STORIES

A COLLECTION

BY

CHARLOTTE COX

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For my friends

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For Young Readers

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Hobby House

Tom Pedersen, a tall man, leaned against the fireplace, gazing at a hole in the ceiling. "Anybody had a look up there yet?" he asked. Dr. Samuels, a much shorter man, said no. Tom peered down at him. "Got a ladder?"

Dr. Samuels pointed toward the bedroom. Tom straightened himself and in two or three strides, it seemed to Dr. Samuels, crossed the living room and disappeared into the back of the house. He came out dangling a ladder from one finger. "You call this a ladder?" he said. "I call it a death trap. You're lucky you didn't break your neck on this thing." Dr. Samuels wondered about the anger in Tom's voice.

Tom let the ladder fall to the floor. One leg and the middle and bottom rungs broke off. "See what I mean?" Dr. Samuels nodded. Tom's concern touched him.

"It's too short for these ceilings, anyway," said Tom. "I've got one in my truck that'll work." Dr. Samuels noticed that Tom had to duck his head as he went through the front doorway and he remembered how he had felt in the hardware store the week before. Small and clumsy and out of place, like a cricket player who had wandered into a rugby game by mistake. It was a world where bodies were more important than brains, and he felt shorter, slighter, and paler than everyone else.

He had gone there because of a broken window in his new house—his "little house," he called it. The house had changed his life already, though he had bought it just six weeks earlier.

The day he found the house the traffic was worse than usual and it was hot, what his father, who had learned English from the customers who came into his tailor shop, would have called a real scorcher. "A real scorcher," Dr. Samuels had said out loud, rolling the r's in the back of his throat just like his father and smiling at the image the sound evoked. His father in shirtsleeves, leaning against the counter, wiping his forehead with a starched white handkerchief.

In the heat of the afternoon, Dr. Samuels abandoned the freeway and turned onto the river road. He was soon winding between tall trees, cooled by a breeze off the water. More houses than the last time I was through here, he thought, and fewer fields. He dimly recalled a controversy about this being good river bottom soil that it was a shame to allow developers to subdivide and build on. But what did he know about bottom soil, or topsoil, or any kind of soil? And what did he care, really? His realm was the mind—the soul, perhaps, but certainly not the soil. He chuckled to himself.

The road narrowed, now running between rows of dark fir trees, judging from their height and girth to date back to the valley's first settlers, or to the Indians before them. The road turned sharply to avoid a gigantic oak and went up a short hill. Dr. Samuels glimpsed the gleam of the river through the trees. It was lovely country. Dr. Samuels reached the top of the rise and passed another stand of old fir trees behind a sprawl of wild blackberries. Then he saw the little house.

It sat back from the road, on a plot of land bordered by an unkempt orchard. The trees were bent and old, and they looked dry, as if there had been no rain for years. But Dr. Samuels barely glanced at the grass and weeds that choked the dirt between the trees and climbed their trunks. His eyes fastened on the house. A sign stood in front of it: FOR SALE.

Dr. Samuels turned into the driveway and stopped the car. The house looked out at him from three windows, two on the left side of the front door, one on the right. Its wooden siding might once have

been white, but it was now gray and the paint was peeling, showing the bare boards underneath. The shutters on either side of the windows were a faded, grayish-green. One shutter hung precariously from its single remaining hinge, needing only a strong wind to take it out of its misery. A tree with long drooping leaves stood nearby.

At one end of the house, a red brick chimney rose above the pitched roof. Projecting from the front of the house, toward the other end, was a small wooden porch with its own pitched roof. That the porch was not in the center of the façade pleased Dr. Samuels, who disliked too much symmetry. The front door was glass, divided into eighteen small panes. Beside the porch a withered rosebush clung to a sagging trellis.

Dr. Samuels got out of the car and walked toward the front door. A paved walkway, criss-crossed with cracks, chunks broken off in places and grass flourishing wherever it could, led to the front porch. He placed his foot on the first step. It creaked ominously. He stepped back onto the walkway. Some of the boards on the porch had caved in, and he doubted it would hold even his slight weight. Dr. Samuels stood barely five foot six inches tall. He had small feet and delicate hands. He kept his nails scrupulously clean, like a surgeon's, though he had never practiced any other sort of medicine than psychiatry.

Abandoning the porch, he walked to the first window on the left and tried to look in. The window was dirty. Dr. Samuels pulled out the handkerchief he always carried, as his father had done, and rubbed the pane. The inside of the house appeared even more neglected than the outside. The floor was covered with plaster dust, no doubt related to the hole Dr. Samuels observed in the ceiling. The window on the left side of the fireplace was broken, and the lopsided shade on the window to the right had a triangular tear halfway up. Stained wallpaper, decorated with blotchy brown stripes and faded red flowers, hung in strips from the walls. At the other end of the room was a dining alcove with French windows. Someone had painted the windows to look like stained glass, giving an eerie glow to that part of the room.

Looking up again, Dr. Samuels was pleased to see how high the ceilings were, and the deep molding above the torn ugly wallpaper was a touch of genuine elegance. He had never liked the ceilings of ordinary houses. These must be at least ten, maybe twelve, feet high. And despite the dirt, the torn window shade, the wretched wallpaper, and the plaster dust, the room was flooded with light. Every outside wall had at least one window. Even the door let the light in.

Dr. Samuels stepped onto the lawn and looked at the door and the windows and the faded shutters and the sad old rosebush and the drooping tree and was astonished to feel his chest swell and his heart thrum. He felt his mouth widening in a grin, his eyes filling with tears. The bottom had fallen out of his stomach. His cheeks felt flushed and his breathing was fast. It felt exactly like falling in love.

He walked to the FOR SALE sign and wrote the phone number in the black notebook he carried in his wallet. He wished he had his camera, but he could take pictures later. First, he had to call the real estate agent and buy the house before anyone else did. The whole lot, old house and old trees, could be bulldozed away in a day.

He got into his car and slowly backed onto the road. He took a last, fond look at the little house, then accelerated toward the nearest phone. He did not want to risk the house getting away from him. He did not even think what he would do with it once he owned it. He only knew he had to have it. Exactly like love. It had not happened to him often, but he knew it when he felt it.

He bought the property with no trouble. On his first visit back, he found a board and placed it across the porch so he could walk to the front door. He stepped over the threshold and stood admiring his little house from the inside. The sunlight cast a golden swath across the floor through the open door. The gold mingled with the red and blue and green light from the dining alcove to give an impression of riches.

He loved the windows on every wall. The little house was full of light, like a mind with no dark corners. But the broken window bothered

him. It was like a flesh wound, an open invitation to intruders, and the rain must already have blown through the hole to damage walls and woodwork.

Dr. Samuels walked to the broken window and looked at it. Why not? he thought. How hard can it be to put in a new piece of glass? Easy to cut your fingers on, maybe an artery, said a voice much like that of his father, who had always warned him against doing work with his hands. Dr. Samuels knew that working with his hands was not all that dangerous, it was just his father's way of speaking, of hiding the real point. Which was that working with his hands was beneath him. Only mental work was worthy of an educated man. That was why people got an education, so they would not have to work with their hands.

"You're going to college," his father had told him as far back as he could remember. "You'll learn, you won't work like me, you'll make me proud." His father had been a tailor since he was twelve, had worked with his hands all his life. He sneered at the neighbor's son when he dropped out of college to become a carpenter. "That family, they were always peasants."

To his surprise, Dr. Samuels found he did not want anyone else to work on his little house. It's as if the house were a woman, and I her jealous lover, he thought. Well, some men have art collections. Some men have mistresses. He had a house. He would keep the house just for himself. He would work on it alone.

A clerk at the hardware store supplied Dr. Samuels with a piece of glass, a can of putty, a putty knife, a lever for opening the can, a pair of gloves, and a small chisel. "To get the putty out," the clerk said. Back at the house, Dr. Samuels examined the inside of the broken window but could not see anything that looked like putty. The glass was surrounded only by wood. He felt panicky. He didn't know what he was doing.

He walked back to the front door and looked closely at the windows. Cracked putty was visible on the outside. Aha! The glass had

been installed from the outside. His spirits soared. He picked up his sack of supplies and went outside.

Although he could see above the sill of the broken window, it was too high for him to work on from the ground. He fetched the ladder from the bedroom. After a few minutes he got the ladder standing despite the uneven ground. He stood on the second step, not at all certain that anyone was meant to perch above the earth on a flimsy wooden board held up by four other flimsy boards. Nevertheless, he could reach the entire window from the ladder.

He put on the heavy workman's gloves the clerk had sold him, grabbed the largest shard of glass, and pulled gently. It did not budge. He wiggled it. It moved a little. Then it broke loose and he almost fell off the ladder. He held the jagged piece of glass gingerly in one hand and carried it down to the ground. He felt more confident with the next piece, and before long he had cleared the broken glass from the opening. Now he attacked the putty. It was old and brittle and came off with practically no effort except for the bits in the corners. These Dr. Samuels dug at with the chisel, as the clerk had recommended, and they quickly fell onto the ground.

Dr. Samuels looked down at the pile of broken glass and chipped putty and felt a satisfying sense of pride. He was looking at his first piece of handiwork. "Sorry, Pop," he said out loud. "But it feels great." He climbed off the ladder to open the jar of putty and fetch the fresh piece of glass.

Dr. Samuels held the glass to the opening he had scraped clean. It did not fit. He saw instantly that he had made a mistake in measuring. Not knowing that he should allow for putty, he had measured from one edge of the glass to the other. The glass was too small. He would have to go back to the hardware store. Either that or find another store that sold glass, an impulse that appealed to his vanity but that he quickly squelched. Dr. Samuels always urged his patients to face up to their mistakes.

He bundled up the glass and put it in the car. Then he remeasured the window and wrote the figures in his notebook. It was only a small defeat, he told himself.

The clerk was not surprised to see him. But his curiosity was aroused. Dr. Samuels told him he had bought an old house in the country. How old? Turn of the century, a little later perhaps. The clerk whistled. "I assume you had it inspected." Dr. Samuels shook his head. "Those old places have all kinds of problems you can't see," said the clerk. "You ought to have somebody look at it before you go to a lot of work." The clerk wrote a name and number on a notepad. "Here's a guy who's made sort of a career out of restoring old houses."

In a few minutes the clerk handed Dr. Samuels the newly cut glass. "Now, don't worry if you measure it and it's a touch small," he said. "The trick is to cut it about an eighth of an inch smaller than the opening, to give the glass room to breathe. Oh, and this might come in handy." The clerk gave Dr. Samuels a flat, yellow pencil with MEASURE TWICE, CUT ONCE printed on the side.

"Old saying in the building trade," said the clerk. "Good luck." Dr. Samuels tucked the pencil into his shirt pocket and left the store.

Back at the house, Dr. Samuels sat on the bottom step of the ladder, balancing the piece of glass on his palms. His hands were trembling. He set the glass on the ground. The clerk had frightened him. For the first time, he felt that perhaps he had made a mistake. What if there was something seriously wrong with the little house, something that new windows, fresh paint, patching plaster, and elbow grease could not fix? He did not know what to do. Yes, that's the trouble, he thought. I don't know what to do. All those years of working with my head. Avoiding working with my hands. Afraid of being incompetent. But you're a successful analyst, he argued with himself. Yes. Excelling at intellectual work to compensate. For what? Fear of what? Of being like my father?

He looked at the pile of glass and old putty on the ground, but he felt none of his former sense of triumph. Any housebreaker could

have done as well, he thought. He was tempted to make a joke, but he knew that was only a way of masking his fear. Perhaps he should call the man the clerk had suggested. Yes, he would do well to consult an expert.

That decision made, Dr. Samuels picked up the glass and held it against the window opening. Balancing it with the splayed fingers of one hand, he dipped into the putty jar with the other. The putty had dried out, but he managed to get some on the putty knife and smear it around the edge of the glass, enough to hold it in. He smoothed the putty with his index finger. Not great, but not bad, he thought, standing back to admire his work.

He felt a breeze and glanced at the sky. The sun had disappeared behind rushing, gray clouds. He thought of the fallen plaster and wondered whether there were holes in the roof of the house, and he felt a pang of anxiety. He wiped his hands, locked the front door, and got into his car. Enveloping the little house in protective thoughts, he pulled out of the driveway.

Now, two weeks after his mixed success with the window, Dr. Samuels picked up what was left of the wooden ladder and carried it outside. Maybe he could burn it in the fireplace, after Tom determined whether the chimney was sound. Dr. Samuels already had great faith in Tom. Tom had seen instantly that the ladder was dangerous. Dr. Samuels hadn't noticed a thing. He knew that contacting Tom had been the right thing to do. He had had to give up the role of jealous lover, but truthfully, he was relieved.

Tom set his metal extension ladder against the side of his truck and stood for a moment, contemplating the house. It wasn't the worst case he'd ever seen. But he wondered about the owner. Seemed an odd kind of fellow to be trying to fix up a rundown old house. Tom smiled to himself. The man was trying to look casual, but his open-necked

shirt was starched and pressed and his chino pants had a sharp crease. The leather and canvas shoes looked imported.

And those hands, Tom thought. Small, immaculate, the nails carefully trimmed. The man is no workman, that's for sure, he said to himself. Guess this will be one of those educational experiences. Tom hooked two pairs of safety glasses over one arm and picked up the ladder with the other.

A few minutes later, Dr. Samuels stood halfway up the ladder. Tom had found the access hatch in the bedroom ceiling, placed the ladder underneath, and climbed into the attic. "Well, what are you waiting for?" Tom jibed. Dr. Samuels doubted whether he would be able to make it the rest of the way to the ceiling, then step off the ladder into the attic. "Come on, it won't slip, it's got rubber feet." Dr. Samuels looked down and saw the gray bulges at the bottom of the ladder.

"Don't look down," said Tom. Dr. Samuels gazed up at the hatch and took a deep breath. Tom extended a hand and Dr. Samuels stepped into the attic. "You've gotta stay on these planks," said Tom. "Otherwise your foot'll go right through the plaster."

Tom shone the flashlight along the length of the attic. Dust and cobwebs covered everything. Dr. Samuels was amazed at the structure. Level boards ran parallel on the underside of the roof. From the sides, where the outer walls met the roof, a series of angled boards, which Tom said were rafters, rose to meet a single beam that ran the length of the house. Dr. Samuels felt as if he were inside a skeleton, looking at skin and bones from the perspective of a parasite of some sort. That was the wrong analogy, though. The house was built to protect him, like a ribcage around a fetus. Did the little house remind him of his mother?

"Stay here and shine the flashlight my way," Tom said. He had begun working his way down the center beam, sticking an icepick into the wood from time to time. Tom said he was checking the ridgepole for dry rot. Dr. Samuels thought that sounded bad. "Well, could be,

but this baby seems pretty sound," said Tom as he worked his way down the ridgepole. "Okay, now just swing the flashlight back and forth," he said. "Maybe you could come down this way a little." Dr. Samuels didn't think so.

"If you walk along the ceiling joists, you can hang onto the rafters, like this," said Tom, demonstrating. Dr. Samuels stepped onto the narrow edge of one of the boards that ran across the attic and felt his knees turn to jelly. He almost dropped the flashlight. "I think this is as far as I'll come," he said. Tom gave him a look that combined pity and amusement and began walking back and forth, sticking his pick into each rafter.

"Whoops, these two here are cracked," he said, and marked the boards with big black Xs. "Probably accounts for that sag we noticed from the outside."

Earlier, Tom had taken Dr. Samuels on a visual inspection of the outside of the house. First, Tom squinted along the ridge of the roof. "Looks pretty straight to me," he said. Dr. Samuels said he didn't notice anything wrong either. Tom led him back a little farther and told him to look at the flat part of the roof. "Seems a little wavy, just past the middle," Dr. Samuels said. "We'll check it out from the attic," said Tom.

Tom then walked almost to the road and told Dr. Samuels to stand so he could see both the front and the back corners. "Now see if they line up," said Tom. They did. Tom walked to the other corner. It was a little crooked, but he doubted it was anything to worry about.

Dr. Samuels wondered what all this meant. Tom said the basic structure seemed to be sound. "If we'd found any big bulges or twists, you'd have had a serious problem, like a rotten foundation or the framing pulling apart." Tom looked at Dr. Samuels and was satisfied that he caught the general drift. "You could be a lucky guy, considering how old this place is." Dr. Samuels felt the knot in his stomach relax. Perhaps his feelings for the house hadn't caused him to make a terrible mistake after all.

In the attic, Tom took the flashlight to check on the spot where the plaster had fallen. He saw light between the lath boards and water stains on the rafters, roof boards, and ceiling joists. He shone the flashlight up. "There used to be a leak here, but I don't see a hole. Maybe someone fixed it. But we'll check it with the hose."

Dr. Samuels asked if that meant running water on the roof to see if it leaked. When Tom said yes, Dr. Samuels didn't confess that he had first envisioned poking a hose at the roof to see if it went through a hole anywhere.

"Okay, I'm done for now." Tom made his way back to the opening, the flashlight shining in Dr. Samuels's eyes. Dr. Samuels turned his head aside. "Wait a minute. What's that?" Over against the side were two wooden boxes. They were covered with dust and cobwebs, like the rest of the attic. "Would you drag those over here?" he said to Tom. The boxes proved to be light. Tom took them down the ladder, then Dr. Samuels followed him.

After closing the attic hatch, Tom removed the ladder and said goodbye. Dr. Samuels felt dirtier and more tired than he could ever remember. And he hadn't done anything except climb a ladder and shine a flashlight around. He sat on one of the boxes and wiped his hands on his pants. The water wouldn't be turned on until tomorrow. That made him conscious that his bladder needed emptying. He didn't want to use the toilet if he couldn't flush it, so he walked outside and into the orchard.

The sky was full of fast-moving clouds, driven by a stiff wind that bent the tall grass between the old trees. Dr. Samuels unzipped his pants and directed a steaming stream against a thick gray trunk. The wind dried the last drop. He recalled Freud's famous footnote about men putting out fire with their urine—symbolically, it was a homosexual competition with the phallic flame, and the first man who could suppress the sexual urge had carried off the fire and used it.

Dr. Samuels felt a chill and turned back toward the house. He had those two boxes to look through. He went into the bedroom and

opened the first. Old athletic souvenirs, it looked like. A deflated football, leather football shoes, the old-fashioned kind, a pair of stiff boxing gloves, a couple of high-school yearbooks, not too badly damaged by insects. A yellowed newspaper clipping was stuck in one book. Oh, the boy had died in the 1918–1919 Spanish influenza pandemic. Along with forty million others around the world, Dr. Samuels remembered. The pandemic that no one knows about anymore. Strange the box was left. The parents must have died and no one had checked to see if they'd left anything in the attic.

The other box contained old schoolbooks and clothes that must have belonged to the same boy. Dr. Samuels leafed through a Latin grammar and set it aside. Maybe he could use it. He once scored second in a statewide Latin test, but he'd forgotten almost everything that he didn't need to write prescriptions. The other books might be of interest to the public library. He closed the box and set the grammar book on top.

You didn't see wooden boxes like that any more. Dr. Samuels noticed the way the sides were fitted together, not with nails, but with little projections on one piece that slipped into slots on the other, like a puzzle. All that handwork, he thought. He decided to keep the boxes and use them in the house when it was ready to occupy.

Dr. Samuels imagined sleeping in the room, waking up in the morning with the sun streaming through the tall double windows, the light glinting off the leaves in the orchard. He would have no curtains, nothing to break the flow of sunlight into his room and onto his bed. He could almost feel the sun. He imagined a woman beside him. The breeze through the open windows would dry the sweat from their bodies but leave the smell of sex. The sensation was so strong Dr. Samuels put his fingers to his nose and his penis stirred.

Now the room felt stuffy and dusty. Dr. Samuels tried to open a window but it was stuck. He'd get Tom to work on the windows right away. He wanted to feel the air moving through the house the

way it moved through the orchard. He ran his fingers through his hair. He could almost feel the follicles, and his hands were as if charged with electricity.

Through the window he watched the long grass blowing between the trees. "A windblown sailor" popped into his mind. Yes, he felt as if he had set sail, launched himself into an unknown world. He took off his shoes and socks and walked barefoot over the floorboards. He glanced back. His footprints in the dust were like footprints in the sand, the trail of an explorer seeking not his fortune but knowledge of the world, of places yet uncharted.

He had set sail in his own private ark. Yes, that's what it was. The attic was like the inside of a ship, the rafters and joists like the beams and boards of an old sailing vessel, the kind archeologists dig up in the eastern Mediterranean, the relics of Greek and Phoenician trading vessels, their pots still full of wine, and glass for barter littering the sands.

When Dr. Samuels arrived home, his wife and sons had already left for the evening. The house was empty and so was his stomach. He usually ate lightly but the day's activities had made him ravenous. He found a plate of fried chicken in the refrigerator and took it into the dining room. He'd forgotten to get a knife and fork but it didn't matter. He felt like eating with his fingers. He had always disliked touching food, getting grease on his fingers, feeling any kind of flesh. He never could have tolerated general medicine, or surgery, anything that required a doctor to touch and manipulate human flesh, or worse, wounded and bleeding flesh.

Now he picked up a chicken breast in both hands and pulled the meat away with his teeth. The piece was too long to fit into his mouth and the flesh brushed his cheek. He wiped his face with one hand. After he had pulled off the loosest meat, he set the piece of chicken back on the plate and began pulling pieces of flesh off with his fingers. The white meat got under his fingernails, but he did not mind. He just licked and sucked his fingers until they were clean.

The grease tasted wonderful. He turned the breast over and dug the meat out of the spot behind the breastbone and the ribs, then pulled the thin flesh off the ribs themselves. The breast had the wishbone attached. He detached it and took one end in each hand and pulled. Then he laughed and licked his fingers one last time. Dr. Samuels was amused to realize how easily amused he had become.

The next day was hot. After a stop at the hardware store for a hose, Dr. Samuels drove to the little house, screwed the hose into the faucet next to the front porch, attached a nozzle to the other end, and began watering the parched plants bordering the house. He wore shorts and a T-shirt and his feet were bare. From time to time he directed the hose onto his feet and felt cool despite the sun beating on his bare head.

I wonder if that rose will come back, he thought, giving it an extra-long dose. He worked his way slowly around the house, as far as the hose would reach. The sun was straight overhead when Dr. Samuels felt hungry. He changed the nozzle for a lawn sprinkler, the kind that throws the water up and around like a fountain, set the sprinkler in the middle of the dried-up lawn, and stood back to watch. Then he fetched a cooler from his car and sat on the front porch, his lunch spread out before him.

The sound of the sprinkler pleased him and sent a cooling spray his way whenever the wind picked up. He was reminded of Rome, and smiled at the memory of sitting outside at night in a small piazza, the air warm and intimate. The food was wonderful, of course. He had asked the waiter to compliment the chef on the homemade fettuccine with butter and cheese, the thin slices of cured beef with greens, the bitter salad, and the lemon ice. The Roman sky was like velvet, and he was surprised to see the stars above such a big city. The whole neighborhood was outside, the people lived their lives in public, and Dr. Samuels enjoyed the show. The atmosphere was at the same time personal and public.

"Public intimacy," Dr. Samuels said to his wife. "Yes, I suppose, but don't you think it's all a bit childish?" she said. Dr. Samuels didn't think so. He listened to the jokes and quarrels with pleasure. So much of his work consisted in drawing things out of people, it was good to hear uninhibited speech. That night it was pure comedy, but he was sure tragedies played themselves out in the little square as well.

Dr. Samuels finished the last of the sandwich and potato salad he had picked up at a delicatessen and ate a bunch of grapes and a piece of cheese for dessert. He moved down to the bottom step and stretched out his legs so the sweep of the sprinkler splashed water on his toes. He felt cool, full, relaxed. A hammock would be nice, he thought, stretching himself out even farther. A nap in the shade, with cool water blowing his way once in a while, nothing could be sweeter.

He rested his head on the porch and closed his eyes. A feeling of contentment played over him such as he had seldom known. He fell asleep and dreamt that he lived in a house at the top of a bluff. The bluff stood high above a small bay, with two arms of land closed tightly around it and a narrow opening leading to the sea beyond. Looking far down at the bay, he was amazed at the brilliance of the waters. They gleamed a deep, shining, translucent turquoise, and the sun glinted off the surface in showers of diamonds. Most amazingly, three whales swam about in the tiny bay, blithely blowing water spouts into the air. The sun shining through the spray sent rainbows arcing from one side of the bay to the other. Dr. Samuels watched the whales playing in the bay and felt the greatest happiness.

The happiness was still with him when he woke, despite having a stiff neck from sleeping with his head propped on the porch. He got up and moved the sprinkler, then took off his shirt and ran back and forth in the water, throwing his hands up in the air and laughing. As he blinked the drops out of his eyelashes, he saw a flash of colors, as in a rainbow. He seemed to hear a voice saying, "Wait an hour after eating before you go swimming," and that made him laugh even more.

He stayed at the little house until long past dark, savoring his happiness. His wife was already in bed when he got home, but she sat up and turned on the light when he came into their bedroom. "Where have you been?" she said. When Dr. Samuels didn't answer, she continued. "You're never home any more. What's going on? I have a right to know." Her voice was strained and harsh. She thinks it's another woman, said Dr. Samuels to himself.

"Nothing's going on. I've been working." That was true as far as it went, he thought. "Go back to sleep. I'm going to take a shower." Dr. Samuels went into the bathroom. He wondered how much longer he could keep his secret, and what he would say when he told her about the house. You know what you have to say, he thought. Yes, he knew. He wanted to leave her. She had changed, he had changed. There wasn't another woman, but he wished there were. He wanted a real lover, a smooth-skinned, supple woman who loved his body, his feet, his hands, his hair, his penis. He wanted to leave his wife's sprayed-stiff hair and blood-red nails, her clubs and committees, her letters to the editor. He wanted a new life to go with his new house. It was just a question of doing it.

He stepped into the shower, turned the massage spray on high, hunched his shoulders, and watched the dirty water swirl down the drain. By the time he went back to the bedroom, his wife was asleep.

By the following Saturday, Tom was already hard at work on the windows. He had loosened most of them and was pulling off the side moldings and repairing the broken sashcords. Dr. Samuels asked what he could do. "There's a lot of paint needs scraping," said Tom. "You game?"

Dr. Samuels nodded and Tom handed him a scraper, a wire brush, and a facemask—"The paint is bound to be lead-based," said Tom—and directed him to the bedroom. "Start on this part here," said Tom, patting the sill. Dr. Samuels put on the facemask.

An hour later he was still working on the first window, and he had decided that scraping paint was one of the worst jobs in the world.

The paint that was blistered and peeling was not hard to remove, but some layers had adhered so well to each other that it took all Dr. Samuels's strength to persuade them to part company. Closer to the wood it was even more difficult. Whoever had painted the house nearly a hundred years ago had known what he was doing. The paint was practically part of the woodwork.

"How's it going?" Tom said from behind him. "Isn't there an easier way?" said Dr. Samuels. "Sandblasting or something?" Tom laughed and said he could send the windows to a commercial stripper. "But we would have to take all the frames out, and remove all the panes. Which would probably mean breaking most of them. And then we'd have to nail boards over all the window openings for a while."

Dr. Samuels pondered. He didn't want to lose the glorious light of his house for even a short time. But it wouldn't be for long.

Tom suggested buying new windows. "Not on your life," said Dr. Samuels. "I want all the original parts restored."

It took Tom and another man three days to remove the windows. While the window openings were boarded up, Tom suspended operations inside the house to work on the front porch.

"It's a shame the way people neglect porches," Tom said. He gazed sadly at the rotten deckboards. "Porches add a lot to the beauty of a house, but people don't appreciate them." Tom shook his head. He leaned a ladder against the side of the house and went up to inspect the roof.

Dr. Samuels stood back and regarded the front of the house. He was astounded at Tom's words about the beauty of porches. This one was hardly in an aesthetic state. He himself would have said porches were practical, built to protect the occupants of the house from the elements, and to keep rain and snow from entering the house through the door.

He could see, however, that the porch broke the straight, boxy line of the house and softened it. The porch seemed to extend the house toward a visitor, to make a welcoming gesture. Dr. Samuels realized that

the porch was one of the reasons he had fallen in love with the house. He tried to imagine what it would look like without the front porch. A poor cabin, that's all. The front door would be only a way into and out of the house, and closed, it would shut a stranger completely out. Who would dare walk up to a closed door on the flat face of such a house? It would be like approaching a person whose face was closed against you, whose mouth stretched tight and narrow below empty eyes and flattened cheekbones, the skin pulled tight by the thin, compressed lips.

"Find anything?" he yelled up at Tom. Tom flourished his icepick and said that the shingles looked good but the facing boards were rotten from lack of paint. He started down the ladder. "But we should probably pull off the old shingles and replace them, just to be on the safe side," he said. "Okay by you?"

Dr. Samuels nodded. By now he would spare no expense to have the most beautiful porch possible. "What about those crooked old posts?" he asked Tom. Tom joined Dr. Samuels at the edge of the porch. It had two round posts at the front and half-posts against the siding. "The front ones'll be expensive to replace," said Tom. "It would be a shame to just put plain four-by-fours in their place." He poked into the base of each with his icepick. "Rotten clear through," he said. He poked into one of the posts. Maybe they could just replace the bottoms. Tom squinted at the square section at the top of the posts and said they might have to replace it because it had been exposed to the weather.

Dr. Samuels said he wanted it to look right. Tom grinned. "Don't worry, this will be one sweet porch when we're through."

"Yes," said Dr. Samuels. "Today I learned about the beauty of porches."

Tom looked at him. "Just what do you do when you're not fixing old houses?" Dr. Samuels said he was a psychiatrist. Tom laughed. "Guess I better watch what I say." The cliché peeved Dr. Samuels. Then he remembered how much he had to thank Tom for. He held up

his hands. "These aren't the same hands I came here with," he said. "They've done more work since I bought this house than they've done in the last thirty years."

Tom reached out his right hand. "Put 'er there, doc. We'll make a worker out of you yet." And he laughed again. Dr. Samuels joined him. If only his father could see him now, he thought. You never told me how good it feels to make things, Pop. What's the good of hands if they can't make things? Like a beautiful, welcoming porch, Pop. Did you know porches were beautiful?

Dr. Samuels dropped Tom's hand and stepped back to admire the porch. "I'm going to paint it myself," he said. "With your permission, of course," he added, inclining his head toward Tom. Tom nodded back. "Might need a little scraping first, but she's all yours." Dr. Samuels groaned. "Is that all you can think about, scraping paint?" he said. "Gotta do the job right," said Tom. Dr. Samuels threw up his hands. "I surrender. First I scrape, then I paint."

Tom clapped him on the back and Dr. Samuels winced. Every muscle ached. He was happier than he had ever been in his life.

1998

Begone

"Begone," she heard herself say. She couldn't make what she meant come out. That it was gone, her ability to make sense. Then she looked out the window of the car and she recognized the fairgrounds and the school and she knew where she was. It was a relief. My name is Edythe Fenton, she thought. I'm seventy-nine years old and I live at 1520 Hawthorne Street. My telephone number is 345-2848. My Social Security number is, what, I can't remember. The card is in my purse, though. She looked down at her lap. Yes, I have my purse. My daughter is driving me to the emergency room again. My brain is making thoughts but they get scrambled when I try to say them.

She tried to speak again but what came out still made no sense. She shook her head. The first time she had gone to the emergency room was that morning. That time she rode in an ambulance. Two young men came into the house, took her blood pressure, gave her something in her veins, put her on a portable bed with white sheets, rolled her outside, and lifted her into the ambulance.

At the hospital they took her blood pressure again and told her she shouldn't have taken the nitroglycerin pills, they had lowered her blood pressure too much. "I thought I was having another heart attack," she told them. They asked her what she'd had for breakfast and she said the normal things, toast, cereal, orange juice, tea. "I was just sitting down to do my nails and I felt sick to my stomach." They took an electrocardiogram and said everything was normal, she was healing fine from last week's procedure, the angioplasty had removed the

blockage from her artery and she was fine. They sent her home with a warning not to take any more of the pills.

Just a while ago she had been sitting in the living room, visiting with her sister-in-law and her nephew. It was the first company she'd had since the procedure, though her daughter had come to stay until she was back to her old self. A nice day, sun warming the room and a clear sky so you could see all the way to the mountains. Somehow they got to talking about the blueberries. Her nephew wondered whether she planned to put nets over the bushes this year to keep the birds away, and she tried to say no, it was too expensive, she'd decided just to live with the birds. She wasn't sure what came out of her mouth, but she saw the alarm on everyone's face. She tried to say something to reassure them but more gibberish came out.

She felt fine. But something had gone wrong in her head, it was obvious, she knew it. Her guests left hastily. "Iggerzit om," she said, meaning goodbye, and shook her head, to show that she didn't mean what she said. Or that she hadn't said what she meant.

