

THINGS AS THEY ARE

By

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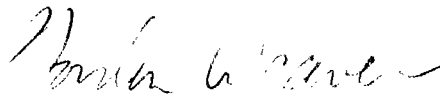
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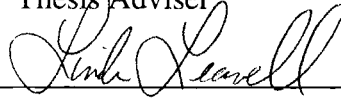
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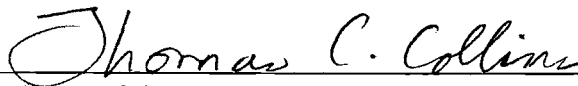


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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Voice and Pleasure:

Booth, Barthes, Fitzgerald, and *Things As They Are*

"The text you write must prove to me *that it desires me*," Roland Barthes writes in *The Pleasure of the Text*. As I see it, this somewhat ambiguous concept, when tied to Wayne C. Booth's ideas on the construction of voice, comes closest to pinpointing what successful fiction must do. Certainly, if one were to say, "the text must give us pleasure," such a statement may seem painfully obvious, but this is not necessarily so, especially in light of a given writer's concern for imposing his or her "experience" or perspective on other people, on readers. After creating a paradigm by applying Barthes and Booth to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, I would like to then use that paradigm as a comparative norm to my own work.

Often, one may get wrongly caught up in the joy of purging (writing as therapy), or in vilifying that which does not fit into the scope of one's vision (the grinding of social or political axes). Writing should instead communicate, share, identify, and yes, even impose, but not without concern for the audience. If we proclaim "True art ignores the audience," a wrongheaded notion according to Booth, then we end up neglecting half of what fictions should do. To use an analogy: we must have a painting which from a distance looks like an

elegant, red rose, but up close is composed of thousands of wicked thorns. The reader needs to be drawn in by a compelling, consistent, concise voice, and seduced at the same time by the promise of pleasure. We do not read for anything but pleasure, even if it means reading something painful in order to gain pleasure by the stark contrast. And so, pleasure and voice are, for me, the fundamental principles I try to keep in mind as I write.

What Barthes calls the "pleasure of the text," Booth calls "Types of Literary Interest" in the *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (125). Booth divides the "values which interest us" into three categories: Intellectual, Qualitative, and Practical. The Intellectual piques our interest in knowing "the true interpretation, the true origins, the true motives, or the truth about life itself." The Qualitative plays on our "desire to see any pattern or form completed." And the Practical touches on our pleasure of seeing the "success or failure of those we love or hate, admire or detest" (125). Broken down more specifically, these result in the pleasures of facing moral choices, in living vicariously, in struggle which may lead to survival or success.

I know of no better example of a text which gives pleasure on a greater scale, in every respect, than F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. One is *compelled* to read by the voice of Nick Carraway when we hear him tell us:

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the "creative temperament"--it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic

readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. (6)

All in one novel we are given the Intellectual mystery of who Gatsby truly is, the Qualitative desire to see *what happens* to these characters, where the story is taking us, how the tensions set up at the beginning will resolve, the patterns they follow, and the Practical aspects of both loving and hating Gatsby at the same time, wanting to see him both succeed and fail. We also get to live vicariously through both Nick and Gatsby, become wealthy people with "advantages" who struggle toward survival and "success" (5). Plus, at the heart of this novel, is a love story--Gatsby's love for Daisy Buchanan--and the moral dilemma all the characters become entangled in, directly or indirectly, with respect to Gatsby stealing Daisy away from Tom.

Not only does *The Great Gatsby* succeed in these ways, but it is fundamentally ripe with tensions we wish to see resolved:

Gatsby, his hands still in his pockets, was reclining against the mantelpiece in a strained counterfeit of perfect ease, even of boredom. His head leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock and from this position his distraught eyes stared down at Daisy who was sitting frightened but graceful on the edge of a stiff chair. (91)

This passage exemplifies a perfect melding of both voice and pleasure, a text which both compels the reader by its voice but proves to the reader it *desires* him.

Specifically, how is this accomplished? Beginning with the voice, one can identify certain elements working to affect our compulsion to read: consistency, reliability, and

distance. Consistency is defined overall by teaching the reader how to read the fiction, what stance he should take, because the writing adheres to that rhetoric. Immediately, when we read the first few lines of Fitzgerald's novel, we know several things: this is a first person story told by an articulate narrator recounting his experience in relation to Jay Gatsby. We have a narrator who recognizes that "Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope" (6). Such capacity for articulation would be rendered inconsistent, and thus break our suspension of disbelief, if in the middle of the novel the narrator suddenly became inarticulate, unable to comment on those things that "temporarily closed out [his] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (7).

Imagine, then, Nick Carraway instead telling us that Gatsby was a "bad, bad man that I kinda still liked." The level of diction in such an utterance, the level of articulation, does not fit our perception of Nick Carraway's voice. This does *not* happen in the novel, however, and we are carried along without bump or jolt in the smooth ride of such a consistent construction.

Reliability also plays an important role in compelling the reader to listen, to read. To what degree can we trust what the narrator is telling us? All narrators are somewhat unreliable by the very nature of their having filtered the experience, shaped it, offered certain portions of it up to the reader, but how unreliable is Nick Carraway? He is intelligent, articulate, but he is also a man who says "Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction," in one sentence, and then proceeds to tell us there was "something gorgeous about [Gatsby], some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" (6). So, it is the consistency of the voice operating in the fiction which helps make it believable,

and the degree of unreliability in that voice which captures our interest.

The degree of unreliability is determined by the construction of various distances in the work: Intellectual, Temporal, Emotional, and Moral. Distances not only occur between the reader and the narrator, but between the narrator and his narrative. It is the distance between the narrator and his narrative which in turn affects the reader. Nick's intelligence is obvious through the level of language he uses and his ability to comment in an articulate way on the events of the story. We do not doubt him when he says, "About half way between West Egg and New York the motor-road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile so as to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land" (27). The details ring true and we are given no reason to question them.

The Temporal Distance is clear in that we know he is telling us the story at some distance in time, somewhere about two years after the events of the story: "After two years I remember the rest of that day, and that night and the next day, only as an endless drill of police and photographers and newspaper men in and out of Gatsby's front door" (171). Nowhere in the novel do we get the sense Nick is really telling us this story forty years after the fact, or even two days after. So the Temporal Distance is reliable. From this slight separation in time comes a certain degree of Emotional Distance, an even keel of sorts on the surface with emotional involvement latent:

as [Gatsby] lay in his house and didn't move or breathe or speak hour upon hour it grew upon me that I was responsible, because no one else was interested--interested, I mean, with that intense personal interest to which everyone has some vague right at the end. (172)

This creates a tension for the reader, this slight distance between a factual reporting of sorts and an emotionally charged subject. But the real tension, the real distance at work which intrigues us, is the Moral Distance. Nick refuses to pass judgement on Gatsby, and so we as readers cannot resist doing so, or at least weighing the matter seriously. Since Nick is "inclined to reserve all judgements" (5), we are being called to task, and perhaps one of our greatest pleasures in life is passing judgement, though we may feign otherwise. In this way, as Roland Barthes phrases it, we are *seduced*, cannot help but feel as if the text *desires* us.

Having been influenced not only by great writers such as Fitzgerald, but by the critical ideas of Booth and Barthes as well, one can see, then, how I intended to translate these influences into my own work. The novel's title comes, obviously, from the Wallace Stevens's poem "The Man With the Blue Guitar," a section of which serves as an epigraph. The novel which follows is, I think best expressed by the color blue; *somber* in all its meanings: dark, gloomy, melancholy, dismal. It is a story about life as defined by death, highlighted by pitting vision and desire against reality and consequence. "The day was green," Stevens writes, but the guitar was blue. As the epigraph suggests, the novel strives to have both the elegant red rose and the wicked thorns, the full ironic dimension. This complexity defines life, I believe, as it is, gives us "things as they are." So the epigraph serves, as epigraphs do, to set up a kind of thematic resonance, to begin revealing the "experience" or perspective I wish to impose, communicate, share with the reader.

Focusing on these thematic concerns helped me shape the novel--and I will address more of these later on--but my first concern, I knew, had to be with finding a compelling

voice. When the reader comes upon the opening section of the novel and reads:

Kristin opens the package of cigarettes, throws the wrapping in the garbage can beneath the kitchen sink, her hands shaking. Before removing a cigarette, she remembers to tap the package against her hand like she's seen so many smokers do. Then she decides she doesn't want to smoke just yet, instead pours a glass of wine from the bottle she bought on the way home from the hospital. (1)

it is my hope that the reader is compelled to listen, to read on. With this voice, consistency, reliability, and distance played significant roles. To keep the voice consistent, I employed an effaced third person narrator who closely follows Kristin's consciousness, then Toby's, alternating chapters between their points of view. By having *one* voice to follow two perspectives, a consistency and simplicity was created; since I wanted to follow both perspectives, I thought it best to use a narrator who would not provide yet another. The level of diction also remains close to the viewpoint characters, never losing sight of what is appropriate to their sensibilities; they are intelligent, reasonably articulate people. By comparing the previous passage to the opening section of Toby's narrative we can see the same voice at work:

Toby drives to the house where a young man committed suicide. *Maria*, he thinks. *Maria Hundido*. Two police cars, their lights off, are parked on the street, one empty, the other with two officers drinking coffee. Toby waves to them, they wave back. *The others must be inside*, he thinks. It is his job to collect the corpse, clean away the blood, and prepare this young man for

burial. (13)

Both passages are written in present tense and follow closely these characters' viewpoints through an effaced third person narrator. Such consistency keeps the reader from being forced to get up and change his seat in the middle of a movie--you've been assigned a seat, had the size and shape of the screen defined, and through these things you've been taught how to view the movie, how to read the story.

Thinking in terms of how reliability comes into play with regard to the construction of the various distances of the story, what are the Intellectual, Temporal, Emotional, and Moral Distances at work in the novel? The relationship between the Narrative Persona and the Viewpoint Characters, as defined by those distances, creates interest and tension for the reader. As far as the Intellectual capacities of the Narrative Persona are concerned we should have no reason to doubt what is being reported to us:

He presses the electric key attached to the visor and drives carefully down the incline. Florescent tubes running the length of the ceiling provide cold light, and several caskets have been stored against the back wall. He parks the van, opens the hatch. He pulls the gurney out and rolls it through the prep room's double doors. (26?)

The Temporal Distance is also clear, since the story is told in present tense. These things are happening in the present moment, as we read; therefore the Temporal Distance is essentially nonexistent (outside of the small number of flashbacks). Since the story focuses on the immediate effects of Kristin's decline, I felt the use of a present tense narrator would nicely mirror such immediacy for the reader. Also, one of the ideas behind the novel was the

tension between things *as they are* and things *as they could be*. Present tense, to me, exemplified things as they are, hopefully making the reader more aware of decisions made in the present moment.

The Emotional Distance between the Narrative Persona and the Viewpoint Characters is also so close as to be nonexistent as well. When we read, "*That goddamn bastard*, she screams inside. *How could he think it was better to tell me alone?* The doctor should have told her and Toby together, but he didn't" (4?), we are receiving Kristin's emotional response directly, nearly unmediated by the Narrative Persona.

Such closeness to the viewpoint characters might be too much to absorb--the design of these three distances serving to bring the reader close to the raw pulse of the narrative--if it weren't for the Moral Distance. Similarly to the way *The Great Gatsby* is constructed, I intended to have a great tension by creating a Moral Distance. Just as Nick Carraway refuses, on the surface, to pass judgement, so too does the Narrative Persona in *Things As They Are*. On the surface, the novel has a Narrative Persona who simply reports, seems distant from the moral issues of the story, but it is Toby's quandary which is reported to us. The absence of commentary or judgement by the Narrative Persona on the narrative forces us to address the same questions Toby grapples with, demands that we comment and pass judgment.

In relation to Booth's "Types of Literary Interest," the Intellectual interest created by the story derives from wanting to know who Toby and Kristin truly are, what their relationship truly means. The Qualitative interest comes from our desire to know who Toby will be loyal to, who he loves, what decision he will come to now that he must confront the

moral questions of his conduct, and even to know how his work as an embalmer will translate into his thinking about Kristin's death. The Practical interest stems from wanting to see Toby make the right decision, of wanting to see how the decision is made, and what that decision will be. We don't like the fact that Toby has been having an affair, but we want to see him redeem himself, to become the better person we hope is just below the surface; we want to see him succeed, *as well as* suffer the consequences, just as we do with Jay Gatsby.

Also, like Fitzgerald's story, we get to live vicariously through the lives of the Viewpoint Characters--with Gatsby we get to experience wealth and pretense, with Toby we have an affair and learn the details of an embalmer's work. Gatsby and Daisy give us the tensions of a love story, just as Toby and Kristin do.

Having learned a great many things from *The Great Gatsby*, one can see many similarities I attempted to create between Fitzgerald's text and my own. One can also see, I believe, the influence Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* had on my approach to writing the novel. But only recently did I encounter Roland Barthes. Until coming upon *The Pleasure of the Text*, I had been aware of giving the reader pleasure, but not as attentive to it as I should have been. I had been engrossed in the act of purging and vilifying, of shoving wicked thorns down the throats of anyone who could bear to swallow it. Having read Booth's discussion of the types of literary interest, I had recognized them as operative, but did not pay it as much attention as it warranted.

So, for these reasons and more, the novel has undergone a great many revisions. First, I wrote a draft which started out with six chapters with Toby as first person narrator,

followed by four chapters from Kristin (also in first person), then an epistolary chapter from the oldest son, Joel, followed by an epistolary chapter from the youngest son, Bobby, and ending with a chapter from Toby. This, I came to realize, was uneven and inconsistent. Whose story was it? How could a reader follow such jumping around? As I've described before, it was too much like being forced to get up and change your seat in the middle of a movie.

I started over, wrote another complete draft from scratch. I decided I wanted to switch between Kristin and Toby's point of view, but I knew that in order to provide a consistent mode of narration it would have to be written in third person. I also knew the novel was perhaps *too* somber, so I added more positive passages at the beginning of each chapter (the italic sections), thus giving the reader not only a chance to breathe, but a contrast or foil to the rest of the text, similar to having the day be green (in the italic sections), changed by the tune of the blue guitar (the text).

After reading Barthes, however, I realized not enough tension or conflict existed to give the reader pleasure, to provide a reason for him to suffer the thorns. So I added Maria Hundido, the woman Toby has been having an affair with for two years prior to the moment of narration. Now Toby is faced with the kind of "heightened sensitivity" Fitzgerald refers to. Who does he love? How could he have been cheating on his wife, even if he did need the escape as a way of coping? What should he do now that she's dying? The reader cannot help but clamor for Toby to do the right thing: "You love your wife, Toby, so dump Maria and show Kristin you love her." And, at the end, when the reader realizes Toby is struggling with making the right decision, and has essentially decided to do what we have been calling

for all along, it's too late, Kristin is dead, and we feel a kind of terrible, pleasurable, moral justice.

Such constructions designed to create erotic tension in absorbing the text are not, however, ultimately subject to consensus or degree of pleasure evoked. Barthes asks, "Does writing in pleasure guarantee--guarantee me, the writer--my reader's pleasure?" He answers:

Not at all. I must seek out this reader *without knowing where he is*. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's person that is necessary to me, it is the site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an unpredictability of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game. (4)

What Barthes describes here is a promise of bliss without knowing when it will be delivered. That promise brings us pleasure in the reading of the text. And so, what are some of the common "sites" of desire? Love, mystery, morality, escapism, learning, fresh experience, language? Certainly. Struggle toward success or survival, identification with the self, voice? Yes, and more. Don't we see these elements woven into the complexity of *The Great Gatsby*? Most certainly. Barthes divides them up like this: "Culture. Intelligence. Irony. Delicacy. Euphoria. Mastery. Security" (51). Boiled down, these elements fit nicely into Booth's Intellectual, Quantitative, and Practical "Types of Literary Interest," but what underlies all of these principles? What are those things which give us pleasure?

We will never agree entirely. What may be a beautiful, elegant rose to most people, may not be as pleasurable for others. Irony created by noticing the wicked-looking thorns beneath may fail to impress. A fiction can only be created with the world as a bull's-eye. We

know where to shoot the target *most* of the time. And as long as we construct fictions with consistent, concise voices which *compel* us to read, which seduce us with the promise of pleasure and then deliver it, we will connect more often than miss. Fictions must keep readers from asking three questions: *Oh, yeah?* or *Huh?* which indicate a faulty construction of voice, and *So what?* which translates to *Why did I read this? Where's the pleasure?*

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THINGS AS THEY ARE

by

Peter J. Theis

About 55,000 words

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."

Wallace Stevens, "The Man With the Blue Guitar"

CHAPTER ONE

"What did you dream about?" Toby asks, moving closer to her in bed. Kristin smiles, drifts back into the memory of her dream, says, "It was the dream about the vineyard. You know, the same dream I've had since I was little: I'm standing in a vineyard, my vineyard, and there are rows and rows of ripe grapes. I'm relaxed, and the sun is so soft, gentle. It's the most beautiful thing." Toby can see everything she describes, and she can see how her dream is affecting him. "You really want that vineyard, don't you?" Toby asks. She nods, happy with his concern, and says, "That's all I've ever wanted--the vineyard. And you, of course. The vineyard and you."

* * *

Kristin opens the package of cigarettes, throws the wrapping in the garbage can beneath the kitchen sink, her hands shaking. Before removing a cigarette, she remembers to tap the package against her hand like she's seen so many smokers do. Then she decides

she doesn't want to smoke just yet, instead pours a glass of wine from the bottle she bought on the way home from the hospital. Finishing the glass in several gulps, she fills it again, carries it to the living room, sipping several times. *This is too much*, she thinks. Finding something to do might help, like reading a magazine or watching television, but concentration is difficult, so she stops, thinking it's a waste of time when she could die the next day, or the next hour. *Only three months*, she thinks. *How can doctors know that? A brain tumor. How can they say for sure it's inoperable?* She wants to believe there's still some chance, some way out.

Pacing about the room, she avoids looking at the grandfather clock. Not wanting to hear it, she hums to herself. She wishes Toby would get home, needs his arms around her. It seems like he's been gone so much longer than normal. Could it actually be taking longer, or is it only her heightened awareness? Even so, where is he?

I can't be dying, Kristin thinks, feeling cheated. *I'm thirty-five. I should have years ahead of me, not months.* She didn't do anything wrong, not anything she can think of, wonders why life with her husband and children must come to an end so soon. Even the vineyard won't be completed in the time left.

Where's Toby? she asks herself, taking a cigarette from the package now, lighting it, inhaling, fighting the urge to cough, but the coughs come anyway. She has never smoked before, but always wanted to try it; something about it reminds her of movies, of her friends, her mother, how calm people seem to be when they smoke. Forcing herself to inhale again, she fights her lungs, lets the smoke trail slowly from her mouth. Feeling

lightheaded, she sips the wine. *I'm smoking, for Christ's sake.*

But it's the least of her worries. It's good the kids aren't home; Kristin wouldn't know what to do. Her instinct as a mother says they shouldn't be told, that they can't know about this because they're too young. She imagines them trying to cook their own dinners, surviving on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, never having her around to wash their clothes, put bandages on their cuts and scrapes. They need her guidance, too, she thinks--when to go to bed, where to put commas in their English papers, what television programs they shouldn't be allowed to watch.

Focus on the wine, she tells herself. Everything about it is wonderful: the color, the shimmer, the bouquet, the way it swirls in the glass. But she also realizes how quickly it is evaporating, how temporary and precious it is.

That goddamn bastard! she screams inside. *How could he think it was better to tell me alone?* The doctor should have told her and Toby together, but he didn't. *In case you didn't want your husband to know*, was his explanation. Why wouldn't she want Toby to know?

In her movement about the room she passes by the phone hanging on the wall between the living room and the kitchen, long cord hanging motionless. It might be comforting to call her mother, just say hello, hear the sound of her voice, but Kristin isn't ready to cope with her mother's strange attitudes.

Looking out the living room window, she sees the gravel driveway leading up to the main road, and beyond that the empty fields which surround the small town of

distance. Consistency is defined overall by teaching the reader how to read the fiction, what stance he should take, because the writing adheres to that rhetoric. Immediately, when we read the first few lines of Fitzgerald's novel, we know several things: this is a first person story told by an articulate narrator recounting his experience in relation to Jay Gatsby. We have a narrator who recognizes that "Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope" (6). Such capacity for articulation would be rendered inconsistent, and thus break our suspension of disbelief, if in the middle of the novel the narrator suddenly became inarticulate, unable to comment on those things that "temporarily closed out [his] interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (7).

Imagine, then, Nick Carraway instead telling us that Gatsby was a "bad, bad man that I kinda still liked." The level of diction in such an utterance, the level of articulation, does not fit our perception of Nick Carraway's voice. This does *not* happen in the novel, however, and we are carried along without bump or jolt in the smooth ride of such a consistent construction.

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the water. The water is ice cold, but feels good, even though it makes her shiver. She uses the small amount of Paul Mitchell--usually saved for special occasions--unimportant to her now. Washing quickly, Kristin lathers up, then rinses and climbs out to dry off. She ponytails her hair, ties it with a purple ribbon to match her T-shirt. She avoids her image in the mirror, brown eyes over sagging eyelids, pale smooth cheeks. Dressed in a T-shirt, knit sweater, and blue jeans, Kristin goes downstairs to wait.

Lighting another cigarette without coughing, the smoke rising and swirling around her, she sits in the living room, thinks about Toby's work, imagines him being the one who has to endure pumping the formaldehyde into her. *It won't be him, though*, she tells herself.

Half an hour passes before the kitchen door opens. Toby's presence brings relief, calming her, yet tension grows from knowing he must be told. "Someone been smoking?" he asks.

Forcing herself to sit still, only glancing in his direction, she sees his muddy work shoes, starts to laugh at how absurd he looks--baggy blue jeans, flannel shirt with an ugly red patch over his little belly, round nose, messy hair. Then her laughter fades, the horror returning, quiet overtaking her. Watching him sit slowly, carefully, next to her, Kristin stares at the dull gray carpet, listens as he asks what the doctor said about the tests.

She waits too long to tell him. He knows now. She looks away from his pained expression. Feeling his hesitation, refraining from touching her, Kristin leans into him and waits to be held in his arms. Remaining that way for a long time, deeply sad, she

listens to his breathing. Her mind wanders, remembers the vineyard and the work just begun.

"All those years of saving money to buy the farm," she says, "and now it doesn't mean anything."

"Don't say that," Toby mumbles.

After her three months have passed, she imagines Toby selling the farmhouse and the land and moving some place else, wanting to start over, to forget her.

Then, remembering Joel and Bobby will be home from school soon, she sits up, terrified they might guess something's wrong if anything is out of place--Kristin usually doesn't let the farmhouse get so disorganized. "We need to clean the house," she tells him. "We don't have much time." He seems to understand her. They go through the farmhouse, she vacuuming the floors, improving them only slightly with her efforts, but the difference comforting her; he dampens several rags and begins dusting. They clean the living room, hallways, kitchen, and porch without saying a word, too afraid to talk.

As Toby finishes wiping the top of the television, he turns just in time to bump into her. He strokes her hair. Turning the vacuum off, she stops his hand by kissing it, tastes the dust and wet soap on his hand, winces. "You taste awful," she says, wiping her mouth on her sleeve.

He laughs, hugs her briefly. "You mean to tell me you don't like the taste of soap?"

They are nearly finished cleaning when the telephone rings, startles Kristin.

Seeming troubled, he looks at her. Avoiding his stare, she says, "Answer it," perhaps a bit too quickly, wanting the tension between them to end. "I'll be fine."

He sets the rags in the kitchen sink, moves toward the phone. He pauses, looks at her again, lets it ring twice more, then takes the receiver and mumbles hello. He nods once, stares at the floor, then says, sounding surprised, "How many are we going to have today?" Then a long pause. "Suicide?" he asks, running his hand through his hair, sighs. "I'll be there in half an hour," he says quietly, then hangs up. He turns to say something to her, but she leans forward, kisses his cheek, cutting him off, forcing the decision he seems to be struggling with. "Some kid just shot himself," he told her. She says nothing, doesn't want to know the details. After a long moment, he puts on his winter coat and leaves through the kitchen door.

Alone again, she thinks. Somehow it is easier that way, but also more frightening. After putting away the vacuum, she lights another cigarette to give her something to do, fills her glass with more wine, turns the television on with the volume off. Twenty minutes later, Joel and Bobby return from school, toss their book bags and coats on the floor, start rummaging through the refrigerator. "Ma, we got any orange juice?" Joel shouts.

"You'll have to make some," she tells him. "Check the freezer."

He groans, opens the freezer door, peers inside. Several canisters of frozen orange juice tumble out, one lands on his right foot. "Ah!" he shouts, reaches for his foot to massage it, then slips and lands on his rear end.

Kristin sits forward. "You okay?"

Bobby comes into view, kicks Joel in the leg, says, "You're a baby. Get up," then pops his head into the living room. "I got an A on my drawing," he tells her in a proud voice, obviously expecting praise.

She smiles, trying to look sincere, says, "Good."

He looks at her strangely. "Why are you smoking?"

For a moment, no excuse comes to her. Finally, she leans forward, slightly drunk, shuts off the television, drops her cigarette into the empty bottle of wine. "I have a bad cold," she tells him.

Joel walks in carrying a glass of orange juice, pushes Bobby out of the way. "Move, you little twerp," he says, then turns toward her. "Where's Dad? Are we going to dig some more in the field?"

A lonely image of the vineyard comes to her, unfinished, barren--how little time there is to do several years of work. In a tired voice, she says, "Ask your father when he gets home."

Bobby grabs Joel's arm, pulls him toward the kitchen. "She's got a bad cold," he explains, "leave her alone."

They return to the kitchen and Kristin climbs the steps to her bedroom--*so many steps*, she thinks--then stares out the bedroom window. Much of the snow has melted, and the basic form of the vineyard--rectangular, holding a few posts, lined by long rows--is starting, struggling, to take shape.

She has always loved plants. In her childhood, dandelions popped up early in summer, surrounding the beautiful house her parents owned. There were many different plants to collect and identify: milkweed, thistles, dandelions, geraniums. She studied all the plant life, their different wind sails, the marks distinguishing pine trees from spruce, maple from oak--her senses were alive with their mysterious smells and textures. Even now, Toby gets sick if there's too much pollen in the air, but she can breathe it in deeply without any problems.

As a young girl, the summer she turned thirteen, she took a trip with her grandfather to Big Sur. California was new to her, but they went all over that long state, from Napa to St. Helena to Livermore. They stopped at vineyards in Fresno, Branscomb, Lompoc, Watsonville, Bonny Doon, and so many other places she couldn't remember them all. He taught her how to taste wines that summer. She still remembers breathing their bouquets, swirling the sweet samples in her mouth, spitting so she wouldn't get drunk.

Then, later, night would fall on Big Sur, as if all the darkness of the world were pouring onto the sunset. The sun dropped slowly into the ocean, shimmer by shimmer, as if being swallowed. At the horizon, a tiny green bar hovered there for a moment, then vanished, and she could see the mystery of the *green flash*, as people called it. Green, purple, azure, and red touched the skyline. It was like looking at the largest glass of wine, the horizon its rim. But now, looking down at the melting snow and mud of what was supposed to be her vineyard, she's frightened by how much work there's left to do, and no

time to do it.

It might help to call her best friend Shirley, or her sister Carmen in Taiwan, but discussing it would only make it more real. She could call her mother, let her know, but Kristin can't seem to gather the strength for it. The good moments with her mother are rare. She remembers her mother driving a trophy-gold Lincoln Continental with the soft leather seats, her eyes bright in the moment of owning such a wonderful vehicle. That was many years ago. Now her mother drives an old, brown Dodge Dart, and her father has passed away, leaving only pictures and memories to remind her of how they once were. Whenever looking at those pictures, it's as if the very image whispers "Good-bye" to her.

How was your day? her mother asked once. Kristin had just come home from school. She could see the glass of wine in her mother's hand, one near her father on the coffee table. *Put down your books. Sit over here. Your father and I have just realized we haven't talked to you in a while. We want to know what's going on with our little baby.* Her father smiled, said, *I hear you got an A in History.* It was one of the few times her parents actually focused on her, wanted to listen to her, give advice, praise her. *This only happens with the wine*, she remembers thinking, wishing they would drink it more often, but she liked seeing them relax, seeing them forget about proper behavior. They were truly like *parents* then. She wishes she could have that now.

The next day, however, when she tried to ask her mother about something she read in her History book, her mother sent her out to the garden to pull weeds. *Always to*

the garden, Kristin thinks--the garden she usually talked to instead of her mother.

Slipping into bed, she lies on Toby's side. The smell of him is strong, lingering there. She imagines what it would be like to be him, to have short hair and a penis, to have strong hands and a coarse face. Picturing him, pretending he's there, only makes her feel terribly alone once again.

It's irresponsible of Toby to stop at Harvey's for a drink, out of habit, but that's where he is now, hiding; she knows his habits. Often, she's wondered why he seems to spend so much time away from home. She's told herself many times that it isn't easy for Toby to handle the work he does, that he deserves every possible way to cope with the stress it brings. Some nights he comes home very drunk after work. Then he wants to sleep, removing himself further from her. He only wants to make love when he's sober, and that isn't very often. He loves her deeply, Kristin knows this, but he's always been afraid of expressing what he feels. Almost always he's too indirect, hidden.

She wants him to be home with her, not out working. It wasn't right of her to send him out to work; unfeeling for him to have gone. Resolving to talk with him when he returns, force him to tell her how he feels, Kristin intends to confront him about what they're going to do.

Before long, her body tires, needs sleep. Calling down instructions to Bobby and Joel, she tells them to fix dinner for themselves, ham sandwiches, then explains her decision to go to bed early. Without seeming disturbed by this idea, they shout "Okay!" to each instruction. Then she hears, "Hey, quit pulling my hair!" from Bobby, and Joel

says, "Who's the baby now? I'm going to pull out one hair a day until you're bald."

She smiles briefly at her children, but soon, exhausted by the trauma of the day, sleep comes to her. She wakes at nine-thirty, dark outside. Toby isn't home. Joel and Bobby watch television downstairs. The sparse, distant sound of icy snow starts on the window.

* * *

Awakening at eleven o'clock, Kristin cannot go back to sleep. She walks quietly down the steps, watches Joel and Bobby as if they are home movies which haven't been viewed in a long time. For a moment, in the habit of motherhood, she thinks of telling them to go to bed, but remembers it isn't a school night. Fascinated, Kristin studies them. Bobby sits on the floor with a pad of drawing paper resting in his lap; a graceful, haunting picture forms, resembling a large egg with some kind of flower or plant inside trying to get out. Joel carelessly flips channels on the television, satisfied only momentarily with the programs until he finds an action movie.

This is a good moment. Fearing its passing, she sits on the steps quietly, wanting to remain unnoticed. It's too painful to imagine what their faces will look like at her funeral. At the one memorial service the whole family went to, years ago, neither she nor the boys knew anyone there. Toby thought it might be good for everyone to go--a family learning experience he'd called it--because he wanted the children to better understand his

profession as an embalmer.

Amazingly, Joel and Bobby were quiet the whole time, but attentive. Afterward, on the way home, Toby took her and the boys for hamburgers and milkshakes; they sat in a tiny Burger King, wearing their funeral clothes, telling jokes, stealing each others french fries.

Part of her hopes her funeral will make people laugh, make them remember her in a good way, with a smile, but another part wants them to cry with deep sorrow, suffer embarrassment, feel her absence. She wants to believe the funeral will be worth the price of death.

Trying to keep positive, Kristin focuses on the youthful energy Joel and Bobby seem to have, but feels tired once again, slips back up the steps, taking the empty wine bottle and pack of cigarettes with her, leaving the children to themselves. The wait in bed for Toby to come home seems painfully long, not knowing how much he's been drinking. She turns on the radio, searches the stations until she finds one playing classical guitar, turns the volume down low. She misses him, begins to cry, then calms herself, lights a cigarette, coughs several times. After a while, sleep seems the best way to pass the time. Dropping the cigarette into the wine bottle, she slides over to his side of the mattress and falls asleep, holding his pillow close, the smell of him strong.

