would sound.

Around them, and soon to be around the visitor, the old house was hungry and hot and charged as an oven, as a mouth, as a lair. All its surfaces were sticky with the detritus of the living creatures who'd passed through it in all its years: footprints of all kinds on its uneven, splintery surfaces; skin scales and minuscule clumps of hair on its grimy baseboards and wainscoting; feathers on the windowsills; shells and bits of bone in the kitchen sink. The air itself was thick as if with mucus, as if with nerves.

Otherwise the house was practically empty; there were few objects. It had been a long time since the last visitor who'd stayed, an Eagle Scout working on a service badge who hadn't been hard to seduce, who'd been almost eager for his fate. Nora presumed that his few leavings—teeth, a watch, a girl's class ring on a chain, pins and cloth badges now charred and out of place since the scarf to hold them had been burned—were still upstairs in the grocery sack where she'd stored them while she could still climb the stairs, unless Jennifer had thoroughly scattered them by now.

She herself had brought almost nothing with her the day she'd moved in, thinking she was merely making another dutiful visit to a lonely and unsaved old woman. Thinking, too, that she wouldn't be coming again, for Beatrice clearly believed that you had to learn to beat the Devil at his own game rather than running away from him.

But she'd been trapped, enchanted by the intensity with which Beatrice had recounted her life story, her many life stories, and by the sticky satisfaction of telling and retelling her own. They'd faced each other in the chang-



ing light and shadow of the brown-curtained front window, or lain together on the bedclothes that had been made into an amber mesh by years of dirt and body fluids, and they'd matched factual and imagined stories of the cruelties of life.

"When I was nine years old my mother locked me out of the house. She always said it was an accident, she always said she was sorry, but I knew better. It was raining and dark and I knocked on the door—"

"When I was four years old my father started having sex with me. He said it would be our secret, and it was, even though I told, I told everybody—"

"There was a nurse lived over there on Julian Street, she said she'd take care of me, she took my laundry to wash and then she said how much she'd always liked this house and would I will it to her and I said no of course not and then she wouldn't bring my laundry back. Since then, it's been years, I've only had the clothes on my back—"

"My second husband was a stupid man—"

"I'm pregnant but the baby's dead. It's just as well—"

"I had to have a plumber fix my toilet and he raped my little dog, my little Snowball. He did, I saw the evidence, her little vagina that should have been that big around was that big around and bloody. The vet said she'd been raped, but then when I asked for the records, I had a right to the records, I was paying the bills after all and it was my dog, my little Snowy, they falsified the records. But that plumbing company, they as much as admitted it, they paid the vet bills. Drexel Plumbing and Heating, don't you know, don't ever call them if you've got dogs—"

The stories had gone on and on, one complaint threading into another, making a web. Building into a powerful and complicated chorus which, like praying and speaking in tongues, uplifted Nora as she learned to sing it.

Actually, there was little else Nora would have brought with her that day even if she'd foreseen that she was going to stay forever. Bookmarks from her Bible that had once marked chapter and verse still worked their way to the surface every now and then through all the other litter on the floor, but their Scriptures were so faded and their referents so long lost that any trail they once had made, any escape—to the door, to another way of living in the world—was now just another disappointment, another strand in the web.

And Beatrice had long since emptied the house of all but a few items: the bed, the table, in the kitchen the set of carving knives that never needed sharpening. People had stolen her things from her, she was fond of insisting, but Nora had seen her give many of them away: an antique pocket watch to the Eagle Scout, fancy lace doilies to the coarse and dour neighbor who'd always mowed their tiny lawn without asking until the summer day he'd dropped dead of a cerebral hemorrhage, a gold-embossed Bible to Nora her-

self. "Thieves, all of 'em," Beatrice would declare, including Nora in her wild-eyed and self-satisfied ire. "Bunch of goddamn thieves and whores!"

There was a knock at the door. Beatrice got there first, although it took a long time. Nora watched impatiently. "Shovel your sidewalks, ma'am?" It was a female voice, cheerful, middle-aged. *Whore*, Nora thought quickly, and licked her chapped lips. Her jaw cracked painfully.

Beatrice was muttering, Just loudly enough that the woman outside the house had to come a step closer to hear. "And you'll charge me an arm and a leg, won't you? I may be old and ugly, but I'm not stupid, don't you know, I'm not senile. This is another scam, isn't it, another way to take advantage of a lonely old woman, another—"

"No charge," said the voice, hesitant, wondering. *Fool*, Nora thought excitedly.

"I have no shovel," Beatrice declared.

"I brought mine."

"If you fall on the ice or strain your back or have a heart attack or something, I'm not responsible, don't you know."

"Of course not."

"So shovel," Beatrice said, and slammed and locked the door.

"Not too young," Nora observed. The house was dim again, but her eyes ached from the sunlight that had intruded. "Not too old. Not easily scared away."

Nodding uncontrollably, trembling with hunger and anticipation and extreme old age, Beatrice shuffled to the front window, where she could watch.

#

The Eagle Scout's name had been Matthew Washington. Nora always tried to remember their names; it gave her a form for her hatred, at first, and, later, her contempt. He had dark skin and close-cropped hair. He was short for a man, though much taller than either Beatrice or Nora; probably he hadn't reached his full growth.

He always wore his khaki Scout uniform when he came to see them, sash and pockets and shirtfront glittering with pins and rainbowed with cloth badges like small flags. His fingers would keep straying nervously to the empty spot which was to be filled with the service badge he'd earn for helping them. Matthew liked uniforms, badges, clear and efficient trails.

"He's not here out of the goodness of his heart," Nora told Beatrice one day when he'd gone and they were waiting for him to come back to fix the front step, to clean up the yard, to take their \$22.38 in cash up to the supermarket and bring back a money order in exactly that amount so they could pay the water bill. To read to them toward the end—neither of them was

interested, and Matthew was a terrible reader ("a product of our educational system"; "what we get for our tax dollars")—but by then they'd run out of chores for him to do and they had him thinking he was their friend. "He's not here because he gives a damn about us. He thinks he's going to get something out of it. A badge to fill in the empty space. That's all it is."

"Young people are like that," Beatrice agreed. "When I lived in London there was a girl who had the flat below me—"

"Once I was crossing the street on my way home from the grocery store," Nora chimed in, "and a teenage boy—"

"—she had two kids, not much more than a child herself, and men in and out of the house at all hours, I'm surprised she didn't have a dozen kids but then I know she'd had at least one abortion, and then she started acting friendly toward me but naturally I knew better than to trust her all she wanted was a free babysitter—"

"—he was a big tall boy he asked me did I have any spare change because he was hungry. Of course I didn't give it to him, you could smell the liquor on him, I just kept on walking as fast as I could—"

"—when she moved in with one of her boyfriends she stole my good silver teapot, just packed it up with the rest of her things, never even said, 'good-bye' or 'kiss my ass'—"

"—he knocked my groceries out of my arms and grabbed my purse and ran off. I can't run but I ran after him as fast as I could. There were four or five other teenagers on the corner, laughing. His accomplices, laughing at me. The minute I got home here I called the police, remember? but that didn't do any good."

Nora was breathless by the time they stopped, and energized. Now she had given something important of herself to Beatrice and to the house, a trail wrapped around itself to make a web.

Matthew turned eighteen while they knew him. "Today's my birthday," he said childishly, hopefully, but neither of them said happy birthday.

For all his efficiency and responsibility, for all the straight and clear paths he had constructed for himself, Matthew was lonely.

He didn't fit in. He had no friends. Nobody liked him. The girl's class ring under the uniform was fake, purchased himself for four bucks at a pawn shop.

One rainy Sunday, they sent him to the grocery store for bread and honey. Nora insisted that he take the empty bread wrapper from the last loaf so he'd be sure to get the right kind, even though it smelled of mold, even though it embarrassed him. He stuffed it in the back pocket of his pressed khaki pants; the orange plastic tail of it dangled behind.

He was gone longer than he should have been. Beatrice stood at the front window the whole time, holding back the drape with her shoulder and hip;

the ulcer on her shin was shiny in the light from the window, and it smelled. "He stole our money," Nora declared over and over. Jennifer crouched at the top of the stairs where he couldn't be seen; softly, he yowled, a round sound.

When at last they saw the boy hurrying back up the sidewalk, they also saw the rain-wet paper sack give way. The bread wrapper came unfastened, too; he must have been sampling their bread. Nora's outrage swelled nicely. Slices of the bread tumbled onto the sidewalk and grass, a soggy trail. Dogs would get it, Nora told herself furiously, or birds; if Matthew thought for one minute he could save himself that way, he was sadly mistaken.

As they watched, he stopped in the rain, hesitated as if he didn't know where he was or wasn't sure anymore where he'd been. He glanced confusedly over his shoulder, half-turned, even took a few off-balance steps toward the street. Nora held her breath. But it was as if he didn't recognize the way he'd come; he turned around again and came to their door. Nora let out her breath.

"It's the wrong kind anyway," Beatrice snarled, meeting him at the door.

"They didn't have the other kind." He thrust the wet and moldy wrapper at her as if in proof.

"You owe us a dollar and nineteen cents." Beatrice had all her fingers around his forearm; the sore on her leg fairly glowed. Jennifer was slinking behind them, his claws clicking like tiny bones on the uncarpeted stairs. Nora stood up; pain clawed through her elbows, knees, hips and gave her strength.

Matthew tried to pull away. Scraps of brown paper and the orange plastic bread wrapper were stuck in the honey that had dripped from the jar onto his uniform; he was still holding the mangled and incorrect loaf of bread. "I don't owe you anything. I was doing you a favor in the first place."

Beatrice and Nora shrieked together, and Jennifer hissed. "You owe us a dollar and nineteen cents!"

"You're nuts!"

"Thief!"

"I try to be nice to you, I feel sorry for you, and what do you do? You turn on me, just like everybody else in the world." He was swinging from side to side like the hand of a malfunctioning compass; Jennifer had positioned himself stolidly between Matthew and the door.

"Thief! Rapist! Murderer!"

"Witch!" His body was tensed as if for running, and he was actually moving through the house, through the thickening viscous air, but he was going the wrong way for escape; he had obviously lost sight of the door. "Old witch!" he shouted again, and, though it was the same word, its meanings now were more complicated, more convoluted.

He was a strong boy, but he was no match for the three of them. Beatrice applied the pressure of her accumulated years, and her fingers sank into the

flesh of his arm as if it were already ulcerated, already dissolving. He screamed. Jennifer leaped, hissing and growling, onto the back of his head. Crouched low because she couldn't straighten up, Nora hurled herself against his knees. He went down with hardly any resistance at all.

They dragged his considerable weight toward the grimy kitchen, where the knives never needed sharpening. The oven had been preheating for a long time.

#

"Would you like me to read to you? I could come over every morning and read you the paper. Or the Bible, maybe? Or poetry? I have lots of poetry books at home, and nobody else—"

"The pain is too great, don't you know. Can't you see that we're both in constant pain? How do you think we'd sit still that long?"

"What about cooking? How long has it been since you've had a nice hot meal? You have to eat to keep your strength up, you know. I could bring you—"

"We haven't starved yet, have we?"

"It must be hard for you to do housework. Not that your house is dirty or anything, but I'd be happy to—"

"Don't you touch anything."

"Well, I'll bet you two have led fascinating lives. So long, so rich. I'd love to hear. What if I come over every once in a while and just *listen*? Would you like that?"

"No."

"Oh. I'm sorry. Does it make you sad to talk about your lives?"

"It—*makes—us—mad!*"

"I had a house but my sister stole it from me, don't you know." Beatrice's rheumy eyes flashed and her cheeks had acquired a soft pink glow. "Our mother left it to her but everybody knew it rightfully belonged to me."

"We kept calling and threatening to expose them and finally they got somebody out here to repair our television," Nora said. Her heartbeat had quickened just enough to make her feel stronger, more alert. "*Two* men. No wonder everything costs so much. There was a fat Spanish man in a red plaid shirt and a bald white man who looked as if he never shaved and who smelled to high heaven. They took it to the shop—after all, it was still under warranty, so they had no cause to act as if they were doing two old ladies some big favor—but when they finally brought it back—*weeks* later, after we threatened to sue—it wasn't our television. They'd switched it for a cheaper model. They'd switched the little metal plate with the serial number, too, so we

couldn't prove a thing. We gave the cheaper one away as soon as we could, didn't want it in our house. To somebody named—"

This woman's name was Margaret Cowling. Nora had had her spell it. She lived on the other side of the block, "in the little brown house with the weeping birch tree in front," as if they'd know, as if they'd been that far away in the last fifty or hundred years. She'd moved there after the divorce because she couldn't take care of the big house herself. Her eyes filled with tears as she said that, and Nora watched attentively.

Margaret had shoveled all their sidewalks: the narrow one that supposedly connected their front door with the rest of the city; their short section of the public sidewalk between the Haverfords' six-foot privacy fence on the north and Max Doherty's perfectly trimmed privet hedge on the south; the cracked and heaved flagstone path that bisected their backyard. She'd shoveled and scraped them all down to the concrete, then happily followed these fresh paths home and back to their house again and home again, but snow was still falling hard and would fill them in again.

She'd raked and swept up all the litter, all the trails. She'd taken out the two small white plastic bags of garbage that had been sitting in the corner of the kitchen since the snow had begun to fall. She'd washed Jennifer's dishes, under his distant and baleful scrutiny, and scrubbed the kitchen counter clean of coagulated honey and breadcrumbs.