Maybe she really had meant "begone," go away, just now in the car. It was shameful to be old. And now something bad had happened. Something had gone seriously wrong. What had she done wrong? Was this a punishment for something she had done? She believed she was a good person. She tried not to hurt people, or say unkind things. She did not lie. Oh, she said she was fine when people asked, even if she wasn't, but that was just politeness. She avoided bad things. She stayed away from the movies because the language was so shocking, words no one used to say in public that embarrassed her to hear, even in the dark of the movie theater.

She glanced at her daughter, driving the car so competently. It pleased her that her daughter had turned out clever and beautiful and smart. She did not take any credit for her daughter's success, that would be claiming too much. All good things come from God. But the

bad things, what about the bad things, she worried. Why has this happened to me?

Her son had died because of her, was that it? She had done nothing to keep him out of the war, to save him. She thought she was over those guilty feelings. But here they were again, blaming, the accusatory finger of God pointed straight at Edythe Fenton.

She thought of her own mother and did not like the way that made her feel. She might be going—going, going, gone—just like her mother. The same thing had happened to her mother. A stroke, she knew the word for it was stroke, even if she couldn't say it. At fifty-six, her mother had had a stroke and then lived the rest of her life in a nursing home. She had been afraid for fifty years that she would end up in a nursing home, just like her mother who never could speak again, just lay in the stuffy dark room with the heavy furniture for years until she died.

Then she noticed that her right arm was numb. She tried to lift it and could not make it obey her will.

Everyone should go away and leave me alone. Begone. She hated to look in the mirror and see how old her neck looked, to hold up her arms and see how the skin hung. Even though the doctor said she looked much younger than her age, and her financial adviser had been fooled, too. He had had to pull strings to get an okay on the annuity he'd arranged after the insurance company learned how old she really was.

At the hospital she sat in the reception area while her daughter made the arrangements. She heard her daughter tell the receptionist, "We were here this morning. I think my mother's had a stroke." A nurse came and took her to another white bed where she lay and waited for a doctor. The nurses, who did not look like nurses in their pastel pants and running shoes, came by now and then. "How are you feeling, Mrs. Fenton?" they asked reassuringly, and she smiled at them. The doctor took a long time to arrive. He had her look right and left and asked her questions. She had to struggle with some words but she

could talk again and mostly she answered him. He noticed that her right eye was bloodshot and asked her if it had been before. "No," she said.

They wheeled her upstairs and into what looked like an iron lung, one of those machines where polio patients used to have to stay in order to breathe. She had been shocked by a television program that showed people who were still in iron lungs and had been since the nineteen-fifties. She'd had no idea.

The nurses wheeled her out of the machine and back to her room. She closed her eyes, then opened them again when someone touched her shoulder. She turned her head and saw the doctor standing beside her bed, holding a clipboard. "The CT scan showed no evidence of a brain hemorrhage," he said.

She was surprised, but he must know, he is the doctor. She began to feel that she might be all right after all. Perhaps this was not her time to leave the world. Then it occurred to her that she should feel glad about going to heaven, and she was confused. But it was the nursing home she feared, not heaven, yes, that's right. She was glad the machine hadn't seen anything wrong with her brain. She tried to put the fear out of her mind, to believe the machine and the doctor.

The next day a woman doctor visited, carrying a worn but handsome leather bag. The doctor said she was a neurologist and shined a light in her eyes, had her touch her finger to her nose, tested her reflexes. The neurologist asked about the huge bruise on her right leg, down to her knee, where they hadn't been able to stop her from bleeding after the procedure until a male nurse had pressed on the femoral artery for an entire hour. She didn't like to remember them giving her a blood transfusion.

In the room with her after the procedure had been a man of at least ninety. She could hear his doctor advise him and his daughter to go ahead with the procedure. Ninety years old. Her daughter was

appalled when she told her. If his arteries are blocked, maybe he was meant to die of a heart attack, said her daughter. The cardiac wing was an angioplasty factory, said her daughter.

She hadn't told her daughter about the procedure until it was over. "Don't call anyone," she said to her sister-in-law. But her sister-in-law had called anyway. She was in a room with three other patients. The nurses were fat and smelled of cigarette smoke. Her husband had been a smoker until the doctor told him to quit. She used not to notice the smell, but now she did. She wondered about the nurses. How professional were they, without proper uniforms, and smoking, when everyone knew it was bad for you?

She asked her daughter to bring makeup and clothes. She didn't feel comfortable without makeup, even in the hospital. The doctor wanted to keep her another day or so but she felt fine. Just the bruise on her right leg, from the groin to the knee. She tried to show her daughter but she wouldn't look.

Two months later she couldn't be bothered to put on any makeup at all, not eyeshadow or foundation or lipstick. She let her lips be, shrunken and pale. Old-lady lips, grooves radiating from them like the gullies on a bare hillside. She got herself to church but didn't bother to comb her hair beforehand. "Do you see that?" her friends said to each other. But no one said anything to her. It wouldn't have been polite, it would have intruded on her privacy. Her friends had been raised that way, they all felt the same way.

She changed doctors to one closer to her house. He told her she should walk half an hour a day and she tried. But some days it was too cold, some days she just didn't have the energy. She didn't exactly lie when her daughter asked about her walking, but she said, "People of my generation don't do that" when her daughter urged her to join a

health club or take an exercise class. "You're stubborn," said her daughter. "I know," she said.

One morning she couldn't turn the water on in the bathroom sink. Something must have happened to the water supply. She waited until eight o'clock to call the plumber, who was not really a plumber, just the neighborhood handyman. He came within the hour and turned the faucet easily. "It was a little hard," he said, but she knew he was being kind. She was dismayed at how weak she had gotten. She who used to think nothing of slinging fifty-pound bags of dirt out of the trunk of the car and carrying them to the garden.

She had tried to work in the garden after she got home from the hospital. She weeded a little around the roses and picked the few blueberries the birds had left. The large pots on the patio needed replanting but the task seemed too daunting. Driving to the nursery, picking out the plants, bringing them home, replacing the potting soil. Too much work, too much to think about. She managed to pull the dried flowers out of the pots one afternoon but the pots remained empty. It was depressing not to see lots of flowers on the patio. But the geraniums bloomed, as they always did, and the little tree in the corner put out new growth, even though she did nothing but water it occasionally.

Mostly she sat in the living room in her favorite chair and stared out the window. When it got dark, she ate a little, some cottage cheese and fruit, maybe, or canned soup. She didn't have much appetite anymore. And she found no more pleasure in cooking. She who had cooked for her family for over twenty years, then for her husband and herself, she who had subscribed to cooking magazines and expertly replicated the recipes, she who had baked bread every Saturday, she was no longer interested in cooking.

She turned on the television to watch the evening news and left it on but she didn't understand the shows they had this season, the comedies or the police dramas. She watched the movie channel sometimes but she didn't understand the movies either. Why did Jimmy Stewart think

someone had been murdered in the apartment across the way? What was so funny about a plane that was about to crash?

"I don't get it, I just don't get it," she told her friend Vivian. It was hard to understand people on the telephone, too. Everyone mumbled so nowadays. Her daughter suggested that she might want to have her hearing tested, but the idea of a hearing aid disgusted her. How ugly, those bits of plastic hooked over your ear. How old and ugly they made people look. She didn't listen when her daughter tried to explain that part of the reason she felt depressed might be that she couldn't hear what was going on, and that made her feel isolated. She knew it wasn't anything like that. Something had gone wrong in her brain, she wasn't herself, that's all it was. She had lived too long. She was an old woman and she didn't know why she was still alive.

She thought of her husband, dead nearly twenty years now. She had placed his photograph in every room of the house except the bathroom, where it wouldn't have been decent. She didn't talk to him, not even in her mind. She just noticed his picture as she went from room to room. He hadn't liked her to talk. When she did he usually ridiculed what she said. No, he was not a person she could talk to. She had been a good wife, she had cleaned house even though she didn't like the work, she had even cleaned the used bricks he bought to build an outdoor barbecue. The fact that the barbecue never worked well was never mentioned.

And there was the childbearing. Two children. Only one was left now, her daughter. Their son had died in Vietnam. Now she wished she had helped him escape to Canada to avoid the war, but then she hadn't dared. Resisting the war was going against the government, breaking the law, unthinkable. Later, she realized that if the minister at the church had suggested resisting the war, she might have done something to save her son. Ministers were like doctors. You did what they said, that's how she was raised, that's the way her generation was.

She fell asleep halfway through channel seven's annual broadcast of the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* and woke up to the telephone ringing.

Vivian was worried. "Where were you? I rang six different times." She felt alarmed herself. She hadn't known who or where she was when she woke up. She felt as if she had almost died. She apologized to Vivian, but she did not tell her that. Her voice rose higher the more she fought her fear. She and Vivian chatted about the club luncheon next week. She didn't really want to go but it was her turn to bring dessert.

She'd make something simple, something with canned fruit and gelatin and cream cheese. There was a recipe in Sunday's paper she could use. She had once spent two days making a red, white, and blue fruit tart for a Fourth of July picnic, mixing the pastry, baking the crust, cooking a custard cream, preparing blueberries, strawberries, and raspberries, then putting everything painstakingly together. None of her friends did things like that anymore. They all ate out of boxes and cans. Some of her friends had moved to retirement homes where they didn't even have a stove, just a little refrigerator and a microwave if they liked. They didn't have to cook at all if they didn't want to. She might eat more if the meals were prepared for her. But she didn't have any desire to move to a retirement home. She was comfortable here, she had things the way she wanted them, she didn't intend to leave until they carried her out in a box.

But in six months, the day came that she had dreaded. She was not leaving in a box, she was leaving in a car. She had shrunk from a size eight to a size two and her daughter said she could not live alone anymore. Her belongings were going in boxes in a moving van. Most of them would go into storage. Only her china closet with her sister's crystal and the old German porcelain, the grandmother clock her husband had made, the television set, her favorite chair, her dropleaf table, a chest of drawers, and the cedar chest in which she'd kept her trousseau were moving with her to the retirement home. Her daughter bought her a new twin bed to replace the double bed she'd slept in with her husband until he died. The bed he'd died in, in fact. That had never bothered her. Death was a fact of life, something she'd learned on the farm.

Every time her father slaughtered a pig or her mother chopped off a hen's head on the chopping block under the clothesline, the lesson was taught to her, her sister, and their little brother. Death is part of life. She was the last one left, and her daughter had no children. Mother dead, father dead, sister dead, brother dead. Son dead. Husband dead. The end of the line.

She hung back as the movers brought the things into her new room. She hated the rug. She was tired. But then she noticed that the bathroom was large enough for a little chest. Almost in spite of herself, her imagination began to work and she felt the beginnings of excitement. Maybe she would buy a chest, something new for her new home. She also needed a different sort of table to sit at, she could see that at once. And plants for the window. Perhaps they'd let her change the curtains, too. A bright bedspread would make the new bed look better. She could use one of the quilts she'd saved all these years without using, or the crocheted bedspread her mother-in-law had made them as a wedding present. She sat in her chair and didn't think of turning on the television, or even a light. She was too busy imagining what she could do with her new home. She had barely said goodbye to her daughter, the thoughts kept filling her head.

She slept badly that night. The busy thoughts in her head kept her awake. Also the new bed was harder than her old mattress, and so narrow it made her afraid to roll over. She could hear sounds of flushing water elsewhere in the building and someone's television on too loud. The grandmother clock bonged every fifteen minutes just a few feet from her head. At four in the morning she got up and turned on the light. The rug looked as if someone had been sick on it, all beige with brown swirls. And her things closed in around her. She'd never lived in just one room. The bed in an alcove, the clock, table, chair, television set, china closet, chests lined up along the walls. She wasn't used to having everything in view. Why had she let her daughter talk her into this move? It was a terrible mistake. She knew she'd never be able to stand the rug.

She went into the bathroom, took off her nightgown, and turned on the shower. How could she not have noticed that the bathroom was a dark little hole without a window? She'd never had a bathroom without a window. She felt closed in and claustrophobic. There was plenty of hot water, though. And she was grateful for the handbar beside the shower. And the alarm bell nearby in case she fell. She was an old woman now, old women fell and broke their hips and soon you read their names on the obituary page.

She sat in the chair in her bathrobe until she felt cold, then she got dressed and went down to the dining room. Cereal, milk, and juice were always available. It was five-thirty in the morning but she was not the only one in the dining room. The old people got up early, she soon learned. She took her bran flakes and orange juice to a table by the window and waited for the sun to come up. She felt like going back to bed but she knew she'd never get back to sleep.

She finished the orange juice and made herself a cup of tea. The sky was turning light. It looked like another hot day. Thank heaven for the air conditioning. She'd always suffered from the heat. Traveling in the old days before cars had air conditioning, they'd had to stop every hour so she could bathe her face and neck in cool water. Her house, the lovely house among the trees, kept cool in summer with just fans. Or else she closed it during the day to keep the cool night air inside.

The dining room was filling up. A woman she knew from her service club beckoned to her. She shook her head and continued to stare out the window. The rose garden outside the windows looked well tended. She took her cup of tea to a bench among the flowers and sat and enjoyed the sweet smell. She was afraid of meeting all these new people but she knew she could not stay by herself forever. A man came into the garden carrying pruning shears and a basket. He nodded at her and she nodded back. The man cut enough roses for several bouquets and left her alone again. Her tea was cold. She sighed and

went back into the dining room, put her cup on the counter next to the sink, and returned to her room. She spent the day watching television.

She skipped lunch, but by evening hunger forced her downstairs to find something to eat. Once again, the dining room was full. The menu featured roast chicken and mashed potatoes. She sat in her assigned seat near the fireplace. This will be nice in winter, she thought. Her club acquaintance walked over to her table. "Why don't you join us, Edythe?" she said.

She picked up her plate and utensils and moved to Gladys's group. Everyone was talking about the afternoon's trip to town. She listened and was glad they didn't expect her to say much. "You must be sure and come along next week," said Gladys. "We go to town every Wednesday." She said she would mark it on her calendar. "No need," said Gladys. "They put flyers up everywhere." She had been too preoccupied with the newness of everything to notice.

She tried hard to adjust to her new life. She traveled with the group on a bus trip to a nearby farm, then on an outing downstate to a wild-animal park. But a few weeks later she mixed up the times, got downstairs after the bus had left, and never signed up for another trip. She enjoyed her meals though she hated the way the kitchen overcooked the vegetables. Especially asparagus. They turned it to mush, she could hardly swallow it even though she loved asparagus.

She tried to use the washer and dryer, which were free, but they were different from the ones she'd had at home and she couldn't figure them out. No one offered to help her and she didn't like to ask. She washed her underwear by hand and hung it in the bathroom. The maid came to vacuum and change the sheets and towels once a week, so she really didn't need to use the washing machines. Her clothes didn't get dirty. Most of the time she sat in her apartment. Once a week to the hairdresser downstairs, once a week to Bible study, twice a week to exercise class. All they did was toss a ball and lift one-pound weights, which didn't make her perspire. Sometimes a bit of food dripped onto

her sweater but either she didn't notice it or she dabbed it off with the handkerchief she always carried in her sleeve.

She began to wake up in the middle of the night and have no idea what time it was. "I couldn't tell if it was night or day," she told her daughter over the phone. "Why didn't you look out the window?" her daughter said. She didn't have an answer, just that it hadn't occurred to her at the time.

Her daughter took her to the doctor. He prescribed an antidepressant and a sleeping pill, plus medication to lower her blood pressure and a diuretic for her swollen ankles. The doctor was a nice young man. She'd read his name in the paper in the births column. "I understand you have a new baby boy," she told him, smiling ingratiatingly, and he said he was surprised she knew. He seemed tired, she thought. No wonder, with a new baby. She and her daughter went to the pharmacy to fill the prescriptions. While they were there her daughter bought her a handsome black cane. "You're walking tilted, Mother," she said.

The next day she left the cane in the dining room and fretted until the next meal, when she found it still lying on the floor next to her chair. She had new table partners. The husband was hard of hearing and difficult to hold a conversation with, he misunderstood so much. But he was a whiz at taking public transportation. He offered to show her the ropes but she felt uneasy about going off on her own. Besides, she had all that medicine to worry about. The nurse had given her a plastic container with a separate box for each day of the week. She refilled the boxes faithfully as soon as she took the pills, but then it was hard to tell which pills she hadn't taken yet. It was all so confusing. She got bills from Medicare that said they weren't bills, and bills from the doctor, and bills from her insurance company, and other papers she didn't understand. She made notes to herself, important phone numbers, things to do, which pills to take in the morning and which in the evening, and left them everywhere in the apartment. But she still felt

confused. She cleaned out her clothes closet and put the clothes still on hangers in the cedar chest.

She started taking sponge baths. She was afraid to step over the edge of the tub into the shower, and besides, the water from the shower hurt her skin. She looked at her hands. The skin was transparent. There was barely anything holding her body together.

She tried to turn on the television but the buttons on the remote control were too small and sometimes she hit the mute button by mistake and thought the set was broken until someone came in and showed her what had happened. She hoarded apples and crackers from the dining room, to eat in case she got hungry in the night. She stayed in her apartment in the morning and read the paper and drank tea and made toast rather than going to the dining room. She sometimes found herself in the hall not knowing what floor she was on, or which direction her apartment was. She began to be afraid to go down to dinner, for fear she couldn't find her way back. She didn't feel at home, it was as if she was a stranger in a foreign country, things that should have seemed familiar just didn't.

She knocked on her neighbor's door late at night. "I need help," she said, and the neighbor came and sat with her awhile. She couldn't explain what she needed help with, and the neighbor finally said she had to go to bed and left. She knew something was wrong, but she didn't know what it was.

She called her daughter. "I think I'm losing my mind, honey," she said. Her daughter made an appointment with a new doctor. "When did your hand start shaking like that?" said her daughter when she came to take her to the appointment. "I don't know, not long ago," she said.

The new doctor said she didn't need so much medicine and stopped everything but the blood pressure medicine. Her ankles continued to swell and the palsy in her hand continued. Her daughter decided she needed more care. "Not a nursing home," she said. Assisted living they

called it. The movers came again and took most of her things in boxes to storage. She started a new life in a small room with a bed, a dresser, an easy chair, a lamp, and large photos of her children that she had hand-colored herself. After she graduated from high school she had had a job at a studio tinting black-and-white photographs. That was when she was sixteen, before color film was available. Now all her clothes had to be marked in indelible ink with her name, even her stockings and the bottoms of her shoes.

Her new home was small and the hallway ran in a circle, with no dead ends, so she didn't have to worry about getting lost. The meals weren't as good as at the retirement home, and they served dinner at four in the afternoon, which made a long evening with nothing to do. She sat in her chair and read and she understood the plots, so part of her mind was still good. It took her an hour to get ready for bed, and she still woke up in the middle of the night. But when she tried to get dressed at two in the morning, one of the aides would tell her it wasn't time to get up, to go back to bed, and she did. It was nice not to have to think so much, not to have to make decisions and worry about things.

One night she went to her room after dinner and a man followed her and began spraying her head with water. She sat in the dark and put up with it awhile, then she turned on the light and looked behind her. The man wasn't there. Sometimes she had other visitors during the night while she was in bed. They opened and shut the window and poked around in her closet, doing whatever they wanted to do. After a while she would politely ask them to leave and they would.

Perhaps she was losing her mind after all. Perhaps that was why she was here. She hated to ask anyone, though. The visitors didn't seem to come into her room to hurt her. Maybe they wanted company, too. Most of the other residents were too sick to carry on a conversation with. She might try talking to the visitors. She didn't think she'd tell her daughter or the doctor about them, though. She was doing well, the doctor told her.

The woman across the hall turned ninety-seven. Edythe wondered how much longer she would live. She hoped it wouldn't be to a hundred. But it might be. So many people lived that long nowadays, the President didn't even send congratulatory cards anymore. That's a pity, she thought. A hundred years is still a long time. I'd like a card from the President if I live that long.

2003

Annie's Dog

Every year on the day after Thanksgiving, Annie got out her tools and started her Christmas cards. Except for the year after her first divorce and the year her dog died, she had hand-made her Christmas cards every year for nearly thirty years. The cards usually featured a generic Christmas scene, a decorated tree with presents piled underneath or a fireplace with stockings hung on the mantelpiece and a dog asleep in front of a roaring fire. Some years she added a stylized version of herself or a Santa Claus.

Annie would carve the scene in reverse on a tile block, using various grades of block-cutting tools, then print it as many times as she had names on her list, using the finest handmade white paper she could afford. For contrast, she usually pasted the prints on dark construction paper, which she signed and addressed in white ink. Her handwriting had hardly changed since she was in grade school. The letters were round and loopy, like those of a happy, innocent ten-year-old, and she still made circles over her i's. Annie didn't write like a woman who had been married three times, but she had.

She put down her cutter and stared out the window. She lived by the ocean, in the house she and her third husband had remodeled south of Los Angeles, and the room where she was working had a view of the Pacific. It was a drizzly Wednesday and no one could be seen on the sand or in the water. The house was only a few miles from the apartment where she and her first husband had lived, in then-sleepy Venice. In those days, she had been proud of her smallest housewifely

accomplishment, such as preparing fresh green beans. She always handpicked every bean from the pile in the supermarket, choosing only the thinnest, firmest vegetables. She knew that people who simply grabbed a handful of beans and stuffed them into a plastic bag would end up with old, tough beans they would have to throw out. The Annie of those days was thin and brown from the sun and wore her hair straight and long. Annie was no longer thin but her hair was still long, though it had mostly turned to gray and had a tendency to frizz, especially on days like today.

Jack, her first husband, had been her boyfriend in college. They met at a sorority-fraternity party and began sleeping together immediately. After graduation, they were married in Annie's family's backyard. Jack had liked her well enough, especially when they lived at the beach and shared their life with friends from the neighborhood, friends for whom Annie made her beans and with whom she laughed at Jack's jokes. Many of the jokes were at Annie's expense, but she pretended not to mind. Eventually she told Jack the jokes hurt her, and he decided she wasn't so much fun to be with after all. He began staying out late or not coming home at all. Annie's cheerful outlook clouded over. This wasn't the way things were supposed to turn out. More out of confusion than passion, Annie had an affair with one of their neighbors, and when Jack found out, he filed for a dissolution of marriage.

Annie went back to school and got a teaching certificate and found a job in a small town north of San Francisco. She taught second grade and lived in a rented house in the woods. To keep herself busy when she wasn't at work, she bought a loom and began weaving the cloth with which she covered her furniture and windows. She taught herself to crochet and made pillow covers for presents and skirts for herself to wear. Flowerpots in macramé slings hung from her ceilings, and the walls were decorated with macramé hangings and "paintings" made of yarn. Annie learned to make bread and included her original recipe for brown bread made with molasses in her Christmas cards her second year there.

Her third spring in the woods, a neighbor's purebred bitch was impregnated by a stray, and the neighbor put an ad in the general store offering the puppies. Annie walked down the road to look at them. There were three females and two males. All but one of the puppies tumbled over themselves to see Annie. It was the little male in the corner by himself who caught her heart. He was black with white feet and a white blaze on his face. Annie loved him instantly and carried him home in her arms. She named him Henry, after Thoreau, her favorite writer.

Henry grew into a wistful, gangly beast. Annie took him everywhere with her. She was delighted to have a companion who took such joy in life. Later she realized what a relief it was to be with a creature that could not criticize her. That fall, Annie erected a pasture fence around the house so it would be safe to leave Henry outside when she went to work. But when he was two years old and fully grown, the dog discovered that he could push on the top of the fence until it gave enough for him to jump over. One day Henry arrived home in the back of a pickup truck. A man of about thirty jumped out of the cab and knocked on Annie's door.

"I think I've got your dog," he said when she answered.

"Oh thank you, that's Henry," said Annie. "He's learned how to jump the fence, I'm afraid."

The man opened the back of the pickup and Henry ran into the house. The man gazed at Annie.

"Mind if I have a look around?" he said. "I might be able to fix your fence problem."

Annie said fine and the man walked around the fence, pulling on it from time to time. "It needs tightening is all. Did you string it up yourself?"

Annie nodded. "What would it cost to fix?" she asked. She had noticed a toolbox in the back of the pickup.

"Not much," said the man. "My name's Frank, by the way. Frank Lorenzo." He stuck out his hand. "I'll be by on Saturday, all right?"

"Fine," said Annie. "I'm Annie Wilkinson. And thanks. "

Frank had fixed the fence and Annie had made him dinner and soon his truck was parked more or less permanently in front of her house. They married the next January, after Annie found that she was pregnant. Frank talked to their landlord and arranged to buy the house. It had only one bedroom, so Frank tore out a wall and built another bedroom onto the back. When the room was finished, Frank built a crib and Annie made baby clothes and knitted baby booties and crocheted baby blankets. The baby was born on a hot Sunday in July. They named her Isabelle.

Annie breast-fed Isabelle faithfully. She worried at first that Henry would be jealous. She had read about dogs who had served as surrogate children to childless parents attacking a new baby when the parents weren't around. But she soon saw that she had worried for nothing. When visitors came to see the baby, Henry stood by watchfully. When Isabelle graduated to crawling, Henry became her best friend and playmate. He didn't seem to mind when the baby pulled his feathery tail or poked her fingers into his ears. She squealed with delight when Henry licked her face, and the dog wagged his tail happily when she kissed him on the nose. When Isabelle began to walk, she would put Henry's leash on and lead the dog around the house and yard. One of the first words Isabelle learned was "sit," which she delighted in addressing to Henry on their walks around the house. He seemed equally as delighted to obey Isabelle.

It wasn't Henry who was jealous of the baby. It was Frank. At first, Annie didn't realize it. Then she noticed how Frank always seemed to want sex when Annie was feeding or changing the baby. He complained that Annie went on breast-feeding too long: "You're ruining your figure," he said. "You want your tits to hang down to your belly?" He refused to photograph Annie and the baby. When Annie asked a fellow teacher to take pictures, Frank scoffed at them as Annie's "Madonna and child" photos.

Frank started insisting that Annie serve only fresh food. He refused to eat leftovers. "Feed it to the dog," he said. Or anything frozen, unless it was ice cream. He wanted everything fresh, "like Mamma made," he said. Frank was from a large Italian family on the East Coast. Finally he refused to eat anything that came out of a package or a box, including pasta. He wouldn't even allow pasta imported from Italy in the house. Annie learned to make pasta by hand, spent hours every day shopping for food, then chopping, roasting, baking, boiling, and otherwise preparing their meals. She had the baby with her at all times. Frank would not allow Annie to hire a helper, not even a babysitter.

It was Annie's doctor who finally intervened. Annie was too exhausted to argue with Frank anymore. Finally she was too exhausted to get out of bed. Frank yelled at her but she simply could not get up. Frank angrily drove Annie to the doctor, who diagnosed malnutrition, dehydration, and exhaustion, and admitted her to the hospital "at least overnight," for rehydration and observation. "What about Isabelle?" said Annie. The doctor agreed to admit the baby also. "When a nursing mother is malnourished, it can affect her milk," the doctor told Frank. He was skeptical but agreed to the arrangement. Annie's doctor insisted that she talk to a therapist before going home.

The therapist, Dr. Oswald, said he wanted to see the couple together, but Annie doubted that Frank would come with her. Dr. Oswald said she was endangering both herself and her baby by giving in to Frank's unreasonable demands. Annie knew the doctor was right. She must pull herself together and confront Frank. The doctor warned her that it was impossible to predict how Frank might react to such a confrontation, and urged her to do it in a joint therapy session. Dr. Oswald would act as mediator. It was important for Annie to protect herself, he said.

Annie lay in the hospital bed and stared out the window. She tried to ignore the noises from the other patients, a gurgling snore

from one, sighs and moans from another, throat-clearing and teeth-gnashing from the others. She was used to sleeping in complete darkness, and the hospital was always lit, day or night. How had she gotten herself into another mess with a man? she asked herself, unable to sleep in the bright light. What had she done to change Frank so much? In their meetings, Dr. Oswald assured her that it wasn't anything she had done. The situation with the baby had brought out a problem of Frank's that would be difficult to solve without his help. Annie accepted this explanation, but she doubted that she could continue to live with Frank, even if he changed his behavior. It was as if he had become a different person. No, it was as if a curtain had been raised on Frank's secret self, a cauldron of resentment and hatred that Annie hadn't suspected but that appalled and frightened her.

To Annie's surprise, Frank finally agreed to join her at Dr. Oswald's office. At first he denied that he felt hostile toward Annie, but then he admitted that he felt she had neglected him after the baby came and was trying everything he could think of to direct her attention toward him and his needs. "It's wrong," said Frank, "I know it's wrong. I love the baby, Annie's wonderful with Isabelle." He agreed to continue therapy with Annie. Life became more like it was before the baby was born. But Annie was careful with birth control. She was wary of Frank, and never quite trusted him again. She felt watchful, the way Henry had watched over the newborn Isabelle when strangers approached.

Finally, after seven years, Annie allowed herself to become pregnant again. Frank brought out the old crib and refinished it. They bought a pair of bunkbeds for the children's bedroom and covered the floor with indoor-outdoor carpeting. Annie started talking to Frank early in her pregnancy, trying to stave off another attack of his jealousy. Frank reassured her that he was "fine with it," and he reinforced his words with affection and kindness toward Annie. She basked in happiness. Being pregnant suited her, she realized, the hormones made

her calm, even placid. Frank would be no problem. She looked forward to completing her family.

Meanwhile, eleven-year-old Henry had developed a weakness in his hindquarters. He wobbled when he walked and it was difficult for him to get up once he lay down. Dr. Bernstein, the vet, diagnosed hip dysplasia. "It's very common in large breeds," he told Annie. "Poor Henry," said Annie. "Can you do anything?" Dr. Bernstein prescribed cortisone shots, which required a weekly visit to his office. When Annie's pregnancy became too advanced for that, the vet showed her how to administer the shots herself. Frank offered to take Henry in each week but Annie said she preferred to take care of him herself. Frank was surprised but didn't insist. Annie was surprised too, but she had acted on instinct. Henry had always been her dog, not theirs. Henry accepted Frank but it was Annie he waited for by the door, Annie he allowed to comb the tangles out of his fur or clean his ears.

It pained Annie to see Henry struggle to walk, struggle to get up. She put her arms around his neck and cried into his handsome, black-and-white ruff. She cried while she brushed his coat, paying special attention to the area between his stomach and his hip, where he shed the worst, and turning him over onto his back to gently brush the hair on his stomach. "Henry, my best boy," she cried, and kissed him on the nose. He licked her wet cheeks. The animal and the woman seemed in perfect sympathy.

One afternoon, Annie woke from her nap and found that Henry was gone. She didn't see how he could have gotten over the fence with his bad hips, but she called and called and the dog didn't come. By the time Frank came home, Annie was frantic. She asked Frank if he'd seen Henry. Annie didn't like the way Frank's eyes shifted to the side. "Do you know where Henry is?" she said. Frank shrugged. "Where is he?" Annie said. Frank looked away. "I took him to the vet," he said. Annie waited. "I had him put to sleep," said Frank. "It was for the best."

To Annie, it was as if Frank had kicked her in the stomach. "How could you do it without me?" Annie screamed. Henry was her dog. "I had him almost his whole life. This was my decision, not yours." Annie wept and shut herself in the bedroom. How could she live with Frank after this? He had tortured her their entire married life, he had the heart of a sadist, she knew it now. She breathed deeply, afraid of Frank, afraid her pain would send her into labor. Somehow she fell asleep.

When she woke up, it was morning. Frank was gone. Annie fed Isabelle and got her ready for school. Then she phoned Dr. Bernstein. He was very apologetic. "I wanted to call you, but Frank said not to, that you had agreed to put Henry down," he said. "Do you still have Henry's body?" said Annie. Dr. Bernstein said it was in the freezer, but that it would be better if she didn't see it.

"I want him cremated, I want his ashes," said Annie. He would arrange it, it would cost a hundred dollars, Dr. Bernstein said. Annie said she would send a check. Two weeks later, the postman delivered a square box. Annie weighed it. Nine ounces, almost exactly what Henry had weighed when she brought him home for the first time. She hid the ashes in the back of her closet, where Frank never looked. Then she called Dr. Oswald and made an appointment to talk about divorcing Frank. Then she called the ambulance. She had gone into labor. The baby was a boy. She named him Matthew.

Dr. Oswald put Annie in touch with a lawyer, who arranged a restraining order against Frank. Annie knew that would not keep him away if he wished to harm her or the children. She called her parents in Los Angeles and asked for their help. They arrived with a moving van and took her, Isabelle, and Matthew home with them. When Annie was able, she found another teaching job and bought the house at the beach. One of the teachers at the school was a Mexican-American man. Annie and Guillermo hit it off right away, Isabelle and Matthew loved him, and after two years Guillermo and Annie were married.

Guillermo had not a speck of cruelty in his nature. He liked to argue, but it was like a game to him, and he didn't play dirty. It seemed so mysterious to Annie, so unexpected to be happy, but she was. When she and Guillermo remodeled the kitchen, she buried Henry's ashes under the floor.

Annie smoothed down her hair, took up her cutter and linoleum block, and got back to her carving. This year, she was picturing Guillermo on her Christmas card, with a dog very like Henry at his feet, in front of the fireplace, and two children curled up next to him. She didn't care if her sophisticated friends found it sentimental.

