

Dog Friend Book Club
Short Works Collection
2024

*For our little group. It's been a
great year reading and
spending time with all of you.*

*"I can't help it. I will
never get over making
everything
such a big deal."*

- Ada Limón, "The Last Thing"

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All Summer in a Day

by Ray Bradbury

“Ready.”

“Ready.”

“Now?”

“Soon.”

“Do the scientists really know? Will it happen today, will it?”

“Look, look; see for yourself!”

The children pressed to each other like so many roses, so many weeds, intermixed, peering out for a look at the hidden sun.

It rained.

It had been raining for seven years; thousands upon thousands of days compounded and filled from one end to the other with rain, with the drum and gush of water, with the sweet crystal fall of showers and the concussion of storms so heavy they were tidal waves come over the islands. A thousand forests had been crushed under the rain and grown up a thousand times to be crushed again. And this was the way life was forever on the planet Venus, and this was the schoolroom of the children of the rocket men and women who had come to a raining world to set up civilization and live out their lives.

“It’s stopping, it’s stopping!”

“Yes, yes!”

Margot stood apart from them, from these children who could never remember a time when there wasn’t rain and rain and rain. They were all nine years old, and if there had been a day, seven years ago, when the sun came out for an hour and showed its face to the stunned world, they could not recall. Sometimes, at night, she heard them stir, in

remembrance, and she knew they were dreaming and remembering gold or a yellow crayon or a coin large enough to buy the world with. She knew they thought they remembered a warmness, like a blushing in the face, in the body, in the arms and legs and trembling hands. But then they always awoke to the tating drum, the endless shaking down of clear bead necklaces upon the roof, the walk, the gardens, the forests, and their dreams were gone.

All day yesterday they had read in class about the sun. About how like a lemon it was, and how hot. And they had written small stories or essays or poems about it.

I think the sun is a flower.

hat blooms for just one hour.

That was Margot's poem, read in a quiet voice in the still classroom while the rain was falling outside.

"Aw, you didn't write that!" protested one of the boys.

"I did," said Margot. "I did."

"William!" said the teacher.

But that was yesterday. Now the rain was slackening, and the children were crushed in the great thick windows.

"Where's teacher?"

"She'll be back."

"She'd better hurry; we'll miss it!"

They turned on themselves like a feverish wheel, all tumbling spokes.

Margot stood alone. She was a very frail girl who looked as if she had been lost in the rain for years and the rain had washed out the blue from her eyes and the red from her mouth and the yellow from her hair. She was an old photograph dusted from an album, whitened away, and if she spoke at all her voice would be a ghost. Now she stood, separate, staring at the rain and the loud wet world beyond the huge glass.

"What're you looking at?" said William.

Margot said nothing.

“Speak when you’re spoken to.” He gave her a shove. But she did not move; rather she let herself be moved only by him and nothing else.

They edged away from her; they would not look at her. She felt them go away. And this was because she would play no games with them in the echoing tunnels of the underground city. If they tagged her and ran, she stood blinking after them and did not follow. When the class sang songs about happiness and life and games, her lips barely moved. Only when they sang about the sun and the summer did her lips move as she watched the drenched windows.

And then, of course, the biggest crime of all was that she had come here only five years ago from Earth, and she remembered the sun and the way the sun was and the sky was when she was four in Ohio. And they, they had been on Venus all their lives, and they had been only two years old when last the sun came out and had long since forgotten the color and heat of it and the way it really was. But Margot remembered.

“It’s like a penny,” she said once, eyes closed.

“No, it’s not!” the children cried.

“It’s like a fire,” she said, “in the stove.”

“You’re lying; you don’t remember!” cried the children.

But she remembered and stood quietly apart from all of them and watched the patterning windows. And once, a month ago, she had refused to shower in the school shower rooms, had clutched her hands to her ears and over her head, screaming the water mustn’t touch her head. So after that, dimly, dimly, she sensed it, she was different, and they knew her difference and kept away.

There was talk that her father and mother were taking her back to Earth next year; it seemed vital to her that they do so, though it would mean the loss of thousands of dollars to her family. And so, the children hated her for all these reasons of big and little consequence. They hated her pale

snow face, her waiting silence, her thinness, and her possible future.

“Get away!” The boy gave her another push. “What’re you waiting for?”

Then, for the first time, she turned and looked at him. And what she was waiting for was in her eyes.

“Well, don’t wait around here!” cried the boy savagely. “You won’t see nothing!”

Her lips moved.

“Nothing!” he cried. “It was all a joke, wasn’t it?” He turned to the other children.

“Nothing’s happening today. Is it?”

They all blinked at him and then, understanding, laughed and shook their heads. “Nothing, nothing!”

“Oh, but,” Margot whispered, her eyes helpless. “But this is the day, the scientists predict, they say, they know, the sun...”

“All a joke!” said the boy, and seized her roughly. “Hey everyone, let’s put her in a closet before teacher comes!”

“No,” said Margot, falling back.

They surged about her, caught her up and bore her, protesting, and then pleading, and then crying, back into a tunnel, a room, a closet, where they slammed and locked the door. They stood looking at the door and saw it tremble from her beating and throwing herself against it. They heard her muffled cries. Then, smiling, they turned and went out and back down the tunnel, just as the teacher arrived.

“Ready, children?” She glanced at her watch.

“Yes!” said everyone.

“Are we all here?” “Yes!”

The rain slackened still more.

They crowded to the huge door.

The rain stopped.

It was as if, in the midst of a film concerning an avalanche, a tornado, a hurricane, a volcanic eruption, something had, first, gone wrong with the sound apparatus, thus muffling and finally cutting off all noise, all of the blasts

and repercussions and thunders, and then, second, ripped the film from the projector and inserted in its place a peaceful tropical slide which did not move or tremor. The world ground to a standstill. The silence was so immense and unbelievable that you felt your ears had been stuffed or you had lost your hearing altogether. The children put their hands to their ears. They stood apart. The door slid back and the smell of the silent, waiting world came in to them.

The sun came out.

It was the color of flaming bronze and it was very large. And the sky around it was a blazing blue tile color. And the jungle burned with sunlight as the children, released from their spell, rushed out, yelling, into the springtime.

“Now, don’t go too far,” called the teacher after them. “You’ve only two hours, you know. You wouldn’t want to get caught out!”

But they were running and turning their faces up to the sky and feeling the sun on their cheeks like a warm iron; they were taking off their jackets and letting the sun burn their arms.

“Oh, it’s better than the sun lamps, isn’t it?”

“Much, much better!”

They stopped running and stood in the great jungle that covered Venus, that grew and never stopped growing, tumultuously, even as you watched it. It was a nest of octopuses, clustering up great arms of flesh-like weed, wavering, flowering in this brief spring. It was the color of rubber and ash, this jungle, from the many years without sun. It was the color of stones and white cheeses and ink, and it was the color of the moon.

The children lay out, laughing, on the jungle mattress and heard it sigh and squeak under them, resilient and alive. They ran among the trees, they slipped and fell, they pushed each other, they played hide-and-seek and tag, but most of all they squinted at the sun until tears ran down their faces; they put their hands up to that yellowness and that amazing blueness and they breathed of the fresh, fresh air and

listened and listened to the silence which suspended them in a blessed sea of no sound and no motion. They looked at everything and savored everything. Then, wildly, like animals escaped from their caves, they ran and ran in shouting circles. They ran for an hour and did not stop running.

And then...

In the midst of their running, one of the girls wailed.

Everyone stopped.

The girl, standing in the open, held out her hand.

“Oh, look, look,” she said, trembling.

They came slowly to look at her opened palm.

In the center of it, cupped and huge, was a single raindrop.

She began to cry, looking at it.

They glanced quietly at the sky.

“Oh. Oh.”

A few cold drops fell on their noses and their cheeks and their mouths. The sun faded behind a stir of mist. A wind blew cool around them. They turned and started to walk back toward the underground house, their hands at their sides, their smiles vanishing away.

A boom of thunder startled them, and like leaves before a new hurricane, they tumbled upon each other and ran. Lightning struck ten miles away, five miles away, a mile, a half-mile. The sky darkened into midnight in a flash.

They stood in the doorway of the underground for a moment until it was raining hard. Then they closed the door and heard the gigantic sound of the rain falling in tons and avalanches, everywhere and forever.

“Will it be seven more years?”

“Yes. Seven.”

Then one of them gave a little cry.

“Margot!”

“What?”

“She’s still in the closet where we locked her.”

“Margot.”

They stood as if someone had driven them, like so many stakes, into the floor. They looked at each other and then looked away. They glanced out at the world that was raining now and raining and raining steadily. They could not meet each other's glances. Their faces were solemn and pale. They looked at their hands and feet, their faces down.

“Margot.”

One of the girls said, “Well...?”

No one moved.

“Go on,” whispered the girl.

They walked slowly down the hall in the sound of cold rain. They turned through the doorway to the room in the sound of the storm and thunder, lightning on their faces, blue and terrible. They walked over to the closet door slowly and stood by it.

Behind the closet door was only silence.

They unlocked the door, even more slowly, and let Margot out.

All Summer in a Day

The Man in the Black Suit

by Stephen King

I am now a very old man and this is something which happened to me when I was very young—only nine years old. It was 1914, the summer after my brother Dan died in the west field and three years before America got into World War I. I've never told anyone about what happened at the fork in the stream that day, and I never will . . . at least not with my mouth. I've decided to write it down, though, in this book which I will leave on the table beside my bed. I can't write long, because my hands shake so these days and I have next to no strength, but I don't think it will take long.

Later, someone may find what I have written. That seems likely to me, as it is pretty much human nature to look in a book marked DIARY after its owner has passed along. So yes—my words will probably be read. A better question is whether or not anyone will believe them. Almost certainly not, but that doesn't matter. It's not belief I'm interested in but freedom. Writing can give that, I've found. For twenty years I wrote a column called "Long Ago and Far Away" for the Castle Rock Call, and I know that sometimes it works that way—what you write down sometimes leaves you forever, like old photographs left in the bright sun, fading to nothing but white.

I pray for that sort of release.

A man in his nineties should be well past the terrors of childhood, but as my infirmities slowly creep up on me, like waves licking closer and closer to some indifferently built castle of sand, that terrible face grows clearer and clearer in

my mind's eye. It glows like a dark star in the constellations of my childhood. What I might have done yesterday, who I might have seen here in my room at the nursing home, what I might have said to them or they to me . . . those things are gone, but the face of the man in the black suit grows ever clearer, ever closer, and I remember every word he said. I don't want to think of him but I can't help it, and sometimes at night my old heart beats so hard and so fast I think it will tear itself right clear of my chest. So I uncap my fountain pen and force my trembling old hand to write this pointless anecdote in the diary one of my greatgrandchildren—I can't remember her name for sure, at least not right now, but I know it starts with an S—gave to me last Christmas, and which I have never written in until now. Now I will write in it. I will write the story of how I met the man in the black suit on the bank of Castle Stream one afternoon in the summer of 1914.

The town of Motton was a different world in those days—more different than I could ever tell you. That was a world without airplanes droning overhead, a world almost without cars and trucks, a world where the skies were not cut into lanes and slices by overhead power lines.

There was not a single paved road in the whole town, and the business district consisted of nothing but Corson's General Store, Thut's Livery & Hardware, the Methodist Church at Christ's Corner, the school, the town hall, and Harry's Restaurant half a mile down from there, which my mother called, with unflinching disdain, "the liquor house."

Mostly, though, the difference was in how people lived—how apart they were. I'm not sure people born after the middle of the twentieth century could quite credit that, although they might say they could, to be polite to old folks like me. There were no phones in western Maine back then,

for one thing. The first one wouldn't be installed for another five years, and by the time there was one in our house, I was nineteen and going to college at the University of Maine in Orono.