"Do you know that your oven is on?"

"We know. Leave it alone."

Now she was searching eagerly, almost desperately, for some other good thing to do, some other way to help. "Tell us about *your* life," Beatrice suggested.

Margaret looked surprised. "Oh, well, there's not much to tell, really. I'm a pretty ordinary person."

"That's fine," Nora said. "Ordinary's fine. There's always plenty to tell in ordinary lives. Plenty of hurt."

"We don't get out," Beatrice said deliberately. "People don't come to see us much. We've lived so long we've used them up." Her laugh was a cackle, and utterly mirthless.

Like most of the people who got this far, Margaret Cowling needed no more encouragement than that to tell some of her life stories. "Well, all right," she agreed, blushing a little. "But you let me know if I'm boring you, okay?" and took her place in the dusty armchair that had been saved out for just this purpose.

Nora sank onto the bed, which didn't relieve the pain but spread it out so that, instead of concentrating in her joints, it suffused her entire body, and she welcomed it. Beatrice seemed to settle onto her haunches. Jennifer came partway down the stairs and gathered himself into a hunting

posture, tail swollen and twitching, eyes glowing between the banisters like yellow crumbs.

Nora had been right, of course; there was plenty to listen to, plenty to work with. The only truly dramatic cruelty in Margaret's life was her desertion by her husband of thirty-two years, who'd left her without warning or explanation for a woman half her age. But there were, as always, many other things just as useful, subtler hurts that less careful observers might have missed:

A younger sister, prettier and smarter than she. A drunken father. A car accident last spring that had been legally her fault even though the driver in front of her had slammed on her brakes without warning or explanation after the light had turned green. A windstorm last week that had torn a huge heavy rectangle of Engelmann ivy off the south wall of her house, taking with it soffit and eave and gutter—whoever had built the house and planted the ivy in the first place had been careless, and now everyone she contacted about repairing the damage quoted an exorbitant price.

"Good," Nora muttered. "Very good." Beatrice glowered at her for her indiscretion. Margaret stopped talking for a moment and regarded her in obvious puzzlement. Hastily, Nora said instead, "That's terrible. That's infuriating. The world is full of people just waiting to take advantage of you. You've been victimized. Go on."

Beatrice took over. "Years ago—fifteen, maybe twenty, don't you know—we hired somebody to fix our roof. Weaver Roofing, it was, at 4607 West 39th; I have their card here somewhere, I'll find it for you. They tore a hole in the roof and climbed down into the attic and stole a set of antique crystal that was a present to me for my first wedding. Just lifted it up out of the hole they'd made and fixed the hole behind them so there wasn't any trace."

Margaret's eyes were wide. "Really?"

"They thought we'd never know, we were just two gullible old ladies, but we knew, we may be old and ugly but we're not senile we know when somebody steals from us. Weaver Roofing had the gall to bill us five hundred eleven dollars and sixty-seven cents for roof repair. We refused to pay, naturally, and they threatened to sue us, thought they could bully us, but they never did, we never did pay, but they got away with the antique crystal."

There was a silence. Jennifer circled. Nora saw Margaret glance at him, then return her gaze to Beatrice. The dust and gloom of the house, its hot and viscous atmosphere, webbed across Margaret's face, her hair, her hands clasped in her lap, her shoulders hunched away from the crooked and lumpy back of the visitor's chair she sat in; she might have been tied there.

After that, she returned almost every day to shovel, to rake, to tell about the bad things that had happened in her life so far and the bad things that would surely yet happen. Sometimes she brought cookies or soup, which they

always threw away, after she'd gone or sometimes right in front of her; that didn't stop her from bringing something the next time, as if she couldn't believe what she saw with her own eyes. Jennifer crouched in the window of the lower landing and waited, growling and purring so intently that there was a sinister clicking in the back of his throat.

#

But something was wrong.

Margaret Cowling willingly told numerous stories of her own hurts and disappointments and willingly listened to many more of theirs, but the stories didn't enmesh—hers with each other, or hers with theirs. She talked about happy things, too, and often the hurts and the joys were the same event.

"It's not working," Nora kept saying anxiously to Beatrice. "Something's not working."

"Some people make webs," Beatrice said, "and some people make trails. I think she's a web-maker, or can be turned into one."

At the end of each visit she went easily away, leaving footprints in the snow, cookie crumbs in the spring mud, summer grass clippings from the quiet soles of her tennis shoes across their floor. Her trails in and out of their house lasted from one visit to the next.

And some of her tales, Nora noticed, didn't even have villains. "I have a bad toothache," she announced one day, and poufed out her cheek with the tip of her tongue.

Beatrice was instantly incensed, an opportunity seized. "That quack of a dentist out there on Sheridan pulled out all my teeth, I wasn't but fifty-three then, and when I was young I used to be beautiful, but you'd never know it after he got through with me. Damn dentures never did fit right. He had me coming all the way out to the office all that winter. He wanted to get into my pants but I wasn't interested, and don't you know he charged me a thousand dollars, look, I have the bill right here, a *thousand* dollars—"

Margaret shrugged. "Well, I always did have soft teeth. My parents used to nag me all the time about brushing."

"My mother used to make us all take baths every Saturday night *in the same bathwater*," Beatrice raged. "My father, goddamn his soul to hell, used to *watch*."

"My father always insisted that I eat every speck of food on the plate, no matter what it was." As she began the recounting, Nora was gratified to feel her anger become so buoyant that it swelled her diaphragm painfully and spread her throbbing ribs. "He'd always say, 'There are children starving in India,' and I'd wish I could move to India and starve to *death* just to get away from him."



Margaret was nodding eagerly, and Nora closed her eyes and opened her mouth in anticipation. "My father was a difficult man, too," Margaret began encouragingly, but then she added, "But I've come to see that he did love me in his own way and he did the best he could."

Nora slammed her fist into the mattress, but the pain she caused wasn't nearly enough. Beatrice cried, "Damn!"

There was a pause. Incomplete webs hovered in the air, strands straining to twist with other strands, tentacles hungry and groping. Jennifer crouched low to the floor at the foot of the stairs, ears laid back flat.

"Well, anyway," Margaret said finally, "I have to go to the dentist tomorrow so I may not be able to come and see you. They're working me in, which I really appreciate, but I don't know exactly—"

"You're just like all the rest." Speaking loudly and at once, before Beatrice could get to it, Nora curled her stiff torso more tightly on the bed, protecting and insulating the pain caused by her words. "Tricked us into counting on you, and now you can't be trusted." As she said it, it came to be quite true.

She had hoped for tears, for protests, for rage even. Instead, to her horror, Margaret smiled, came across the room with high careful steps, bent, and kissed her cheek.

"You fool! It hurts! I'm in constant, terrible pain and you touch me like that and make it hurt worse!" She was trying to shriek, of course, but her voice caught in her throat, and the truth was that the spot Margaret's lips had touched on her cheek was numb.

They waited then for Margaret to come again. Beatrice hobbled from door to window to kitchen and back again, leaving trails in the dust like a snail, muttering curses and litanies and prayers. Her ancient voice raveled in the darkness of the house and in its dirty light. The ulcer on her leg glimmered like a talisman.

"It's not working," Nora finally declared when Margaret hadn't come by noon of the second day. Jennifer was scrabbling upstairs, bones rattled. "We're going to die."

"I'm not going to die," Beatrice said grimly. "I'm not ever going to die," and Nora was somewhat reassured. Beatrice was far more experienced and resourceful, inconceivably older. Jennifer leaped onto the bed beside her, teeth bared, and sank his claws companionably into her shoulder, where her skin and flesh rolled as if they were barely attached anymore to the bone.

That afternoon, peering through the film on the front window, Beatrice announced Margaret's arrival. "Here she comes. She's *bringing* something again, goddamn her. Plants. Goddamn her. Get ready."

Nora nodded. Her breath was coming hard. Her head throbbed. The canopy of cobwebs over the bed snagged across her face. Pain cascaded down

her spine. Jennifer was circling. Beatrice was making her way to the door, painfully but with some speed. Nora tried to stand, fell, crawled.

"Hi!" came Margaret's cheerful voice as Beatrice opened the door to her knock. Cool fresh air streaked in, sunshine and birdsong, and Nora flinched. "Fletcher's had rosebushes on sale yesterday and I picked up a couple for you. 'Sunshine' and 'Morning Mistress,' they're called. Yellow roses. I thought they'd look real pretty right here by your front door. I thought I could plant them today—"

"Get in here." Beatrice actually reached both clawed hands and the top half of her body out into the spring day in order to clutch Margaret's arm and pull her inside. Still crawling laboriously across the floor, making scuff marks through the dirt and cobwebs and husks of insects, Nora admired the older woman's courage, and because of it understood just how desperate their situation was. Jennifer's whiskers webbed and fanned as he slunk toward the door; he was shedding his winter undercoat, and bits of fur clung to the baseboards as he passed.

"Wait," protested Margaret, "you're breaking the rosebushes—"

"You look at this!" Beatrice shook in Margaret's face the stack of papers she'd collected on the newel post. With the other hand, she managed to pull Margaret all the way inside and slammed the door on them all. "You don't believe me, just look at all this proof! I may be old and ugly, but I'm not stupid and I'm not senile!"

"You're not ugly," Margaret began, but stopped. She stood in the gloom of the foyer, looking bewildered, the rosebushes in her arms. She hadn't noticed Nora yet, or Jennifer. Dirt had scattered out of the plastic that wrapped the root balls, and Nora thought she glimpsed minuscule, translucent green scales steadily coming loose from the stems.

"Here, here, look at this!" Beatrice yanked a sheet at random out of the stack; other papers fluttered onto the stairs and into the dimness of the foyer, but she made no effort to retrieve them and there were still plenty in the collection. "Read this! That damn doctor, that goddamn clinic! They say I owe them money, they say they'll take me to court, but they never sent me my records, they never told me what this was for! And now they want to cut off my leg because of the gangrene, but I'm not about to consent to that!"

Carefully Margaret set the rosebushes down. She took the letter from Beatrice and squinted at it. In the doorway from the front room into the hall and foyer, Nora stopped to catch her breath, sank back onto her knees, and pressed her cheek against the warm, gritty floor. It hurt.

"Beatrice," Margaret said cautiously, wonderingly, "this bill is fourteen years old."

"Nobody's going to take advantage of *me*! Not while I've got my eyes open, they're not! Look at this, Just you look at this!" She pulled another sheet from the loose pile on the newel post, then another and another, sending more crumpled envelopes and torn half-sheets into the thick air and onto the layered floor. Jennifer reached out a long spotted leg and, claws out, batted as if he were toying with a half-dead mouse. Some skittered; some settled where they'd fallen. The big, hollow-sided cat growled.

Margaret looked up and saw him, then saw Nora. She gasped and moved forward, lifting her foot high as though to step over and through debris, nearly losing her balance. "Nora! Did you fall? Are you all right?"

Beatrice pushed between them, waving a wrinkled sheet of pale blue stationery in Margaret's face. For a moment Margaret kept staring somewhat confusedly at Nora. Then her distracted gaze was on Jennifer, who was stalking her, back humped, ears flat, growl rising in his throat. "Read this, god-damn you, *read this!*" Margaret accepted the letter, bent her head close to read it in the uncertain light.

"I didn't know you had a daughter," she said finally. "You've never mentioned—"

"I don't claim her! She's nothing to me! Do you see what she says? Do you *see?*" Beatrice was beside herself with fury now, her frail hunched body contorted, her small foot stomping as if she'd make holes in the floor, her voice more a wordless cackle than a cry.

Margaret scanned the letter again. "She says she loves you, Beatrice. She says can she come and visit you."

"It's a trick! She's a liar and a whore! She just wants me to put her back in my will! Nobody's going to take advantage of *me*, don't you know!"

The blue paper trembling in her hands, Margaret looked at Beatrice, Nora, Jennifer. "I had a daughter," she said.

Nora held her breath. Jennifer crouched.

"She died," Margaret said. "She was hit by a drunk driver. She was eight years old. He got two years probation."

"Son-of-a-bitch!" Beatrice shouted. "Liar! Trickster! Whore!"

"I could never have any more children after my baby died," Nora wailed from her place on the floor, no longer sure whether the details were true but surer than ever of the rage, the spreading enmity. "That doctor could cut me open, sterilized me, killed my child, my little girl—"

"But I'm so glad I had her," Margaret said, and smiled, and Nora suddenly could hardly breathe, could hardly feel the distant hurting parts of her body. "I'm so glad our lives touched each other."

"Shut up!" Nora shrieked.

"Liar trickster whore," Beatrice was still chanting, but she'd lost her fervor and was swaying back against the dusty broken bars of the banister. "Cheat murderer thief—"

"When someone you love dies, what you have left is the love." Margaret was almost chanting herself.

Nora was outraged. She writhed on the floor. Desperately glaring at Margaret, Beatrice breathed, "Witch!" Jennifer was closing in, moving swiftly now, his body flat to the floor. Nora pushed forward, taking strength and purpose from the pain she could cause herself, although it wasn't nearly enough. Eyes open wide in her chanting, Beatrice had both hands on Margaret's arm.

"I'd better go plant those rosebushes before they dry out," Margaret said hastily, and fumbled behind her for the doorknob. "The man at the nursery said they'll likely bloom this season. Pale yellow and golden yellow. I thought you'd like that, you can see them from the front window without having to go outside. I'll tend them for you, I'm pretty good with plants, I—"

"Kindness!" Beatrice shrieked, an imprecation. "We don't want *kindness*! It's a trick! It's a trap! It weakens us! We may be ugly old ladies, but we're not senile!"