2001

The Man Who Loved His Children

"How Adam would love this!" said Randy as he stomped on the brake and stretched his head and shoulders over the steering wheel to stare out the windshield. Three immense snow-covered peaks rose in front of him, miles away but seemingly just beyond reach. If only he could share this beauty with his children. As always when he was away from them, Randy missed Adam, almost seven, and Sophie, just turned three, though he had left them at his mother's only hours earlier. The sky was cloudless, the atmosphere vibrated with light and color, the deep blue of the sky and the blazing white of the volcanoes. The volcanoes dwarfed everything.

Randy shifted his foot from the brake to the accelerator and resumed the slow drive up the narrow mountain road. From the passenger seat, his wife, Karin, gazed at the scenery in silence. Her eyes focused not on the shining volcanoes but on the landscape beneath them. In all directions, the land was rigid, black. A barren wasteland of hills, valleys, and flatlands, made of black lava. All was dead, burnt, scarred. One or two bleached, skeletal trees broke the surface, bleak and forlorn. A lone hawk glided in the thermals above.

Randy and Karin Quist were on their way to a wedding on the other side of the mountains. The Quists had been married ten years, since their last year in graduate school. They were drawn together when they discovered they were born on the same day of the same year. Twins, they called themselves, though nobody would say they looked like twins. Randy was tall and blond, his legs lanky and his body thin

like a long-distance runner's. Karin was short and plump, her long dark hair exploding in kinks and curls around her pale freckled face.

Randy's words reverberated in Karin's ears, as if amplified by the thin air: "How Adam would love this." She studied her husband's profile. A smile played at the corner of his mouth. Karin knew he was thinking of the children. He always thinks of the children, she thought. Only of them. A pain passed under her ribs. When she and Randy met, they had seen themselves as spiritual as well as temporal twins.

Karin turned in her seat, looked straight at Randy, and took a deep breath. The air that filled her lungs was pure and clean and it gave her courage. She took another breath. "You love Adam and Sophie too much," she said. Randy jerked the wheel. The car swerved left across the road and grazed the guardrail. Randy wrenched the wheel to the right and brought the car under control.

"What do you mean?" he said. But he knew what Karin said was the truth. Yes, he loved Sophie and Adam to distraction. Karin, well, she was his partner and he would tell you if you asked that he respected her intelligence and her mothering skills. But his love for her seemed to have evaporated in the white heat of his love for his children. He did not even think of them as their children. They were his, and he ached with missing them every moment he was away from them.

"Stop the car before you kill us both," said Karin. Randy pulled over and husband and wife faced each other. "What do you mean?" repeated Randy. Karin's skin was so pale her freckles stood out like moles. "I mean," she said, then fell silent. After a few seconds, she continued: "I mean you love the children too much. And me too little."

Randy had been holding his breath and let it out in a rush. Now it was said. Now the truth was out. The wasteland of their marriage was exposed. What would happen now? What about the children? He knew women who said they didn't realize how much they could love someone until they had a child, but he was the only man he knew who felt that way. Or maybe it was just that men didn't talk about such things.

On Friday he had called home from the office. "Put Sophie on the line," he told Karin. He waited impatiently for the familiar small voice, but when it came: "Hi, Daddy," his throat swelled so he could barely speak. "Can we ride bikes when you get home?" said Sophie. Randy told her they would take a long ride on Saturday. "Okay, Daddy." Sophie put the phone down and went to get Adam.

Randy could not get over how gifted his son was, how quick to learn, how extraordinarily focused he was, more than most adults. Adam had all the earmarks of genius, Randy was certain. He smiled as Adam's voice rushed out through the receiver: "Dad, you know that bird's nest we found in the maple tree? Well, I was looking at it and realized that it's round, I mean, it's not square or oblong or some other shape, but round. Why was that? And it occurred to me that round was not only good to hold eggs, but maybe it's easier to build. I mean, no corners, nothing to square off. So I'm building a bunch of other shapes of nests, to test my theory. You ought to see, some of them are pretty neat."

Adam paused for breath and Randy jumped into the conversation. "I'm really impressed, son, it sounds like you're doing some super thinking. I'll have a look when I get home. Maybe we can work on it together." Adam was silent. Randy knew Adam preferred to work on his projects by himself but was too polite to say so. "Or maybe I'll just watch my young genius at work," Randy said.

"Oh, no, Dad, we can build nest shapes together," said Adam. "It's just that I want to reach my conclusions as soon as possible."

That night, Randy went upstairs to tuck in Sophie and read her a story. Sophie had memorized most of *The Cat in the Hat* but liked to pretend she could read it herself. "Let me, Daddy," she would say, and Randy would be quiet while she continued with the story. Randy inhaled the sweet smell of his daughter's hair when he reached over to turn the page. "Your turn now," said Sophie, and he read on. Sophie leaned her blonde head against his arm and fell asleep. He lay down next to her, just for a minute.

When he woke up, his watch read five o'clock and his neck was stiff. He got up carefully, so as not to wake Sophie, and went into the hall. He decided not to wake Karin, went downstairs and made breakfast, found a clean but unironed shirt in the laundry basket, and drove to the office. He was known for getting to work well before everyone else. Also for his rumpled shirts.

On Saturday, Randy walked his mountain bike around the neighborhood while Sophie pedaled her tricycle furiously beside him. Then he took a long, proper ride with Adam, who could almost keep up with him on his training bike. Somehow the ability to ride a bicycle signified to Randy not only physical skill but also mental and emotional strength, and it made him proud to see his healthy, remarkable children riding beside him. Being with the children completely occupied his mind. How could people find children boring? Randy had no desire to read, to see films, even to go to a restaurant for dinner, unless Adam and Sophie went along.

"Let's get out of the car," Randy said to Karin. The lava beds stretched as far as he could see. It was hard to imagine those inert black acres as boiling fields of red-hot, spitting liquid, with boulders shooting out at hundreds of miles an hour. The volcanoes, the source of such burning violence, rose cold and quiet now, their covering of snow too bright to look at without sunglasses. The peaks seemed closer than they really were, perhaps an optical effect of the altitude. One stood alone to the north, the other two huddled together farther south. The road was near the summit of the pass, over five thousand feet in the air. The wind blew hard across the bare black rock and made a sound almost like music.

Karin's hair flew into her eyes and she had to hold it back with both hands. The wind made it even thicker and curlier than usual. A

few hundred yards ahead a short trail led to an observation tower. "Let's walk," said Randy. Karin started up the road ahead of him, pulling her hair out of her eyes. Randy wondered why she didn't have a ribbon, or a hat. He felt in his pockets for a rubber band. All he had was a stick of gum. He caught up with Karin.

"You should have brought a hat," he said. Karin jerked her head and flung words like poison arrows back at him: "Don't presume to criticize me."

They climbed to the top of the tower in silence. It was round and built of chunks of lava, rising out of the black wilderness like a medieval watchtower. Instead of arrow-holes the tower had square holes at irregular intervals in the wall, labeled with the name of the volcanic peak framed by each hole. The farthest was in the next state. Only on rare clear days like today could you see a mountain through every viewhole.

Karin moved from view to view without speaking. Other tourists arrived, panting from the climb. Karin went outside and climbed to the top of the tower. Randy followed. He touched her arm. "What do you want me to do?" he said. "I don't know," said Karin. "I can't make you love me."

"It's not that I don't love you," said Randy.

"Don't," said Karin. "What I said is the truth and you know it." Randy sat on a stone bench and stared at the nearest mountain peak. The snow dazzled his eyes until they hurt. He felt tears running down his cheeks and realized he had left his sunglasses inside the tower. He went back and fetched them, walked down from the tower, and waited in the car for Karin.

She opened the passenger door and got in. "I don't feel like going to a wedding," she said. Randy turned the car around and they drove back down the mountain.

The air in the valley was dense, choked with fog, impure. Randy felt his spirits deflate, away from the clean brilliance of the mountain air. "Do you want a divorce?" he said as they pulled into his mother's

driveway. "I don't know," said Karin. "Why should I be the one to decide, anyway?"

She was back in a few minutes with Adam and Sophie. Randy longed to embrace the children but merely gave them each a kiss as they climbed into the back seat. Karin watched him, her lips pinched tight. The children were quieter than usual on the drive home.

Finally Adam spoke. "Grandma was going to make waffles." "Fine," said Karin, "we'll make waffles." Randy stopped the car in front of a convenience store, went inside, and came back with a small package. "What is it?" said Adam. "Sausages," answered Randy. "You're not serious," said Karin. "I like sausages with my waffles," said Randy.

"What are sausages?" said Adam. "Disgusting pieces of animal they scrape off the floor of the abattoir," said Karin. "What's a bat war?" said Adam. "Never mind," said Randy. "But . . . ," said Adam. Karin glared at the boy and he was quiet.

They arrived home in silence. Karin found the waffle iron and she and the children mixed the batter and cooked the waffles. Adam played with his food, spinning the waffles in the syrup while sneaking looks out the window at Randy. Karin had made him cook his sausages on the barbecue and eat them in the backyard.

Karin told Adam to finish his dinner. "I'm not hungry anymore," he said. "Fine, you're excused. Get ready for bed," Karin said. "Can I tell Dad goodnight?" Karin nodded. Adam went outside, gave Randy a kiss, and disappeared upstairs.

After both children were in bed, Randy came inside. His stomach was in knots. The sausages had tasted delicious but his system wasn't used to animal fat and he was beginning to feel ill. Karin finished cleaning the waffle iron and sat down at the kitchen table. "If we divorce I'll take custody of them," she said. "Don't imagine that I'll let you have them."

"Do you want a divorce or don't you?" said Randy. Karin stared at her hands and twisted her wedding ring, then looked at Randy. "Do you think you could ever love me again?" she said.

Randy dropped his eyes.

"I don't know if I can accept it," Karin said.

Randy looked at Karin. Her gaze focused on a spot somewhere in the yard, behind Randy's back, as if she could see through him to a screen where one of her favorite movies was playing and she was trying to remember the dialogue. And then Randy was afraid. His breath caught and his heart began to pound. He understood what would happen.

He would lose the children. Karin would move away and take Sophie and Adam with her and his life would be over. The children would grow up without him. They would resent him for divorcing their mother. Karin would poison their minds against him, convince them he was bad. He would try to see them and she would stop him. Or he would see them occasionally. Maybe they would visit one weekend a month, then that would become too difficult and the time between visits would stretch longer and longer. Karin would remarry and Sophie and Adam would have a new father. Randy's life would be over. His heart would be broken, he would be a walking dead man.

Something burst inside his chest and the bile rose into his throat, and he rushed outside to the maple tree. He hung onto the tree trunk and spewed up the pieces of his shattered heart along with undigested sausages and waffles. He felt himself grow old, his skin drying out and his hair turning thin and wispy. He wondered why his teeth did not fall out, why he did not spit them out with the last gobbets of vomit.

He heaved again, as if to disgorge his entire insides onto the grass. The labels on a chart he'd had to memorize once for biology class came into his mind—trachea, esophagus, diaphragm, vena cava, aorta, ventricles, pulmonary arteries, pleura, lungs, alveoli, liver, gallbladder, appendix, duodenum, colon, ileum, jejunum, Islets of Langerhans, spleen, prostate, ureter. He was like a volcano come to life, spewing up the earth's hot insides.

In an instant the landscape changed and he was overflowing with water. He felt he could cry forever. What surprised him was that

the more his tears flowed, the more filled with resolve he felt. He was not empty, he was not without resources. He was a man of strength. He would not let it happen, he would not let Karin have the children. He would fight her. Whatever it took to keep Adam and Sophie, he would do it. He loved the children too much to let them go. He would take Karin to court. If that failed, he would steal the children and take them into hiding, India, Kazakhstan, Borneo, to the ends of the earth if necessary.

He found the outdoor faucet in the darkness, turned on the water, hosed himself off, and walked into the kitchen. Karin handed him a towel. "I told you sausages were disgusting," she said.

Randy toweled his hair dry and dabbed at his clothes. He needed to see the children, to watch the slow up-and-down motion of their sleeping, breathing bodies. As he walked toward the stairs, Karin said, "We need to talk more." Randy said he'd sleep on the couch.

"You act as if it's all settled," said Karin.

"It is," he said. "You're not getting them."

Randy climbed the stairs and went into the children's room. Sophie clutched her teddy bear. Adam turned over in his sleep and kicked his covers off and Randy tucked him in again. A wave of uncertainty hit him. Could he take care of Adam and Sophie by himself? Did he know how to be both father and mother?

In the dark he flexed his narrow shoulders, as if by willpower his shoulder blades would grow and spread over his children like the wings of a giant condor. He saw Adam's bird's nests on the dresser. One was lined with soft down, another with bits of paper. He would spread his wings over his children, shelter them, keep them safe and warm. He would protect them from attack, keep them clean, raise them to be strong and healthy. His role was clear. He was their father.

He went downstairs and made up a bed on the couch. Then he turned on the television. It was a nature program. A male penguin sat on a nest, keeping his chicks warm while his mate looked for food. The

announcer said the male did not eat while he sat, and that he would lose up to half his body fat in the process. Randy smiled ruefully. He himself had only three percent body fat. But he knew how the male penguin felt. He was a father. If he got off the nest, his chicks would freeze. He would stay where they needed him as long as necessary. Randy turned off the television and pulled up the covers. It was good to know who you were, he thought, then fell asleep.

In his dream, he ran to the children's room. Adam's bird's nests were still on the dresser, but the drawers underneath were empty and the only thing hanging in the closet was the snowsuit Randy had bought for Sophie last Christmas. He ran into the bedroom he shared with Karin. Her side of the closet was bare, her dresser drawers pillaged. They were gone. Karin had done it. She had stolen the children and left him.

Randy woke in a sweat. He went upstairs and into the children's room. They were sleeping peacefully. Trembling, Randy kissed them each on the head, then stumbled into the bathroom. He stared at his face in the mirror over the sink, remembering the resolve that had filled him earlier. He waited for it to return. He had never felt such fear.

He sat on the lid of the toilet for a while, staring at the pattern in the tile floor. It was an old house and the small hexagonal tiles in the bathroom were real glazed clay, not vinyl, set by a workman's hand eighty years earlier. He studied the floor until he understood the pattern. White tiles, then every twelfth one a dark green, whether you counted diagonally or vertically. A common pattern, but someone had to have worked it out.

The regularity and order of the tiles were soothing and cleared Randy's mind. He checked the children's room again. Everything was as it should be. He looked at his watch. It was three-thirty. He dressed and got his mountain bike out of the garage, put on his helmet, and rode furiously down the hill toward the river.

He crossed the drawbridge over the river and raced along the highway, then shot into the hills where the going was rough and steep.

He shifted into the lowest gear and started to sweat. Trails ran for miles through the forest. He heard an owl. Twice he had to brake to avoid a raccoon crossing the trail. Toward dawn, he saw a doe and her two fawns drinking from a stream. They raised their heads and flicked their ears as he rode by. Randy stopped the bike and stood still, watching the deer. Emotions skittered across his belly like spider legs. The doe was beautiful, with great brown eyes. The fawns still had their spots. Randy heard himself moan. The sound startled the deer and they crashed off through the brush. Don't run away, thought Randy. Tears streamed down his face. I didn't mean to frighten you.

Randy rode to the end of the trail, until the forest preserve ran out and the expensive new subdivisions began. He turned the bike around and rode toward home along a different trail. As he coasted down the hill toward the river, the sun came up behind the mountains in the distance. He thought he could see the peaks of the three volcanoes. But surely they were much farther south.

When he got home, the odometer on his bike read fifty-three miles. It was full daylight and Karin was up, drinking coffee at the kitchen table.

"We should talk," said Karin.

Randy sat down opposite his wife. "I saw a family of deer on the trail," he said. "A doe and two fawns." The hairs stood up on his arms. He realized that his feelings for his wife had awakened, as when someone stirs a fire banked in ashes. "The deer made me think of you. It was like seeing you and the children on the trail in front of me. And I scared them away."

"You didn't scare me away," said Karin. "Pushed, maybe."

Randy remembered how he had felt riding his bike, fast, along the highway. "No, I've been running away. I don't know why."

He was silent. He realized how much of himself he saw in his children. Maybe that was it. Maybe he longed to be too much like his children, maybe he had only partly grown up. Then he remembered the penguin parents. One to protect, the other to feed.

"I think they need both of us," Randy said.

"You mean both of us living here in the same house together?" said Karin.

"No," said Randy. "I mean being truly together. The way we were at the beginning."

He had a vision of Karin sitting naked in front of the fireplace in their first apartment, holding out a glass of wine to him. He reached for her hand.

"You've been running away from me for a long time," she said.

Randy breathed deeply, then smiled at Karin. "Yes," he said. "I was running this morning. But I was lucky. The deer stopped me."

Karin squeezed his hand.

2002

AJIJIC

Night had fallen by the time the bus from Guadalajara arrived at the small cobblestone plaza, paused to deposit two passengers, and rattled on its way again. One of the passengers was a tall man with a walleye. The other was a girl. The two of them stood where the bus had left them, straining to see in the dim light of a single bulb that hung above the plaza's rough stones and ragged trees. The man kept apart from the girl, an army surplus pack at his feet.

The girl put her satchel down and tied the sleeves of her black sweater tighter around her waist. She felt the back of her skirt with one hand to see if the sweater still covered the menstrual stain. It embarrassed her to have blood on her clothes, but none of the bus stations between Tijuana and Guadalajara had had water in the restrooms, so she hadn't been able to wash it out. She hoped Emily's bathroom worked.

Yellow light and women's voices spilled out the open doors of the stucco buildings that edged two sides of the plaza. Men walked in and out the doors or sat on chairs tipped back against the walls under the wide eaves. The girl knew from their white hats that the men were there, but she could scarcely see their faces in the darkness and the shadow of the eaves. You had to stand still and let your eyes adjust to the dimness before you could take in the details.

A man walked across the plaza. That was a holster and a gun on his hip, unmistakable, a detail you couldn't miss. The girl looked hard at the men sitting along the walls. They all wore holsters, they all had guns. The scene was familiar to her from movie Westerns but alarming

to her as a visitor. She had never imagined Mexico as a place where men still wore guns.

The girl looked at the man she'd come with. His wandering right eye made it impossible to tell whether he'd noticed the guns. He took a letter out of his pack and when they had walked to the other side of the plaza, he stopped a boy and pointed to the return address on the envelope. Neither the man nor the girl spoke more than a few words of Spanish. The boy shook his head. The man said, "Emily? Tonio?" The boy smiled and extended his right arm. "*Aquí*," he said, and showed them down a lane that led off the plaza. The cobblestones were covered with slippery, rotting fruit that made it hard to walk. The smell went straight to the girl's stomach.

Emily had stringy brown hair and sallow skin and her belly stuck out. Another baby. The girl counted five kids already, running in and out of the yard through a rough gate. Emily tried to struggle to her feet when the two Americans walked onto the patio but gave it up. She and a young Mexican man were sitting at a wooden table covered by an arbor of bougainvillea. That must be Tonio. "Come in, come in," said Emily. "I had to go to the dentist and have another tooth pulled today. They're rotting because of this." She pointed to her belly. She's sick, the girl thought.

The walleyed man sat down in one of the leather basket chairs. It began to rain. "It rains every evening," said Emily, "but the mornings are nice." She smiled at the girl, who smiled back and then remembered her skirt. "Could I use your bathroom?" she said. Emily pointed to a door at the edge of the patio.

The girl stood in front of the sink and took her skirt off. She was rinsing it when the walleyed man came in. "What are we doing here, anyway?" he said. The girl watched their faces in the mirror. "I guess it's not what you expected," she said. The man pursed his lips. "No." The girl waited, then rubbed more soap into the bloodstain and scrubbed the cloth hard. The man left the bathroom. The girl rinsed the skirt, wrung it out, and looked at the stain. Almost gone.

She pulled a cotton shift out of her satchel, took off her blouse, and pulled on the dress. She didn't see anywhere to hang the wet skirt, so she wadded it up and carried it outside. "Do you have a clothesline?" she said. Emily pointed to one side of the garden. "You'll get wet, why don't you wait till it stops raining," she said. "Doesn't matter," said the girl. She crossed to the clothesline on a path of boards laid across the mud between the patio and a new building at the back of the garden. The yard smelled of wet stucco and fresh wood. The rain ran down her forehead and dripped off her nose as she spread the skirt across the line.

She hurried back across the boards to the patio. A Mexican woman came out of a stucco lean-to attached to the other side of the patio and handed her a cup of hot chocolate. "*Gracias*," said the girl. The woman looked at her without smiling and went back inside the lean-to. "We didn't know exactly what day to expect you," said Emily. The walleyed man turned his head toward the new building. A tall, red-haired woman had come out and was walking toward the patio. She wore a tailored skirt and blouse and high heels.

"This is Kitty," said Emily. "From Seattle. That's her new house." Emily smiled at the walleyed man. The gaps in her teeth showed. "This is Frank." The man inclined his head. "And—what was your name, dear?" she asked the girl. "Caroline." Kitty sat down next to Frank. Caroline walked to the kitchen door and watched the Mexican woman working at a two-burner propane stove. She didn't know enough Spanish to offer to help so she just looked. The woman ignored her. After a few minutes the woman went outside and spoke to Emily. Kitty started putting plates and cutlery on the table.

"Can I help?" said Caroline. "Nothing to do," said Kitty. "Just sit down. Rosario will bring everything." Caroline wondered if she'd heard the name right. Wasn't "o" the ending for a man's name? Maybe Kitty's pronunciation was bad.

Caroline sat down at the table. She was tired and hungry. During the two days on the bus from Tijuana, she had been afraid to eat the

food at the rest stops and had only drunk orange soda, thinking the sealed bottles would be safe. Rosario brought a plate of fruit, which Caroline recognized as the fruit rotting in the lane. "Mangoes," said Emily. "Have one." Caroline smiled, no. Her stomach felt queasy at the sight of them. Tonio brought out a bottle of rum and offered it around. The rum was Cuban. Mexico did not participate in the U.S. embargo against Cuba. Caroline shook her head. A tow-headed boy of about six, one of Emily's, ran up and asked if he could have a little *ron*. Tonio shooed him away.

Frank asked Kitty why she had left Seattle. "Couldn't stand the professor's wife bit." Caroline thought Kitty must have money. She wanted to ask if you could build a new house in a friend's backyard anytime you wanted down here. Did you just hire workers and build a house? What about permits, inspections, electrical codes?

Emily pulled a packet out of her purse and poured some white pills into her hand. She took one and passed them around. Caroline, at the end of the table, was last and she took one, too. The blond boy ran up and asked for one of the pills, but Emily said no, it wasn't for kids, even the university people didn't give it to their kids. Caroline swallowed the pill along with everyone else. She was too tired to refuse.

Caroline's head drooped. "Let's find you a bed," said Emily. She heaved herself up and led Caroline into the house. It had little furniture, as if all the life happened outside on the patio and the house was only for sleeping. Emily showed her to a small room with a narrow cot. "I'm sorry we don't have a proper bed. Hope you'll be comfortable," she said. Caroline thanked her and lay down.

She was dead tired. She hadn't been able to sleep on the *Tres Estrellas de Oro* bus that took them to Guadalajara because the air conditioning didn't reach the back seat where they'd had to sit, the last passengers to enter the bus, and besides, she wasn't good at sleeping anywhere but in a bed, lying down. The night before she and Frank crossed the border they had sat up all night in the bus station and

someone had spilled beer on her feet. In the morning they went to the beach and tried to sleep on the sand.

The night before that, they tried to sleep in Frank's sister's car somewhere in the Los Angeles suburbs. Frank's car had disappeared while they were at his house across the Oregon border. Caroline had looked out the window one morning and seen that his car was gone, and Frank had said, "Oh, they took it back." She guessed he hadn't made the payments. His sister picked them up and drove them to San Diego.

"Achilles saved me," Frank had told her. They were outside his house in Oregon, looking at the stars. Achilles? The hero of the Trojan War, that Achilles? What does he mean, a special relationship? "We communicate, he shows me the way," Frank said. Caroline pretended they were having a normal conversation. "How do you communicate?" she said. Frank said, "Mentally." "Oh." Now what? "Can you communicate all year, or just when his constellation is out?" she said. "Don't be stupid. I said mental. Mental is anytime."

Caroline's eyes were closed but she couldn't sleep. Her heart was pounding, she began to sweat. She opened her eyes. The doorway shrank and receded into the distance, surrounded by a pink haze, like cotton candy. She was afraid to close her eyes, she felt sick to her stomach again. Emily appeared in the doorway, small, far away.

"Are you okay?" said tiny Emily in a faraway voice. An invisible shield surrounded Caroline. It reminded her of the plastic shield in a mouthwash ad she had seen on television. It was an effort to speak through it. "Yes," she lied. I don't know you, I can't say anything, she thought.

"Can't you sleep?" Emily must have heard her through the shield. Caroline said no. "Come on outside and join us," Emily's voice said. Caroline got up and started walking toward where she hoped the door was. She couldn't trust her eyes, nothing looked the way it was supposed to. Something had happened to her eyes. She reached the patio table and sat down.

People were eating grapes and talking. A bowl of roses or camellias sat in the middle of the table. Caroline looked at the flowers. Brown blotches of decay erupted and spread over the white petals like mold on an old photograph. She looked at Emily. Her face was pitted with pockmarks and purple sores oozed pus down her cheeks. Don't look. But don't close your eyes, you'll disappear. Look at the pillar holding up the arbor. That's just a green vine around it, not a snake, yes a snake. Don't close your eyes, you can't close your eyes. Look somewhere else. The flowers. Ah, they're white again. Relax. Rest. Think. This is your punishment. She held her face steady, a mask over her terror. My fault, a voice said to her, her voice. My fault, the vine writhed and snaked up the pillar, a python, my fault. It was impossible to tell how many hours had passed. I don't know these people, the voice in her head said, I mustn't say anything. She didn't know exactly what she was guilty of.

The sky was still dark, but now she was standing in the kitchen, watching Emily fry hamburgers. "Want one?" Caroline nodded. Emily put the meat in a bun and handed it to Caroline. The bun felt heavy and hot, it was like hot lead sinking through her hand. Caroline gave a little cry and dropped the hamburger. Emily looked at her. "Is something wrong?" Caroline didn't answer.

Then everyone walked to Kitty's new house. Caroline started across the muddy yard, trying to stay on the boards. She saw two bats fly out from under the eaves of the new building. She turned her head away and went inside. The ceiling in Kitty's new living room was high, the walls white. An Indian rug covered the floor in front of a small fireplace. Caroline looked toward the kitchen, where they all leaned over a table. Kitty lay on the table and someone was taking her appendix out. Or maybe Frank was screwing her. It was impossible to tell.

Caroline left Kitty's house and made her way across the yard and found her cot and lay down. She could close her eyes now, but she

couldn't sleep. The sky grew light behind the small window high on the wall. The rain stopped, and Caroline could smell the mangoes rotting outside the wall. The sheets were damp.

The sun rose. Caroline got up and walked with the others down a path that led through trees to Lake Chapala. The green of the leaves hovered above them, but the leaves themselves were gray, as if their color had lifted off them. The scene looked like a badly registered color photograph in a cheap newspaper. Parrots flew screaming among the branches. A young man arrived, carrying a guitar. His name was Lindsey and he seemed to be a special friend of Emily's. Caroline was surprised to see Frank on the trail. Kitty must have stayed home. Maybe she really had been sick.

When they got to the lake, Caroline sat on the stones by the brown water. The lake was ancient. A worn, gray-green mountain rose on the far side. Nearby, horses grazed in a flat field beside a red river. There must be iron in the hills to stain the river that color. Frank sat beside her. "Maybe it will be okay," he said. His voice sounded far away. The invisible shield separated them. Caroline didn't reply. She was too concerned with what was happening to her body. The skin on her arms and hands was turning inside out, she was molting on the rocks. Finally she could keep quiet no longer, and she screamed. "My skin!" Frank leapt up and rushed her into the water. After a while she felt better. They went back to the house and ate. The next day Emily took Caroline to meet Miss Zara.

Miss Zara was a Russian who had lived for many years in a hacienda outside town. She met Emily and Caroline at her gate, on horseback, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and brown riding pants tucked into brown leather boots. Miss Zara got off her horse and walked with them to the hacienda. The house was hidden in vines and bushes and was dark inside. They went into the dining room. "We always set a place for my brother," said Miss Zara. "He was my manager." Miss Zara had been a ballerina. Her brother had been dead for twenty years.

"Is anyone living at the mill now?" said Emily. "No, not since the university people left," said Miss Zara. They agreed that Caroline would rent the mill for fifteen dollars a month. Miss Zara gave Caroline a key, and Caroline and Emily walked back to town. Caroline packed her satchel. "Just take the road toward the lake," said Emily. "The mill is at the end of the road, you can't miss it." Caroline thanked her. "Let me know if you need anything, pots or anything," said Emily as Caroline left the house. She didn't see Frank. He had moved in with Kitty, Emily said.

The mill was built of brick, with a wide verandah along one side and two low interior rooms. Caroline walked into the kitchen and found a one-burner propane stove, a concrete sink with a built-in washboard, a table, and a shelf holding a pottery cooking pot, a frying pan, a cup, and a few utensils. A glassless window stretched above the sink, open to the air and protected only by the eaves outside.

She opened a door leading off the kitchen and went into a dark room containing a bed and a rush chair. The small window opposite the bed was covered by a shutter. Like the kitchen window, it had no glass. A few books lay on the terra cotta floor. Caroline picked one up. It lacked a cover, but it was in English. Something about the history of language.

She took the book into the kitchen and sat down at the table and began reading. She was glad there were books. Her bag was too small for anything but clothes, an extra pair of shoes, toiletries, and a bath towel. The books must have been left by the university people. The town had forced them to leave a few weeks ago. "The townspeople had to take care of the children because their parents were too stoned to bother," said Emily. It was a scandal, and finally the town got rid of them. They were doing LSD research, the university people had said.

Caroline put the book down and went outside. It was nicer here, a breeze blew from the lake. Bushes and trees surrounded the mill. A hut down one path from the main building contained a shower and a

toilet, and another path led through a field to the lake. Caroline went inside and changed into the bikini she'd bought in Italy the year before, the summer of 1963. The style was common in Europe by then, but her parents had been scandalized.

She walked to the lake and waded in. Warm. Her feet sank into the muddy bottom. Men in white hats bent over the fields along the bank. She lay back and floated. She was not a good swimmer but the water felt smooth and relaxing. She thought she might sleep that night.

Then she heard splashing. Someone was coming toward her, through the water. She stood up. Two of the men from the fields. One was next to her, touching her. The other one grinned and tried to touch her, too. She said, "No, no," but the men just grinned and tried to put their arms around her. She wriggled free and ran back to the mill and took off the bikini.

The men didn't follow, but she stayed in the kitchen the rest of the day. What was she going to do with herself? All she had were some paperback novels and a book about language. It grew too dark to read. Caroline got ready for bed, locked the bedroom door, and closed the shutter. The bedsheets were linen. She went to sleep for the second time in six days.

The next day she walked down the road, past the fields, to a small grocery store. She asked the proprietor for bones. "*Por el perro*," she managed to say in Spanish, and he handed her bones covered with great hunks of meat. Lucky dog, she thought. Does he know I'm the dog? She bought potatoes and onions and carrots and tomatoes and orange soda and returned home and made stew. She spread her money out on the kitchen table and figured how long she could stay. Bones for the dog would make the money go farther. She didn't really want to stay, it looked like a mistake, but she was here, she didn't have any other plans for the summer, and who knows, maybe something would happen. She liked the guitar player, Lindsey, though she was sure something was going on between him and Emily.

Lindsey stopped by on Wednesday and showed her how to play an American folk song on his guitar. "Would you like to go to Guadalajara in a couple of days?" he said. He was going for a guitar lesson, and she might be interested. Now, Caroline thought, now something is happening.

Lindsey picked Caroline up in his mother's station wagon. He told her that his father was a U.S. army officer who had retired to Mexico, and that he had grown up mostly in Mexico. They stopped at a pharmacist's and Lindsey asked for an injection. He didn't tell Caroline what for. They drove on to the guitar teacher's house. Lindsey and the teacher talked in Spanish, and Lindsey played a tune Caroline recognized. Afterward, Lindsey and Caroline went to the market and sat outside and drank fruit juice and shared a pork sandwich. People lived with their pigs, Caroline had noticed on her walks to the grocery store. Pigs on one side of the house, people on the other. They didn't like dogs, though. Lots of dogs running loose. Everyone threw stones at the dogs.

"The people are cruel," Caroline said. "No, they're just afraid of dogs," said Lindsey. They drove back to the mill and went to bed on the linen sheets. Lindsey wore a condom, and he stood Caroline against the wall the second time. About midnight, he went back to his parents' house. "It wouldn't be cool if I stayed here all night," he said. Caroline locked the door behind him and had trouble going to sleep.