But that is only the roof of the thing. There was no doctor closer than Casco, and no more than a dozen houses in what you would call town. There were no neighborhoods (I'm not even sure we knew the word, although we had a verb—neighboring—that described church functions and barn dances), and open fields were the exception rather than the rule. Out of town the houses were farms that stood far apart from each other, and from December until middle March we mostly hunkered down in the little pockets of stovewarmth we called families. We hunkered and listened to the wind in the chimney and hoped no one would get sick or break a leg or get a headful of bad ideas, like the farmer over in Castle Rock who had chopped up his wife and kids three winters before and then said in court that the ghosts made him do it. In those days before the Great War, most of Motton was woods and bog, dark long places full of moose and mosquitoes, snakes and secrets. In those days there were ghosts everywhere.

This thing I'm telling about happened on a Saturday. My father gave me a whole list of chores to do, including some that would have been Dan's, if he'd still been alive. He was my only brother, and he'd died of being stung by a bee. A year had gone by, and still my mother wouldn't hear that. She said it was something else, had to have been, that no one ever died of being stung by a bee. When Mama Sweet, the oldest lady in the Methodist Ladies' Aid, tried to tell her— at the church supper the previous winter, this was—that the same thing had happened to her favorite uncle back in '73, my mother clapped her hands over her ears, got up, and

walked out of the church basement. She'd never been back since, either, and nothing my father could say to her would change her mind. She claimed she was done with church, and that if she ever had to see Helen Robichaud again (that was Mama Sweet's real name), she would slap her eyes out. She wouldn't be able to help herself, she said.

That day, Dad wanted me to lug wood for the cookstove, weed the beans and the cukes, pitch hay out of the loft, get two jugs of water to put in the cold pantry, and scrape as much old paint off the cellar bulkhead as I could. Then, he said, I could go fishing, if I didn't mind going by myself—he had to go over and see Bill Eversham about some cows. I said I sure didn't mind going by myself, and my Dad smiled like that didn't surprise him so very much. He'd given me a bamboo pole the week before—not because it was my birthday or anything, but just because he liked to give me things, sometimes— and I was wild to try it in Castle Stream, which was by far the troutiest brook I'd ever fished.

“But don't you go too far in the woods,” he told me. “Not beyond where it splits.”

“No, sir.”

“Promise me.”

“Yessir, I promise.”

“Now promise your mother.”

We were standing on the back stoop; I had been bound for the springhouse with the waterjugs when my Dad stopped me. Now he turned me around to face my mother, who was standing at the marble counter in a flood of strong morning sunshine falling through the double windows over the sink. There was a curl of hair lying across the side of her forehead and touching her eyebrow—you see how well I remember it all? The bright light turned that little curl to filaments of gold and made me want to run to her and put my arms around her. In that instant I saw her as a woman, saw her as my

father must have seen her. She was wearing a housedress with little red roses all over it, I remember, and she was kneading bread. Candy Bill, our little black Scottie dog, was standing alertly beside her feet, looking up, waiting for anything that might drop. My mother was looking at me.

“I promise,” I said.

She smiled, but it was the worried kind of smile she always seemed to make since my father brought Dan back from the west field in his arms. My father had come sobbing and bare-chested. He had taken off his shirt and draped it over Dan’s face, which had swelled and turned color. My boy! he had been crying. Oh, look at my boy! Jesus, look at my boy! I remember that as if it had been yesterday. It was the only time I ever heard my Dad take the Savior’s name in vain.

“What do you promise, Gary?” she asked.

“Promise not to go no further than where it forks, ma’am.”

“Any further.”

“Any.”

She gave me a patient look, saying nothing as her hands went on working in the dough, which now had a smooth, silky look.

“I promise not to go any further than where it forks, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Gary,” she said. “And try to remember that grammar is for the world as well as for school.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Candy Bill followed me as I did my chores, and sat between my feet as I bolted my lunch, looking up at me with the same attentiveness he had shown my mother while she was kneading her bread, but when I got my new bamboo pole and my old, splintery creel and started out of the dooryard, he

stopped and only stood in the dust by an old roll of snowfence, watching. I called him but he wouldn't come. He yapped a time or two, as if telling me to come back, but that was all.

"Stay, then," I said, trying to sound as if I didn't care. I did, though, at least a little. Candy Bill always went fishing with me.

My mother came to the door and looked out at me with her left hand held up to shade her eyes. I can see her that way still, and it's like looking at a photograph of someone who later became unhappy, or died suddenly. "You mind your Dad now, Gary!"

"Yes, ma'am, I will."

She waved. I waved, too. Then I turned my back on her and walked away.

The sun beat down on my neck, hard and hot, for the first quarter-mile or so, but then I entered the woods, where double shadow fell over the road and it was cool and fir-smelling and you could hear the wind hissing through the deep needled groves. I walked with my pole on my shoulder like boys did back then, holding my creel in my other hand like a valise or a salesman's sample-case. About two miles into the woods along a road which was really nothing but a double rut with a grassy strip growing up the center hump, I began to hear the hurried, eager gossip of Castle Stream. I thought of trout with bright speckled backs and pure white bellies, and my heart went up in my chest.

The stream flowed under a little wooden bridge, and the banks leading down to the water were steep and brushy. I worked my way down carefully, holding on where I could and digging my heels in. I went down out of summer and back into midspring, or so it felt. The cool rose gently off the water, and a green smell like moss. When I got to the edge of

the water I only stood there for a little while, breathing deep of that mossy smell and watching the dragonflies circle and the skitterbugs skate. Then, farther down, I saw a trout leap at a butterfly—a good big brookie, maybe fourteen inches long—and remembered I hadn't come here just to sightsee.

I walked along the bank, following the current, and wet my line for the first time with the bridge still in sight upstream. Something jerked the tip of my pole down a time or two and ate half my worm, but he was too sly for my nine-year-old hands—or maybe just not hungry enough to be careless—so I went on.

I stopped at two or three other places before I got to the place where Castle Stream forks, going southwest into Castle Rock and southeast into Kashwakamak Township, and at one of them I caught the biggest trout I have ever caught in my life, a beauty that measured nineteen inches from tip to tail on the little ruler I kept in my creel. That was a monster of a brook trout, even for those days.

If I had accepted this as gift enough for one day and gone back, I would not be writing now (and this is going to turn out longer than I thought it would, I see that already), but I didn't. Instead I saw to my catch right then and there as my father had shown me—cleaning it, placing it on dry grass at the bottom of the creel, then laying damp grass on top of it—and went on. I did not, at age nine, think that catching a nineteen-inch brook trout was particularly remarkable, although I do remember being amazed that my line had not broken when I, netless as well as artless, had hauled it out and swung it toward me in a clumsy tail-flapping arc.

Ten minutes later, I came to the place where the stream split in those days (it is long gone now; there is a settlement of duplex homes where Castle Stream once went its course, and a district grammar school as well, and if there is a stream it goes in darkness), dividing around a huge gray

rock nearly the size of our outhouse. There was a pleasant flat space here, grassy and soft, overlooking what my Dad and I called South Branch. I squatted on my heels, dropped my line into the water, and almost immediately snagged a fine rainbow trout. He wasn't the size of my brookie—only a foot or so—but a good fish, just the same. I had it cleaned out before the gills had stopped flexing, stored it in my creel, and dropped my line back into the water

This time there was no immediate bite so I leaned back, looking up at the blue stripe of sky I could see along the stream's course. Clouds floated by, west to east, and I tried to think what they looked like. I saw a unicorn, then a rooster, then a dog that looked a little like Candy Bill. I was looking for the next one when I drowsed off.

Or maybe slept. I don't know for sure. All I know is that a tug on my line so strong it almost pulled the bamboo pole out of my hand was what brought me back into the afternoon. I sat up, clutched the pole, and suddenly became aware that something was sitting on the tip of my nose. I crossed my eyes and saw a bee. My heart seemed to fall dead in my chest, and for a horrible second I was sure I was going to wet my pants.

The tug on my line came again, stronger this time, but although I maintained my grip on the end of the pole so it wouldn't be pulled into the stream and perhaps carried away (I think I even had the presence of mind to snub the line with my forefinger), I made no effort to pull in my catch. All of my horrified attention was fixed on the fat black-and-yellow thing that was using my nose as a rest-stop.

I slowly poked out my lower lip and blew upward. The bee ruffled a little but kept its place. I blew again and it ruffled again . . . but this time it also seemed to shift impatiently, and I didn't dare blow anymore, for fear it

would lose its temper completely and give me a shot. It was too close for me to focus on what it was doing, but it was easy to imagine it ramming its stinger into one of my nostrils and shooting its poison up toward my eyes. And my brain.

A terrible idea came to me: that this was the very bee which had killed my brother. I knew it wasn't true, and not only because honey bees probably didn't live longer than a single year (except maybe for the queens; about them I was not so sure). It couldn't be true because bees died when they stung, and even at nine I knew it. Their stingers were barbed, and when they tried to fly away after doing the deed, they tore themselves apart. Still, the idea stayed. This was a special bee, a devil-bee, and it had come back to finish the other of Albion and Loretta's two boys.

And here is something else: I had been stung by bees before, and although the stings had swelled more than is perhaps usual (I can't really say for sure), I had never died of them. That was only for my brother, a terrible trap which had been laid for him in his very making, a trap which I had somehow escaped. But as I crossed my eyes until they hurt in an effort to focus on the bee, logic did not exist. It was the bee that existed, only that, the bee that had killed my brother, killed him so bad that my father had slipped down the straps of his overalls so he could take off his shirt and cover Dan's swelled, engorged face. Even in the depths of his grief he had done that, because he didn't want his wife to see what had become of her firstborn. Now the bee had returned, and now it would kill me. It would kill me and I would die in convulsions on the bank, flopping just as a brookie flops after you take the hook out of its mouth.

As I sat there trembling on the edge of panic—of simply bolting to my feet and then bolting anywhere—there came a report from behind me. It was as sharp and peremptory as a pistol-shot, but I knew it wasn't a pistol-

shot; it was someone clapping his hands. One single clap. At the moment it came, the bee tumbled off my nose and fell into my lap. It lay there on my pants with its legs sticking up and its stinger a threatless black thread against the old scuffed brown of the corduroy. It was dead as a doornail, I saw that at once. At the same moment, the pole gave another tug—the hardest yet—and I almost lost it again.

I grabbed it with both hands and gave it a big stupid yank that would have made my father clutch his head with both hands, if he had been there to see it. A rainbow trout, a good bit larger than the one I had already caught, rose out of the water in a wet, writhing flash, spraying fine drops of water from its filament of tail—it looked like one of those romanticized fishing pictures they used to put on the covers of men's magazines like *True* and *Man's Adventure* back in the forties and fifties. At that moment hauling in a big one was about the last thing on my mind, however, and when the line snapped and the fish fell back into the stream, I barely noticed. I looked over my shoulder to see who had clapped. A man was standing above me, at the edge of the trees. His face was very long and pale. His black hair was combed tight against his skull and parted with rigorous care on the left side of his narrow head. He was very tall. He was wearing a black three-piece suit, and I knew right away that he was not a human being, because his eyes were the orangey-red of flames in a woodstove. I don't just mean the irises, because he had no irises, and no pupils, and certainly no whites. His eyes were completely orange—an orange that shifted and flickered. And it's really too late not to say exactly what I mean, isn't it? He was on fire inside, and his eyes were like the little isinglass portholes you sometimes see in stove doors.

My bladder let go, and the scuffed brown the dead bee was lying on went a darker brown. I was hardly aware of

what had happened, and I couldn't take my eyes off the man standing on top of the bank and looking down at me, the man who had walked out of thirty miles of trackless western Maine woods in a fine black suit and narrow shoes of gleaming leather. I could see the watch-chain looped across his vest glittering in the summer sunshine. There was not so much as a single pine-needle on him. And he was smiling at me.

"Why, it's a fisherboy!" he cried in a mellow, pleasing voice. "Imagine that! Are we well-met, fisherboy?"