"No—" Margaret began, and then they were on her.

Jennifer was big enough that his front claws sank into the back of her head while his powerful hind legs grasped her waist. She screamed, twisted toward him. Beatrice flung herself into Margaret's face, hands and feet flailing. Nora wrapped herself around Margaret's ankles and sank her teeth into the flesh.

Then she broke free of all of them and ran out into the bright spring day, leaving their door wide open. The rosebushes stayed drying and crumbling in their foyer, and her many trails were clearer than ever down their front steps and along their sidewalk into the wider world.

Nora didn't see her actual escape, because the moment Margaret was gone Beatrice and Jennifer turned on her. Nora saw fangs and fur and seepage from Beatrice's devouring wound, felt teeth and claws at her throat, heard hissing, heard Beatrice insisting, "*I'm* not going to die! *I'm* not ever going to die!" Some people made webs and some people made trails; as the ancient woman and the giant cat dragged her toward the kitchen, where knives never needed sharpening and the oven was always hot, Nora realized what choice she had made.

END

## *Pandorette's Mother*

Pandorette hadn't had any stuffed animals since Mom had found a newspaper story about some little kid, some *baby*, who'd suffocated when his teddy bear fell on top of him in his crib. While Pandorette was reading the article, Mom had stood in front of her shelf and spread her arms as wide as she could and gathered all the stuffed animals—her pig, her funny rhinoceros, her long-haired white kitten with the blue eyes and the pink bow. Then, carefully, not dropping any of them, she went down the hall and threw them all away.

Pandorette swore she could hear them crying, calling out to her to save them. But there wasn't anything she could do. Once Mom got an idea in her head there was no stopping her. So Pandorette just let them go.

When Mom came back into Pandorette's room, her arms were terribly empty, and Pandorette looked away. Mom came over to Pandorette and hugged her. "I love you," she said in a singsong voice. Pandorette pulled away, thinking but not daring to say, *Hugs can hurt you. You can suffocate if somebody holds you too tight.* "Oh, Pandorette Katrice," Mom said sadly, "I'm sorry, but I'm your mother, and I'm supposed to keep anything bad from ever happening to you."

She detested her name. Who wouldn't? Girls named pretty, ordinary things like Jennifer or Tiffany said they hated their names, too, she remembered, but they were just saying that to be cool. "Pandorette" was truly *ugly*.

It didn't even sound real, especially when you put it together with her stupid middle name: Pandorette Katrice. What it sounded like was one of those ridiculous fancy names little girls made up for their dolls and then changed the very next day to Monique Monaye or something. Sometimes when Pandorette was feeling especially miserable and mean, she wondered what her name had been before her mother had come up with Pandorette Katrice, and whether someday her mother would decide to change her name again.

Come to think of it, Mom did treat her like a doll. Not a doll you loved, really, and played with and slept with and combed her hair, but a doll that might break or get dirty and then you'd be in trouble. Pandorette thought you'd get awfully tired of having a doll you had to treat like that, no matter what you named it.

Back when she used to know other kids, some of them said her middle name "Kat-Rice" because that was how it was spelled. She had never told anybody what her middle name was, but somebody saw it in her school records or something, when she still went to school, and pretty soon everybody knew. And she couldn't exactly hide what her ugly first name was.

Now nobody except her mother called her anything, because she never talked to anybody except her mother. Last year Mom had read some weird story about some teenager who'd been electrocuted when lightning struck the telephone wires and came out the receiver in a blue ball, so now they didn't even have a phone. Not that a lot of people would have called. But somebody might.

She'd had friends; not very many, but some. Nobody was allowed to come to her house because Mom didn't want the responsibility of somebody else's kid. There was a time when Pandorette could go to the park, or to somebody's house to play, or to the corner store; there was a time when she went to school. Mom was always worried—if Pandorette was five minutes late, she'd be out hunting for her, and she'd get grounded for a long time. She'd figured out that Mom was actually glad to have an excuse to keep her in the house.

Sometimes it seemed like just a few days since she'd been allowed out of the house, maybe a long weekend. Sometimes she thought it had been half her life or more. Probably it had been months. Her mother didn't look any different. Pandorette didn't know if she herself looked any different because Mom had taken all the mirrors away when she took away everything else made of glass, but she *felt* different. Months older, at least, Maybe years.

Hearing her mother hurrying down the hall, Pandorette stiffened. By the time Mom got to the doorway she was halfway into a story about some little

girl in Mississippi or Missouri or Montana, one of the M states, who'd choked to death on the head of a Barbie. Now who'd be dumb enough to stick a Barbie head in their *mouth*? Pandorette did not believe the story. Mom wouldn't say where she'd read it. The *National Enquirer*, probably.

It didn't matter if it was true or not. Sometimes Pandorette thought her mother *liked* finding out about some danger she hadn't thought of before, no matter how farfetched. Whenever she took something else away, Mom was sorry, but there was also a certain glee.

When Pandorette was six, she'd just been learning to ride a two-wheeler without training wheels. Looking back on it now, she thought that really had been a big adventure, but at the time it had just been what you *did* when you were a kid. She remembered feeling proud of herself, at the same time that she was scared to death. Then the boy across the street had gone over his handlebars and scraped himself pretty bad from his chin to the top of his head. Right away, Mom confiscated Pandorette's red bike and hung it from a hook in the garage ceiling where she could see it every time she went in there but couldn't reach it. After a while it just disappeared.

One of Pandorette's earliest memories was of when Mom used to take her to the playground. She wasn't allowed to climb on the monkey bars because she might fall off and break her arm. She wasn't allowed to dig in the sand because a little boy in another city had buried himself and couldn't breathe and died. She wasn't allowed to swing on the swings because the chain might break and she'd hit her head and get brain damage. Looking back now, going to the playground at all seemed like tremendous freedom, kind of reckless on Mom's part; after all, she could have gotten hit by a car on the way home or there could have been a child molester on the merry-go-round. But Pandorette remembered how the wind had felt in her hair when she went really high on the swings, and how fast she could come down the big slide.

Now Mom was going to throw away every single one of Pandorette's dolls, not just the Barbies, even the Raggedy Ann she'd had practically all her life and it hadn't hurt her yet and its head wouldn't come off unless you chopped it off and anyway it was as big as her own head. Pandorette thought about it. Maybe you could suffocate on the stuffing, but she didn't see how.

She tried to save one of her dolls by hiding it in her pocket. It hadn't even been one of her favorites—she could hardly remember ever playing with it, and it didn't have a name. But with her hands tied it happened to be the one she could reach when she heard Mom coming, talking out loud about how most mothers would never think about how dolls could kill their children, most mothers weren't careful enough. This time Pandorette's mother didn't seem to be getting any pleasure out of what she was doing. She acted almost bored.

After Mom had crammed all the other dolls into a black plastic trash bag to throw away (so some *other* kid could rescue them and name them, Pandorette thought ferociously; so some *other* kid could die), she came right over to Pandorette and searched her, patted her down just like cops did on TV only Pandorette wasn't allowed to watch TV anymore because there was so much sex and violence. Naturally she found the doll hidden in the pocket. She yanked it out and tried to break it in half but it wouldn't even bend. So she dropped it whole into the trash bag and just walked out of the room without saying anything. Pandorette knew she was really mad. She probably would have slammed the door, except she'd taken it off the hinges a few weeks back when she'd heard on the radio about two kids who died in a house fire because the door to their room stuck shut.

That was when she'd started tying Pandorette to the bed because she couldn't lock her in her room anymore to keep her safe. Pandorette could think of all kinds of ways she could get hurt on the ropes (scrape her arms, saw her hands off, strangle herself) or on the bed (pull it over on top of her). But apparently Mom hadn't thought of that.

Time passed. It was hard to know how much time; there weren't any clocks in the room because they might fall off the shelf or the wall and hit you on the head while you were asleep, and Pandorette couldn't see the sun because there were boards on her window so the pane wouldn't shatter inward and cut her eyes if there was an earthquake, never mind that there were never earthquakes in this part of the country. Pandorette started thinking what if her mother just got tired of being her mother. What if she gave up on trying to keep her safe. What if she just left her on her own. What if she'd already left, and Pandorette was alone and didn't know it.

But then Mom came back in. In her hand was a pair of long scissors (scissors could hurt you; scissors could cut).

She sat down chummily on the bed as if they were going to have a mother-daughter chat. She untied the ropes around Pandorette's wrists, then kissed her cheek and laughed happily as if she'd just given her some neat surprise gift. Pandorette didn't know what was going on. Her heart pounded. Maybe she was having a heart attack. That was almost funny; what if Mom herself scared Pandorette to death, not meaning to?

Then Mom cut the breast pocket off Pandorette's shirt. Just like that.

At first, when Mom came at her, smiling, with the scissors, Pandorette had been scared, imagining her mother stabbing her in the heart. That was stupid and mean; Mom would never do anything to hurt her. Mom spent every waking minute, and probably a lot of minutes when she was asleep, too, coming up with ways to *keep* Pandorette from getting hurt. She ought to be grateful.

"Stand up, honey," Mom told her gently.



Pandorette hesitated, but then she stood up. If she couldn't trust her mother, whom could she trust? Her legs were kind of wobbly and tingly from sitting in one position for so long, and she leaned against Mom, who caught her and kissed the side of her head.

Pandorette let herself relax a little in her mother's arms. She should have known better. That was when the long sharp scissors slid down her hip and, with one, two downward snips and one across, cut the hip pocket right off Pandorette's jeans.

Then Mom proceeded to take the pockets off everything. Sweats, jackets, robes, T-shirts, everything. Sometimes she tore and sometimes she cut, leaving tiny holes from the stitching, darker rectangles of fabric where the pockets had been, ragged bits of the pockets themselves that wouldn't quite come off.

The whole entire time, while she was dragging stuff out of drawers and the closet and out from under the bed, she was explaining in that you'll-understand-when-you-have-children voice, "Pockets aren't dangerous in themselves, as far as I can tell. But they hide all kinds of things that could hurt you. Pins. Matches."

*Knives.* Pandorette thought fiercely. *Guns.*

"Dolls," said her mother, nodding wisely.

There were a couple of times while Mom was busy with all this tearing and cutting and explaining that Pandorette might have been able to escape. Once Mom went way back in the closet to pull out the old Brownie uniform (from before a busload of Girl Scouts in Alaska had gone off the road and three of them had been killed). Another time she dropped a pajama top with two heart-shaped pockets off the edge of the dresser and had to get down on her knees and snake her arm way back there along the wall to get it. Mom always kept herself between Pandorette and the door, but maybe she could have pushed past her really hard and run out of the room really fast, out of the house, away from her mother.

In fact, Pandorette started wondering if that was what her mother *wanted* her to do. She watched her. It didn't seem to her that Mom was being as careful as usual. Maybe she was secretly hoping that if her daughter ran away and she did her best but there wasn't anything she could do to stop her, then it wouldn't be her fault if something happened to her.

But then where would she go? What would happen to her? The world was a dangerous place.

So she just sat there as if she were still tied up and waited until her mother couldn't find any more pockets in the room. Mom sighed. Pandorette couldn't tell if it was from satisfaction or sadness or both. The scissors went *snik* when Mom closed them and stuck them into her pocket. It wouldn't do any

good to argue, but Pandorette couldn't stop herself. "How come *you've* got pockets, if they're so dangerous?"

Mom said right away, without even really thinking about it, "Because I'm the parent and you're the child."

"That's not fair."

"I'm supposed to keep *you* safe, not the other way around."

All of a sudden, Pandorette had an idea. But she was afraid to think it. "It's not *fair!*" she wailed miserably, knowing it wouldn't make any difference. Her mother was already tying her wrists again, so she couldn't even wipe her own tears away.

Very gently and lovingly, Mom did it for her. "I know, honey, I know it's hard." She finished tying her up, which by now didn't take very long. She hugged her, kissed her forehead, and went out of the room.

For a little while, Pandorette gloated over the secret pocket she remembered was sewn into the waistband of the flowered skirt she'd worn the last day she'd been allowed to go to school. Mom hadn't found it, and for a few minutes that made Pandorette feel strong and adventurous and rebellious, as if she was in charge of *something* in her life after all.

But she couldn't get to it, and even if she could have there wasn't anything worth hiding in it. She'd probably outgrown it by now anyway. So a lot of good it did her. The hard, excited, knowing-what-she-was-doing feeling didn't last very long.

Mom was fixing dinner now. Pandorette was hungry so the food smelled good, but that was just a trick she was playing on herself, because she knew what she'd get to eat. The same thing she got every lunch and every dinner—stuff out of the blender with no chunks of meat or vegetables or noodles for her to choke on. She'd never liked any kind of soup in her whole life, and this stuff was awful. Mom told her she tried to make it more interesting for her with weird spices like cardamom and marjoram and turmeric (*maybe you could name a little girl Cardamom*), which was nice of her, but they just made the blender stuff truly disgusting, and blended green beans didn't taste a lot different from blended chicken. For breakfast she always got oatmeal. So far, her mother hadn't found any reason not to put sugar and milk in it.

*You can get sick if you don't eat the right vitamins and food groups and stuff*, Pandorette wanted to tell her mother. She did feel weak and kind of dizzy a lot of the time now. But she was afraid to say anything for fear Mom would come up with something else to protect her from.