The next morning, she pulled the two heavy sheets off the bed and put them in the kitchen sink. She poured detergent on a section of sheet and rubbed it against the concrete washboard on the side of the sink. She washed a section of a sheet at a time, rubbing one hand over the other the way she'd seen the Mexican women do. It created suction and helped draw the dirt out, she imagined. She scrubbed until the sheets were perfectly white, then rinsed them and wrung them out. It was hard work. The wet sheets were heavy and awkward to handle. She carried them outside and laid them across the bushes to

dry. The sun was hot, and the sheets dried fast, despite the humid air. Caroline took them inside and made the bed, pulling the corners tight. Perhaps Lindsey would visit tonight.

She ate some stew and read until it was dark, washed her teeth, and went to bed. Very late, she woke to the crash of thunder. Rain poured under the bedroom window shutter and ran across the floor, and lightning flashed through the louvers. She went to the verandah. The trees bent sideways, lashed by the rain and wind. It was warm. She suddenly felt sick. She sat down in one of the leather chairs, but she felt worse. She ran to the shed and puked into the toilet while the thunder rattled and the lightning cracked and the rain poured. She had been careful not to drink the water. It must have been brushing my teeth, she thought. The shed stank, the thunder echoed off the hills. She staggered back to the verandah and fell onto the bricks.

The place was rotten, the whole country was rotten, she had known it from the beginning. Frank was right to wonder why they were here. There was no reason to be here. She had imagined Mexico to be like southern Italy, only closer to home. Not a frontier town, not damp walls and peeling stucco and rotten fruit in the streets. Not piles of shit that you had to shit on top of because there was no water to flush them away. Not a woman with too many kids and an illegal new house in her backyard. Not a time warp with a name like an exclamation. Ajijic. She couldn't decide whether it sounded like a laugh or a cry for help.

You should pay attention to things like streets full of rotting mangoes, Caroline thought. The rain was soaking her. She went inside, wrapped herself in her towel, lit a candle, and spread her money on the table.

The next day she packed her bag, walked to town, and caught the bus to Guadalajara. Two days later she was in San Diego. She got a room at the YWCA and took a bath and washed her hair, but the water was hard and her hair looked dirtier than before she had washed

it. She caught the bus for Los Angeles. There was some summer vacation left, and she wanted to lie on the beach in the sun. To get clean. The sun made everything clean.

A few weeks after Caroline's classes started at the university, Lindsey wrote to say that Emily was seriously ill, and later to say that she had died shortly after the baby was born. He didn't say whether it was a boy or a girl.

1993

Sweet Basil

As she opened the door, Miss Thayer wished for the hundredth time that someone would paint the walls yellow. But Mr. Nicholas, she reminded herself, was blind and could not see the stains, so the institutional green could not depress him. A single bare bulb hung from the ceiling on a black, twisted cord. Miss Thayer's hand automatically reached for the light switch as she closed the door behind her.

"How are you, Mr. Nicholas?" she said as she crossed the few feet from the door to his chair. "Listen to this," he said, motioning her to the other armchair. The radio squawked, bellowed, and wheezed. Miss Thayer hated the sound of bagpipes and was glad Mr. Nicholas couldn't see her face.

He listened to the radio all day, morning news, music, noon news, talk shows, evening news, more music until midnight. She had tried to interest him in Braille, but he preferred radio dramas, or books on tape, or being read to. Whenever she suggested moving into what he called the old-folks' home, Mr. Nicholas turned up the volume on the radio and put on the dark glasses he wore in public. Miss Thayer was used to the dead eyeballs, but Mr. Nicholas knew they shocked other people.

"Listen to this," he said again. Miss Thayer shifted in her seat. She was trying to sit still but she was thinking of the next visit she had to make, and that Mr. Nicholas's bed needed to be changed and his breakfast cooked. She got up, said, "Excuse me," and went into the

kitchen nook. Mr. Nicholas drank only Greek coffee, and she bought it for him in an import store in Old Town. He had a small, long-handled coffee pot he'd brought with him those many years ago when he'd left the island of Kalymnos and its sponge-fishermen and sailed to America.

Miss Thayer put the grounds in the pot, filled it with water, and brought it to a boil. She carried the coffee to Mr. Nicholas in a glass cup with a brass handle, along with yoghurt and a piece of almond cake. He had eaten the same breakfast all his life. His American friends had tried to convert him to ham and eggs and toast, but he said the ham made him thirsty and the toast lacked flavor and he didn't like eggs cooked with butter or margarine, only hardcooked. He didn't much like American yoghurt either, too sharply acid and too runny. On Kalymnos, he said, the yoghurt was like custard, with a crust on top that you had to break with a spoon, and creamy. Made from goat's milk. American yoghurt came from cow's milk, and he wasn't a bit surprised when the radio reported that cow's milk was bad for babies.

"More coffee, Mr. Nicholas?" He handed her the cup and she went to prepare another pot. The sun streamed in the big window at the end of the room and warmed her back as she worked at the stove. "Beautiful day," she said. The worn linoleum even shone.

"Would you like to go out when I come back this afternoon?" she said, walking across the room and putting the cup on the little table beside Mr. Nicholas's chair. He seemed not to hear. She reached out to turn the radio down, then pulled her hand back, not wanting to offend him. "How about a walk, then, later?" she said, a little louder. "Oh, a walk, yes, why not," he said. Miss Thayer bustled around, pulling off the soiled bed linen and spreading out clean sheets and tucking the corners tight, hospital style.

When she had finished, she carried Mr. Nicholas's cup and plate to the sink and washed them and set them in the drainer to dry in the sun. "I've changed the bed now. Anything you need before I go?" Mr. Nicholas shook his head. "I'll see you later, then," she said in her soft

voice, as she switched out the light. She hadn't needed it this morning, she thought, but it was a habit. In winter, she arrived for the first time before light.

She hated those walls and the stains around the edge of the bed, pushed up against the wall as a couch. She wished she could put a rug over the old linoleum, too, but that would be dangerous for Mr. Nicholas. He had lived in the room for fourteen years and knew his way around by touch. She wondered if he used his sense of hearing like a bat, picking up sound waves as they bounced off objects. Blind as a bat, she thought, then pushed the thought out of her mind. Mr. Nicholas never bumped into anything, though it was important for things to always be in the same place. He had a splendid memory.

Miss Thayer was afraid he would try to cook for himself if she wasn't there at mealtimes. He was independent and had cooked often before he lost his sight. Greek cooking, dishes he remembered from home. Stuffed peppers and tomatoes, roast chicken, fried octopus, green beans with tomatoes. Now he kept a bottle of Greek olive oil on the kitchen counter and Miss Thayer used it to dress his salad every day.

In summer, Mr. Nicholas grew sweet basil in the window. Every year at the end of May he sent Miss Thayer to the garden store for a seedling in a two-inch pot. They filled an old gallon olive-oil can with fresh dirt, planted the basil, and put the can on the far edge of the window ledge where it would get the most sun. By August the leaves pushed against the windowpane and made a green crown for the sailing ship painted on the front of the can. Miss Thayer made eggs with basil, salad with basil, soup with basil, tomatoes with basil, pasta with basil, and still she couldn't keep up with the bounty. By the first weekend in September, flowers were forming and the plant was going to seed. Mr. Nicholas harvested the remaining leaves and laid them out to dry, then had Miss Thayer help him put them in jars to use during the winter.

After Miss Thayer left, Mr. Nicholas turned up the radio and made his way to the window. He stood in the sun for a long time. On hot

summer days on the island, after the sponge-fishing boats came in, the divers would sit along the quay and sort the sponges. Afterward the men would walk home up the narrow stone streets and sleep during the hottest part of the afternoon. In the evening they would gather back at the quay, sit outside the taverna, and listen to the sea and watch the stars come out.

Tourists almost never came in those days. But he had heard that the island had been discovered by Europeans and Americans and that the people made money in the summer by moving out of their houses and renting their bedrooms to visitors. It was warm enough to sleep outdoors anyway, as Mr. Nicholas and his wife, Margarita, had done many times in the heat of August.

A frown formed on Mr. Nicholas's already creased forehead. He felt for the kitchen chair and pulled it over to the window. He didn't like to think of Margarita, dead thirty years now, or their baby girl, dead before her first birthday. Margarita's picture sat framed on the table next to his bed, but he seldom touched it before he went to sleep anymore. He would have been ashamed if he had realized that he was glad he could no longer see it.

Mr. Nicholas opened the window and let the sounds of the city into the room. A dog barked, another answered. Mr. Nicholas smiled, remembering a song that had been popular at home, and he began to hum. Then he stood and danced one of the old dances, moving slowly about the middle of the floor, squat, kick, turn, right, squat, kick, turn, left, forward, turn, never out of the circle of the sun.

When Miss Thayer returned, he told her he thought it was time to plant this year's basil, the sun was so warm, and that's where he wanted to go this afternoon, to the nursery. "Let's get a tomato, too," he said. Miss Thayer reminded him they had not had much luck with tomatoes, but he wanted to try once more, he said. "The sun feels warmer, maybe it's the hole in the ozone layer."

Miss Thayer remembered the one year Mr. Nicholas's tomatoes had ripened on the ledge and the birds had discovered them before he

could pick any, but she kept quiet and made a mental note to borrow some bird netting from Mrs. Pumfrey, who had always had a splendid vegetable garden before her arthritis made it impossible for her to work outdoors. Miss Thayer had often thought of introducing her two patients, but she never could bring herself to suggest it. It was hard enough to keep from becoming personally involved in their lives without becoming a matchmaker, she told herself.

By July, Mr. Nicholas had a flourishing garden on his window ledge. The wind brushed the tomato vines against the basil and released its minty perfume into the room. Mr. Nicholas had his kitchen table and chair moved in front of the window, close to the plants. The smell reminded him of summers in Greece, when the patio was surrounded by pots and cans full of basil. He and his wife grew tomatoes on a plot of land outside the town, where oregano and thyme and rosemary grew wild on the brown hills. On the rare occasions when they roasted a lamb, his wife would gather rosemary and bring it home tied in her kerchief. That was the only time she allowed the neighbors to see her magnificent hair without a kerchief over it.

In an old cardboard suitcase under his bed Mr. Nicholas had a braid of that black hair. Every year on their wedding anniversary, he used to take out the hair and undo the braid and comb the hair with his fingers, and smell the olive oil his wife had dressed it with. Then he could no longer see to make the braid and he left the hair alone, and Miss Thayer knew nothing about it until she had to sort his things and was amazed at how smooth and pliant it still was, and at the faintly bitter odor it gave off.

"We must have a party, Miss Thayer." Mr. Nicholas held three beautifully ripe tomatoes toward her as she entered the room. A party? she wondered. Yes, call up his old friend Stavros and order moussaka from the deli and serve sliced tomatoes dressed with basil and olive oil alongside. And retsina. Stavros could bring some. Miss Thayer was relieved that the party would only be the two old men. "You will come

too, of course," Mr. Nicholas said. "And you will not serve. Stavros and I will do everything. Will you come?" Miss Thayer felt she could not refuse and promised to make arrangements for her other patients on the day of the party.

It pleased her to see Mr. Nicholas beam. "Good, good," he said. "I will give you the number of Stavros." They left the table by the window and borrowed two kitchen chairs to go with the one Mr. Nicholas had. Miss Thayer brought a white linen cloth and napkins and bread, and some Greek olives she found at the deli when she went for more coffee. Stavros insisted on bringing the moussaka as well as the retsina. The tomatoes and basil glowed red and green in the center of the white cloth. A pity Mr. Nicholas can't see them, thought Miss Thayer. The two old men drank and ate and told stories all afternoon. Miss Thayer drank a glass of retsina even though the resin taste made her shudder, and she really didn't mind that she couldn't understand what the men were saying. Mr. Nicholas apologized. "No, no, it's all right," she said. "It's just like sitting in a café in Greece, listening to you talk. Please, don't worry."

As she listened to the men, the green walls and worn linoleum seemed transformed to whitewash and stone, and the window seemed to open onto the sea rather than the noisy neighborhood. Miss Thayer closed her eyes and the traffic noise surged and slapped like water against a seawall. She saw women dressed in black lifting their skirts to wade, seabirds swooping and diving, and the waves glinting in the sun. The air smelled of warm rocks and resin. The waves slapped and broke, slapped and broke.

When the sun had shifted too far west to warm their table, Stavros got ready to leave. "Miss Thayer," he said, and that was enough to wake her. She helped Stavros gather up the dishes and linens. She insisted on washing up. "Thank you for the wonderful party," she said as she left.

By the middle of August, Miss Thayer had received nine complaints about Mr. Nicholas's radio. It was too loud, the neighbors said, he

played that radio all day, too loud all day, but especially at six in the morning and eleven at night. Some people had to get up and go to work and needed their sleep, they said. Miss Thayer tried to talk to Mr. Nicholas about the radio. "But if it's any lower I can't hear it," he said. And she discovered it was true, unless the radio was on as loud as it could go, Mr. Nicholas could not hear it.

Miss Thayer felt afraid, but she didn't tell Mr. Nicholas. He will discover soon enough on his own, she thought. She managed to persuade him to leave the radio off until nine in the morning and turn it off by ten at night. Then she went to the neighbors and explained that the radio was Mr. Nicholas's main source of pleasure but that he was getting old and hard of hearing and all she could do was get him not to play it so early or so late and couldn't they be charitable, he was an old man, old and blind and far from his native land.

Then Miss Thayer arrived one day in late August and noticed something different. It took her a moment to realize what it was: the room was silent. She switched on the light and looked for Mr. Nicholas. His chair next to the radio was empty, and she was astonished to see him still in bed. She had never seen him in bed in the six years she had been coming to help him. He was never sick, he was always up with the birds, whose singing woke him, he said.

"What's wrong, Mr. Nicholas?" she said. He didn't answer and she walked over to the bed and asked again. He didn't respond, so she touched him on the hand. Mr. Nicholas struck out, making a strange cry, and hit Miss Thayer on the chin. "It's me," she said, her voice breaking. "Who is it?" Mr. Nicholas said. Miss Thayer took his hand again. "Oh, it's Miss Thayer, did I hurt you?" he said. She answered no but he said it again, "Did I hurt you? I'm sorry. I didn't hear you. I can't hear anymore. I can't hear anything, Miss Thayer. I can't hear." Mr. Nicholas was crying and she didn't know what to do. It didn't seem right to put her arms around him, so she patted his hand and sat by him until he stopped crying.

Finally she got up and made the coffee and brought it to him, but he pushed it away and it spilled onto the sheet. Miss Thayer couldn't think how to get Mr. Nicholas out of bed so she could change the sheet, so she sponged the coffee up as best she could and tried to plan what to do. Surely Mr. Nicholas would have to go into a home now. Blind and deaf both, what if there was a fire and he couldn't hear the alarm? What would he do all day?

Mr. Nicholas stayed in bed for four weeks. Miss Thayer came every day and fed him a little rice and soup and despaired of the sheets, but he wouldn't get up. He lay with his face to the wall, the grimy green wall that made Miss Thayer sick to look at, and never spoke. Miss Thayer brought him a bedpan but he preferred using his old metal dishpan as a chamber pot, and that made her sick, too, but she emptied it as she'd been trained to do.

It was the end of September now, and the basil was flowering. Miss Thayer picked some leaves and brought them to Mr. Nicholas's bed and put them in his hands. He crushed them and the sharp odor filled the room. Mr. Nicholas turned toward the window and held the herbs to his face.

The next day when Miss Thayer arrived, Mr. Nicholas was sitting next to the window, his arm outstretched on the sill. She touched his hand and he smiled. I can feel the sun getting cooler, he thought but did not try to say. He had almost stopped talking, and when he did speak, his words were garbled. The wind is from the north now, it blows the hairs on my arm, can you feel it, too? was what he meant. Miss Thayer made the coffee and he smelled it with joy, and savored the almond cake and even the yoghurt. Miss Thayer thought it was a miracle that he had discovered a way to enjoy his life still. If only he had learned Braille, she thought again. But he seemed content to sit by the window and she supposed he lived in his memories. Even on cold winter days he kept the window open and seemed to know what time it was by the feel of the air, or the warmth of the sun if it was shining. He

put crumbs on the ledge for the birds, and one sparrow became tame enough to eat from his hand. He showed Miss Thayer one day.

Then came the morning when she handed him his coffee and he looked at her in alarm. "What kind of coffee is this," she understood him to say, and she felt the same fear she had before, only deeper. "It has no smell, you got the wrong kind." Miss Thayer took the cup and poured the coffee into the sink. She made another and gave it to Mr. Nicholas. He took a sip and threw the cup on the floor. "No taste!" he said. Then his face crumpled and she knew he understood the lack of taste was in him, not the coffee. She touched his hand but he shook her off and turned toward the window. Then he took her hand again. She held onto his left hand while he put the right one out the window. How will he ever bear it, she thought.

That winter, Mr. Nicholas waited for Miss Thayer to come before he got up in the morning. He ate little, only enough to ease the hunger pains. Miss Thayer saw how shrunken he looked on the pillow and she brought him some smaller clothes. Mr. Nicholas spent his days by the window, feeding the birds when they came, catching the drops in his hand when it rained, holding a finger up to gauge the wind, as he had gauged the wind when they went diving for sponges off the island.

Miss Thayer was right about Mr. Nicholas living in his memories. He sat by the window, but his mind was in Greece, and he rowed out to sea at dawn and plunged into the waters time and again, to where the sponges hugged the ancient rocks. Each day he dived deeper and deeper, and stayed down longer. The light filtered through the clear water and made ripples on the sandy bottom. The boat was a small shadow far above, and all was quiet, except for the roaring in his ears. He would have to go up soon, his lungs were bursting. But he wanted to stay a little longer, gather more sponges than anyone else. The roaring grew louder, louder. His lungs burned and he swam toward the surface, toward the dark shadow of the boat. All was blue, then all was black.

Miss Thayer found Mr. Nicholas with his head on the table, his right arm stretched onto the window ledge, a sparrow pecking at the palm of his hand. Miss Thayer raised the sash and lifted his hand inside. It was clean from the rain and cold to the touch. The bird flew into the kitchen and landed on the stove. It stared at Miss Thayer, its body quivering. She reached to pick a breadcrumb off the table and offer it to the bird. But the motion startled the bird and it flew outside. Miss Thayer closed the window and went to the telephone.

1993

Smoke And Mirrors

The glare of the sun off the water made it hard for the old couple to see each other, so they pulled their patio chairs away from the edge of the swimming pool. The pool was at the back of the house, beside a hill covered in chaparral, dry to the point of combustion in the August heat. Smog obscured the Santa Monica Mountains in the background.

The other mourners clustered around the bar next to the sliding-glass door that led to the patio or sat in the living room, talking to the widow. Only a few were dressed in black, and some of the women wore slacks.

The couple had been married for over forty years but they still enjoyed talking to each other. They chatted quietly, balancing their coffee cups and plates of roast beef and potato salad on their laps.

"Paul was such a beautiful man," said the woman. "Didn't you think so?"

Her husband took a bite of roast beef and mumphed.

"I remember the first time I saw him," his wife said. "I thought to myself, That's the kind of man I've always wanted."

Her husband looked at her. "Oh, not seriously," said the woman and laughed. "Still, it did come into my mind. It was his looks. You couldn't help yourself."

"After we got to know each other, when we worked at the same studio, he used to talk to me about it," she went on. "Women were always approaching him, on the street, in restaurants, and he liked it,

even when they propositioned him. Some were beautiful, and one or two were even famous—no, I won't tell you the names, I gave my word—but he usually turned them down. 'I like to get to know someone better before, you know,' he would say."

"Mmmm," said her husband, and raised his left eyebrow at her.

"Well," she said, "he's food for worms now. It's a pity."

A small plane passed overhead, writing a message in smoke: "Happy Birthday Dan."

"Of course, he wasn't perfect," said the woman. "His arms were too short. And his feet were fat." She looked down at her own narrow feet, encased in smooth black leather, and felt a sudden urge to tear off her clothes and jump into the pool.

"You seem to have made quite a study of our friend," said her husband. "I can't say as I ever noticed his feet."

Ruth felt the blood rise to her face. "They paid me to notice details," she said. She fanned herself with her napkin. "It's all very well to observe the proprieties, but I'm roasting in this dress."

Her husband took a bite of potato salad, chewed, and swallowed. "Ruth, I told you no one dressed for funerals anymore," he said.

His wife sipped her coffee. "Nonsense. You've just lived in L.A. too long."

"No longer than you."

"Well, Ted, maybe I'm old fashioned." Ruth set down her cup and paid attention to her food for a while. "Surely you noticed his fingernails," she said. "He chewed them."

"I thought it was his smoking that bothered you," said her husband.

"It did. He smoked like he had a special relationship with a cigarette," said Ruth. "It always made me angry when I'd be talking and he'd take a drag on a cigarette."

Jealous of a cigarette, she thought to herself. She finished her salad, set the plate on the patio, picked up her coffee cup, and smoothed her black skirt.

Her husband finished his food and squinted at the pool.

"That time I visited Paul after he went to New York, he was in a bad way," he mused. "Feeling old, and his play not going well."

"Yes, I remember," said Ruth. Paul had visited her before he'd pulled up stakes and gone East. He had admitted he felt frightened—well over forty, without children or a companion, a lonely old age coming on. He'd looked up one or two former girlfriends and tried to imagine himself married to them. But one of the women had moved away to take a better job, and the other was still too attached to her former husband to pay Paul the kind of attention he required. He got a cat but it ran away. So he went to New York and immersed himself in producing one of his plays.

"Rehearsals didn't go at all well," said Ted. "Paul disagreed with the director's changes, felt they trivialized the play."

According to Paul, the director, a young man named Steve who was not long out of school but whose star was rising, had told him, "If you want to make it on Broadway, you can't ask people to think too much. They want to be entertained."

"I don't see why thinking can't be entertaining," Paul had argued. "Look at Tom Stoppard. Besides, you're acting like the play's intellectual or something." Paul liked to say he hated intellectuals.

Steve had ignored Paul, but the play developed other troubles. The leading lady felt she knew more about the theater than Steve, and she refused to take his direction if she didn't like it. Paul had to act as intermediary. Privately, he often thought she was right, but he had spent a lot of time on Steve and didn't want to lose him.

"Then Paul met Monique," Ted said. "After the set designer quit." The designer said he was moving to L.A. with his lover and Paul argued for hours with him but he went anyway. It was the last straw, and Paul stormed out of the theater. He left without his overcoat or gloves, and the wind was arctic, so he ducked into a bar on Sixth Avenue.

"Irish coffee," Paul said to the barman. When the drink came, he warmed his hands on the glass and breathed in the steam. He felt chilled and hoped he wouldn't get sick, though the cold and the brisk walk had helped cool his anger. But he felt he was getting nowhere with the play. Maybe he should just get on the next plane to L.A. and forget it. He missed the sunshine and the beach and the vegetables.

He felt hungry and ordered a turkey sandwich. As he picked it up, he noticed how pale his hand looked, and he pushed up his sleeve. The skin looked puckered, pathetic, old, he thought, and those little wrinkles and blotches hadn't been there last year either. Gloom washed over him. It didn't occur to him that last year his tan might have covered up the blotches. The energy seeped out of his body, despite the charge of the caffeine. He stared into the mirror, watching his jowls sag and the corners of his eyes droop. The light was fading outside the window, and his image looked dim and brown. Paul leaned farther forward on his elbows, letting self-pity settle onto his shoulders like an old shawl.

Then he noticed a woman sitting at the end of the bar, near the door. She must have just come in. She was tan, her hair was dark and close-cropped, and she wore a khaki jumpsuit with zippers everywhere. He noted a large watch on her wrist and that she wore no rings on her fingers. A canvas satchel sprawled at her feet.

"Monique was even more beautiful than Paul," said Ruth.

Then she fell silent, remembering Paul's hair, dark and wavy rather than curly, his deep brown eyes, his olive skin, his sharp nose. When he was a boy, his Yiddish-speaking friends had nicknamed him "*Italyener*" because he looked more Italian than Jewish. His chest had just the right amount of dark hair, and there was a delicious patch of hair in the small of his back. Ruth smiled. His penis had been thick and dark. When she first saw him naked, she could hardly believe she was in the same room with him.

She and Paul became lovers the year they both turned forty, the year Ted took a job in Washington for six months. They never actually spent the night together, however. "I really prefer to sleep alone," Paul told her. So after they made love she would put on her clothes and go home. It was better that way anyway, she thought, since she had to go to work the next morning.

Sometimes, not often, Paul visited her. She learned it was a mistake to offer him something to eat. He said he didn't like her to take trouble over him, but she thought it was really that he didn't like women to get domestic ideas. After he had been in her house awhile he would turn on the television in the bedroom and lie on the bed to watch. That was the signal that he wanted sex.

One evening he came into her house, dropped his clothes on the floor, marched into the bathroom, and stood in front of the mirror over the sink. "Don't you have a full-length mirror?" he said, turning first one side toward the mirror, then the other. He frowned hard, regarding the slope of his sides and the curve of his back.

"Do you think I'm getting fat?" His frown deepened. It was hard to know what to say, except to laugh, but it was clear he was not joking. Well, no, of course he wasn't fat, Ruth said.

"Really?" Paul turned his other side toward the mirror, pinching the flesh below his ribs. "What about here? A little too much, don't you think?" He continued to gaze into the mirror.

Ruth tried to think how to answer him. Then suddenly she saw that to him, she was just another mirror, one that could send back his reflection in words. She could hardly speak, it was such a shock. In a few minutes Paul came out of the bathroom, switched on the television, and waited for her to reaffirm his beauty.

Ruth explained carefully to Paul, not wanting to lose his friendship, that she thought it would be better if they ended their sexual relationship. She told him she felt guilty about deceiving Ted, and also that she needed more attention than Paul seemed able to give. He was sympathetic

with the first reason but puzzled by the second. Within a month, however, a young woman half Paul's age moved in with him. Ruth couldn't help feeling hurt when she heard about it.

She had seen Susan at the office a few times, visiting Paul. Susan was boyishly thin and had long hair, and she was spoiled. Paul was willing to indulge her, though he complained that she read the comics first in the Sunday paper and that she wasn't interested in politics. "But she's so good-looking," he said to Ruth. Ruth remembered how surprised she was. Didn't Paul realize that Susan was much less good-looking than he?

The relationship lasted six months. One day Paul arrived at work late. He said he'd gotten up, had a leisurely breakfast, and then discovered that Susan had taken his car. When he tried hers, he found the battery was dead. The cab was expensive, all the way from the beach to the valley, and Paul was furious. Hurt and furious.

When Susan got home he confronted her. "You knew I had an appointment this afternoon. Why didn't you ask me to drive you or something?" Susan said she hadn't wanted to wake him. "Oh sure," he said, "very thoughtful."

And Paul remembered more than once when he'd asked her to pick up cigarettes or some small thing for him and she'd "forgotten." He accused Susan of selfishness. She threw his car keys at him and yelled, "You're a fine one to talk about selfishness!" and stormed out the door. Paul was bewildered. Hadn't he given her a home, didn't he help her with money, didn't he come to her rehearsals? And what about the friends he helped out when they got sick or lost their jobs? His heart hardened against Susan; she didn't appreciate him. Susan became spiteful, they argued more often, she threw tantrums. Paul finally said she had to leave, she wasn't willing to make any sacrifices for the relationship.

In Ruth's opinion, Susan had been frustrated and angered by Paul's self-centeredness, as she herself had been. Susan just didn't have a

fallback position. Well, Ruth thought, Susan behaved badly about leaving, but I doubt whether she was really sorry to go.

Ruth noticed her husband looking at her. "You're awfully quiet," he said.

"I was remembering Paul's affair with that girl Susan," she said.

"That was the one he moved in with just before I got back from Washington, wasn't it?" said Ted. "She was way too young."

"I thought all his men friends were jealous of him, snagging a sexy little starlet like that," said Ruth.

"She wasn't a starlet and she wasn't that sexy," said Ted. "I just thought it was odd that someone who prided himself on his sense of honor would take up with a girl who was young enough to be his daughter."

"Maybe it's the symbolic breaking of the incest taboo that makes young girls attractive to men of a certain age," said Ruth. "Maybe that's why he used to talk about honor so much."

"I don't know about your incest theory," said Ted. "I always thought Paul's regarding himself as a man of honor was a funny, old-fashioned idea. Still, I respected him for it."

"Interesting ambivalence on your part," said Ruth. She finished her coffee and set the cup on the concrete beside the plate. "What he mostly meant by honor was keeping his word," she said. "Which he usually did. I mean, if he said he'd phone, he'd phone."

"And he seemed to be the faithful type, basically," said Ted. "I mean, he usually kept to one woman at a time."

"But he could never really commit himself," said Ruth. "Not until he met Monique."

Ted remembered the story Paul told him, about the first time he saw Monique, staring at her reflection in the mirror behind the bar, his belly thrumming with excitement. Ordinarily, Paul would have done nothing. But he felt reckless, perhaps because of the whiskey in the coffee, and turned toward Monique.

"You from California?" he said. "That's a great tan for the middle of winter." He smiled.

Monique looked him over. "No." She leaned down, as if to pick up her satchel. Then, addressing Paul's reflection: "Is that Irish coffee?" And to the barman: "Let me have one of those, too."

Paul waited. Monique drank her coffee.

Paul asked if she was from Hawaii. She appeared not to hear him.

He felt miffed. "Are you from Hawaii, then?" he said a little louder.

"No." Monique looked at her watch. Then she sighed and turned toward him. "If you must know," she said, "I just got back from South Africa." She shivered and rolled down her sleeves. "It's summer there."

"Yeah, I know," Paul said. He looked at the satchel. "Are you a model?"

She laughed. "So many questions! You ought to be in my line of work." Paul wondered aloud what that might be. She lowered her chin and looked at him from under her eyebrows: "Journalist."

Paul felt more excited. He asked who she worked for.

"*U.S. News*," Monique said. "Foreign correspondent."

Ted realized he hadn't said anything for several minutes. He smiled at his wife. "The thing about Monique was that she was Paul's dream come true," he said. "Or rather, the dream he'd had for himself." He recalled Paul telling him how he'd grown up listening to Lowell Thomas broadcast from all over the world, Tibet, China, Africa. Although Paul had majored in drama and English in college, he had sat in on journalism classes, imagining with what flair he'd write dispatches from wherever. He'd never done it, though. He wrote plays and, later, screenplays.

"As soon as Paul learned Monique was a journalist, he was a goner," said Ted. "All she had to do was smile."

Paul had skipped the rest of the rehearsal that afternoon and stayed away the next day, too. Three months later, he and Monique were

married. They moved into a condominium just off Central Park that Monique had bought with part of her trust fund.

"Funny, though, how she never stayed around long," Ted said. "Took off for Bangladesh the week after they were married, and went off every year from then on. Just as she had before they got married."

"She didn't have to work so hard," Ruth said. "Her trust fund was generous."

"I think she just loved being in the thick of exciting, dangerous situations," said Ted. "And she was good at her work."

"Yes, and the Pulitzer-prize committee agreed with you," said Ruth. She remembered how Paul sometimes came back to California to write a movie script, and to keep up his tan. He and Monique had bought the house in Malibu just five years ago.

"Did you know Paul used to write Monique long letters while she was away, love letters?" said Ruth. "She would send them back with comments in the margin, sometimes with a brief note written on hotel notepaper. Can you imagine responding that way to a love letter?"

Ruth knew that Paul had saved his marked-up letters and Monique's notes in his old army footlocker. "They might work themselves into a play someday," he told her. He had lots of time to work while Monique left him alone. But he was never unfaithful to her, Ruth was sure of it. He was too much in love with the reflection of his own ideal self-image in Monique.

"Paul felt he had achieved everything he ever wanted by marrying Monique," said Ruth.

Ted gave her a warning frown. Ruth felt a hand on her shoulder and heard Monique's deep laugh.

"It's true," Monique said. "I loved the way he adored me. And I have to confess, I loved the way he looked."

"That must have pleased him," said Ruth, remembering the scene in front of her bathroom mirror.

"I never told him. I never talked about his looks," said Monique. "Never once."

"You didn't? How could you not?" said Ruth, astonished.

"I didn't want him to stop loving me," said Monique. "Oh, I knew what he was like. I knew lots of women had wanted him, and I knew no one had ever gotten him. I could tell by the way he looked at me in the mirror that first day. I don't know how, but I could. I also knew I was just what he wanted. So I let him have me, but I made sure I was always a little out of reach."

She lit a cigarette and blew the smoke away from Ruth and Ted. "I think it worked out very well. Very well indeed." Her eyes filled with tears.

Ruth felt tears on her own cheeks. She brushed them away and signaled to the waiter to bring the champagne their direction. She handed glasses to Monique and Ted and took one herself. "To Paul," she said, raising her glass.

Ted smiled and clinked glasses with the women. "To Paul," he said, glancing up at the sky. The skywriting was disappearing into a loose trail of smoke. Like Paul, like all of them before long.

Ted noticed that Monique's glass was already empty. "More champagne?" he said. Monique held out her glass.