"Hello, sir," I said. The voice that came out of me did not tremble, but it didn't sound like my voice, either. It sounded older. Like Dan's voice, maybe. Or my father's, even. And all I could think was that maybe he would let me go if I pretended not to see what he was. If I pretended I didn't see there were flames glowing and dancing where his eyes should have been.

"I've saved you a nasty sting, perhaps," he said, and then, to my horror, he came down the bank to where I sat with a dead bee in my wet lap and a bamboo fishing pole in my nerveless hands. His slicksoled city shoes should have slipped on the low, grassy weeds which dressed the steep bank, but they didn't; nor did they leave tracks behind, I saw. Where his feet had touched—or seemed to touch—there was not a single broken twig, crushed leaf, or trampled shoeshape.

Even before he reached me, I recognized the aroma baking up from the skin under the suit—the smell of burned matches. The smell of sulfur. The man in the black suit was the Devil. He had walked out of the deep woods between Motton and Kashwakamak, and now he was standing here beside me. From the corner of one eye I could see a hand as pale as the hand of a store window dummy. The fingers were hideously long.

He hunkered beside me on his hams, his knees popping just as the knees of any normal man might, but when he moved his hands so they dangled between his knees, I saw that each of those long fingers ended in what was not a fingernail but a long yellow claw

“You didn’t answer my question, fisherboy,” he said in his mellow voice. It was, now that I think of it, like the voice of one of those radio announcers on the big-band shows years later, the ones that would sell Geritol and Serutan and Ovaltine and Dr. Grabow pipes. “Are we well-met?”

“Please don’t hurt me,” I whispered, in a voice so low I could barely hear it. I was more afraid than I could ever write down, more afraid than I want to remember . . . but I do. I do. It never even crossed my mind to hope I was having a dream, although I might have, I suppose, if I had been older. But I wasn’t older; I was nine, and I knew the truth when it squatted down on its hunkers beside me. I knew a hawk from a handsaw, as my father would have said. The man who had come out of the woods on that Saturday afternoon in midsummer was the Devil, and inside the empty holes of his eyes, his brains were burning.

“Oh, do I smell something?” he asked, as if he hadn’t heard me . . . although I knew he had. “Do I smell something . . . wet?”

He leaned forward toward me with his nose stuck out, like some one who means to smell a flower. And I noticed an awful thing; as the shadow of his head travelled over the bank, the grass beneath it turned yellow and died. He lowered his head toward my pants and sniffed. His glaring eyes half-closed, as if he had inhaled some sublime aroma and wanted to concentrate on nothing but that.

“Oh, bad!” he cried. “Lovely-bad!” And then he chanted: “Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary’s

lemonade!” Then he threw himself on his back in the little flat place and laughed wildly. It was the sound of a lunatic.

I thought about running, but my legs seemed two counties away from my brain. I wasn’t crying, though; I had wet my pants like a baby, but I wasn’t crying. I was too scared to cry. I suddenly knew that I was going to die, and probably painfully, but the worst of it was that that might not be the worst of it.

The worst of it might come later. After I was dead.

He sat up suddenly, the smell of burnt matches fluffing out from his suit and making me feel all gaggy in my throat. He looked at me solemnly from his narrow white face and burning eyes, but there was a sense of laughter about him, too. There was always that sense of laughter about him.

“Sad news, fisherboy,” he said. “I’ve come with sad news.”

I could only look at him—the black suit, the fine black shoes, the long white fingers that ended not in nails but in talons.

“Your mother is dead.”

“No!” I cried. I thought of her making bread, of the curl lying across her forehead and just touching her eyebrow, standing there in the strong morning sunlight, and the terror swept over me again . . . but not for myself this time. Then I thought of how she’d looked when I set off with my fishing pole, standing in the kitchen doorway with her hand shading her eyes, and how she had looked to me in that moment like a photograph of someone you expected to see again but never did. “No, you lie!” I screamed.

He smiled—the sadly patient smile of a man who has often been accused falsely. “I’m afraid not,” he said. “It was the same thing that happened to your brother, Gary. It was a bee.”

“No, that’s not true,” I said, and now I did begin to cry. “She’s old, she’s thirty-five, if a bee-sting could kill her the way it did Danny she would have died a long time ago and you’re a lying bastard!”

I had called the Devil a lying bastard. On some level I was aware of this, but the entire front of my mind was taken up by the enormity of what he’d said. My mother dead? He might as well have told me that there was a new ocean where the Rockies had been. But I believed him. On some level I believed him completely, as we always believe, on some level, the worst thing our hearts can imagine.

“I understand your grief, little fisherboy, but that particular argument just doesn’t hold water, I’m afraid.” He spoke in a tone of bogus comfort that was horrible, maddening, without remorse or pity. “A man can go his whole life without seeing a mockingbird, you know, but does that mean mockingbirds don’t exist? Your mother—”

A fish jumped below us. The man in the black suit frowned, then pointed a finger at it. The trout convulsed in the air, its body bending so strenuously that for a split-second it appeared to be snapping at its own tail, and when it fell back into Castle Stream it was floating lifelessly, dead. It struck the big gray rock where the waters divided, spun around twice in the whirlpool eddy that formed there, and then floated off in the direction of Castle Rock. Meanwhile, the terrible stranger turned his burning eyes on me again, his thin lips pulled back from tiny rows of sharp teeth in a cannibal smile.

“Your mother simply went through her entire life without being stung by a bee,” he said. “But then—less than an hour ago, actually— one flew in through the kitchen window while she was taking the bread out of the oven and putting it on the counter to cool.”

“No, I won’t hear this, I won’t hear this, I won’t!”

I raised my hands and clapped them over my ears. He pursed his lips as if to whistle and blew at me gently. It was only a little breath, but the stench was foul beyond belief—clogged sewers, outhouses that have never known a single sprinkle of lime, dead chickens after a flood.

My hands fell away from the sides of my face.

“Good,” he said. “You need to hear this, Gary; you need to hear this, my little fisherboy. It was your mother who passed that fatal weakness on to your brother Dan; you got some of it, but you also got a protection from your father that poor Dan somehow missed.” He pursed his lips again, only this time, he made a cruelly comic little tsksk sound instead of blowing his nasty breath at me. “So, although I don’t like to speak ill of the dead, it’s almost a case of poetic justice, isn’t it? After all, she killed your brother Dan as surely as if she had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger.”

“No,” I whispered. “No, it isn’t true.”

“I assure you it is,” he said. “The bee flew in the window and lit on her neck. She slapped at it before she even knew what she was doing—you were wiser than that, weren’t you, Gary?—and the bee stung her. She felt her throat start to close up at once. That’s what happens, you know, to people who are allergic to bee-venom. Their throats close and they drown in the open air. That’s why Dan’s face was so swollen and purple. That’s why your father covered it with his shirt.”

I stared at him, now incapable of speech. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn’t want to believe him, and knew from my church schooling that the devil is the father of lies, but I did believe him, just the same. I believed he had been standing there in our dooryard, looking in the kitchen window, as my mother fell to her knees, clutching at her swollen throat while Candy Bill danced around her, barking shrilly.

“She made the most wonderfully awful noises,” the man in the black suit said reflectively, “and she scratched her face quite badly, I’m afraid. Her eyes bulged out like a frog’s eyes. She wept.” He paused, then added: “She wept as she died, isn’t that sweet? And here’s the most beautiful thing of all. After she was dead . . . after she had been lying on the floor for fifteen minutes or so with no sound but the stove ticking and with that little stick of a bee-stinger still poking out of the side of her neck—so small, so small—do you know what Candy Bill did? That little rascal licked away her tears. First on one side . . . and then on the other.”

He looked out at the stream for a moment, his face sad and thoughtful. Then he turned back to me and his expression of bereavement disappeared like a dream. His face was as slack and avid as the face of a corpse that has died hungry. His eyes blazed. I could see his sharp little teeth between his pale lips.

“I’m starving,” he said abruptly. “I’m going to kill you and tear you open and eat your guts, little fisherboy. What do you think about that?”

No, I tried to say, please, no, but no sound came out. He meant to do it, I saw. He really meant to do it.

“I’m just so hungry,” he said, both petulant and teasing. “And you won’t want to live without your precious mommy, anyhow, take my word for it. Because your father’s the sort of man who’ll have to have some warm hole to stick it in, believe me, and if you’re the only one available, you’re the one who’ll have to serve. I’ll save you all that discomfort and unpleasantness. Also, you’ll go to Heaven, think of that. Murdered souls always go to Heaven. So we’ll both be serving God this afternoon, Gary. Isn’t that nice?”

He reached for me again with his long, pale hands, and without thinking what I was doing, I flipped open the top of my creel, pawed all the way down to the bottom, and

brought out the monster brookie I'd caught earlier—the one I should have been satisfied with. I held it out to him blindly, my fingers in the red slit of its belly from which I had removed its insides as the man in the black suit had threatened to remove mine. The fish's glazed eye stared dreamily at me, the gold ring around the black center reminding me of my mother's wedding ring. And in that moment I saw her lying in her coffin with the sun shining off the wedding band and knew it was true—she had been stung by a bee, she had drowned in the warm, bread-smelling kitchen air, and Candy Bill had licked her dying tears from her swollen cheeks.

“Big fish!” the man in the black suit cried in a guttural, greedy voice. “Oh, biiig fiiish!”

He snatched it away from me and crammed it into a mouth that opened wider than any human mouth ever could. Many years later, when I was sixty-five (I know it was sixty-five because that was the summer I retired from teaching), I went to the New England Aquarium and finally saw a shark. The mouth of the man in the black suit was like that shark's mouth when it opened, only his gullet was blazing red, the same color as his awful eyes, and I felt heat bake out of it and into my face, the way you feel a sudden wave of heat come pushing out of a fireplace when a dry piece of wood catches alight. And I didn't imagine that heat, either, I know I didn't, because just before he slid the head of my nineteen-inch brook trout between his gaping jaws, I saw the scales along the sides of the fish rise up and begin to curl like bits of paper floating over an open incinerator.

He slid the fish in like a man in a travelling show swallowing a sword. He didn't chew, and his blazing eyes bulged out, as if in effort. The fish went in and went in, his throat bulged as it slid down his gullet, and now he began to

cry tears of his own . . . except his tears were blood, scarlet and thick.

I think it was the sight of those bloody tears that gave me my body back. I don't know why that should have been, but I think it was. I bolted to my feet like a jack released from its box, turned with my bamboo pole still in one hand, and fled up the bank, bending over and tearing tough bunches of weeds out with my free hand in an effort to get up the slope more quickly.

He made a strangled, furious noise—the sound of any man with his mouth too full—and I looked back just as I got to the top. He was coming after me, the back of his suit-coat flapping and his thin gold watch-chain flashing and winking in the sun. The tail of the fish was still protruding from his mouth and I could smell the rest of it, roasting in the oven of his throat.

He reached for me, groping with his talons, and I fled along the top of the bank. After a hundred yards or so I found my voice and went to screaming—screaming in fear, of course, but also screaming in grief for my beautiful dead mother.

He was coming along after me. I could hear snapping branches and whipping bushes, but I didn't look back again. I lowered my head, slitted my eyes against the bushes and low-hanging branches along the stream's bank, and ran as fast as I could. And at every step I expected to feel his hands descending on my shoulders pulling me back into a final hot hug.

That didn't happen. Some unknown length of time later—it couldn't have been longer than five or ten minutes, I suppose, but it seemed like forever—I saw the bridge through layerings of leaves and firs. Still screaming, but breathlessly now, sounding like a teakettle which has almost boiled dry, I reached this second, steeper bank and charged up to it.

Halfway to the top I slipped to my knees, looked over my shoulder, and saw the man in the black suit almost at my heels, his white face pulled into a convulsion of fury and greed. His cheeks were splattered with his bloody tears and his shark's mouth hung open like a hinge.