CHAPTER TWO

"You know, that's what I want, too," Toby says, "To have a family, someday. I've never really had a family. Everyone kept . . ." Kristin frowns, asks, "Kept what? Leaving?" Toby nods, tells her, "Leaving or dying." "We already have a family," Kristin says, pats her stomach, "You and me and at least one little one." He looks at her, at her hips and waist, and asks, "Are you?" "Yes," she tells him. For the first time in years he feels reborn, as if some terrible part of his past has been replaced with something good, something new. He wonders what his child, his children, his family, will be like years from now, and he plans to create a life for them far better than he's ever had--one where everyone stays together for the right reasons.

* * *

Toby drives to the house where a young man committed suicide. *Maria*, he thinks. *Maria Hundo*. Two police cars, their lights off, are parked on the street, one empty, the other with two officers drinking coffee. Toby waves to them, they wave back. *The others must be inside*, he thinks. It is his job to collect the corpse, clean away the blood, and prepare this young man for burial. Earlier in the day, he picked up two elderly ladies from the hospital who died in a car wreck, drove them back to the funeral home, and embalmed them. Not too long after that, Kristin told him the results of the hospital tests--that she's going to die soon. He tells himself it is an omen, warning him he will have to stop seeing *Maria*. How could he have been seeing her in the first place? It was

lust, nothing more. Comfort, maybe. It certainly couldn't be love, could it? He didn't know. He *did* know he loved Kristin. *Can't deal with this now*, he thinks, knows it's too much for him to collect and put in order. He wants to be home, with Kristin, Joel, and Bobby, wishes none of this was happening.

The young man's family stands in front of the house with Toby, looking at the closed garage door. *We all know what's in there*, he thinks. They're waiting for him to open the garage and go inside. The father refuses to look and instead stares at the ground. The aunt asks Toby if he'd like some help. Toby says he wouldn't. He has no idea where the mother has gone. The aunt hands him the garage door opener. The garage's boards are cracked, and the paint is peeling in patches. He wants to show no fear in what he is doing. He steps forward and presses the button. Everyone flees to the house, and he stands alone on the icy pavement. At first everything seems just fine. There are two vehicles, a blue station wagon on the left, dirt-caked truck on the right. He starts inside, smells the body. The body is all around, everywhere. It is in the corner, holding the muzzle there in the cold. It is under the station wagon, sprayed against the back wall, flung in pieces on the lawn mower, everywhere.

It is colder inside the garage. Toby doesn't want to look at the young man. The muzzle of the shotgun has fallen away, resting now on the chest. *"Why do you do this?" Maria asked him once. "You like dead bodies. Los Muertos?"* Closing his eyes, he tries to clear away all thoughts of her, instead remembers the first time he met her.

"Hey, Amante," Maria whispered, sliding into the booth with him at Harvey's, her

lips wet with gin. "I've been watching you ever since I got here two months ago.

Married man like you, you should be happy. Why aren't you happy, Amante?" That was how he met her. How she knew he was married, he didn't know. Why she thought he wasn't happy, he didn't know. "I bet you can be exciting," she told him, touching her empty glass to her lips, "when you want to."

Part of him misses Maria, wants to stop at Harvey's for a drink, then go around back, climb the stairs to the flat above the bar, slip into bed with her. He'd been seeing her for two years without Kristin knowing. *"Isn't it exciting?" Maria asked him once. "No," he told her, "it's an escape, that's all." Maria smiled, said, "Not for me."*

Kristin, Toby tells himself, tries focusing on what he has to do. He needs to make certain this young man is buried properly. Wrapping the body in a canvas tarp, he wheels it out on the gurney, and loads it into his mini-van. The father runs from the house, waving a fat finger. "You sonofabitch," he says. "Don't take him away yet! He meant *no harm!*" It hurts Toby to hear the father talk that way, but he places his hand on the father's shoulder and tells him he is sorry. He pulls him close and hugs him. "My boy's gone," the father says, as if he has to convince Toby. Toby walks him back to the house, holding his arm.

"You're very kind," the young man's mother says, but there is an air of accusation to these words. Because of Toby's profession, his family is known by almost everyone in Columbus. The mother must know his sons, Joel and Bobby, are alive, and it hurts her deeply. Toby retreats to the garage, feeling almost ashamed to have his own children in

the face of what she has lost. But it also makes him angry. She does not know about Kristin, and he fights to keep himself from going back and shouting at the mother. How dare she presume *she* is the only one suffering?

He concentrates on his work, pushes all but the most simple thoughts from his mind. He scrubs the garage until his arms are sore, but there is too much for any one person to do in one evening. *Thank God this doesn't happen all the time*, he thinks, not liking this part of his job, though he must do it--there isn't anyone else. The rubber gloves he wears are thick, but he worries about them tearing open from cleaning the cement floor. When he finishes, he takes off the gloves and puts them in the van, then comes back for the bucket. He has been working with the dead for years, so blood does not bother him, except for the danger of infections, like hepatitis or AIDS. He knows how to keep his distance. But working with this young man is different--he thinks of Kristin, and he fears losing control.

He exits through the garage's side door into the winter cold carrying a bucket of stained, soapy water. At the house, long yellow curtains mute the dim light glowing behind the living room window, and while his breathing is quiet and slow in the frigid air, he can hear the murmur of the family's voices inside. He walks to the edge of the street where steam rises from the sewer drain, pours out the contents of the bucket. The ice-glazed branches of the neighborhood trees groan in the wind. Snow swirls and collects in drifts.

Knocking twice before opening the front door, he quickly leans his head inside.

He clears his throat. "I've done all I can," he says. The young man's father looks up and nods at Toby. His wife's face burrows into his shoulder. She snuffles but does not look in Toby's direction. An older policeman Toby doesn't recognize waits in one corner. The aunt stands up from a brown rocking chair and meets Toby at the door.

"He shouldn't have said those things before," she whispers.

"He's upset," Toby tells her. "Don't blame him."

"It's a shame. He was a fine boy," she says. "You have two sons, don't you?"

"Joel and Bobby," he mumbles. "They're younger." He steps back to close the door a foot or so, not wanting to let the cold air in. "Will you be all right from here on?" he asks, wanting to say something.

"You look dreadful," she says. "Go home before all this catches up with you."

The policeman steps forward, edges her out of the way, introduces himself as Axel McCown. "The coroner just left," he says.

"Karl?"

"Yeah. He'll be back in a little while, help us finish up. You can go."

When Toby reaches the highway, he turns off the van's headlights, drifts through the dark much slower than he should, listening to the tires crunching the patches of winter ice. He remembers what he has seen, the way the tissue and blood were frozen to the garage wall, and driving in the dark seems to help him focus his mind away from the young man.

Ahead, the road vanishes into a winding stretch, illuminated only by the moon and

stars. It is difficult to distinguish the opposing lane from his own. He picks up speed.

There are no oncoming cars yet, no ominous headlights he can see. Not that he is surprised--not in this isolated stretch of country. He turns on the radio, finds a slow jazz number that sounds like Coltrane, clicks the heater up a notch as he approaches the bottom of a tall, dark hill.

He has no idea where he is on the road. He lights a cigarette and flicks the ashes out the window. He feels the need for a drink, maybe more than one. *Maria Hundo* knows. He cannot allow all of this to control him. In time, in dealing with the tougher jobs such as this one, he has found a few drinks can give him back a sense of control, keeping reality away until something seems firm again. This is something no one knows better than Maria.

But, he thinks of Kristin waiting for him at home, how she keeps his side of the bed warm those cold nights on the farm, sliding over when he climbs in, giving up that comfortable space. He knows he should be with her, but doesn't have the strength just yet to face her. He also knows she needs him. *I need her too*, he thinks.

It has always been this way; Kristin and Toby depending on each other. Six years after Bobby was born, they purchased the farm so the land could be transformed into a vineyard, and most everything they owned was sold to pay for it. They hoped to begin planting this spring, and to work in the field full time, but he has to continue his work with the funeral home until the loans are paid. Kristin has studied horticulture for many years, keeping the farm filled with lush, green plants, but the vineyard is her dream, and

he wants it to happen for her. Though, at this moment, he doesn't know if he can make anything happen the way he'd like.

He thinks of Joel and Bobby. Bobby wants his bicycle fixed so it will be ready before the snow melts. It is important to him. It seems like such a small thing to Toby right now. He has to embalm this young man, pack his head to give it shape again, wire his mouth shut.

Drifting snow crawls over the crest of another approaching hill. Light pierces the edge and he jerks the steering wheel, missing an oncoming car by only a few feet. The driver's horn blares away, and Toby is glad he didn't force the other car off the road. He lets out a ragged, hitching sigh.

This year, Toby has worked with over three hundred bodies. Twenty have been violent deaths. With each one comes a growing sorrow. He wakes up mornings with the dead white skin of some person's face floating before him. The eyes, lips, noses, cheeks, chins, and teeth of people flash into his mind like snapshots. They are watching.

He passes under a single light positioned at the top of a telephone pole. Shadows shift. For a moment, he sees tire-grooves from previous drivers on the road in that luminous circle, but then they are gone and he is drifting once again, listening to the soft play of the music on the radio.

Through the trees, on one side of the road, are two farmhouses. A barn rests between them. In a small clearing a combine stands partially covered by mud and snow. Toby has always admired farmers, how they feed the community. They work with nature

and what it provides. He has no aptitude for farming--it was Kristin who insisted on building their own vineyard--so driving a tractor or stacking bales of hay are only visions in his head. While Kristin keeps plants alive and healthy, Toby forgets to water or fertilize, or places them too far into the sunlight.

* * *

Walking into Harvey's, he is immediately surrounded with dark oak and warm light. Music murmurs in the background and the bartender moves slowly at whatever he does. The hardwood floor is sticky in places from spilled drink. Fish netting drapes from the ceiling.

Toby takes a stool near the back, calls for a shot of whiskey and a glass of Miller. Since Maria isn't serving drinks, there's a good chance she's upstairs, practicing her songs on an acoustic guitar.

Harvey has bushy eyebrows, speckled with gray, his face set with concentration. He places the drinks in front of Toby. "What's on your hands?" he asks.

"Nothing," Toby tells him, slips his hands under the counter top. After a moment, Harvey sighs, moves away toward the tap. Toby drinks the shot of whiskey while Harvey isn't looking. He notices his hand in the light of the bearded lady lamp, winces at the pink hue of his skin. *Should have washed before leaving the young man's house*, he thinks, but he had wanted to get away from that place. Apparently some of the blood had washed in

under the gloves onto his hands and dried.

The image of the body does not leave him. His thoughts return--inevitably--to his own sons, to Kristin. Maria has no concept of family, can only think of perfecting her music until she's ready to go on stage and be a star, has never taken an interest in knowing his wife or children. At fourteen, Joel is fragile, plagued by ear infections; his grades have suffered because of it. He is good with numbers, shows talent at music, but is always slightly anxious, and that sometimes brings trouble. Toby worries less about Bobby. Bobby rarely complains. Both of his sons seem are getting close to reaching the same age as the young man he just worked on.

And now Kristin's dying, he thinks, knows he will have to raise his two sons alone. Maria wouldn't help, would she? *Jesus Christ, Toby!* he thinks. *Kristin isn't dead yet and you're already replacing her!*

"I'll take Kristin over Maria any day," he mumbles. He loses count of how many drinks he orders, orders another, sips it while looking around the bar. The place is empty except for a few groupings of people. Sitting seven or eight stools down from him, a woman with auburn hair keeps glancing in his direction. *It's time to go*, he thinks, leaves the bar, stumbling out the front door.

He knows he needs to drive to the funeral home to finish his work, but cannot help walking around the building to the stairs in back. Light comes from Maria's window. Shivering, he climbs the stairs, trying to keep quiet, not knowing yet if he wants to see her. Six steps from the top he hears her soft, airy voice, singing, "O Senora, the

sun's too hot down here, Senora."

Maria keeps her place well stocked with alcohol, buys two bottles of gin from Harvey each week at the cheap rate, steals a bottle of whiskey from him too, when she can. *I'll only stop for a drink*, he tells himself. *No more.*

Stepping up to the landing, he taps lightly on her door, hears her singing stop. "Quien es?" she calls.

"Toby."

"Ah, mi Amante!" The latch inside unlocks and the door opens. "Come in," she tells him, grabs his coat, pulls. "Did you hear my song? Am I not good?"

He shuts the door, says, "I need a drink."

"Si, of course. But, you know what I need," she tells him, slides her hand down to his crotch. "I need this."

Stepping back, he leans against the door. "I can't tonight."

Frowning, she runs her long fingers through her dark hair, studies him. Finally, she sighs, lifts his hand to her breast, holds it there. He can feel her warmth, the slightly erect nipple, the soft curve. "You need a different job," she tells him. "You come here depressed too often. *Deprimido*. It makes me sad." Touching his face lightly with the back of her hand, she whispers, "Come to bed. I will make you happy."

Toby cannot stop himself, begins to cry. *I should be home*, he thinks.

Letting his hand drop, she opens the cabinet door beneath the television, takes out a small flask she keeps filled with gin. "Here," she says, pressing the flask into his hands.

"Go now, okay? But come back soon, tomorrow. It's been almost a week since I got you in bed and I want to play." She opens the door, helps him onto the landing, kisses him, then closes the door.

At the bottom of the stairs, a brutal wind rushes over the snow. He feels warm and has difficulty breathing. Climbing inside his van, he rolls down the windows, removes his coat and sweater, strips to his T-shirt. Goose bumps ripple over his skin as he starts the engine. He sets the van in motion, drives through slush before meeting the main road. Reaching for the flask of gin, he takes a drink, then sets it under the seat.

Wind comes in through the open windows. He clenches his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering, but that does little to help. Snow weighs down the pine trees along the road, and ice clings to a glazed fence with a No Trespassing sign.

Red and blue lights swirl behind him. Startled, he shuts off the radio. He pulls the van to the side of the road, sits back, shivering, arms crossed. After a short while, a flashlight cuts into the darkness, an eye squinting for its prey. He recognizes the policeman as Donald Brinks. Brinks claimed to have known Toby's father before he died, though Toby does not remember him from that part of his life.

"Toby?" Brinks flashes the light inside. A gust of wind slaps him and he shades his face with his free hand. He shines the light at the back of the van. "Is that what I think it is?"

"His name is Eric Hamilton."

Brinks shuffles his feet in the snow. "Driving without your coat. And no lights

on."

"I have to get back to the funeral home," Toby says. He nods toward the back of the van. "This one's a big mess."

Waves of snow engulf Brinks once again and he looks almost insignificant in his dark blue uniform, black lawman's coat. "Listen," he says through the muffling noise of the storm. "I just saw you swerve once and I thought you might've been one of the Kuttick boys fresh from the tavern. You all right to drive?"

Again Toby nods.

"Well, put your coat on and be careful."

Toby waves as Brinks turns his patrol car around. He edges the van out slowly and drives less than half a mile before reaching under the passenger seat for another drink of gin. He finishes the flask and shoves it in the glove compartment. Brinks was near the age Toby's father would have been if he hadn't died. *Such a slow death*, Toby thinks, remembering how his father came home from the railroad most days filthy with coal, smoking his cigarettes, sitting down to a large meal of steak, buttered bread, whole milk, fudge brownies. His father would wake mornings coughing again and again, as if he were hacking up his lungs. He had no regard for his body, let it slow down until pneumonia killed him.

He was right, though, a little bit, Toby thinks, sees how his father knew you couldn't escape what the body wanted to do to you. But still, Toby knows the value of going to a doctor, the importance of paying attention to his body, though he thinks it

doesn't matter ultimately, that people go about killing themselves in different ways, whether they want to or not.

The adrenalin rush, he thinks, must have been fearsome as that young man slid the metal of the muzzle into his mouth, took one final, deep breath, held it, pushed the trigger down.

Thirsty for something other than alcohol, and wanting to soften the smell of gin, he stops at a gas station two blocks from the funeral home to buy some chocolate milk. The place reeks of gasoline and oil, but feels warm and he stays there for a moment. He is glad to be out of the car, away from the body. The attendant keeps glancing at him. Before any questions can be asked about where Toby's coat is, he opens the carton of milk, steps outside. His boots crunch the gray snow.

He drives to Murphy's Funeral Home. Thinking of the upper part of the funeral home, he is reminded of how different it is than below, where he works. Above, it is comfortable, simple, elegant; travel books lean against a marble bust resting on the mantle of the fireplace, an oriental rug covers most of the floor, pastel wallpaper softens the room. But below it is very different. The service entrance in back angles down sharply into an underground parking structure. A single light attached to the top of a black post provides visibility for a good twenty feet around the entrance.

The light catches the sign above, illuminates the words there. *Murphy's Funeral Home, founded 1887 by Earl Murphy and William Block.* William Block... Grandpa Willy. *That's how it started*, Toby thinks. Back then, Grandpa Willy worked for the

funeral home as a photographer, taking postmortem pictures of those who had just died. Photography was expensive back then, so many times people died without a picture their loved ones could remember them by. Toby thought Grandpa Willy had done a great service, had preserved memories, held back some of the pain death gave those people. And, since Toby's parents died when he was fairly young, he felt a duty to make death easier on others since it had been so hard on him. Like Grandpa Willy had done. *He's still there for me*, Toby realizes. *His name's still on the plaque.*

He presses the electric key attached to the visor and drives carefully down the incline. Florescent tubes running the length of the ceiling provide cold light. Three hearses lined up on the left look as if they've been washed recently, and several caskets have been stored against the back wall. He parks the van, opens the hatch. He pulls the gurney out and rolls it through the prep room's double doors.

As he slides the young man onto the table, his stomach heaves and gin creeps into his mouth. He swallows, shakes his head, blinks his eyes clear, hoping things will be better if he can get this done. He wants to go home to Kristin, but cannot allow himself to think about her now--he knows it will break him if he does. The young man's body cannot be left on the slab overnight. The next day's work will only be minor preparation, and with any luck he will not be bothered with calls. He fears the telephone. He hates having to wear a beeper.

Taking a deep breath, he unwraps the tarp. All bodies have to be washed. He rolls the table to the walk-in shower, adjusts the water to a warm temperature, lathers up

the brush and sponge-glove, scrubs down the corpse. He turns it over, cleans the back side, removes the feces the young man excreted at the time of death. Then Toby rinses the body using the moveable shower head.

After drying the corpse with a large cloth, he places it back on the table. There are plenty of exposed veins inside the shell of the skull, so he pushes the trocar into the largest one and turns on the pump. He sets a release at the feet for the blood's exit. His hands are shaking. After removing blood with the trocar, he starts looking for a vein--some place to pump the formaldehyde into--watches the levels in the glass tank lower as the fluid transfers. The formaldehyde has an awful, pungent odor. Once it reaches the very ends of the body's network, decay is slowed immediately. The flesh becomes pale where the preservative reaches it, and patches appear where the skin will need touching up with careful needlework. Sometimes bodies have dismembered limbs, sometimes their chest cavities are open, and some are fat, sagging, or wrinkled. Most, though, are picked up intact from the hospital.

Maria and Kristin's bodies, however, are thin, Maria's skin slightly darker, Kristin's breasts a little larger, both women beautiful to look at. *Such a difference*, he thinks.

His rubber gloves make it difficult to work the needle into the left arm where the preservative has not taken. On the young man's finger is a copper ring Toby cannot remove without cutting, and that is not permitted because he wants to retain each person's normal appearance whenever possible. The parents would want to see the young man as

he had been, not with any improvements Toby might make--though he isn't certain the body can be prepared for viewing; there is, perhaps, too much damage. He studies the young man's body, noticing the black, wavy hair that glistens--it helps Toby cope a little because the body doesn't resemble Joel or Bobby.

Why do you do this? Maria had asked him. *Because so many people I knew died when I was fairly young,* Toby told her, *it just seemed right to do something to help.* Maria said, *I think you do it because you're scared, because you think it keeps you safe.*

Often Toby uses driver's licenses for guides to facial reconstruction because families usually do not want to give up a personal picture. In his photo the young man is smiling, his nose drooping down to his upper lip with some stubble where he might have hoped a mustache would grow. In person, Toby can only tell so much: the tiny diamond sparkling in his left ear, eyelashes curling upward, straight teeth. His chest, arms, and shoulders are thicker, as if he lifted weights.

Toby wonders what the young man had been like, if he smoked cigarettes or dreamed of becoming an astronaut. He seems like someone Toby might have seen fishing every spring on Fox Lake, casting his line in just after the ice melts a hole near the long, gray pier. Toby remembers seeing many people like that fishing along the lake and the nearby river. When he is most depressed by the bodies piling in, he thinks of these strange people as ghosts fishing along the water for their lost lives.

Toby knows this young man is an unusual case. The coroner, Karl, who pronounced the young man dead before calling, thought drugs were not involved. The

police, who had been to the scene before the coroner, agreed. From Toby's experience, he knows it takes extraordinary mental strength for someone to decide to place a shotgun in their mouth, or slit their wrists, or swallow a thousand sleeping pills, and many times drugs or alcohol provide the extra push needed to remove any indecision. Suicide is not considered a sane act. According to Karl, this young man had not used any unnatural substances.

On occasion, like this suicide, Toby uses a fabric made of stainless steel to fill large holes in the body. Most often, it is used when organ donations have been taken and the chest cavity or stomach sags. One time, a man was murdered with a twenty-two, and the bullet bounced around inside his skull before finally stopping. Toby made an incision on the side of the head, scraped away where the bullet pushed out a four inch square area, then packed it and sewed it up.

He notices the belly seems somewhat bloated, possibly from something the young man consumed. He applies a little pressure and a deep gurgling issues from the mouth, the damaged lips parting as air rushes out. The gurgling sounds like "cock" to Toby, as if the corpse were getting one last insult in: You cocksucker, leave my body alone. Toby waves his hand over the corpse to clear the stench, thinks of how the dead sometimes have ways of talking. Many times, on other occasions, he believes he's heard an unexplained word or noise, similar to this noise, while working. He could never pinpoint the source--and perhaps it was only his imagination--but he knows it is the dead talking. He wants to know what they are saying. Was there something he should know?

Working with the needle, he begins lacing thick black thread across the gap made by the shotgun blast, trying to keep his hands steady. What would Grandpa Willy say? *You listen to those doctors*, Willy said once, but it was a doctor who killed him, accidentally injecting him with the wrong medication, the wrong needle. Toby's father vowed to never go to a doctor after that, if he could help it. *Crazy fool died because of it*, Toby thinks.

Unfortunately, it appears as if there will not be enough of the skull left to permit a viewing of the body at the services, though the family asked that he try to make it possible. The shotgun blast has cracked the cranium, left a hole larger than his fist, but he can suture across a network, like knitting or weaving a cloth, attach hair over the structure. Then, if the body is laid correctly in the casket, the damage will be less visible.

After the bodies are washed and embalmed, they have to be dressed. People choose the best garments--a dark double-breasted suit or a light pink dress with fine lace--and hope their loved ones will look elegant and peaceful. Sometimes makeup is used. Hair is combed. Shirts are buttoned, pants straightened, shoes tied. The preparations are methodical, and Toby tries to arrange them without much thought, almost as if he is watching himself do those things. But he always saves the dressing of the bodies for the next day, so he can confer with the family and the funeral director. The family is always the most important thing. The loss of his parents and the work of Grandpa Willy taught him that; preserve what you can, comfort those who are hurt to help compensate for what they've lost.

Taking a moment to rest, he decides to call Dr. Link at the hospital, dials the number on the phone near the sink. After several transfers and a number of clicking sounds, Link answers. "This is Dr. Link."

"Link, this is Toby Block."

"Oh, Toby. Glad you called. How are you doing?"

"Listen," Toby says. "Kristin won't talk about the chemotherapy."

Link sighs. "Yes, I'm sorry. She doesn't deserve all of this."

"I know. But I want to know about the chemotherapy. I assume that's an option. Kristin won't talk about it."

There was a long pause. "I have to be honest, Toby. It won't help the situation. A tumor of this kind will only respond to treatments in a minimal way. And they will do very little to slow the process. It might give her a small amount of time, but she will have to suffer the side-effects of the treatments. The ultimate decision is hers. Both of yours. But she has to realize her hair will fall out, her gums will become sore. She'll have to stay out of sunlight and--"

"Thanks," Toby says, interrupting Link. It was not something Toby wanted to hear. "I just wanted to know."

He hangs up the phone, finishes his work on the young man, washes up, puts his coat on. He has papers for the young man's parents to sign which will give him permission to prepare the body for viewing, but that can wait. The cold exterior he has created to retain control leaves him now and he feels exhausted. He wants to be in the

THINGS AS THEY ARE
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house where his family is resting peacefully, sleeping. And he feels an urgency to be with Kristin, a strong need to hold her, listen to her voice.

CHAPTER THREE

"We never really fight, do we?" Kristin asks. Toby shrugs, says, "Not in any way that isn't healthy. We fight, but we always know it's just temporary, that there's a lot of strength holding us together." "We talk a lot--well, not always talk, but communicate," Kristin says, "We find ways to communicate with each other." Toby runs his hand through his hair, thinks, asks, "But where does that strength come from? It's love, but what else? Religion? We're not religious, so where does it come from?" She parts his hair for him, straightens it, says, "We create our own. I think everyone creates their own lives." Toby laughs, asks, "So what's in Heaven? Is there one?" She leans back, puts her feet up on the small table, says, "It's imagination. Whatever you imagine it to be."

* * *

She is certain Toby's drunk when he comes in. It's after two in the morning. She has a headache, reaches for the aspirin on the nightstand, knowing now the tumor is the reason she has been taking them heavily for the past several weeks. She can smell the alcohol on him, but doesn't care, not tonight. Tonight she simply wants to make love, hold him.

Watching him undress through the open bathroom door, she moves to her side of the bed as he steps out of his pants and tosses his shirt in the corner by the hamper.

"Honey?" she says.

He opens the door, joins her in the bedroom, kisses her shoulder as he climbs in. She slides close, presses her breasts against him, touches his chest with her dark blonde hair, kisses him, straddles him.

He runs his hand down her cheek to her chin. "Not now, sweetheart."

She pulls back and rests her head on his shoulder. "You've been drinking."

"Some."

"There's nothing we can do," she tells him, then reaches down, massages him with her hands. "This will help," she whispers.

"Not this time," he says.

* * *

She is awakened by his movement in bed. His breathing is erratic, hurried. He is mumbling something and she knows he must be having a nightmare. She thinks of waking him, but decides it is better to leave him alone while he's dreaming.

"No," he says under his breath, then, sounding frightened, he mumbles something she cannot understand.

It's been a long time since he's talked in his sleep, and she knows very little about

his dreams, except how terrible they are, usually having something to do with work. It is a subject Toby has always avoided discussing with her, but it makes sense that tonight, so soon after knowing she's dying, he would be dreaming so strongly.

But then he is quiet and she is left with nothing but the sound of his breathing. Several hours later, she rolls over, shakes his shoulder gently. "Honey?" she says. She cannot stand being awake while he sleeps, wants him to help her fall asleep.

"What?" he groans, turning toward her, rubbing his face. "You all right?"

"I don't understand how you can sleep," she tells him, takes a cigarette from the nightstand, lights it, tries to inhale without coughing. She feels almost comfortable with her smoking now.

"Don't do that," he says. "Put it out."

She looks at him. "You do it," she tells him.

"You know I don't like to smoke anymore. I quit for you, remember?" He turns over, doesn't move. She knows he's pretending to fall asleep. She brings her cigarette to her lips slowly, thinking of what she should do, concentrating so hard that lines appear on her forehead. She touches his arm, clears her throat, wanting to say something.

"Christ," he says, then plumps the pillow under his head.

She frowns, feels like hitting him. "How can you sleep?" she asks.

He sits up, turns on the lamp. "Who needs sleep, anyway!" He picks at something on the quilt and she places her hand on his so he will stop. He takes one of her cigarettes, lights it, climbs out of bed, cracks the bedroom window open to let the smoke

out.

"Tell me what I did wrong?" he says. "I'm listening."

"I just don't know how you can sleep like that."

He turns around, blows smoke from his mouth. She notices the muscles in his chest and shoulders, feels weak. *He looks so healthy*, she thinks, tries to take her eyes off him.

"I give up," he says, tosses his hands in the air. He rubs his forehead. "Christ, I have a headache now."

She pulls her knees up to her chest, wraps the covers around her feet. Looking at his hands, the thin fingers, the knuckles covered with hair, she thinks of them touching her, wants them to move over her, into her. "It's late," she says. "You have a headache from drinking. You should stop drinking."

He glares at her. "I know that," he tells her. He takes an ashtray from the drawer in the nightstand and sets it on the window sill. Sighing, he says, "Looks like you got me smoking again."

Smiling, she says, "Come here," then holds out a hand for him.

He hesitates, then turns away, stares out the window. "I can't," he tells her.

She growls, throws her cigarette at him. It strikes the floor near his feet and he jumps out of the way. He picks it up and stamps it out in the ashtray. "Stop it!" he says. "Don't look at me that way!"

There is nothing she can say to him now. She curls up on the mattress, clenches

handfuls of quilt. He leaves the room; she knows he will sleep on the living room couch tonight. "Go ahead and sleep on the couch!" she shouts after him. "At least you can sleep!"

She closes the window, climbs back into bed. Then she starts to rise once again, intending to go to him and apologize for being so foolish, but stops herself, thinking how inconsiderate he had been. She wishes none of this was happening, wishes her body was not so weak--*it has failed me*, she thinks, pushes the quilt away.

Joel appears in the doorway and for a moment she forgets she is naked. Joel stares at the floor while she stands, retrieves a long T-shirt from the dresser, puts it on.

"What are you and Dad fighting about?" he asks. He looks at her now, leans against the doorway, crosses his legs.

She stares at the band-aid on his knee, wonders when and where he cut himself. It seems strange to her that he did not tell her about it, that he was able to take care of the wound without her help.

"We weren't fighting," she says. "We had an argument."

"About what?"

She suppresses an urge to smooth out his hair, which is sticking up on one side and matted down on the other. *He was sleeping too*, she thinks, can only stare at him now. She doesn't know what to say to him. For a moment she is afraid Toby has informed both of the boys she is dying, but somehow she is certain Joel would not be acting this way if he knew. She looks at his bare stomach, skinny white legs, wonders

how he would behave if she told him. She lets him watch her, certain he won't see what she's hiding. *He could never understand*, she thinks.

She waves her hands at him to go. "Back to bed," she tells him. "It's late."

"Bobby's drawing now. You woke him up."

"Tell him to put his drawings away and go to sleep. Now, back to bed."

"But, he snores real bad and--"

"*Joel!*" She picks up one of the pillows, tries to throw it at him, but it slips from her fingers, lands half way to the door.

Joel winces, then ducks out of the way, says, "Okay, okay!" and leaves her alone.

She knows Joel is only worried and she feels ashamed. It reminds her of the day she started to worry--the day she was taken to the hospital and they started testing her. Sitting at the drugstore downtown, eating a piece of banana nut pie and talking to her friend Shirley, she had no idea she would be taken to the hospital only a few minutes later. She remembers marveling at what they had done to the walls--a beautiful wallpapering she thought absolutely brightened up the place. It was then she collapsed. Bright flashes appeared on the borders of her vision, a migraine rolling in like thunder from the horizon. Her right hand went numb. It tingled. She had no control. She lost the fork she held in her hand, heard it tumble and chime all the way to the floor. She remembers having a chunk of half-chewed pie in her mouth as she tried to rub her hand, and then everything went blank.

She woke up in the hospital, felt circular pads on her forehead, saw wires coming

out. A big machine with a small green monitor showed some kind of strange readouts. A nurse and a doctor stood over her. When she opened her eyes, the nurse said, "There she is. She's coming to."

"Well, hello," the doctor said. "Your husband's on the way."

Suddenly, she didn't want Toby there with her. There she was, in a hospital bed, tired, confused, wires sticking out of her head. She felt as if she had driven her car to a dead-end road out in the middle of the country, waiting for someone to come by and tell her how silly she looked sitting there behind the wheel.

"What happened?" she asked.

The doctor looked up from what he was doing. "Let's just find out all we can before we draw any conclusions."

She sighed, shrugged her shoulders. She thought she might be in bad shape, but she also thought, *I'm going to joke about the whole thing, because it's out of my control.* But she didn't. She remembers that.

After a while, Toby came to visit her. They left the hospital soon after he came, but she was told to come back for more tests later. They said it could all be related to stress, but they wanted to be certain of their diagnosis. Toby was very quiet.