1992

The Bouquet Of Red Dahlias

The florist's shop smelled of damp earth. Mrs. Ellickson leaned over a rose and inhaled but got no rose scent, only the odor of leaf mold and moss. When she straightened up, Fran was peering at her over an armload of blood-red flowers. "What about these for the centerpiece, Mother?" she said. "Dahlias! At the end of November!" said Mrs. Ellickson. "Yes," said Fran, and she bought the whole bouquet, with bear grass and fern for contrast.

For the grave, Fran hesitated, then chose yellow and white daisies, with a few orange gerberas. A child's bouquet, thought Mrs. Ellickson as she watched. Daisies, daisy chains. Mrs. Ellickson felt uneasy. She hadn't known until they were leaving the airport parking lot and Fran asked if she'd mind stopping by the cemetery that her daughter still visited her husband's grave regularly. Fran's bouquet reminded her of the vacant lot she had played in as a girl, full of Queen Anne's lace and bachelor buttons and wild daisies. She had picked the daisies and bachelor buttons but not the Queen Anne's lace because of their stink.

Mrs. Ellickson saw Fran about to walk out the shop door and hurried to catch up with her. Fran laid the flowers in the back seat of the car and they got in and drove up the hill to the cemetery. "This is the oldest part." Fran pointed to an area near the entrance where old firs shaded the gravestones, many decorated with elaborate statuary and urns. "They only allow flat gravestones now," Fran said.

They drove around the wall of the cemetery, farther uphill. At the top, Fran parked the car.

"This way," she said, carrying the flowers toward a giant cedar. Mrs. Ellickson followed her daughter, being careful not to step on any of the gravestones. Fran dumped out an old bouquet at the foot of the cedar and filled the vase with water. It fitted into a stand at the foot of the grave. Mrs. Ellickson walked to the gravestone and read the inscription:

"Arthur David Harris. Beloved husband. He is not dead; he doth but sleep." Mrs. Ellickson was pleased to recognize the quote from Shakespeare.

Fran fixed the fresh bouquet in the vase and joined her mother. Mrs. Ellickson was annoyed to see that Fran's eyes were red and that tears ran unchecked down her cheeks. Fran lacked self-control. Arthur had been in the grave ten years, after all. Mrs. Ellickson's own husband had been dead only five years, but though she had worn black to the funeral, no one had seen her weep, and she had finished mourning in six months. Her daughter's grief was still too fresh, too close to the surface, her tears flowed too easily.

"I picked a place where Arthur could see the river," said Fran. She blew her nose. Mrs. Ellickson shifted her eyes toward the distance. "Do you like the gravestone?" said Fran. "I worried about choosing a stone Arthur would like." Mrs. Ellickson began to understand that her daughter still saw the world through Arthur's eyes. "Yes, dear," Mrs. Ellickson said carefully. "It's lovely. I'm sure you did well." She fastened on a detail. "I like that pink streak through the granite," she said. Fran touched her mother's arm. "Yes, I liked that, too. It reminded me of a marble wall Arthur admired on our honeymoon in Italy."

Mrs. Ellickson dropped Fran's hand and walked a few steps down the hill. The view was splendid, she had to admit. She shaded her eyes from the sun glinting off the river. This would be a nice spot for a picnic. "I often sit here for hours, talking to Arthur," said Fran. Mrs. Ellickson looked at her daughter in alarm. "What do you mean?" she said. "Just what I said. What's the matter? I always talked everything over with Arthur, and I still do. His spirit is here for me."

Mrs. Ellickson looked away, hoping Fran wouldn't start talking about past lives or angels. "Perhaps we should be getting to the house," she said at last. "I'd like a bath, and we need to start making to-do lists." Fran had invited a group of friends and neighbors to Thanksgiving dinner and asked her mother to help.

As Fran walked uphill toward the car, Mrs. Ellickson noticed how quickly her daughter's breath became labored, how blotched her face was by the time she reached the car. Her heart, thought Mrs. Ellickson, whose own skipped a beat. Why doesn't her doctor make her lose that weight?

Arthur had surprised Mrs. Ellickson by wanting to marry her daughter. Fran had been a bright, pretty girl, but she had been obese from the age of twelve. Her daughter's body was an embarrassment to the fashionably thin Mrs. Ellickson. Fran further offended her mother by favoring bright colors and large prints that accentuated her size rather than disguising it. Mrs. Ellickson had rarely commented on her daughter's appearance, but Fran knew that her mother disapproved of her. Arthur liked Fran the way she was. A miracle, it seemed to both mother and daughter.

Then Arthur had developed alarming symptoms, blurred vision, numbness, loss of balance. His illness was finally diagnosed as multiple sclerosis. Arthur grew weaker and required more and more care, and one day Fran called and told her mother he was dead. But Fran had never stopped talking about him. Now it seemed that she still talked *to* him as well.

They got back in the car and were soon out of the cemetery. Fran drove fast. She asked her mother about the flight. "It was fine," said Mrs. Ellickson, "but I had a little trouble about the knives." Fran looked puzzled. "My kitchen knives," said Mrs. Ellickson. "They didn't want to let me carry them on the plane." A frown appeared between Fran's eyebrows. "I have knives, Mother," she said. "I prefer my own," said Mrs. Ellickson. "Other people's knives aren't always reliable. Especially for carving turkey."

"My knives are fine," snapped Fran. "Arthur insisted on keeping them sharp." Mrs. Ellickson glanced at her daughter's left hand. She still wore her wedding ring. She probably can't get it off, thought Mrs. Ellickson. "He got out the whetstone and steel at least once a month and sharpened all the knives." Mrs. Ellickson refrained from remarking that the knives surely had not remained sharp for the ten years since Arthur's death.

They pulled into the driveway. Fran had not given up the big house on the hill when Arthur died. Last summer she had had the kitchen remodeled. The year before she had had the roof replaced and the siding repainted. The year before she had had the carpeting pulled up and the hardwood floors refinished. Every year it was something. Mrs. Ellickson had tried to persuade Fran to sell the house and move to someplace smaller and less expensive, but Fran had always resisted.

Fran led her mother into the new kitchen. Mrs. Ellickson was stunned. "This must have cost a small fortune," she said. Fran said yes, she was in debt up to her eyebrows, but she looked pleased as she showed her mother the two new ovens and the professional range that fit into what had been a breakfast nook, the polished granite counters, the Swedish dishwasher, the white linoleum floor. Mrs. Ellickson sat down on a stool at the center counter and pulled out a notebook. "Don't you want to get settled first?" said Fran. "Actually, I'd like a cup of coffee," said Mrs. Ellickson. She began making notes.

Fran pulled a French press coffeemaker from a cupboard over the stove. Mrs. Ellickson went to the refrigerator and got a carton of milk. She poured milk into a cup and opened the microwave. "What are you doing?" said Fran. "Just heating milk for my coffee," said Mrs. Ellickson. "Here, you'd better use this pan," said Fran, handing her mother a small pan with a pouring lip.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Ellickson. "It will be faster in the microwave." She started to put her cup in the microwave, then pulled a book out of it. "Do you always keep the instructions inside your

appliances?" she asked her daughter. Then she noticed that the microwave wasn't plugged in. "Don't you use this?" Fran shook her head. Mrs. Ellickson pulled the sales receipt out of the instruction book. "You've had this ten years, and you've never used it?" Fran walked over and shut the microwave door. "I prefer the regular oven," she said. "But Fran," said Mrs. Ellickson, "why have something this expensive that you don't use?" Fran turned to her mother. Her face was splotched and angry. She began to cry.

"Why, Fran," said Mrs. Ellickson, "what's the matter?"

Then she looked at the date on the sales receipt. "Fran," said Mrs. Ellickson, "isn't that the day Arthur died?" Fran nodded her head, still sobbing. "You bought this the day Arthur died? Oh, I see." Mrs. Ellickson wondered why Fran left the oven in such a conspicuous spot. "Why don't you put it away someplace, where you don't have to look at it every day?" Fran looked up. "I want to be reminded," she said. Mrs. Ellickson forced herself to sit still and look calm. "What do you mean, reminded?" she finally said. "That I could have saved him," Fran said.

Mrs. Ellickson took a deep breath. "But dear, he was sick," she said. "Yes," said Fran. "He was sick. And I went shopping for a microwave." Fran was having trouble breathing. "Instead of staying home, I went shopping," she gasped. "And he died."

Fran ran out of the room. Mrs. Ellickson put the pan of milk on the stove and watched while it heated. Her hands shook. She gripped the handle of the pan and concentrated on the milk. Fran came back into the kitchen, clutching a paper. "Here," she said, "read this." "I don't want the milk to boil over," Mrs. Ellickson said. Fran reached in front of her mother and turned off the burner. Mrs. Ellickson looked at the paper. "Why do you want me to read Arthur's death certificate?" she said.

Fran pointed to one line. Mrs. Ellickson frowned. "I don't understand," she said. "How could he asphyxiate?" She had a sudden vision of her daughter holding a pillow over her husband's head. "He

choked to death," said Fran. "He was eating by himself and he choked to death." Tears ran down her cheeks. "I could have saved him. I knew the Heimlich maneuver, I took a course and practiced. It's my fault. My fault." Fran was sobbing again.

Mrs. Ellickson thought of the tens of thousands of dollars Fran spent every year on the house, her attention to Arthur's grave, her wedding ring. "Fran," said Mrs. Ellickson, "come sit in the living room. We need to talk."

Fran grabbed a paper towel and blew her nose. "No, that's enough." She went to the stove and turned the burner on under the milk. After a few seconds, she picked up the pan and poured the milk into the cup. She added coffee and handed the cup to Mrs. Ellickson. "Sugar?" Fran said. Mrs. Ellickson shook her head. Fran picked up her mother's single small bag. "I'll take this up to your room," she said. "Just a minute," said Mrs. Ellickson. She opened the bag and pulled out a leather carrying case. "We'll need the knives here."

Mrs. Ellickson listened to her daughter's footsteps climbing the stairs. She's buried herself here, she thought. She's buried herself in this house. She envisioned Fran's wedding ring, cutting into the flesh of her fat finger. And she's buried in her own fat, she thought. Watching her daughter gorge herself on Thanksgiving Day was the last thing she wanted to do. She could feign illness, pretend there was an emergency that called her back home. But she wouldn't.

Mrs. Ellickson went up the stairway. "Fran," she called. "All right if I have that bath now?" Hot water was a sure restorative. Fran handed her mother a stack of towels. "I blew up the bath pillow for you," she said. Mrs. Ellickson took the pillow. "I thought we'd order pizza tonight," said Fran. "Rest up for our cooking marathon."

Mrs. Ellickson smeared a clay mask on her face, tied up her hair, and lowered herself into the tub. She sank into the water, lay back on the plastic pillow, and closed her eyes. She shrugged her shoulders and heard the muscles pop. She sank deeper into the water, submerging every part

of her body but her head. She sometimes fell asleep in the tub. I could drown someday, she thought. Would they write "drowned in the bathtub" on her death certificate? Mrs. Ellickson sat up and rinsed off the mask. Then she lay back in the water. She wanted to let her mind wander, to set it loose like a dog off the leash and see where it ran.

Perhaps Fran was right, that she could have saved Arthur. But she hadn't. What was it about the house? Fran remodeled the house every summer. Arthur died in the summer, didn't he? New roof, new paint, new appliances. Every summer. Every year, Fran gave the house new life. It's worse than I imagined, thought Mrs. Ellickson. Fran is trying to keep Arthur alive by keeping his house alive. "You can't let her stay buried in this house," said a voice. Mrs. Ellickson jerked her head up. That sounded like Frank. She must have fallen asleep.

She remembered an argument with her husband. "Fran's wilting for lack of attention from you," Frank had said. "Like a plant starved for water." Mrs. Ellickson had been angry with her husband. "I never criticize her," she said. She didn't like to receive criticism any more than to give it. "You don't have to put it in words, it's your attitude," Frank told her.

Mrs. Ellickson opened her eyes. The bath water had grown tepid. She stretched out her left leg and turned the hot water tap with her foot. She swirled the water with her hands to move the hot water toward her, then lay back in the steaming water.

She heard a knock on the bathroom door, then Fran's voice. "Are you all right, Mother?" Mrs. Ellickson felt a flash of anger. She hated being fussed over. "Of course," she answered, then added, "dear." "The pizza should be here any minute," said Fran. "Okay?" Mrs. Ellickson noticed dog hairs on the bathroom tile as she stepped out of the tub and grimaced. She had thought of getting a pet after Frank died, but animals were dirty. Fran's bathroom was well stocked. Mrs. Ellickson helped herself to the hairdryer, put on her bathrobe, and stepped into the hall, refreshed and hungry.

The doorbell rang. "Pizza's here," yelled Fran from downstairs. Mrs. Ellickson went to the top of the stairs and said, "Here I am," in a normal voice. She hated being yelled at from other parts of the house. Fran glanced up and smiled at her mother as she reached the bottom of the stairs. "Shall we eat in here?" Fran gestured at the living room. "'Mystery' is on in a few minutes." Mrs. Ellickson followed her daughter to the couch in front of the television. Fran went to the kitchen for plates and napkins. "Bring me a knife and fork, please," said Mrs. Ellickson. She never ate with her fingers.

They watched the television drama in silence. Mrs. Ellickson glanced at Fran as she fed herself a piece of the pizza, folding the slice lengthwise so it would fit easily through her lips. As she ate, her jaws ground from side to side like an insect masticating a leaf, and her hands moved automatically, folding one piece after another of the pizza and pushing it through her teeth and into her mouth. Mrs. Ellickson laid down her knife and fork in disgust. The show ended and Fran switched off the television. "Aren't you hungry?" she asked, noticing the unfinished pizza on her mother's plate. Mrs. Ellickson shrugged and looked away. "I had a snack on the plane," she said. Fran gestured at her mother's plate, and receiving a nod, picked up the remaining piece and finished it. She took the plates into the kitchen and washed them while Mrs. Ellickson looked around the living room.

Fran had hired a decorator and everything matched. Mrs. Ellickson would have shopped for herself and chosen a mix of pieces, but she supposed Fran lacked the imagination for that. The furniture was massive, such as a man might choose for his study. Large cabinet for the television and stereo, heavy leather couch, armchairs with thick arms and high backs, chunky end tables, tall, heavy lamps. Arthur's old desk stood in front of a window overlooking the back garden. The desk was diminished by the new furniture, surely an unintended effect. Mrs. Ellickson knew Arthur had built it himself. He had also added a deck off the dining room and made the outdoor furniture. Mrs.

Ellickson noticed many photographs of Arthur—one on the desk, three on the bookshelves, another on an end table, more on the wall. He was only thirty-five when he died.

Mrs. Ellickson heard Fran open the back door and call the dog, then the click of the animal's nails on the linoleum. She went into the kitchen. The dog wagged her tail but kept eating. Fran had climbed on a stepstool in front of a tall cupboard. She said she was getting down the crystal glasses so they could wash them. "Can't we do that later?" Mrs. Ellickson said as she steadied the stool. Fran said she'd rather get it out of the way. Mrs. Ellickson took the box from Fran. She realized it was the same one she'd packed the glasses in when she gave them to Fran and Arthur for their wedding. She set the box on the counter and opened it. The wedding card was inside. "Haven't you ever used these?" she asked. Fran brought down another box. "You gave us a set of twenty-four," she said. "We never had that kind of party." Noticing her mother's look, she went on: "We always used two of the glasses on our anniversary. You mustn't think I don't like them. They're beautiful. Beautiful things should be kept safe." Mrs. Ellickson ate off her French porcelain and drank from her Irish lead crystal glasses every day, but she didn't say so.

The dog finished her food and approached Mrs. Ellickson. Fran noticed her mother pull away and sent the dog into the living room. Fran filled the sink with soapy water and washed the glasses one by one, handing them to her mother to rinse and wipe dry. "Life is full of beautiful things," Mrs. Ellickson said as she dried the last glass. She held the glass up so the facets would catch the light. "I wonder if it isn't a mistake to hoard them." Fran let the water out of the sink. "What do you mean, Mother?" she said slowly. "Nothing," said Mrs. Ellickson. "Only that we can't keep things hidden away for fear they'll get broken. Or lost," she added.

Fran hung up the wet towels. "I'm tired, Mother," she said, "so I'll say goodnight." They left the kitchen and Fran turned out the

light. Mrs. Ellickson said she was going to stay up awhile longer. Fran went up the stairs. "Thank you for getting the pizza," said Mrs. Ellickson. "Come on, Sadie," said Fran. The dog followed Fran up the stairs.

Mrs. Ellickson sat on the couch and stared at the cold fireplace. After a few minutes, she stood up and began moving from one part of the room to another. She gathered the photographs of Arthur and piled them in the deepest drawer of his desk. She fetched a small rug, lifted the desk onto it, and dragged it into the next room. "There, that's better," she said. She went into the kitchen and tried to lift the microwave. It was too heavy. She rested and tried again. Still too heavy. So she plugged it in, heated up some leftovers she found in the refrigerator, and went back into the living room. The movie channel was showing one of her favorites.

Next morning, Mrs. Ellickson sat drinking coffee in the kitchen when Fran burst in. "What have you done, Mother? Where did you put Arthur's photos?" The microwave dinged and Mrs. Ellickson removed a pitcher of milk. Fran turned pale. "You're using the microwave. I told you I never use the microwave." Mrs. Ellickson poured the hot milk into her cup and added coffee.

"Sit down, Fran," she said. "We have to talk." Fran did not move. "You're being hysterical," said Mrs. Ellickson. She spread a carefully manicured hand on the black counter. One of the nails was chipped, she noticed. It must have been last night's furniture moving. She looked at her daughter. "This all must stop, you know," she said. "It's morbid, the way you act as if you're still married to Arthur." She cited Arthur's picture everywhere, Fran's constant visits to Arthur's grave, the unused microwave. Then she brought up the house. "Find a smaller place, stop putting so much time and money into this house," she said.

Fran put a bag of bagels on the counter and boosted her bulk onto a stool across from her mother. Mrs. Ellickson was willful, Fran

knew. She thinks I'm soft, she thought. "This is my home, Mother. I don't want to move. Besides, I can't afford to sell." Mrs. Ellickson gestured impatiently. Yes, she had heard this before, she said, but it was just a rationalization, surely Fran could see that. Fran thought, if it really were a rationalization then I couldn't see it, could I? A rationalization arose to keep a person from feeling pain, shame, guilt, something. Fran tuned out her mother's words until she heard Mrs. Ellickson say, ". . . you're married to this house just as you were married to Arthur."

Fran stared at her mother. "What a ridiculous idea," she said. Mrs. Ellickson willed herself not to smile in triumph. If Fran resisted her idea, it must be right. Mrs. Ellickson helped herself to a bagel. "You know I'm right, Fran. When you calm down, you'll see it." Fran remembered hearing the same words when she had wanted to try out for the school play and her mother had argued against the idea, she knew Fran would only be embarrassed and humiliated. Where did she get the idea that she could act? her mother had said. Did she think herself beautiful? Fran knew her mother meant thin when she said beautiful.

Fran poured herself a glass of milk. "Thank you for the amateur psychoanalysis, Mother, but you don't know anything about Arthur and me, and certainly not about how I feel about the house." Mrs. Ellickson stirred her coffee. "That's just it," she said. "You have feelings about the house. It's not natural." Fran felt the blood rush to her face. What did her mother know about natural feelings? She had made her child feel unwanted and unloved. The only feelings she had were for herself. Fran felt tears threatening her eyes. She willed them away.

"And then there's your ring," she heard her mother say. Why won't she stop? thought Fran. She hoped her eyes were not red. "What about my ring?" she said. Mrs. Ellickson sipped her coffee. "It makes it look as if you're a married woman. Arthur's been dead ten years. Ten years, Fran. He's dead. You don't have a husband anymore. You have to accept it." Fran opened her mother's leather case and took out the

chef's knife. How dare she, she thought. Fran cut open a bagel, spread it with cream cheese and apricot jam, and stuffed it into her mouth. Mrs. Ellickson finished her coffee.

Fran reached for another bagel, but stopped and spread her left hand on the counter. The nails were short and bitten, the cuticles ragged. She turned her wedding ring and pulled. "See, it won't come off," she said, smiling at Mrs. Ellickson. I'm not surprised, thought her mother. She watched as Fran picked up the knife and brushed the cutting edge against the ball of her thumb.

"This knife is as sharp as a scalpel," said Fran, and she ran the tip slowly around the outside of her ring. Mrs. Ellickson pressed her lips together as a thin line of red opened up on Fran's finger. Then Fran brought the knife blade down, hard and fast, on the counter, and Mrs. Ellickson shut her eyes. Her heart bucked in her chest. She opened her eyes, expecting to see blood gushing from Fran's severed finger.

What she saw was Fran's finger, still whole, and Fran staring at her. "You never liked me, did you?" said Fran. Mrs. Ellickson watched the blood oozing from Fran's finger, around the wedding ring. Lies came to mind, but she couldn't say them. "You never liked me. Why did you have me?" The only answer that occurred to Mrs. Ellickson was that she had loved her husband. She didn't like the way that made her sound, like an ordinary, conformist housewife.

Fran began bending the knife blade back and forth on the countertop. "Please don't do that, you'll break it," said Mrs. Ellickson. Fran bent the blade harder. Mrs. Ellickson reached to take the knife away, but Fran pointed the sharp edge up and Mrs. Ellickson pulled her hand back just in time to keep from being cut.

Fran's excitement mounted as the blood pooled on the counter around her ring finger. "This business about how I'm still married to Arthur. Or to the house," said Fran. "That's crap. Horse manure. Bullshit." Fran enjoyed the shocked expression on Mrs. Ellickson's face. Her anger leapt like flames from a bonfire. "You know what? I

think you're jealous," she said. "Guilty and jealous." Fran laughed. Why had she never realized it? Arthur had loved her, when her mother couldn't. Mrs. Ellickson stared at the knife blade Fran was still bending on the counter. She was afraid. The blood started to drip off the counter.

Mrs. Ellickson put her fingers on her wrist and counted the pulse beating in her artery. Fran stopped bending the knife. "Something wrong, Mother?" Mrs. Ellickson shook her head. She hadn't loved Fran, she admitted to herself. She had resented her. She hated her pregnant body, she hated childbirth, she hated changing diapers, she hated the sleepless nights, the worry, the fear. Then when the girl got older and fat, the embarrassment, the shame. Her heart was beating too fast.

"Aren't you going to clean up that blood?" Mrs. Ellickson said. Fran shrugged. "You don't look good," she said. She herself felt splendid, like an Amazon going to battle. Her mother looked pale. She wasn't putting up much of a fight.

Mrs. Ellickson stood up and gripped the countertop. "I think I'll go lie down," she said. Fran felt the pleasure of battle fading. She reached out her uninjured hand to help her mother, but Mrs. Ellickson brushed it away. Halfway to the kitchen door, she collapsed. Fran struggled off the stool and eased herself to the floor, kneeling beside her mother. Mrs. Ellickson tried to speak. "Don't talk," said Fran. Mrs. Ellickson opened her mouth. "Fat," she said. Fran suppressed an urge to giggle. "Heart," her mother's voice whispered, then stopped. Fran felt Mrs. Ellickson's throat for a pulse. What had been too fast a moment ago was now imperceptible. Fran noticed that her finger had dripped blood onto her mother's face. She wiped it off, pushed herself off the floor, and went to the phone.

When the paramedics had bandaged her finger and driven her mother's body away, Fran sat by the phone and canceled Thanksgiving dinner. Then she took her mother's knife case outside and dropped it into the garbage can. Sadie pushed her nose into Fran's hand and

followed her into the house. Fran felt a need to keep moving. She dragged Arthur's desk back into the living room, found his pictures in the drawer, and redistributed them on the shelves and walls. She remembered a bag of daffodil bulbs in the spare refrigerator and decided now would be a good time to plant them. As she passed through the kitchen, she saw Sadie licking the blood off the floor next to the counter. It would leave a stain on the white linoleum, she realized. Well, she'd think of something.

She fetched the bulbs and began digging holes for them in the fragrant earth. The air was fresh and the sun was warm. Her injured finger hardly hurt at all. She remembered the dahlias, keeping cool in a bucket in the basement. They would look nice on her mother's grave, she thought. She dropped a bulb into a hole and smoothed the dirt over it. She realized that she did not want to have Mrs. Ellickson buried in the earth, like Arthur. No, she would have her mother's body cremated, she would burn up those unhappy memories and scatter them in the wind. She would take the dahlias to Arthur. He would appreciate them. She put another bulb in the ground and filled the hole with earth.

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Pastor Tillit sighed and pushed aside the lace curtain next to his desk. He disliked lace curtains but the women's guild had furnished his study and they hadn't asked his opinion. In a succession of pastorates, he had become used to living with other people's taste in curtains.

The sidewalk was deserted in the hot afternoon sun. He watched a black cat walk slowly through the uncut grass in the yard across the street and disappear under a fence. A lavender blossom from the jacaranda next to the window fell onto the lawn. Heat waves rose from the asphalt of the street.

Pastor Tillit dropped the curtain and looked at his watch. Three o'clock. It was too hot to think. The congregation had voted against installing air conditioning. Most of them were only in the building on Wednesday nights and Sundays. He was here all week. To run the church's business. And in case his flock needed him.

"Will you marry them, then?" Mrs. Webster's gray face had looked anxiously at Pastor Tillit from the other side of his desk. She had phoned that morning and asked to see him right away. "I'm afraid it's kind of urgent," she'd told him. He was pretty certain he knew what she meant by "urgent." He didn't like it when girls got pregnant and then he had to perform the ceremony as if they were still pure, but there was really no choice. Mrs. Webster had clearly not properly instilled the fear of God in her daughter, by which he meant the fear of pregnancy out of wedlock. But it was his duty to make sure the baby

had both a father and a mother, so he said yes, he would marry the girl and the boy. Mrs. Webster praised God and blessed her pastor, who squeezed her moist hand in a gesture of compassion and told her to check with his secretary about a date. "As soon as possible," Mrs. Webster said. Pastor Tillit nodded and smiled as he closed the door behind her.

The next visitor had been Mr. Dobbs. Pastor Tillit understood that Mr. Dobbs wished his wife would die but could not admit it. The pastor had suggested to Mr. Dobbs that he cultivate outside interests—for instance, the men's club at the church. Or perhaps he could take himself to a movie once in a while, or get a library card and read. But Mr. Dobbs, though he always thanked Pastor Tillit for his advice, never did anything but take care of his wife, or talk about taking care of her. The bedpans were a special burden. "She keeps wanting me to take her to the bathroom, but the doctor says I mustn't, and it's hard for her to do her business lying down." Pastor Tillit reminded Mr. Dobbs of how Mary Magdalene had washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and hair. "Marriage is a sacred bond," he reminded Mr. Dobbs. "Your service to your wife is a sacred duty." "Amen," said Mr. Dobbs. He left soon after. Pastor Tillit paused a moment to ask God's forgiveness before taking up his duties again.

After lunch, the precinct chairman called to confirm that the church would once again be a voting place for the upcoming special election. Pastor Tillit was proud to see the flag flying in front of the church and the sign POLLING PLACE on the lawn on election days, and he would come into the Sunday school room several times a day to observe the proceedings. This was democracy in action, he thought as he looked about the room. It pleased him to see the voters sign their names in the poll books and go into the portable booths to mark their ballots. Sometimes the room was empty except for the poll clerks. That always worried him. Sometimes people were lined up outside on the sidewalk, especially if the election was controversial. On those occasions,

Pastor Tillit felt especially proud. He always gave a sermon about democracy and American values just after election day, drawing on the patriotic feelings the polling place aroused in him.

Pastor Tillit pushed the rough draft of Sunday's sermon into a pile—his subject was Paul's second letter to the Corinthians and it had not inspired him—and stood up. The parsonage was behind the church, across a tidy alley. Pastor Tillit locked the door of the church behind him and crossed the alley. He was sweating by the time he got to his front door. It was a modest West Los Angeles stucco house, with a struggling flowerbed in front and two flourishing citrus trees in back. As he unlocked the door, Pastor Tillit smelled the lemon blossoms. The inside of the house was cool. He had bought his own air conditioner. Marjory was not home from work yet, and their two boys were probably at the beach. Pastor Tillit made himself a glass of iced tea and stretched out on the living room couch.

He woke up when the glass spilled on his chest. He was tempted to swear but restrained himself. Pastor Tillit still half-believed that each person had a black book in which God recorded all his transgressions and that He consulted when deciding the fate of the person's soul after death. The fear of hell still lived in Pastor Tillit, though he judged it had died out in most people. What had taken its place, he wondered. Maybe it was the nameless, nonspecific anxiety so many suffered from. Did it have something to do with the worship of money? While he changed his shirt, Pastor Tillit mused that this might make an interesting sermon topic.

In a few minutes Marjory would be home, and then the boys would arrive, sunburned and ravenous. Everything they said about the appetites of teenage boys had turned out to be true. This thought made him hungry, and he went to the kitchen for a snack. He was tempted by the lemon pie Marjory had made the night before, using the sweet Meyer lemons from their own trees, but he peeled a banana instead, remembering his cholesterol.

Then the phone rang, and Pastor Tillit hurried to answer it. He never questioned the necessity of picking up the machine whenever it called, at however inconvenient a time. Marjory had suggested using the answering machine to screen calls, especially at dinnertime, when salesmen were more likely to call, but he had rejected the idea. Someone in need of his help might be put off by the machine. That would be another black mark in his book—and Pastor Tillit knew he had many sins to answer for after more than forty years of life.

"Tillit residence," he said.

The line went dead. That's odd, he thought. Then he decided it was probably one of the girls who were pursuing his fourteen-year-old son, Peter. Girls these days were shockingly aggressive, even some of the ones at church. He had been relieved when his second child turned out to be another boy. You didn't have to worry about boys getting pregnant, after all. But girls didn't fear pregnancy the way they used to, and parents had terrible things to worry about no matter what sex their children were. He heard Marjory's car pull into the carport, swallowed the last of the banana, and went to greet her.

After dinner, Pastor Tillit took the boys into the backyard and led a family discussion about their summer project. He was a firm believer in group projects to knit the family ties closer, and this year the project was a swimming pool. The idea was not entirely his own—the boys had pestered him for months, ever since one of their friends' fathers put a pool in their backyard—but he had to admit the idea of lounging in the water on a hot day, surrounded by the fragrant lemon trees and entertained by the boys and their friends, had its appeal. So they had decided on an aboveground model, four feet deep, with a ladder on the sides. Bright blue. They would have to level the ground, but it would not be necessary to excavate. They would need to move the lemon trees, though. Marjory wanted to call a nursery and have them send someone to help, but Pastor Tillit would not hear of it. He was used to leading people, not taking advice.

"I know what I'm doing, Marjory," he told his wife.

On Saturday, said Pastor Tillit, they would get up early and dig new, deep holes along the fence for the trees. Tonight, they would figure out exactly where the trees would go and measure out the pool area. After they moved the trees, they would get to work leveling the ground, which would take two weekends, Pastor Tillit figured. They would order the pool to be delivered on the third weekend, and in a month, it would be ready.

Pastor Tillit went to his toolshop in the former garage and brought out a long measuring tape, some wooden stakes, and three hammers. He and the boys marked the circumference of the new pool and chose two spots for the lemon trees. They would be far enough from the pool not to drop leaves or fruit into it, but close enough to be enjoyed for their smell and their beauty. Pastor Tillit had grown up in Minnesota, and this backyard with its yellow fruit and sweet blossoms was like paradise, especially in January, when back home you had to put heaters on your car's engine block overnight lest it freeze and crack.

On Saturday, the male Tillits were outside by seven o'clock. By nine, the new holes were dug. The lemon trees were next. Pastor Tillit began digging about a foot and a half from the trunk, going as deep as he could with his shovel. From time to time, he directed one of the boys to turn the hose on the ground and soften it. He finished circling the tree and began pushing the trunk. It barely moved. He realized he would have to dig deeper to get all the roots. At eleven, he pushed on the trunk again. It gave a little. He told Peter to run more water on the ground around the base. Then he pushed again. Something cracked, and the tree leaned over. Pastor Tillit stuck his shovel under the roots and pried. The tree tilted farther. He pried some more, and the tree tipped over.

"Okay, boys," he said, "everybody grab on. We'll lift on my count of three."

One, two, three, and they struggled to lift the tree, which was heavier than Pastor Tillit had expected. The thorns on the branches tore his shirt and scratched his arms. They placed the tree in one of the holes and filled in the gaps around the base with the soil they'd dug out.

"Run the hose on it while we dig up the other one," said Pastor Tillit, and they repeated the process. Marjory came outside once or twice, looking doubtful. By two o'clock both trees had been transplanted, and the Tillits were enjoying lunch. They spent the rest of the afternoon scraping the ground where the pool would sit. But they didn't make much progress. The ground was hard, and they were tired from moving the trees.

On Sunday morning, Pastor Tillit walked into the backyard with his cup of coffee and noticed that the leaves on the lemon trees had curled up. Must not have given them enough water, he thought, and turned on the hose. This was his busy day, and he didn't look at the trees again.

The next morning he saw that the leaves were turning brown, and that several had fallen to the ground. Marjory suggested the nursery again, but Pastor Tillit brushed her aside.