"Fisherboy!" he snarled, and started up the bank after me, grasping at my foot with one long hand. I tore free, turned, and threw my fishing pole at him. He batted it down easily, but it tangled his feet up somehow and he went to his knees. I didn't wait to see anymore; I turned and bolted to the top of the slope. I almost slipped at the very top, but managed to grab one of the support struts running beneath the bridge and save myself.

"You can't get away, fisherboy!" he cried from behind me. He sounded furious, but he also sounded as if he were laughing. "It takes more than a mouthful of trout to fill me up!"

"Leave me alone!" I screamed back at him. I grabbed the bridge's railing and threw myself over it in a clumsy somersault, filling my hands with splinters and bumping my head so hard on the boards when I came down that I saw stars. I rolled over onto my belly and began crawling. I lurched to my feet just before I got to the end of the bridge, stumbled once, found my rhythm, and then began to run. I ran as only nine-year-old boys can run, which is like the wind. It felt as if my feet only touched the ground with every third or fourth stride, and for all I know, that may be true. I ran straight up the righthand wheelrut in the road, ran until my temples pounded and my eyes pulsed in their sockets, ran until I had a hot stitch in my left side from the bottom of my ribs to my armpit, ran until I could taste blood and something like metal-shavings in the back of my throat. When I couldn't run anymore I stumbled to a stop and looked back over my shoulder, puffing and blowing like a

windbroke horse. I was convinced I would see him standing right there behind me in his natty black suit, the watch-chain a glittering loop across his vest and not a hair out of place.

But he was gone. The road stretching back toward Castle Stream between the darkly massed pines and spruces was empty. And yet I sensed him somewhere near in those woods, watching me with his grassfire eyes, smelling of burnt matches and roasted fish.

I turned and began walking as fast as I could, limping a little—I'd pulled muscles in both legs, and when I got out of bed the next morning I was so sore I could barely walk. I didn't notice those things then, though. I just kept looking over my shoulder, needing again and again to verify that the road behind me was still empty. It was, each time I looked, but those backward glances seemed to increase my fear rather than lessening it. The firs looked darker, massier, and I kept imagining what lay behind the trees which marched beside the road—long, tangled corridors of forest, leg-breaking deadfalls, ravines where anything might live. Until that Saturday in 1914, I had thought that bears were the worst thing the forest could hold.

Now I knew better

A mile or so further up the road, just beyond the place where it came out of the woods and joined the Geegan Flat Road, I saw my father walking toward me and whistling "The Old Oaken Bucket." He was carrying his own rod, the one with the fancy spinning reel from Monkey Ward. In his other hand he had his creel, the one with the ribbon my mother had woven through the handle back when Dan was still alive. DEDICATED TO JESUS, that ribbon said. I had been walking but when I saw him I started to run again, screaming Dad! Dad! Dad! at the top of my lungs and staggering from side to side on my tired, sprung legs like a drunken sailor.

The expression of surprise on his face when he recognized me might have been comical under other circumstances, but not under these. He dropped his rod and creel into the road without so much as a downward glance at them and ran to me. It was the fastest I ever saw my Dad run in his life; when we came together it was a wonder the impact didn't knock us both senseless, and I struck my face on his belt-buckle hard enough to start a little nosebleed. I didn't notice that until later, though. Right then I only reached out my arms and clutched him as hard as I could. I held on and rubbed my hot face back and forth against his belly, covering his old blue workshirt with blood and tears and snot.

“Gary, what is it? What happened? Are you all right?”

“Ma's dead!” I sobbed. “I met a man in the woods and he told me! Ma's dead! She got stung by a bee and it swelled her all up just like what happened to Dan, and she's dead! She's on the kitchen floor and Candy Bill . . . licked the t-t-tears . . . off her . . . off her . . .”

Face was the last word I had to say, but by then my chest was hitching so bad I couldn't get it out. My tears were flowing again, and my Dad's startled, frightened face had blurred into three overlapping images. I began to howl—not like a little kid who's skun his knee but like a dog that's seen something bad by moonlight—and my father pressed my head against his hard flat stomach again. I slipped out from under his hand, though, and looked back over my shoulder. I wanted to make sure the man in the black suit wasn't coming. There was no sign of him; the road winding back into the woods was completely empty. I promised myself I would never go back down that road again, not ever, no matter what, and I suppose now God's greatest blessing to His creatures below is that they can't see the future. It might have broken my mind if I had known I would be going back down that road, and not two hours later. For that moment,

though, I was only relieved to see we were still alone. Then I thought of my mother—my beautiful dead mother—and laid my face back against my father’s stomach and bawled some more.

“Gary, listen to me,” he said a moment or two later. I went on bawling. He gave me a little longer to do that, then reached down and lifted my chin so he could look into my face and I could look into his. “Your Mom’s fine,” he said.

I could only look at him with tears streaming down my cheeks. I didn’t believe him.

“I don’t know who told you different, or what kind of dirty dog would want to put a scare like that into a little boy, but I swear to God your mother’s fine.”

“But . . . but he said . . .”

“I don’t care what he said. I got back from Eversham’s earlier than I expected—he doesn’t want to sell any cows, it’s all just talk—and decided I had time to catch up with you. I got my pole and my creel and your mother made us a couple of jelly fold-overs. Her new bread. Still warm. So she was fine half an hour ago, Gary, and there’s nobody knows any different that’s come from this direction, I guarantee you. Not in just half an hour’s time.” He looked over my shoulder. “Who was this man? And where was he? I’m going to find him and thrash him within an inch of his life.”

I thought a thousand things in just two seconds—that’s what it seemed like, anyway—but the last thing I thought was the most powerful: if my Dad met up with the man in the black suit, I didn’t think my Dad would be the one to do the thrashing. Or the walking away.

I kept remembering those long white fingers, and the talons at the ends of them.

“Gary?”

“I don’t know that I remember,” I said.

“Were you where the stream splits? The big rock?”

I could never lie to my father when he asked a direct question— not to save his life or mine. “Yes, but don’t go down there.” I seized his arm with both hands and tugged it hard. “Please don’t. He was a scary man.” Inspiration struck like an illuminating lightning-bolt. “I think he had a gun.”

He looked at me thoughtfully. “Maybe there wasn’t a man,” he said, lifting his voice a little on the last word and turning it into something that was almost but not quite a question. “Maybe you fell asleep while you were fishing, son, and had a bad dream. Like the ones you had about Danny last winter.”

I had had a lot of bad dreams about Dan last winter, dreams where I would open the door to our closet or to the dark, fruity interior of the cider shed and see him standing there and looking at me out of his purple strangulated face; from many of these dreams I had awakened screaming, and awakened my parents, as well. I had fallen asleep on the bank of the stream for a little while, too—dozed off, anyway—but I hadn’t dreamed and I was sure I had awakened just before the man in the black suit clapped the bee dead, sending it tumbling off my nose and into my lap. I hadn’t dreamed him the way I had dreamed Dan, I was quite sure of that, although my meeting with him had already attained a dreamlike quality in my mind, as I suppose supernatural occurrences always must. But if my Dad thought that the man had only existed in my own head, that might be better. Better for him.

“It might have been, I guess,” I said.

“Well, we ought to go back and find your rod and your creel.”

He actually started in that direction, and I had to tug frantically at his arm to stop him again, and turn him back toward me.

“Later,” I said. “Please, Dad? I want to see Mother. I’ve got to see her with my own eyes.”

He thought that over, then nodded. “Yes, I suppose you do. We’ll go home first, and get your rod and creel later.”

So we walked back to the farm together, my father with his fishpole propped on his shoulder just like one of my friends, me carrying his creel, both of us eating folded-over slices of my mother’s bread smeared with blackcurrant jam.

“Did you catch anything?” he asked as we came in sight of the barn.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “A rainbow. Pretty good-sized.” And a brookie that was a lot bigger, I thought but didn’t say. Biggest one I ever saw, to tell the truth, but I don’t have that one to show you, Dad. I gave that one to the man in the black suit, so he wouldn’t eat me. And it worked . . . but just barely.

“That’s all? Nothing else?”

“After I caught it I fell asleep.” This was not really an answer, but not really a lie, either.

“Lucky you didn’t lose your pole. You didn’t, did you, Gary?”

“No, sir,” I said, very reluctantly. Lying about that would do no good even if I’d been able to think up a whopper—not if he was set on going back to get my creel anyway, and I could see by his face that he was.

Up ahead, Candy Bill came racing out of the back door, barking his shrill bark and wagging his whole rear end back and forth the way Scotties do when they’re excited. I couldn’t wait any longer; hope and anxiety bubbled up in my throat like foam. I broke away from my father and ran to the house, still lugging his creel and still convinced, in my heart of hearts, that I was going to find my mother dead on the kitchen floor with her face swelled and purple like Dan’s had been when my father carried him in from the west field, crying and calling the name of Jesus.

But she was standing at the counter, just as well and fine as when I had left her, humming a song as she shelled peas into a bowl. She looked around at me, first in surprise and then in fright as she took in my wide eyes and pale cheeks. “Gary, what is it? What’s the matter?”

I didn’t answer, only ran to her and covered her with kisses. At some point my father came in and said, “Don’t worry, Lo—he’s all right. He just had one of his bad dreams, down there by the brook.”

“Pray God it’s the last of them,” she said, and hugged me tighter while Candy Bill danced around our feet, barking his shrill bark.

“You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to, Gary,” my father said, although he had already made it clear that he thought I should—that I should go back, that I should face my fear, as I suppose folks would say nowadays. That’s very well for fearful things that are make-believe, but two hours hadn’t done much to change my conviction that the man in the black suit had been real. I wouldn’t be able to convince my father of that, though. I don’t think there was a nineyear-old that ever lived who would have been able to convince his father he’d seen the Devil come walking out of the woods in a black suit.

“I’ll come,” I said. I had walked out of the house to join him before he left, mustering all my courage in order to get my feet moving, and now we were standing by the chopping-block in the side yard, not far from the woodpile.

“What you got behind your back?” he asked.

I brought it out slowly. I would go with him, and I would hope the man in the black suit with the arrow-straight part down the left side of his head was gone . . . but if he wasn’t, I wanted to be prepared. As prepared as I could be, anyway. I had the family Bible in the hand I had brought out

from behind my back. I'd set out just to bring my New Testament, which I had won for memorizing the most psalms in the Thursday night Youth Fellowship competition (I managed eight, although most of them except the Twenty-third had floated out of my mind in a week's time), but the little red Testament didn't seem like enough when you were maybe going to face the Devil himself, not even when the words of Jesus were marked out in red ink.

My father looked at the old Bible, swelled with family documents and pictures, and I thought he'd tell me to put it back, but he didn't. A look of mixed grief and sympathy crossed his face, and he nodded. "All right," he said. "Does your mother know you took that?"

"No, sir."

He nodded again. "Then we'll hope she doesn't spot it gone before we get back. Come on. And don't drop it."

Half an hour or so later, the two of us stood on the bank looking down at the place where Castle Stream forked, and at the flat place where I'd had my encounter with the man with the red-orange eyes. I had my bamboo rod in my hand—I'd picked it up below the bridge—and my creel lay down below, on the flat place. Its wicker top was flipped back. We stood looking down, my father and I, for a long time, and neither of us said anything.

Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary's lemonade! That had been his unpleasant little poem, and once he had recited it, he had thrown himself on his back, laughing like a child who has just discovered he has enough courage to say bathroom words like shit or piss. The flat place down there was as green and lush as any place in Maine that the sun can get to in early July . . . except where the stranger had lain. There the grass was dead and yellow in the shape of a man.

I looked down and saw I was holding our lumpy old family Bible straight out in front of me with both thumbs pressing so hard on the cover that they were white. It was the way Mama Sweet's husband Norville held a willow-fork when he was trying to dowse somebody a well.

"Stay here," my father said at last, and skidded sideways down the bank, digging his shoes into the rich soft soil and holding his arms out for balance. I stood where I was, holding the Bible stiffly out at the ends of my arms like a willow-fork, my heart thumping wildly. I don't know if I had a sense of being watched that time or not; I was too scared to have a sense of anything, except for a sense of wanting to be far away from that place and those woods.