Later that day, strange things happened. The phone rang and she answered it. There she was, just about to scream into the phone when it went dead. She felt like a kettle of water on a stove burner, just building up to a full steam, ready to blow under pressure. But then she wondered: Could it have been a wrong number? Then she felt

her head pounding and saw the phone was resting in its cradle across the room.

She does not want to think about such things, afraid they will happen more frequently. It is at times like these she prays. When she was a little girl, she used to look through her father's books. She remembers pictures of the Easter Island statues. Most of the photos were black and white, giving each scene a mysterious, ancient quality. The sky above them was dark gray, the grass around the black stone faces stiff and lightly colored. She asked her father what those statues meant. He said they were probably built to welcome their gods with the rising of the morning sun. He believed the people who lived there arrived in canoes from another island so they could build the statues. There was a battle between the Long-ears and the Short-ears, he said, and the Short-ears eventually won. He said, "When I saw those up close and walked between them, I felt like praying. I've believed ever since. It's beautiful." He touched her chest, right above her heart, and smiled. Years later, after her parents were no longer wealthy, she asked her father if he still believed in God. He said he did, but he was sad. He never told her why, but she thinks it is because he knew he couldn't afford to travel to Easter Island ever again. She knows her ideas about God came from her father, only now she isn't certain if she believes in anything at all--maybe only her imagination.

Toby had all of her father's good qualities and, unlike her father's distaste for family, she knew Toby felt a great desire for one. It wasn't apparent on the surface, but she could tell he wanted children, wanted to be a father, wanted to go on family trips and tell bedtime stories. She could see it was almost as if Toby *needed* these things, and she

loved him for that, wanted to do what her parents had failed to do: to provide her children with a caring mother and father.

Pressing her fingers to her scalp, she tries to feel if there are any bumps or depressions where the tumor might be, thinks of cutting it out herself. She wants to know why there aren't any doctors who have discovered a procedure to operate in cases like hers.

She turns off the light, crawls into bed, wishes she could hear some classical guitar, but doesn't feel like turning on the radio. She pulls the quilt up to her neck. "Why me?" she whispers.

* * *

In the morning, she finds Toby, Joel, and Bobby working in the field. The sun is up, the snow melting. *Spring is very near*, she thinks, but doesn't know why they are bothering to work on the vineyard. Perhaps Toby wishes to keep up appearances so Joel and Bobby will not worry.

She notices they have a production line going. Joel sets the seven foot metal poles in regular increments of eighteen feet, just as she instructed them days ago, and Bobby holds them as Toby drives them in with a sledgehammer. As they go along, they lay out the wire they will attach later. The trellises are being constructed in the field where the previous owner, an elderly farmer, used to plant corn in years gone by. Any cornstalks

will simply be pulled up and tossed out. The eight inch diameter end posts will be the most difficult to fit in the ground, she thinks, because they will have to dig deep where the earth is still thawing, and because they will have to be mounted at an angle to properly keep the tension in the twelve-gauge wire.

She watches them for a long time, standing in her bathrobe near the kitchen window. Eventually, they will begin attaching the wire using large galvanized staples, adding wirewise tensioners at the endposts using their heaviest pliers. She thinks Joel and Bobby should be able to handle twisting the earth anchors into the ground with a crowbar, but it will be a few days before they are ready for that.

"We should have started in October," she tells herself. She knows the grafts are strong, but are only guaranteed for a month and will have to be planted soon.

She decides they should not be working without her. She showers, dresses, takes some of the medication the doctors gave her, then selects a shovel from the barn before walking out to the field. A wind is rising, pushing the clouds west, whipping up dust and flecks of dead grass over the remaining snow. She coughs from time to time, expelling bursts of air that float in front of her face.

Toby glances at her, looks as if he's going to say something, then returns to what he is doing. Joel and Bobby are enjoying themselves, occasionally throwing dirt at each other, calling each other names, sometimes singing, and she tries to adopt their frame of mind, but can't quite allow herself to feel the way they do. She works the spade into the earth, kicking it with her foot, standing on it to dig in. She digs planting-holes fifteen

inches wide for the grafts. After several hours, her muscles ache. She tries to ignore them. The doctor recommended she stay away from heavy physical exercise, take it easy, rest when she feels like resting, but she refuses to stop while she has the ability to work.

The day warms toward noon, feels more like spring to her. She is stomping the spade when she finds herself swaying to the left. She jerks her foot out to catch herself, brings her hands up to her face, cannot see clearly. Her head throbs and she does not know what to do to stop the pain. The spade falls with a dull clank, makes an impression in the dirt. Toby runs to her and holds her by the elbows.

"It's okay," she says. "I'll go in the house and sit for a moment. I'll be fine." She walks slowly, steadily, toward the house. She knows Toby is watching her. She turns when she reaches the front door, waves to him. Inside, she pours herself a glass of wine, a pinot noir she likes, and sits at the kitchen table waiting for the pain to leave her.

* * *

"Where are you going?" she asks Toby. He's sitting in his mini-van with the engine running. She wishes he would turn the engine off so she can hear more clearly.

He rolls the window down an inch or so. "I have to go to work and get some papers. To take with me when I visit the family tomorrow morning."

"Is this the family of the kid who shot himself?"

"What?" he says, speaking louder than before. He seems aware now of the noise

the engine is making. "I'll be back soon," he tells her as he rolls the window down the rest of the way. "Are you all right?"

She leans forward, kisses him. "Would you mind," she begins, leaning into the door of the van. "I'd like to have Christmas again," she says, then wishes she hadn't said anything. He looks puzzled and she tries to smile.

"With a tree?" he asks. Then he pauses and she knows he is thinking seriously about it. "What will we tell the kids?"

She thinks for a moment herself, standing back from the van and pushing her hands into her jean pockets. "We'll tell them it's a reward for all the work they've been doing in the field."

Just then, she feels dizzy, stumbles backward. She hears Toby open the door of the van, knows he is holding her, but doesn't know where. Then everything clears and the pressure of his hands around her waist is strong.

"Let's go inside," he says.

"No," she tells him. She breathes deeply, waits for her nerves to calm. "I feel better now. You need to finish work."

He helps her inside, sets her in one of the kitchen chairs. She smells freshly baked bread, but knows she hasn't made any recently and the smell frightens her. She decides to bake some bread so it will match what she is sensing. Plus, she thinks, she will then have something to do while Toby is gone.

He reaches for the phone, starts dialing.

"Who are you calling?"

"Dr. Link," he says.

"No," she tells him. "Don't. He can't do anything. Besides, I'm feeling much better."

"He can do something!"

"No, he can't!" she shouts back. She squeezes her knees with her hands, digs her nails into them. "Put the phone down!"

"Christ!" he growls, slams the phone into the cradle. He turns toward her, hands clenched at his sides. "I don't need this."

She runs her fingers over the grain of the kitchen table and tries to block the smell of bread from her mind. She breathes through her mouth, but that doesn't seem to help. "Then go to work," she tells him. "You have work to do."

He crosses his arms, paces the kitchen. Then he stops, stares at her for a long moment. Finally, he throws open the kitchen door, stomps through the mud and snow to his van. Before the door swings shut, she hears the van's engine and knows it has been running the whole time.

"Why are you being so foolish?" Kristin asks herself. She uses the table to help her stand, retrieves the large wooden mixing bowl from the lower cupboard, opens a new bag of self-rising flour. She pours the flour into the bowl, not caring about measuring, adds a fair portion of baking soda, stirs it in with a fork. She tries to decipher what has been happening to her. She doesn't know why she's been pushing Toby away. She wants

him there with her, but feels frightened when he's present.

She adds salt to her recipe, stirs that in. Then, after melting three sticks of butter, she mixes that with a cup of milk and starts to work the liquid into the dry ingredients. She dribbles milk into the bowl, little by little, until all of the flour has become dough--scrapes this into several tins, places them in the oven. She turns the oven on and waits for the bread to bake--feels nervous, waiting like that, until finally she knows the smell is real.

The decision not to tell Joel and Bobby seems clear to her now. Coping with everyone knowing about her condition would be too much for her. She wonders why it has been so difficult to tell the children when she knows they are perhaps more comfortable with death than any other children in town. Ever since they were young enough to ask questions about Toby's profession, these questions have been answered in a straightforward manner. Their ideas about death seem very natural to her and she wants to believe they will handle her passing easily.

The phone rings, startling her. "Kristin? How are you?" Shirley asks. "I haven't talked to you in a long time. I was getting worried."

"I'm fine," she says. For a moment she doesn't know what to say, doesn't want Shirley to know. "The doctor said I'm fine. Just fatigue."

There is a long pause. "You sure? I have seen you in a while. I miss going to breakfast. You can't ignore this friend, you know."

"We've been working on the vineyard. I call you when I have time. I promise."

"Well, say hi to Toby, okay? And call me."

"I will." They say goodbye. She misses Shirley, but cannot handle seeing her now. Shirley would see right through her if they were together--on the phone Kristin can hide it, but not in person.

Toby has been gone for several hours and it is nearly supper time. Joel and Bobby return from playing soccer with the neighbor kids. Joel is sweaty, Bobby's clothes stained with dirt and grass. She sends them upstairs to shower, then puts two pizzas in the oven.

She thinks of her mother once again, knows she should call her. If Joel or Bobby were dying, she tells herself, she would want to be told ahead of time. But telling her mother would inevitably result in everyone knowing and Kristin would never be allowed to rest. She wonders if Toby has spoken to anyone about her condition. He could have informed her mother, but Kristin knows she can trust him not to. *Toby's a very private person*, she thinks, knows the same is true of herself.

When she was a child, she was taught to keep silent. Every time she tried discussing something of importance with her mother, she would be sent out to pull weeds in the garden. Her father thought the garden was an attractive thing to have around the house. Later, when her father's business collapsed, it became a necessity, but her mother never did like gardening. Kristin remembers pulling the weeds, talking to them, telling them everything her mother was not willing to hear. Her father would always defer to her mother, saying, "That's a womanly thing. Talk to your mother." She believes the reason her mother was so silent is their family lineage. Her mother was raised in Boston by a

wealthy family who taught her proper behavior and the determination to pass on that behavior to any of her offspring. Even when Kristin's father died--and she's tried to forget how terrible this was--her mother refused to talk much about it.

She feels guilty now, still the silent little girl she thought she escaped. But she understands why certain things should not be discussed, believes Toby is the same way because of his profession. Only rarely does he tell her details of the families he has worked with. *He doesn't like to confront it twice*, she thinks.

The boys come down from their showers. Joel's hair is slicked back, very neat, but Bobby's is flying every which way and she knows he hasn't even touched a comb to it. She sets out the bread baked earlier, removes the pizzas from the oven and cuts them on the table. She tells Bobby to pour something to drink for everyone, asks Joel to find knives and forks for the three of them.

"Where's Dad?" Bobby says.

She sits at the table, selects a slice of pizza. "He's working."

Eating quietly, she studies them. They look so young to her, their arms and legs thin, agile. Joel has two pimples on his right cheek that are fading. He has Toby's thin shoulders and long fingers. He's wearing a light blue sweater with the picture of an electric guitar on the front. Bobby is wearing a black T-shirt, black jeans. His wrists are circled by several leather-woven bracelets. She wishes she could stare at them all day long, study them, pick out things she hasn't seen before.

She doesn't know how to behave towards them. Only days before, everything

came naturally to her and she knew clearly what was expected. But things have changed, as if she's starting over, re-learning everything. She will miss too much of their lives, most of their lives, she knows this. Given a second chance, she would pay attention to every detail, watch the children she gave birth to become men, go to college, find themselves wives, bring her grandchildren to babysit. But she will not be given that second chance--second chances are not things she seems to be getting. Someone or something has decided she may only have part of her life, and she wishes she could destroy whatever it is that is cutting her time short.

"We got any salsa, Ma?" Joel asks, setting a piece of pepperoni on his plate.

She starts to tell him he has two legs, can look for himself, but she stops. She realizes she would like salsa on her pizza as well, rises from her seat to go look in the refrigerator. Standing too quickly, something strange happens inside her head. She stumbles to the counter, trying to conceal her feebleness.

"Mom?" Bobby says. "You okay?"

Joel helps her back to her chair. He leaves her for a moment, searching the refrigerator, returns with the salsa. He sets it on the table, starts to eat his piece of pepperoni, apparently forgetting the reason he went to the refrigerator in the first place. She tries to open the jar of salsa, but isn't strong enough. She stares at her hands. Bobby takes the jar, opens it for her. They watch her, look puzzled. She picks up her pizza, takes a bite, chews, concentrates on the way her teeth divide and break down the food. Shaking, she swallows, takes a drink of orange juice, feels better.

"Mom?" Joel says. Bobby looks at her.

"I'm fine," she tells them, takes a deep breath, tries swallowing the knot forming in her throat. "I have a bad cold, that's all." She nibbles her food slowly. She cannot look at her boys now, knows she should say something.

"Mom?" Joel asks again. "Are you sick?"

"You're not going to die, are you, Mom?" Bobby asks.

This should not surprise her, knowing how sharp children--especially her children--can be, but it does startle her. They know nothing of her collapse in the restaurant, nothing of her trips to the hospital--she and Toby kept those things quiet, not wanting to alarm Joel or Bobby--but still they seem to know. "I'll be fine," she says. "Eat your pizza."

* * *

She is filling her second shot glass full of whiskey when Toby comes home. Joel and Bobby have gone to bed at her request. "I need the house quiet," she tells them, "so we'll all go to bed early." Toby has been drinking as well, smells of gin, but seems confused by the whiskey in front of her.

"What are you doing?" he asks, then sits across from her.

She drinks, then slides a second shot glass across the table, pours until both glasses are filled to the rim. "We're going to drink," she tells him. "And after tonight,

you're going to slow down."

He watches her set the whiskey in front of him. "What is this?" he says.

"I'm--" she starts, then lowers her voice. "I'm dying, and I don't want you to raise our children with alcohol on your breath. Now, drink up!" She finishes her third drink, raps on the table just in front of his, waits for him to pick it up. "This is the last bottle," she tells him. "I threw out the others."

He is silent for a long moment. She watches the changing expressions in his face. Finally, he pushes the shot glass several inches away. "I can't," he says. "I'll stop now."

She pushes it back toward him. "We're going to finish this," she tells him. "Drink up."

He shakes his head. "I don't want to," he says, looks past her toward the window. "I had enough after work."

She remains quiet because his tone of voice is familiar. Sometimes, when he assumes that voice, he will tell her what has happened at work. He does not say anything for the longest time, but she notices his eyes are glassy. *He hasn't cried in the longest time*, she thinks. She reaches out to place a hand on his arm. He glances at her, picks up the shot of whiskey, drinks it quickly. There isn't much left in the bottle. They finish it without speaking.

After rinsing the glasses in the sink, she puts them away in the back of the cupboard, takes his hand. "Don't sleep on the couch tonight," she tells him.

He drops the bottle into the wastebasket, then follows her upstairs to bed. They

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make love slowly, carefully, and for a moment she feels so frightened it is all she can do to keep from running out of the house. Afterward, Toby falls asleep in her arms and she lies awake staring at the ceiling. Perhaps an hour later, her eyes feel heavy and soon she begins to dream.

CHAPTER FOUR

"I know, I know," Toby says, sighs, then laughs, "I think too much. I worry too much. I know! You're absolutely right." Kristin touches his arm, says, "I love the fact that you worry--it means you care--but you've got to have some humor, some laughter, too. You've got to ease up and let go sometimes." Toby nods, "Yeah, but every time I accidentally do something wrong. I hurt or offend someone--like the time I laughed at the Buxton's funeral. Those three brothers playing clarinet--they just looked so funny, and they played terribly, and I couldn't help myself. But, now, none of the Buxton's will talk to me anymore. I had good intentions, but--" Kristin holds up her hand, says, "You just have to find ways to cope with it. It's easier to cope with mistakes than to live a life full of worry." Toby absently runs his hand over his knee, back and forth, tells her, "I've never been good at coping. I usually find some way to hide." Kristin sits up, says, "Not with me, mister. I'll just run a search party and flush you out. But enough talk. I want to go skinny dipping." "Now?" Toby asks, "Where?" Kristin kisses him, takes his hand, says, "Right now. Down at Miller's Creek."

* * *

In the morning, Toby wakes with a hangover, remembering how much he and Kristin drank the night before. He takes two aspirin, drinks three glasses of water, goes

back to bed. Two hours later, he wakes again, the headache gone, though his stomach hurts. He wishes she hadn't forced him to finish that whiskey. He intends to keep his promise to her. She is right; it isn't a good thing for him to be drinking after she is gone--better for Joel and Bobby if he didn't--but he knows he will miss the taste of alcohol, especially whiskey.

Before coming home last night, he'd been out drinking with Karl. He missed supper and didn't feel hungry, so he stopped at Harvey's for a drink. Maria wasn't home or at the bar. Karl came in an hour later, ordered a beer, sat on the stool next to Toby. Karl was sweating as he tried to adjust his weight on his seat, but the stool was too small for him. Toby noticed Karl's hair had thinned more on top, making him look like an old, overweight, balding man. Normally, Toby would have laughed at this, teased Karl about it, but it seemed sad now, like Karl didn't really know about it, and had no chance of changing it.

"How long you been here?" Karl asked. He smiled. "I've been here 35 years this October."

Toby swallowed a portion of his whiskey. "Not long enough."

"That's what she said. 'Not long enough.' But she did me anyway."

"Very funny," Toby told him.

"Okay," Karl said. "Something's wrong--out with it."

"Leave it alone."

"Leave *what* alone? My pecker or your condition?"

Toby finished his drink, ordered another. He wished Karl wasn't with him. The whiskey tasted good and he studied the way the ice cubes moved around in the glass. He pretended not to hear Karl's question.

They drank in silence, but Toby knew it was only a matter of time before Karl started talking about some of the jobs they had done in the past, casting them in a humorous light. He decided anything was better than listening to those stories at this moment, so he told Karl it was late, he was going home.

"I guess I don't deserve to know," Karl said.

Toby swayed, held onto the bar, tried to stand straight. "No, you don't. No one deserves to know. Just leave it alone."

"Is it Kristin? Does she know about you-know-who? I know I've told you a thousand times already, but you're crazy, you know, risking your life like this. Kristin's a good woman. Please tell me she doesn't know."

"She doesn't, Karl. Just shut up."

And then, when he returned home, Kristin was sitting at the kitchen table with a shot glass and a half empty bottle of whiskey. *What has she been doing?* he thought. They finished the bottle; he threw it away. Some of the guilt left as he did this, but he believed something had changed in both of them, something he couldn't locate, and he wasn't sure whether it was a good thing. They went upstairs, made love. It was the first time they'd made love since her illness was known. He was afraid of exciting her, of demanding too much from her physically. The awareness was almost more than he could

endure, and he concentrated on the way her nails pressed into his sides, holding onto him as if he were going to disappear.

But now it is the morning after, and even though he wishes he could remain in bed with her all day, he knows he must get some work done. He has to take the papers he gathered yesterday to the young man's parents to sign. He hopes he won't be away for too much time, but the drive will be fairly long and he will have to talk about the arrangements, which is always difficult because it requires the family to think about their son--about the circumstances of the suicide. He wants to finish it quickly so he will have more time with Kristin.

Not wanting to wake her, he leaves a note, saying he will be back soon. He showers, dresses, checks to see if she's still sleeping. She turns over and yawns as he is watching her. As he leaves, he walks quietly down the stairs, wincing at each creak and groan of the wood.

He drives to the young man's house, but once he arrives, he isn't certain of what he's seeing. A bulldozer rams into the garage, its treads gripping the earth, its bucket out like a fist. Only the cement slab and a pile of splintered wood remains, pushed to the side, mixed with the snow. The young man's father stands holding his wife, and the aunt sits on the front porch with two children he has not seen before. They watch the destruction of the garage with dazed expressions.

Toby steps out of the van, watches the destruction. He shakes his head, thinking, *I should have known*. He crosses the front lawn with the papers, hands them to the father.

Just like a woman, he thinks, jokes with himself, trying to keep positive. *Once you get a place cleaned up, she changes it all around.*

Toby stares at the bulldozer, amazed by its power. "Could you sign these, please?" he asks.

The father frowns, rearranging the papers. "Listen," he says, "I'm very sorry about yesterday. None of it was your fault." It is difficult to hear him over the roar of the bulldozer. He nods toward the destruction. "We didn't think we could live with the garage the way it was. I didn't want to walk into it and feel him there. My wife felt the same way. We had to start over."

"I understand," Toby tells him.

"We--" the father starts, struggling to compose himself. "We are thankful you were there to help. You were very kind."

Toby looks at them for a long moment, the growling engine and the crack of the lumber loud behind him. "I'm very sorry any of this happened. I have to go. Return those by mail if you wish."

He leaves them standing there, does not want to hear the destruction of the garage. He climbs into his van, drives slowly down a block or two before he starts to think about Kristin.

When he returns home, she is still sleeping, even though it is early afternoon. He wonders if her body is demanding more sleep of her; needing more because of her condition. He is tired from work, climbs back in bed with her, though he has no intention

to sleep. Last night he had yet another dream, which was nearly the same as the one he had two nights ago. The dreams--the nightmares--have been repeating. He cannot remember ever dreaming so intensely. Most of the first dream focused around the young man who committed suicide--Eric Hamilton. The Hamilton boy had the shotgun in his hands, ready to use it. "No, don't do that," Toby shouted to him. Eric Hamilton simply smiled and the dream ended. The smile seemed to be saying that it didn't matter how much Toby reminded himself he was still alive, body after body, because someday he, too, would die. The same dream happened the night before, and he is afraid to fall sleep.

He lies next to Kristin, stares at the ceiling, studies his feet and legs, trying to stay awake. They look bony, as if thinned by cancer, and there seems to be less hair on his legs than before. Kristin doesn't truly believe these things. *Hypochondriac*, she would say. *Go to a doctor if you're so concerned*, she would say, but he has never trusted doctors, not then, not now.

There was nothing a doctor could do for Toby's mother. Soon after his father died, depression slowed his mother down, made her ill. *You have a life, Toby*, she told him once. *You're young. My life left with your father. I never loved him more than I do now. I miss him.* Not more than a year after that she died.

Some days he is at war, overwhelmed by the number of casualties brought in, knowing none will survive. Sometimes he feels as if the war is closing in on his wife and children, as if they are all out there in that battlefield, no longer safe, and one day he will see them carried in on stretchers. He drinks--or at least he *used* to drink before last night-

-to keep those images away. He started sleeping with Maria for the same reason, to avoid seeing the blood, veins, skin, eyes. Making love to Kristin helps, but many times he finds himself thinking about work, about that young man or some other victim, and the urge dissolves. Only with Maria can he forget for short piece of time. He tries to keep his mind focused away from the images, but they never truly leave him.

His legs are indeed thin. They are *emaciated*. He declares himself doomed. Retribution is finally at hand. He scolds himself for not being prepared, wants to explain his worries to Kristin, but is afraid of what she might say, of what might happen, because he no longer feels certain of anything. Instead, he waits another hour, hoping she will wake. Finally, he can take it no longer. Gently shaking her shoulder, he tells her it is time to get up.

* * *

Toby hopes moving on to the next job, to a new death with different circumstances, will allow him to clear his mind of the suicide, return to the way he was. He believes it will be easier coping with Kristin's death if this happens. Unfortunately, the next job is no less strange. An elderly woman has climbed into the winter cold of her attic and hanged herself with a thick clothesline wire. Unable to reach the pinnacle of the V-shaped ceiling, she chose one of the rafters. It was not high enough. Her feet touch the floor and her body angles at the waist. The wire has snapped her neck. Her head rests to

the side, tilting backward at an unnatural angle. The bruised skin above her shoulders has stretched. Her mouth hangs open. Her eyes stare.

He touches her arm. It feels like marble, cold. He estimates she has been up there three days minimum, and with the air as sharp and cold as it was, she has solidified. Her breasts are wrinkled. Hardened goose bumps appear in patches all over her body. She is heavy set, perhaps two hundred thirty pounds. Her death is the second suicide in a week. Such numbers are rare, and have been, in all of his years of work.

"Man she's a fat one," Karl says. "And her skin is blue."

"Quiet," Toby whispers, pointing at the floor. The family is waiting below in the living room.

Karl takes a jackknife from his pocket. "This'll work," he says. "It has a saw blade."

Toby steps back. The wire snaps after a couple passes of the knife. Karl jumps out of the way. The elderly woman strikes the hardwood floor. Frozen, in her angled position, she begins rocking back and forth on her rear end.

Karl snorts, clamps a hand over his mouth. "My God!" he says through his fingers, tries suppressing his laughter. The family is waiting close by. Toby tells Karl to keep quiet, to have some respect.

They try to catch her, to stop her from rocking, but she is heavy, awkward, and it takes several attempts.

"One hell of a popsicle!" Karl says. "Blueberry!"

Toby points at the floor. "They'll hear you."

Giggling, Karl turns the body, slides it closer to the canvas. "Let's pick her up if we can. Unless you want to slick her down. She'll slide just fine then."

"Karl!"

They pick her up, but she is terribly heavy and they have to move slowly. After a few steps, Toby's ankle catches on something and they drop the body. She lands with a thud that reverberates through the attic, her once flabby breasts now resting against Toby's leg like two pointy rocks. Toby winces, steps back.

Karl grabs her by the ankles, spins her around. She rotates on her rear end, slowly turning on the hardwood floor.

"You're *sick*," Toby whispers. He can hear the family members talking below, cannot imagine what they must be thinking. "Have some respect!"

"Man, she's a fat one," Karl says. "And ugly. She should have worn her wig. I mean, look at that frizzy head. Makes a hell of a toy, though, don't you think? She'd make a hell of a bobsled."

"Enough, Karl."

They roll her in canvas cloth. Carrying her down the steps is extremely difficult, but they manage to maneuver them without stumbling. Downstairs, a young boy, perhaps the same age as Bobby, creeps closer, following them. "Is that Grandma?" he asks.

"Shush," the boy's father says, though he watches carefully as if wondering what is in the canvas. Neither the boy nor his father seem afraid or terribly sad. They appear

mostly curious that Grandma has hanged herself in the attic. "Grandma's going away," the father says to his son.

"That's okay," the boy says. "Her cookies taste bad."

Outside, they set the old woman in the back of Karl's station wagon, wave goodbye before driving off through the slush on the road. Evergreens on both sides rise up above them into the low-angled hills, allowing the sun to cast light only in fragments. Nestled between the slopes are two houses and a large wooden shed, standing quietly there as if waiting for someone to occupy them. The snow has been pushed aside, piled in great, dirty hills on the berms, but is melting quickly.

Karl doesn't seem to notice any of this, but concentrates on opening his pack of cigarettes. "I talked to that guy--her son you know," he says, fishing out a smoke. "He was going to move her into a nursing home. Pack her away like a bag of bones in an ugly old building. I guess she couldn't take care of herself." Karl lights a cigarette, then offers Toby one. Toby shakes his head. "Look at your coat, you ripped it on something," Karl says, pointing at Toby's sleeve.

This reminds Toby of the day Kristin was taken to the hospital. On that day, he tore a pair of pants on a table corner at work. He remembers his beeper going off, then stopping with Karl at a restaurant to find out who was calling him. He let a quarter drop into the pay phone, waited for the clicks to finish and the ringing to begin. After a few seconds, someone on the other end picked up. A very distant, professional voice said, "St. Luke's Hospital of Fox Lake."

He cleared his throat, shifted to his other foot. "This is Toby Block, someone there paged me."

"Oh, hello, Mr. Block. One moment," the lady said. He heard papers shuffling on her end of the line. Behind him forks and knives clicked on plates, people talked. "Mr. Block, your wife is here. The doctors are running some tests."

"Tests?"

"Yes. That's all I know."

He went to pull Karl away from his coffee, weaving through the closely positioned tables. "What's going on?" Karl asked. "Constipation?" Toby threw a five dollar bill on the table. They put their coats on without any further questions. He dropped Karl off at the funeral home, then drove to the hospital.

He remembers passing by Bob's Bait Shop, its roof under a mound of snow. Several small, square houses followed, evergreen Christmas wreaths and colored lights everywhere as decoration. One house had red candles glowing in every window, and in front an American flag flapped back and forth, then wrapped itself around the pole, froze momentarily. A group of children just down the block were forming the base of a snowman in front of the church, and a little girl among the group slapped her fuzzy red mitten against her snowmobile suit to knock off the caked snow. The sun had gone behind a cloud and the whole landscape seemed gray, fading.

He wondered what Kristin was thinking. Surely, she was afraid. They were running tests. In the moments while the suspense lingered like thick fog over his head,

the world seemed too open to possibilities. He hated knowing Kristin had to endure that long expanse of time in limbo, waiting, wondering where he was, wondering what the *results* would be.

He fiddled with a pen he had in his coat pocket, broke the metal clasp, pressed it in the palm of his hand. Staring blankly ahead, he rubbed the tiny strip of metal against his wrist.

He was cold. The heater pumped out waves of hot air, but he still felt cold. He rubbed his face with his hand, feeling the bite of the stubble against his palm. The car seemed sluggish. He could not pick up speed fast enough in the slush and ice of the roads. The seat felt uncomfortable, pressing against his back, and his jaw ached and clicked. He had difficulty breathing. His body was off balance somehow, like a scale tilting slowly toward the heavy end.

"Results," he says to himself, tries to block out the whole memory, but he cannot. He remembers how small the hospital looked, even for a community the size of Fox Lake. He found a parking place up close. Gray stucco walls rose high above the white-tiled entrance. He shivered, did not want to go inside.

He worried how Joel and Bobby would cope with all of this. Every time he or Kristin felt sick, their children worried, because they knew what sickness could lead to. They were better adjusted than most kids. Long ago, he and Kristin explained things, answered all their questions as truthfully as they could. *What happens when we die?* Joel asked. No one knows, Toby told him. They decay, Kristin said, and people forget about

them. *Will they forget me?* Bobby asked. Some will, Toby said. *We won't forget you, sweetheart,* Kristin told him. *Why do you work with dead people, Dad?* Joel asked. Because, Toby explained, I like to make sure people get buried properly. Because your father can handle working with dead people, Kristin said, and not many people can.

But as he climbed the hospital steps, he knew he wouldn't be able to tell Joel and Bobby, that he would hide it from them if he could. There were certain things, he thought, that were meant to be kept to yourself.

The floors smelled of bleach and soap. When he stepped from the elevator he thought of how he should have a rose for Kristin. *But they're only running tests,* he told himself. The doctor said she could have fainted for any number of reasons. She worked hard preparing for the vineyard, could very well have been exhausted.

He moved past a room where an elderly man gummed an orange while staring at a TV. The halls were quiet except for the panting of someone somewhere wanting air, and the squeak of Toby's wet boots on the tiles.

He saw one of the nurses pushing a small cart of towels and asked her where 1074A was. "At the end of the hall," she said, and he followed her finger to the last door on the left. It was open and sunlight blazed down from the wide window in the far wall. He stepped inside. Kristin was in bed, hands resting on her belly. She stared at the ceiling. Her feet rocked back and forth under the blankets like pendulums. Her cheeks were a dark pink, as if she had just come in from the cold. Her hair spread out on the pillow. She looked up when he came in.

"Sweetheart," he said, sliding over to sit next to her.

"I'm scared, Toby."

He brushed hair from her forehead, ran his hand down her cheek. He kissed her gently. "Everything will be fine." He remembers saying that, and it hurts him now. How wrong he was--he feels now as if this were a cruel thing to say.

Then she looked away, through the window where the sun had passed behind the clouds. Her face seemed darker in the shaded light. "I don't think so," she said.

"Sure," he told her. He took her chin in his hand, turned her to face him. "We're going to be okay."

"Just before I fainted I kept thinking there isn't going to be a vineyard," she said. "I know that sounds crazy." She touched her fingers to her lips. "Remember grandfather's wine? That tiny glass he'd give me? I've told you a thousand times, I know." Her eyes grew distant, remembering. "So sweet. That *fragrance*. I was young. Sit on the porch and sip that wine. . . trees moving. . . wind." She licked her upper lip. "Summer," she whispered.

"You'll be all right," he told her. "It's probably nothing serious. You've been working on the vineyard too much, that's all. It stressed you out."

"I hope so. It makes me feel better to hear you say that."