Once Mom had tried spoon-feeding her while her hands were still tied, but Pandorette had drooled and then choked. Practically panic-stricken, Mom had untied her right away and let her feed herself.

Tonight, when she came bustling in with the steaming blue bowl, set it down on the empty dresser, and crouched to loosen the knots, Pandorette was thinking that she wasn't really a very big woman, and that she looked tired, maybe sick. That last thought terrified her. What in the world would she do if anything ever happened to her mother?

"It's hard, isn't it?" Pandorette asked. Her voice cracked because she hadn't spoken since lunchtime, and because she was scared. She cleared her throat.

Mom's head, bent over Pandorette's left wrist, nodded. "These ropes are starting to fray a little so they're hard to untie."

"No," said Pandorette. "I mean, it's hard being a parent, isn't it?"

Mom looked up at her. "Oh, honey, you have no idea. It's my job to keep you safe and alive until you're grown up, no matter what that takes, and sometimes it just seems impossible. Just now while I was fixing your dinner I heard on the news about a girl your age whose heart stopped when she went into REM sleep, or something like that. Maybe there'll be an article about it in the paper tomorrow and I can find out more. I didn't think I had to worry about anything like Sudden Infant Death Syndrome anymore. Does that mean I have to stay in here with you all night and not let you fall into deep sleep? But that's not good for you either. Oh, I just get so confused, and so *tired*." She tugged at the rope, which just made it tighter. It was cutting into Pandorette's arm.

"I'm almost fifteen," Pandorette reminded her.

"You're fourteen, dear."

"I'm almost fifteen." *I could have a baby of my own. Then I'd get to name her whatever I wanted. Cardamom Athena, goddess of the hunt.* She wondered if her mother had known who Pandora was when she'd named her, or if she'd found out later and so part of what she was guarding against was Pandorette herself, all the things Pandorette would let loose if she had a chance. "That's how old you were when you had me."

"That's not grown up. Oh, *damn* this thing!" Mom sat back on her heels and slammed her fists into her thighs like a frustrated little kid. Her face was all scrunched up and her eyes were shiny with tears.

Pandorette lowered her head and got the rope between her teeth. It took only a couple of chews to break through the first strand, and after that the rope just sort of fell apart. Triumphantly, surprised at herself, she raised her head and looked straight at her mother. "There," she said.

Mom's eyes were wide and she looked shocked. It crossed Pandorette's mind that now Mom would probably decide that *teeth* were too dangerous for Pandorette to have.

But they just sat there, staring at each other. Then her mother whispered, as if she could hardly believe what she was saying, "Go ahead. Do the other one."

Pandorette couldn't get the other rope to come off. She tried to pry the knot apart with her fingers, but all that happened was her nails broke. This section of the rope wasn't as frayed as the other, and her teeth wouldn't go through it. Finally she gave up and looked at her mother for a signal about what to do next.

Mom looked stumped. "Well, do you think you could eat with your left hand?" She probably could, but she said, "No. I'm right-handed."

"I *know* you're right-handed, Pandorette Katrice. I'm your mother." She was frowning, and her bottom lip was sticking out like a pouty kid's.

Pandorette almost laughed. She also almost didn't say what she said next. "I'm hungry," she declared, putting just a little whine into her voice.

"I don't know what to *do*!" Mom wailed.

"*Everything's* dangerous, if you look at it that way," Pandorette pointed out. "If you feed me, I'll probably choke. If I try to feed myself with my left hand, I won't get much food in my mouth. If I don't eat, I'll starve. If you use those scissors in your pocket to cut the rope, you might cut me. Face it, Mom. There's just no way you can keep me safe."

Her mother had gasped and put her hand over her pocket when Pandorette mentioned the scissors, as if she'd thought her daughter hadn't known they were there, or as if she'd forgotten them herself. Now she slowly took them out and very carefully laid them in her lap and sat there looking down at them.

Pandorette took a deep breath and pressed her advantage. "Come on, Mom. Cut the rope."

There was a long pause, and Pandorette had just about decided her mother wasn't going to do it when Mom picked up the scissors in both hands and leaned over to her. Her hands were shaking and she was clumsy, but she managed to work one sharp point under the rope. It nicked Pandorette's skin, but she kept herself from jumping or yelling. Mom tried once, twice, and the scissors wouldn't cut. She wiggled them around some and tried again. *Snik*. The rope fell away and Pandorette was free.

She didn't give herself time to think about it. She jumped up, pushed her mother back on the bed, and piled pillows and blankets all around her. Mom said, "Pandorette Katrice, what are you doing?" and "It's not safe!" a few times, but she didn't really fight or try to stop her.

When Pandorette had her all tucked in, swaddled like a baby so she couldn't move and hurt herself and nothing could get in to hurt her, she bent and kissed the tip of her mother's nose. "I love you, Mom," she whispered. "I'm just doing my job."

She stood in the doorway of her room for a split second, and then stepped through. It had been a long time since she'd been in the rest of the house, but

she knew the way to the front door and it didn't take her long to figure out the locks. She hesitated and then went outside, making sure to lock the door behind her so her mother would be safe.

Then she turned and looked.

The steps leading down to the sidewalk didn't have a railing, and it would be easy to fall and break her neck. But she liked the way they looked in the twilight, their edges sharp and clear, and she went down them, carefully but quickly. The sidewalk wasn't very far off the street, and a drunk driver could jump the curb and hit her. But two cars went by, and she liked the way their headlights and tail lights glowed, and one of them had its radio turned up loud so she could feel the beat of the music. They were going somewhere. So was she.

There were clouds in the sky. It might rain.

It had been a long time since she'd been out of the house. She might get lost.

There might be a mugger waiting behind that bush, or a big mean dog around the next corner, and she really was hungry and had no idea how to get something to eat.

Pandorette set off.

END

## *Pele*

**T**he drive up Haleakala took less than ninety minutes, and they climbed ten thousand feet. The very air changed. As the sky lightened with the dawn, Hilary could see rocks and ground cover and pine stands reminiscent of the Rockies, but with groves of eerily twisted eucalyptus reminding her that she was not at home. Here the hairpin turns seemed—impossibly, of course—to overlook ocean on all sides. Eight, then nine, then ten thousand feet below them, and perpetually dissolving in the blue-gray mist, water glimmered everywhere and the land receded so nearby that it could hardly be said to have a horizon.

She cut open papayas for breakfast, drizzled gray-green lime juice over the nest of slimy bitter black seeds, and fed bites of the orange pulp to Joel while he drove. They laughed together, and she patted the juice off his beard with a white napkin, giddy with the pleasure of touching him so easily again, fearfully taking note that this was the closest they'd been in a long time.

"What happens to marriages?" she'd cried during one of their interminable discussions, lengthened by Joel's interminable silences.

After a long pause he'd said sadly, "Everybody learns what everything means, I guess, and then nothing means anything anymore."



This was their last chance. If things weren't better after this vacation, they wouldn't live together anymore when they went home. Already they'd been in the islands nearly their full two weeks, and the sheer sensory presence of the place could make Hilary forget why they were here.

Fourteen days and thirteen nights in utterly unfamiliar surroundings. First the pink high-rise hotel on Waikiki where the beach was a narrow spotlighted strip and the buildings and litter and avenues and hucksters of Honolulu clung fiercely to the thin moving crust of the earth. Then Maui, which was altogether another world, where colors had familiar names but were deeper and richer, plants had parts she recognized but were so tangled that she couldn't see where one stopped growing and the next began, rocks looked as if only recently they'd been alive. The two of them alone together in a place so spurning with impetuous life, so alien, that maybe, for the first time in years, their relationship would send out new growth and claim their notice.

"I think it's working," Joel had told her on their first night. She knew what he meant, though she didn't know if it was true. He'd smiled at her and cupped her face in his hands, which were damp from the ocean spray and from his constant sweat mingled with hers. Hilary had thrilled at being able to hold his gaze like that. At home, he was in the habit of glancing at her a hundred times a day, then as quickly glancing away, and there were always little avalanches between them. Here, with no apparent effort, things took hold.

The air here was viscous, hard to take in. Her throat had clogged with her first breath off the plane, and the cilia in her nose had seemed to swell and stick together. But once the air got inside her body, she couldn't imagine ever getting it out, and she could feel the random energy of things growing.

Hilary aligned herself here with the structure of the earth, the continental plates sensuously drifting, the islands continually erupting and sinking back into the sea. The knowledge that rock could exist in a molten state and still be rock now amazed her, though she'd known it for a long time. She shivered with the teeming of the ocean and the building up of the coral reefs, the rotting away and hollowing out of millions of tiny bodies, the vivifying of their skeletons. In the soles of her feet and the palms of her hands, nerves tingled with the rampant powers of growth and decay. On the islands, anything would grow, whether there was room for it or not, and anything would decay.

"This place makes me nervous," she kept saying to Joel. "It's all so *lush* that it's just one step this side of decay."

Two nights, then three nights in a row she had dreamed: Joel melting at her touch, sensually, and she couldn't stop touching him. In the dreams she left her body and entered the ocean, entered the thick wind, entered the hot flowing lava, but she still couldn't stop touching Joel, even though her hands and her love passed right through him. His face was a skull without flesh, but



soft and lovely, the forehead dimpled wherever she touched it, the eyes liquid. She had walked with him along an endless beach at night, endlessly forming and re-forming, and his fingers had carried the imprint of hers in their flesh. A dim phosphorescence had glistened out to sea and moved toward them like footprints across the waves.

Around them now, on this volcanic mountain, it was snowing. Ninety minutes below, the air would be steaming and hissing like the ocean on the beach. Here you could see your breath. Hilary shivered and pulled on her sweatshirt. Briefly, Joel took her hand.

"Civilization," he said, as if they'd been talking about it, "is nothing but a holding action anyway, and so are relationships." He moved his hand to her knee for a moment before putting it back on the wheel. Through her jeans, her knee stayed warm from his touch, a patch of flesh heating like lava and then stiffening uncomfortably until she put her foot up on the seat and massaged her leg and thigh with both hands.

Awake, she was afraid of the ocean. In the dreams, she went in, and the ocean floor dissolved under her feet like Joel waiting alone behind her and like the warm water closing over her head. In the dreams she wasn't afraid; someone was waiting for her out there, an enemy, but also a guide. Awake, she was the one who waited on the shifting beach every night while Joel went swimming.

Each time she woke up, Joel would be beside her. Solid. Impenetrable. She would feel his breath on her arm. The cries of strange birds would plait over the constant hiss of the ocean under their hotel window, and she'd be sure there was someone else in the room, in front of the mirror, under the covers, in the sweet warm living air she couldn't help but breathe.

They arrived at Haleakala Crater just in time for the ranger's sunrise lecture. Hilary leaned back against Joel in the crowd, and he put both arms around her waist. The ranger was Polynesian, with a charming accent and the crisp, folksy, passionate patter of park rangers everywhere.

"Looks pretty foggy today." He gestured toward the windows, through which mist was just visible in heavy peaks and eddies. "Sometimes it burns off, sometimes not. Be careful in the crater on a day like this."

He lectured them about the crater, its flora and fauna, its geologic history, and read to them from Captain Cook's account of its discovery by Europeans. The ranger's tone was both playful and reverent, but the words of the old explorer sounded downright testy, as though he'd been offended by the mystery of the place, its liquidity and unpredictability. Hilary listened, pressing Joel's fingers against her sides and staring out the window. From here she could see nothing but the fog, growing steadily whiter as the earth turned toward the sun.

She wondered suddenly what Joel was thinking, and couldn't even imagine. She glanced up at him. He was watching the fog, too, but she knew his thoughts wouldn't be like hers, the words and images he used to shape his thoughts would barely be recognizable to her. Here on the islands, where everything grew, they sometimes seemed to be understanding each other, but Hilary knew that wasn't true. Watching the mist, she shivered. Joel's arms tightened around her, and she had to settle for that.

Hands on hips, the ranger strode to the center of the group. "The sun, ladies and gentlemen, is preparing to rise." There was an excited murmur, as if these people had never seen the sun before, and the ranger held up his hands. "But before you go out to meet it, I must tell you the most important thing about Haleakala.

"These islands are inhabited by the Goddess Pele. Madam Pele is the Goddess of the volcano, and the Goddess of the ocean, and all the Pacific Islands are her domain. But because Haleakala is not extinct, only dormant, it comes under her special protection.

"It is dangerous to cross Madam Pele, and almost as dangerous to be loved by her. She has been known to change both her rivals and her lovers into lava, bit by bit, starting by hardening the palms of the hands. She can set fire, she can drown, she can melt.

"It is said that the curse of Madam Pele shall be forever upon anyone who takes anything from this place. A rock, a flower, anything. Pele claims her own. This place belongs to her. Remember that."

The ranger was not smiling, nor was he looking at the crowd. He stood with his legs firmly apart and his hands on his hips, gazing into the crater full of mist where the sun was preparing to rise.

Then suddenly, dramatically, he turned. "We have proof!" he cried, waving a newspaper clipping framed under clear plastic. "A family from Montana took home one rock, just one little scrap of lava, and in the next year they had \$20,000 in medical expenses. We get packages in the mail all the time, full of rocks and dried plants that people have taken away from this place, people like you who scoffed at Pele, and she has followed them. Accidents, illnesses, financial reverses, romantic difficulties."