My Dad bent down, sniffed at where the grass was dead, and grimaced. I knew what he was smelling: something like burnt matches. Then he grabbed my creel and came on back up the bank, hurrying. He snagged one fast look over his shoulder to make sure nothing was coming along behind. Nothing was. When he handed me the creel, the lid was still hanging back on its cunning little leather hinges. I looked inside and saw nothing but two handfuls of grass.

"Thought you said you caught a rainbow," my father said, "but maybe you dreamed that, too."

Something in his voice stung me. "No, sir," I said. "I caught one."

"Well, it sure as hell didn't flop out, not if it was gutted and cleaned. And you wouldn't put a catch into your fisherbox without doing that, would you, Gary? I taught you better than that."

"Yes, sir, you did, but—"

"So if you didn't dream catching it and if it was dead in the box, something must have come along and eaten it," my father said, and then he grabbed another quick glance over his shoulder, eyes wide, as if he had heard something

move in the woods. I wasn't exactly surprised to see drops of sweat standing out on his forehead like big clear jewels. "Come on," he said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

I was for that, and we went back along the bank to the bridge, walking quick without speaking. When we got there, my Dad dropped to one knee and examined the place where we'd found my rod. There was another patch of dead grass there, and the lady's slipper was all brown and curled in on itself, as if a blast of heat had charred it. While my father did this, I looked in my empty creel.

"He must have gone back and eaten my other fish, too," I said.

My father looked up at me. "Other fish!"

"Yes, sir. I didn't tell you, but I caught a brookie, too. A big one. He was awful hungry, that fella." I wanted to say more, and the words trembled just behind my lips, but in the end I didn't.

We climbed up to the bridge and helped one another over the railing. My father took my creel, looked into it, then went to the railing and threw it over. I came up beside him in time to see it splash down and float away like a boat, riding lower and lower in the stream as the water poured in between the wicker weavings.

"It smelled bad," my father said, but he didn't look at me when he said it, and his voice sounded oddly defensive. It was the only time I ever heard him speak just that way.

"Yes, sir."

"We'll tell your mother we couldn't find it. If she asks. If she doesn't ask, we won't tell her anything."

"No, sir, we won't."

And she didn't and we didn't and that's the way it was.

That day in the woods is eighty-one years gone, and for many of the years in between I have never even thought of it . . .

not awake, at least. Like any other man or woman who ever lived, I can't say about my dreams, not for sure. But now I'm old, and I dream awake, it seems. My infirmities have crept up like waves which will soon take a child's abandoned sand castle, and my memories have also crept up, making me think of some old rhyme that went, in part, "Just leave them alone/And they'll come home/Wagging their tails behind them." I remember meals I ate, games I played, girls I kissed in the school cloakroom when we played Post Office, boys I chummed with, the first drink I ever took, the first cigarette I ever smoked (corn shuck behind Dicky Hammer's pig-shed, and I threw up). Yet of all the memories, the one of the man in the black suit is the strongest, and glows with its own spectral, haunted light. He was real, he was the Devil, and that day I was either his errand or his luck. I feel more and more strongly that escaping him was my luck—just luck, and not the intercession of the God I have worshipped and sung hymns to all my life.

As I lie here in my nursing-home room, and in the ruined sand castle that is my body, I tell myself that I need not fear the Devil—that I have lived a good, kindly life, and I need not fear the Devil. Sometimes I remind myself that it was I, not my father, who finally coaxed my mother back to church later on that summer. In the dark, however, these thoughts have no power to ease or comfort. In the dark comes a voice which whispers that the nine-year-old boy I was had done nothing for which he might legitimately fear the devil either . . . and yet the Devil came. And in the dark I sometimes hear that voice drop even lower, into ranges which are inhuman. Big fish! it whispers in tones of hushed greed, and all the truths of the moral world fall to ruin before its hunger. Biiig fiiish!

The Devil came to me once, long ago; suppose he were to come again now? I am too old to run now; I can't even get

to the bathroom and back without my walker. I have no fine large brook trout with which to propitiate him, either, even for a moment or two; I am old and my creel is empty. Suppose he were to come back and find me so?

And suppose he is still hungry?

The Lottery

by Shirley Jackson

The morning of June 27th was clear and sunny, with the fresh warmth of a full-summer day; the flowers were blossoming profusely and the grass was richly green. The people of the village began to gather in the square, between the post office and the bank, around ten o'clock; in some towns there were so many people that the lottery took two days and had to be started on June 2th. but in this village, where there were only about three hundred people, the whole lottery took less than two hours, so it could begin at ten o'clock in the morning and still be through in time to allow the villagers to get home for noon dinner.

The children assembled first, of course. School was recently over for the summer, and the feeling of liberty sat uneasily on most of them; they tended to gather together quietly for a while before they broke into boisterous play. and their talk was still of the classroom and the teacher, of books and reprimands. Bobby Martin had already stuffed his pockets full of stones, and the other boys soon followed his example, selecting the smoothest and roundest stones; Bobby and Harry Jones and Dickie Delacroix-- the villagers pronounced this name "Dellacroy"--eventually made a great pile of stones in one corner of the square and guarded it against the raids of the other boys. The girls stood aside, talking among themselves, looking over their shoulders at rolled in the dust or clung to the hands of their older brothers or sisters.

Soon the men began to gather. surveying their own children, speaking of planting and rain, tractors and taxes. They stood together, away from the pile of stones in the corner, and their

jokes were quiet and they smiled rather than laughed. The women, wearing faded house dresses and sweaters, came shortly after their menfolk. They greeted one another and exchanged bits of gossip as they went to join their husbands. Soon the women, standing by their husbands, began to call to their children, and the children came reluctantly, having to be called four or five times. Bobby Martin ducked under his mother's grasping hand and ran, laughing, back to the pile of stones. His father spoke up sharply, and Bobby came quickly and took his place between his father and his oldest brother.

The lottery was conducted--as were the square dances, the teen club, the Halloween program--by Mr. Summers. who had time and energy to devote to civic activities. He was a round-faced, jovial man and he ran the coal business, and people were sorry for him. because he had no children and his wife was a scold. When he arrived in the square, carrying the black wooden box, there was a murmur of conversation among the villagers, and he waved and called. "Little late today, folks." The postmaster, Mr. Graves, followed him, carrying a three- legged stool, and the stool was put in the center of the square and Mr. Summers set the black box down on it. The villagers kept their distance, leaving a space between themselves and the stool. and when Mr. Summers said, "Some of you fellows want to give me a hand?" there was a hesitation before two men. Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter. came forward to hold the box steady on the stool while Mr. Summers stirred up the papers inside it.

The original paraphernalia for the lottery had been lost long ago, and the black box now resting on the stool had been put into use even before Old Man Warner, the oldest man in town, was born. Mr. Summers spoke frequently to the villagers about making a new box, but no one liked to upset

even as much tradition as was represented by the black box. There was a story that the present box had been made with some pieces of the box that had preceded it, the one that had been constructed when the first people settled down to make a village here. Every year, after the lottery, Mr. Summers began talking again about a new box, but every year the subject was allowed to fade off without anything's being done. The black box grew shabbier each year: by now it was no longer completely black but splintered badly along one side to show the original wood color, and in some places faded or stained.

Mr. Martin and his oldest son, Baxter, held the black box securely on the stool until Mr. Summers had stirred the papers thoroughly with his hand. Because so much of the ritual had been forgotten or discarded, Mr. Summers had been successful in having slips of paper substituted for the chips of wood that had been used for generations. Chips of wood, Mr. Summers had argued, had been all very well when the village was tiny, but now that the population was more than three hundred and likely to keep on growing, it was necessary to use something that would fit more easily into the black box. The night before the lottery, Mr. Summers and Mr. Graves made up the slips of paper and put them in the box, and it was then taken to the safe of Mr. Summers' coal company and locked up until Mr. Summers was ready to take it to the square next morning. The rest of the year, the box was put away, sometimes one place, sometimes another; it had spent one year in Mr. Graves's barn and another year underfoot in the post office. and sometimes it was set on a shelf in the Martin grocery and left there.

There was a great deal of fussing to be done before Mr. Summers declared the lottery open. There were the lists to make up--of heads of families. heads of households in each family. members of each household in each family.

There was the proper swearing-in of Mr. Summers by the postmaster, as the official of the lottery; at one time, some people remembered, there had been a recital of some sort, performed by the official of the lottery, a perfunctory, tuneless chant that had been rattled off duly each year; some people believed that the official of the lottery used to stand just so when he said or sang it, others believed that he was supposed to walk among the people, but years and years ago this part of the ritual had been allowed to lapse. There had been, also, a ritual salute, which the official of the lottery had had to use in addressing each person who came up to draw from the box, but this also had changed with time, until now it was felt necessary only for the official to speak to each person approaching. Mr. Summers was very good at all this; in his clean white shirt and blue jeans, with one hand resting carelessly on the black box, he seemed very proper and important as he talked interminably to Mr. Graves and the Martins.

Just as Mr. Summers finally left off talking and turned to the assembled villagers, Mrs. Hutchinson came hurriedly along the path to the square, her sweater thrown over her shoulders, and slid into place in the back of the crowd. "Clean forgot what day it was," she said to Mrs. Delacroix, who stood next to her, and they both laughed softly. "Thought my old man was out back stacking wood," Mrs. Hutchinson went on. "and then I looked out the window and the kids was gone, and then I remembered it was the twentyseventh and came a-running." She dried her hands on her apron, and Mrs. Delacroix said, "You're in time, though. They're still talking away up there."

Mrs. Hutchinson craned her neck to see through the crowd and found her husband and children standing near the front. She tapped Mrs. Delacroix on the arm as a farewell and began to make her way through the crowd. The people

separated good-humoredly to let her through: two or three people said. in voices just loud enough to be heard across the crowd, "Here comes your, Missus, Hutchinson," and "Bill, she made it after all." Mrs. Hutchinson reached her husband, and Mr. Summers, who had been waiting, said cheerfully. "Thought we were going to have to get on without you, Tessie." Mrs. Hutchinson said. grinning, "Wouldn't have me leave m'dishes in the sink, now, would you. Joe?," and soft laughter ran through the crowd as the people stirred back into position after Mrs. Hutchinson's arrival.

"Well, now." Mr. Summers said soberly, "guess we better get started, get this over with, so's we can go back to work. Anybody ain't here?"

"Dunbar." several people said. "Dunbar. Dunbar."

Mr. Summers consulted his list. "Clyde Dunbar." he said. "That's right. He's broke his leg, hasn't he? Who's drawing for him?"

"Me. I guess," a woman said. and Mr. Summers turned to look at her. "Wife draws for her husband." Mr. Summers said. "Don't you have a grown boy to do it for you, Janey?" Although Mr. Summers and everyone else in the village knew the answer perfectly well, it was the business of the official of the lottery to ask such questions formally. Mr. Summers waited with an expression of polite interest while Mrs. Dunbar answered.

"Horace's not but sixteen vet." Mrs. Dunbar said regretfully. "Guess I gotta fill in for the old man this year."

"Right." Sr. Summers said. He made a note on the list he was holding. Then he asked, "Watson boy drawing this year?"

A tall boy in the crowd raised his hand. "Here," he said. "I'm drawing for my mother and me." He blinked his eyes nervously and ducked his head as several voices in the

crowd said things like "Good fellow, luck." and "Glad to see your mother's got a man to do it."

"Well," Mr. Summers said, "guess that's everyone. Old Man Warner make it?"

"Here," a voice said. and Mr. Summers nodded.

A sudden hush fell on the crowd as Mr. Summers cleared his throat and looked at the list. "All ready?" he called. "Now, I'll read the names--heads of families first--and the men come up and take a paper out of the box. Keep the paper folded in your hand without looking at it until everyone has had a turn. Everything clear?"