He looked at her then, chest heavy with the idea of her not getting better. The room seemed a dark hue then that no amount of bright paint could beautify. He let a faint smile grow on his lips, but felt no happiness inside. He only knew he wanted her with

him. *He* should be the one to die first, he thought. He remembers how crazy he felt to be thinking about her death when she was not dead.

Outside, snow floated past the window. He could almost count the soft snowflakes. For some reason, just then, he wanted to hold each one in his hand.

The lines of her forehead shifted, eyes grew still. *Like sleeping eyes*, he thought. She sighed, pushed herself up, set a pillow at her back. "I'm just thinking crazy," she said.

"I'll check to see if we can go."

Dr. Link was a strange man--Toby worked with him occasionally when picking up a body from the hospital, and Link was never very friendly--but he was a decent man, from what Toby could tell. He was tall, had gray hair cut short. The skin under his eyes sagged. He explained the tests looked normal, but wanted Kristin to come back for a CAT scan and other tests, just be certain everything was okay. With guarded optimism, he said it was probably nothing to worry about. But Toby should keep an eye on Kristin, he said, make sure she eats right. And call if anything seems wrong. They had all they needed of blood and urine samples to run the tests, and for now she could leave if she felt well enough.

Kristin held onto his arm as they left the hospital. She was quiet, her hands warm. He had promised her the vineyard. He knew very little about such things. In college, he tried growing a few plants, but they had gotten as pale as dried corn stalks, drooping as if wet with rain.

He did know it wasn't easy to start a vineyard. You couldn't just throw things together and expect to have wine when you were done.

They stepped through the slush in the parking lot. He opened the passenger door for her, then climbed in himself and started the van. "Let's take a vacation," she said.

"Where?" he asked, though he knew they had no money for it. They had extensive loans for the vineyard to pay back. He should have asked, "What about the kids?" but didn't. He let her thoughts float undisturbed.

"Ireland, I think. I've always wanted to walk through castles. Or sing in pubs. Maybe Mexico. Put my feet in the sand. Let the sun burn me."

We'll get plenty of sun this summer working on the vineyard, he thought. He turned a corner, down Farrel street. The van's rear end fish-tailed. "You never wanted the vineyard," she said.

"What she want a vineyard for?" Maria asked him once. *"You can buy wine easy at the store, si?"* She placed a hand on his chest. *"But enough talk. Kiss me."*

"I want it," he told Kristin, though the idea had never seemed reasonable or wise to him--working as an embalmer made him realize nothing is really reasonable when you boil it down.

But that was days ago. Now, since her second visit to the hospital--since the CAT scan--they know she is dying. Things are not so simple anymore. Somehow, he knows he must find ways to cope--one way is to marry the young man and the old woman in his mind. Somehow, he thinks, they seem as if they should be together. Both were suicides.

Both had horrible deaths. Both involved his having to clean up messes. He sees them together in his mind, holding hands, making love, taking long walks down a forest path, dancing in a large empty ballroom. He didn't know what to say to their families. He knows it's difficult to comfort people. They want to be upset, to complain. Mourning must have its way.

He wants to make love to her again tonight, will find a way to clear his mind. By imagining a marriage, he can allow himself to believe the two suicides are taken care of, that they have each other.

* * *

A Christmas tree, Toby thinks as he takes Joel and Bobby out to the group of trees behind the barn. He has decided to give Kristin the second Christmas she asked for. Outside, it is cold, nearing nightfall, and a few stars can be seen where the sky is the darkest.

"Why do we need a tree, Dad?" Joel asks.

"We're going to have Christmas again."

"Cool!" Bobby says.

"Why?" Joel asks.

Toby puts his gloves back on, crosses his arms. He smells the pine. A snow drift slowly forms at his feet. "Your mother does a lot for you boys," he tells them. "Follow

me."

He carries a small chain saw. The snow is thick and heavy from melting. Their boots sink into the mud as they work their way down the hill.

"Come on, slow poke," Joel tells Bobby.

Bobby throws a chunk of crusty snow at his brother, says, "Shut up," and soon rejoins the group.

"Here's a beauty," Toby says, grabbing the trunk of a medium-sized spruce. It looks a little thin, but has a straight trunk.

He starts the chain saw. Joel stands back from the oil-gas fumes. Bobby holds his hands over his ears. Toby cuts as close to the ground as he can, then trims a few of the lower branches.

He shuts off the motor and the saw sputters into silence. They carry the tree up the hill.

Later that night, he dreams of the Hamilton boy digging a hole in the ground. Dust and dirt fly from the hole as he digs deeper. Suddenly, the digging stops and Eric Hamilton climbs out of the hole, waiting for something.

* * *

The next day, they set up the tree and start to decorate. The tree stands nicely in the metal bowl with the clamps tightened around the trunk base. It looks marvelous in

their living room. Kristin has already wrapped Joel and Bobby's presents. Weeks ago, Toby bought a necklace for their anniversary, but feels she needs it now, that it cannot wait. It is wrapped in shiny gold paper with a green ribbon.

They decorate the tree as they have always done since Joel turned six, the number of ornaments increasing year by year. He is surprised to see Kristin bought tinsel. She holds the glittering strands over the branches, lets them fall where they may. The lights blink on and off, colors dancing through the tinsel.

He leaves the living room, goes to the kitchen, takes a dish rag from the sink and pours enough water on it to make it damp. Wind howls outside. He squeezes the rag, returns to the living room, hands it to Kristin.

"What's this for?" she asks.

"For your face. Some of your makeup is too thick. You might want to check it."

"You think so? I thought it was just fine."

"You're beautiful without it. You don't need it."

"I need *something*," she says. She scrubs her face clean. When she finishes, she hands the rag back to him. He rinses the rag in the kitchen sink, then returns to the living room to throw tinsel on the tree. He tells Joel to find some Christmas tapes and put them on.

They open presents. Joel stares at his electric guitar, amazed. He plucks the strings. "I need an amp," he says.

"Me, too," Kristin says, laughs. "Whatever that is."

"An amplifier," Joel explains. "I can't hear the guitar."

"You can use the money you've saved," Toby tells him. Joel is thrilled to hear that, and Toby is happy to see it in his face.

Bobby opens his present from his mother. It is a new jean jacket he has been wanting. He unwraps Toby's gift next, stacking the packets of colored pencils, paint brushes, and charcoal sticks in front of him.

"Those are expensive," Kristin says.

"Thanks, Mom! I need more paper, too," Bobby tells her.

The room is quiet for a long moment; only the sound of Christmas music playing can be heard. He hands her the package he wrapped for her. She looks at him, seeming uncertain how to react. The idea must seem strange to her, he thinks, because things are far different for them than the boys. Her fingers work the paper and bow away from the small box. "Oh, it's lovely," she says.

"Put it on," he tells her. He looks at her bare neck, wants to see the necklace there, helps her put it on.

"I love it," she says, running her fingers over the stones.

After a while, they take out a couple of games, *Monopoly*, *Clue*, and *Risk*, and finally decide on *Monopoly*. Joel ends up owning the most land; Bobby falls asleep before the game is over. Toby is thankful their evening together has been easy, relaxed. They are happy to simply be together, and that is what he has always wanted.

But before the evening ends, his beeper sounds and he is forced out into the cold.

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As he walks toward his van, he hears Christmas music playing inside, and the quiet voices of his family.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I hate being alone," Kristin says, exchanges a glance with Toby. "You're never alone," Toby says, "I can't ever remember you being alone. Besides, you and I are together almost all the time." "Yes," she tells him, "you aren't like my mother--my parents left me alone many times and I hated it. You never leave me, that's true. I just worry what would happen if something happened to you." Toby takes her bare foot in his hand, massages it, says, "There's always the kids." She nods, "Yes, but that's not the same. It's like crossing over a bridge after you say goodbye to someone--once you cross it, you're alone. There's too much silence when you're alone." "Hey," he says, waits till their eyes meet, tells her, "You'll never be alone, okay? Even if I'm not there--physically, there--I'll be there in some shape or form." Then he takes her other foot from the couch, massages it too, and soon she relaxes.

* * *

She lights a cigarette, stares at the grandfather clock in the living room. The clock is old, its side panels cracking, its pendulum swinging only from the left to center and back to the left. Every three days or so she has to reset the time. Yesterday, Sunday, she slept through the morning and most of the afternoon. Today, she is wide awake, though she doesn't know why. The night before, Toby kept her from sleeping with yet another

nightmare, and she wonders if Toby's work is weighing down on him too greatly.

He is at work now. Sometimes, lately, it seems he's gone so much, as if he has a whole other life. If they could afford it, she'd have him quit his job so he could be home more often. Right now, though, she's alone. Even Joel and Bobby are off with friends, playing with their Christmas presents. She doesn't like being alone. Everyone seems so far away now, as if it will be days before she sees anyone again.

She sits on the floor in front of the grandfather clock, smokes her cigarette. She's beginning to enjoy the flavor of smoke, able to breathe it in, exhale without coughing or feeling light-headed. Her cigarette is half gone, the ash hanging on the end just long enough for her to tap it into her hand. Then she decides it isn't important to be clean, blows at her palm, watches the ash float to the floor.

* * *

"Yes, Mrs. Block, how can I help you?"

She is quiet for a moment, twirls her hair in her fingers, chews on her lower lip. "How long did you say I had? Was it three months?" She pauses, then interrupts him just after he starts speaking. "What I mean is, could it be four months? Or four months and two weeks? Why does it have to be three months?"

He clears his throat. "It could be four months, but it is my medical opinion that three months, or less, is accurate. I'm sorry." She is about to say something when she

hears the sound of papers being moved. "Mrs. Block," he says. "Perhaps you should talk with Dr. Hansen, as I suggested before. She can help you adjust to--"

"The shrink."

"Well, that's a rather poor term, but that's what she is, more or less."

"Why should I bother?" Kristin asks. "Can she tell me I've got a few more weeks?"

"Well, no, but--"

"Then I don't need to go. I'm sorry I called you." She is just about to hang up when he apologizes again, starts talking quickly, almost randomly.

"You can set up an appointment with Dr. Williams," he tells her. "You might want to get one more opinion."

"No," she says. "I've had enough of that." She hangs up, checks her watch, sees it is two-thirty, decides to get out of the farmhouse for a while and go downtown. Just before she is about to leave, Toby comes in, turns on the TV. He sits on the couch and stares at the screen as if drunk, but she cannot smell any alcohol on him.

She waits for him to say something, but he is lost in his own thoughts. She wants to know what is going through his head, but doesn't know how to ask him. "I'm going downtown," she says.

He looks up, then lowers the volume on the television. "Why don't you wait a minute and I'll go with you," he tells her, then rises, turns off the television. "I have an idea."

She follows him upstairs and into their bedroom. He takes an old violin from the top shelf in the closet--a violin his father gave him when he was young--and asks her to hold it. Next, he removes his gold Timex, sets that on the bed. "Wait here," he tells her, then disappears downstairs and returns with a box. He places the violin and the Timex inside and adds a personal Walkman he uses when he goes running from time to time. She is confused, but doesn't interrupt. He carries these things downstairs, out to the barn. He seems to be looking for more things to add to the collection. From the workbench he takes his wood burning tools, and hanging on the back wall of the barn he finds his golf clubs, leans them against the box. He removes an old radar detector from the glove compartment of the van, adds that as well.

"What are we doing?" she asks.

"You'll see," he says.

He opens the top drawer of the workbench, removes forty silver dollars. She recognizes them. They are all dated 1898, the year his grandfather was born. They were given to Toby's grandpa by his father, his grandpa continued to hand them down, and now they are Toby's. He places all but two of them in the box, tells her he is ready to go.

They load everything into the van, head for town. Between Little Jack's Texaco and the Wagon Wheel restaurant, just off Water Street, is Bud's Pawn Shop. She normally doesn't like this place, but today it doesn't bother her. Bud manages to keep his business going, drawing customers from all around the state. He is shrewd, offering maybe thirty percent of what the things are worth, but treats her and Toby well. Toby

embalmed Bud's father three years ago, Captain Eugene Sour, and from what Kristin has heard, Bud was happy to see him go.

The bottom floor of Bud's house is the pawn shop, the upstairs his living quarters. She steps back as Toby knocks on the ripped screen door where an Open sign hangs. They step inside.

"Just a second," Bud calls.

She notices electronic equipment mostly: old stereos with eight-track tapes built in, televisions with cracked picture tubes, slow-speed fax machines, cordless telephones. In a glass case near the back he keeps jewelry: diamond necklaces, pearl earrings, class rings, tie pins, fancy letter openers. He has car parts, clothing, garden equipment, cameras, and paintings. *A little of everything*, she thinks.

She helps Toby carry the box in. They set it on the only clear counter they can find, lean the golf clubs against the wall. Bud appears from the back where the bathroom is, his eyes white in the dim light, his tanned arms sticking out of his sleeveless Harley Davidson T-shirt.

"Toby and the wife!" he shouts. "How you doing?"

"Doing fine. How's the girlfriend? Surgery go okay?"

"Yeah, she's cool. Gonna get married in August."

Toby grins, extends his hand, and Bud shakes it. "She's a good woman."

"I'm happy for you," Kristin says.

"Guess where Debra and I are going on our honeymoon? Gonna go to New

Orleans! Gonna take the hog down to save on gas. Debra's getting to ride it pretty good. But you know my Harley, how touchy I get. I've been fixing up this pottery wheel to give Debra as a present."

Pottery wheel. She remembers her parents, tipsy on wine, talking to her about the pottery wheel in art class. Fifth grade. *We heard you had some trouble in art class,* her father said. *Heard you couldn't do the pottery wheel. Don't worry. I called Mrs. Myers and she's going to change your grade.* Her mother smiled, said, *Isn't that nice?* Then they all played a game of Monopoly, her parents sipping wine, talking, laughing.

She glances into the box, then points at the golf clubs.

"Oh, sorry," he says, hands pushing through the contents. "Here I've been rambling on and you've got stuff to dump out. A Timex. Good one. Give you . . . thirty for it. Can't do more than ten bucks for the walkman--got too many of them already. What's this? Radar detector? Yeah, must be. Give you twenty for that--"

Kristin listens to Bud's rambling list of prices, the bargains and sales he's creating instantly, and she is fascinated. She feels swept up, like she does when watching a good movie.

"The violin," she says.

"My father used to play it," Toby explains. "It was made in 1944."

"Junior high school here's been aching for cheap instruments," Bud says. "Most good violins these days, if I recall, will run you about three hundred. It's got a nice case and all, so the school might give me two hundred. I'll give you half that." He leans

forward, then moves around the counter to look at the golf clubs. Kristin watches him intently. "Nice. Very clean. Give you forty for those." He scratches his head. "Now, what does that add up to." He mumbles, numbers clicking over his lips, eyes off in space. "Two-hundred dollars? Yeah, that's right."

She nods. Toby leans against the counter. Bud slaps his hand down on the antique cash register, slips out a stack of bills, licks his thumb, flicks through them, hands Toby the money.

"And the silver dollars?" Toby asks.

"Oh--" Bud looks at them, one by one, checking the dates. "They all the same date? Guess so. Got, what, thirty some. Thirty-two, thirty-three . . . thirty-eight? Give you fifty bucks for the whole batch." He sets fifty dollars on the counter, collects the silver dollars.

"It's a deal. I also need to buy some things," Toby says, picking up the fifty and putting it with the rest.

"Anything here you like?" Bud motions around the room.

She is excited now, wondering what Toby intends. "Got any fishing poles?" he asks.

"Got *five* of them. Give you the best one for ten bucks."

"You think it's the right size for Bobby? He's been using a bamboo pole up till now."

"And his other one is broken," she whispers to him.

"He can handle it," Bud tells them.

"How about a guitar amp?"

Bud moves his fingers slowly back and forth through his hair. "Seems. . . there was one around here someplace." Kristin watches him move through the piles and rows of things. She and Toby wait. She wants to hold the money Toby has in his hand. Bud shouts, tugs at something, pushes other things out of the way. "Your lucky day. No, wait--well, the front cloth panel is torn pretty bad, but the speakers are okay. And it's only a thirty-watt bugger. Won't shake the walls, I'm afraid."

"Perfect," Toby says.

Kristin laughs. "It's for Joel," she says. "How much?"

"Joey's playing guitar? He any good?"

"I don't know," Toby tells him. "But he's happy."

"Thirty bucks, and I'll give you a distortion pedal I got around here someplace."

On their way home, they stop at the grocery store. They buy a gallon of the mint chocolate chip ice cream the boys like, five loaves of bread, cheese slices, ham, two gallons of milk, eggs, Captain Crunch, ten frozen pizzas, a case of generic mixed soda, a large jar of pickles, and a bag of red apples. Kristin runs the list through her head several times. She is proud of Toby when he avoids the refrigerated units filled with beer.

When they get home, they set the fishing pole on Bobby's bed, the amplifier on Joel's. She convinces him to let her work in the field for an hour or two. "Only if you take it easy," he tells her. After a while, they have only three holes to dig. She is happy

to see the end of that phase. With each step in the process, she thinks of Toby and the children, and something in her refuses to stop or rest. She keeps going until Toby tells her she has done enough. They eventually agree on continuing for half an hour. After that, they go inside, sit at the kitchen table, listen to the radio. Neither of them talks. She notices Toby staring at the phone hanging on the wall opposite him. She wonders why he seems anxious for work. Taking his hand, she pulls him close, kisses him, watches until his eyes meet hers.

When Joel and Bobby come home, they find the fishing pole and the amplifier and run down the stairs, eyes beaming. Toby tells them this is their reward for working hard in the vineyard. She smiles as best she can.

* * *

They soak some of the plants for ten hours in buckets of water before planting them. The trellises go up quickly with Joel and Bobby's help. They have only one row of posts to finish before they wire everything up. They dig shallow trenches, lay the roots down, cover them with soil, keep them watered. She has already trimmed most of the roots. After a month or so, some growth will be visible, but it will be a long time before grapes are produced. Once planted, she tells Toby they will eventually need to set up seven sprinklers. Finally, they wire up everything, tighten the trellises, check the earth anchors to make sure they are holding.

Then she takes Toby and the boys to the house, into the kitchen, sits them down. She tells them Toby will be cutting hair from now on and that she is going to teach him. "Why?" Joel asks. Bobby looks worried. "Because . . . I'm going to need as much time as I can get so I can keep a close eye on the vineyard. Your father will show you how to do the laundry, too."

"Laundry?" Bobby protests. "Uh-uh! Not me!"

"I can't do laundry!" Joel says. "I gotta practice guitar."

She crosses her arms, sighs. "Well, I could add a few more things for you to do. How does cleaning the bathroom sound? Washing windows? Sweeping out the barn? Taking--"

"I'll do the washing, you hang them up," Joel says.

Bobby shakes his head. "No way! Not me!"

"Vacuuming the carpet, mopping the kitchen--"

"Mom!" Bobby says.

"Taking out the garbage--"

"Okay, okay!"

With Bobby sitting on one of the kitchen chairs, she guides Toby through the basics of a haircut. First, you wet the hair down with water from the sink, she explains, then you comb it out so you know exactly what the true length of the hair is. She explains it all, as much as she can remember, and Toby does his best to follow her instructions.

But as he is cutting, Bobby says, "Shouldn't we buy a dog so you could practice on

him first?"

Kristin imagines a dog, a little toy collie, sitting before them, panting, staring up at them innocently with big, curious eyes. "It wouldn't be any fun if I practiced," Toby tells him. "Let's see just how weird I can make it look."

"Mom, tell Dad to practice first!" The whole rest of the day, Bobby wears a baseball cap. Then he decides it isn't too bad, goes without the cap.

"When will we get grapes?" Joel asks her later. They sit at the kitchen table, eating chili.

She pushes her spoon around in the bowl. Toby clears his throat, says, "I need a beer." She watches him rise, go to the refrigerator, then stop. He pauses for a moment, then opens the door, takes out a can of lime soda. He sits next to her, says, "This'll be fine."

"We'll have grapes in about two years," she tells Joel.

"That's a long time."

She sits back in the hard, wooden chair, places her hands in her lap. She wishes she could be given just enough time to taste the grapes fresh from the field, to see the vineyard produce wine.

* * *

"Let's go for a ride," she says, orders everyone into the van, drives out to Beecher

Road. Most of the snow has melted, only patches of white visible now. The road is hilly, riddled with pot holes, and crosses several creeks. There are many bridges, but one bridge is larger and older than all the others, the kind that bulges upward in a half circle of wooden planks and iron bolts. Crossing that bridge is an unequalled thrill for her. She wants Joel and Bobby to feel it, to have it in their hearts, if only for a moment. Toby sits in the back of the van, lets the boys share the passenger seat.

"Buckle up," she says, searching for the belts that have disappeared between the cushions. She feels dirt, wrappers, and a few coins before she finds the straps. She helps Bobby buckle. Joel locks his into place, rolls the window down a few inches.

On either side of the nickel-gray road are bright, yellow fields. A warm breeze ripples the grass. A robin flutters into view. Over the low hill stands a billboard, decayed and peeling from years of neglect, telephone wires sagging almost low enough to rest on the billboard's top edge.

They pass through a tunnel of trees, the low-hanging branches scraping the roof of the van. Then they are once again in sunlight.

"Mom, Joel's on my side of the seat!" Bobby says.

"Am not!"

"Your hand is! Look!"

"Boys," Toby says. "Not now."

Bobby is wearing his red bandanna, a bright contrast to his black sweater. Joel leans his head against the window, lets the wind blow through his hair.

"Do you know what's ahead?" she asks.

"A forest?" Joel says. Bobby simply shrugs.

"We're going to go *fast* over an old-fashioned bridge."

"We're going to jump a bridge?" Bobby says, sitting up. "Like in the movies?"

They approach the turn. "I should drive," Toby says.

"We're going to *sail* over it," she tells them, ignores Toby's worry.

The road slopes suddenly. At the bottom of the valley between two small hills, the best of the Beecher Road bridges appears. "You're crazy," Joel says, seeing the bridge, hands clamping onto the dashboard. Disbelief and excitement cross his face.

She brings their speed up to forty-five. She knows if she takes the bridge any faster, she'll drop the engine. She rolls down the window and a warm breeze rushes in carrying the smell of fish and damp grass. "Can you hear the creek?" she shouts. They do not hear her. They are waiting for the impact.

The front tires slam into the bridge. Metal rattles. They fly forward, thrust upward by the incline, airborne. Bobby and Joel cry out. Toby grunts. And then they land. Her gut falls.

Bobby giggles, clapping his hands. Joel turns to look back at the bridge fading in the distance. "Wow!" he says. "Let's do it *again*."

She smiles, remembering what her father told her when she said the same thing. "That's an old bridge," she tells them. "We don't want to break it. Once is enough."

"Let's do it again," Joel repeats. "Please."

She turns her face into the wind. "Dairy Queen is opening up today. How about some ice cream cones?"

Outside, a beautiful spring day is unfolding, creeks winding in and out of woods, clouds wispy and very white in the warm sun. They all want to vault over that bridge again, to launch through the air at great speed, but on the way home from ice cream cones she takes a different route, and everyone is silent. She looks across the fields where farmers planted wheat last spring. Her vision loses focus. A large pot hole jars the van. Her head begins to buzz. Her temple throbs and she forgets where she is, what she's doing. From the back seat, Toby grabs the steering wheel, guides it for her. He pushes her foot off the gas pedal, manages to slow the van.

Not now, she thinks, not when she is with her children--give her just a few more days--*please God*, even a few more hours. She tries to think of a promise she can make, something she can offer the monster in her head as a way of buying time. She promises to stop smoking, to refrain from working on the vineyard, to pray regularly.

Toby stops the van safely. She can feel him carrying her, and then she is lying in the back of the van, resting. Toby suggests taking her to the hospital, but she refuses, knowing there is nothing they can do. She can hear Joel and Bobby asking questions, but Toby tells them to keep quiet, leave her alone. When they arrive at the farmhouse, she's feeling better. After a little while she is back to normal. She lights a cigarette without thinking, then realizes what she promised only half an hour earlier, tamps the cigarette out in Toby's ashtray. But then, she lights up again, finishes her smoke, watching the

grandfather clock and listening to it chime every fifteen minutes.

* * *

A month has gone by since her diagnosis. She feels the passing of time now more than ever. It is on her mind almost every moment. One night, she wakes Toby, asks him to turn on the lamp.

"I want to tell the boys," she says. "It's not right. I feel horrible."

He sits up, places a pillow behind his back. "I don't think we should," he tells her. "I can't handle that."

She feels a strange tingling in the back of her head on the left side, but it doesn't hurt so she ignores it. "It will help them. This way they won't blame you."

He is quiet for a long moment. He starts to say something, stops, then frowns, looks away from her. His forehead creases. "It won't help. It will only make them suffer more."

She touches his shoulder. "They already have a good idea something's wrong. They've already asked me if I'm dying. Do you think they aren't suffering now? We need to tell them. We have before."

"This is different," he says.

"How's it different?"

He slides down from the back of the bed, rolls over. "The answer is no."

Her face feels warm now, but her feet and hands are cold. She cannot believe what he is telling her. She punches him in the back, tells him to look at her. He refuses. "Listen to me!" she screams.

But just as he rolls over, something happens she cannot control. Suddenly she cannot move, cannot speak. Her eyes water and she tries to warn him, to touch him, manages to whisper his name.

He looks confused. She can only see him out of her left eye. The whole right side of her body feels numb. She cannot move her right arm or her right leg. Moments later, panting for air, grasping for Toby, she loses consciousness.

* * *

She wakes in the hospital. Toby is there, sitting next to her. Joel and Bobby are asleep in chairs off to the side of the room. She notices Toby isn't looking at her, that his eyes are red and swollen. He stares at the white sheets.

She tries to speak, but the words are slurred. She uses the left side of her mouth, struggles with the right, manages to say his name. Her right hand is nearest to him, and she tries to touch his face, but cannot. Then she notices he is already holding that same hand--she is unable to feel it.

"Oh, Toby," she whispers. "I'm sorry."

"You're awake," he says. He looks excited and nervous at the same time. He calls

for the doctor and after a few minutes Dr. Link appears. Link takes her pulse, asks her some questions, acts somewhat relieved. "You can talk," he says. "That's a good sign. And you seem to be thinking clearly. It looks as if the stroke only affected the motor functions on the right side of your body."

"A stroke?" she says.

"Yes," he tells her. "You've had a stroke."

"We're going to take you home," Toby tells her.

Dr. Link frowns, asks Toby to step out into the hallway. Normally she would be angry for being left out of the conversation, but feels frightened, wants Toby back in the room with her. She hears Toby shouting, but cannot understand what he's saying through the door. When he comes back in, his face is red, his hair wild. Dr. Link is not with him.

Joel and Bobby sit next to her on the other side of the bed. They are holding her good arm and she can feel them. Bobby is crying, and Joel puts an arm around him.

"They can't do anything here except give you some stronger medication," Toby says. "And I can handle that at home."

For a moment, this seems like a simple idea to her, a solution to everything. But then she realizes she won't be able to walk, or do much of anything. She wonders if Toby will have to help her to the bathroom, to wash her hair, change her clothes. She thinks of everything he will have to do, begins to cry. He kisses her forehead and she is thankful she can feel his lips and the faint trace of moisture left there. He leaves them for a moment, returns with a wheelchair.

"Mom, don't cry," Bobby says. Joel and Toby help her sit up. She struggles to turn her head toward Bobby, touches his cheek with her good hand. Joel helps hold her while Toby dresses her in jeans, T-shirt, sweater. Once dressed, they lower her into the wheelchair, check to make sure all of her things are accounted for.

The door swings open and two nurses come in. "What are you doing?" one nurse asks. "You were supposed to wait for us. Who gave you the wheelchair?"

"I'm sorry," Toby tells them. "But my wife is not going to spend another minute here. Thank you for your help, but I can take care of everything."

They take the elevator down to the lobby, then exit through the double doors to the lower parking lot. Toby wheels her to the passenger side of the van, opens the door, lifts her out of the wheelchair, sets her gently into the seat. Then he rolls the wheelchair around to the rear of the van, loads it in the back with Joel and Bobby's help.

That night, Toby cooks tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. She is able to sip the soup through a straw. It is luke warm so she will not burn her tongue. She wants to go upstairs, change clothes, go to sleep. She thinks of her redwood dresser where all her white lace bras are, how she will not be able to wear them again--she believes it will be easier on Toby for her not to wear them, since he must help her bathe now. She pictures her row of clothes, tightly packed into the closet, all the different colors and textures collected over the years. Her shoe boxes are there too, tied with frayed twine, set on the back of the shelf. Inside are postcards and letters from Taiwan, written in the tiny hand of her sister Carmen. Carmen is a Maryknoll nun, has been teaching English and

caring for handicapped children for eight years overseas, and Kristin has not seen her in a long time. In the other boxes she has pine cones, sand dollars, wooden beads, and copper metal disks, along with yarn, black string, and several thin chains, which she keeps for making necklaces, decorations, ornaments. Even her old records are there--and cassette tapes of Nat King Cole, Vivaldi, Chubby Checker, Andres Segovia.

She knows she will never be able to use these things again. She sips her tomato soup, curses her body for only partially killing her.

"Let's go to bed," Toby whispers, carries her upstairs, helps her get ready. After she's settled in, comfortable, he slides his hand over her breast, the one she can feel, then kisses her lightly on the lips. This tenderness continues as they make love, slow, gentle, quiet.

* * *

"See this?" Toby says to Joel, holding the box of generic laundry soap. Kristin pushes the right wheel, then reaches across her body, pushes the left, slowly rolling her wheelchair a foot or so closer. Joel looks at Toby, glances at her, then nods. "Good," Toby says. "This is the powder kind. You put in one full scoop, then you put in the clothes. Then you turn the knob to Full Load and pull out. Like this. See?"

"Yes," Joel says quietly.

"Oh, come on," Kristin pipes in. "I bet you'll love to do laundry. Maybe you'll

like it so much you'll want to do it all the time."

Joel rolls his eyes, starts working the laundry as Toby wheels her away. In the kitchen, Bobby is drying the dishes, stacking the plates neatly under the cabinet he cannot reach. A puff of soap clings to his cheek. He wipes it off with his hand, careful to keep it away from his eye.

Just then, the phone rings and they all jump. Toby answers it, holding the receiver close. "Yes," he says. "Now's not a good time, Karl." There is a long pause. "I know that. Don't you think I know that . . . No, later . . . I'll tell you later . . . fine! Fine, Karl, all right, fine. Fuck you."

He hangs up. She stares at him, unable to calm him down. She knows he has to go to work, tells him to go. "Bobby and Joel can take care of things," she says.

"They're going to have to get a replacement," he tells her. "They can't expect me to do this. Not now."

"You have to," she says. "The closest person to replace you is Fred Pixton. He can't drive four hours each day to cover everything."

"I'll find someone else. There are other people who can do it. Hell, Karl almost has enough experience."

"We can't afford that," she says, tries to sound strong so he will not worry. "You go ahead. It won't take long." She wants him active. She's afraid he will fall into a pattern which will carry on past her death--she wants him working, for himself and the boys, after she is gone.

Finally, he submits. He calls Karl to tell him he will be there soon, leaves quietly through the kitchen door.

"You can let the rest of the dishes air-dry," she tells Bobby, instructs him to hang the towel on the oven's handle. "One hour of television, and then it's off to bed," she says.

He looks confused, as if this was the last thing he expected to hear. He stuffs his hands into his pockets, shuffles away from her. She calls him back, asks him to give her a hug, holds him for a long time, then lets go.

"Just think," she says. "You get to do the dishes every day from now on. Isn't that great?"

"I hate doing dishes."

She tries to smile. "And I bet they hate getting dirty."

"Why can't we eat with our fingers? My fingers don't mind getting dirty."

"When was the last time you talked to them?"

"When I was doing the dishes."

She laughs, tells him to go watch television before it gets too late. Feeling sore from sitting in the wheelchair, she wheels herself into the living room, struggles to remove a cigarette from an unopened pack, then places the cigarette in the left side of her mouth, lights up. She feels proud of herself for being able to do even this small thing on her own.

* * *

Another week passes and she feels certain she has only a month to go, if not less. She doubts her body will allow her much more time than this, hopes something reverses in her condition, that some feeling may come back to the right side of her body, but knows this is unlikely.

The whole week, Toby has been dreaming, but she's only been able to retrieve small phrases from his mumbled words. She worries about him, often thinks of asking about the dreams, but is afraid of what he might tell her; or worse, what he might keep from her.