"They just need time to settle in," he said.

By the next weekend Marjory could see that the lemon trees were dead. Pastor Tillit and his sons busied themselves with the ground-leveling project and didn't mention the trees. Before he went in to dinner, Pastor Tillit left the hose to run on them.

"It's a waste of water," said Marjory. "You broke the taproots. I heard them crack."

Pastor Tillit ignored her. But the next Saturday he organized the boys and they sawed down the two lemon trees. They cut the trunks and large limbs into lengths for the fireplace and hauled the rest to the dump. This work set their schedule for the pool installation back a week. By Labor Day, however, the pool was up and filled, and the shouts of the boys and their friends filled the neighborhood all that fall.

Pastor Tillit spent little time in the pool. It was mainly for the kids, after all. In January, they were called to another pastorate. Their new home would be in Arizona, so they dismantled the pool and moved it with them. The backyard they left behind was nothing but a patch of bare soil, and the sun beat down on it without mercy. Pastor Tillit was glad to be gone. The place hadn't been the same without the lemon trees. He tried to rationalize that they were, after all, just trees. But he knew, deep down, that he had been guilty of pride and arrogance, and that his book had at least two new heavy black marks. Hubris, that was the word for his sin. Ignorance, yes, that too. But he kept busy and tried not to think about it much. It was easier after they moved away.

1997

The Lame Man

Any passersby in the street, seeing the young man make his painful way down the three shallow steps to the sidewalk, would have turned their eyes away. They wouldn't have wanted to watch him balance on the first step with his right leg, fling his left leg out to the side, then hurl it forward and let it drop. He might even have had to lift his leg with his hand.

But the street was empty. Setting his jaw, the young man stepped down with his right leg, threw his left leg out and down, then started over as he negotiated the last step. He had been lame from birth. It amused him to refer to his "gammy leg" like a retired military officer in some English novel, and to see the uncomprehending looks on people's faces. If they were friends, he would give them a small lecture on the meanings of "game" and the British dialectal forms of the adjective. His specialty was English dialects.

He reached the sidewalk without mishap. But he felt rattled from the tumble he had just missed taking inside, in the entry hall. The edge of the rug had been curled up, and if his eyes hadn't happened to move down to his feet when they turned away from the mirror, he might not have seen it. With his bad leg, it would have been difficult for him to get a purchase on the floor if he had fallen, and he could have lain there a long while, until the landlady came back from work, without being able to raise himself. It would have been more embarrassing than painful, but still, the thought of it frightened him.

He made his way slowly down the street. Heavy clouds were moving in from the west, and he wished he'd brought his umbrella. He hated the idea of getting wet. But it was too much trouble to go back to the house.

He thought back to the landlady's rug. It was a genuine Persian, old and worn and thin, but in places still showing rich reds and blues, echoes of the rug's splendor when the dyes had been washed in the waters of a cold, swift mountain stream—in the headwaters of the Tigris or the Euphrates, perhaps, the rivers of Eden. The rug lent an exotic touch to the otherwise drab house. It aroused his imagination, and his senses, with its colors of walnut and pomegranate, mint, rosewater, turquoise, and sand.

It could have been a magic rug, he mused, the flying carpet he'd often dreamt of as a child. Instead of tripping him, the rug could have lifted him up and out through a window, above the houses. He wouldn't have needed his leg to take him places now that he could fly, move anywhere, faster than normal people could walk. Swift and powerful he would feel, the earth rushing by underneath, and warmed by the sun, as the carpet had been in its infancy.

He felt the first drops of rain and tried to hurry.

As he opened the door of the café, his briefcase knocked against a young woman on her way out. He apologized, but she rushed on without acknowledging him. He smiled wryly—he was a long way from the Garden of Eden.

He got himself a coffee and a Danish and sat at his usual table, the gathering spot for a small group of friends who considered themselves the intellectual heart of the community. Mostly they just talked about books they had read. Sometimes they told jokes, although the young man thought it was a stupid waste of time. He didn't like the hostility he felt beneath most jokes, and he found it hard to laugh at them.

He was the first one there today, and he occupied himself by staring out the window. By now the rain was coming down in torrents,

creating a mist so thick he could hardly see across the street. He could barely make out the new leaves on the oak trees, just coming out, small brownish swellings that would soon shade the entire street. He could see the blurred outlines of the female cones on a young pine next to the window, standing proudly erect, but the small male cones, hidden farther up the branches, would have been invisible even if it hadn't been raining. He didn't know quite what to make of this reversal of sexual parts, compared with humans, except that it amused him.

He grew fascinated by the sheets of rain running down the glass. The view, distorted by the water, was mesmerizing. Greens and browns and grays ran together like watercolors dropped onto wet paper. He forgot to blink, the colors slid down his eyes, and he was back at the house, looking at his reflection in the hall mirror. He saw a broad forehead, electric blue eyes with blond hair falling into them (he needed a haircut), generous mouth, prominent cheekbones. He leaned his head on his hand and gazed at himself, smiling faintly.

He watched his reflection put on a pair of glasses. Then he started out of his reverie. The woman sitting across from him turned around quickly and looked behind her, alarmed. He tried to collect himself. The woman leaned forward a little.

"Is something the matter?" she said.

He felt himself blush, and his smile returned, more embarrassed than friendly. "No, not really." He looked away.

"I thought something must have happened, from the look on your face." She paused. "Are you sure you're all right?"

He looked even more embarrassed. "Yes, it was nothing, really."

She turned to the book she had started reading. It probably wasn't worth pursuing. Still, there was something appealing about the man, something boyish and innocent. She read a few paragraphs, but the man's image kept interfering with the sense. She looked up. He was still there. He was good-looking. She put her book down.

"You're going to think I'm awfully nosy," she said, "but won't you tell me what it was that startled you so?"

He smiled self-consciously again, then spoke. "It was just that I thought I was looking at myself, and then I saw it wasn't me, it was you."

The woman took off her glasses. "You mean without these?"

"Well, yes, but it was just an illusion. The eyes and the forehead and the hair, perhaps."

"Yes, perhaps."

They were silent. The table filled up with the regulars, and the woman realized she was intruding. She stood up and said she had to be going.

He looked at her. "Do you come here often?" She nodded. "Then I'll see you again I suppose?"

"Yes, I suppose."

She was past the cashier's stand before it occurred to him that he didn't know her name. He stood up and made his way, awkwardly, through the now-crowded tables and to the door. Luckily, she had had to stop to put up her umbrella.

"Sorry, I forgot to ask your name," he said, panting a little.

"Liz," she said, looking deliberately into his eyes, hoping he wouldn't notice that she had noticed his limp. "And you?"

"I'm Andrew."

He took the hand she held out: "Hello." She smiled at him, then pushed through the door and into the storm. The rain had settled into a steady downpour. Andrew went back to the table, but instead of joining the debate on the late novels of Henry James, he stuffed his briefcase under his jacket and started home. He didn't care so much about getting wet anymore.

Liz frowned to herself as she strode down the street under her umbrella. He's lame, she thought. He would always walk slower than she did, and he wouldn't be able to hike, or run, or even windowshop very well. Was he someone she'd have to take care of? When she got to

the curb, she deliberately splashed in the puddle. I'd better think about this, she thought. Very, very carefully. She plodded on, gripping her umbrella, so deep in thought she didn't notice the rain had stopped until she reached her front steps and closed the umbrella. She wondered how long she had been walking with the umbrella open, protecting her from nothing.

Andrew didn't see Liz for another week. Then he remembered it was time for midterms—perhaps she had exams. When she came in on Monday of the second week, he sat down beside her. No, she wasn't a student, she'd been busy. He didn't press her. But he asked her to come to dinner, and she said yes. He promised her he was a good cook.

"You're as good as your word," Liz said, laying her fork across her plate. "That was delicious." She waved away Andrew's offer of more *coq au vin*, but held out her glass for more of the *vin*. Andrew raised his glass: "*Skol*," he said. "You're supposed to look the person who says that in the eyes." She lifted her glass and looked into his eyes; it was like looking into her own. "*Skol*," she said, and when she put down her glass, she knew they would be lovers.

At first Andrew was shy with her. His deformity had made him passive, and he was ashamed of showing himself. Liz brought the full-length mirror next to the bed so they could laugh about how they looked like twins wrestling. "It's only because you aren't wearing your glasses," Andrew said, and gradually, as the summer stretched into fall, he relaxed.

Then one afternoon, the rain pounding against the windows and the wind howling in the trees, Andrew looked at the body lying beneath him, and it seemed like any woman, not Liz, not anyone in particular, just a woman, and he felt a sudden fury that would have frightened him had he not at the same time felt himself swell with

desire. He pushed Liz's knees back to make room for him and entered her without any preliminaries. She pulled the corners of her mouth back in what was not quite a smile and not quite a grimace, and her eyes got dark. Then she closed them and opened her mouth wider as he plunged, slowly and methodically at first, deep into her body. He felt the hot blood rising and filling his eyes, and he closed them, too.

"No," he whispered. "No, no, no" and he wanted to bite the woman's neck and taste her blood but he grabbed a pillow and plunged his teeth into that instead. The hate boiled into his penis and he plunged more savagely. "No," he moaned into the pillow. And he wanted to kill his mother for not allowing the doctor to cut her open so he could be taken out of her body whole, with two strong legs like other men. "Bitch, bitch, bitch!" he screamed. "Selfish bitch!" and he felt the woman's moans rather than heard them, and they plunged and sweated in unison, then lay moaning and panting in the wet sheets.

He was shocked. "Did I hurt you?" he said anxiously, running his hand across Liz's stomach. "Don't be silly, I love your fierceness, it makes me feel free," she said. She pushed a dank piece of hair off her forehead.

Andrew opened his mouth but she put a finger across his lips. "No, don't say it," she said. He understood that she wanted passion, not sentiment, but all the same, he knew he loved her.

Twelve months later, Andrew stood in a shower stall, admiring the handpainted green tiles and looking for a place to put his shampoo and soap. He and Liz had been married two weeks before and were spending their honeymoon in a beach cottage lent by a generous friend, on the edge of a city where it almost never rained. He remembered again the day he had slipped on a piece of soap in the school shower and couldn't right himself and lay there on the tiles, red with embarrassment, his genitals flopping, until a couple of other boys came along and helped him up. The designer of the cottage apparently expected

people to come into the shower only to rinse off the salt water—he leaned out and set his bottles on the edge of the sink.

The cottage was small but luxurious, with white-tiled floors, high ceilings, and white walls everywhere except in the bedroom, which was painted a deep Pompeian red to match an intricate Persian carpet—old but not showing its age. French doors gave onto a small deck off the bedroom, with the beach and the ocean beyond. Andrew had just been for his morning swim. Liz was making *café filtre* in the small but efficiently arranged kitchen, everything fitted into shelves or cupboards, as in a ship's galley.

Andrew came out of the shower and onto the deck. He let himself into one of the patio chairs and waited for Liz to bring the coffee and rolls. He never volunteered to carry things. His lurching gait put things like a tray of cups and saucers in grave danger. He had to be careful even carrying a cup of coffee, but he'd practiced, and besides, the café he frequented back home served its coffee in paper cups—if he dropped one of those, who cared?

He watched the first tourists of the day stake out their claims on the sand. Not that he and Liz weren't tourists themselves, but they had the loan of the house, which made all the difference. The tide was coming in. He felt invigorated by his swim, yet torpid. And happy. Liz handed him his coffee. He took her hand and held it to his face, his eyes closed, smelling the oil of the coffee beans as he nuzzled her palm. He licked it. "You taste delicious," he said, then opened his eyes and smiled at her.

That night they retired to the red bedroom while it was still light. They left the French doors open to let in the sound of the sea. Now Andrew cried "Liz, Liz," and his body moved slowly, its rhythm following the ebb and flood of the waves, its strength answering that of the tide.

Liz had said to him one day, shortly after they met, "You should get more exercise." She was an avid runner and went out to train every

day, rain or shine. Andrew liked her athleticism, her hard-muscled calves, her firm, strong thighs. In a way they made up for his own weakness, his deformity. He had always avoided exercise.

"I can't exercise," he had said. She looked at him scornfully: "You could swim." He wrinkled his nose. "You could get a rowing machine." He hated machines.

"Okay, we could get a boat, that's not a machine. A canoe," she said. A fat, slow river flowed through the city, and in summer it was full of boaters making a quiet, old-fashioned scene of rowboats and canoes and kayaks. No motors were allowed on the river. So they bought a hand-built wooden canoe, beautifully made, and Andrew and she paddled down the river nearly every day that summer, ending at a small restaurant built over the water where they could refresh themselves before making their way upstream, back to the car. They housed the canoe along the river, in a shed owned by the university.

In the red bedroom, Andrew ran his hand over the hard muscles of his wife's legs. His arm felt hard and strong, and he watched the bicep flex as his hand moved across her flesh, molding itself to the indentation along the side of her thigh, then to the slight bulge above the knee where the quadriceps muscles joined. He was proud of her body and had begun to feel proud of his own, for the first time in his life.

He had told Liz this at the end of the summer, adding that she had made him feel almost whole. She didn't like the "almost," she said, and that evening she brought home a set of barbells—one long and two short—a set of weight plates, a rack, an exercise bench, and two books on weightlifting, one by a former Mr. Universe. "Winter is coming," she said. "This will give you something to do."

Andrew was doubtful but when the rains started, he could see canoeing would be out. The first time he lay on the bench and tried to

lift the long bar off the stand and above his chest, feeling like an obedient child and not a little resentful, he thought he would faint. But by the end of the winter, he could press one hundred twenty pounds, and his stomach, not just his arms and shoulders, were announcing the benefits. Liz laughed and called him "Jock" when he took off his shirt. He was strong enough to hold her body up when they made love.

After their honeymoon by the shore, Liz and Andrew looked for a place of their own. "Let's live by the river," he said. And they found an old house above a steep slope, choked in blackberry brambles, that ran to the water. The garden was full of neglected black walnut trees, with one ancient sour cherry. The nurseryman said the cherry tree should come out, but Andrew said no. That summer it bore enough fruit for several pies, and the tree rewarded Andrew's husbandry the next spring with a beautiful display of blossoms that soon covered the ground like snow.

They hacked a path to the river through the blackberries. This allowed them to continue their canoe trips and also to reach the berries. Liz had little interest in cooking, as it turned out, so Andrew became chief jam maker. He liked having manual work to do, to offset the long hours he spent sitting at his desk, reading or writing or grading papers.

Not far from their house was another old wooden house, gaily decorated with gingerbread and surrounded by rose trellises and grape arbors. Local artists had turned the house into an art center. Liz went to look it over and signed up for a pottery class. "I can make us a set of dishes," she said. No one had thought to give them dishes for a wedding present, so they were making do with the odds and ends they had both collected over the years. Liz rented a potting wheel from the art center and set it up in a little shed next to the garage. But she grew bored sitting for long hours in one place. "Maybe we should go buy some dishes," she said, announcing to Andrew that she was giving up on being a potter. "No, wait," he said.

He went down to the shed that afternoon and tried out the potter's wheel. He liked the feel of the wet clay in his hands, the treadle that went faster or slower depending on how hard he pumped, and that it was all done by the power of his own body. He appreciated his good leg. He ran a water line from the river into the shed, where he could dip the water as it came straight, untreated, from the mountains and sluice it over the clay. His hands established a rhythm of their own, so he no longer had to think about adding water or clay, it just happened.

After he made cups and plates, Andrew began throwing bowls, vases, pots—larger shapes with solid bottoms and curving sides. He loved to pull the clay up as it spun, pinching in with his thumb against his fingers and drawing the clay in, then letting it out again, and sluicing it with water. At night, he caressed Liz's body, and during the day, in the shed, his fingers remembered those curves, the roundness of a cheekbone, the hollow behind the knee, the bulge of the ribs, the firmness of the heel, the raised sweep of the collar bone, and worked them into the clay. He experimented with glazes and developed one the color of the river after a storm, and one like the cherry blossoms covering the grass, and another like the blue of his wife's eyes.

His pottery was beautiful, and people began to buy it. Perhaps, without knowing it, they felt the echo of a loved one's body when they ran their hands over one of Andrew's pots. Perhaps that was why his work attracted them so much, and what made them love to touch it.

1992

High School Reunion

Sarah dodged the couples on the dance floor and made her way toward the table next to the stage where the senior class president and the rest of the old popular crowd sat. The PA system blasted out rock-and-roll records from thirty years before. Though Sarah had never much liked pop music, she did not find it unpleasant listening to the records. The music added to the nostalgia that buoyed them all up that night.

She reached the table and sat down. The white tablecloth was rumpled and stained. The waiters had cleared away the plates and cutlery, but crumbs littered the cloth, and here and there amid the remnants of the banquet stood half-filled wineglasses, their rims smudged with lipstick.

Sarah brushed the crumbs into a pile next to her glass. It was hot in the room, and she fanned herself with a souvenir program someone had left on the table. She motioned to a waiter and ordered a fresh glass of wine. She had to raise her voice to be heard over Buddy Knox's recording of "Party Doll."

A quiet woman who had been the class secretary smiled at Sarah and started to speak, but a commotion on the dance floor interrupted her. Sarah turned and saw a tall man shoo the dancers off the floor, then join two other men in one of their old yell king routines. Despite his receding hairline and graying beard, Sarah recognized the tall man as Peter. He clowned around and fell off the top of the human pyramid, and all three men collapsed in laughter.

The crowd whistled and applauded. Sarah turned back to the quiet woman. She thought it odd that such a shy person had been a class leader, but then she didn't remember the woman as a shy girl. Perhaps it was because she had been even shyer herself. Or had the woman's marriage made her shy? She looked subdued and matronly in her dark blue dress with its white collar and single strand of pearls. What Sarah remembered was going to the girl's house for scout meetings, and the magnolia tree on her front lawn whose flowers looked like tulips.

The woman asked Sarah where she was living now. Before Sarah could answer, someone slid into the chair next to her and grabbed her wineglass. It was Peter.

"Cheers," he said, and emptied the glass. Sarah looked at him. "I forgot you'd been a cheerleader." Peter put his hand on her wrist. "I came to see if you'd like to dance."

They walked onto the dance floor and Peter pulled her close, pressing his hand into the middle of her back. Sarah laid her cheek against his. Then she moved away, glancing toward the table. Didn't he have a wife somewhere? When she looked back at Peter, his eyes were gleaming. Perhaps there was no wife. Anyway, what did it matter? They'd known each other for over thirty years. No, she corrected herself, they used to know each other thirty years ago. They'd only seen each other once since high school, at a party, when someone burned a cigarette hole in the cream-colored leather jacket Sarah's mother had lent her for the evening.

Sarah felt she should say something. "It's really too hot to dance, isn't it?"

Peter just pulled her closer and they danced on. Then she felt him draw a deep breath and let it out in her ear. He spoke softly: "Will you ever forgive me?"

Sarah heard herself laugh nervously. She told him no, then yes, she had forgiven him years ago. Her thoughts skidded back to the

summer after graduation. She knew what Peter was talking about. That summer, when she was eighteen, Peter had visited her every morning after he'd finished delivering doughnuts and she'd gotten back from her all-night shift at the cannery. During the harvest, the cannery union opened the work to students over eighteen. Sarah spent from six-thirty at night to four-thirty in the morning on an assembly line filling and weighing cans of French-cut green beans. It was boring and noisy and talking was not allowed, but it was a good way to make money. Both Sarah and Peter were saving for trips to Europe.

Peter would arrive about nine o'clock and sit in the chair by the front door and stare at Sarah sitting on the couch across the room while her mother worked in the kitchen. Sarah said little but she had all Peter's attention, and he told stories that made her laugh. After he left she would sit outside in the sun for hours, working on her tan. She got as dark as the Klamath Indian who worked at the cannery and left her a mash note one night.

On Sarah's evenings off, Peter sometimes sneaked her into a movie theater where he'd once worked, through an unlocked side door he knew about that led into the balcony. To Sarah this was an adventure. They began to sit in the car every night and kiss for hours. Peter touched her under her clothes, and when she protested, he said, "You love it, you know you do," and it was true, she did.

One evening, toward the end of July, Sarah's parents went away for the weekend, and she invited Peter into her bedroom. The first time they made love she screamed a little, but mostly for show—it didn't hurt much. Then they went upstairs and made love again on the rug in front of the couch. Peter stayed only until midnight, but by the time Sarah went to sleep, she felt she'd pledged herself to him, that this was the beginning of all the things she'd been longing for. In her mind, she had married Peter.

But Peter didn't call or come by the next day, or the day after, or the day after that. Sarah sat by the phone, afraid to go out, afraid she'd

miss his call. A terrible fear took hold of her. Every day she didn't hear from him, the fear grew stronger. At the end of the summer, one of the popular boys invited Sarah to the county fair. She was surprised at the invitation but she accepted. As they stood on her front porch after the date, the boy said something about Peter that she didn't understand, but he seemed to have expected more than a kiss from her.

Days and weeks went by, and then she heard that Peter had left for Europe. She received a letter from him from Italy, but he was jolly and clever and didn't mention anything about the night in July, or love. She thought of nothing else, it seemed, for an entire year. She remembered sitting in her freshman philosophy class and gazing out the window at the old oak trees, struggling to understand why Peter had abandoned her while the class discussed Immanuel Kant or the rules of symbolic logic.

Sarah had felt she'd never recover. She did, of course, but she had never forgotten. Apparently, Peter hadn't either.

The record changed, and they continued to dance. Peter dipped her down, then up, clowning around again. She tripped over his foot and almost fell. Peter held her up.

"I never danced much in school," Sarah said.

They went back to the table. Sarah picked up her empty glass and started to call the waiter, but Peter leaned close and said, "Come on."

Sarah pushed the pile of crumbs toward the edge of the table. She was forty-eight years old, but suddenly she felt more like twelve.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"I mean, let's go, let's get out of here," he said. "Let's go somewhere where we can be alone."

Sarah felt a rivulet of sweat run between her breasts and down her stomach. Now that his words had recalled the past so vividly to her, she wasn't at all sure she had really forgiven him.

"Let's go outside," she said. "I need some air."

The verandah stretched toward the river, its broad waters gleaming in the moonlight. They walked to the railing, as far from the

banquet room as they could go. The air smelled of damp moss and new-mown grass. Peter put an arm around Sarah's shoulders. To their left, the river curved east toward the mountains. The bend was lined with alders and black cottonwoods, the trees cast into silhouette by the moonlight.

"Listen to the frogs," Sarah said. "There must be hundreds of them." The frogs were close by, hidden under the reeds and branches of a backwater near the bank, but she could see nothing. It sounded like the darkness was boiling.

A burst of music from the banquet hall drowned out the frogs. Sarah felt Peter's eyes watching her. "What are you thinking?" he said. The music faded and the voices of the frogs filled the air again.

Sarah was remembering that year she couldn't think of anything but him. "You're very dramatic," she said. "That's one of the things I always liked about you." She paused. "But you surprised me back there. I don't know what the answer really is. I mean, I don't know if I forgive you or not."

Peter turned her face toward his. The frogs were quiet for a moment. Sarah could hear the rush of the water around the great dark rocks in the middle of the stream. The current was treacherous for swimmers.

Sarah took a deep breath. "Why did you go away like that, without saying anything?" she said. "Why didn't you ever come to see me after that night?" She remembered how unnecessarily cautious she had been, using her mother's diaphragm that she'd found in the top cupboard of the bathroom, and then her period had started the next day.

"I don't know," he said. "It was stupid. I guess I was scared."

Sarah felt a draft of cold air from the river and shivered. Peter took off his jacket and put it around her shoulders. He took her hands in his, but she pulled them away.

"That's not much of an explanation," she said.

"I know," he said. "I can't explain." He took her hands again. "But I'd like to make it up to you." Sarah tried to withdraw her hands, but he held them tight. "Please let me try."

Sarah felt around for the old, familiar pain. It was there, but fainter than she remembered it, and it seemed as if her heart was beating lighter, faster. She had liked the feel of Peter's arm around her, and the strength of his hands. Was it possible to make the past into something good?

"I'm not anxious to make the same mistake twice," she said.

"It won't be a mistake," Peter said. He leaned over, slid his left arm under her knees, and picked her up. He twirled her around slowly, almost solemnly. Then he sped up, taking smaller and smaller steps.

Sarah pulled his beard. "Let me go," she whispered. She didn't want to attract attention from the crowd inside.

"Never," he said, laughing, and twirled her faster.

"Stop! I'm dizzy," Sarah gasped, and both her shoes fell off.

Peter stopped spinning and set her down. The wind came up, warm, rustling the cottonwoods and sending sparks of moonlight off the ripples in the water. "Come to my room with me," Peter said, taking her hand. Sarah stared at him. His voice sounded the way it had when he'd told her, "You love it, you know you do," so many years before. Her stomach lurched with desire, then fear, and she remembered being eighteen and waiting for him to call, more afraid every day that he didn't. Then the sound of the frogs drew her back to the present, and she pulled her hand away.

"So you don't forgive me," said Peter.

"It's not that," said Sarah. "It's just that I can't forget." She leaned over and picked up her shoes. "Let's go back to the dance."

"You go," said Peter. "I'll stay out here for a while."

Sarah sat in a chair and put on her shoes, then she walked across the verandah toward the banquet room. In the glass door she could see the reflection of Peter leaning against the railing, staring at her back. Then she opened the door and Peter's reflection disappeared.

Once inside, a man who had been in the high school a cappella choir with Sarah asked if she'd like to dance. By this time hardly anyone was dancing. People were gathered in clusters, talking intensely. No one was ready to go home, though it was well after midnight.

"I saw you dancing with Peter," said the man, once they were on the dance floor. "There's something you should know." Sarah waited. "Before we graduated, he told a bunch of guys in the locker room after gym class that he'd 'had' you, if you know what I mean." Sarah's stomach lurched again. "Go on," she said. "There isn't any more," the man said. "I just thought you should know what he said."

But there was more, and Sarah knew what it was. The real reason he made love to her that summer was to make good his boast, that was it. Sarah excused herself and went outside and sat for a half-hour or so in her car, then drove to the motel where she was staying. No, she wouldn't go back and tell Peter what she had discovered. But she might at the next reunion. Who knows, he might really have forgotten why he did it.

Sarah remembered how Peter's reflection in the glass door had vanished when she opened the verandah door. No, she would never be able to turn the past into something good. That was only a fantasy, like the idea that Peter might not let her down again. He let people down, that's the way he was. She supposed it was part of being dramatic.

1993-2003

THE TRAILER

"What's that smell?" I said as soon as Rod opened the door.

"Whaddya mean, smell? I don't smell nothing," he said.

"You must have something wrong with your nose then," I said. "Pee-yew! I'm staying outside."

Rod grabbed his beer and joined me. We sat on the top step and leaned against the metal door. "It's not much better out here," I said. "When's the last time you had a bath?" Rod just laughed and bit the back of my neck. "You know you love my smell," he said. Which was true in a way. But that day he was an extreme case, and I made him take a shower when we went inside.

Rod's trailer sat on cement blocks, which kept it out of the mud but didn't add much to its beauty. Even a coat of paint would have helped, but Rod wasn't much interested in home maintenance. Mostly he lounged around and watched TV on a set that took up most of the room inside the trailer. You had to be seriously into closeups if you wanted to spend much time with Rod.

I did, want to spend time with Rod, that is, though I never quite got used to watching a thirty-inch TV from three feet away. My attachment to Rod had a lot to do with the fact that he lived by himself. At home, we were eleven at the table and three to a bedroom, except for Mom and Dad, of course, and you never had any time to yourself. If being around other people all the time is your idea of hell, then my life at home was hell. Things have changed for the better now, partly because of Rod's bad example.

As I said, the idea of living alone appealed a lot to me. Also drinking beer whenever you wanted to. My mother was a staunch supporter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Once she had to replace the refrigerator after my older sister came home from college and put a six-pack in it. Every month the teetotalers' newsletter would slide through the mail slot, and of course I had to read it, being a compulsive reader. Reading was not something Rod and I had in common. In fact, we were not much alike at all. For one thing, Rod was bone lazy. He hated to work, and as far as I could tell, he never did anything remotely related to labor. He was vague about where he got the money for things like the TV set and his steady supply of beer, but there was something wrong with his left arm so maybe he got disability.

When Rod and I went anywhere, it was usually cheap. But I didn't care. I was perfectly happy to sit in the trailer and watch TV, especially since we usually stopped watching after about fifteen minutes and started screwing. That's what was mainly on my mind. I was sixteen and hot-blooded, partly from war novels I'd started reading, full of purple passages about the hero's sexual exploits. I was an early bloomer, sexually speaking.

Anyway, Rod and I had this passionate affair for about six months. Luckily, I didn't get pregnant. Once he said he bet I couldn't guess what clothes he'd take on his honeymoon. "A pair of pajamas," he said, laughing and punching me on the shoulder. "Nothing but pajamas." I didn't think it was that funny at the time. Now I wonder why he thought he'd need pajamas.

I got Rod to take me out to a couple of dances, and I discovered dancing turned me on almost as much as watching TV in bed. We even went to a movie theater a couple of times instead of watching TV, and we did everything you could do without taking your clothes off, which was pretty exciting. I dragged Rod to the summer playhouse once but he was bored stiff, since we couldn't do anything but watch the show.

Things ended badly with Rod. One day toward the end of summer I was out shopping for school clothes and saw a friend of his from the trailer park. "I bet you're going to miss him," the friend said, smirking. "What do you mean?" I said. "Rod's pullin' out, didn't he tell you?"

I ran home and asked to borrow the car and drove like mad out to the trailer park. The cement blocks were still there, but Rod's trailer was gone. I drove around the block and came back and looked again, just to make sure I wasn't hallucinating. No, it was gone. I sat in the car for a long time, staring at nothing.

After I'd been there for an hour or so, the manager came over. What was I doing? I told him I was a friend of Rod's. "Your name Laura?" he said. I nodded. "He left something for you." My spirits leapt. The manager handed me a postcard with a photo of a seafood restaurant on one side. On the other side was the message. "Hi doll," it began. "Surprise! I got a job pumping gas in Phoenix. See ya later, keep smiling. Signed [he wrote that out] Rodney. G. Steele." With periods after each name.

I went home and stayed in bed for the rest of the day. That night I borrowed the car again—"I need to do some work at the library," I told Mom—bought a couple of bottles of port at the Safeway, parked out by the river, and drank both bottles while I cried and felt sorry for myself. Scotch would have been more dramatic but you had to get that at the liquor store and even though I had false ID, the store was already closed. Still, the port seemed to have the desired effect. I had a hard time driving home because the centerline kept doubling, but I went slow and made it all right.

The next morning I felt awful and had to get out of bed and vomit a few times. I told Mom I must have a touch of the flu. She brought cool cloths for my head. When I got the dry heaves after I'd puked everything out of my stomach she looked skeptical but didn't bug me.

In a couple of days I'd recovered from my alcohol poisoning and had another look at Rod's note. I almost tore it in little pieces and

burned them, very symbolic, but at the last minute I changed my mind. Now I'm glad I saved the note. Not because I feel nostalgic about Rod or the trailer or anything. It's just that nobody else ever called me "doll."

1992

Lost Boy

In a box canyon dotted with Ponderosa and lodgepole and jack pine and cut through by two streams that joined a few miles to the north, the men of the Tyson family had gathered to herd their cattle to winter pastures. Some hundred yards from the herd, a young boy waited on a cinnamon-colored pony. He rubbed his gloves together. Everywhere he looked, the sky was the same gray-white, and the cattle stood in a steaming cloud of their own breath. It was cold. To the west loomed the mountains, but today the peaks were hidden by clouds, and it felt like snow.

The boy patted his pony and urged him forward. Stephen was there to help his father and his uncle and his grandfather drive the cattle to a holding pen, where they would be loaded onto trucks and transported to pastures at a lower elevation. In winter, the cattle would starve if left in the canyon, unable to get at the grass beneath five or six feet of snow. It was only October, but winter comes early in the Cascade mountains.

Stephen trotted to where his father sat on a black-and-white pinto. "Dad," he said, "I'm cold. I think I'll head back to camp." Stephen was nine but he'd been riding in the mountains for the last four years. The camp was only a few miles away, down a well-used Forest Service road. Rusty, the pony, had been there and back many times. Stephen's father said okay and to give his love to his mother. Stephen set off at a slow trot, waving one gloved hand goodbye.

The boy and his pony were soon out of sight, moving easily through the brush and grass. As Stephen crossed the canyon floor, he

watched carefully. He had been warned about getting too close to the sinkhole, a boggy spot of ground where floating sod covered mudpits people said were fifteen feet deep.

He reached the other side of the canyon safely and moved into the trees, heading toward the Forest Service road. It ended in a small meadow about half a mile away. The meadow was a lovely spot in summer, with grass high enough to tickle Rusty's belly and a spring on one side that kept everything green even in the heat of August.