"This place belongs to Madam Pele!" He waved both curved fists over his head as if in a hula. "If you try to take anything from here, she will take it back, and she will take you, too!"

"Can we take you home with us?" giggled one of the matrons in the crowd. "Or are you under Madam Pele's special protection, too?"

The ranger dimpled. "Well, now, that all depends, ma'am. Some of us have tried to leave the islands and have discovered that Pele wouldn't permit it. But for the right offer . . ."

"Is it all right to take pictures?" someone else asked.

"You may take all the pictures you wish. Pele has no objection, and neither do we. Of course," he added solemnly, "anything Madam Pele regards as her own won't show up on your film anyway."

They stood at the rim of the crater—or where they imagined the rim to be, since the fog was so thick they couldn't see more than a few feet below—and watched the sun come up—or thought they did, since the fog hid the sun, too. The earth turned. The sun came up very gradually, until they were flooded by clouds of brilliant burning white. The sun and the earth were not distinct from each other; there was no horizon, and they couldn't see the rim of the crater at their feet.

Hilary could hardly catch her breath. "Let's go down."

As they descended the narrow path—if, indeed, there was a path; the stones seemed random—the fog closed around them so that they could see nothing above or below, and the fog or the presence of Pele hushed footsteps and voices. Joel reached for her hand, but Hilary shook her head; it was hard enough to keep her balance alone.

Every night on the islands they had walked along the beach, at the very edge of the land where the ocean came in. The hugeness and opacity of the water stirred her, the smallness of the land, the sense of being alien and powerless. The sky was moist tropical black, with a haze over the moon. The sand was dark and wet, sticky between her toes, and warm from the day's hot sun; it accepted her footprints and absorbed them before she could even look back over her shoulder. Her feet stiffened from the hardening sand; she thought of Pele's lava and hastily went to wade in the sea, which, of course, was Pele's, too. She went in farther than she meant to; the blood-warm water was up to her knees before she knew it, and she had cupped some of it in her hands, splashed it onto her face, rubbed it into her dripping hair.

She ran out of the ocean. Her footprints on the sand glistened for a moment, one after the other, and then filled in. She'd thought she could bury herself safely in Joel's arms, but he had run off down the beach and was only a black silhouette against the pearly black sky and the black sea. She heard his voice, playing, calling her name, but in syllables just slightly altered so that she wasn't sure it was really her name at all. Other silhouettes milled just at the periphery of her vision, rippling away when she looked.

Standing again at the edge, Hilary couldn't understand how the ocean could *have* an edge, a beginning or an end, any more than fire did, or the constant quiet drumming which she hardly noticed anymore until it stopped. There was a story about Pele, wakened in a dream by a distant drum like that which announced a hula, assuming her spiritual form and leaving her physical

body, an old woman asleep in a cave, to go and investigate. She was gone for a long time.

Backing up from the ocean, feeling the drums at her back like breath, watching the mysterious points of phosphorescence in the air and across the water, Hilary understood how that could happen. Land was only an interruption of water. Silence was only an interruption of drums. It wouldn't be hard for her to move in and out of her body, or for Joel to move in and out of his. She knew they would not be allowed to leave this place together.

Joel went in.

His hands would leave her and she would faintly see him run into the surf, his body blurred and then swallowed. She would hear a dim splash, glimpse spray from his first stroke or two, and then he'd be gone. Hilary would retreat a few more steps from the lapping sea and try to wait for him on the shore, unable to see him among all the light and shadows or to hear him through the island's cacophony, unable to distinguish him from all the other presences, unable to fix on anything she could believe was the horizon.

Joel went in every night. "You can swim," he'd say to her, every night. "We used to swim laps together at the pool, remember? Come on in with me." But she couldn't bring herself to go into this water. She couldn't even stay very long near the ocean. The land wasn't much better, for she knew that at its core the land was on fire.

Finally he would emerge, wet, laughing and shaking, breathless, and she'd rub him down with a white towel. Then they'd walk back to the hotel hand in hand, arm in arm; sometimes he'd carry her like a bride across a threshold, or she'd wrap her arms and legs around him from behind. In the hotel they'd take a long steamy shower together, and then make love.

On the islands they made love more than they ever had. In the giant vibrating bed, on the sea-green carpet, in the shower, on the open-air patio that overlooked Waikiki. The drums never stopped. They drank mai-tais and smoked the good Hawaiian weed that Joel had casually scored in a scrimshaw shop on the main street of Lahaina from a spacey pony-tailed kid from New Jersey and his pretty Polynesian lady. Hilary was on a constant, horizonless high.

She knew she couldn't live like this forever; this was not her home. She couldn't love Joel like this forever, not knowing where she was, and anyway the loving seemed to have little to do with either her or Joel, seemed to seep out of the very air like the mist or the fragrance of orchids, seemed to tremble and erupt out of the sea like Pele's island chain. Hilary held onto Joel's hand, but she had to look down now and then to make sure it was there.

A few hundred feet down into Haleakala Crater, they stopped and sat down together on a cold outcropping of lava rock. Mist swirled between them. On

the path beside them someone went by with horses, huge silent beasts with muffled hoofbeats and icy tails. Hilary ran her hand over her hair and brought it away with snowflakes on the palm. Joel's beard was tipped with silver.

"It's beautiful here," she said.

Joel put an arm around her. "It's beautiful with you."

"Let's get some pictures."

"All you'd get is fog. You wouldn't get a sense of the vastness of it, the perspective." He grinned. "You wouldn't get anything important. Pele would see to that."

Hilary stood up, slipped, made her way a few steps down the slope. With every step she seemed to be on the edge of something, but when she peered over all she could see was fog and the dim outline of more volcanic rock. She held her hands protectively away from her body and thought maybe someone would take them, but the offering was refused, or ignored.

The hike back up to the crater rim seemed endless. On the way, making sure Joel didn't see, Hilary picked up a small nondescript brown crater stone and put it in her pocket.

Again and again she touched parts of Joel's body with her fingertips and tongue. In the hollow behind his ear, she listened to his pulse like the beating of the sea in a shell. He lay across the bed under her and she rubbed coconut oil into his back, his neck, his thighs. His muscles slid and separated under her hands. There were still grains of sand rough on his skin, between his ribs and in the hollows of his knees; he flinched when she scraped them away with the heel of her hand. In the daytime, the light was watery, rippling; at night, there was always a dim fire. "Mouths were made for kissing," Hilary murmured, quoting Pele, and like Pele felt the fire come into her eyes.

A breeze came in the open patio doors, stirring the bamboo shades. The trade winds had picked up again. From the outdoor cafe just above the beach proper—where only communal illusion kept the tables and dancers, the palms and eucalyptus and flickering gas lamps from sliding off into the sea—flowed rhythms of ukuleles and steel drums. There was a show every night, haunting tenor ululation from a man with sleeves like white wings, alto from a woman whose hair the color of cinders fell straight to her waist.

It seemed to Hilary that on the islands she'd hardly slept at all, or that there was no real boundary between sleeping and waking. Pele was known to disturb the sleep both of her rivals and of those she loved, because she could make dreams seem real and reality seem like dreams. It seemed to Hilary that everything was in constant motion: the sea, the sand, the music, the winds, the molten core of the earth, the many aspects of Pele who was goddess of fire and goddess of water and goddess of the islands themselves. Her own love for Joel and his for her moved, too, struggled to hold on,

grew frenetically even though its roots, she knew, were precarious. Hilary could hardly keep still.

She leaned over Joel, laid herself against him. She absorbed the sweet smells of his body, tasted the salt in his hair, whispered, "I love you." As she said it, it grew in her, until she was nothing but her love for Joel.

"I love you, too," he answered, like a chant, and rolled over, tumbling her onto the bed and taking her in his arms. Her back burned where he'd touched her; her eyes burned with hot tears.

That night, their last in Hawaii, Hilary for the first time dared to walk alone on the beach. It was very late, but the lights and the music hadn't stopped, any more than the ocean had stopped, or the intimations of Pele everywhere.

Hilary walked barefoot through the pools at the very edge of the ocean and stared out in the direction she thought was home. Immersed as she was in the dangerous magic of the islands, she couldn't really imagine going home, but somewhere beyond those mythical black waters was a high, still, dry place where growing things had to be cared for and feet could be kept solidly on the ground. She waded farther out into the sea and spread her hands on its undulating surface, trying to understand this element that seemed so alien and yet that filled so much of her own body, trying to feel what force it was that held the water together, thinking desperately of Joel.

Then, suddenly enraged, she flung the small brown stolen crater stone as far as she could out to sea, away from Pele's islands, toward home. The stone disappeared; she couldn't have thrown it that far. She had a sudden image of its springing to life, *growing*, arching back toward her. Mourning Joel, knowing this would be their last time together, she stumbled back to shore so as not to see where the stone sank into the sea.

Joel caught her. At first he frightened her, coming out of the dark like that; she pushed him away, then clung to him. "I don't want to go home!" she said against his chest. She could hear his heartbeat, the air in and out of his lungs, the blood in his veins.

"We have to." She could hardly hear him over the surf and the cacophonous undertow of voices, magnified as if there were crowds nearby, although no one else was in sight. "Our tickets are non-refundable without a death certificate or a doctor's excuse. And we both have to be back to work on Monday."

"Things won't last at home."

He held her at arm's length and smiled down at her. She could see his eyes, reflecting the phosphorescence of the sea, or of her own eyes. She could feel the rich air all around her, hear the voices, female voices, whispering and rumbling. "Everything that's happened between us here," Joel said, "we can take home with us." He was firm; he believed what he was saying. But she knew it wasn't true.

"I love you," she said, helplessly.

"I love you, too." He kissed her. She opened her mouth under his, braced her feet wide apart so that her legs were spread, but she couldn't get him close enough, couldn't keep him from moving away from her and saying, "I'm going in one last time."

"Don't, Joel."

"There won't be time in the morning, and who knows when I'll have a chance to swim in the Pacific Ocean again? Come in with me." He held out his hand to her.

"No."

"Wait for me, then."

She watched him for as long as she could see him, which wasn't long. The ocean waves caught all the lights and made moving shadows among themselves. She listened to his rhythmic splashing until it melted into the other island sounds.

Then she heard him cry out.

She took a few steps. Her heart filled her ears. Water surged around her ankles, so close to her own body temperature that she could barely feel it. "Joel?"

"Hilary! Help!"

She saw him go down, at about the place where the crater rock she'd stolen and then returned had disappeared. She saw his head go under the waves. There were a host of other forms out there, crowding around. She screamed, "Joel!"

His head came back up. He was choking. He made a sound that was not her name, but she knew he was calling her.

She could swim. She was afraid of the ocean, especially at night, but Joel knew that she could swim. Frantically she glanced around; there was no one else on the beach, although the sounds and scents of life were everywhere. She waded in up to her waist, two steps, then half-fell forward with her face in the water and took a few strokes out to sea, in the direction of the spot where she'd last seen Joel.

When she shook the salt water out of her eyes, she didn't know where she was. There were lights everywhere, shadows everywhere, horizons near and far. For a terrified instant she thought she couldn't touch bottom. Then she stood up, her feet on the molten floor of the ocean in the tepid water but the rest of her exposed. There, she saw Joel, flailing, making his own cloud of spray. She heard him cry out again and again, her name like the drums in Pele's dream.

But he had been claimed. She didn't go to him. Skin stinging with tears and sweat and spray, stinging as if with hot ash, she turned and went back up the beach alone.

They found his body without much searching, discarded onto the shore. It had already been possessed by the sea, of course, invaded by the hot salt sun. It was already decomposing, so that the boundaries between Joel's flesh and the sand on the beach were blurred.

Hilary was there when they found him. She ran to him, crouched beside him. She could hear herself keening, taste it in her throat. She took one of his hands in her own, though the bare-legged men of the search party told her not to; the fingers were bulbous like fat roots, and her fingers sank into them. She tried to be careful that they didn't pass all the way through. The palm of Joel's hand was hard, like lava; it did not accept even a deliberate scratch from her nails.

Hilary let go. One of the dark-skinned men in the bright shirts pulled her away from Joel's body, muttering kind admonitions. Hilary looked around. In the crowd she saw women, shrouded, with eyes reddened from tears or from fire; in the brilliant reflections off the sand and the waves, their backs seemed to be gorgeously on fire.

Joel had had no family but her. She had had no family but him—none she counted, anyway; none who would care. She and Joel were still each other's family. They had grown together, and now would always be. Planning his cremation, watching his smoke drift up into the watery blue sky, Hilary was as joyful as she was grief-stricken, as filled as she was bereft. She had been about to lose him, and now that would never happen.

On the plane home, she took her seat by the window behind the wing. The urn of Joel's ashes was in her carry-on bag behind her feet. There was no need for her to stay in the islands anymore, and she was eager to escape. Already, in the thin dry cabin air, her head was clearing. The thought of spending the rest of her life in the mountains was like a strange fruit: inside the pulpy layers of widowhood, of aloneness, would always be Joel.

Hilary fell asleep over the ocean. When she started awake, there were presences in the aisles. A haggard old woman sat beside her where an empty seat had been, asleep, her uninhabited body breathing lightly and regularly on its own. A beautiful young woman, in countless forms, filled the walking spaces and breathing spaces of the plane, eyes blazing, back afire.

"When you come to the islands," Pele said gently, as she had always been saying, "I possess you and you possess me."

Through the golden cloud pile, toward the perpetual sea, the plane began to fall.