She cannot think about it too much, instead tries to focus on other things, decides to spend some time with Bobby and Joel. She has Bobby sit at the kitchen table with her. Joel is upstairs, playing his electric guitar. It is a relief to her they know now, that she doesn't have to lie to them any more. The results are not what she expected. She hoped it would allow Joel and Bobby to talk to her, to ask questions, work through it, but the opposite has happened. Instead of talking directly to her, Bobby expresses himself through his drawings and paintings, Joel through his guitar. She can hear and see them responding, but isn't allowed to know exactly what they are feeling. *It was wrong*, she thinks, for her mother to conceal things, to follow proper behavior, keep her feelings and thoughts trapped inside. She wishes she could explain this to Toby so that he might pass it on to Joel and Bobby. There is so much she wants to tell all of them. She wonders if

they will listen to her, if it is possible for them to listen. There are so many things she has not done, so many things she wishes she could do differently. But she is dying--believes it now, knows it is real.

At night, she listens to the sound of Toby breathing next to her, and in the morning listens to her family moving about the house, preparing for another day. She becomes very quiet, keeps herself from thinking about those around her. It is painful to be so close to them and still be alone.

The next morning, she sits on the porch. It is warm from the sun. She wonders what Toby did yesterday at work, knows it was not easy for him, that it was probably something far worse than what he does from day to day. It hurts her every time he is called in. Her greatest fear is being without Toby. She thinks about him, misses him while he is gone, wishes she could put both arms around him right now. Part of her believes he might be better off if he didn't love her, yet she cannot think of what her life would be like if he were not such a large part of it. She knows her present condition is not easy for him, that her presence and her needs are more than he can handle. But she cannot let him go. She does not want to let him go.

CHAPTER SIX

"I dreamed about us last night," Toby says, "About you and I when we're old." Kristin rests her head on her arm, listens intently. "You were on the porch, sipping wine, looking out at the vineyard, tapping your foot. I was in a big green chair, just sitting there and feeling the wind blow in from the field. And I thought I heard some music, like guitar music. We were old and happy, looking out over the farm--the vineyard, the barn, the shed, the field, all of it--and we both knew we had accomplished something, so we could simply relax and enjoy it now. It was like a fairy tale--like seeing a Norman Rockwell painting of an old couple's house with a sign that reads, 'Gone Fishing.'" Kristin smiles, says, "Sounds wonderful." "It was," Toby tells her.

* * *

Ever since her stroke, Toby has been thinking about the day they jumped the old bridge. He believes it was good for them to get outside and do things. He knows it will be much more difficult to take her places now that she is partially paralyzed, but he

cannot allow her to behave like someone who is already dead. They can go places, get outside. If he can just keep her focused on doing things which remind her she is still alive, he thinks it might be possible to keep her from feeling too depressed about her condition.

The night Kristin had her stroke, she woke him at three in the morning. They talked about the possibility of telling Joel and Bobby the truth. Suddenly, she placed a hand on her forehead and sank into the mattress. For a moment, he didn't notice anything was wrong. She was silent and it disturbed him. He touched her shoulder, asked her if she was all right. She didn't respond. He threw the pillows out of the way, centered her on the mattress. He tapped her cheeks with his fingertips. She was still breathing, he could hear it.

"Not now, sweetheart," he remembers saying, and she mumbled something. He panicked, scrambled for the phone on the far end of the nightstand, accidentally knocked it to the floor, then found the receiver, called for an ambulance. He hung up, jerked the quilt free from the bottom of the bed, wrapped her in it from the elbows down. He lifted her gently, carried her out into the hallway.

"Joel! Bobby!" he shouted, starting down the stairs sideways, taking the steps one by one. He called for Joel and Bobby again, then Joel was standing next to him. They sat on the couch, he held her in his lap, waited for the ambulance.

"What's wrong, Dad?" Joel asked. "Is Mom--is she dead?" Bobby stood behind him then.

"Your mother's very sick," Toby told them. "We're going to the hospital." For a moment he couldn't look at them, his eyes blurred. "Hurry and get dressed now," he said. They stood there for a moment; he shouted "Go!" and they ran upstairs to get ready.

She felt limp and he tried to get her to respond. "Kristin," he said quietly. She rolled her head, blinked her left eye, mumbled something. *It's as if she's drunk*, he thought, and he worried she would be with him for only a few more seconds. He rocked her back and forth. "Where's the fucking ambulance!" he said. "Come on, come on!"

Joel and Bobby ran down the stairs just as the ambulance pulled up. Five minutes later, they were riding down the highway, sirens blaring. Several medics pushed him aside as they examined her. He could do nothing except wait. He pulled his sons close, searched for something to say, said nothing.

That night they stayed with her in the hospital room. Dr. Link was certain she suffered a stroke, but couldn't offer much of an estimate on how much time she had left. He thought there was almost no time, informed Toby her chances of continuing much further were slim. "This is related to the tumor," Link said, "and normally she would be gone by now, but it seems there's a chance she may hold on a little longer."

In the morning, on the second day, she came back to them. She had difficulty speaking and only had limited movement, but he was relieved that her memory and her thinking seemed normal. *That's still Kristin in there*, he told himself, and even though he felt guilty for being so selfish, he knew he was blessed to have her with him.

He took her home despite Dr. Link's *realistic* assessment of what life would be

like for them without hospital care. "You've known me for a while, Toby. I know your job isn't easy. Neither is mine. We've been in this too long for me to lie to you. It won't be easy. You'll have to see to her every need," Link told him, "and you may find it better--for you and your children--if she passes away in the hospital rather than in your home. It would be easier on you--you're going to live, she isn't. Let the hospital worry about her."

This angered Toby and it was all he could do to keep from striking Link. "My wife is not going to wither away in some *alien* world," Toby said, trying to hold his voice down. He stepped forward, tapped Link on the chest with his index finger. "You just wait. Some day I'll have someone you love on the slab--maybe even *you* Link--and then we'll see how you feel about caring only for yourself." He left Link alone in the hallway, headed back toward the room. *Bastard has all the answers*, Toby thought, *but they're not the right ones.*

Once home, Toby returned things to normal. He told Joel to play his guitar, asked Bobby to work on his drawings. Thankfully, they listened to him, and he was able to focus on Kristin. He dressed her in sweat pants and a comfortable sweater. She asked for her necklace with the blue and brown beads--he found it in her dresser, in the top drawer, let her put it on. She adjusted it with her left hand, then fingered one of the blue beads.

He looks at her now as they sit in the living room on the couch, wonders if he was right to convince her to go without treatments, without chemotherapy. She brushes her hair back from her face, motions him to come closer. "What is it?" she asks. He shakes his head. "Nothing," he tells her. She stares at her feet and says, "My foot is cold."

* * *

When the phone rings for the first time, he answers it without pause. "Hello," he says, glances at Kristin, sees her chewing on a pen as she works a crossword puzzle in the newspaper.

"You *puerco!* What a pig you are!" Maria screams. "How come you no call me? Huh? How come mi Amante no come to my bed?"

Don't move, he thinks. *Stay calm*. "Yes, I see," he says.

"She there? Si? Yes? You come see me soon or I come and see you at your house! You want me to come there?"

"No, I'm fine," Toby mumbles. "I'll talk to you soon."

"Bueno! Fantastico! Don't ignore me, Amante."

Shaking, he hangs up. Half a second later, the phone rings again. He jumps, blurts, "Jesus!"

"You okay?" Kristin asks.

"Yeah," he tells her. "I just didn't expect it to ring right after I hung up."

It rings again. "You want me to get it?"

"No, no, I got it." He picks up the receiver. "Hello?"

Karl's voice on the other end tells him someone has been shot. Toby is tired of arguing about work--with Karl *and* Kristin--so he listens to what Karl has to say, then hangs up. The last time Karl called, the hospital needed three bodies to be picked up and

Karl thought Toby might need some help. This made Toby feel guilty because he had been rude to Karl while Karl was just trying to be nice; eventually he called Karl back.

The pressure of everything simply got to him and he didn't know how to handle it.

Now, Karl has called again, only this time things are not so simple. Karl wanted to explain the whole situation over the phone. "You remember Ted Ho, that oriental guy that owns the camera shop in town?" Karl said. "He was up late working on something when some dirtbag decided to break in. Ho decided to be John Wayne and shot him. The police have everything they need. They need you down here to clean up. Ho is all worried." Toby told him he would be there soon.

But driving downtown, he wishes he didn't have to do any of this. When he arrives at Ted Ho's camera shop, the place is a mess. Inside, Ted Ho breathes onto the lens of one of his cameras, polishing, watching Toby sponge the floor. The equipment has been cleared away from the area where the thief was shot twice in the chest. On the walls of Ho's shop are posters of lush landscapes, everything hazy green and beautiful. In the largest poster, monkeys swing from tree limbs, their elongated arms frozen in the picture like timeless pendulums. White collars of fur circle their necks and their brown-orange bellies are smooth, round.

"Get that mess cleared away," Ho says.

Karl walks past Toby out the door, whispering, "Asshole."

Toby squeezes the sponge into the bucket. "You just shot this man."

"Did you look at him?" Ho says.

"Yes, I did." Toby had already wrapped the body in a tarp and carried it out on the stretcher to the van. He remembers the shock in the victim's eyes, the cheeks tight as if someone were tugging on his shoulder-length hair, his unshaven face pitted badly from acne. He had thin shoulders, thick legs, dirty clothes. *He's not a model human being*, Toby thinks, but he's a better man than Ho and his cameras.

"Trash," Ho says. "He deserved it."

Toby lifts the bucket. Blood and soap-water spill. He drops the sponge, throws open the door.

"Are you going to finish cleaning?" Ho asks.

"I've done *my* job. You made the mess," Toby says, then slams the door on his way out.

Toby unloads the body at the funeral home, forces himself to finish what he knows must be done. Half way through the procedure, he starts to cry. He bites his tongue, wipes his eyes, watches the fluid levels in the tank. His vision blurs with tears. Cursing himself, he struggles to keep control, shakes his head, clears his throat, continues with his work.

After leaving the funeral home, he drives to Harvey's, parks out back near Maria's place. Climbing the stairs, her window glowing orange from the light inside, he cannot hear her singing. Faintly, the sound of music can be heard below in Harvey's. Without knocking, he throws open her door, surprised to see it isn't locked.

Maria is bending over her planter of geraniums with a glass of water when he

enters. Straightening up in shock, she drops the glass, water spilling on her couch and floor. "Amante!" she says.

Tossing his coat aside, he lunges for her, kisses her passionately, tears open her blouse, kisses her breasts. They tumble to the floor, he pulling off his sweater and shirt, she unzipping her pants. In a matter of seconds, he is inside her, thrusting violently.

"Si," she growls, holding his head, pulling his hair, nails digging into his scalp. "Rapido! Si!"

She climaxes before him, but he continues, finishes soon after, rolls off her. The room is hot. He stumbles to the bathroom, tired now, climbs in her shower, uses shampoo to wash away the smell of her, rinses, dries off, gets dressed.

Maria sits naked on the couch, says, "I should call you at home more often, si?" He glares at her. She sighs, mumbles, "Maybe not. But don't you ignore me, Amante, or I'll call every day."

He kisses her lightly on the lips, grabs his coat, leaves her. Only now, standing outside in the cold, away from Maria, does he begin thinking again. The weight of every worry slowly returns. *Maybe Maria is what I need*, he thinks, knowing there is no guilt with her, no consequences, only freedom, escape.

* * *

Another week passes and Toby spends his free time in the vineyard whenever

Kristin is resting. The nightmares have been getting worse, vague images of Maria and Eric Hamilton together, haunting him.

"I wish we could go outside," Kristin tells him that weekend. Joel and Bobby look up from the television. "It's so sunny--a good day for a picnic."

Toby is exhausted, doesn't know if he has the energy to do anything as extensive as a picnic, but knows he won't be happy if he denies her this. He tells Joel and Bobby to fill the red cooler full of ham and cheese sandwiches, ice, grape soda, Doritos, onion dip, and some hamburger meat. They load up the van, roll down the front windows. As they drive, air rushes in, touches Kristin's face. The fresh smell of spring is with them.

Toby turns up the road that leads to Meadow High Park. She says, "I'm glad I'm home," and he knows she's thinking about the hospital. She smiles through a grimace that passes over her face, sways toward the window, pressing the palm of her hand to her forehead.

He pulls to the side of the road, slows the car.

Pushing her head up straight with her left hand, she says, "No, don't stop. We're going to the park." She turns a sweet face toward him, smiling. Her temple wrinkles. "You want to go to the park, don't you?"

He lets the engine idle, unable to decide, afraid of going on ahead. He cannot decipher why this is so important to her, but senses she wants to do this more than anything. Finally, he places the van in gear, starts back on the road. Trees sway lazily in the wind like lumbering giants. The sky is a luminous blue, the sun bright on the rolling

hills. Burned wood fragrances mix with the smell of dried leaves from last autumn.

He places his hand on her knee, wanting to remember the feeling, the warmth. He darts a glimpse at her, and she places her hand on his. She stares out the open window, her freckled shoulders dark against her white tank top. Her breasts push out, move freely without the restraint of a bra. She is wearing no makeup. To him, she looks elegant. All the memories of lying on a blanket with her under the shade of some leafy tree, of feeling confident in touching her, feeling her touch, her skin--all of it rushes him in one moment. He wants to be naked, bundled up in some thick sleeping bag with her, talking quietly, feeling her firm nipples on his chest, touching her soft skin.

They pass into a clearing and drive to the quiet edge of the cliff he has named High Meadow Park. *No one comes here anymore*, he thinks. He and Kristin used to spread out their picnic lunches in the sun and talk as they rubbed lotion on each other--before Bobby or Joel were born.

They park in the shade of an oak tree. Toby lifts Kristin out while the boys haul the cooler over to one of the wooden tables. He pushes her to the place where the grass is the darkest, near the cliff edge. He feels wind burned, sunburned, tired, knows it is from the work he has done on the vineyard, sweating in the heat of the field during the times she is resting.

They fix lunch, eat the ham and cheese sandwiches, grill the hamburger. "God, what a beautiful day!" Kristin says.

Toby agrees, "This was a good idea."

"That cloud looks like a giant frog," Bobby says, pointing.

"It does not," Joel says. "That's stupid."

"*You're* stupid."

Toby picks up Joel, slings him over his shoulder, turns toward Kristin. "Where's that door to the land of the stupid people?" he asks her. "I have to return both these boys."

Kristin smiles. "Just to the right of that tree. But look out for the vegetable monster. He'll make you eat all kinds of broccoli and spinach."

"Yeah," Bobby says. "Make him eat spinach!"

Joel squirms on Toby's shoulders. "No way! Let me down!"

"It's good for you," Bobby tells him.

They run off to the trees, Kristin laughing, and a wrestling match begins. For the rest of the day they are able to relax enough to enjoy themselves.

That night, he and Kristin sit on the porch with the windows open. "I love this farm," she says, and he looks out on the field, the barn, the telephone lines working their way down to the highway, the silo they have never used. He remembers the day they decided to purchase the farm. Kristin researched everything beforehand, calculating how much land they would need, how much money it would cost them, what materials the vineyard would require. They dropped the boys off at her mother's house, went in search of the right piece of land.

"I've never worked on a farm," he remembers telling her. "I don't know if we can

do it."

"I know what do to," she told him.

He trusted her at her word. It did not take them long to find what they needed.

The filled out the loan applications, made an offer to the owners, started moving out of their apartment at the end of that month. She was excited to be pursuing her dream, and he looked forward to enjoying the countryside. It took them several years before they had enough money saved to begin buying equipment and materials. Kristin worked various jobs and Toby saved as much as he could from his salary. Those years were not easy on them, but they were good, productive, healthy years.

He only wishes he could've known about Kristin's condition enough in advance, to have started work years earlier so she might have cultivated the vineyard, watched it grow, tasted the wine it produced.

He lifts her onto the couch, sits next to her. "You know," he says, "I--" She rests her head on his chest, holds onto his shirt with her good hand, and he knows she is waiting for him to say something.

"Yes," she says, but he cannot speak. Something stops him from telling her she is all that has ever mattered to him.

When he says nothing, she doesn't ask him to explain. "Tell me what it's like," she says. "Tell me about that young man who committed suicide. What was it like--you know--preparing him--"

"Kristin, no," he says.

"You never tell me what it's like. I want to know."

He doesn't want to discuss this, doesn't understand why she wants to know.

"Think back," she says, but he is afraid to open his mind to those memories. "Tell me," she says.

"I can't."

"Why?"

He feels like leaving the porch, going into the living room, having a cigarette. He wants a drink--a large glass of whiskey. "It reminds me of too many things," he says.

"Things I don't want to think about."

"Tell me."

"Don't," he tells her.

"You have to talk about it," she says. "If you don't, you'll do the same thing after I'm gone and you won't ever be able to live normally."

Normally, he thinks. *What's normal?* He remembers the first time he slept with Maria, how it allowed him to finally relax. Feeling free of responsibility, perhaps for the first time in years, he gave himself to her.

"Tell me about the young man," Kristin says. "Why did he shoot himself?"

He wipes his eyes with his shirt sleeve, tries to compose himself. "Why are you asking me these things?"

She sighs, runs her hand down his chest to his stomach, wraps her arm around him. "There's just so much we haven't said to each other. I want to hear you say it."

He knows she is talking about more than the young man's suicide. He tries to force the words from his mouth, to tell her everything she wants to know, but he cannot. He feels as if he will break if he says those words.

* * *

Bobby leans his head on Toby's shoulder. "Tell me a story, Dad."

He glances at Kristin, but she is asleep in her chair. "Close your eyes," he says, and Bobby does. "Imagine being out in the country. It's near the end of summer and the field grass is tall, the color of wheat. You can hear it whisper when the wind blows. Railroad tracks made of rusty metal run straight through the grass. Can you see it?"

"Yeah," Bobby says in a far away voice. "Where do they go?"

"They go everywhere. Some people join you. They say hello, and then they leave. There are white clouds above you and you're warm from the sun. Ahead is a bridge. You step off the tracks and walk down to some bubbling springs. Water cress grows there. You pick some. It tastes like lettuce and you nibble at it. You sit down and look at the bridge."

Toby stops, not knowing where he plans to take the story.

"What happens?" Bobby says.

"Not much," Toby mumbles.

"Something's gotta happen, Dad."

"It's not that kind of story."

"What do you mean?" Bobby asks, then stands up. "I'm gonna ask Mom."

"She's sleeping. You can ask her later."

His face twists. "I'm gonna ask her," he says. "She'll know what happens. She's good at stories."

"I already told her the story, but you can ask."

"I will." Bobby turns, looks at Kristin for a long moment, then heads upstairs.

Toby wishes he could find a way to explain this to his son.

The next morning, he takes his oldest pair of jeans from the dresser, puts them on, along with a thick sweater, white socks with thin patches at the heels, rubber boots, and a round cap with lures stuck in the gray band. He knows Kristin is watching all of this, but she says nothing. When he finishes, he dresses her, hands her a cap to wear, tells her he would like to go fishing with the boys. He thinks it would be good for her, for all of them, if they could get out of the farmhouse once again.

"The ice has melted on Miller's Creek," he says.

"The boys have school," she tells him.

"I'll call in, say they're sick. Then we'll work on the trellises when we get back."

"You can go. I'll be fine here by myself."

He pushes the fishing cap back on his head, reaches down to tie his boot strings. He clips the beeper to his belt, turns it on. "We're all going," he says. "We're going to catch us some fish."

He wheels her to the stairs, carries her down, sets her on the couch, then hauls the wheelchair to the bottom of the steps, places her back in it. He hurries upstairs once again, wakes Joel and Bobby. He tells them they're going fishing instead of going to school, and they are thrilled.

After loading the van with both bamboo and regular fishing poles, tackle box, jug full of Kool Aid, and a cooler packed with sandwiches and chips, they head out to Miller's Creek, stopping only to buy worms from their neighbor who sells them almost year round. It isn't cold outside, almost warm, but the air is brisk.

The road turns to gravel when they reach the trees. The creek runs under an old bridge down between the slopes of two hills. It is a different bridge than the one they nearly jumped earlier, but it reminds him of how Kristin collapsed while driving the van. For a moment, he wonders if it would be better to stay home, to keep things simple and safe. But he knows that wouldn't be good for her--sitting home, doing nothing.

He parks on one side of the bridge, leaving ample room for someone to get by if necessary, though most of the time this road goes unused.

Bobby climbs out of the van, stomps at the wet field grass with his boots. Joel opens the passenger door, but Toby motions for the boys to get the gear. Then he lifts Kristin from the van, places her in the wheelchair. Blue chicory covers the path, matted down from winter's passing. The smooth surfaces of large rocks protrude from the mud to provide good footholds. Joel slips and the wind layers his hair as he starts to fall, catches his balance, continues on as if nothing happened. Bobby stomps through the

rows of spruce and birch at the top of the slope. Thin clouds lift away from the hard red sun. Toby calls Bobby down.

He wheels Kristin to where the creek grows wide at the base of the rusted bridge-- the safest place he can bring her near the water. Light from the water reflects up under the curve of the bridge.

Joel and Bobby lay down a blanket before handing out cans of grape soda to everyone. Then they retrieve the fishing poles and push worms onto their hooks. Joel has his line in before any of them, casting ahead while Toby helps Bobby with his new fishing pole. The creek water chuckles by, swirling in the low places, carrying a few stray slivers of ice under the bridge and hiding them, moving Bobby's plastic bobber away from him the moment he casts his line in.

They fish for half an hour, perhaps a little longer, when someone shouts from the other side of the creek. A man with short legs and a long upper body works his way down, followed by a younger man and a pale-faced girl. The young man and the girl hold hands, swing their connected limbs back and forth. The older fellow smiles a lot, showing long yellow teeth. A red patch of skin glows on his left cheek like a birthmark. The younger man looks familiar to Toby, but he cannot get a clear view of his face.

"How-do?" the old man shouts. He carries all the fishing poles. "Any luck?"

"Not yet," Toby says. He doesn't like them being here, wants them to move to the other side of the bridge.

The young girl giggles. The boy turns enough to show his face. He looks familiar

and it makes Toby nervous. Toby knows most of the people in town and the surrounding areas, but hasn't seen this group before. Then the boy smiles and for a moment Toby thinks he looks like Eric Hamilton. *That's him*, he thinks, and the idea terrifies him. Then the boy takes his girlfriend's hand and they follow the old man up the creek. Even though they talk among themselves, their voices carry. Intending to tell them to keep their voices down, Toby starts to walk closer. He is angry at them for being here, afraid to have them remain much longer.

"Toby, come back," Kristin says. He stops, reluctantly, turns to watch Joel and Bobby fish. For a while, the younger man throws rocks at the spiles of the bridge, apparently aiming to hit any of the supports, but he is a poor shot, soon gives up.

The creek is clear enough to see brook trout in the deeper, fast-moving water, their bodies distorted and fluid. The brook trout hold themselves near the gravel bottom, pushing up mists of sand in their quick movements. They don't take much interest in Toby's lure. He wonders if Joel and Bobby are just casting their lines out wherever, not seeing the trout.

Upstream, the old man laughs. Toby is just about to stand up, shout at them, when his line tugs, grows taut; he knows he has a big one. He reels in. The rod is alive now, fighting the current, bending in jerks as the trout works against him. Joel sets his pole aside, holds his hand out, ready to help at any moment. Bobby grips his new fishing rod, watches Toby struggle. After working the line for a few minutes, the brook trout tires and Toby is able to pull it out of the water. It thumps against the ground, its back

mottled, its side flashing in the sun.

"Joel, open the tackle box," Toby says. "The knife's in there." He takes a sandwich from the cooler, hands it to Kristin, then fills a plastic cup with Kool Aid and sets it on the arm of the wheelchair. "We'll clean the fish while we eat," he tells them. Bobby passes a sandwich to Joel, then takes one himself. They sit eating peanut butter sandwiches as Toby works the knife into the trout's belly and up to its gills. He scrapes out the guts, letting them steam on the dead-brown quack grass. He saws off the head and tail, tosses them into the creek where they are swept away after a brief splash. He wraps the brook trout in some newspaper he finds in the tackle box, then washes his hands in the creek.

He wonders why his legs are so thin, why his skin looks blotchy. He is certain he has something bad working inside him, some disease or virus. He doesn't feel awful, but he can sense something is there, something which will allow him to die soon after Kristin passes away.

Upstream, the young man shouts, hauls in a large trout. The girl croons, pats him on the back. Even his voice sounds familiar, the way he shouts. It gives Toby an eerie feeling, like the times he imagined people breathing, belching, or gurgling on the table as he pumped formaldehyde into them.

He watches those people, glares at them. The young man holds his catch out to the girl and the two of them run their hands over it, marveling at its squirming. They turn it over, study it, seem happy about it. Then, the trout wriggles free, lands on the muddy

grass with a smacking sound, and the girl slips, falls, lands on her back, slides down to the creek. When she stands up, her whole backside is dark brown, slick. The young man tries to help her, but she only slips again--and the whole time they are doing this the trout flops closer and closer to the water. The old man sits watching, a big grin of yellow teeth reflecting in the sunlight.

Toby turns away, disgusted. But then he hears Kristin and turns to see her laughing so hard tears are running down her face.

"Oh boy," Bobby says. His pole jerks downward. He scrambles to regain his grip. Toby helps him lift the pole. The pull is strong. He tries to help Bobby stand so they can simply back the fish out of the water, but before they can move, the shaft snaps at one of the joints, jumps into the creek, floats out. Toby rushes after it until he is waist-deep in the creek, the icy water pinching his skin, filling his boots. The rocks and gravel are slippery. The broken shaft races away. He lunges for it and misses. A chunk of ice jabs him in the back, rolls around in the swirling water, continues on.

He climbs out, takes off his wet gloves, hands Bobby a different pole. "Here," he says. "We'll fix yours later. Somehow."

Legs numb, he grabs a blanket from the van, slips out of his pants, wraps up. He stumbles down to the creek again and sits next to Kristin. She touches his hair, moves her hand through it.

After a while, Bobby catches a pregnant brook trout from the creek, eggs spilling everywhere. Bobby's face is red and his hair droops into his eyes. The brook trout has a

gash in its underbelly from the struggle, its mouth and gills pump. Toby tells Joel to skin it, to show Bobby how. Joel works the knife efficiently, pushing guts into the blue chicory and mixing it in with the blood. Kristin looks away downstream.

Toby jabs his index finger into the ground. The earth is cold, but it parts with very little effort. He thinks of Kristin's vineyard and the work they have to do on the trellises, feels cold, inside and out, claps his hands together like two stone slabs, tells Bobby and Joel to pack the gear.

"That was nice," Kristin says as he lifts her into the passenger seat. "I'm glad you made me go."

He kisses her, shuts her door, climbs into the driver's seat, starts the van. They head back up the gravel road. The van is warm from sitting in the sun and the cold grip on his legs loosens almost as soon as they reach the main road. His forehead appears in the rear view mirror, wrinkled and dry as if he has been resting it on a salt block for hours. *My hair is retreating*, he thinks. He can see more scalp than before, wants a cap to hide it.

As they turn toward town, the wind picks up where County Trunk G crosses Birdcall Road. In the back seat, Joel holds the bag of gutted fish between his knees, stares out the window. Bobby scribbles with a pen on the bottom of his shoes. Kristin plays with the radio, searching unsuccessfully for classical guitar, then rubs her temples, massages her neck. He takes them home.

* * *

Sitting on a stool next to the work table, he finishes with the formaldehyde, his legs and arms heavy. The body is that of an old man--died of a heart attack. Toby picked up the body from the hospital, and was relieved he didn't run into Dr. Link.

Toby notices a silver chain resting around the man's neck with a small turquoise crucifix. Looking at it resting there makes him think of his father: a railroad man who fixed engines and occasionally connecting cars. His father was a religious man, but Toby is not. He feels as if everything in his life has focused around death.

He stares at the cement floor which has been painted blue-gray. A hairline crack runs from the circular drain, branches out, disappears under one of the walls. The walls are covered with soundboard, something Toby has never understood, and there are sixteen holes in each square tile. The tiles are brown and white and form a checkered pattern. The room lacks a human touch, Toby thinks, wishes he didn't have to work in this place.

He slides the stool back to its corner by the brown metal cabinets, soaps his arms to the elbows, scrubs them clean. He locks up and goes out to the van, thinks of visiting Maria again, decides against it. *Quit being such a shithole*, he tells himself.

Sickly looking trees, not yet budding with spring, line the road. The skyline has disappeared and stars pierce through the cold, blue-gray clouds. Kristin has been growing distant, detached. It makes him angry. He taps his thumbs on the steering wheel. The van's tires strain with each curve. He promises himself to do whatever he can to comfort

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her. He feels like the skin after a scab has been peeled away, all pink, raw, vulnerable.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I want them to grow up with something solid," Kristin says, "You know? I want to be there for them, whenever they need me. I want to be a good mother." "You will be," Toby assures her, says, "Just look at the way you take care of both of them." Kristin closes her eyes, says, "But I don't want them to be afraid. I want them to be strong enough to be who they are, not weak like those people who become what their parents want them to become, or do what others tell them to do. I want them to become great men." Toby smiles, kisses her neck, says, "They will be." She presses her hand against his cheek, feels his unshaven face, tells him, "I used to play house as a little girl--secretly so my mother wouldn't see. She would always say 'I made you' when I didn't want to do something. She doesn't say it any more, but I can tell she wants to sometimes." Toby raises his chin a little, says, "You're not your mother, my dear, and I'm not my father. And that's good. You're good with the kids. Be proud of yourself. I'm proud of you."

* * *

She has Toby make her three sandwiches, eats them while sipping on a chocolate shake. She feels like eating until she's full, then going to sleep. It is three in the afternoon. Normally, she enjoys watching Toby and the boys working in the field, to sit

at the edge of the vineyard, supervise them, but today she is tired, doesn't see the point in going outside. She knows she cannot help them, that all she can do is sit and wait for her time here to come to an end. They are doing fine without her--*because they never needed her*, she thinks, and perhaps they will be better off without her. There is nothing she can do about it, nothing she can change, so she eats her sandwiches and drinks her chocolate shake, then asks Toby to bring her some chips and salsa. "It's a good sign," he says. "You have an appetite, and that's always a good sign." She shrugs, then touches her fingers to her forehead, feels a headache coming on.

After she is full and cannot eat another bite, he starts to move her toward the kitchen door. She knows he is taking her outside, to the vineyard; it has become a ritual for them every day, and she has enjoyed it up till now.

"I think I'll stay inside," she tells him.

He pulls the wheelchair to a stop. "What do you mean?"

"I have a headache," she says. "You go ahead. You don't need my help anyway. The boys know what to do."

"You okay?" he asks, stepping around to stand in front of her.

"I think I'll take a nap. I'm fine--just tired."

He tilts his head slightly, frowns, places his hand lightly on her cheek. "You sure?"

She nods, asks if he will take her back to the living room and put her on the couch. He does this, then sets a blanket next to her on the floor, leaves her for a moment,

returns carrying a white plastic box. He unplugs the phone next to her, plugs the line into the box, sets it next to her on the lamp table. "See this?" he says. "It's part of this cordless phone I bought yesterday. It's all set up. All you have to do is press this gray button. I'll have the phone outside and it will beep when you press that." He points to the gray button and she closes her eyes, feeling very tired now, wanting to sleep more than anything. "Okay," she says and he kisses her. Then she falls asleep, thinking of how she likes the sound of his voice.

* * *

Bobby brings her one of his drawings, asks what she thinks. She takes it from him and holds it in her lap. "It's nice," she says. It is a picture of a pond filled with green plants, and behind the pond, in the distance, railroad cars cross an iron bridge.

"Do you see the frogs under the water?"

She looks, blinks her left eye, tries to focus. She cannot see the frogs. "Where are they?" she asks.

He points at several places on the drawing. "There, and there, see? Can't you see them?"

She shakes her head. "Where?"

"There's one. See, that's his head, and those are his legs. I drew them so they'd be easy to find."

She still doesn't know what he's referring to, feels guilty, as if it's her fault the images are not clear. Bobby looks at her, holding his index finger out on the paper. *I should've spent more time with him*, she thinks, should've helped him learn how to draw, to somehow teach him to be better than any other artist. She stares at the image on the paper and is drawn in--it is as if she is there, standing on that piece of land, hearing the sound of the train and smelling the smoke from its engines--but she cannot see the frogs under the water, feels she has failed him.