The people had done it so many times that they only half listened to the directions: most of them were quiet, wetting their lips, not looking around. Then Mr. Summers raised one hand high and said, "Adams." A man disengaged himself from the crowd and came forward. "Hi. Steve." Mr. Summers said. and Mr. Adams said. "Hi. Joe." They grinned at one another humorlessly and nervously. Then Mr. Adams reached into the black box and took out a folded paper. He held it firmly by one corner as he turned and went hastily back to his place in the crowd, where he stood a little apart from his family, not looking down at his hand.

"Allen." Mr. Summers said. "Anderson.... Bentham."

"Seems like there's no time at all between lotteries any more." Mrs. Delacroix said to Mrs. Graves in the back row.

"Seems like we got through with the last one only last week."

"Time sure goes fast.-- Mrs. Graves said.

"Clark.... Delacroix"

"There goes my old man." Mrs. Delacroix said. She held her breath while her husband went forward.

"Dunbar," Mr. Summers said, and Mrs. Dunbar went steadily to the box while one of the women said. "Go on. Janey," and another said, "There she goes."

"We're next." Mrs. Graves said. She watched while Mr. Graves came around from the side of the box, greeted Mr. Summers gravely and selected a slip of paper from the box. By now, all through the crowd there were men holding the small folded papers in their large hand, turning them over and over nervously. Mrs. Dunbar and her two sons stood together, Mrs. Dunbar holding the slip of paper.

"Harburt.... Hutchinson."

"Get up there, Bill," Mrs. Hutchinson said, and the people near her laughed.

"Jones."

"They do say," Mr. Adams said to Old Man Warner, who stood next to him, "that over in the north village they're talking of giving up the lottery."

Old Man Warner snorted. "Pack of crazy fools," he said. "Listening to the young folks, nothing's good enough for them. Next thing you know, they'll be wanting to go back to living in caves, nobody work any more, live that way for a while. Used to be a saying about 'Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon.' First thing you know, we'd all be eating stewed chickweed and acorns. There's always been a lottery," he added petulantly. "Bad enough to see young Joe Summers up there joking with everybody."

"Some places have already quit lotteries." Mrs. Adams said.

"Nothing but trouble in that," Old Man Warner said stoutly. "Pack of young fools."

"Martin." And Bobby Martin watched his father go forward. "Overdyke.... Percy."

"I wish they'd hurry," Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son. "I wish they'd hurry."

"They're almost through," her son said.

"You get ready to run tell Dad," Mrs. Dunbar said.

Mr. Summers called his own name and then stepped forward precisely and selected a slip from the box. Then he called, "Warner."

"Seventy-seventh year I been in the lottery," Old Man Warner said as he went through the crowd. "Seventy-seventh time."

"Watson" The tall boy came awkwardly through the crowd. Someone said, "Don't be nervous, Jack," and Mr. Summers said, "Take your time, son."

"Zanini."

After that, there was a long pause, a breathless pause, until Mr. Summers, holding his slip of paper in the air, said, "All right, fellows." For a minute, no one moved, and then all the slips of paper were opened. Suddenly, all the women began to speak at once, saying, "Who is it?," "Who's got it?," "Is it the Dunbars?," "Is it the Watsons?" Then the voices began to say, "It's Hutchinson. It's Bill," "Bill Hutchinson's got it."

"Go tell your father," Mrs. Dunbar said to her older son.

People began to look around to see the Hutchinsons. Bill Hutchinson was standing quiet, staring down at the paper in his hand. Suddenly, Tessie Hutchinson shouted to Mr. Summers, "You didn't give him time enough to take any paper he wanted. I saw you. It wasn't fair!"

"Be a good sport, Tessie." Mrs. Delacroix called, and Mrs. Graves said, "All of us took the same chance."

"Shut up, Tessie," Bill Hutchinson said.

"Well, everyone," Mr. Summers said, "that was done pretty fast, and now we've got to be hurrying a little more to get done in time." He consulted his next list. "Bill," he said, "you draw for the Hutchinson family. You got any other households in the Hutchinsons?"

"There's Don and Eva," Mrs. Hutchinson yelled. "Make them take their chance!"

"Daughters draw with their husbands' families, Tessie," Mr. Summers said gently. "You know that as well as anyone else."

"It wasn't fair," Tessie said.

"I guess not, Joe." Bill Hutchinson said regretfully. "My daughter draws with her husband's family; that's only fair. And I've got no other family except the kids."

"Then, as far as drawing for families is concerned, it's you," Mr. Summers said in explanation, "and as far as drawing for households is concerned, that's you, too. Right?"

"Right," Bill Hutchinson said.

"How many kids, Bill?" Mr. Summers asked formally.

"Three," Bill Hutchinson said.

"There's Bill, Jr., and Nancy, and little Dave. And Tessie and me."

"All right, then," Mr. Summers said. "Harry, you got their tickets back?"

Mr. Graves nodded and held up the slips of paper. "Put them in the box, then," Mr. Summers directed. "Take Bill's and put it in."

"I think we ought to start over," Mrs. Hutchinson said, as quietly as she could. "I tell you it wasn't fair. You didn't give him time enough to choose. Everybody saw that."

Mr. Graves had selected the five slips and put them in the box. and he dropped all the papers but those onto the ground. where the breeze caught them and lifted them off.

"Listen, everybody," Mrs. Hutchinson was saying to the people around her.

"Ready, Bill?" Mr. Summers asked. and Bill Hutchinson, with one quick glance around at his wife and children. nodded.

"Remember," Mr. Summers said. "take the slips and keep them folded until each person has taken one. Harry, you help little Dave." Mr. Graves took the hand of the little boy, who came willingly with him up to the box. "Take a paper out of the box, Davy." Mr. Summers said. Davy put his hand into the box and laughed. "Take just one paper." Mr. Summers said. "Harry, you hold it for him." Mr. Graves took the child's hand and removed the folded paper from the tight fist and held it while little Dave stood next to him and looked up at him wonderingly.

"Nancy next," Mr. Summers said. Nancy was twelve, and her school friends breathed heavily as she went forward switching her skirt, and took a slip daintily from the box "Bill, Jr.," Mr. Summers said, and Billy, his face red and his feet overlarge, near knocked the box over as he got a paper out. "Tessie," Mr. Summers said. She hesitated for a minute, looking around defiantly. and then set her lips and went up to the box. She snatched a paper out and held it behind her.

"Bill," Mr. Summers said, and Bill Hutchinson reached into the box and felt around, bringing his hand out at last with the slip of paper in it.

The crowd was quiet. A girl whispered, "I hope it's not Nancy," and the sound of the whisper reached the edges of the crowd.

"It's not the way it used to be." Old Man Warner said clearly. "People ain't the way they used to be."

"All right," Mr. Summers said. "Open the papers. Harry, you open little Dave's."

Mr. Graves opened the slip of paper and there was a general sigh through the crowd as he held it up and everyone could see that it was blank. Nancy and Bill. Jr.. opened theirs at the same time. and both beamed and laughed. turning around to the crowd and holding their slips of paper above their heads.

"Tessie," Mr. Summers said. There was a pause, and then Mr. Summers looked at Bill Hutchinson, and Bill unfolded his paper and showed it. It was blank.

"It's Tessie," Mr. Summers said, and his voice was hushed. "Show us her paper. Bill."

Bill Hutchinson went over to his wife and forced the slip of paper out of her hand. It had a black spot on it, the black spot Mr. Summers had made the night before with the heavy pencil in the coal company office. Bill Hutchinson held it up, and there was a stir in the crowd.

"All right, folks." Mr. Summers said. "Let's finish quickly."

Although the villagers had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones. The pile of stones the boys had made earlier was ready; there were stones on the ground with the blowing scraps of paper that had come out of the box. Delacroix selected a stone so large she had to pick it up with both hands and turned to Mrs. Dunbar. "Come on," she said. "Hurry up."

Mr. Dunbar had small stones in both hands, and she said, gasping for breath. "I can't run at all. You'll have to go ahead and I'll catch up with you."

The children had stones already. And someone gave little Davy Hutchinson few pebbles.

Tessie Hutchinson was in the center of a cleared space by now, and she held her hands out desperately as the villagers moved in on her. "It isn't fair," she said. A stone hit her on the side of the head. Old Man Warner was saying, "Come on, come on, everyone." Steve Adams was in the front of the crowd of villagers, with Mrs. Graves beside him.

"It isn't fair, it isn't right," Mrs. Hutchinson screamed, and then they were upon her.

The Metamorphosis

by Franz Kafka
Translated by David Wyllie

I

One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin. He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked.

“What’s happened to me?” he thought. It wasn’t a dream. His room, a proper human room although a little too small, lay peacefully between its four familiar walls. A collection of textile samples lay spread out on the table—Samsa was a travelling salesman—and above it there hung a picture that he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and housed in a nice, gilded frame. It showed a lady fitted out with a fur hat and fur boa who sat upright, raising a heavy fur muff that covered the whole of her lower arm towards the viewer.

Gregor then turned to look out the window at the dull weather. Drops of rain could be heard hitting the pane, which made him feel quite sad. “How about if I sleep a little bit longer and forget all this nonsense”, he thought, but that was something he was unable to do because he was used to

sleeping on his right, and in his present state couldn't get into that position. However hard he threw himself onto his right, he always rolled back to where he was. He must have tried it a hundred times, shut his eyes so that he wouldn't have to look at the floundering legs, and only stopped when he began to feel a mild, dull pain there that he had never felt before.

“Oh, God”, he thought, “what a strenuous career it is that I've chosen! Travelling day in and day out. Doing business like this takes much more effort than doing your own business at home, and on top of that there's the curse of travelling, worries about making train connections, bad and irregular food, contact with different people all the time so that you can never get to know anyone or become friendly with them. It can all go to Hell!” He felt a slight itch up on his belly; pushed himself slowly up on his back towards the headboard so that he could lift his head better; found where the itch was, and saw that it was covered with lots of little white spots which he didn't know what to make of; and when he tried to feel the place with one of his legs he drew it quickly back because as soon as he touched it he was overcome by a cold shudder.

He slid back into his former position. “Getting up early all the time”, he thought, “it makes you stupid. You've got to get enough sleep. Other travelling salesmen live a life of luxury. For instance, whenever I go back to the guest house during the morning to copy out the contract, these gentlemen are always still sitting there eating their breakfasts. I ought to just try that with my boss; I'd get kicked out on the spot. But who knows, maybe that would be the best thing for me. If I didn't have my parents to think about I'd have given in my notice a long time ago, I'd have gone up to the boss and told

him just what I think, tell him everything I would, let him know just what I feel. He'd fall right off his desk! And it's a funny sort of business to be sitting up there at your desk, talking down at your subordinates from up there, especially when you have to go right up close because the boss is hard of hearing. Well, there's still some hope; once I've got the money together to pay off my parents' debt to him—another five or six years I suppose—that's definitely what I'll do. That's when I'll make the big change. First of all though, I've got to get up, my train leaves at five."

And he looked over at the alarm clock, ticking on the chest of drawers. "God in Heaven!" he thought. It was half past six and the hands were quietly moving forwards, it was even later than half past, more like quarter to seven. Had the alarm clock not rung? He could see from the bed that it had been set for four o'clock as it should have been; it certainly must have rung. Yes, but was it possible to quietly sleep through that furniture-rattling noise? True, he had not slept peacefully, but probably all the more deeply because of that. What should he do now? The next train went at seven; if he were to catch that he would have to rush like mad and the collection of samples was still not packed, and he did not at all feel particularly fresh and lively. And even if he did catch the train he would not avoid his boss's anger as the office assistant would have been there to see the five o'clock train go, he would have put in his report about Gregor's not being there a long time ago. The office assistant was the boss's man, spineless, and with no understanding. What about if he reported sick? But that would be extremely strained and suspicious as in five years of service Gregor had never once yet been ill. His boss would certainly come round with the doctor from the medical insurance company, accuse his parents of having a lazy son, and accept the doctor's

recommendation not to make any claim as the doctor believed that no-one was ever ill but that many were workshy. And what's more, would he have been entirely wrong in this case? Gregor did in fact, apart from excessive sleepiness after sleeping for so long, feel completely well and even felt much hungrier than usual.