## Cousin Claudine

**I**n one voluminous, disorderly family album was a picture of Lynne and her cousin Claudine that Lynne thought pretty much summed up their relationship. Dated, in Aunt Minnie's sloppy hand, the summer just after Lynne turned two and just before Claudine did, the two little girls it showed bore a family resemblance only if you already knew they were related, which allowed Lynne to regard any shared gene pool as minimal.

Dark-haired and dark-eyed, both wore bonnets and buttoned-up coats with flared skirts that looked cream-colored in the photo, though Lynne had a vague memory of pink flannelette. They were in their grandfather's back yard, which had been dingy and smelly from steel mills in the valley below, fragrant one visit a year when the scraggly lilac bush was in bloom. The lilac wasn't blooming in the picture.

The toddlers had been made to hold hands, some adult apparently having thought the pose would suggest cousinly affection. Instead, it conveyed the more accurate impression of mismatched combat. Claudine was a step in front and more or less smiling for the camera, while Lynne was hanging back and crying.

Lynne had seen the picture no more than a few times in her life, but it stuck in her mind and made her angry just thinking about it. The incident it captured was too early for her to actually remember, which heightened her feeling of victimization, for she was certain Claudine had been doing something to her, pinching her hand or twisting her wrist or hiding out of lens range a toy of Lynne's she'd appropriated. That the picture revealed no specific scenario was proof of both how sneaky Claudine had been at an early age and how helpless Lynne had always been against her. Even if she'd been old enough to tell, the grown-ups wouldn't have believed her. But every time they'd seen each other—blessedly, only once or twice a year, since they'd lived several states apart—Claudine had been mean to her.

So Lynne couldn't imagine what had possessed her to take this road trip to Quebec with her cousin Claudine. Out of the blue, after no contact for a good five years, Claudine had called to suggest it, and Lynne, caught off guard, had agreed. Maybe out of some wildly misplaced hope that they could get to be buddies as well as cousins, though she couldn't name one thing she found attractive about Claudine. Or maybe out of sheer boredom; she was frequently bored and, worse, afraid she always would be.

"Why Quebec?" she thought to ask, though it wouldn't have been any odder or any more foolish to be traveling with Claudine to Houston or Eugene or Cleveland.

"It's the only walled city north of Mexico."

After a moment of mental blankness, Lynne said, "So?" The idea of a walled city chilled her.

"And besides, I speak French." Characteristically, Claudine acted as if Lynne were really dense to have to be told this. Lynne, characteristically, half-agreed and backed down, even though it was patently obvious that her cousin's replies didn't explain anything.

"I don't speak a word," she admitted, in surrender or in self-defense. "Took German in high school."

Claudine chuckled. "I'll speak for both of us then," she promised. "Trust me."

In the few days Lynne had to get ready, while she bought new luggage and put in a last-minute vacation request at work and found her birth certificate, she worried—with good reason, she knew—that Claudine wasn't telling her everything. Though the border was less than half a day's drive away, she'd never been to Canada at all, let alone as far north as Quebec, never thought about going. It troubled her that her cousin Claudine, of all people, should be the one to broaden her horizons.

The appointed day of departure dawned thickly overcast in the way upstate New York is famous for, dispiriting and foreboding, visually suggest-

ing chill though it was a warmish June, the summer between their twenty-first birthdays. Claudine arrived earlier than they'd arranged and made no attempt to hide her impatience that Lynne wasn't ready; if she'd offered to help Lynne would have refused, but she could have offered.

Lynne stole glances at her cousin as she hurried to get herself ready, fixing her appearance in her mind out of a vague nervousness that they might get separated or in some other circumstance she might have to identify Claudine. The waist-length hair was nearly black and dull, as if she never brushed it. She had a dancer's build and carriage; Lynne hadn't heard anything through their mothers about Claudine dancing. Her face still carried traces of the bad acne Lynne's mother had tried to offer as an excuse for her adolescent snottiness, craters and still a zit here and there.

"I'm prettier than she is," Lynne assured herself, running hands over her own smooth skin and chin-length dark auburn hair. "You couldn't tell we're cousins."

As Lynne was checking her purse for the dozenth time to make sure she had her birth certificate and photo ID where she could find them without fumbling at the border, Claudine held something out to her. "My mother sent this for you."

She was way across the room and wasn't going to bother to get up, hardly even extended her arm. So Lynne had to put her stuff back into her purse in a less organized way than she'd intended, set the purse down, get up off the bed, and walk over to take the envelope out of her cousin's hand. In addition to being pissed off by Claudine's high-handedness, which was nothing new, she also felt a certain trepidation; Aunt Minnie wasn't likely to send her anything unpleasant, but this could be one of Claudine's jokes, like the gift-wrapped shoebox full of tampons, most still in their paper casings but a few, randomly mixed in, bulging and bloody as little dead things, for her thirteenth birthday when she hadn't even started her period yet but, apparently, Claudine had.

This envelope, though, held only an old picture. Guessing it would be of herself and Claudine, Lynne didn't much want to look at it, but out of obligation she turned it aslant under her desk lamp so she could make it out. There they were, maybe ten years old, both in shorts and braids, in front of Claudine's flat-faced brick house flattened even more by white sunlight. Claudine was astride her bike, one tiptoe on the curb to hold herself erect for the photo before she took off again. Lynne stood flat-footed on the sun-bleached sidewalk, face scrunched up with the effort of keeping her bike from falling over, hands visibly straining on the seat and the ungainly handlebars.

"I remember that bike! Every time I tried to ride it some piece fell off."

"I know." Claudine shook her head in a pretense of fondness. "We bought it just for you to ride when you came to visit. My dad said he couldn't imagine what you did to it."

Lynne glared at her in a bug-eyed way she knew could be construed as comical. "Right after your dad took this picture the front wheel came loose and I broke my arm."

Claudine said, straight-faced, "And I felt bad for you."

The trouble between them became overt before they were even out of Lynne's neighborhood, though it still seemed of the familiar, familial variety, exasperating but not particularly sinister. Claudine lit up a joint. Lynne objected, on grounds of impaired driving and secondhand smoke. Claudine said, "Hey, cuz, it's my car," and Lynne, as usual, gave up. She settled for cracking her window and maneuvering into an awkward position so the outside air would blow into her face. When they got on I-81 and Claudine was zipping along well above the speed limit, the sharp, persistent blade of wind was uncomfortable, and by the time they were skirting Onondaga Lake, Lynne could feel a cold coming on.

"Want to take a detour and go see Champ?"

Lynne didn't, of course, have a clue what her cousin was talking about; she wasn't supposed to. Dutifully, resentfully, she asked, "Who's Champ?"

"Oh, haven't you heard of Champ?"

"No, Claudine, that's why I asked."

"The Lake Champlain Monster. There are even signs by the side of the road that say 'Monster Crossing.' It's not that far east, might add an hour or two to the trip. Unless we actually saw him, then it might take longer. Want to go?"

"No."

Claudine shrugged and nodded, and as far as Lynne could tell they stayed on I-81. But she was unsettled by the realization—maybe a deliberate reminder—that Claudine could take her practically anywhere, by practically any route, and she wouldn't know the difference until it was too late.

Crossing the Canadian border turned out to be something of a letdown. A short line of vehicles. A booth and a guy in an inconspicuous uniform that could have been taken for nondescript street clothes, the cursory passing back and forth of birth certificates and photo IDs, and no more than half a dozen words required for the entire transaction. The unofficial-looking official nodded them on, and then they were in another country. Something about the simplicity of the whole thing Lynne found distressing. At least the road markers were a little different; now they were on Prov 40.

"Good thing he didn't look in the trunk, huh?"

For a long moment Lynne had the awful vertiginous feeling that something crucial had slipped her mind. "What are you talking about?"

"You never did have a sense of humor, did you, cuz?" Lynne subsided into resentful confusion, still not getting the joke.

They stopped for gas outside Prescott; though the town itself wasn't in evidence and the rest area looked like any other, Lynne made a point of noting the place name when they got off the highway, as though she might need it to get herself out. Claudine pulled in at the pumps, then without saying a word got out and walked briskly off toward the building, presumably to the restroom. Another car pulled up behind, and then a third, so now there was a line, waiting.

Seething, Lynne got out and circled the car looking for the gas cap, found it finally and figured out the nozzle and filled the tank. Claudine wasn't back when the bell dinged, so Lynne replaced the hose, closed the cap, and grudgingly went inside to pay. Still no sign of Claudine, so Lynne stalked back outside, moved the car to the parking lot, and went to the restroom to find her cousin and complain.

The bathroom door was locked. From inside she heard a child whining. Her first thought, frustrated and a little alarmed, was that Claudine wasn't in there after all. But then she heard her cousin's voice, too, its insinuating tone and mocking timbre unmistakable though she couldn't quite make out the words without actually pressing her ear against the door, and she wasn't about to do that.

She fidgeted. She was just getting ready to call Claudine's name through the door when it opened and a little girl emerged, face shadowed but clearly tear-stained under a pale pink bonnet, the skirt of her pink flannelette coat flared above her knees. The outfit looked more like a costume than like something a child would actually wear, and the unnatural effect was heightened by the fact that the coat and hat were much too warm for a June day.

The girl couldn't have been much more than two years old. Nobody seemed to be with her or even waiting outside for her. Somewhat against her better judgment, Lynne bent and inquired, "What's wrong, honey? Are you lost?"

The child tilted her head to see Lynne under the bonnet brim. Her eyes were dark and shiny with tears. "That lady's mean."

"What lady?"

"That lady in there."

Claudine came out of the restroom then, humming under her breath and wagging her hands to air-dry them. Lynne glanced up, and in those few seconds the child disappeared. "What was that all about?" she demanded.

Claudine looked at her. "What was what all about?"

Cars were pulling in and out of the lot, people entering and leaving the station. There was no sign of the child, but obviously she'd found whoever was responsible for her. Lynne allowed herself a vague, uncertain disapproval of parents who'd send a two-year-old to a gas station bathroom by herself, then complained to Claudine about being left to pay for the gas and let it go at that.

They could have driven straight through and made it to Quebec City in one long day, but Claudine wanted to stop for the night right after they got around Montreal, and Lynne, naturally, acquiesced. Pre-trip arrangements—self-protectively designed by Lynne, acceded to without much interest by Claudine—had included taking turns paying for motels, and the first night was Lynne's. While she was signing the credit card slip, Claudine picked up the one key and went to the room. By the time Lynne had extricated her suitcase from the trunk, Claudine was back out, having staked claim to one of the two narrow beds and one of the two thin towels—not that Lynne would have had a preference, but she'd have appreciated a vote.

The engine roared as she slammed the trunk shut. She jumped and swore, and her cousin called jauntily from behind the wheel, "Back in a few!"

"Where are you going?" But the squat red car was already out of the parking lot, spitting gravel.

Lynne's first thought was that she'd been locked out and would have to get the ugly lady in the office to use the master key. She was well into a snit about this before she thought to actually try the door, and when it opened she felt not so much relieved as made a fool of.

The little TV got lousy reception on only two channels, three if you counted the one with snowy sound and squiggly picture. There was no air conditioning, and the window didn't open; the room smelled like a swimming pool in need of cleaning. She hadn't brought anything to read. It upset her that there was no phone in the room, not that there'd be anybody to call.

She thumbed through the Gideon in the nightstand, which didn't seem like a Bible because of its hard cover. She watched a grainy newscast, mostly local and boring. She lay on the bed Claudine had left for her and tried to doze off. She took a shower, in tepid water.

Sometime around nine o'clock she came to several related conclusions: Claudine wasn't coming back any time soon; this dinky motel had no room service, restaurant, or vending machines; without a key or a car she couldn't go out to find something to eat. Made ravenous more by righteous indignation than by actual lack of food, her stomach too nervous to have allowed her to eat much anyway, she consumed the half roll of breath mints in her purse and an ancient pink packet of sugar substitute she'd pilfered from a restaurant

some time in the distant past. The water from the tap, slurped from cupped hands because there was no drinking glass, tasted like aluminum foil.

Eventually, she did fall asleep, and when Claudine came in, well after midnight, she did her best to give no sign that she was awake, waiting, furious and, now, intensely relieved not to have been completely abandoned in this place. Making a show of being quiet while she got ready for bed, Claudine, of course, made lots of noise, crescendoing when she took a shower on the other side of the thin wall at Lynne's head, just the slightest maddening hint of song underneath the clattering torrent of water against tile.

But Lynne did, apparently, fall asleep again, because when she jerked back into wakefulness the shower was off and Claudine was in the bed on the other side of the tiny room, within arm's reach if Lynne had cared to reach, and not alone. There were definite sounds of two bodies, two people breathing hard. Outraged that Claudine would pick up some asshole and bring him back here, Lynne thought about sitting up and turning on the rickety lamp between the beds and throwing them both out; thought about protesting loudly in the dark; thought about stealthily pulling the pillow over her head and trying to go back to sleep. Then, strangely, thought about sliding out of her bed and into theirs.

A little cry came from the other bed, and Claudine's low laugh, the nasty snicker that Lynne knew well. Then, "Ouch! Hey, that hurts!" A female voice, and young.

Lynne lay rigid, not knowing what to do. There came the sounds of a struggle that could have been playful or real, or both in an erotic combination, and then someone freed herself from Claudine and from the skimpy bedclothes and stood up in the narrow space between the beds and the door, right in Lynne's line of vision. It was a girl about ten years old, dark hair in braids, sniffing and pulling on a T-shirt and shorts over little-kid underwear.