"I see them now," she tells Bobby. "They're beautiful."

"Do you like my drawing? Is it better than my last one?"

She nods, then asks him to leave her alone so she can rest. He looks hurt, and she does not know what to say to him. He takes his drawing from her, hurries out of the room.

* * *

She moves slowly around the house, pushing the wheelchair on one side, then reaching across with her good arm and working the other. Toby and the boys are out in the field, putting their effort into the vineyard. *I wish they would give up*, she thinks. It has been her dream for years to own a vineyard, to harvest the grapes, make them into wine, but the whole idea seems self-indulgent to her now and she cannot watch them carry out something so foolish.

Between the kitchen and the living room, a small hallway leads away from the flight of stairs and ends in a small office. She knows the special writing paper she needs is in the bottom drawer of the desk there. Sweating now, she pushes one wheel, then the other, zig-zagging down the hallway, turning her head for a better view of her path. Kristin knows it is time to write her mother, to let her know everything. Talking to Rose is not easy or simple, because she insists on everything being done properly, in perfect order--the writing paper Kristin intends to find is the only paper Rose believes appropriate for letters.

She tires half-way down the hallway, sits motionless for a long time, wonders if it is even worth her effort to do this. She places her hand in her lap and it touches her right arm. She gasps at the feel of it and pulls away. It is like touching something freshly dead, she thinks, something still warm but without function or sensation. *I'm half-dead*, she tells herself, begins to cry.

The loss of vision in her right eye is so strange to her, and the right side of her face doesn't seem to exist--as if that part of her has been injected with Novocaine. She tries to lift her right leg, to move it, to find some feeling in it, but it is connected to her body without a purpose, useless.

She sits still, not bothering to wipe her face dry. There isn't any point in writing her mother, she thinks, because she doubts Rose would want to know. *Let things happen by their natural course*, her mother used to say when Kristin was young. *Keep it to yourself*, was another one of Rose's favorites. Part of Kristin's life was spent fighting

such notions. Kristin never intended to be the typical woman as her mother believed one should: staying home, cooking, cleaning, bearing children. Kristin wanted more, made it clear to Rose she wasn't going to settle for less. But she cannot deny the affect those notions have on her--and now, thinking of how she is doing what her mother wants, keeping the news of her death to herself, she is angry and knows it is right and good to send a letter to Rose. Already, Kristin has compromised by not calling Rose on the phone to tell her, which is far from the *proper* thing, more than her mother could handle. *You're weak, Mother*, she thinks, and refuses to let herself be servile.

Reaching down, she works the wheels again, right, then left, back and forth. She has very little strength--the past few days she hasn't had the energy to do more than eat and sleep--but she makes it to the door of the office, sweating, breathing heavily, wonders if this is the last time she will see this room. There's a small bookcase against the wall straight ahead, a tiny oak desk resting off to the right, and a floor lamp with a dark green shade leaning over the desk from the back corner. The room is carpeted, brown, and it isn't easy for her to move the wheelchair over its thick, almost spongy surface. She opens the bottom desk drawer, pulls out the pads of paper, rolls of tape, cassette tapes, and other items in her way, tossing them on the floor off to the side. Near the bottom, she finds the pink monogrammed paper her mother bought her. She sets the box on the desk, opens it, removes a single sheet. The paper has a fancy K pressed into the top center of the page--*Kristin's paper*, her mother used to say, pointing at it, *no one else's*.

She takes a pen from the center drawer, pauses to collect her thoughts. What is it

she wants to tell Rose? It must be short and simple, otherwise it will turn into a ten or twelve page letter, and she does not want that.

Dear Mother, she writes, having trouble working the pen, using her left hand now. The words are difficult for her. She goes over the choices in her head, finally settles on the direct approach.

Dear Mother, I have bad news. Not too long ago, I began having terrible headaches. Soon after that I had to go to the hospital. They conducted some tests while I was there, then asked me to come back to take some more. I went alone--without Toby even--because I didn't think it could be anything serious, but it is. One of the tests was a CAT scan, which took a cross-section picture of my head. To make a long story short, they found a tumor in my brain. Unfortunately, it is inoperable--there's nothing they can do. Dr. Link informed me that I have very little time left, that I may very well die within the month.

She pauses, thinks of telling her mother the exact dates, decides they are unimportant. She knows she should end the letter with a softer tone of voice, something less factual, writes, *I thought of not writing you to tell you this, but I felt it would be best to let you know.* For a moment, she considers mentioning the stroke and the details surrounding it, but decides it is more than her mother can handle.

I hope you will come to visit me soon. I have not seen you in over a year. I'm sorry I did not write you sooner--and please forgive my handwriting. Love, K.

She folds the letter, slides it into a matching pink envelope, licks the flap, seals it.

After writing her mother's address, Kristin places a stamp on it, sets the letter in her lap. She feels very tired, decides to rest for a moment before going back to the living room, but not too long after closing her eyes, her head tilts forward, and she sleeps for several hours.

* * *

Lying in bed with Toby, she reaches her hand over, sets it on his thigh. He is asleep and she is tired, but it is two hours earlier than she normally wakes. She does not understand how he can dream so fitfully and yet sleep so soundly. During the night, he shouted and it made her shiver. "Maria don't!" Those were his words; she remembers them distinctly. They frightened her then and still worry her now. Who was Maria? He's mumbled names before, but she's been able to recognize them up till now. She's asked him about work before, about the people he meets, the bodies. *You know I don't like to talk about it*, he always tells her, and she can't blame him. Most likely Maria is just another person he has recently worked on. If only she could take away his pain, his fears.

Her muscles are sore, making it difficult to move. She thinks of taking Toby's penis in her hand, touching him until he is hard and awake. He has not made love to her since her stroke and she misses being close to him that way. Most of the feeling and sensitivity is still with her. Wanting to feel him inside her, she tries to move her hand down so she can work him, but her mobility is too limited and her reach does not extend

quite far enough. Struggling with her limp arm and leg, she moves so she is lying flat on her back, then shakes his shoulder until he comes alive.

He rolls over, says, "Anything wrong?"

"Make love to me," she whispers.

His forehead furrows, his eyes look sad. "Kristin," he says.

She is able to reach him now, strokes him, feels the blood rush into him, persuades him to lie on top of her. At first, he is slow, gentle; she knows he is afraid. It is strange to feel his weight only on the left side of her body. He does not look her in the eye--when he does this, she thinks, he is not focused on her; he is somewhere else, hiding from her. She pulls him close, forces him to look at her. When she has control of his eyes, she tells him, "Now," and he is finally able to hear her, to see her, but only for that brief moment.

Later that day, Joel brings her one of his shirts, a needle, and some thread. One of the buttons has come off. "How do you sew a button?" he asks.

"You buy a new shirt," she says, staring at the grain in the wooden floor. She brushes her fingers against her breasts, remembers the feel of Toby's hands, his lips.

Joel laughs hesitantly, not knowing if she is serious about the new shirt or not.

"No, really," he says. "Show me how to fix this."

She sighs, pulls her limp arm across her body, rests the good one on top. She is too tired to look up from the floor, doesn't want to see his face. "Do you have the needle threaded?"

"Not yet."

"Pull out some thread, wet the end with your lips, and try to put it through the needle." She waits as he does this, closing her eyes and concentrating on her breathing.

"Okay," he says, and she opens her eyes again, letting them rest on a crack in one of the floorboards. "Pull it through so you have about two or three feet, then break the thread near the spool and tie both ends. Then--"

He shuffles his feet. "Just wait," he says. "Okay. Now what?"

"Now set the button on the shirt where you want it to be. Then you start with the needle from the bottom and you go up through one of the holes in the button. Go up and down like that a few times. Then go up one more time, and tell me when you've got that done."

After a minute, he says, "Got it."

"Now go back down again, but only go through one of the button holes--don't go through the fabric of the shirt. Sneak it out to the side. Got it?" She waits for him, but it is difficult because she is very tired. "Next thing," she says, "you take the thread and wrap it around the button several times. And once you've wrapped it, you go back up through one of the button holes, then back down through another hole and take the needle right on through the fabric to the bottom."

"And that's it?" Joel asks.

"Well, you can do that a couple more times if you want to. And you need to cut the thread and tie a knot with the two ends. Then clip off the excess and you're all done."

There is a long moment of silence and she nearly falls asleep in that space of time. She has a stomach ache and knows she'd feel better if she could have something to eat, pictures a plate full of chocolate brownies and a glass of milk, wishes she could find enough energy to do some baking.

"I just thought I should know how," Joel says. He leans forward, hugs her, and says, "I love you, Mom." With those words, she falls into a deep depression--it is sweet of him, but she feels worthless, unable to be what she used to be, unable to return to what Joel used to love. *It's hopeless*, she thinks, to pretend she is anything other than a crippled corpse--a useless, diseased version of who she was.

Joel leaves her, forgets to take the shirt with him. It is resting on her lap and she looks to see how well he has done. Something seems odd though--there are too many buttons--and she realizes the shirt was not missing one in the first place. Joel had sewn on an extra between two of the regular buttons.

* * *

"Kristin, what's wrong?" Toby asks. He's standing in front of her in the kitchen, boots caked with mud. "This is the second time you've said no to joining us in the vineyard."

"I'm tired," she says.

He crosses his arms. "Tired for this long?"

"Yes."

"No," he says, shaking his head. "I don't buy it."

"What's the point?" she tells him. She can see Joel and Bobby through the kitchen window, working in the field, looking dirty and tired. "Wheel me into the living room or I'll do it myself."

He leaves her and goes out to join the boys in the field. She moves herself over to the kitchen table where her cigarettes are, watches the star-shaped clock on the wall for the little hand to click to the next minute. The clock looks small to her. She lights a cigarette, draws deeply on it. It doesn't taste very good to her, but she smokes it anyhow. She tries to imagine not existing, wondering if it is possible she will no longer be someone or something--anything--when she dies. Her father used to say, *When you plant a seed in the ground, you know it's there but you can't see it.* That was one of his better phrased statements, but she doesn't know whether she thinks it's valid or not.

She imagines herself being lowered into the ground, resting inside the darkness of her coffin, soil falling over her head, landing with a distant tinny sound. After a great many years pass, she will have withered to nothing. Worms, maggots, strange insects, will have devoured her skin, her organs, every hair and tissue. Her bones will eventually become brittle and dry, and soon she will be no more than the soil itself.

She flicks the ash from her cigarette, chews on her thumb, glances at the star-clock. Her cigarette is half finished, but she has no desire to smoke the rest of it, lightly taps it into the ashtray until it goes out.

Don't you get filthy like those other girls, her mother told her once in high school. *Any old trashy girl can smoke cigarettes. Proper ladies don't.* She remembers this coming up again when she first told her mother about Toby. It didn't matter that Toby was planning to quit. It didn't matter that her mother took up smoking herself only a few years ago. *He's a smoker, you can tell. Why do you want to marry such a man? He's a self-centered hypochondriac who works with dead bodies. And where are his parents? His family? That's not a man to marry.*

Kristin said, *You're cruel, Mother*, and left it at that. How could Toby help the fact that his parents died so young?

For a moment, she's confused, feels nauseated, a little dizzy, grabs onto her chair so she has a point of reference. She grits her teeth, holds on; her muscles tense. "Leave me alone," she tells her body. A few minutes pass and she starts to feel somewhat normal again. She wonders if she should have taken the option of chemotherapy, but her tumor was technically Stage Four--hardly worth trying something like that so late in the game. She imagines things would be worse if she had undergone treatments, but wonders if she made the right decision--could things have been better if she had chosen differently?

"Things will get worse," she says, and the words frighten her.

The kitchen door opens and Toby comes in. "I have to go to work," he says. She sits up straight, tries to look good for him. She knows he is angry with her for not joining them in the vineyard, does not want him to be so distant.

"I'm sorry," she tells him, but he picks up the phone and dials Karl's number.

"Karl, I have to take a shower first," Toby says. He switches the receiver to his other hand. "I've been working in mud. What? Yeah, the vineyard. Pretty good. I'll see you in half an hour."

He leaves her, goes upstairs. She can hear the shower running; the sound of it makes her sad. She wishes she could climb the stairs, step into the bathroom, and join him. How can she live with this! How can she be expected to endure these last few days if she cannot even climb a few steps to be with her husband? She listens to him, to the water changing direction as he moves under it, to the sound of him dropping something--a bar of soap? After a few minutes, the shower stops. The shower curtain opens quickly. He steps out and dries off; she can hear him do these things, is certain of them. She touches a hand to her drooping right cheek, imagines him dressing now, putting on his underwear and socks, his blue jeans and t-shirt.

Struggling with the wheels, she moves herself to the bottom of the stairs. She tries to estimate how difficult it would be to climb them by herself. She needs to see him, is worthless without him. He understands who she is--or who she was--and he is the only one she's ever been able to confide in. There is so much she wants to say--they have not talked like they used to since the day she told him about the tumor--the day she made him stay home so she could go to the hospital without anyone there to make her nervous. But, she knows now, Toby wouldn't have made her nervous, that it was wrong of her to insist that he stay behind.

"*Toby!*" she shouts. She can hear him but she does not know--not for sure--that he

is actually there. She is confused, terrified by each moment he is out of her sight, shouts his name again, leaning forward in her chair, waiting.

Finally, he appears.

* * *

She is ashamed of herself as a mother. Her children have been struggling with her death, do not know how to behave toward her, especially now with the physical damage of her stroke so visible to them. She has done nothing to comfort them--to comfort anyone for that matter. She has only just recently asked Toby to mail the letter to her mother, and she has selfishly taken more and more from Toby, giving him little in return.

Sitting in the back corner of the living room, she tells herself it is too late now. Toby has gone into work, and the boys have gone to bed. She doesn't feel like smoking, eating, watching television, anything that requires movement. The small lamp resting on the end table is the only light in the living room. She stares at the way the white shade glows. It seems bright to her, though the room is mostly dark and composed of shadows.

She feels like sleeping, but her bladder is full, knows she will have to use the bathroom soon. Toby is not home to help her, as he usually does, and she cannot ask Joel or Bobby to do any such thing--they would be permanently and negatively affected, she thinks. In case of an emergency, Toby set out a small bedpan on the kitchen counter for her, one he bought yesterday. There is a bathroom in the hallway just before the back

office, but she doesn't feel like moving. Her good arm feels heavy; she has never felt so tired, doesn't see the point in moving, doesn't care what happens--nothing matters now.

She remembers looking in the mirror as a young girl and making herself beautiful; a little blush, a touch of eyeliner, a hint of lipstick. She used to spend hours in the bathroom, trying different combinations until she found something she liked. Then she'd wash her face and go out for the evening. She never liked to have people see her with makeup on. Now she avoids mirrors. Her face is not something she recognizes any more--the pale skin, the sagging right half, and her deviated eye are all abominations she wishes to deny. She feels like a freak now, *a monster* she thinks, and does not blame her family for pulling away. She knows they are trying to reach out to her, but believes it is better that they stay mostly in their world, let hers dissolve.

She can no longer hold it. Urine begins to seep out of her. She wonders why she has even been trying to keep it back. For a brief moment, she thinks of reaching the bathroom in time, or retrieving the bedpan from the kitchen, but it is too late. She lets go. The pressure is gone. Her dress soaks with urine and a small puddle forms on the floor. When she finishes she feels relieved, but also ashamed. *It is wrong*, she tells herself, can smell it now; it makes her nauseated.

She takes a deep breath, gathers her strength, works her way toward the bathroom. She hurries now, wanting to clean herself before Toby comes home. The wheelchair is too wide for the bathroom doorway, but the bathroom itself is small and she is able to reach the edge of a towel hanging to her left. She leans forward and sets the towel in the

sink, then stretches just about as far as she can reach and turns on the water. Once the towel is wet, she pulls it out of the sink, wipes herself thoroughly. She washes several times, rinsing out the towel as best as she can. Then she throws it into the bathtub, takes the last hanging towel with her into the living room. She bends down carefully, soaks up the puddle of urine, then works her way back to the bathroom, rinses the towel, and returns to the living room to wipe up the residue on the floor. Sweating, exhausted, she finishes by working her way back to the bathroom and throwing the second towel into the bathtub to join the first. She is out of breath. Her face is warm, her dress wet, and for a moment she's confused. She cannot remember why she is sitting in the hallway. The hallway looks only vaguely familiar to her. She wonders where she is.

Then she stops, frozen, terrified. *What's my name?* she thinks. She is certain it begins with the letter C. *Carmen! Is it Carmen?* Carmen lives in Taiwan and hasn't been home very often, she knows this, and almost never writes--but who is Carmen? This is not Taiwan; Carmen lives in Taiwan. She doesn't know what the right answer is. She concentrates, tries to think of who she is, then remembers Carmen is her sister. But Carmen and who else?

She gasps. "Kristin!" she says out loud, relieved now. She is afraid she will forget it again, so she says it over and over, whispering, "Kristin. My name is Kristin. Kristin."

She feels normal now--able to remember everything about herself--but is afraid of losing her memory, cannot imagine failing to recognize Joel or Bobby. She knows it is

possible she will become nearly mindless, that she may lose the ability to know where she is or who she is talking to, but cannot believe she will forget who her children are. She will always know Toby by sight, or voice, or touch--has known him too long for this to happen. But she knows it *can* happen. There are very few rules left, not much of anything is predictable any longer. Even though she knows she is dying--and there is nothing she can do about it--she cannot help feeling betrayed. She doesn't know who to blame.

Feeling lonely, she wishes there were more people she could share her life with. Toby has always been her companion, her friend, her lover, her husband. She is not a social person, she realizes this, knows she has fewer friends than the average person. Her mother is not a friend, and her sister is too far away, too preoccupied with her own life. She thinks of Shirley, her best friend at the coffee shop, how they have always enjoyed eating breakfast and lunch together. They would spoil themselves with large quantities of apple pie, sweet rolls, cheese cake, or fudge brownies. Shirley has called several times to ask how she was doing, and to see if Kristin wanted to meet for breakfast, but Kristin declined each time. Other than Shirley, the friends she has are not very important. She loves them, enjoys their company, and will miss them, but would not want to see them now. Not even Shirley.

Her family has always been her life. She cannot imagine anyone or anything else being more important to her, and would not want it any other way.

She falls asleep waiting for Toby to come home.

THINGS AS THEY ARE
Theis

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I remember the first time I saw you," Toby says, "how beautiful you were. You had such long, silky hair, and it moved around you so gracefully. You always had so much energy. Poetry, wine, music--you talked about them all the time. I still remember your favorites: Wallace Stevens, pinot noir, and Andres Segovia. And Picasso was your favorite artist." Kristin's face brightens and she tells him, "Remember the mud angels? That night it was raining so hard and the ground turned muddy and we laid down in it. And we moved our arms and legs and made angels. Remember?" Toby smiles, "And the shower afterwards." She sighs, says, "We were young." He tells her, "My brother had a girlfriend once. She was by far the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. I loved everything about her, and I told myself that if I ever got lucky enough to find a woman like that, for myself, that that's all I'd ever need. And I didn't think that would ever happen."

* * *

When he arrives home, the smell is strong. At first he doesn't recognize the odor, but he is uneasy about it and knows it isn't good. Then he realizes what it is, the smell of urine. He rushes through the house looking for Kristin, thinking of something he has learned all too well at work--that people lose their bodily functions at the moment of

death.

He almost runs past her, finds her in the hallway, sitting in front of the small bathroom, a damp towel resting in her lap. He shakes her, does not wait to see if she is responding, feels for a pulse. Her breathing touches his arm and he is relieved, but shakes her again, wanting her to speak to him.

She finally comes awake, stares at him as if confused. "Hi," she says.

He takes the towel from her lap and throws it onto the floor behind her. "Are you okay?"

She smiles. "Oh, I just had to pee. I guess I was pissed off." She giggles, rolling her head drunkenly. "I'm being a real stinker, don't you think?"

"Kristin, be serious."

"To hell with that," she says, flinging her hand in front of her. "I don't believe in *serious* any more. I don't believe in death any more. You know why? I don't believe in death because it's been done before."

Her humor strikes him. Not knowing how to respond, whether to laugh or cry or ignore this, he sighs, feels the rush of tears wanting to escape, but pushes them back, gritting his teeth till his jaw hurts. Finally, with as much calm as he can gather, he asks, "How do you feel?"

Leaning her head back, she mumbles, "Sleepy." But she is more than this, he can tell. She seems dazed, incomplete.

He lifts her out of the wheelchair and carries her upstairs. The smell of urine is

strong, almost smothering, and he breathes through his mouth. He takes her to the large bathroom, sets her on the toilet seat, shuts the door, undresses her. After removing several towels hanging from the shower curtain, he starts the shower, strips himself, then steps into the tub with her. She responds only faintly to the touch of the water. He washes her with soap, then sits her down and leans her against him to wash her hair and back with shampoo. He finishes by rinsing her and lifting her out of the tub to dry her off. Setting her on the toilet seat again, he holds her there to keep her from slipping off, then dries her with several towels. He takes her bathrobe from the bathroom door, lifts her to put it on, and sits her again.

He isn't certain, but she seems to be responding to him. He takes some of her perfume from a small wicker basket on the shelf, holds it in front of her nose. She winces at the first one, seems pleased with the second, smiles at the third. He pours the second and third on his hands, pats her neck and shoulders with them, then gently pushes his hands through her hair.

Lifting her, he holds her close, then carries her to their bedroom, covers her to her waist and lets her rest. He puts on a t-shirt and underwear, climbs into bed with her, and tries to talk. "Kristin?" he says, and she turns her head to look at him. "Do you feel better?" he asks, not knowing what else to say.

She smiles faintly and says, "I'm sleepy." She yawns, extends her hand to him. He takes it, holds it against his face, kisses it, watches her eyelids close. "I smell flowers," she tells him, falling asleep, breathing deeply and rhythmically. After half an

hour, he allows himself to rest his head on the pillow next to her. He, too, falls asleep, still holding her hand.

In the morning, he wakes from a nightmare. He tries remembering the details, but they are gone. It is early, and he cannot sleep any more, so he slips downstairs and calls Maria.

"Hola," she says, still groggy.

He asks quietly, "Can I see you later?"

"Tomorrow is better. I have guitar lesson today and I work for Harvey tonight."

Hanging up, he decides to go down to the basement to cool off and relax. Once he reaches the bottom of the stairs, he searches for the light switch, turns it on, squints against the harsh light of a bare bulb. In the back, piles of scrapbooks rest on his workbench. They are old obituaries his grandfather kept during the years he worked taking post-mortem photographs. Toby reaches behind and searches the depths until he finds the half-empty bottle of vodka. He selects a couple of the articles from the stack of scrapbooks and sips from the bottle as he looks at them.

"Mr. Thomas Brown," Toby reads aloud, "brought home a bottle of whiskey which he put up in the house near a bottle of carbolic acid which had been there for a long time. He arose sometime past four in the morning, drank about four ounces in one swallow, and lived about four minutes." Toby stares at the words, thinking of what a fool that man had been, then turns the page and reads of another death. "The eighty year old mother of an imprisoned man threw herself in front of a train and was cut into three

pieces. She was crazed by her son's disgrace." And the next clipping: "Mrs. Arlene Ebert, 60-year-old wife of a farmer in Columbus, Dane County, killed herself by cutting her throat with sheep shears." *A baaaaad idea*, he thinks, laughing at the thought, feeling the humor turn quickly into pain.

Toby drinks some vodka, sighs, notices the empty wine bottles Kristin has stacked in the basement. There are several hundred in boxes, some on shelves. He thinks of what Kristin said about sterilizing them by washing them three times, the best way to keep them from contamination. He sees dust everywhere, has trouble breathing.

"The malignant diphtheria epidemic in Louis Valley," he continues, "proved fatal to all the children in Martin Molloy's family, 6 in number. Three died in a day. The house and the furniture were burned."

Toby wishes he was his grandfather, William Block. Grandpa Willy only took pictures. He captured images and left the subject behind. He did not have the burden of working directly with people who had once been. He could be artistic and touch up his photographs. Toby's job involved art, too, cosmetically preparing the bodies for viewing, but it was not the same. *Grandpa Willy never had to endure what I have to*, Toby thinks.

Toby cannot imagine Kristin gone from his life, cannot picture himself alone with only Maria and his children for comfort. He sips from the bottle of vodka, tries not to think about it.

Looking at his grandfather's book of clippings, he reads another article aloud, slowly speaking the words: "The old man feared and despised doctors, and read all the

patent-medicine advertisements in the newspapers, believing for a moment each flowery promise of an end of pain!" Toby clears his throat. "He received many pamphlets by mail, testimonies of miraculous healing, illustrated by photographs of ugly men and women who had been sufferers, and wrote for salves, powders, and tonics. His wife sighed and shook her head whenever an agent drove into the yard with a valise full of samples, but the old man invariably described his symptoms; the ambitious salesman invariably expressed his sympathy, gave advice, and received a large order. Every druggist in neighboring towns prepared personal recipes for him."

Toby places the clippings back on the shelf, stares at the bottle of vodka in his hand. "What are you doing?" he asks himself, sets the bottle down.

He sways forward, blows dust from the workbench. A notebook rests on the far edge of its surface. It is open. Numbers are written on the page. He recognizes Kristin's writing; she's scribbled down some calculations about how much wine will be produced and how many bottles it will take. Her writing is graceful, but he doesn't like the way she has written the number eight. She leaves the tops open. He always makes both circles full and complete.

He turns the notebook sideways, changing her eights into open-ended infinity signs. He thrusts the notebook from the workbench and reaches for the vodka, pauses, remembers what he promised her, then caps the bottle. He looks at the clock, sees it is only ten-thirty in the morning, and feels ashamed; he has failed to keep his promise.

He thinks of how impressed he was with Kristin when he first met her. She read

poetry and knew wine, had opinions, liked to dance and go for long walks. He thought he was in love, but he had never been in love before, and there were no tangibles.

* * *

He is working in the field with the boys. She isn't with them; it is the third time she's refused to join them in the vineyard. He doubts he will try convincing her again. She's been behaving this way ever since she wrote her mother. He found the pink envelope the night he cleaned the urine from her body--an envelope tucked into her blouse. He pulled it out slowly and saw it was addressed to Rose. Later on, she asked him to mail it for her, but for a moment, when he first noticed the letter, he contemplated hiding or destroying it. Kristin and her mother have never been friendly. Many times they're interactions were barely controlled, their words almost violent. He thought about what the letter meant. He knew Rose didn't like him. She wished Kristin had married a man with a *dignified* profession. He doubts a visit from Rose would be completely healthy, but he cannot deny Kristin this--Rose is her mother, and there must certainly be some goodness or love remaining between them. Reluctantly, he placed the envelope where he found it, between the folds of her blouse.

But now, working in the field for the third time without her, he wonders if he should ask about the letter. He doesn't even know if it's worth asking her once again to join them in the field.

This is sad, he thinks, because the vineyard is starting to take shape. The notches have been made in the end posts, the wires set into place and attached to the earth anchors. All that remains is the last of the planting.

They leave the field and go to the barn, begin trimming the bare-rooted stock, pruning the grafts. They only prepare ten for planting, enough for today, and carry them to the field.

Joel sets the grafts into the ground, arranging them carefully, and Bobby pushes enough dirt into the hole to hold them in place. Toby follows behind them, filling up the remaining space with the proper amount of soil.

When they return to the house, Kristin is still sleeping. In her lap are the empty wrappers of several candy bars. He removes them gently, careful not to wake her, throws them in the garbage. Her lips are stained with chocolate and he wishes she were awake so he could tell her to clean herself. He is no longer certain her eating habits are healthy; she has been eating large amounts of food for the past several days. Sometimes it almost seems grotesque to him.

Sleeping the way she is now, he thinks she looks almost normal. Her face rests more evenly, and he cannot see her deviated right eye. It does not bother him so much that she looks different now--not for himself, because he finds her attractive in so many ways--but it hurts him to think of what she might be feeling whenever she sees her reflection. She is proud of her beauty, he knows this, amazed at her calm, her *strength*.

Toby remembers visiting a Jewish synagogue, rebelling against his family of

devout Christians. He sat among the congregation, listening to the people praying. A short man with a large belly walked up front and helped with the preparations. What little hair he had was white, and he brushed it aside with his right hand. He seemed like a quiet, normal, almost invisible man until he pushed up his sleeves and took something from the rabbi. And that's when Toby saw the numbers on the man's forearm, dark blue and faded into his skin. At first he didn't realize what they were, but then he remembered his father telling stories about World War II at the dinner table. A chill ran over him. This simple-looking man had been through hell--literally--had endured more than Toby could imagine.

You just don't know, he thinks to himself now. *You can never know what someone has endured. Not completely.* It is the same with Kristin--he cannot know what is in her mind, not truly, and wishes she were awake so he could hold her and comfort her. He contemplates waking her, but knows it is better to let her sleep. He is convinced her body is demanding sleep because it needs time to heal. It frightens him that her body is demanding so much, but to deny need would only make things worse for her.

Later that night, he dreams of Maria and Eric Hamilton, sees them dancing, knows they are talking about him. Before long, the dream ends, casting him into a deep sleep.

Near morning, he wakes thinking about the first time he and Kristin made love since her stroke. She seemed vibrant. Her breathing was nervous, quivering. He did not know what it was she wanted until she reached down and took hold of him, massaged him. He didn't know how to react, was afraid to make love to her, wondered if it was

even decent, then realized it was she wanting him, she who initiated contact. He moved closer to her, gently letting her guide him in, paused to look her in the eyes. He focused on her left eye, trying to discover what she was thinking or feeling. "Now," she told him. She wanted him to continue. She told him be wild--make her feel it. "Please," she said, and he did as she asked, his face buried in her shoulder to hide the tears coming to his eyes. He missed her then, even though she was there with him. The future seemed too close, too dangerous; he felt it pressing down on them, gathered up as much of the sheets as he could in his hands, squeezed fiercely, focused entirely on her. "Please," she said.

He has mixed feelings about it now, wants to make love, but doesn't feel right initiating it. He listens to her breathing, yearning to be close to her, waits for the morning to end.

They plant ten more grafts the next day, but Kristin remains inside. He does not bother asking her. It is the fourth time she has refused to join them, and he doesn't know what to do. The second time, he got angry with her and it upset her too much. It made him feel guilty to see her like that. He remembers his beeper going off, and going inside to take a shower. As he passed her she told him she was sorry, but he didn't think that was enough of an answer. He wanted to know what was going through her head, what she was feeling, and she would not tell him if he allowed her to simply apologize. *She's my wife*, he thought, and that meant more to him than simple existence--it meant a deep closeness, and he was tired of feeling so far removed from her when they were together. Sometimes it felt like the distance he and Maria kept.

He called Karl, asked where he was needed, then left Kristin and went upstairs to shower. He rinsed himself under the showerhead, grabbed the bar of soap, dropped it, cursed, finished in a few minutes, threw open the shower curtain, dried off, and returned to the bedroom. He pulled on a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt.

"*Toby!*" he heard from downstairs. It was Kristin's voice but it did not sound like anything he heard from her before. It was a frantic, disturbing tone. He dropped his hairbrush on the floor, rushed downstairs. She was at the base of the steps, waiting for him, crying. She looked like a child lost in a place where she didn't know anyone, didn't recognize anything. He touched her face, felt the sweat on her cheeks, told her she would be all right.

"I'm sorry," she said, and he felt horrible. He knew he did this to her--he had refused to respond before, refused to accept her apology, and that made her nothing short of terrified. He took her hands, pressed them against his face, then laid his head in her lap and held onto her. He was ashamed of what he had done, knew he would never leave her alone to grope in such silence again.

Joel asks him what's wrong, jarring Toby out of his thoughts. The sun is hot on his face. Bobby watches, waiting for his response. Toby tells them he's tired. He knows they want to ask why Kristin is not with them--it is a question he would like the answer to as well.

* * *

Later that day, Karl calls. "Where are you?" he says. "This is very unprofessional, Toby. Do you know what these people are going through? Ha! It's like I'm dying here without you!"

"I know," he says, then glances back to see that Kristin is still sleeping. She knows he must go into work--he explained this to her while she was still awake--but he doesn't like the idea of leaving her alone.

There is a long pause. Toby is just about to hang up when Karl says, "Why don't you tell me what's going on? Is it Maria? You may not think so, but I *do* give a shit."

Toby sighs, stares at the kitchen floor, tries organizing his thoughts. "I'll tell you when I get there," he says.