He was still hurriedly thinking all this through, unable to decide to get out of the bed, when the clock struck quarter to seven. There was a cautious knock at the door near his head. "Gregor", somebody called—it was his mother—"it's quarter to seven. Didn't you want to go somewhere?" That gentle voice! Gregor was shocked when he heard his own voice answering, it could hardly be recognised as the voice he had had before. As if from deep inside him, there was a painful and uncontrollable squeaking mixed in with it, the words could be made out at first but then there was a sort of echo which made them unclear, leaving the hearer unsure whether he had heard properly or not. Gregor had wanted to give a full answer and explain everything, but in the circumstances contented himself with saying: "Yes, mother, yes, thank-you, I'm getting up now." The change in Gregor's voice probably could not be noticed outside through the wooden door, as his mother was satisfied with this explanation and shuffled away. But this short conversation made the other members of the family aware that Gregor, against their expectations was still at home, and soon his father came knocking at one of the side doors, gently, but with his fist. "Gregor, Gregor", he called, "what's wrong?" And after a short while he called again with a warning deepness in his voice: "Gregor! Gregor!" At the other side door his sister came plaintively: "Gregor? Aren't you well? Do you need anything?" Gregor answered to both sides: "I'm ready, now", making an effort to remove all the strangeness

from his voice by enunciating very carefully and putting long pauses between each, individual word. His father went back to his breakfast, but his sister whispered: “Gregor, open the door, I beg of you.” Gregor, however, had no thought of opening the door, and instead congratulated himself for his cautious habit, acquired from his travelling, of locking all doors at night even when he was at home.

The first thing he wanted to do was to get up in peace without being disturbed, to get dressed, and most of all to have his breakfast. Only then would he consider what to do next, as he was well aware that he would not bring his thoughts to any sensible conclusions by lying in bed. He remembered that he had often felt a slight pain in bed, perhaps caused by lying awkwardly, but that had always turned out to be pure imagination and he wondered how his imaginings would slowly resolve themselves today. He did not have the slightest doubt that the change in his voice was nothing more than the first sign of a serious cold, which was an occupational hazard for travelling salesmen.

It was a simple matter to throw off the covers; he only had to blow himself up a little and they fell off by themselves. But it became difficult after that, especially as he was so exceptionally broad. He would have used his arms and his hands to push himself up; but instead of them he only had all those little legs continuously moving in different directions, and which he was moreover unable to control. If he wanted to bend one of them, then that was the first one that would stretch itself out; and if he finally managed to do what he wanted with that leg, all the others seemed to be set free and would move about painfully. “This is something that can’t be done in bed”, Gregor said to himself, “so don’t keep trying to do it”.

The first thing he wanted to do was get the lower part of his body out of the bed, but he had never seen this lower part, and could not imagine what it looked like; it turned out to be too hard to move; it went so slowly; and finally, almost in a frenzy, when he carelessly shoved himself forwards with all the force he could gather, he chose the wrong direction, hit hard against the lower bedpost, and learned from the burning pain he felt that the lower part of his body might well, at present, be the most sensitive.

So then he tried to get the top part of his body out of the bed first, carefully turning his head to the side. This he managed quite easily, and despite its breadth and its weight, the bulk of his body eventually followed slowly in the direction of the head. But when he had at last got his head out of the bed and into the fresh air it occurred to him that if he let himself fall it would be a miracle if his head were not injured, so he became afraid to carry on pushing himself forward the same way. And he could not knock himself out now at any price; better to stay in bed than lose consciousness.

It took just as much effort to get back to where he had been earlier, but when he lay there sighing, and was once more watching his legs as they struggled against each other even harder than before, if that was possible, he could think of no way of bringing peace and order to this chaos. He told himself once more that it was not possible for him to stay in bed and that the most sensible thing to do would be to get free of it in whatever way he could at whatever sacrifice. At the same time, though, he did not forget to remind himself that calm consideration was much better than rushing to desperate conclusions. At times like this he would direct his eyes to the window and look out as clearly as he could, but unfortunately, even the other side of the narrow street was

enveloped in morning fog and the view had little confidence or cheer to offer him. “Seven o’clock, already”, he said to himself when the clock struck again, “seven o’clock, and there’s still a fog like this.” And he lay there quietly a while longer, breathing lightly as if he perhaps expected the total stillness to bring things back to their real and natural state.

But then he said to himself: “Before it strikes quarter past seven I’ll definitely have to have got properly out of bed. And by then somebody will have come round from work to ask what’s happened to me as well, as they open up at work before seven o’clock.” And so he set himself to the task of swinging the entire length of his body out of the bed all at the same time. If he succeeded in falling out of bed in this way and kept his head raised as he did so he could probably avoid injuring it. His back seemed to be quite hard, and probably nothing would happen to it falling onto the carpet. His main concern was for the loud noise he was bound to make, and which even through all the doors would probably raise concern if not alarm. But it was something that had to be risked.

When Gregor was already sticking half way out of the bed—the new method was more of a game than an effort, all he had to do was rock back and forth—it occurred to him how simple everything would be if somebody came to help him. Two strong people—he had his father and the maid in mind—would have been more than enough; they would only have to push their arms under the dome of his back, peel him away from the bed, bend down with the load and then be patient and careful as he swang over onto the floor, where, hopefully, the little legs would find a use. Should he really call for help though, even apart from the fact that all the

doors were locked? Despite all the difficulty he was in, he could not suppress a smile at this thought.

After a while he had already moved so far across that it would have been hard for him to keep his balance if he rocked too hard. The time was now ten past seven and he would have to make a final decision very soon. Then there was a ring at the door of the flat. “That’ll be someone from work”, he said to himself, and froze very still, although his little legs only became all the more lively as they danced around. For a moment everything remained quiet. “They’re not opening the door”, Gregor said to himself, caught in some nonsensical hope. But then of course, the maid’s firm steps went to the door as ever and opened it. Gregor only needed to hear the visitor’s first words of greeting and he knew who it was—the chief clerk himself. Why did Gregor have to be the only one condemned to work for a company where they immediately became highly suspicious at the slightest shortcoming? Were all employees, every one of them, louts, was there not one of them who was faithful and devoted who would go so mad with pangs of conscience that he couldn’t get out of bed if he didn’t spend at least a couple of hours in the morning on company business? Was it really not enough to let one of the trainees make enquiries—assuming enquiries were even necessary—did the chief clerk have to come himself, and did they have to show the whole, innocent family that this was so suspicious that only the chief clerk could be trusted to have the wisdom to investigate it? And more because these thoughts had made him upset than through any proper decision, he swang himself with all his force out of the bed. There was a loud thump, but it wasn’t really a loud noise. His fall was softened a little by the carpet, and Gregor’s back was also more elastic than he had thought, which made the sound muffled and not too noticeable. He

had not held his head carefully enough, though, and hit it as he fell; annoyed and in pain, he turned it and rubbed it against the carpet.

“Something’s fallen down in there”, said the chief clerk in the room on the left. Gregor tried to imagine whether something of the sort that had happened to him today could ever happen to the chief clerk too; you had to concede that it was possible. But as if in gruff reply to this question, the chief clerk’s firm footsteps in his highly polished boots could now be heard in the adjoining room. From the room on his right, Gregor’s sister whispered to him to let him know: “Gregor, the chief clerk is here.” “Yes, I know”, said Gregor to himself; but without daring to raise his voice loud enough for his sister to hear him.

“Gregor”, said his father now from the room to his left, “the chief clerk has come round and wants to know why you didn’t leave on the early train. We don’t know what to say to him. And anyway, he wants to speak to you personally. So please open up this door. I’m sure he’ll be good enough to forgive the untidiness of your room.” Then the chief clerk called “Good morning, Mr. Samsa”. “He isn’t well”, said his mother to the chief clerk, while his father continued to speak through the door. “He isn’t well, please believe me. Why else would Gregor have missed a train! The lad only ever thinks about the business. It nearly makes me cross the way he never goes out in the evenings; he’s been in town for a week now but stayed home every evening. He sits with us in the kitchen and just reads the paper or studies train timetables. His idea of relaxation is working with his fretsaw. He’s made a little frame, for instance, it only took him two or three evenings, you’ll be amazed how nice it is; it’s hanging up in his room; you’ll see it as soon as Gregor opens the door.

Anyway, I'm glad you're here; we wouldn't have been able to get Gregor to open the door by ourselves; he's so stubborn; and I'm sure he isn't well, he said this morning that he is, but he isn't." "I'll be there in a moment", said Gregor slowly and thoughtfully, but without moving so that he would not miss any word of the conversation. "Well I can't think of any other way of explaining it, Mrs. Samsa", said the chief clerk, "I hope it's nothing serious. But on the other hand, I must say that if we people in commerce ever become slightly unwell then, fortunately or unfortunately as you like, we simply have to overcome it because of business considerations." "Can the chief clerk come in to see you now then?", asked his father impatiently, knocking at the door again. "No", said Gregor. In the room on his right there followed a painful silence; in the room on his left his sister began to cry.

So why did his sister not go and join the others? She had probably only just got up and had not even begun to get dressed. And why was she crying? Was it because he had not got up, and had not let the chief clerk in, because he was in danger of losing his job and if that happened his boss would once more pursue their parents with the same demands as before? There was no need to worry about things like that yet. Gregor was still there and had not the slightest intention of abandoning his family. For the time being he just lay there on the carpet, and no-one who knew the condition he was in would seriously have expected him to let the chief clerk in. It was only a minor discourtesy, and a suitable excuse could easily be found for it later on, it was not something for which Gregor could be sacked on the spot. And it seemed to Gregor much more sensible to leave him now in peace instead of disturbing him with talking at him and crying. But the others didn't know what was happening, they were worried, that would excuse their behaviour.

The chief clerk now raised his voice, “Mr. Samsa”, he called to him, “what is wrong? You barricade yourself in your room, give us no more than yes or no for an answer, you are causing serious and unnecessary concern to your parents and you fail—and I mention this just by the way—you fail to carry out your business duties in a way that is quite unheard of. I’m speaking here on behalf of your parents and of your employer, and really must request a clear and immediate explanation. I am astonished, quite astonished. I thought I knew you as a calm and sensible person, and now you suddenly seem to be showing off with peculiar whims. This morning, your employer did suggest a possible reason for your failure to appear, it’s true—it had to do with the money that was recently entrusted to you—but I came near to giving him my word of honour that that could not be the right explanation. But now that I see your incomprehensible stubbornness I no longer feel any wish whatsoever to intercede on your behalf. And nor is your position all that secure. I had originally intended to say all this to you in private, but since you cause me to waste my time here for no good reason I don’t see why your parents should not also learn of it. Your turnover has been very unsatisfactory of late; I grant you that it’s not the time of year to do especially good business, we recognise that; but there simply is no time of year to do no business at all, Mr. Samsa, we cannot allow there to be.”

“But Sir”, called Gregor, beside himself and forgetting all else in the excitement, “I’ll open up immediately, just a moment. I’m slightly unwell, an attack of dizziness, I haven’t been able to get up. I’m still in bed now. I’m quite fresh again now, though. I’m just getting out of bed. Just a moment. Be patient! It’s not quite as easy as I’d thought. I’m quite alright now, though. It’s shocking, what can suddenly happen to a

person! I was quite alright last night, my parents know about it, perhaps better than me, I had a small symptom of it last night already. They must have noticed it. I don't know why I didn't let you know at work! But you always think you can get over an illness without staying at home. Please, don't make my parents suffer! There's no basis for any of the accusations you're making; nobody's ever said a word to me about any of these things. Maybe you haven't read the latest contracts I sent in. I'll set off with the eight o'clock train, as well, these few hours of rest have given me strength. You don't need to wait, sir; I'll be in the office soon after you, and please be so good as to tell that to the boss and recommend me to him!"