As Stephen passed through the trees, he noticed how quiet it was. No birds sang, no ground squirrels chattered. Only Rusty's hooves crunching an occasional pinecone, and Stephen's head brushing a pine bough now and again. Then a noise broke the silence, coming toward him from the southwest, from the mountains. The trees began to sigh and bend, and the noise grew louder, like the roar of a waterfall heard from a distance.

It was the wind. Suddenly it hit Stephen's back, strong and cold. He urged Rusty into a canter. They still had about four miles to go. Stephen hunched his head into his collar and leaned into Rusty's neck. The pony's warm breath blew back onto the boy's cheek but it didn't reach his ears.

Stephen wished he had a sheepskin cap with earflaps. He'd wanted one for Christmas but they were too expensive, with his father getting less and less of the logging work the family depended on for income. The cattle belonged mainly to Grandpa Tyson. Stephen's mother had never worked—his father didn't believe in it and besides, she had five children to take care of. She was a good mom, Stephen thought. She didn't yell at him and she let him come and go pretty much as he pleased.

His father was stricter but he wasn't always there, and when he'd been in the woods all day, he was too tired to do much but eat dinner, drink a few cans of beer, and watch television until he fell asleep. Stephen vowed he wouldn't be a logger when he grew up. He wanted

to own a cattle ranch, a real ranch, with herds spread out over miles and miles and a big ranchhouse and barns and lots of horses. He loved Rusty. His grandfather had given him the pony on his fifth birthday, and whenever Stephen visited his grandparents at their small ranch, Rusty was there for him to groom and ride.

The wind died down, and Stephen felt soft wet drops on his face. It was snowing. Stephen stuck out his tongue. The few flakes he caught quickly disappeared, as if they had hardly even been wet. Stephen urged his pony forward. The snow fell faster, filling in Rusty's hoofprints almost as fast as he made them. It didn't seem so cold without the wind.

It was getting hard to see. The clouds seemed to have drifted down to the tops of the trees, in some places almost to the ground. Stephen brushed the snow out of his eyes and peered into the whiteness. "Come on, Rusty," he urged, and laid his head back against the pony's neck. He could barely make out the meadow when at last they reached it, and he hoped Rusty could find the road on the other side. He couldn't tell whether that gap in the trees was the road or just a gap.

While Stephen and Rusty crossed the meadow, let us imagine that someone—or perhaps two someones—made their way through the nearby woods. It is likely that, considering the weather, they cast worried glances at the sky, wondering if they shouldn't head back to camp. But it was the opening day of elk season and they decided to give it another half-hour or so, wanting the thrill of bagging one the first day.

The snow was falling fast and heavy by now, and visibility was bad. They—let us say two men, one heavyset, the other lean—came to the edge of the Forest Service road. "Ssst," said one of the men. "There's something up ahead."

The other man squinted through his rifle scope. He nodded. They crept into the road and raised their guns to their shoulders. If Stephen looked back, all he saw was the men's orange jackets. But he

probably didn't look, and didn't even hear the guns go off. His body fell out of the saddle as the pony, spooked by the shot, ran into the trees.

"Damn" (it was the heavyset man speaking). "Missed." They started back toward camp, but the lean one stopped, saying they should check, maybe the animal was wounded. Then they walked up the road and found Stephen's body.

"Holy shit!" one said. "Now what?" These were not the types of men to think twice about the boy whose horse they had mistaken for an elk, only about what would happen to them. One took his flask, drank, and passed it to the other.

They would have to hide the body. If they had had a shovel, they could have dug a grave. But one of them, or perhaps both, picked Stephen up and carried his body into the woods, a few hundred yards from the road. In a small depression, covered by snowbrush and surrounded by young jack pines, they left him. By nightfall, the body was buried beneath a foot of snow.

When the Tyson men arrived back at camp that night, they discovered that Stephen had not returned. By the next day it was clear that he had disappeared, and the Army, the Forest Service, sheriff's deputies, and local people began to look for him. The weather was bad. Yet the headlines in the paper from the nearest city read, "200 Search Canyon Area for Lost Boy." The blizzard continued, but the headlines said, "Searchers Refuse to Quit." Still there was no sign of Stephen. They dragged the bog; they brought in high-tech, infrared scopes; it continued to snow. They found no sign of Stephen. The temperature stayed just above zero for two weeks.

Rusty showed up three months later, dragging his reins. The next spring, hikers found the remains of Stephen's body. It was impossible to tell what had happened by then. But Stephen's parents did not want to believe their boy murdered. In their version of the story, Stephen is simply overwhelmed by the storm, and makes a mistake.

After leaving his father, Stephen's parents imagine, he rides toward where he remembers the Forest Service road begins. He urges Rusty through old, thick Ponderosas he thinks he recognizes and looks for a road marker. The snow is piling up by now, and he doesn't see a sign. "Maybe it's under the snow," he thinks, and he urges Rusty forward. They ride about a half-hour more.

Then the snow clouds descend to the ground, and it is impossible to see three feet ahead. Stephen loses all sense of direction, but he trusts Rusty's instincts to take them to the right road. Rusty grows nervous, however, and tosses his head from side to side, flaring his nostrils and snorting. "What's wrong, boy?" Stephen pats the pony's neck. Rusty snorts again, then stops short.

Stephen can see nothing—perhaps Rusty can't either. Holding the reins with one hand and putting the other straight in front of him, Stephen leads Rusty slowly forward until he touches a tree trunk. He decides to rest awhile, to see if the storm will let up. He feels in his pocket for the candy bar he put there that morning. He breaks it in half and gives half to Rusty. His half tastes good, he is hungry.

Stephen doesn't have a watch but he feels he's been traveling for hours, it must be long past lunchtime. He tries to melt snow in his hands for Rusty to drink, but the little amount of water trickles through his fingers before he can get it to the pony's mouth. He licks a handful of snow himself and puts his gloves back on, quickly. He thought it was getting warmer, but now he feels chilled through.

He curls up against the tree and thinks about home. How the other kids in Mrs. Martin's fourth grade class will crowd around on Monday while he tells the story of his adventure in the snowstorm. How his mother will bake a special batch of brownies on his birthday next month. How he and Rusty will ride along the Skyline Trail next summer, when the snow has melted and wildflowers bloom all around them. How he'll caw back at the hoarse ravens that fly overhead, disputing loudly over a roosting spot. How . . . here he falls asleep. The

reins slip out of his hand. After a while Rusty nudges him, but Stephen doesn't move. The pony moves away to find grass. He is hungry, too. In a few hours, the snow has covered Stephen over. Still, he doesn't move.

Perhaps this story, of innocence and bad judgment, is closer to the truth than the one we imagined earlier. But why did the searchers not find Stephen as he lay curled under the tree, dreaming and freezing to death? And why did the pony stop short in the storm? It could have been, as Stephen's parents believe, because the storm made it impossible to see. But might not the animal have stopped because he sensed the presence of men with guns, and whiskey, and danger?

1991

A Walk In The Woods

Jim Davenport decided he needed to go outside and get his blood circulating.

He stepped off the porch; damn, forgot to hold the screen door. It slammed behind him and startled the butterflies feeding on the chinquapin. They flew up and around, orange with black spots that reminded Jim of monarchs but not so large. One lay in the dust directly in front of him, fanning its wings. He lifted his foot to step over it, but it flew off and settled on a blossom. The other butterflies were coming back to the bushes, too, having apparently forgotten the loud noise that had frightened them. I wonder where their ears are? mused Jim. Do butterflies have ears? Something told him they didn't, but then, why did the screen door send them flying? He almost turned back to look up butterflies in his wildlife book, but decided he could do it later, now it was more important to walk.

He turned onto the main road, dusty and quiet in the afternoon heat. Jim's feet sank into the dust. He stepped over a small gully left from last week's cloudburst. The water had almost washed out the trail and left furrows down the hillsides. You'd think such a downpour would have settled the dust for a while, but now things were dry as a desert again. When he came here as a child, they'd made a game of keeping the dust out of the car. As soon as they reached the end of the paved road, everyone would roll up the windows and his father would turn on the fan. His father had always driven slow, but when he stopped they had to wait to open the car doors until the dust cloud

had passed in front of them and settled. People who didn't know that trick got a mouthful of dust. City slickers, scoffed Jim, like the fellow down the way who raked up all the pine needles and then the rain came and washed half a hill onto his back porch. Jim hadn't much liked the bonfire of pine needles he'd built, either. What did he think, just because the trees were green they wouldn't catch fire? I'll have to keep a watch on that guy, Jim thought.

On the right was a pile of brush he would have to burn himself, after the fall rains came. This brush was tricky, too, sent up sparks if you weren't careful. But it burned fast, and he could clean up the whole pile in a few hours. He'd come out to trim dead limbs when it had been so hot and dry last year that he had to do something, it scared him to see all that fire fuel lying about. He'd cut more than he'd realized.

Past the pile was a curved gray log, standing upright with a sign hanging from it. Old Mr. Main, he died last spring, they'd been coming up here as long as we had, thought Jim. He'd forgotten to tell his mother Mr. Main had died. Two years ago, Jim remembered, the Mains had had a pump running to clean their septic tank. And then a little girl had come to the Mains' cabin, and he'd heard her laughing and trying to help her dad. Old Mr. Main's son, Jim supposed.

They didn't visit each other. People up here seldom did. You respected each other's privacy, even on the beach. Jim remembered the news stories of a few years back, about the Germans building sand walls, fencing off their territory, on the beaches along the Baltic. Here no one needs walls, we're all trained the same. "Private, keep out," read the invisible signs around each house, along each stretch of beach. Only the dogs don't obey, mused Jim, thinking of the neighbor's husky who walked right in the front door if it was open, come to call, with a big smile and trick or two if you knew what to offer him (Jim knew—dog biscuits or cheese). The trouble with dogs is their hair, even if they don't have fleas, worse than hair. Jim's scalp felt itchy and he reached

up to scratch. Power of suggestion. Just let someone mention poison oak, or fleas, and suddenly you have to scratch.

Jim heard the whoop-whoop of a raven's wings and looked up. How fine to glide through the air like that, even if you had a terrible voice, no song. The raven gave a raucous caw and landed at the top of one of the giant Ponderosa pines along the road. It was a grove, running up the hill to the left, and it always reminded Jim of a cathedral. Or the sacred woods of the Druids, even though those were oak, not pine. This grove was at least three hundred years old. What was happening when they were seedlings? Jim wracked his memory; 1690; nothing came to mind. War of the Roses? No, too early. First settlements on the East Coast? Yes, Harvard founded sometime around 1630. Wish I'd taken the chance to go there, Jim thought, foolish to stay at home and go to school. Contacts, prestige, polish, wouldn't have hurt me at all. Oh well, I didn't take the scholarship, that's that. It might have helped convince people I was somebody, a degree from Harvard. But then I wouldn't have met those good friends at school in California, still friends after all these years, and so who knows whether going to Harvard would have been the best thing.

Jim passed into the shade, where firs lined the road and blocked the sun. Oh, the ferns (or are they bracken?) have come back, even better than last year. In May, the fronds had lain brown and burnt, he thought the minus-thirty degrees last winter had done them in, but now here they were again. Purple wildflowers, just a few, poked up between. This part of the woods was more like the western slope, must get more rain, even though it's less than a mile from our place. Or maybe it's springs, yes, must be; this is the only spot with ferns on the whole lake.

The road turned sharply uphill, to Jim's left, but he walked straight ahead through a gap in the rocks and down the trail through the forest camp. He stepped over a broken bottle. Motorcyclists, dumb slobs. Jim picked up the glass shards and held them carefully in one

hand. Somebody might step on them in the dark. He dropped the shards into the dumpster at the end of the trail by the first campsite. No one seemed to be about, but he saw a tent and a camp stove and a fire in the firepit. Jim frowned. Stupid to leave a fire burning in such weather, with the hot wind blowing from the desert. Maybe I should alert the campground host about the unattended fire. I could see if anyone's in the tent, but they might be making love or something. Better to leave well enough alone, wait and see if the fire is still burning by itself on my way back.

Jim swung onto the blacktopped road that ran through the campground. Not many people here. Surprising, with such fine weather, and the lake glistening through the trees. Then he saw the red tags on the water spigots. The water was contaminated, that explained it, and most campers didn't bring their own water. Those people must have, he thought, spotting two tents at a site near the water. Of course they could haul water from the lake, but they probably didn't think of that, or assumed the water wasn't safe. Some of the other cabin owners hauled water from town for drinking, but he pumped it right out of the lake and had never been sick. Must be one of the few pure lakes left on earth. Where else can you drink the water right out of a lake without treating it first? That always made him feel proud, somehow, as if he himself were responsible for the water's purity. Swimming in it was like a purification rite, not to mention a test of fortitude—cold, instant goose pimples, heart attack city—except for a few weeks in August when the top few inches warmed up and you didn't care if it was cold anyway because the air was so hot and dry.

It was just past that time, autumn was in the air, the pines were turning brown. Subtle color changes, not like fall in New England, which he'd missed, not going to Boston when he had the chance. Do the wild geese fly over New England? They must, on their way to the east coast of South America, or Mexico, or Florida. This is ridiculous, I should know these things, Jim thought. Well, he knew the sound, far off,

the honking of hundreds of birds, which meant the geese were on the move. When he was small, he could hear them from inside the house, there were so many, and he'd rush out to the front lawn, shading his eyes with his hand, turning his head until he spotted the great V. His mother would come out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. How fast they moved, no time to get the binoculars before the flock was out of sight, heading south or north along the flyway through the valley.

A Steller's jay cut in front of Jim and squawked at him from the top of another dumpster. Sorry pal, nothing for you. Jim held out his empty hands. The bird tipped his blue head to one side. Jim liked jays, he liked all the crows, intelligent birds. Some people disliked them because they stole food from other birds, even stole their nests. Cheeky devils. Jim whistled at the jay but the bird flew off and Jim went on down the road. He passed the campground host's trailer and considered reporting the campfire, but remembered he'd decided to wait and see. He turned right and stepped onto the gravel road on top of the earthen dam that regulated the flow of water from the lake into the wild creek, or formerly wild creek, before they built the dam, that rushed down the mountain to join up with other creeks and form a river.

A ground squirrel sat on a rock beside the path, more squirrels scurried between the rocks on the side of the dam. Chipmunks is really a better name for them, thought Jim, that's what everyone calls them anyway. It's a chummier word, fits the forest, wood chip, chip off the old block. They look busy, they must be gathering food for the winter. They know the days are getting shorter, though we don't really notice it. Jim saw the remains of a pinecone alongside the path. Chipmunks, he thought, getting the pine nuts. He'd been finding pine boughs everywhere the last few days, from the chipmunks, they dropped boughs when they chewed off the cones. Busy, busy. Jim felt a twinge of guilt, visualizing the pile of notes he'd left on his desk. He was finding it hard to work, maybe the solitude was getting to him. He'd had lots of enthusiasm at the beginning of the summer.

He reached the other side of the dam and walked behind one of the resort cabins, toward the modest lodge with its store and the pay phone on the porch. The water still roared through the dam into the creek, where last summer he'd seen boys jumping from the concrete abutment into the water, and sometimes fishing, though the fish were scarce now, since the dam had been built. One good anarchist with a bomb is all we need, he thought, as he always did on this spot.

The bare space on the opposite bank still startled him. Part of him must remember that old trees had stood there until last year, though he couldn't have told you what was on the spot if you'd asked. He supposed someone had made a bit of money from the timber, but it was a shame, and he was glad he hadn't been there to hear the trees scream as they fell. On the other hand, he hadn't been there to stop whoever it was from felling them, though of course no one had told him the trees were being cut. A chipmunk raced across the gravel in front of him, probably down to a burrow in the rocks, getting ready for winter, no doubt carrying seeds in his (or her) pouch. Another chipmunk rushed across the path, headed the other direction, toward the woods. Jim stepped down the path between a huge boulder and a tree stump and walked to the front of the lodge.

A man was using the phone, leaning against the post where the pay phone hung, so Jim walked to the edge of the porch and sat down, pretending not to listen but eavesdropping just the same. How could you help but hear a conversation going on outside, in plain air, Jim excused himself. The man, he looked silly in those plaid Bermudas, was talking to his wife, it sounded like: "Yeah, fine. Hot and dry, girls spend most of the day in the water." What girls, Jim thought; must be those two, long hair, skinny legs, hanging their beach towels over the railing of the cabin across the grass. Well, one not so skinny, woman-girl, breasts and hips; both girls about the same age, friends, not sisters. I wonder how many middle-aged men go on vacation with their daughters and their daughters' friends. Which one was the daughter? "Don't

forget the steaks," the man said. His wife must be coming for the weekend. "The store up here don't carry much." The man pulled at a can of beer. Jim remembered the drunken forest ranger who'd come in last month and the owner refusing to sell him any more booze. "Okay, see ya later." The man hung up.

Jim waited what he considered a polite interval, but not too long to lose his turn, and walked to the phone. He pulled a roll of quarters from his pocket and ripped it open, counting out three piles of four each and laying them on the railing, to be ready when the operator came on. He dialed, listened, shoving quarters into the machine to stop the mechanical voice; words patched together to make sentences, but not human. Three rings, four. She's not home. Then, "Hello?" the familiar voice: "Hi, it's Jim. Got your note this morning." It had been written on a postcard with an Ansel Adams photo of Yosemite on the other side, Half Dome in the snow, a sight Jim had fallen in love with, not like he fell in love with Susan, but he must have told her, and she must have remembered. She went with a hotshot district attorney now and played around the edges of politics. The card invited him to a reception for an environmentalist candidate for the senate seat what's-his-name was vacating. Jim found it hard to get interested in politics. "Oh good, I was afraid you might not pick up your mail in time. Can you come?" Funny, I never noticed that twang in her voice before. How long has it been? Love must be deaf as well as blind, like the butterflies, if they are deaf, Jim thought, anyway, a nice image.

"Well, I'm not sure. I'm not sure who this guy is. Maybe you could . . ." Three loud explosions blasted the air. "Hold on, sounds like shooting." A woman ran toward him from one of the cabins. "Call you later." Jim clicked the receiver and handed over the phone. Did the woman know you could call 911 up here? Yes, she punched three numbers and then, "We need the sheriff over at the lake, right away. Someone's firing pistols. Yeah, guns. Behind the campground." Jim drifted over toward the parking lot, where the shots came from. Too

late, they're taking off. A car roared away, leaving a cloud of dust. "We had the same trouble last year," Jim heard the woman say.

Wasn't it illegal to shoot around here? Jim wondered. That hunter last fall down the lake surely shouldn't have been so close to the cabins. In a few weeks it wouldn't be safe to be out wandering around. Maybe I should hang around until the sheriff gets here and ask him. By now Jim had crossed the dam and was in the forest camp. Might as well get back and get some work done. I can call Susan tomorrow, don't think I really want to drive a hundred fifty miles roundtrip to meet a politician, or to see her again for that matter. No, I won't go.

Jim looked toward the water, sun glinting off the ruffled surface, shadows lengthening, evening chill coming on. Feels good after today's heat. That campfire was just ahead, ah, a man and his dog, good thing I didn't report the fire, everything seems okay. Jim raised a hand in greeting. No response, the guy didn't see me, too busy watching that coffee pot on the fire. Too late in the day for coffee, I'd never get to sleep, but some people it doesn't bother.

Jim reached the end of the trail and stepped onto the dusty road. Ah, the clouds, look at those colors. Walking with his head tipped back, Jim watched the tops of the trees converge above him and merge into the pink and orange sky. Smell that air; tomorrow maybe it won't be so hot.

1991

Smoking Or Nonsmoking?

About seven o'clock on Friday night, my first night in Sicily, I went into a pizzeria in the old part of Syracuse and ordered what turned out to be the best pizza I've ever eaten. I was the only customer, except for what looked like the owner and his family in one corner. How odd for Friday night, and then the crowds began arriving an hour later, and I understood I was early. Now it was seven o'clock on Sunday night and I was at the station waiting to take the night train back to Rome. And I was hungry. I would have loved another one of those pizzas—sautéed onions, fresh tomatoes, buffalo mozzarella, and fresh tuna—but I was too far from Friday's pizzeria, so I went into a snack bar next to the train station. It didn't have any food that appealed to me so I ordered mineral water. The woman at the counter asked, "*Una grande?*" and I said yes, thinking I was buying a glass of water, but then she handed me a liter bottle. I took it anyway, it might come in handy on the train.

I sat on a plastic chair next to a tall ashtray filled with sand and wrote postcards to my friends. My belongings kept falling down around me. I stayed in the snack bar until I was finished with the cards, then dropped them into the yellow post box outside the front door of the station.

It was an old-fashioned train station, with only three or four tracks, a small waiting room with two windows, marble stairs leading to the platform, and a phone booth. My guidebook said there was a tourist office at the Syracuse station, but there wasn't. The train to Rome was scheduled to leave at 8:20.

I walked down the stairs, under the tracks, and up onto the platform. The sign above track two said ROMA but the only train to be seen was on track three. Several of us northbound passengers lounged around the cement benches. A short train departed from track two. The clock said 8:10.

Then a tall, dark young man wearing a faded-red down jacket rushed onto the platform and asked me, in Italian, if this was the train to Rome. I said I didn't think so, because the sign said the train to Rome left from track two. He said he didn't know about the trains because he usually took the plane from Catania, but the train on track three looked like the intercity because it had sleeping cars. I said, "But the sign. . . ." He said, "They always do that."

He asked other people if this was the train to Rome. No one knew for sure, and there wasn't a conductor in sight, but it was getting late and track two was still empty. So we rushed our things on board the train standing on track three and found our compartment. The young man and I were in the same one. I had the top bunk on the left, he had the bottom one on the right. The conductors are particular about people getting into their assigned bunks.

The train started up. The young man asked another passenger if this was the train to Rome. The person said he thought so. We left the station, slowly. All traffic was held up because of the high winds at Messina, someone said. But everything was calm now. We ran awhile, then stopped, ran some more, stopped again. I thought I'd reserved on an *interurbano* (intercity), but this was more like a *rapido* (the slowest class of Italian train).

The young man and I still had the compartment to ourselves. He stashed his suitcase on the shelf above the door. Then we stood in the corridor and opened the window. It was hot. The air conditioning appeared not to work. A sign by the window said it was forbidden to open it, but no one paid any attention. We stopped again outside Augusta, across the bay from Syracuse.

The young man pointed out the wooden barracks that filled a large field. "They built those to house the people after the earthquake in December 1990," he said. I asked him if he'd been in the earthquake. He said yes, it had been terrifying: "It almost threw me out of bed," he said, and many houses had fallen down.

The train started up again. A full moon hung above the bay. I pointed it out to the young man. We went back into the compartment, and I got out my map. "Look at this map," I said. "I bought it because I wanted to see what provinces I was traveling through, but they aren't even marked." "We know where they are," he said. "But this isn't a map only for Italians!" I exclaimed. "How are the rest of us supposed to know?" I showed him how nothing on the map suggested that Sicily was called Sicilia, or even, for that matter, that the big peninsula was Italy. No indication of Basilicata, or Calabria—the provinces I'd traveled through for the first time on the train two days earlier. A traveler going somewhere for the first time wants to know when he gets there! The map was designed for tourists as well as for native Italians, I said, and pointed to the legend, printed in English, French, and German, as well as Italian.

I put my map away and sat down. The young man stood in the doorway and asked me why I was traveling alone. I said, "I'm not married," which wasn't really the reason. I must have been making a play for sympathy. If so, it worked. *"Terribile!"* he said. If I hadn't been traveling alone, I'd never have been sitting there talking to him like that, I might have said. He was attractive, thin, tall for an Italian, particularly a Sicilian. He had a beautiful Roman nose and long, thin fingers.

I asked him if he had a family in Syracuse. "A wife," he said. They had gotten used to living apart much of the time, he said. He worked in Nola, outside Naples, and traveled to Syracuse on the weekends. It was the only way he could afford a house, he said. He also went away for longer periods, to Libya for example, for his company. He was an *ingeniere* and helped build roads and so forth. He would be going to Arabia in January or February.

He sat down opposite me and asked me what I did. I said I wrote imaginative pieces. He said, "Science fiction?" I said no and couldn't think of how to describe my work in Italian. He looked at me.

I was tired after two days of walking around Syracuse and speaking only Italian. I'd gone to the archeological museum that morning, then returned to the hotel to pack and bring my bags downstairs. A little girl said she liked my blue eyes and suggested that we make a trade. The desk clerk and I got into a conversation. When I walked away to have lunch at a restaurant he recommended, he protested, "But we were talking!"

I walked to the island of Ortygia, just across a bridge from the hotel, found the restaurant, ordered spaghetti with *frutti di mare*, and helped myself to *antipasti* from the self-service table. After lunch I walked around Ortygia, the Sirocco blowing warm from Africa, the smell of the sea counteracting the half-liter of wine I'd just drunk. At the Fountain of Arethusa, which legend says flows with water that comes underground all the way from Greece, a crowd of young people had gathered for the Sunday afternoon *passeggiata*, the ritual walk now taken by car or motor scooter rather than on foot. After eating a *frutti di latte* ice cream (cream, milk, sugar), I walked on through the narrow streets, taking pictures of old buildings with Moorish grills and round windows. I ended up back at the sea again as dusk was falling. I took a picture of a building with laundry hanging from the windows in the half-light. Down an alley was a lighted shrine in a corner niche. I took a picture of that, too.

I remembered reading about a man who made *pasta reale* (realistic fruits and vegetables made from marzipan paste) at a little shop nearby, so I went in search of it. Though it was Sunday evening, the shop was open. I walked in and asked for three pastries. The clerk, a young man, showed me boxes already made up, but I said I had room for only three pieces in my luggage. He made me a box and patted sisal around a lemon, a fig, and an apricot and wrapped it all in paper, putting gold seals at each end.

Then I noticed the man who made all these things, identified on the shop door as the Cavaliere Luigi Marciante, working by himself in the back room. I asked if I could watch the *fabbrica*. He invited me in and showed me how he shaped lemons, apricots, figs, and other fruit using simple, handmade tools. He pushed some yellow marzipan into a cardboard mold to shape a lemon, and pricked its skin using a cork with needles stuck in one end. With a small wooden paddle he scored the side of a round of plain marzipan, and he had an apricot. He stuck a slice of candied lemon onto the top of a half-round of marzipan. "This will squirt if you squeeze it," he said. All the while he talked about the value of handmade goods versus those made by machine. Before I left, he showed me a letter from a customer in Miami ordering a marzipan Statue of Liberty for the 1992 celebrations of the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage to America, and said I could call him any time if I wanted something special.

When our train reached Catania, the next big town, a businessman entered the compartment. The young man stood in the corridor. The businessman, an older man dressed in a brown suit, sat in the corner reading a newspaper. Finally I said something to him. He said he traveled all the time, working for a company that did work for the Libyans. The young man offered him a cigarette and they both smoked. I had asked for a nonsmoking car at American Express in Rome, but they said they were all booked. But I wasn't to worry—"They won't smoke in the compartment."

The train stopped again. The young man called me into the corridor and pointed out the window. "See over there, in that little house, the head of the station?" Yes, I saw. "Do you see who it is?" I didn't. "The head of this station is a woman. That's why the train is stopped." I didn't know whether he was making a joke, but I only half laughed.

A few minutes later the businessman came into the corridor. "I don't believe women have the capacity to work," said the young man. "Oh, you're a *maschilista* (chauvinist)," said the businessman. "I've worked with many women, and I know you're wrong. My daughters have advanced degrees and careers, too." The young man frowned and rubbed his chin. "Still," he said, "I just don't think women have the capacity."

Finally, I went in and sat down by my luggage. At the next stop—it seemed like hours later, the train was so slow—a young girl with lots of dark hair came on board. She said she was a student of Chinese and was returning to Rome, where she attended the university. She took out a cigarette and the businessman lit it. The young man came into the compartment and sat down next to me. I looked at his hands and his nose again. His leg barely touched mine. It was after eleven, and no one had made a move to put the bunks down and go to sleep. I leaned on my luggage and closed my eyes.

Well after midnight, as we approached the Straits of Messina, a fussy little man bustled into the compartment and insisted on arranging the beds. "I must go to sleep, I have to work in the morning," he said. The blankets, pillows, and sheets, made of some synthetic material, were already on the top bunks. The little man made up his bed and fiddled with the air conditioner. It still didn't work. Then he said we were supposed to lock the door after everyone was in bed. We said we knew that. He was officious but I was glad he'd come. I could hardly hold my head up from sleepiness.

We reached the straits and the train was put on board the ferry. The others went up on deck, the young man and I stayed in the compartment. He took his suitcase down and pulled out a packet of crackers and a cardboard container of juice. I got out my water. "Would you like some?" he said, offering me a cracker. I took one. He offered me some juice, but I declined. I asked what his name was. "Marco," he said. I said good night and stretched out on my bunk. It was still too hot.

We were an hour late getting to Naples in the morning. As Marco passed me on his way out of the car, he touched my shoulder and wished me well: "*Tanti auguri.*" The businessman said he would get off the train with him, to fetch a newspaper. I stood in the corridor after they left, then opened the window and yelled, "*Ciao.*" Marco looked back, startled. He and the businessman disappeared down the platform.

The train took off again. An hour later we were in Rome. I went to American Express to make sure I was booked into a nonsmoking compartment for the trip back to Paris, where I would catch my return flight to the States. It turned out not to be simply a matter of checking the ticket. "That information only shows up on the computer screen when the ticket is purchased," the clerk told me. I could hardly believe the system could be so clumsy. "You can check with the conductor when you get there," she said. I said that wouldn't do any good, they don't like to change things. "Besides," I said, "they must know which cars are smoking and which are nonsmoking long before the train leaves."

The clerk leaned through a slot in the wall and talked to someone behind. "We have a kind woman who works the computers. She will check again." But she found nothing. The system would not say whether a ticket that was already sold was nonsmoking or not.

"I think maybe if it says nothing on the ticket, that means nonsmoking," said the clerk. I pulled out the remains of my ticket from Syracuse to Rome. It said "*Fumatori*" (smokers), but this reasoning sounded dubious. The only thing was to buy another ticket.

"You'll have to pay three thousand more lire, to make the exchange," the clerk said. I was almost in tears by this time. "I understand, I don't smoke either," said the clerk. She reached through the crack in the wall and took the new ticket. "It says nothing," she said. "Since your old one also says nothing, why don't you just keep it. Nothing is printed on it, so it's probably nonsmoking." She handed me back my old ticket. And she didn't charge me the three thousand lire.

Three days later, I rolled my baggage onto the night train, bound for Paris. In a window near the door was a small printed card. It read, "*Nonfumeurs*" (nonsmokers).

1992

Dialogue Of Salt And Pepper

Dinner was over, the kitchen was quiet, and all the spices and condiment jars had been put back in the cupboard. All except the salt-shaker and the pepper mill. Those two—known to each other as Madame Sel and Signor Pepe—were both too useful ever to be put away, and so they sat together on the counter beside the stove, within easy reach of the cook.

The pepper mill, carved from rosewood and banded in silver, stood on a bright pottery dish someone had brought back from Italy. Signor Pepe was well aware of his dark good looks and exotic ancestry.

"Regard," said Signor Pepe, "how splendid I am!" He turned his shoulders slightly, crushing a single peppercorn inside the mill. "And smell my fragrance! Does it not excite your every sense?" He crushed another peppercorn. "Do I not render the very air exotic?"

He tipped a shoulder toward Madame Sel. "Come, Madame, do not be dull! Life is to savor, and I am here to help!"

Madame Sel did not answer. She was used to Signor Pepe's bragging, and considered it quite déclassé. She herself was too elegant, too noble, too refined for such self-aggrandizement. Nevertheless, she couldn't help feeling proud of her beautifully wrought, exquisitely chased silver cap and her elegant, three-footed stand, and she knew she was dazzling at dinner parties, with the candlelight reflecting off her hundred crystal facets.

"Are you dreaming on your feet?" said Signor Pepe, leaning once again toward Madame Sel.

"Royalty never sleeps," said Madame Sel. "But I wish you'd brag a little less. It's tiresome."

"All things considered," said Signor Pepe, "it must be admitted I have much to brag about. Who am I but the 'king of spices,' after all? The most valuable spice in the world! A pound of pepper or a pound of gold, it was all the same in the old days."

"That may be," said Madame Sel. "But it does not change the facts. I am a necessity. You are a mere luxury. People can get along without pepper, but they would die without salt. Men sought me out, mined me from the earth, distilled me from the seas, and traded me before you'd even been born."

"I'll admit you're somewhat older than I," said Signor Pepe, who disliked being upstaged by anything, especially the facts.

"That's not what I meant," sniffed Madame Sel. "You're always misconstruing what I say. That tropical heat you grew up in must have affected your brains."

"Ah, *cara* Madame Sel, forgive my foolish tongue," said Signor Pepe, in his most ardent tones. "I am fire; you are savor; we complement each other most wonderfully."

Madame Sel distrusted flattery but she smiled to herself just the same. "There is truth in what you say," she said, "though I cannot help but feel the sentiment is too strongly put."

"How can I help it, *chère* Madame?" cried Signor Pepe. "Am I not a child of the East, where blood runs hot, where love is a high art, even a religion?"