Karl says, "Thank you," and they hang up.

Before going out, Toby stops upstairs to find Joel. "I have to go to work," Toby says. "I want you to keep an eye on your mother until I get back. She's not feeling well."

Joel frowns, hesitates, then asks quietly, "She's not going to die soon, is she?"

He places his hands on Joel's shoulders. "I don't think so. She's sleeping now. I just want you there in case she wakes up before I get back. Okay?" Toby knows he's being over-cautious, but more and more he hates having to leave her for work.

"Okay," Joel says.

Toby smiles at his son. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Driving his van out to a small neighborhood just south of town, he feels apprehensive, afraid of how he might react to the job ahead of him. He parks in front of

the house, next to Karl's station wagon, then rings the doorbell and waits for someone to answer.

The outer door is glass from top to bottom, but it is not clear--it is black. He cannot see through it. The inner door opens and he hears a woman's voice, but he cannot understand what the woman is saying. He leans forward, squints into the glass, trying to see someone or something.

"Hello?" he says. "I'm Toby Block. I'm here to--"

The door slams shut, which confuses him, uncertain now of what to do. He notices a small sign hanging just to the left of the door. *There's nothing worth stealing in here that's worth your life!* the sign reads.

"This is absurd," he tells himself, then rings the doorbell once again. He waits a few minutes, rings again, stands there feeling like he's being watched. Finally, the door opens and Karl lets him in. "Weird lady," Karl whispers, and some woman in the background says, "What? What did you say?"

Immediately inside is the living room, which smells of an older person. Sitting in one of two rocking chairs, facing the television, is an elderly woman, perhaps in her seventies. She looks as if she's sleeping, her hands folded together in her lap, her lower jaw hanging slightly open.

The woman who first answered the door sits in the other rocking chair and stares at the television. Karl leans over, close to Toby's ear, and says, "The sleeping one is Doris--or should I say *was* Doris. The one watching television is Carla."

Toby nods, then steps forward to catch the woman's attention. "Ma'am, my name is--"

She looks up. "Oh, sit down. I've cleaned off the couch and you can sit there." She rises slowly from her rocker and leaves the room. She returns with a plate full of cookies and sets them on the coffee table, sits, motions toward the plate, but neither Karl nor Toby take one.

Karl squirms in his seat. "Carla, we should be taking Doris to the funeral home soon," he tells her.

"What's your rush?" Carla says. "Don't you like molasses cookies? Doris likes them." She takes one from the plate, breaks off a piece, and places it in Doris's open mouth. "See, she loves them!"

Toby cannot imagine eating cookies in the presence of Doris who has--according to what Karl told him--died of heart failure. Trying not to look at the cookie in Doris's mouth, he rises from his chair and kneels in front of Carla. The last thing he wants to do is to remain here, eat cookies, and talk. He thinks of Kristin, his only wish to return home as soon as possible.

"Carla," he says, placing a hand on her arm, feeling the lightness of the sagging skin. "We really cannot stay. I'm sorry."

Carla starts rocking in her chair. "We took this house together, you know. Right after my husband died. Her husband Arthur died a few years before. So we decided to live together. We were too old to do anything else, you know. It was cheaper on bills,

too."

Toby asks Karl to talk with her while he goes to the van. He takes the gurney and rolls it up to the house, sets a brick in front of the outer door to keep it from closing, then opens the inner door. He wheels the gurney inside, thinking it is better--with Carla present--to simply lift Doris out of her chair rather than carry her out of the house.

Karl pats Carla's hand, then rises and asks her if she would like to wait in the kitchen while they take care of Doris.

"Do you have to take her now?" she asks. "I'm sure she'd like to have one more cookie before she goes."

Karl nods. "I'm sorry."

After taking the food from Doris's mouth, they lift her onto the gurney, cover her with a white sheet, start rolling her toward the door. Carla stands and watches, seems uncertain, as if she feels she must do something, but doesn't know what that something is.

Once they have maneuvered the doorway and the steps, Carla shouts at them. "Stop!" she says. "Don't go. Don't take her away. Please."

Toby tells Karl to take Doris out to the van while he goes to talk with Carla. He places his hands on her arms, just below her shoulders. "I know it's not easy," he tells her.

"You can't take her," she says. "I don't have anyone else. You don't know what it's like."

Her words are more than he can handle. He leaves her. Helping Karl load Doris

into the back of the van, he waves to Carla and steps into the driver's seat. He starts the engine--for a moment he feared it wouldn't start--and drives off just as soon as Karl hops in and closes his door.

They are nearly half-way to the funeral home when Karl turns off the radio, lights a cigarette, cracks his window open. "What's been bothering you?" he asks. "You all right?"

Toby is silent for a long while, thinking of Kristin, wishing he were home with her now. The worst thing he can imagine is to come home--after being away for any reason--only to find Kristin has already left him. "I don't know if I'm all right," he says.

Karl waits for him, says nothing. "I don't want anyone else to know," Toby says.

"Sure."

He turns down the next street, clears his throat, forces the words out. "Kristin--" he says. "Kristin's not feeling well."

Karl sits forward in his seat. "Shit, I'm sorry. I should have known it was something like that." He crushes his cigarette, starts to take out another one, then stops. "Is she going to be okay?"

Toby shakes his head. The mere act of admitting so openly that she is going to die makes it even more real to him, and he thinks of what Carla said. *You don't know what it's like.*

* * *

He isn't certain if he should ask her. She has declined four times now and he doesn't know if she intends to ever go out to the vineyard again. But they only have a few more grafts to plant, and he wants her to be there when they finish.

He starts toward the door, intending to pick up his work boots and go outside, when she asks him what he is doing. Finally, he asks her. To his surprise she agrees to join them. He takes this as a good sign and resolves to finish the vineyard before the end of the day.

After moving her outside and locking the wheels so she won't roll, he goes inside and calls upstairs to the boys. "Time to work!" he shouts, and after a few minutes they come down, follow him out. He is worried about them--they have been very quiet. Joel spends most of his time playing guitar or changing channels on the television, but is always watching everyone. Bobby has hardly spoken a word since their visit to the hospital; he simply sits by himself somewhere and draws pictures of dark things Toby does not recognize. Toby intends to talk with them soon. He knows Kristin has been trying to communicate with the boys, but the tension between them, between what they want to say and what they actually do say, is too much for them to handle. Toby hopes he can do something to help Joel and Bobby, though he is not certain of what or how.

But today, out in the field, they seem to be in better spirits. Perhaps, being so close to finishing the planting, they have a sense of completion. Perhaps it gives them a feeling of hope and control. He thinks it is good for them to feel this, but wonders if the effect is only superficial, momentary. If it is, that sense of completion will turn into one

of loss, if not depression. *What happens next?* Toby can hear them asking. But they are not done, not truly. The field must be watered regularly, watched carefully. Eventually, the vines will produce fruit and need to be harvested. Each season after, they will have to do the same.

They are nearly finished. Only one hole remains to be planted. He huddles over the hole with Joel and Bobby and they work the soil. "This is the last one," he whispers. "So I want us to say surprise to your mother just as soon as we're done. She's been waiting a long time for this."

"Okay," Joel says.

Bobby says, "Yeah," and starts patting the soil. Before long they are done. They seem nervous as they rise and walk to Kristin. Toby kneels next to her and tells her they are finished.

At first, she looks puzzled, as if she does not believe what they are telling her. Then she realizes what he's saying is real--her mouth opens slightly, her left eye widens and begins to water with tears. It is a moment he is proud of. They have given her what she has dreamed.

"I am very--very happy," she tells them, and for the rest of that day it seems to be enough for them all.

The next day, something has changed in her. He can sense it. She asks Toby to call and tell everyone. She wants to see them. He doesn't know if this will be a good thing for her, but he cannot think of a good reason to deny her this. "Tell them to come

down this Saturday," she says. She sounds unemotional to him now, stable, controlled.

"We can talk on the porch."

He cannot sense any emotion in her, cannot determine what happened in her mind, but he calls their friends and relatives nonetheless. He starts with her mother Rose, then her sister Carmen, then Karl, and moves on down the list until everyone has been informed. His ear is sore from pressing the receiver into it. When he finishes, he sits on the couch, lets his head roll back. He sighs and stares at the ceiling.

She places her hand on his knee and says, "Thank you." He looks at her, studies her face, wonders what is going through her mind.

CHAPTER NINE

"God, it's so quiet," she says, "Look at the rain. I've never seen it so thick--it looks like it's floating in the air. Everything looks so soft." He strokes her hair, stares out the window, too, tells her, "It's quiet because everyone's asleep. That's what I like

best about holidays--I mean Easter itself is okay, but I like that peaceful time after the festivities. You've got the memories of being with family and friends fresh and new in your mind, but you don't have to deal with them anymore, either." "I know," she says, "I have no desire to see anyone but you right now. I don't have to do anything when I'm with you, but everyone else requires a lot of work. It takes effort." He closes his eyes, says, "I know. The kids, your mother, everyone--they wear me out." "Do you still want to go hiking tomorrow morning?" she asks, says, "I wanted to stop by Shirley's house to see her baby. She has a boy." "I thought her boyfriend left her," he says. "He did, but she had the baby anyway and she's very happy about the whole thing. I want to see her." He opens his eyes, looks at her, tells her, "Well, good. But what about your mother--you know she gets upset when she wakes up and we're not home. Remember the last time?" Kristin shakes her head, says, "I don't care. She doesn't control me anymore. We'll do whatever we want. I'm strong enough to live my own way and ignore her attempts to run my life." "Good," Toby says, "That sounds healthy."

* * *

Sitting on the porch with Toby, she listens to their guests talk endlessly about everything but her death. Carmen has not arrived from Taiwan yet, but should be coming in from the airport soon. Karl's wife will pick her up and bring her to their house.

Her mother smokes filtered cigarettes, watches Kristin with side glances, her head turned to face the clock on the far wall. She is very quiet--too quiet for Kristin.

Karl looks tired, even sad, hands reaching out on the table. It seems as if he wants to touch her, but he doesn't move closer. "I'd like it if you'd help Toby," she says to Karl.

"He will need help with the vineyard after I'm gone." Karl stares at the red and white checkered pattern of the tablecloth and slowly nods his head.

"Hell of a time for this to happen," her mother says.

Kristin glares at her. "What would you like me to do? Postpone the service? Change the reservation time?" She pulls her right arm across her body and rests her left hand on top. "This isn't a restaurant."

Her mother blows smoke, shakes her head. "I never," she says.

Kristin's friend Shirley Milton is with them, sitting on the couch near the windows. "I still don't believe it," she says. "This is crazy. You can't be--" She seems to realize she's talking to herself and suddenly stops, pushes her knees together, resting her hands on them, and watches the fingers of her hands pull and twist nervously at each other.

"It's all right," Kristin says. "It seems strange to me too, but it's real. It's very real to me."

Half an hour later, Karl's wife pulls up in their station wagon and parks just in front of the farmhouse. Joel, Bobby, and Carmen step out after her. Kristin's heart jumps when she sees Carmen. Her sister is still a natural beauty with her dark blue eyes, her soft brown hair, her thin figure. She is not wearing her habit, which is a change, and her clothes look new. Kristin wishes she could run to meet her. "Carmen!" she calls, and only moments later everyone is inside, talking.

Carmen bends down to hug her, says, "I've missed you."

Kristin wipes her eyes and smiles. "You look so tan."

"I've been helping on the fishing docks. The fishermen are getting too old."

"Carmen," their mother says, lighting up another filtered cigarette. "Come say hello to me."

"In a moment," Carmen says, then turns back to Kristin. Her eyes light up and a smirk appears on her face. "That's Mother, all right."

"You're absolutely evil," Kristin says. "And I love it."

"She needs it," Carmen whispers, then kneels down beside the wheelchair. "Listen, isn't there anything that can be done? Have you seen specialists? Other doctors?" Kristin nods, but Carmen keeps on: "What about seeing some of the doctors back in Taiwan, or China? They have methods there that might help--different techniques than here in the states."

"It's too late," Kristin says.

"Carmen!" Rose says, flicking cigarette ashes at the screened window. "Come say hello to me."

"You'd better go," Kristin says, and Carmen leaves her, promising to return in a few moments. Kristin notices Rose sitting uncomfortably, leaning away from Karl and Karl's wife. Karl's wife sits in his lap, trying to cheer him up. They are sitting next to Rose and she is obviously bothered by their closeness to her.

Joel and Bobby bring Kristin a peanut butter sandwich and a plastic cup of orange juice. They set everything on the table in front of her. "Bobby made the sandwich," Joel

says. "I made the juice."

Toby calls them away from her, tells them to sit on the couch, but she is grateful they have done this. She takes her time and eats the sandwich, sipping on the orange juice between bites. It is a simple meal, but wonderful--she enjoys the whole thing.

"I'm still not sure how I should be buried. I think I might like to be cremated."

"Heavens, no!" Rose says. She taps her long fingernails on the table with each word. "I will not have you cooked up in an oven."

"Why not, Mother? Extra crispy would be good, don't you think?"

Her mother gasps. "My word!"

"It is very common in the East," Carmen tells her.

"I don't give a damn about the *East*. This isn't the East," Rose says. "And I can't believe we're all just sitting around discussing these things so calmly, so . . . *rationally*, as if everything is just wonderful. You'd think there might be some sign that I had a hand in raising the two of you. What kind of behavior is this--talking about someone's funeral like it was some simple chore?" She turns away now, struggling to compose herself. For the first time in years, Kristin sees a shimmer in her mother's eyes--she is fighting tears, trying to keep them from being visible.

"It's all right, Mother," Kristin says quietly. And it is all right, she thinks, because what they are doing is healthy. It isn't easy for her, or for them, but she knows it's better to have everything out in the open. It's good they know beforehand rather than after.

It does bother her, however, that Toby is so quiet. He has been silent most of the

day, just sitting and observing as if he were deciding something. She hopes he will tell her later what is bothering him--perhaps it's Rose, or having everyone at the farmhouse.

"My mother died of cancer," Rose says, staring at the floor. "She taught elementary school," she tells them. She glances at Bobby for a moment. "She taught art classes. Drawing, painting, working with clay, you name it. She didn't have to teach it, of course. She just wanted to. And then she found out she had breast cancer and she almost quit teaching." Rose sits up straight, touches her hands to her hair, trying to adjust what she cannot see. "But she kept with it. She'd come in every day and tell her students what her white blood cell count was. She told them just about everything. And those kids were something else. They washed their hands every day before class so the risk of infections would be lower."

Carmen leans forward. "Mother?" she says.

"Her first doctor told her vitamins are nothing but placebos. Can you believe that? 'There have been no studies done on the relationship between chemotherapy and nutrition,' is what he said. But my mother didn't believe it," Rose says, shaking her head slowly. "She went to the library and did some research and started taking vitamin-A by the gallons. And it worked. Her blood cell count dropped five points in one week!"

"Mother," Carmen says. "This is not good for you."

"She died anyway," Rose tells them. She wipes her eyes, lights another cigarette. "Took a while, but she died."

Kristin wonders why her mother is telling this story--she has never told it before.

Rose seems aware of it and becomes very quiet, aloof. Kristin can see the history of cancer in their family now--her grandmother dying of breast cancer, her Aunt Julie suffering from ovarian cancer, now her own ordeal with a brain tumor. For some reason, Rose has been left untouched. She has never been seriously ill. Kristin wonders if Rose is thinking of the continuation of cancerous genes--down through the generations--and asking herself why she has not been touched by it. Kristin worries more about Joel and Bobby, wanting to warn them to be alert for any signs of the disease at all times, wanting them to be prepared. But she knows being prepared does not always help. As she sits listening to everyone speaking, their words all around her, she tries to think of what would help.

* * *

"He just doesn't seem very alert," Rose says. "You'd think he'd be more alert."

"What do you mean?" Kristin asks. Her mother and Carmen sit across the table, facing Kristin, talking quietly after dark.

"He never said a word," Rose says. "Your father would have been ashamed."

Carmen leans forward. "Mother," she says. "What is wrong with you? What is Toby supposed to say?"

Rose tilts her head back, twists the large ring on her left hand. "I don't know how to explain it. I just remember your father--how he would handle things." She smiles

faintly, then caresses her left hand with her right. "There was one night I was very ill. I had a terrible cold. I was so sick I just wanted to stay on the couch all night and not move. I don't think I could have made it up to bed. And it was raining awfully bad outside--thunderstorming. Your father knew that kind of weather scared me, so he slept on the floor next to me all night, bringing me water when I asked for it, making sure extra blankets were close at hand. We didn't say more than a few words to each other, but your father was alert, and he listened, and he never left me alone. I don't see that with Toby. Toby looks like a frightened boy, keeping his distance."

"Yes," Kristin says, "but you're not his wife. There's more to it than that." She knows her mother is correct--Toby has been keeping his distance, and they have had difficulty communicating, but she cannot blame him--not too much. How is he supposed to behave? She doesn't understand her mother's complaint. "Of course he's frightened," she says. "What I want to know is why you're so angry. Why are you always so angry, Mother?"

"Angry? Where on earth--"

"She's right," Carmen says. "You've been angry for years."

"What's gotten into the two of you?" Rose asks.

"You're negative too," Kristin tells her.

"I am not!"

Carmen smiles, leans forward, says, "And opinionated."

"I'm your mother! How dare the two of you talk to me that way!"

"I'm dying, Mother," Kristin says. "I don't have time for games."

Rose shakes her head. "It's a pity you ever met Toby," she says. "He changed you."

Kristin grabs the tablecloth with her left hand and jerks it from the table. She takes the plastic cup resting between her legs and throws it at Rose. It strikes the wall behind her mother, spilling orange juice everywhere, some of it catching in her hair. Rose gasps, stands up, looks at herself, juice dripping.

"Don't you blame him," Kristin says.

"Stop it," Carmen tells both of them. "I did not fly half way around the world to have the two of you tear each other apart."

Rose sits, dries her hair with a napkin, returns once again to her careful composure. "I'm sorry," she says.

Kristin notices for the first time how old her mother looks. The lines in her face are deeper than before, her hair is almost completely gray, and she moves more slowly than the last time she visited the farmhouse.

The porch door opens and Toby steps inside. His pants and boots are caked with mud. He takes the boots off just outside the door, stands still and looks at the three women. "What's wrong?" he asks, but no one says anything. "I got the sprinkler system set up. We can turn the water on any time."

In the morning, she is sick, feels like vomiting. Toby is still asleep and she tries to be quiet. She has not felt this way for a long time and is afraid of what this might

mean. This is how she felt before she learned she was pregnant with Joel, and later, Bobby. She wonders if Toby has any idea she might be pregnant. *This can't be happening*, she thinks, but the feeling of nausea is unmistakable.

"This isn't real," she says, thinking of the day she smelled baked bread in the kitchen. Perhaps her mind is producing strange side effects--she knows the bread was not real, that the smell was something her mind *created* and nothing more, but she is unsure if the sickness is the same.

The last thing she wants is to reveal any sign of this--she does not want Toby to worry. But it is difficult to restrain the nausea. She turns her head to the side, breathes slowly and deeply, but it happens anyway. She closes her mouth, holds it shut as she vomits, can feel it back up her throat into her nose. It fills her mouth. She swallows as quickly as she can, then coughs, wipes her eye clear. She feels proud of herself for holding it back. Her stomach churns, almost violent now, as if it were angry with her for disobeying.

Toby stirs, turns over, yawns, remains still. She is just about feeling stable when the sickness suddenly turns wicked, washes over her. "Toby," she says. She raises her voice. "Toby, wake up."

"Yeah," he mumbles, then seems to realize the tone of her voice, sits up. "What is it?"

"Take me to the bathroom, please. Hurry."

He scrambles out of bed, slides his arms under her, lifts her from the mattress. He

is half way to the bathroom when she loses control--she clenches her teeth, but it doesn't help. She vomits, wetting his chest and stomach. "Oh, God," she says. "I'm sorry." She feels herself fading, begins to black out.

As they shower together, the touch of the cold water brings her back, and she remembers why she is in the bathtub. Before, with Joel and Bobby, she was able to hide much of her morning sickness from Toby--what her mother would call the proper thing to do--and he may not be aware of what the sickness means. Certainly, if he doesn't know this morning, he will know tomorrow when she's sick once again--*if* she's sick again. She hopes it will not happen that way. She cannot entertain the idea she might be able to have a child if she is pregnant now with so very little time left, possibly a few weeks, perhaps only a few days. The child will not have time to develop. It will die with her.

At her father's funeral, she remembers feeling as if something were looming over her, waiting. She knew the casket would be open, that she would be expected to go to her father and pay respects to him, but the idea terrified her. She remembers walking up to him, slowly, staring at her feet; she was amazed they were moving--left then right then left, one after the other. Then she was standing in front of the casket, knowing she had to look. The rose in her hand poked its thorns through her thin gloves. *Put the rose on his chest*, she remembers thinking. *Put the rose on his chest and then you can go*. But she was angry with herself as well. This was her father. She was not behaving as a daughter should, showing a longing for him to be alive. Instead, she was frightened of him.

She extended her arm, watching it shake in front of her like some unknown thing.

Her heart raced as she set the rose on his chest. And then her eyes, which she'd been trying so desperately to keep averted, turned toward him, studied the calm features of his face--the soft, pale cheeks--the heavy eyelids--the relaxed forehead. She knew this was her father, but it didn't look anything like him. For a brief moment, she imagined this strange person coming to life, opening his eyes, turning toward her, speaking. *Come here*, the corpse would say, but it would not be her father--not any more.

She ran from the casket, fled the funeral home, climbed into the back seat of someone's car. She stayed in the parking lot for a long time before her mother finally found her. She barely remembers the drive home. Only those terrible moments of walking up to the casket were with her.

It's better not to know, she thinks. It would be easier if she would have died the day she collapsed--the day this whole thing began. She realizes everyone is already aware they will die someday, but it isn't *real* to them like it is to her. It's very real to Toby as well. She knows now what it must be like for him--watching it happen from the outside, day after day. She will not subject him to another loss if she can help it--she will keep her pregnancy a secret as long as she can.

* * *

She is sitting on the porch, eating breakfast with Toby, when Rose and Carmen join them. Kristin is thankful she has only the two of them to cope with, tries to smile at

them as they sit down.

"Listen," Rose says. "Carmen and I have decided to go shopping today. Would you like to come along?"

She glances at Toby. He is struggling not to look at her, eats his eggs and bacon, stares at his plate. She knows this is his way of letting her decide for herself--but she's also aware this is her mother's way of being able to spend time with her alone. "Do you want to go?" she asks Toby.

He pushes his fork through the food on his plate. "I'll be all right here. I'm no good at shopping."

"Yes," Rose says. "It'll be a ladies' day out."

Carmen touches her right hand, unaware Kristin cannot feel it. "We can buy some new clothes," Carmen says, "--a couple of blouses, maybe some comfortable shorts for you to wear."

Toby clears his throat. "Can you handle the wheelchair?"

Rose raises her head. "We sure can," she says. Then she looks at Carmen. "Can you handle it?"

It doesn't take them long to get ready. They are just outside the front door when she realizes what this means. Everyone will be able to see her. *Everyone* will know. She realizes she must openly face each person who recognizes her. Questions cannot help but be asked: What's happened to you? Are you all right? How much time do you have? You should come visit us--can you come visit?

"I want a hat first," she tells them. "I want a large hat and a scarf. And sunglasses."

Rose laughs. "Don't be silly. You look fine." She starts wheeling Kristin toward the van.

Kristin knows her mother will not let her have those things. Her mother firmly believes in pride--Rose believes it's shameful to go out in public and hide one's face. Suddenly Kristin is terrified. She tells Carmen to get her a hat, but her mother tells Carmen to forget about such a silly thing. "Open the door, Carmen," Rose says. "I can't open van doors."

"Toby!" Kristin calls, hoping he can hear her. "Toby!"

For a long moment, nothing happens and she fears he will not respond. She shouts his name several times. Carmen and Rose start to argue. Finally, Toby steps out of the farmhouse and lets the screen door slam behind him. "What's going on here?" he asks.

"Nothing," Rose says. "We're fine."

Kristin reaches a hand out to him, motions him to her. He kneels down and looks at her with a worried face. "I want a hat, and a scarf, and some sunglasses," she says. She tells this to him, and is concerned he will not understand the importance of her request. But he nods and squeezes her hand and seems to know exactly what she wants them for.

"Hold on just a moment," he tells Rose and Carmen. He lowers his voice, sounds

commanding. "She's not going without her things."

Everyone is silent as he goes inside. Rose climbs into the passenger seat and closes the door, leaving them alone. Carmen crosses her arms, mumbles to herself, grinding her shoe into the gravel. "I can't believe her sometimes," Carmen says.

Toby returns with exactly what she asked for. He has a bright yellow straw hat, her sunglasses with the large lenses, and a blue scarf--thin and soft, but dark enough to hide her face. She wishes she hadn't agreed to go shopping now. She wants her mother to leave her alone. She would rather spend the time with Toby, even though her mother would be hurt, but it's too late now. She lets Toby dress her in her disguise, then waits patiently as Toby and Carmen lift her into the van. The side door closes and she is alone with her mother in the dark for a moment. Then the passenger door opens and her mother jumps.

Toby leans inside, places his face close to Rose. "Have a good time," he tells her. "And be *nice*."

"Who do you think you're--"

"Rose," Toby says, his voice like a cold wind. "Behave like you're her mother, not some bitch who only cares about herself. You understand me? Grow up."

Rose starts to cry. "I can't believe you're talking to me that way. What've I done? I care about her--of course I do!"

"Then start behaving like it," Toby tells her. He quietly shuts the passenger door and leaves them alone once again. After a minute, Carmen climbs into the driver's seat,

starts the engine, takes them down to the highway toward town.

Kristin touches her mother lightly on the shoulder and says, "It's okay, Mother," but she feels proud of Toby, proud of her husband.

* * *

When they return home, she calls for Joel and Bobby. Most of her shopping was for them. She couldn't bring herself to buy any new clothes, other than a couple pairs of sweat pants and T-shirts, and she insisted Carmen and Rose spend their money on the boys. It seemed easier to buy clothes for Joel and Bobby--easier for all of them--and once they started shopping without having to worry about her, they had a good time.

"This is a silly shirt," Joel says, standing still as Rose holds up a T-shirt with Mickey Mouse on it.

"Oh, it's cute," Rose says. "I thought it would look good on you." Joel rolls his eyes, but Rose does not see this. "Let's try the sweater I bought."

Kristin hands Bobby a blue shirt and a pastel vest. Bobby takes off his faded black T-shirt and tries on the new clothes. "Tuck it in," she tells him. "No, don't button the vest. Leave it open like this. There, that looks good. You look handsome."

Toby joins them after a little while. "Dinner's almost ready," he tells them.

Kristin pulls out a sweater she bought--a dark green cardigan with soft leather buttons--and asks him to put it on. "It should be a good color for you," she says. He

unbuttons the front, slips his arms through the sleeves, adjusts it so that it rests loosely on his body. "Oh, good," she says. "It fits."

"This is expensive."

"Do you like it?"

"Well, yes, I like it a lot, but--"

"Then let's eat," she tells him. "I'm starving."

At dinner, she thinks of how wonderful it was that her disguise kept everyone away. She was able to enjoy herself with her mother and Carmen without the distractions of other people. She was happy to simply be with her family. After dinner, when she's watching television with Joel and Bobby, listening to Carmen, Rose, and Toby wash dishes, she asks Joel to bring her a garbage bag. He goes into the back hall closet and brings her a folded, black bag.

"What's it for?" Joel asks.

"Nothing important," she tells him. "Just to wrap some things in for Carmen."

"Can you see if the news is on?"

"Do we have to?"

"Just for a little while." As he goes to change the channel, she slips the garbage bag under her sweatshirt, thankful that Joel didn't ask any more questions.

That night, she places the garbage bag under the mattress on her side while Toby is in the bathroom--though she hopes she won't need it in the morning.

When the lights are out and they are settled in, she asks Toby to make love to her.

It is somewhat easier for him this time. She senses that he's still afraid, but she believes it will bring them closer, if only for a little while.

In the morning, she wakes early. Again she feels sick. She knows it is real now, not just a side effect of the tumor. Quietly moving to the edge of the mattress, she removes the garbage bag. She is thankful Toby has always been one to sleep soundly, but doesn't know what she'll do the next morning. She decides she should eat very little after supper from now on.

Feeling the sickness in her now, she holds the bag to her mouth, tries to keep it back, but cannot. To her surprise, she is quiet enough not to wake Toby. When she finishes, she ties the bag tightly and pushes it as far under the bed as she can, then lies back and swallows the awful taste in her mouth. When she's certain she cannot smell any of the sickness--thankful the ceiling fan is going--she wakes Toby and asks him to bring her a glass of water.

Later, after they've showered and dressed, she says, "Did you have any dreams last night? You were very quiet."

He pauses for a moment before answering. "I don't remember any."

Then, wanting to create a diversion, she asks if she can comb her hair while he makes breakfast. "Sure can," he says, then goes downstairs to fix pancakes for everyone.

While he is gone, she rolls herself over to the bed, hooks the garbage bag with her bare foot, takes it in her hand, tries to decide what to do with it. Finally, she thinks of the window. She rolls over to it, stretches to reach the lock, opens it enough to slip the bag

THINGS AS THEY ARE

Theis

out. She knows there are evergreen bushes directly below, thinks the bag will fall behind them and not be seen, lets it drop past the window sill, then closes the window and locks it tight.

CHAPTER TEN

"I love you so much," Toby says, "I can't believe how happy I am. God, what a terrific day." She smiles, says, "I'm glad everything went so well. The wedding cake was so beautiful. I could've eaten the whole thing." He pulls her close, says, "Well, tonight we're going to take a long shower together, then I'm going to give you a back rub, and then I think I'll pour champagne all over you." She laughs, kisses him, says, "I hope you're going to be thirsty too." "We'll have to name one of our kids Don and the other Perignon." "What if we have three or four kids?" she asks. "Well," he says, "Martini and Rossi?" "Mmmm," she answers, "And you said the shower would come before the champagne? What about after?" "Oh," he says, "I think we could shower again afterward, then stay awake and watch the sun come up."

* * *

Toby doesn't know what to make of the turns in Kristin's illness, or Rose's decision to go shopping, but he is glad everyone is gone now except Rose and Carmen. He remembers sitting on the couch near the back of the porch and listening to everyone talking, but after a while he didn't want to hear what they were saying, blocked them out. He opened a window, lit a cigarette, blew smoke into the room.

"I'm still not sure how I should be buried," Kristin said. "I think I might like to be cremated."

"Heavens, no!" Rose said.

He'd been trying to avoid those kinds of thoughts all morning, but it wasn't easy with everyone in the farmhouse thinking about it, talking about it, reminding him of it.

So, instead of listening, he dressed in his boots and work jeans and went outside to lay down the sprinkler system for the vineyard. He hauled several rolls of punctured hose out of the barn and set one at the end of each row. He used T-connectors to allow the rows to run perpendicular to the end hose. Once everything was hooked up, he pulled the slack of the end hose toward the barn and attached it to the water tap. He turned on the water and watched hundreds of thin lines spray out of the hoses, shrouding the vineyard in a mist.

He sat on the ground and watched it for a long time. He had no desire to go back inside the farmhouse and listen to them talking. He saw little good in Kristin's mother--she seemed to care only in a remote, aloof way. It had not been the same for Toby's parents. His father had been a decent man. Toby remembered him being a quiet man who died young. Toby lived without his mother and father for most of his adult life--they both died just before he turned eighteen. *It is better*, Toby thought, that they didn't survive. But he wouldn't allow himself to fail Joel and Bobby the way others failed him.

He picked up a chunk of dirt and threw it into the middle of the field, then took a piece of gravel, rolled it around in his hand, looked at it, wondering for a moment why he

picked that particular bit of gravel rather than some other. He felt guilty holding it, as if he were keeping it from the rest of the stones in the driveway. It's a silly thing, he thought, to feel anything for a stone--a piece of rock--but he knew what it was like to be alone.

He'd been alone for years. His only family was Kristin, Joel, and Bobby--he couldn't allow himself to consider Rose family. Or Maria. Before he met Kristin he didn't really know anyone, and he loved no one. Part of him thought it was easier back then because he had to care only for himself. Back then it was easy to work as an embalmer; it was easy to cope with people dying because he didn't know them. He used to think of them as snowflakes falling from the sky and piling up on the ground--hill after hill of snow blurring into one icy landscape. He felt comfortable with that landscape, could travel through it, bundled in his own warmth.