"You're mean!" the kid accused Claudine.

"Sorry," Claudine said languidly from the bed.

The girl was at the door now, which, Lynne saw unhappily, hadn't been locked. When she pushed it open, security light and air as stuffy as that trapped inside the room trickled in. "I'm telling," she threatened.

"Where you going? Need a ride?" Claudine all but purred.

"I got my bike."

"It's not safe. It'll fall apart before you get out of the parking lot. You'll break your arm or something." The girl ran out, leaving the door open.

Lynne sat up. "Claudine, what the hell—"

Claudine stirred, as if she'd just been rudely awakened. "Huh?"

"That kid. What was she doing here? Where'd she—" Lynne got up and went to the door, where she hesitated. Then she stepped outside, being sure to keep her grip on the handle so she wouldn't get locked out. There was

activity in the motel parking lot—a family with several kids just arriving, a party spilling out of an end room—but no young girl in shorts and braids on a rattletrap bike.

She retreated inside the room and shut and locked the door. Claudine gave every appearance of having gone back to sleep. Lynne doubted that, but the girl—whoever she was, whatever Claudine had been doing with her—was gone now, and it didn't seem worth braving more of her cousin's vitriol by asking questions to which she really didn't want answers anyway.

In the morning, they found a place for breakfast and took their time eating, neither of them saying much. Claudine regarded the check with total lack of interest; rather than discuss it, Lynne just paid. It was ten o'clock before they were back on the road, Lynne driving because Claudine had simply wordlessly appropriated the passenger seat.

As they continued northward out of the Montreal metro area past factories and woods in about equal proportions, Lynne did feel compelled to bring up last night's incident. "So what are you, some kind of perv?"

Slumped against the passenger door with her head cradled in the shoulder harness, her cousin grunted.

Lynne pressed. "Who was that girl?"

"What girl?"

"What was she doing in your bed? And you had no business letting her leave all by herself in the middle of the night." There was a long pause. Lynne thought Claudine wasn't going to answer, and she wondered what she'd do then.

With exaggerated and completely fake patience, Claudine said, "Let's see. Last night. I went out to get something to eat, met some people, had a few drinks. Came back to the room about midnight, took a shower, went to bed. You were asleep. That's it. No girl, in the room or leaving in the middle of the night." Her head swiveled back and forth against the seat until it came to rest facing away, so her voice was slightly muffled as she summed up. "Jesus, you always were a little weird, but you're getting weirder by the minute, you know that?"

Lynne was sputtering now, rage at her cousin practically beyond words. "Did it ever occur to you that I might want to go get something to eat and meet some people and have a few drinks, too?"

There was another pause. Then Claudine laughed incredulously and said, "Sor-ry."

Now the road signs were in French. Lynne guess that "Nord" was probably north and "Sud" south, but otherwise she couldn't grasp much orientation and just followed the highway, not exactly trusting it to take her where she wanted to go but not having the wherewithal to deviate.



"Je me souviens," Claudine announced.

Lynne took the bait. "What?"

Claudine waved a hand. "On the license plates. It's the new Quebecois motto. Used to be 'la belle province'—big deal. Now it's 'Je me souviens. I remember who I am.'"

Now Lynne saw the phrase on the plates of many vehicles ahead of her and in other lanes, though what Claudine was saying didn't sound anything like the way the printed words looked and she wouldn't have made the association if it hadn't been made for her. She scowled. "I'm happy for them." She knew her attempt at sarcasm had been clumsy; she heard Claudine snort.

The passage of time and distance wasn't right. On the one hand, she'd always imagined Quebec to be much farther away than it had turned out to be, and she was still geared up for a taxing journey. But at the same time, it was taking longer to get from Montreal to Quebec than she'd expected from the map. She drove and drove. Her back hurt. The gray day got grayer and darker. Claudine was asleep, or, at least, totally uncommunicative.

After a while she found herself thinking, in a nightmarish sort of way, about the last time she'd been with her cousin before Claudine's call a few days ago suggesting this trip. They both must have been sixteen; it had been just before school started in the fall. Claudine and her parents and brother had been visiting Lynne's family.

Their mothers, who were sisters, had been on the front porch, maybe talking and maybe not; Lynne never had figured out whether they were close, whether they even liked each other. Their fathers, who decidedly did not like each other, had been in the living room watching a TV show she'd doubted either of them was much interested in. The three little brothers had been creating a commotion in the back yard, through the house, up the stairs and back down.

The girls had been in Lynne's room in the basement. She and her dad had just finished it and she'd moved in no more than a week before; she really hadn't wanted anybody else in there, least of all her cousin Claudine. "What do you want to do?" she'd asked, rather miserably since she hadn't wanted to do anything with Claudine and had known full well anything she came up with would be shown by her cousin's scorn to be silly and boring.

Lynne had been curled up on her bed, which was tucked into a snug little alcove of her own design, so she'd had no way to escape when Claudine had reached over and snipped off a thick lock of her shoulder-length hair with scissors from her own dresser that she hadn't even seen her pick up. Astonished, she could muster only a yelped "Shit!" in response, and Claudine, advancing on her with the scissors, had jubilantly declared, "We'll do a makeover!" Face flushed with excitement and acne, she'd managed another

two or three ragged shears before Lynne could even get her hands up, and by that time it was too late for Lynne to do anything but surrender. When Claudine had pronounced the transformation complete, Lynne's hair had been no more than two inches long anywhere on her scalp, and in some places it might as well have been shaved.

Remembering now how her hair had looked, fallen like scabs onto the bedclothes around her, Lynne shuddered, and then realized there were stone walls on both sides of the highway, so much higher than the car that she couldn't see the tops of them through the windows. The rear- and sideview mirrors showed a wall behind them, too, somehow having closed off the route they'd just traveled.

Claudine said, "Basse-Ville."

This was utterly incomprehensible to Lynne, as Claudine had of course known it would be. Lynne might have demanded a translation, had it not been for the fact that now there was a wall ahead, too, no other cars on the road, and a massive gate opening.

When she tried to slam on the brakes, the pedal sank under her foot with no purchase and no effect. Claudine snickered. The steering wheel rotated pointlessly, so she couldn't have turned even if the walls hadn't been there to stop her.

"Lower Town," Claudine said obligingly, "Both Upper Town and Lower Town were fortified lots of times to keep various invaders out. Didn't work."

Lynne asked stupidly, "Are we there? Is this Quebec?"

"You might say that."

Though it was clear she was having no influence over the propulsion or direction of Claudine's car, Lynne kept her hands on the wheel and her feet on the pedals as they went through the high, wide, thick gate. They were in some kind of defined space then—an enclosed courtyard, she thought, but on the basis of virtually no evidence, since she couldn't detect edges. Mostly what she saw were gradations of the gray sky they'd been under the entire trip, lowered now into fog, contained, and in a few shifting places indistinctly striped to suggest bars.

The engine died. Claudine opened her door and bounced perkily from her seat. The door slammed in the middle of her jaunty call back to her cousin, "Back in a few!"

Enclosed by the immobilized car, the fog, and the centuries-old fortifications, Lynne watched in mirrors and out windows and in misty reflections on window glass as her cousin Claudine met another woman, young, maybe sixteen years old. They were near enough for her to make out that the girl's auburn hair was cut to within an inch or two of her skull and in some places might actually have been shaved. Her head looked fragile and misshapen in

the thick gray dimness. It glistened. Claudine put her hands to it, and Lynne heard her laugh as the girl's voice rose in sharp objection.

Then Claudine backed up a few steps and was gone. The shorn young woman made as if to follow; Lynne caught a glimpse of her expression—mouth opening and closing indignantly, forehead comically wrinkled in a frown—but couldn't tell whether she'd lost track of Claudine in the fog or knew exactly where she was.

There was no point in chasing Claudine. Claudine would come back when she felt like it and decide what to do next. After a while Lynne lay down on the seat. She'd just wait.

END

# *Fry Day*

*by Melanie Tem*

**M**y daughter Rachel always loved carnivals, and she'd have been delighted by this one. A seedy, smelly, gaudy, two-truck affair, it set up last Saturday in the little park near our house. I'm sure they don't have a permit. I'm sure they're violating all kinds of ordinances, not to mention the boundaries of good taste. Rachel would have been charmed by all that.

There are more people here than I expected. A lot of people I know—neighbors, the day clerk from the 7-11, the relief mail carrier. I don't know many of their names anymore, but I remember their faces and most of their stories. This one's husband was killed in a car accident. That one is dying of cancer of the prostate, liver, bowel. I hardly believe in their sorrow, and it angers me to have it presented as though it mattered, as though it gives us something in common. None of them lost Rachel.

That one, passing now in front of me, has never had anything bad happen in her life, a story that seems far more plausible to me than the others, easier to accept. I smile at her and raise a hand in greeting. She waves back. Her bouquet of balloons both obscures and magnifies her face.

Unlike many children, Rachel never was afraid of clowns or barkers, the Ferris Wheel or the Tilt-a-Whirl or the roller coaster, speed or height or centrifugal force or things that are not what they seem. The world for her was a good place, and only going to get better.

Which is why, thirteen-and-a-half years ago at the age of twenty-one, she died. Brian James Dempsey killed her.

Killed *and* raped her, I remind myself diligently; it seems especially important to be precise tonight. Killed *and* raped *and* mutilated her. Along with, depending on which theory you subscribe to, fourteen or thirty-seven or a hundred other pretty young women with long dark hair.

A clown skips by. The orange yarn of his wig is raveling and he's lost the middle button of his polka-dot blouse, so that you can see the gray hair and the gray sweatshirt underneath. He bows elaborately to me and I bow back, laughing a little, a little bit scared.

Unless there's another stay, which at this point doesn't seem likely, Brian Dempsey will die in the Florida electric chair at five o'clock tomorrow morning, our time, for the only murder they've been able to convict him of. Not Rachel's.

At the end booth is a fortune-teller. She's dressed, of course, like a cartoon gypsy—bangles on her wrists and ankles, a black lace shawl over her head. Maybe she really is a gypsy. Maybe she really is a fortune-teller, come to this. She's reading the palm of Mrs. McCutheon, who used to babysit for me when Rachel was a baby. Foolishly, I wonder if the gypsy could have foretold Rachel's death, or the death of Mrs. McCutheon's daughter Libby, a grown woman with a husband and children, of a heart attack two years ago. I wonder if now she can see whether Brian Dempsey really will die tomorrow morning, and how it is that I could have lived after my daughter's death, and how I will go on living after her murderer's execution.

When Mrs. McCutheon gets up from the fortune teller's table, she is crying. Her tears offend me, whether they're for me or for herself. She doesn't know me at first; we haven't seen each other in a long time, and I've changed. When she realizes who I am, she gasps, "Oh, hello, dear," and looks at me as if she thinks she should say more. But I don't encourage her. Especially tonight, my grief is too good to share. Finally. Mrs. McCutheon just shakes her head and goes off down the midway.

The gypsy mistakes my hesitation for interest. "Come and see into your fu-tah!" she cries in a hoarse, heavy accent. "Fortunes one dollah only!"

"I can already see into my future." I tell her, "Thanks anyway." She shrugs and turns to another, likelier prospect. I went to a medium once in those first desperate weeks after Rachel died, but I knew before I went that the woman would be a fake.

When the execution date was finally set, I called the governor's office to ask if I could come and watch. Be a witness to Brian Dempsey's extermination. Bear witness to what he did to my daughter, what he did to me. But Florida allows only official visitors at its executions. The woman on the phone sounded very young, younger than Rachel would be now, and she hardly gave me the time of day.

I couldn't stay home alone tonight counting the hours. I tried to find out what his last meal would be, but they won't release that information till tomorrow, so I fixed for myself what I thought he might have: a hamburger, French fries, baked beans. He'll talk to his mother tonight. He'll dream. I couldn't stay home alone, trying to imagine all that, so I walked over here. It seems a fitting place for a vigil. Rachel loved carnivals, and this tacky little traveling sideshow will stay open all night.

"Hey, lady, win a dancing bear!" calls a barker in a dirty red-and-white striped shirt from under a tattered red awning. "Flip the switch and it dances, just like Brian Dempsey!"

The plywood counter in front of him is crowded with the chintzy gadgets. The midway lights make him and them and me, I suppose, look ghoulish. The toys are about the size of my clenched fists, and they make a tinny whirring sound when you turn them on. Actually, they look more like slightly melted human beings than like bears. All around me people are clapping, hooting, laughing appreciatively. I appreciate the gag, too. I laugh, too.

"Three chances to win for just one dollar, lady! Take home a souvenir of this great day in history to your kids and grandkids!"

Rachel was my only child, so all my grandchildren died with her. A few years afterward, when there were still no real suspects in her murder but serial killer Brian Dempsey had just started making the news, a young man I'd never heard of called me one afternoon from California. His voice breaking, he told me he'd been in love with my daughter and planned to marry her. Now he was married to someone else and his wife was expecting their first baby. If it was a girl, they wanted to name her Rachel.

I don't know why he called me. For my blessing, maybe; my permission, at least. I had none to give. I have no interest since Rachel died in other people's happiness, or in their pain.

I wait in the short line to pay the man my dollar. He takes it with a practiced gesture much like palming, and he doesn't look at my face or react to the condition of my hand. Probably he's seen worse. He offers me the bucket of multicolored balls and I take three. It doesn't matter which three, and it doesn't matter how I throw them, since the game is of course rigged.