"You embarrass me," said Madame Sel, turning her facets away from the light. "Still, I cannot deny there is a bond between us. Our essences have mingled in the cooking pot more times than I care to remember. It might be said we have shared salt, and so must be true to each other, according to the ancient custom."

"And you, Madame, are a gift of the gods, not to mention the salt of the earth," said Signor Pepe. "I wonder, though, what the world would

do without me, now that it knows me? The Romans loved me so much, they even added me to desserts, and Horace wrote that if he had to choose between pepper and wine grapes in his garden, he would choose pepper."

"I'm glad to see you still remember your Latin," said Madame Sel, who was something of a snob, having once graced the table of the archbishop of Salzburg. "And I grant you, the Romans were fond of you," she went on. "But that was long, long ago. Surely you know the street they named after you has now disappeared from Rome?"

"What!" cried Signor Pepe. "The Via Biberatica gone? How could such a thing happen? Whose idea was this? Ahi, my soul, my honor, my life!"

"Shhh, calm down," said Madame Sel. "I'm sure it was merely an accident of city planning, nothing deliberate. No one can take away your value, certainly not by simply destroying a road."

"Thank you, Madame," said Signor Pepe, bowing low.

"Careful!" said Madame Sel. "Don't knock me over! You know it's bad luck to spill salt!"

Signor Pepe straightened his shoulders. "Being touched by you could only be an honor, Madame," he said.

Madame Sel decided to get back to history. "I, too, of course, was important to the Romans, whose legions marched on the salt road to conquer the world."

"Ah yes, the Via Salaria—the original Great White Way," said Signor Pepe. "To make such a long journey would require a good, spicy meal beforehand," he mused, "but I think I could manage it, if you would accompany me. Who was it said, 'Pepper is small in quantity and great in virtue'?"

"Virtue—from *vir*, man, and *virtus*, manliness," said Madame Sel, before she could stop herself.

Aha! said Signor Pepe to himself. "It seems we both have much glory in our pasts," he said aloud, "and much in common, despite our differences."

He leaned close to Madame Sel and whispered, "Perhaps we should not, then, waste the whole night in argument?"

1991

Canetti Contest

In its end-of-summer catalog for 1989, Daedalus Books, a company that sells remaindered books through a witty, literate catalog, announced a contest in conjunction with its listing of Elias Canetti's book *Earwitness: Fifty Characters* (on sale for $2.98). The announcement read, "If you send us your own detailed explanation for the 'Narrow Smeller,' the 'Tablecloth Lunatic,' and the 'Beauty-Newt' before you read the book, we'll pick the best ones, in our own not-so-humble opinion, and publish them in a future catalog. . . . Don't worry, we won't print your name." My entries were chosen as runner-ups, worth a $10 gift certificate. Here's what I wrote.

The "Narrow Smeller"

People of this type are not necessarily tall and thin, though that is often the case. Nor do they always have a long, narrow nose, though that too is quite frequently found. Almost invariably, however, their eyes are set unusually close to their nose, with very little space separating the left eye from the right. The narrow field of vision afforded by this arrangement corresponds to the mental makeup of such persons, whose horizons tend to be limited and who tend to take a narrow point of view. They are, in short, what is generally known as narrow-minded. In any new situation, they "smell out" the circumstances to determine how closely they agree with their preconceived attitudes and tastes. In a foreign country, the narrow smellers are particularly on guard. Are meals served at the proper time? Do salespeople speak their

language? If not, the end of the nose may be seen to twitch disdainfully, even in the most snub-nosed member of the species. Anywhere, at home or abroad, the mere mention of garlic will send a narrow smeller into paroxysms.

The "Tablecloth Lunatic"

This personality type is usually female, and is often married to an Autocrat of the Breakfast Table. Perhaps as a defense against her spouse's tyranny, or perhaps as a mere expression of her own repressed nature, this woman develops a need to place a covering over any piece of furniture upon which hands would leave their prints or dust could gather, from the grand piano in the parlor to the little shelf by the back door where the housekeys are kept. The dining-room table receives special care. No one has ever eaten off its polished mahogany surface. Indeed, not even the finest damask tablecloth has ever actually touched its finish, for between the cloth and the wood is always placed a table pad. Wealthy tablecloth lunatics usually commission custom-made pads from expensive department stores, which send young girls to the house to take precise measurements and promise to send the finished pad within two weeks. Less-well-off women make do with ready-made pads that seldom fit well and often produce lumps under the cloth, though every effort is made to smooth them out. A smooth tablecloth is very important to this personality type. As a result, women afflicted with tablecloth lunacy spend a good deal of time ironing, since they would never dream of using a cloth containing polyester. Even if a tablecloth has not been used since its last washing and ironing, it is taken out religiously once a year, laundered, and ironed anew. When there are no table linens to iron, these women iron sheets and pillowcases. It may be unnecessary to note that tablecloth lunacy will probably disappear within our lifetime. It is, after all, genetically related to anti-macassar mania, which has died out in all but the most out-of-the-way corners of the planet.

The "Beauty-Newt"

This character type is male. He is almost always short, with a high waist that makes his arms look too long in proportion to his trunk. His hairline is rapidly receding, if he is not already bald. Behind his thick glasses his eyes are heavy-lidded and shrewd. He looks ugly to almost everyone, including himself. People seek out his company, however, because he tells good jokes and has a gift for making money. He spends the money on elaborate entertainments and beautiful young women, whom he dresses in furs and jewels and shows off in all the best restaurants and resorts. In his heart, he wishes the tale of the Frog Prince would come true—that someday one of these women would kiss him and turn him into the beautiful young man he really is.

1989

For Young Readers

A Cloud In The House

One day Jamie opened the front door to watch the rain. He stuck out his hand and tried to count the raindrops that fell on it—1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20—but they came so fast he soon ran out of numbers.

Then Jamie saw a little rain cloud floating toward the house. Suddenly, before he knew what was happening, the cloud drifted up to the porch, through the open door, and RIGHT INTO THE HOUSE!

Jamie shut the door and ran inside. The little cloud was in the living room, hanging over dad's big red chair. Luckily, dad wasn't home from work yet.

Jamie shooed the cloud up the stairs and into his room. The cloud floated over to the fish tank by the window. "Don't move," Jamie said to the cloud. "I'll be back to see you right after dinner."

Jamie couldn't wait to go to school the next day and tell everyone about the cloud in his house. But when he got there and told his story, nobody believed him. The children laughed and said he must have been playing too many video games. Mrs. Albright, the teacher, didn't laugh, but she tried to talk him out of it.

"Jamie," she said. "Are you sure the cloud was really inside your house? Maybe you meant there was a cloud above it." On the board she drew a picture of a house with a little cloud floating above its roof.

"Or maybe you meant there was a cloud next to your house," she said. And she drew another picture, this time of a house with a cloud next to its chimney.

"And you might even have seen a cloud under your house," she said, "if you lived on a hill or high up in an apartment building." Mrs. Albright drew two more pictures on the board.

"A cloud might also float beside a tall skyscraper," she said, drawing another picture. "And sometimes a cloud can go all the way around the top of a mountain, completely hiding it, like this," she said, and she drew a mountain with a cloud where the top should have been.

"You've probably even seen clouds below you, like a huge layer of cotton," she continued, "if you've ever flown in an airplane." Jamie smiled and nodded.

"But, Jamie," Mrs. Albright said, "I don't think anyone has ever heard of a cloud being inside a house. Are you sure you didn't mean to use another word when you described where you saw the little cloud?"

Jamie thought hard about "above" and "next to" and "under" and "beside" and "around" and "below." He looked at the pictures Mrs. Albright had drawn. When he was through thinking about the words and looking at the drawings, he raised his hand.

"I understand about above and below and next to and beside and under and around," Jamie said. "But I really did mean that the little cloud was inside our house. Really," he said. But the class just laughed again, and Mrs. Albright said to get out their arithmetic books.

When Jamie got home, he rushed upstairs. But the cloud wasn't in his room. "Mom," he called. "Where's the cloud?"

"What?" she cried. "I can't hear you, I'm in the basement."

Jamie ran down the stairs from his bedroom and into the kitchen, then down more stairs and into the basement. There he saw the cloud. It was hanging over the washing machine where his mom was doing the laundry. The cloud looked nice and fat—you could almost see it sucking up wet steam from the hot wash water.

"I went into your room to get your dirty clothes," said Jamie's mom, "and the cloud followed me down here."

"Maybe it likes to be where it's damp," said Jamie. So he left the cloud in the basement and went upstairs.

The next day was Saturday, and Jamie played outside all day. He was tired when he got home, but he took his dirty clothes down to the laundry room himself. When he got to the basement, he didn't see the little cloud at first. Then when he saw it, he felt scared. The little cloud was so thin and weak, it could barely float above the sink. Jamie knew he had to do something fast.

So he flapped his arms and made a breeze and helped the little cloud up the basement stairs, then up the other stairs and into the bathroom. He closed the door and ran a nice hot bath. The steam filled the room and fogged the mirrors and windows. The little cloud floated right over the tub. It got fatter and fatter, and Jamie imagined he saw it smile happily.

Then the cloud began to turn gray and to make low rumbling noises. "What's the matter? Do you have a tummyache?" asked Jamie. "Maybe you drank too fast!" By now the cloud filled up almost the whole bathroom.

Then Jamie felt a few drops of water on his head, then more drops, and finally, a whole bunch of drops, almost as many as on the day of the rainstorm. Jamie thought for a minute that he'd turned on the shower by mistake. But it wasn't the shower. It was the cloud, making rain, just like a shower only more fun. Jamie laughed and danced around the bathroom, playing in his own private indoor rain shower.

"What's going on in there?" cried Jamie's mom, hearing all the noise. She came into the bathroom and saw the raindrops falling from the cloud. "Well, this is certainly an interesting way to take a shower," she said. Jamie was having so much fun, she decided not to worry about the puddles on the floor.

But after a minute or two, the raindrops began falling slower and slower. The cloud got smaller and smaller and paler and paler.

Finally the cloud was small and white again, the way it was when Jamie first saw it, and the rain stopped.

The little cloud still hung over the bathtub, although the water had stopped steaming. Jamie knew that without moisture, the cloud would grow small and weak again and wouldn't be able to make rain. So he and his mom decided to take at least one hot bath a day, to keep the little cloud fat and happy and full of raindrops.

When Jamie went to school on Monday, he just had to tell the class about the rain shower in his bathroom. This story was so incredible that no one believed him, not even when he offered to bring his mom to class as a witness. Jamie felt bad that his friends didn't believe him. Mrs. Albright could see that he was sad, and she came over to his desk.

"It's awfully hard for us to imagine how the things you're telling us could be true, Jamie," she said. "But there's one thing you could do, to make it easier for us to understand your story."

"What?" asked Jamie, feeling better already.

Mrs. Albright went to the back cupboard and got out some big pieces of paper, a box of crayons, and a thick black pencil.

"Why don't you write your story, just as it happened, and draw some pictures to show us how things looked?" said Mrs. Albright.

Jamie thought this was a fine idea, and he got right to work. In his best printing, he wrote the title at the top of page one: "A Cloud in the House." Then he drew a picture of a little boy standing on a porch, holding his hand out in the rain. A few inches below the picture, he started his story, like this:

"One day Jamie opened the front door to watch the rain. He put out his hand. . . ."

And he went on to write the same story you've just read, using his very own words and drawing his very own pictures.

When Jamie read his story to the class, everyone laughed again. But this time they weren't laughing at Jamie. They laughed because

they liked his story so much. And they all begged Mrs. Albright to let them write their own stories, just as Jamie had done. But of course Jamie was the only one who had a cloud in his house to write about!

1991

Clumsy Cat

One afternoon in early autumn, in a house not far from here, a small orange cat lay sunning herself on the dining room table. Near the table, on a narrow ledge, sat two red candlesticks and one blue-and-yellow pottery plate.

The cat sat up and looked at the ledge. She narrowed her eyes to see better. Then she jumped. And CRASH! Down came the plate. The cat sat on the ledge and licked her paws, pretending not to see the pieces of blue and yellow pottery that lay scattered on the floor.

Mother came running in. "Oh, see what you've done, you clumsy cat!" she cried. She shook her finger back and forth at the cat. The cat jumped off the ledge, onto the table, and down to the floor, then ran as fast as she could to the corner, where she hid under the big leather chair.

"Come out of there!" said Mother. But the cat didn't budge.

A girl wearing pigtails ran into the room. "What happened?" she said. Then she saw the broken pottery on the floor.

"It was that clumsy cat again," said Mother. "Honestly, we won't have a dish left if this keeps up."

The girl knelt down and peeked under the leather chair. "What's the matter with you?" she said, but in a nice voice. "Cats are supposed to be light on their feet."

The cat's green eyes glowed, but she didn't make a sound.

"Well, she's not light on her feet, not this cat," said Mother. She swept the broken pottery into a dustpan and stomped into the kitchen.

The cat stayed under the chair all the rest of that day, all that night, and all the next day, too.

Finally she crawled out and went into the kitchen for a drink. She looked at her water bowl. It was full, but bits of dust and dirt floated on the top. The cat splashed her paw in the water to clean it. But the dust and dirt were still there.

So the cat went to find some fresh, clean water. She jumped onto the kitchen counter and into the sink. Someone had left a glass of water, nearly full, under the faucet. The cat put her paws on the edge of the glass and reached toward the water. CRASH! The glass tipped over and broke into a hundred pieces in the sink.

"What was that?" Father shouted as he ran into the kitchen. "Oh, you clumsy cat!" he cried. "Look what you've done now!"

The cat jumped out of the sink, streaked out of the kitchen, and ran under the couch, leaving a trail of wet paw prints across the floor.

The girl came into the kitchen. "Why are you yelling?" she asked her father.

"It was that clumsy cat again," said Father. "She's using up her nine lives fast, if you ask me."

"What happened?" asked Mother, who had been working in the basement.

"That clumsy cat broke something else," said Father. "I can't think why we decided to keep her. Maybe we should reconsider our decision."

"No, no!" cried the girl. And she ran to look for the cat.

By the next Sunday, everyone had calmed down. Father sat in the leather chair sewing a button on his blue shirt, Mother sat at the desk paying bills, and the girl in pigtails sprawled on the floor doing a jigsaw puzzle. The cat lay stretched on the back of the couch, sleeping. Suddenly there was a loud THUMP and then a sharp MEOW.

"What happened?" cried the girl. "What happened?" cried Mother. "What happened?" cried Father. And around the end of the couch came the cat, looking embarrassed.

"Oh, you clumsy cat," they laughed. "You fell off the couch, didn't you?"

"What a silly cat," said the girl, hugging the cat in her arms.

"She's sure not your usual cat," said Father, still laughing.

"She's our own clumsy cat," said Mother. "Wait a minute," she cried. "That's it!"

"What's it?" said Father.

"Her name," said Mother. "It's time we gave the cat a proper name. And that's it."

"What?" said the girl.

"Why, Clumsy Cat, of course," said Mother.

"Clumsy Cat, Clumsy Cat, Clumsy Cat," cried the girl. Clumsy Cat, who couldn't tell the difference between her new name and what the family had been calling her all along, curled up in the girl's lap and purred contentedly.

Over the next few months, Clumsy Cat broke four plates, tipped over ten glasses of milk, knocked Father's favorite pipe off the mantle, jumped on Mother's sunglasses and broke them, pushed the girl's dressing-table mirror onto the floor, where it shattered into a thousand pieces, knocked both red candlesticks off the ledge, and smashed three vases that were full of flowers. She fell off the couch, off the bed, off the leather chair, and off the kitchen counter, and twice she got her tail caught in the swinging door. The family still yelled and called her "clumsy cat," but they laughed, too, and they loved her.

Then summer came, and the family was sitting on the deck, enjoying a picnic lunch. Clumsy Cat came outside to join them. She walked around everyone's feet, then she sat down and looked up at the railing.

"Don't even think about trying to jump up there," said the girl, reading Clumsy Cat's mind.

But Clumsy Cat kept staring at the railing. Then, in one smooth motion, up she sprang—and landed with all four paws on the railing. There she sat, twitching the end of her tail and sniffing the air.

Father looked at Mother. Mother looked at the girl. They all looked at Clumsy Cat, who gazed calmly back at them.

"How did you do that, Clumsy Cat?" said the girl.

"Who would have believed it?" said Father.

"You know, I think our Clumsy Cat has grown up," said Mother. "She's outgrown her clumsiness."

"I think you're right," said Father. "See how pleased she looks."

Clumsy Cat's answer was to jump onto the picnic table, step lightly around three glasses and a bottle of soda, sidle around the salad bowl, then jump over a plate of tuna sandwiches, without touching any of them, much less knocking anything over.

"Bravo, Clumsy Cat," cried the girl. And she held out a piece of tuna sandwich, which Clumsy Cat ate as gracefully and neatly as anyone could wish.

1993

SPAGHETTILAND

"I have to rest," said Oscar, and he sat down on the next big rock he came to. Oscar and Lucy had been hiking in the woods all morning. Now Oscar's feet hurt and his stomach was growling.

"We should have brought a snack," he said.

"You're always complaining," said Lucy. "Just have a drink of water."

Oscar took a drink from his water bottle.

"Are you done resting yet?" said Lucy. She tugged on Oscar's sleeve. "Come on, let's go."

Oscar sighed and stood up. "Okay," he said. "But I'm getting hungrier and hungrier."

"That's nothing new," said Lucy. "You must have an extra stomach or something."

Oscar made a face at her and they continued down the trail. The shadows turned green as they passed under the dark trees. They heard a woodpecker in the distance. A rabbit bounded in front of them. Finally they reached the top of the hill and started down the other side.

"What funny-looking trees these are," said Oscar. And he was right. The trees on either side of the trail had long stringy white branches, hanging down like weeping willows dipped in flour.

"What kind of trees are these, anyway?" Oscar went over to inspect one. He touched a branch and it broke off in his hand.

Suddenly a little man shouted at him: "Hey, watch what you are doing!" The man was wearing blue trousers, a blue shirt, and a black cap. His hair was red.

"I'm sorry," stammered Oscar. "I didn't mean to break the tree. I just wanted to find out what it was."

"What do you mean?" said the man. "You have never seen a spaghetti tree?"

"Spaghetti tree?" said Oscar and Lucy at the same time.

"You like spaghetti, do you not?" said the man. "Come, help me pick our lunch."

Oscar felt much better. Lunch sounded good, and spaghetti was his favorite.

Lucy and Oscar and the little man picked handfuls of spaghetti and put them in a big basket the man took from behind one of the trees. "Come with me," he said, and the children followed him down the trail. White butterflies flew around their heads.

"How beautiful!" said Lucy. The little man plucked some of the butterflies out of the air. "We can have these for dinner," he said, "baked in the oven."

Lucy looked horrified.

The little man laughed and patted her arm. "Do not worry," he said. "They are not real butterflies. Like almost everything that grows in my country, these butterflies are a kind of spaghetti."

"Boy, oh boy," said Oscar.

"Well, at least you've stopped complaining," said Lucy. "Oh, look," she said. "There's a bird's nest." The little man grabbed the nest and put it in the basket. "We can eat this, too. It is a nest of ribbons. We call them fettuccine."

"Oh yes, I've had fettuccine," said Lucy. "But I didn't know they came in nests."

"You have obviously never visited Spaghettiland," said the man. "You will learn many things here."

He led them to a clearing. In the middle, open to the air, was a kitchen, with a sink, a stove, a refrigerator, a table, and a funny round oven made of clay. Off to one side, under a big white umbrella, was a

picnic table. Oscar and Lucy sat down at the table. The man dropped the spaghetti into a pot of water.

"We always have boiling water ready on the stove," he said. "This will not take long."

"Don't you have to make sauce?" said Lucy.

"Come here," said the man. "See this red faucet?" They nodded. "Turn the handle." They did. And out poured red tomato sauce. "It comes from the salsa stream over there," he said, pointing behind two big spaghetti trees. "We pipe it over here, and presto, the sauce is always ready."

"But look here," said the man. "The spaghetti is cooked, come bring your plates." They brought the man two bowls from the picnic table. He scooped out a big pile of steaming spaghetti for each of them.

"Just help yourselves to salsa from the faucet," he said. They did.

"Aren't you having any?" said Lucy, as they sat down at the picnic table. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Guido," said the man. "What is yours?"

"I'm Lucy and he's Oscar," said Lucy.

"Happy to make your acquaintance," said Guido, with a little bow. "And I prefer my spaghetti with butter and cheese."

"Cheese?" said Oscar. "Where do you get that?"

Guido pointed to the yellow stone Oscar was sitting on. "That is a wheel of the finest Parmesan," said Guido, walking over with a knife. "Here, I will take a little slice."

Oscar stood up to get out of the way of Guido's long, sharp knife. Guido cut off a piece of cheese, then took a grater out of a drawer and grated fresh cheese over his spaghetti.

Guido held out his bowl. "I'd like cheese, too," he said.

After Guido grated cheese over Oscar's spaghetti, he went to the refrigerator for butter.

"Do you grow butter and cheese here?" Lucy asked Guido.

"Oh, no. They come from the Land of Milk and Honey, next door," said Guido. "We have excellent trade relations with our neighbors.

The Land of Milk and Honey gives us butter, milk, and cheese, and we give them spaghetti and sauce. It is a fair trade."

"Besides," Guido said, "we cannot grow our own butter and cheese because the cows need to eat lots of grass to make the milk that turns into butter and cheese. That takes rain, and it never rains here."

"Never rains?" said Oscar.

"Oh, no," said Guido. "Our crops need perfectly dry weather. Imagine what would happen if it rained on the spaghetti trees! Limp strings is all we would have."

"Guido," said Lucy. "This tomato sauce is extremely delicious. But my mouth is watering for pesto. Do you have any?"

"Well, of course," said Guido. "But it is not as easy to get as tomato sauce. We will have to go on an expedition. Here, take this bucket and follow me."

On his way past the stove, Guido threw the ribbon nest into the pot of boiling water. "That will be ready by the time we get back," he said.

Then he led Lucy down another trail into a denser part of the spaghetti forest. "Here we are," said Guido. He lifted a cover of leaves to reveal a dark green pool covered with a film of oil. It smelled like mint and garlic.

"Here is the pesto pool," he said. "Just scoop some up. That is olive oil on top. We will stir it up a bit before we eat it."

Lucy stuck her finger into the pool and licked it. "Mmmmm," she said. "This is the most delicious pesto I've ever tasted."

"Of course," said Guido. "What did you expect in Spaghettiland? Cheap imitation pesto, pesto in a can, pesto made with parsley, for heaven's sake? Here we have the best of everything, only the best."

Lucy nodded happily and followed Guido back to the clearing.

She looked into the pot of boiling water. "Hey, it's empty," she cried. Oscar was sitting at the picnic table, stuffing noodles into his mouth. "I was afraid they were getting overdone," he said. "Oh, no,"

said Lucy. "I was so looking forward to eating this pesto." And she sat on the wheel of Parmesan cheese, ready to cry.

"Never mind," said Guido. "The woods are full of noodle nests. Just wait here. I will be back in a flash." And Guido ran into the woods and came back carrying another noodle nest before Lucy could squeeze even one tear from her eye.

Guido dropped the noodle nest into the boiling water. "Ten minutes," he said. "While it cooks, we can grate more cheese."

He carried his long, sharp knife over to Lucy's stool and cut off a hunk. "Here," he said. "You can grate."

"Well, at least you have to work a little for these noodles," said Lucy.

"Oh, so you like to work?" said Guido.

"Yes, of course," said Lucy.

Guido made a face. "Here we work only to enjoy ourselves by eating," he said. "It is a fine life."

"You said it," said Oscar. He'd finished his second plate of noodles. "I hardly feel full at all. I could eat spaghetti all day."

"That looks like what we're doing," said Lucy.

"What is the matter?" said Guido. "Do you not like to eat?"

"Oh, yes, of course, but it's just that. . . ." Lucy faltered.

"Go on," said Guido.

"Well," said Lucy. "Everyone knows there's more to life than food."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Guido. "Food is the most important thing in the world. That is the philosophy of Spaghettiland. And spaghetti is the best food. Try to look at things from our point of view. That is how to be a good guest in a foreign country."

Lucy frowned and looked thoughtful.

"Now here," said Guido. "Bring your bowl. The fettuccine and pesto is ready."

Lucy ate one bowlful, then asked Guido for another. "It's wonderful," she said. "I could eat this all day and not get full at all."

"Good," said Guido. "Very good. You have discovered the best thing about Spaghettiland. You can eat as much as you want and it will never be too much. You will like it here, I am sure."

Oscar was too busy eating his third bowl of noodles to talk. He kept his eyes on his plate and fork. Finally his plate was empty and he lifted his eyes.

A black cat was sitting on the table in front of him, looking curious. "Who's this?" said Oscar.

"Let me introduce Panther," said Guido. "He likes to hunt wild things."

"You mean like birds and bunnies?" said Lucy, shivering.

"Oh no," said Guido. "Panther hunts wild greens. They grow in the fields between here and the Land of Milk and Honey. Panther is clever at finding the first asparagus of the season, and the tastiest salads. Perhaps we should send him out for salad greens. We will need salad for our dinner."

Guido called Panther over and whispered in his ear. The cat bounded off toward the east. "We let him have all the asparagus he wants in return for his hunting," said Guido. "He always brings back something delicious."

By this time everyone felt sleepy. Guido spread a blanket under an old spaghetti tree and Oscar and Lucy lay down and were soon napping. Guido smiled at them and lay down under another tree. Butterflies fluttered over the sleeping children, the salsa stream bubbled cheerfully, the sun shone hot and dry on the branches of spaghetti, and Oscar and Lucy dreamed.

In two hours they woke up. "I'm a little hungry," said Oscar. Lucy reached up, grabbed a few butterflies, and handed them to him. "Here, drop these into the water. I'm in the mood for a snack, too," she said.

Guido came over and shook his head. "Those are for baking in the oven," he said. "We have rather strict rules about such things." He

reached down and dug in the dirt, then pulled up some thin stringy things. "Here, try these little worms," he said, handing them to Lucy.

"Ew," said Lucy, and dropped them. "Worms? I can't eat worms." Guido laughed. "We only call them worms. Look again. They are thin, thin spaghetti. They will cook fast and give you a snack in minutes. They are especially good with peas."

"Peas?" said Oscar. "I thought you didn't grow anything except spaghetti and sauce here."

"We keep peas in a special corral behind the kitchen," said Guido. "They are quite tame. You just call them and they jump right into the cooking water. Here, I will show you."

Guido led Oscar and Lucy to a pen in a little gully behind the kitchen. He whistled three times and a cup of peas leapt out and jumped right into the pot.

"I prefer wild greens," said Guido. "These peas are too domesticated for my taste, but they are good in a pinch. And they taste good with the little worms." When the worms were done, Guido added the peas and a pat of sweet butter and they sat down to enjoy their snack.

"Where do you get the peas?" asked Lucy. She knew that peas would never grow without water. "Well," said Guido, "as I explained, we have liberal trading policies with our neighbors. Peas come from the Low Country near the sea. The Low Country farmers also send us carrots and onions, which arrive in big sacks twice a year."

"Do you ever eat potatoes?" asked Oscar, who was fond of them.

"With all this spaghetti, who needs potatoes?" said Guido. "But we do trade for a few, to put in the bottom of our pesto bowls sometimes."

"Mmmm," said Oscar. "When can we try that?"

Guido laughed. "How about tomorrow? Lucy can show you where the pesto pool is, and I will fetch some potatoes from the cellar."

"This is an interesting place," said Lucy. "Do you have any other animals besides Panther?"

"Well," said Guido, "we employ a flying squirrel to find truffles. Sometimes a pig helps him, but it is hard to keep him from eating the truffles. The squirrel eats a few, but he brings us most of what he finds. He has a small stomach."

"Not like some people," said Lucy, pointing to Oscar.

"What are truffles?" said Oscar, ignoring her.

"Wild things that grow in the ground under certain trees," said Guido. "They taste like mushrooms but better."

"What do you do with them?" said Lucy.

"Sometimes we cook them in butter and eat them plain," said Guido. "Other times we shave a little over spaghetti, maybe adding a bit of cream. They are truly delicious."

"Could we have some with the butterflies?" said Lucy.

"Oh, no," said Guido. "It is not truffle season yet."

"What are we going to do with the butterflies, then?" said Lucy.

"Watch," said Guido. And he threw all the butterflies they had caught during the day into the boiling water.

"I thought we were going to bake them," said Lucy.

"We are," said Guido. "But we must boil them first. Otherwise they will just get dried out and hard as a rock when we put them in the oven."

Guido handed Lucy the cheese grater. "Here, we need more cheese." Lucy started grating.

As soon as the butterflies were soft, Guido took them out of the water and drained them. Then he walked over to the cupboard and pulled out a long, flat pan. He took the pan over to the red faucet and squirted tomato sauce in the bottom. He added the butterflies, sprinkled them with lots of cheese, then added more butterflies, more salsa, and finally more cheese. The whole thing took two minutes. He slid the pan into the funny little oven, which was always hot, and said they could have supper in an hour.

Oscar wandered over to the salsa stream and began tossing pebbles into the bright red liquid. Lucy tried to stop him. "Can't you think of

anything better to do than throw rocks at things?" she said. But Guido said it was all right.

Just as Lucy had stopped worrying about Oscar and the rocks and was starting to worry about Panther, the cat came prancing into the clearing. He held his head high, and in his mouth was a gorgeous bunch of light-green and dark-green herbs. There were dandelion greens and things Lucy had never seen before.

Panther also carried a beautiful bunch of asparagus. "The asparagus is for him tonight," said Guido. "Day after tomorrow we will send him after asparagus for us, and we will have a special treat."

"Everything so far has been a special treat," said Lucy.

"Yes," said Guido. "But wait till you try asparagus with cream and mustaches."

"Mustaches!" said Lucy. "Do you eat those, too?"

"We grow them on the bridegroom bushes," said Guido. "Come along, I will show you. A little walk will help us work up an appetite while our dinner cooks."

Lucy and Oscar followed Guido out of the clearing and down a hill into another part of the forest.

"See," said Guido. "Those are the bridegroom bushes. They grow gentlemen's mustaches, along with little ears, elbows, and tongues. And bowties, for the finishing touch. Not to mention rings for the bridegroom's wedding."

Lucy ran over and picked a mustache, an ear, a tongue, and a ring off the bridegroom bushes. She put them in her pockets, then looked around for Guido and Oscar. Where could they have gotten to?

"We're over here," shouted Oscar. Lucy saw Oscar and Guido standing under a shelter of lacy vines and branches.

"This is the angel-hair arbor," said Guido. "Come and see."

Lucy ran up the path to join Guido and Oscar. "Look, here are a lady's curls, and over there are garlands for her hair, and ribbons."

"Yes, fettuccine, I recognize them," said Lucy. She picked a curl, a garland, and a nest of ribbons. Her pockets were bulging.

"What about our dinner?" said Lucy. She was starting to worry again.

Guido squinted up at the sky. The sun was getting low but the air was nice and dry. "Our dinner will be done in ten minutes. Let us go back another way."

Lucy and Oscar followed Guido down a narrow, curving path. They turned a corner and found themselves in another clearing. Leaping around them were curly spaghetti, round spaghetti, and spaghetti that looked like little horns.

"What are these?" said Lucy.

"Shells and wheels, pipes and priest hats, pots and propellers," said Guido. "And over there are coral and stars, bugles and trains, little lambs, and even diamonds."

"Whew," said Lucy. "I had no idea you could grow so many different kinds of spaghetti." She bent over and grabbed as many shapes as she could and stuffed them into her pockets. Now they were really full.

"We have many more kinds," said Guido. And he led them back into the forest. "If you look closely, under the leaves, you will find snails and mushrooms," said Guido. "And if you are lucky, you will see daisies and sparrow's tongues."

Lucy poked under the leaves and held up a handful of tiny shapes. "What are these?" she said.

"Apple seeds," said Guido. "They are a small kind of spaghetti we put in soup. But do not pick any more now. We are almost home."

And around the next corner was the familiar clearing. Oscar ran straight to the oven. "I hope our dinner is done," he said.

Lucy went to the table and emptied her pockets. "I can't believe we found all these kinds of spaghetti," she said, her eyes round as the rings of Saturn.

Guido laughed in his friendly way and went to the oven. "Here, Oscar, take the butterflies out while I put salt, oil, and vinegar on the salad," said Guido.

"Mmmmmm," said Oscar when he opened the oven door. "It smells delicious. I can't wait."

Guido scooped steaming helpings onto their plates and brought the salad to the table. Panther finished his asparagus, licked his chops delicately, and settled under the table for a nap. "Enjoy your dinner," said Guido to the children. And they ate the last of the butterflies just as the sun set behind the mountains.

After supper, Guido spread out the blankets and the children fell asleep, dreaming of spaghetti of all shapes and sizes and of cream from the Land of Milk and Honey. Panther dreamt only of asparagus. Guido didn't dream at all. It wasn't necessary to dream when you spent every day in a dreamland like Spaghettiland.

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