But then Kristin changed all that. He let her in, and it wasn't easy to do because he had to learned how to keep people out. *Let them in and you'll regret it*, he told himself after his mother died. And then, Joel and Bobby entered their lives and he had to open himself up even further.

He stared at the sprinkler system, watching the spray of the water. *She's slowly disappearing*, he thought. Slowly leaving him. He would be alone again. *I can't return to the way I was before*, he thought, trying to envision what his life had been like before he met Kristin. He couldn't return because Joel and Bobby would be with him, and he must not fail them.

"No," he said, then pushed himself off the ground and walked through the field. He checked the hoses before going inside, making sure the connections were solid. When he finished, he worked his way out of the vineyard toward the house, pausing to wipe some of the mud on the grass before crossing the gravel driveway and opening the porch door.

He wonders when Rose and Carmen are planning to go; *if* they are planning to go. It disturbs him not knowing--it reminds him of some of his dreams, the ones he cannot quite remember. He has been having them nearly every night, and from what he can recall they are increasingly worse.

He lies in bed and tries to bring back last night's dream, but cannot. For the past couple of days he has been sleeping late--except for the morning Kristin was sick--but this morning he wakes early, before she does. He selects some of her favorite clothes, sets them out. Half an hour later, the alarm sounds and she tries to sit up in bed. Almost immediately, she begins to cough and holds her hand to her mouth.

"Are you sick?" he asks, thinking it might be happening again. After a few minutes, she seems to calm down. Finally, she shakes her head, opens her mouth, wipes her eyes clear.

"I need a shower," she says, though her voice is faint. He wonders if she's feeling weak from her strange eating habits. She has been eating a lot in the mornings, almost nothing in the evenings.

He starts the shower, removes her clothes, then his, carries her into the bathroom.

He's done this so many times it's become routine. "I feel dizzy," she says.

He hadn't noticed, but looking at her face, it seems clear she's not well. An image enters his thoughts. He pictures himself standing in the shower at work, washing off one of the corpses . . . and suddenly he feels as if Kristin is merely a body he has to care for. He is caring for a living corpse--the body of his wife Kristin.

The thought terrifies him.

"Maybe the shower will help," he says, not knowing what else to do. Fortunately, as the water touches her, she seems to come back to him--she's more awake, more in control. He washes her hair, breasts, stomach, and arms, trying to not picture the table rolling into the walk-in shower--turning the water to a warm temperature, lathering up the brush and sponge-glove, and scrubbing.

Turn it over, clean the back side, remove the feces, rinse with the moveable shower head.

Then he's rinsing Kristin and everything seems to happen at once. His hands start tingling at the slightest touch, his ears hurt from the loud hiss of the shower water, and his breathing becomes erratic. *Wait*, he thinks, this is Kristin. This is his wife.

Standing, he moves behind her so she cannot see his face. It is easier to hide this way, but her eyes are gone from him, he can no longer see them, and her identity seems to fade. He switches his position once again, moving around to face her, decides it is better if he can see her eyes.

Then he realizes the problem *is* her identity because she *has* an identity. He

knows her. No one is closer to him--not Maria, not his children. And he cannot avoid her because she is such a large part of who he is, but her flesh and blood and bone will fail her soon, leave him. *Tell Maria*, he thinks. *Tell Maria you're going to be faithful. Kristin deserves at least that.*

Sitting in the shower with her now, he fears an emptiness will pour into him as she is taken from him. "Your hands feel good," she says as he rinses her hair and runs his fingers through. "Wish I could feel both of them."

He listens to the water falling with a hiss, marking a steady blur of time, wonders if taking her home from the hospital--the way he did--was the right thing. Perhaps she would've been happier there. They could've cared for her every need with very little difficulty, given her total attention.

His experience with caring for someone in this way is limited; in fact, his only true experience comes from his work at the funeral home. He knows the majority of deaths these days occur within the hospital--much of his work comes with bodies sent from hospitals--but leaving Kristin there in that efficient, impersonalized place would not allow her much dignity. It seems to him that hospitals are designed to heal the sick, that they are threatened by patients who have no hope of healing.

It would be easy for him to let someone else care for her--most people wouldn't do what he's doing. But he can't imagine her being any place else. This is her home. This is what she's familiar with.

As he lifts her out of the shower and dries her off, he wishes he had a glass of

whiskey. He hasn't had whiskey or gin for what seems like the longest time. He thinks of asking her if she would like him to go buy some wine, but it is too early in the day to drink.

He sits her on the bed, reaches for her clothes. "I'm such a burden," she says, allowing herself to fall to the mattress.

"Don't think like that," he tells her.

She is silent for a long time, gathering up the blanket in her hand. "It's going to hurt, Toby," she tells him. "I don't know what's going to happen to me."

It's easier to clear his mind now that he is out of the bathroom. He stares at the bed where he set out clothes for her to choose from, waits for her to decide. He thinks of corpses for a moment, of how he has to care for them, clean them. He's ashamed for thinking it. The whole idea is terrifying to him--he touches her face and tries to focus on the warmth of her skin. "Let's go downstairs," he says, hoping that saying something will force a change in his frame of mind. "I'll fix breakfast."

"I have a stomach ache," she says. "Fix something that's not greasy."

Later that morning, he visits Maria, hears her practicing guitar, interrupts her by knocking. "Amante," she says, kisses him. "You look tired. What's wrong?"

Abruptly, he tells her, "I can't see you any more."

"Por que? This is not fair." She sighs. He sits with her on the couch, begins to tell her, stops. "Oh, mi Amante. You look so terrible. What is wrong?"

"She's dying," he whispers.

Pushing him away, she stands, throws her arms in the air. "*Mentiroso!* How can you lie to me?" He says nothing, stares blankly at the floor, empty now. "Say something! You expect me to believe this? *Cristo!*"

"You don't have to believe anything. Just wait and see."

"Por Dios! Yes, I'll wait. Like I always wait. *Cristo!*"

Quietly, he leaves her, hears the door slam above him as he slowly descends the stairs. He knows she will not bother him, will be there for him when he is ready. Only he doesn't think he will ever be ready, doesn't know if he will ever climb those stairs again.

* * *

The phone rings and Karl has some strange news. "Joel and Bobby were just here," he says.

"Where? At the funeral home?" Just then he realizes he hasn't seen them all morning. He wonders how he could've missed them.

"I sent them home," Karl says. "I told them to be careful on the highway. It's only about five or six miles--easy stuff for kids--but I know you don't like them biking into town." Then he quickly adds, "I would have given them a ride home, but I had work . . ."

"It's okay," Toby says. "What were they doing there?"

"They didn't do anything. They just looked around and didn't say much."

"Well, thanks, Karl. I'll have a talk with them." He says goodbye, hangs up, still

curious about Joel and Bobby. They've visited the funeral home before--he's taken them there himself on several occasions--and he thinks it odd they decided to go without telling him.

He imagines them standing in the upper part of the funeral home, listening to the soft music, carefully touching the marble bust resting on the mantle of the fireplace. The image of them standing in that room with the lavender-flowered wallpaper strikes him as disjointed, out of place. On their last visit, he took them below to the prep room and even showed them some of the instruments and general procedures of his work, keeping the gruesome details from them.

The porch warms from the afternoon sun before they return home. They are sweating and look tired.

"Hey, Dad," Joel says, trying to seem casual.

Toby takes yesterday's newspaper from the table and opens one of the porch windows. Then he opens the newspaper and pretends to be reading. "How was your bike ride?"

There is a long silence before Bobby says, "We just rode around."

"Yeah? Where'd you go?"

"To--" Bobby says, but Joel shuts him up. "We just went for exercise," Joel tells him. "We rode into town."

Toby turns a page of the newspaper. "Did you see Karl?"

"Yeah," Joel mumbles.

Bobby sits across from him and places his hands on the table. "Where's Mom?"

"Upstairs, taking a nap."

He does not ask anything more, and they leave him to go upstairs. He says nothing about Joel and Bobby's trip into town.

That afternoon, Carmen leaves and Kristin cries frequently the rest of the day. Toby sympathizes with Carmen, not only because he's fond of her, but because saying goodbye to Kristin is something he, too, will have to face. He is somewhat relieved when Rose takes Carmen to the airport and he is able to spend time alone with Kristin.

"She's such a good person," Kristin says. "I mean, it was a strange thing for me when she became a nun. But after that, I couldn't imagine her doing anything else. My mother thought it was a good thing--you know, one child goes to the church and the other tries to help society. She always did her part. I just looked out for myself," she says, then glances at him. "Mostly."

"You did good," he tells her.

She tries to smile.

* * *

They are sitting at the kitchen table when Rose announces her things are packed. "I should leave you alone for a while," she tells them, and he is surprised she is willing to go.

"You don't have to," Kristin says. "You can stay."

Listening to this, he realizes that he, too, wouldn't mind if Rose stayed. Earlier that day he felt like kicking her out, but now, with her behaving kindly, he almost wishes she would stay.

"I'll come back next weekend," Rose tells them, and he is relieved that she is not planning on staying away forever. For a reason he cannot pinpoint, he believes Kristin and her mother should spend as much time together as possible. Though it could be that he, too, needs to have her with him. Perhaps he fears being alone with Kristin as much as he wants to be with her.

Rose looks at him as if she knows this, as if she can see exactly what's going through his mind. "Why don't you let me take Joel and Bobby with me," she says. "For the week." Kristin is about to say something, but Rose quickly adds, "If you want."

"Thank you, Rose," he tells her. "That might be a good idea." He looks at Kristin, but she is watching her mother. It isn't a simple decision, he knows this.

"Just for the week?" Kristin says.

Rose nods her head slowly. "Yes. But I can bring them back sooner than that if you wish. Just give me a call." Then, as if she feels she needs to add something to explain herself, she says, "I am their grandmother, you know. It's the least I can do."

"Maybe we should ask the boys," Toby says.

Kristin touches him. "Can you ask them?"

He nods, and climbs the stairs to look for Joel and Bobby. He finds them in their

bedroom--Joel is playing guitar through his amplifier, but listening to it with headphones, and Bobby is sitting at his desk, drawing something with a charcoal pencil. It seems odd to him to not see them fighting. They are so quiet, motionless.

Joel sees Toby and takes off the headphones. "Hey, Dad."

"Got something to ask you," Toby says.

Bobby looks up from his drawing, Joel shifts nervously back to his other foot.

"We went into town," Joel says. "That's all."

"No, no, it's okay. Your mother and I just want to know if you'd like to go to Grandma Rose's house for a couple of days."

Bobby turns in his chair to face him. "Is Mom okay?"

"She's fine."

"What about school?"

"No problem," he says, though he hadn't thought of that. "I'll call them tomorrow."

"Do you want us to go?" Joel asks.

Toby runs his hand through his hair and scratches the nape of his neck. "Well, no, we don't want you to go. But your mother and I need some time together, that's all. You can do whatever you want there--no homework, no school, just fun."

Bobby turns toward Joel. "You want to?"

Joel shrugs. "I guess."

He starts toward the hall, then stops in the doorway. "If you want to come home

sooner, it's okay. But don't try riding your bikes--it's over a hundred miles."

Joel rolls his eyes. "Pack a few things. Grandma's leaving in just a little while."

He leaves them, goes downstairs. The farmhouse seems very quiet, and the silence makes him uncomfortable.

* * *

They are lying in bed, completely alone now. Almost an hour passes and they do not move or talk. He is afraid to be the one to start talking. Finally, Kristin whispers to him. "We need to talk," she says, and he knows now that she's been thinking the same things. "We haven't talked in a long time."

"I know."

"Why is it so hard?" she asks.

"Nothing's easy any more," he tells her. He can hear the clock radio's dim light humming behind him on the nightstand, thinks of how it should be playing music, maybe some classical guitar, instead of the monotone mechanical hum.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Did you cut your hand?" Toby asks, "Are you all right?" "I'm fine," she says, "It hurts, but I'm okay." "Wow," he says, "It looks deep. What were you doing?" "Chopping carrots," she says, "for dinner." "How can you be so calm?" he asks, "This might need stitches." "Pain doesn't bother me too much," she tells him, "I have a large imagination, so all I have to do is put my mind some place else, imagine something nice, and the pain is easy to deal with. It only hurts more if I think about it." He wraps her hand in a damp cloth, asks, "What are you imagining?" "You and I swimming naked in a bright blue ocean--the way the water tingles--palm trees leaning out over the sand beach--seagulls floating overhead--sea shells." "You're very brave," he tells her. "I must be," she says, "Imagination, pain. Maybe we're on to something."

* * *

She will be sick in the morning--though it probably won't show, not much, because she hasn't eaten anything since supper. *It is better to keep quiet*, she thinks, because it cannot help her, or him. It seems as if this is the only thing she cares about, knows it is probably better to talk to Toby about it, but for some reason she cannot convince herself of it. She knows she isn't being rational.

She supposes there is some technique the doctors could do to remove the embryo from her, place it in some jar and let it grow there under a yellow light until it becomes a baby--like a test tube baby. But Toby has enough to handle with Joel and Bobby; to try

such a thing now would only be crazy. The words *truthful* and *straightforward* came from her own lips, but this truth will remain untold. *Toby doesn't know to ask*, she thinks, so she won't have to answer. *Leave it unspoken*, she tells herself.

Very little worries her, except telling Toby about the baby. She isn't afraid of going out after dark, or locking the door to the van, or walking through a bad neighborhood. Crime, politics, war, even murder, don't concern her now. Not like they used to. She only worries about such things when she thinks of Toby or their sons, of Carmen and her mother.

She remembers when she used to worry about things she saw in the news, like the story about the six teenagers who pulled a young woman into a group of trees for fun. That's what they called it, fun, she remembers. They used rocks and knives and a metal pipe on her, then raped her and left her for dead. The teenagers called it a *wilding*. It is a word that has stayed with her. It used to worry her greatly that Joel and Bobby might be in danger of such a thing, or that they might even end up with the wrong group of teenagers, have a *wilding* themselves, but now she knows her boys are safe--they are not the type of boys to ever do something like that--and Toby is watchful of them, makes sure they are safe in school, with their friends, wherever they go. Toby will be a good father to them.

It's crazy, she knows this now, but there was a time when she worried about Toby. Not until a year of their marriage had passed did she completely trust him. There was always a mystery to him she couldn't penetrate. But then she realized he was keeping the

more terrible details of his work from her--that he felt she'd be better off not knowing what was happening *out there*. Finally, they came to a compromise. Sometimes he'd tell her about one of his embalming jobs, and sometimes she would let him keep it to himself.

"I worry about you," she says as she struggles to push herself closer to him. She turns more on her side in bed and looks at him directly. She's about to say something more, when her head begins hurting. She feels nauseated, reaches to touch his arm, hears him sit up, but cannot see him. Everything blurs.

She can hear him breathing quickly. It is nearly as fast as her own. She has difficulty seeing. The words coming out of her mouth are strange, distorted versions of words she's used all of her life. She can hear everything.

She screams. Her head is bursting--so much pain.

He lifts her, telling her he has water and pills. Medication. Pain killers.

Thankfully, she can swallow, but it is difficult to keep the water from going down her wind pipe.

* * *

The drugs come regularly now. He gives them to her nearly every three hours, though she's not supposed to take them more often than every four. The pain is numb,

but persistent. She has difficulty sleeping. He lies next to her often.

She cannot imagine it getting any worse; the urine and feces already seeping out, not longer in her control. Toby has cleaned her several times, washing with soapy water from a bucket.

When morning comes, she begins to vomit, mostly dry heaves. After she finishes, the nausea subsiding, he offers her a glass of water and she drinks a good portion of it.

She wants to see Joel, Bobby, Carmen, her mother. Yet she doesn't want them to see her like this. Toby's face appears in her line of vision. She begins to cry, wishes she could simply lift her head and kiss him, tries moving her arm up to his neck to pull him down, but is unable to do more than bring it to the middle of her stomach.

"Kiss me," she says.

For a moment she is unsure her words were clear enough for him to understand. She studies his face; there is a strange sadness she has not seen before. She feels less than human, less of a woman. He will not kiss her because she is ugly now; her paralysis grotesque. It was wrong of her to ask him, she thinks, struggles to turn her head away from him, knowing now he cannot bring himself to kiss her. She doesn't blame him. Why would he even want to touch her?

Then her head turns and she can see him again. He is looking at her. "I'm ugly," she tells him.

"No," he says. "That's not true. Don't even think that. Just tell me where you can feel me." Then he kisses her.

Hours later, she wakes, knowing her mind has been wandering, but only recollects fragments of where she has been. The pain in her head is getting worse and she doesn't think the medication is helping much. She reaches out for him, but she is unsure if her arm is moving. "Are you there?" she asks.

There is no response. She senses, faintly, that something is seeping out of her, trickling down the inside of her leg, feels as if it will gush at any moment. At the same time, the pain in her head is growing--as if wires are working their way through her.

"Toby?" she calls.

"I'm here," he tells her.

A sudden jolt makes her scream. *This is it*, she thinks. Her good hand has clenched something. She thinks it is the quilt, pulls on it, wants to tear it away from its place. She can hear herself breathing.

Warmth flows between her legs. "Oh, God, what is it?" Toby asks.

I love you, she thinks, tries to say it to him. She wants to hear her voice say those words, but the pain is too great, realizes it is blood between her legs. "The baby!" she screams.

The pain is too much. *This is it*, she thinks, frantic now, terrified. *This is it*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"You kiss so well," Kristin tells him, "Every time I kiss you it stays with me--even a long time afterward. I don't know why. But I'm not complaining." "It's the same for me," he says. "I still think about the first time we kissed," she tells him, "I thought I was going to faint. God, that sounds silly, I know, but it's true. It's weird--I mean, a kiss only lasts a short time, but in my memory it's still strong. I close my eyes sometimes at night and I can imagine that first kiss perfectly. I'm silly, I know." "No," he tells her, "Not at all. You were wearing lip gloss that tasted like strawberries, and your hair smelled like the wood-smoke from the camp fire. I remember, too."

* * *

Those last few days, Toby remembers clearly. Toward the end, it seemed as if everything were going in slow motion, as if every second were repeating itself again and again. There was something in the way she was behaving that seemed wrong. She rested her hand on her stomach, and he wondered if she was sick.

He fingered one of the yellow tassels made of yarn. He knew he could ask her anything now, but he wasn't sure if he should. He wanted to ask what it was like to actually *be* dying. What does it feel like, he wondered, that moment you are falling out of this world and into *something* else?

He traced of one of the quilt's squares with his finger. "What is it--" he said, but he couldn't bring himself to ask her such a question.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

She seemed angry then. He was ashamed for even thinking the question. This wasn't one of the bodies he cared almost nothing for. He could ask such questions at work, hoping to find some clues to answers, but not here. This was Kristin. She meant something--and he shouldn't treat her otherwise.

"I hate it when you don't finish your sentences," she told him. "What were you going to ask?"

"I can't," he said.

"Toby!"

He looked away. The words fell from his lips without thought. "I've always wondered what people are thinking." He tried to stop himself, but the urge to ask her was strong. "You know--before--during--" He laid back and placed the pillow under his head. He said too much. *I'm such an asshole*, he thought. *A cold, self-centered asshole.* "Never mind," he told her.

"Before what?" she asked. "During what?"

You've gone too far, he thought, knowing she will eventually pull it out of him. He pushed his head into the pillow, tried to relax. "It's just--I never get to see them before. I only get to see them *after*. After they've died."

He kept still, hoping she wouldn't say anything. He tried to think of some other subject--something about Joel or Bobby--but nothing came to mind. He could've asked her about the burial instead; did she want to be cremated?

"You mean, what is it like to die?" she asked.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No," she told him. "It's okay."

He placed his hands on his belly and crossed his fingers, trying not to appear anxious. She was about to tell him something he'd been wanting to hear all of his life.

"Mostly fear," she told him. "I'm afraid of not knowing what's going to happen to me. Afraid of how much it's going to hurt." Part of him wanted to cover his ears so he wouldn't hear this, but the other part wanted to write down each word, record them and read them over and over again.

"I can't *stand* headaches," she said. "I'm afraid I'll never get to see you, or Joel, or Bobby."

There was a long moment where she appeared to be thinking, and he wished she were thinking out loud. He waited, but he was impatient. He wanted to hear her voice, right then. He wanted her to talk for hours.

"I worry about you," she said, struggled to push herself closer to him. She turned on her side and looked at him. Then her face seemed to grow heavy and her forehead furrowed. She looked dizzy. Her hand reached out and touched his arm.

He sat up, knowing something must be wrong. "Kristin? What's going on?" he

asked. She said something, but he couldn't understand her. Her words were slurred. It frightened him to hear her speak.

"What?" he said. He held her arms and waited for her to say something. "I can't understand you." He was frantic. *Where's her medication*, he thought. But before he could look, she grew limp and her head fell back. He checked for a pulse and found a weak one. He could hear her breathing. Somehow, she was still alive.

Half an hour passed before she moved. He wondered if it was real or if it was something his mind fabricated--did she move? Tired, frightened, he placed his head next to hers on the pillow, started singing to her. He didn't know what to sing, so he created a melody as he went. He couldn't remember any songs from his childhood. For some reason, he didn't think anything else would be appropriate. He remembered a few of the words to one of those nursery rhymes . . . *Jack and Jill went up a hill* . . . but he couldn't recall any more of the words--and the melody escaped him completely.

Finally, she woke, began to moan, then screamed.

He scrambled for her pills, forced himself to calmly tap two tablets from the bottle, then ran to the bathroom for a glass of water. He hurried back and sat beside her. He lifted her head and helped her take the pills, then the water, thankful she didn't have difficulty swallowing them. "Hold on," he told her, then leaned over and poured the bottle of pills onto the nightstand. He separated them into piles of two. *It won't happen again*, he thought, knowing he would be prepared from now on.

He sat with her for almost an hour; slowly she began to calm down. The

medication seemed to be working. There seemed to be a chance she would sleep.

Then she lost control of her bladder and he had to clean it up. He decided he must go to the store--there was a Wal-Mart just five miles away--and buy some underwear. He remembered Karl telling him about the Depends he used to buy for his mother before she went into a nursing home. It was late, but the store was open 24-hours.

He waited until it seemed certain she was sleeping, then slipped quietly down the steps and outside to his van. He drove fast. He left the radio off--he had to concentrate on driving--and before long pulled into the parking lot. Hurrying inside, he ran through the aisles looking for the Depends. He found them and selected four different kinds, then rushed to the check-out line. Thankfully, no one was there ahead of him. The girl at the register pulled the bundles over the laser light and came up with a total of thirty-five dollars and change. He threw out two twenties and a ten for her, then gathered up his packages and left before she had time to react.

Back at the farmhouse, his face covered with sweat, the van's engine clicking as it cooled down. He rushed inside and carried the packages upstairs to their bedroom. She was still sleeping. He looked at the clock, saw he'd been gone barely fifteen minutes. He stretched out next to her, exhausted.

He was just about asleep when she woke and asked for a drink of water. Taking the water from the nightstand, he held it for her, feeding it to her little by little until she finished. Then he opened a package and dressed her in one of the Depends. It looked like a large diaper--he quickly covered it with the bed sheet and quilt. He was afraid she'd

ask what he'd done, but she seemed too tired to do anything but lie still and breathe deeply. He listened to her breathing, thinking of how peaceful it sounded.

Then the phone rang. It startled him. His first thought was that it might be Maria. *It could be Karl*, he thought. Not too many people called this late. Kristin didn't seem to notice the ringing, but he took the phone from the nightstand and lifted the receiver to make it stop. "Hello," he said softly.

"Toby, it's Rose. How is she?"

Relaxing, he whispered into the receiver, "I'd rather not say right now."

"Is she there? Can I talk with her?"

"Sleeping," he said, trying to keep his words to a minimum. *It is best*, he thought, that Kristin be left alone until she was better . . . if she could get better. That thought depressed him and he had to suppress the urge to simply hang up on Rose.

"I'm sorry," Rose said. "It's just that--well, Joel and Bobby want to come home." She sighed and he could hear the weight in her voice. "We just stepped inside the door when Bobby said he wanted to go back. Then Joel said the same thing. I don't know what to do. Should I drive them back so soon?"

"No," Toby said. "Now is not a good time."

"Would you talk to them? They won't listen to their grandmother."

"Put Joel on."

Kristin stirred for a moment. "Joel?" she mumbled, then swallowed and fell silent.

"Dad?" Joel said. "Can we come home? We want to see Mom."

"Mom's not feeling too good right now," Toby explained. "I know it's hard, but you and Bobby are going to have to stay with Grandma for a few days."

"But, Dad--"

"Joel, the answer is no. You can call tomorrow and talk to Mom, okay? She's sleeping right now and we don't want to wake her up. She needs her sleep."

Joel was quiet. Finally, he said very softly, "Okay."

"Okay, good. Now take care of Bobby, and listen to Grandma. And you should be in bed, too. It's pretty late. Put Grandma back on the phone."

"Okay."

"Toby?" Rose said.

"They'll stay with you for a few days. You can call tomorrow, but . . ." He looked at Kristin, at how peacefully she was sleeping, couldn't imagine her talking to anyone on the phone--not with her words slurring. He thought it was best he was the only one to hear her like this. It was more dignified that way.

"She's been having difficulty talking," he told Rose. "She might be better tomorrow, but I don't know."

There was a tremble in Rose's voice. "I'll leave you be."

"Call tomorrow."

"Yes, we will," she said.

They said goodnight and hung up. He filled a glass of water and set it on the

nightstand, then lay next to Kristin and tried to sleep. After what seemed like a long while, he was able to doze off.

Several hours later, she woke and he gave her two more pills, even though she seemed better than before. He cleaned her again, then dressed her in a new pair of padded underwear. "Rose just called," he told her. "The boys want to come home."

"No," she said. "Not like this."

It took him a moment to understand what she was saying; he told her everything was fine. "I told Rose they had to stay with her," he explained. "She's going to keep them." Kristin seemed both confused and relieved by this. He wondered if he should've mentioned the call.

"It's happening," she told him.

He could barely understand her. "What's happening?" he asked.

"Dying," she said. "I'm not going to get better."

"You'll get better."

"Stop lying to yourself," she told him, and he didn't know what to say. Perhaps she wanted to die. Maybe the pain was too much for her. The last thing he wanted was for her to suffer, but he couldn't imagine what his life would be without her. He didn't know how he'd function--the simple thought of it made him feel dazed and lost.

"Don't give up yet," he told her.

"I won't be in pain anymore," she said.

"What?" he asked. She repeated herself and he was able to piece it together. *I*

won't be in pain anymore. Those words were the last she said before falling asleep.

* * *

In the morning she was sick again, and he wondered if she might be pregnant. With the loss of movement in half her body, the slurred words, the confusion she seemed to be having, he didn't think it was strange her body was behaving in this way. Even so, he considered asking her directly, though he felt he should wait until she seemed to be feeling better.

She looked at him with her good eye--a dark, probing eye. "Whiskey," she said.

"Whiskey?" He wondered if she was asking him for a drink, didn't think it would be wise. He knew there wasn't any whiskey in the house, and didn't want to leave her to go get some.

"You," she said.

"No. I don't want any," he told her, but it was a lie. He wanted a drink badly--it might've been easier for him to handle all of that if he could have a few--but he was afraid if he started he wouldn't be able to stop.

Her head moved a little, back and forth. "No," she told him. "You've been drinking." She repeated those words several times.

"No," he said. "I haven't."

She was silent. He didn't know what to say. He hadn't touched a drink in a long

time. Being accused of it then seemed so out of place.

She said nothing more about it, and he looked for something to do. He opened the window shades, then the window. It seemed to help her. Her face brightened, relaxed.

He offered her more medication and she took the pills with an urgency she did not have before.

* * *

"Where are my dolls?" she said, looking around the room.

He didn't know what was happening to her. The last doll Kristin owned was a little china girl with fine black hair and rosy cheeks. But he hadn't seen the doll in years. "Kristin?" he said.

She looked at him, seemed confused. "Where's Carmen?" she asked. "What have you done with Carmen?"

"She's in Taiwan--remember? She flew back a few days ago."

"Where's her bed?"

"Kristin," he said, trying to sort through what she was saying. "What's going on?"

"Carmen! Get the red teapot! Carmen!"

He leaned back for a moment, frightened by what was happening. He knew about the red teapot. Kristin used to keep all of her secret and special things in it as a little girl.

"Kristin," he said quietly. "How old are you?"

"Twelve," she told him, then rolled her good eye. "Who are you? I want Carmen. Where's Carmen?"

This wasn't good--he must do something to bring her back. "What about Joel and Bobby? Do you remember Joel?" She looked confused. "Do you remember Bobby? Bobby and Joel?"

Smiling, she said, "They don't have school today. I heard it on the radio. There's too much snow. They love snow days."

He kissed her, thinking it may help keep her with him. She seemed pleased. She looked at him with a bright, warm eye. Her face smoothed out and relaxed. She tried to reach up, touch him.

* * *

She slept for over an hour before he felt tired enough to sleep, but he tried staying awake, afraid of his dreams. Before long, Kristin was talking. He listened to her voice. "Did we get the loan?" she asked him, and it took him a few moments to understand her. He did not think in terms of the present moment, let his mind wander through their memories.

He smiled at her, remembering what he told her many years ago. "They approved it," he said.

"We can do it!"

He thought she was talking about the house loan--the one that allowed them to buy the farm--but he couldn't be certain. "Do what?" he asked.

"Build the vineyard, of course!"

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

It did seem odd to be talking with her in that way--with her in that past state of their life, he fluctuating between the present moment and memory. He felt as if he had been looking at himself in a mirror, seeing the reflection of who he used to be.

"Let's start looking for some land soon," she said. "Maybe we can buy a farm."

He was silent for a moment, pretending to think it over. The best care for her just then, he believed, was to make things easy and simple. "Yes, that sounds good," he told her, but as he said this he noticed the odor of urine and realized she had to be changed. He waited a few minutes to make certain she had emptied her bladder, then slipped off the soiled Depends and reached for a new one.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. What did you say?"

"Are you making love to me?"

"You've had an accident," he said. "I have to change you."

"Change me?"

"It's okay," he said. "You're doing okay."

She tried to move, struggling to sit up. "I have a headache."

He checked his watch. "Is it too soon?" he mumbled to himself, but then he

decided it didn't really matter. He didn't think it would harm her in any way to take her medication half an hour early. Holding the pills and a glass of water for her, he paid close attention to her every movement and sound--he was always afraid she would choke--and for a couple of seconds she seemed to be having difficulty swallowing. But then she opened her mouth and breathed and he knew everything had gone down.

"Thank you," she said. But a minute later, her forehead creased and she reached out for him. "Are you there?" she asked.

He was about respond when he felt something wet on his leg. The bed sheets were soaked red. "Toby?" she called.

"I'm here." *Why is she bleeding?* he thought. *What's happening?*

She screamed. It startled him. Her breathing was rapid. She had to be in pain.

Then more blood gushed from her. "What is this!" he said.

"The baby!" she screamed.

He was stunned. How could he have been such an idiot? She *was* pregnant. *She's having a miscarriage*, he thought, but he couldn't move. "The baby," he said out loud. His own words seemed to jar him. He thought of calling for an ambulance, but he knew it was too late. They would not arrive in time to help.

"Oh, God," he said. He was shaking--he felt cold. Suddenly, the room was very quiet. "No," he said. He turned to her, checked her pulse, her breathing--nothing.

"Kristin?" he said, but there was no response.

Dazed, he stumbled across the bedroom in search of the telephone, finally

remembered it was on the nightstand. He didn't think he could handle this alone, thought it would be best to have Karl there with him. It was difficult to see. He wiped his eyes. Finally, he reached the telephone and dialed Karl's number.

"Hello?" some strange voice said.

"Is Karl there?"

"Who?" the woman asked.

"Let me speak to Karl."

"I'm sorry, you must have the wrong number."

He dialed once more. Again the number was wrong, except this time it was a different person. "There's no Karl here," a man's voice said, then hung up. Forcing himself to concentrate, he dialed again, heard a familiar voice answer, a woman's voice. It startled him. "Hola," Maria said. He held the phone in front of his face and stared at it.

"Hola?" the voice on the other end repeated. "Hello?"

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