I come close on two of my throws but don't hit anything. I've lost most of my dexterity and grip; my thumbs scarcely oppose anymore. The tall kid next

to me wins. I can't remember his name, but he's been living in foster homes since his mother shot his father and then herself when he was five or six. I wonder what he's doing here, how he dares be seen in public. His bear writhes and hops in his hands. Someone in the crowd yells. "Hey, Brian, it won't be long now!" and, briefly, I feel as if I've won something after all.

Over and over I've imagined what must have happened. At first I could hardly stand it, but I told myself I owed it to her; if she could go through it, the least I could do was think about it. So I've read everything that's ever been written about him watched the TV movie four times, seen interviews, studied psychological theories about sociopaths. For a long time now, imagining in detail what must have happened to my daughter Rachel has been a daily habit; those are the first thoughts in my head when I wake up if I've been able to sleep, and they give me energy and reason to face the day.

Speed and height and centrifugal force, and things that aren't what they seem. He'd have been quick—quick-thinking, quick with his hands and his words, though probably not quick, the experts have said, with his killing. Quick with his handsome smile. Even after all these years on Death Row, he has a quick and handsome smile. His approach to her that early, snowy morning thirteen-and-a-half years ago—his offer of a ride to the bus stop, his thermos of steaming coffee—would have seemed to her an innocuous little adventure in a thoroughly adventurous world.

While he drove her into the mountains, he'd have kept up his patter, his pleasant jokes, his intelligent observations. Once she realized she was in terrible danger, she'd have thought of me. I was on my way to work by then, worried about a committee report that wasn't done. Things are not what they seem; she was already dead before I even knew she was missing.

That isn't going to happen to me this time. I'm going to know the exact moment Brian James Dempsey dies. I'm going to be wide awake and cheering. Then, I don't know what I'll do.

He didn't take her very far into the mountains. The roads were snow-packed, and he wouldn't have wanted to risk an accident. He dumped her nude body into the shaft of an abandoned silver mine just outside Idaho Springs; they didn't find it until nine weeks later. Most of his other victims, the ones he killed in summer, he buried; I suppose the ground was too frozen for him to bury Rachel, or maybe he'd forgotten his gloves.

The crowd is thinning. I'm approaching the end of this improvised mid-way; beyond it is the rest of the park, and the darkened houses of people with their own tragedies. Here's a guy swallowing fire. I watch him for a while and can't see the trick. His throat and lungs and chest must burn, like mine. I have a fleeting image of him setting all those houses on fire, one by one by one.

I check my watch, wind it. If the guy who flips the switch isn't late to work or the governor's heart doesn't start bleeding again at the last minute, Brian James Dempsey will be dead in five hours and ten minutes. Noticing a vague pain, I raise chilled fingers to loosen my lower lip from under my canine teeth. There's blood, but not much; I wipe it on my jacket, and nobody will notice.

This booth sells cotton candy. I'm one of a handful of customers. The kid behind the counter has an enormous "Fryin' Brian" button pinned to the bill of his cap, and an empty sleeve. As he hands me a large cone and, then, change, his glance inadvertently cuts across my face, and he does an obvious double-take. But this is a traveling sideshow, after all, and it's nearly midnight; he probably sees all manner of strange and deformed creatures.

"Where'd you get the pin?" I ask him. It's one I don't have.

He doesn't hear me because he's already saying very loudly, not exactly to me but to the whole little crowd of us, "Hey, didja hear that Brian Dempsey didn't know tomorrow was Tuesday?"

One of the teenage girls behind me, who have been blatantly flirting with him, yells back as if this were a rehearsed routine, "No! Why?"

"Because he thought it was *Fry Day*!"

The girls shriek with laughter. I laugh, too, and wave the gaudy blue cotton candy as if it were a pompon. As I turn away from the counter toward the end of the midway, I think deliberately about those three pretty girls and the young man behind the counter, and I imagine in quick detail how he might lure them away from the carnival tonight, kill and rape and mutilate them. The fantasy calms me a little. The cotton candy sticks like clots of hair to my teeth.

There's even a freakshow. I thought freakshows were illegal. I walk slowly past the tents and cages lined up across the end of the midway, staring at everything.

Siamese twin girls joined at the top of the head. Both of them stare back at me and give little shrieks, as if I frighten them. I stand in front of their tent for a long time, probably longer than my quarter entitles me to, savoring their distress and my own.

A boy with fur all over his body. WOLF BOY, one sign declares. DOG BOY, says another. He's sitting in an armchair reading *Time* magazine by the display light over his head, taking no notice at all of me. I long to be in there with him, to have my arms around his hairy neck, my teeth at his throat. I'd make him notice. I'd make us both a display. I'd make the world acknowledge this awful thing that has ruined my life. But others must have had the same impulse, because bars and mesh make a cage around the Wolf/Dog Boy, protecting him from me.



A Two-Headed Calf, asleep in its straw, all four eyes closed. A Fat Lady whose flesh oozes toward me as if it had a life and a purpose of its own. A woman with six fingers on each hand; since otherwise she looks quite ordinary, she makes sure you notice her deformity by leaning far forward on her stool and pressing her hands against the screen that shields her from anything other than the stares and words of the audience. The palms and all twelve fingers have hatch marks on them from the screen.

Rachel would have hated this part of the carnival. People being unkind to each other; people exploiting their own misfortunes. Thinking of her disapproval, I start to turn away.

Then fury at her propels me back. Rachel is *dead*. She let herself be killed, raped, mutilated. She brought this horror into my life and will make it stay forever. I owe her nothing.

But there's nothing more to see. I've come to the end of the freakshow already. It must be hard to staff these days, when people accept so much. Reluctantly, I move away from the almost-silent row of tents and cages toward the carousel on the other side of the midway.

The carousel is unstable. I watch it make a couple of rotations, remembering Rachel in pigtails on a pink horse, and the platform is noticeably lopsided and rickety. The same two or three bars of its tune are endlessly repeating, as if the tape is stuck. The old man who apparently runs the ride is asleep on his bench, legs stretched out in front of him, arms folded crookedly across his belly. At first I think he might be dead, but then I hear him snoring. The painted animals go around and around, up and down, without anybody on them.

I step over the old man's feet and duck under the rope. When my chance comes, I leap up onto the merry-go-round. It creaks and tilts under my weight.

I prowl among the animals. There are no pets here, no horses or noble St. Bernards, only lions with teeth-lined gaping mouths, giant cats perpetually stiff-tailed and ready to pounce, snakes with coils piled higher than my waist and fangs dripping venom as peeling yellow paint.

The three variations—lion, tiger, snake—are repeated to fill up the little merry-go-round with perhaps a dozen wooden animals to ride. I've seen them all. I sit down near the edge of the platform and, with curved upraised arms and crossed legs, make another place where somebody could ride. A child, maybe. A pretty little girl. Her parents would let her on this ride because, unlike the teetering Ferris Wheel at the other end of the midway or the roller coaster whose scaffolding is obviously listing, it would not seem dangerous. She would spot me right away and curious about what sort of animal I was supposed to be, she would come and sit in my lap. After a few rotations, a few stuck bars of the music, I would tighten my arms and legs around her until neither of us could breathe, and I'd never let her go.

"Fifty cents for the ride, lady," comes the stern, cracked voice.

Dirty hands on gaunt hips, the old man glares at me as his carousel takes me slowly past him, but he doesn't stop it. Maybe the control is stuck, so that it will only stop if it's dismantled. I get awkwardly to my knee, leaning into the turning motion, and fish in my hip pocket, on my next trip around hand him an assortment of nickels and dimes.

"See here," he says, and with unsettling agility leaps up beside me. "You missed the best one."

I can feel my nostrils flare at his odors: coffee, cigarettes, alcohol, dirt and cold sweat. Under the ragged jacket, his new-looking bright blue sweatshirt reads, BURN BRIAN BURN.

He takes my forearm in his horny fingers and leads me toward the center pole, which is unevenly striped and nowhere near vertical. With his other hand, he points. "There now, ain't she a beauty? Made her myself." Seeing at once what it is, I catch my breath.

A heavy wooden chair, tall as my head and wide as my shoulders, sturdy and polished, its surfaces reflecting the carnival lights. Leather straps across the back, seat, arms; shiny metal buckles. On the plank between the front legs, two inverted metal cones: electrodes. The cord, snaking so cleverly away that you have to look closely to see that it isn't plugged in. I prefer to pretend that it is.

"Gettin' a lot of business this week," the old man says with satisfaction. "Just like I thought."

Thrilled, I'm almost afraid to ask, "May I try it?"

He squints at me in a caricature of shrewdness. "Fifty cents extra."

I pay him without argument and take my place in the chair. The old man straps me in—one thong too tight across my breasts, another too low across my abdomen. He's just finished fastening the sharp buckles at my wrists when I notice that his jacket pockets are stuffed with trinkets, tiny replicas of this chair. "Wait," I say breathlessly. "Those are wonderful."

He chuckles and extracts a glittering handful. "Special shipment direct from Florida. Quarter apiece."

"I'll take them all."

He peers at me. I can tell that this is the first time he's noticed my face, but he doesn't seem particularly interested. "All? Must be a couple hundred here. Wasn't such a hot item as I thought. Might be some market for 'em tomorrow, *after*—"

"He killed my daughter." Killed *and* raped *and* . . .

There is a pause. We've made a complete rotation together, although here near the center it's harder to feel the motion. The magician across the way is still trying to get his frayed scarves untangled. "Well," the old man says, "I guess you're entitled."

"Yes."

"Let's say twenty cents apiece since it's quantity. Forty bucks."

"The money's in my back pocket." I manage to lift my hip off the seat of the electric chair long enough for him to slide his hand in and out of my pocket. I have no idea how much he takes. It doesn't matter. He empties his pockets of all the little electric chairs and piles them on the platform at my feet.

"Enjoy the ride," he tells me. He's leaning close over me, and my head is secured so that I can't avoid his rancid breath. He could avoid mine, as most people do, but he doesn't seem to mind. He's grinning. So am I. "Not much business this late, so you can stay on as long as you like."

Absurdly grateful, I try to nod my thanks, forgetting for the moment that my head won't move. He hasn't shaved my head, of course, but I can easily imagine that for myself. When I try to speak, my voice cracks and growls. He waves a twisted hand at me as if he knows what I want to say. Then he makes his way expertly among the silent and forever raging beasts and off the carousel, out of my restricted line of vision.

I'm alone. I can't see my watch anymore, but it must be nearing one o'clock. Brian Dempsey will die in a chair like this in four hours. The carousel keeps turning; before long, even its jerks and bumps have melded into a somnolent pattern.

*I'm in my house, in my back yard filled with flowers. Rachel loved flowers. Under the rose arbor is a chair, so polished it glows, so sturdy I know it has rooted to my garden. In it is tied a handsome young man. He's crying. They're going to execute him. I go to him, kneel, smell the roses, put my arms around him. His body stiffens as if he would pull away from me if he could. I look at his face and see that he's afraid of me, and I know that he has reason to be. I hold him. I can feel his heartbeat, the pulse in his temple. The executioner is approaching, from the back door of my house, a whole parade of executioners each wearing a party hat and swallowing fire. They're going to kill him. I'm not trying to stop it. I just want to comfort him. I hold him close and am suffused with sorrow for us all.*

I wake up enraged. I've been betrayed by my own dreams.

It's still pitch dark. I'm aware of a steady rotation, and of music that is scarcely music anymore, and of lights, and of hands at my wrists and under my arms. "Wake up, lady," says the voice of the old man, not, I think, for the first time. "It's time."

"Oh. God, what time is it?"

"It's five o'clock."

Then from all up and down the midway comes a ragged cheer, and the triumphant cry of "Brian Dempsey is dead!" I imagine the Siamese twins saying it to each other, the Wolf Boy snarling it through bared teeth, the fire swallower spitting it up. I say it, too: "Brian Dempsey is dead!" Saying those words makes me tremble as though an electric shock has gone through me,

although I don't recognize them coming out of my mouth and I hardly know what it means.

The old man is staring at me. He's not frightened, and he's certainly not surprised, but he can't seem quite to take in what he's seeing. I raise my hands to my face, but neither my face nor my hands are there anymore in any recognizable form.

He lifts me out of the chair. I can hardly walk; I stumble over the scattered trinkets as if they were bits of bone. My spine has bent at a sharp angle; my feet hurt too much to bear my weight.

The old man picks me up in his arms, finds places finally to hold onto my body. He steps off the still-turning platform of the carousel, and without effort takes me the short distance to the end of the midway to the row of tents and cages that make up the freakshow.

Next to the Two-Headed Calf, on the very edge of the carnival where the park leads to other people's houses, a cage is empty, except for a chair like the one I dreamed in. The old man drops me into it but doesn't bother to strap me down. He leaves, clangs the door shut behind him but doesn't lock it.

An early-morning line of watchers and revelers, celebrating the execution, is already starting to form outside my cage. They've come to see what I've turned into, what Brian Dempsey has made me, what they all can turn into if they try.

END

## *About the Author*

MELANIE TEM has been writing since she was five years old and has published short stories in a wide range of magazines and anthologies. Her horror/suspense novels *PRODIGAL*, *BLOOD MOON* and *WILDING* have earned high praise, and *PRODIGAL* won the Bram Stoker Award for Superior Achievement, First Novel.