And while Gregor gushed out these words, hardly knowing what he was saying, he made his way over to the chest of drawers—this was easily done, probably because of the practise he had already had in bed—where he now tried to get himself upright. He really did want to open the door, really did want to let them see him and to speak with the chief clerk; the others were being so insistent, and he was curious to learn what they would say when they caught sight of him. If they were shocked then it would no longer be Gregor's responsibility and he could rest. If, however, they took everything calmly he would still have no reason to be upset, and if he hurried he really could be at the station for eight o'clock. The first few times he tried to climb up on the smooth chest of drawers he just slid down again, but he finally gave himself one last swing and stood there upright; the lower part of his body was in serious pain but he no longer gave any attention to it. Now he let himself fall against the back of a nearby chair and held tightly to the edges of it with his little legs. By now he had also calmed down, and

kept quiet so that he could listen to what the chief clerk was saying.

“Did you understand a word of all that?” the chief clerk asked his parents, “surely he’s not trying to make fools of us”. “Oh, God!” called his mother, who was already in tears, “he could be seriously ill and we’re making him suffer. Grete! Grete!” she then cried. “Mother?” his sister called from the other side. They communicated across Gregor’s room. “You’ll have to go for the doctor straight away. Gregor is ill. Quick, get the doctor. Did you hear the way Gregor spoke just now?” “That was the voice of an animal”, said the chief clerk, with a calmness that was in contrast with his mother’s screams. “Anna! Anna!” his father called into the kitchen through the entrance hall, clapping his hands, “get a locksmith here, now!” And the two girls, their skirts swishing, immediately ran out through the hall, wrenching open the front door of the flat as they went. How had his sister managed to get dressed so quickly? There was no sound of the door banging shut again; they must have left it open; people often do in homes where something awful has happened.

Gregor, in contrast, had become much calmer. So they couldn’t understand his words any more, although they seemed clear enough to him, clearer than before—perhaps his ears had become used to the sound. They had realised, though, that there was something wrong with him, and were ready to help. The first response to his situation had been confident and wise, and that made him feel better. He felt that he had been drawn back in among people, and from the doctor and the locksmith he expected great and surprising achievements—although he did not really distinguish one from the other. Whatever was said next would be crucial, so, in order to make his voice as clear as possible, he coughed a

little, but taking care to do this not too loudly as even this might well sound different from the way that a human coughs and he was no longer sure he could judge this for himself. Meanwhile, it had become very quiet in the next room. Perhaps his parents were sat at the table whispering with the chief clerk, or perhaps they were all pressed against the door and listening.

Gregor slowly pushed his way over to the door with the chair. Once there he let go of it and threw himself onto the door, holding himself upright against it using the adhesive on the tips of his legs. He rested there a little while to recover from the effort involved and then set himself to the task of turning the key in the lock with his mouth. He seemed, unfortunately, to have no proper teeth—how was he, then, to grasp the key?—but the lack of teeth was, of course, made up for with a very strong jaw; using the jaw, he really was able to start the key turning, ignoring the fact that he must have been causing some kind of damage as a brown fluid came from his mouth, flowed over the key and dripped onto the floor. “Listen”, said the chief clerk in the next room, “he’s turning the key.” Gregor was greatly encouraged by this; but they all should have been calling to him, his father and his mother too: “Well done, Gregor”, they should have cried, “keep at it, keep hold of the lock!” And with the idea that they were all excitedly following his efforts, he bit on the key with all his strength, paying no attention to the pain he was causing himself. As the key turned round he turned around the lock with it, only holding himself upright with his mouth, and hung onto the key or pushed it down again with the whole weight of his body as needed. The clear sound of the lock as it snapped back was Gregor’s sign that he could break his concentration, and as he regained his breath he said to

himself: “So, I didn’t need the locksmith after all”. Then he lay his head on the handle of the door to open it completely.

Because he had to open the door in this way, it was already wide open before he could be seen. He had first to slowly turn himself around one of the double doors, and he had to do it very carefully if he did not want to fall flat on his back before entering the room. He was still occupied with this difficult movement, unable to pay attention to anything else, when he heard the chief clerk exclaim a loud “Oh!”, which sounded like the sighing of the wind. Now he also saw him—he was the nearest to the door—his hand pressed against his open mouth and slowly retreating as if driven by a steady and invisible force. Gregor’s mother, her hair still dishevelled from bed despite the chief clerk’s being there, looked at his father. Then she unfolded her arms, took two steps forward towards Gregor and sank down onto the floor into her skirts that spread themselves out around her as her head disappeared down onto her breast. His father looked hostile, and clenched his fists as if wanting to knock Gregor back into his room. Then he looked uncertainly round the living room, covered his eyes with his hands and wept so that his powerful chest shook.

So Gregor did not go into the room, but leant against the inside of the other door which was still held bolted in place. In this way only half of his body could be seen, along with his head above it which he leant over to one side as he peered out at the others. Meanwhile the day had become much lighter; part of the endless, grey-black building on the other side of the street—which was a hospital—could be seen quite clearly with the austere and regular line of windows piercing its façade; the rain was still falling, now throwing down large, individual droplets which hit the ground one at a time.

The washing up from breakfast lay on the table; there was so much of it because, for Gregor's father, breakfast was the most important meal of the day and he would stretch it out for several hours as he sat reading a number of different newspapers. On the wall exactly opposite there was photograph of Gregor when he was a lieutenant in the army, his sword in his hand and a carefree smile on his face as he called forth respect for his uniform and bearing. The door to the entrance hall was open and as the front door of the flat was also open he could see onto the landing and the stairs where they began their way down below.

“Now, then”, said Gregor, well aware that he was the only one to have kept calm, “I'll get dressed straight away now, pack up my samples and set off. Will you please just let me leave? You can see”, he said to the chief clerk, “that I'm not stubborn and I like to do my job; being a commercial traveller is arduous but without travelling I couldn't earn my living. So where are you going, in to the office? Yes? Will you report everything accurately, then? It's quite possible for someone to be temporarily unable to work, but that's just the right time to remember what's been achieved in the past and consider that later on, once the difficulty has been removed, he will certainly work with all the more diligence and concentration. You're well aware that I'm seriously in debt to our employer as well as having to look after my parents and my sister, so that I'm trapped in a difficult situation, but I will work my way out of it again. Please don't make things any harder for me than they are already, and don't take sides against me at the office. I know that nobody likes the travellers. They think we earn an enormous wage as well as having a soft time of it. That's just prejudice but they have no particular reason to think better of it. But you, sir, you have a better overview than the rest of the staff, in fact, if I can say

this in confidence, a better overview than the boss himself—it's very easy for a businessman like him to make mistakes about his employees and judge them more harshly than he should. And you're also well aware that we travellers spend almost the whole year away from the office, so that we can very easily fall victim to gossip and chance and groundless complaints, and it's almost impossible to defend yourself from that sort of thing, we don't usually even hear about them, or if at all it's when we arrive back home exhausted from a trip, and that's when we feel the harmful effects of what's been going on without even knowing what caused them. Please, don't go away, at least first say something to show that you grant that I'm at least partly right!"

But the chief clerk had turned away as soon as Gregor had started to speak, and, with protruding lips, only stared back at him over his trembling shoulders as he left. He did not keep still for a moment while Gregor was speaking, but moved steadily towards the door without taking his eyes off him. He moved very gradually, as if there had been some secret prohibition on leaving the room. It was only when he had reached the entrance hall that he made a sudden movement, drew his foot from the living room, and rushed forward in a panic. In the hall, he stretched his right hand far out towards the stairway as if out there, there were some supernatural force waiting to save him.

Gregor realised that it was out of the question to let the chief clerk go away in this mood if his position in the firm was not to be put into extreme danger. That was something his parents did not understand very well; over the years, they had become convinced that this job would provide for Gregor for his entire life, and besides, they had so much to worry about at present that they had lost sight of any thought for

the future. Gregor, though, did think about the future. The chief clerk had to be held back, calmed down, convinced and finally won over; the future of Gregor and his family depended on it! If only his sister were here! She was clever; she was already in tears while Gregor was still lying peacefully on his back. And the chief clerk was a lover of women, surely she could persuade him; she would close the front door in the entrance hall and talk him out of his shocked state. But his sister was not there, Gregor would have to do the job himself. And without considering that he still was not familiar with how well he could move about in his present state, or that his speech still might not—or probably would not—be understood, he let go of the door; pushed himself through the opening; tried to reach the chief clerk on the landing who, ridiculously, was holding on to the banister with both hands; but Gregor fell immediately over and, with a little scream as he sought something to hold onto, landed on his numerous little legs. Hardly had that happened than, for the first time that day, he began to feel alright with his body; the little legs had the solid ground under them; to his pleasure, they did exactly as he told them; they were even making the effort to carry him where he wanted to go; and he was soon believing that all his sorrows would soon be finally at an end. He held back the urge to move but swayed from side to side as he crouched there on the floor. His mother was not far away in front of him and seemed, at first, quite engrossed in herself, but then she suddenly jumped up with her arms outstretched and her fingers spread shouting: “Help, for pity’s sake, Help!” The way she held her head suggested she wanted to see Gregor better, but the unthinking way she was hurrying backwards showed that she did not; she had forgotten that the table was behind her with all the breakfast things on it; when she reached the table she sat quickly down on it without knowing

what she was doing; without even seeming to notice that the coffee pot had been knocked over and a gush of coffee was pouring down onto the carpet.

“Mother, mother”, said Gregor gently, looking up at her. He had completely forgotten the chief clerk for the moment, but could not help himself snapping in the air with his jaws at the sight of the flow of coffee. That set his mother screaming anew, she fled from the table and into the arms of his father as he rushed towards her. Gregor, though, had no time to spare for his parents now; the chief clerk had already reached the stairs; with his chin on the banister, he looked back for the last time. Gregor made a run for him; he wanted to be sure of reaching him; the chief clerk must have expected something, as he leapt down several steps at once and disappeared; his shouts resounding all around the staircase. The flight of the chief clerk seemed, unfortunately, to put Gregor’s father into a panic as well. Until then he had been relatively self controlled, but now, instead of running after the chief clerk himself, or at least not impeding Gregor as he ran after him, Gregor’s father seized the chief clerk’s stick in his right hand (the chief clerk had left it behind on a chair, along with his hat and overcoat), picked up a large newspaper from the table with his left, and used them to drive Gregor back into his room, stamping his foot at him as he went. Gregor’s appeals to his father were of no help, his appeals were simply not understood, however much he humbly turned his head his father merely stamped his foot all the harder. Across the room, despite the chilly weather, Gregor’s mother had pulled open a window, leant far out of it and pressed her hands to her face. A strong draught of air flew in from the street towards the stairway, the curtains flew up, the newspapers on the table fluttered and some of them were blown onto the floor. Nothing would stop Gregor’s

father as he drove him back, making hissing noises at him like a wild man. Gregor had never had any practice in moving backwards and was only able to go very slowly. If Gregor had only been allowed to turn round he would have been back in his room straight away, but he was afraid that if he took the time to do that his father would become impatient, and there was the threat of a lethal blow to his back or head from the stick in his father's hand any moment. Eventually, though, Gregor realised that he had no choice as he saw, to his disgust, that he was quite incapable of going backwards in a straight line; so he began, as quickly as possible and with frequent anxious glances at his father, to turn himself round. It went very slowly, but perhaps his father was able to see his good intentions as he did nothing to hinder him, in fact now and then he used the tip of his stick to give directions from a distance as to which way to turn. If only his father would stop that unbearable hissing! It was making Gregor quite confused. When he had nearly finished turning round, still listening to that hissing, he made a mistake and turned himself back a little the way he had just come. He was pleased when he finally had his head in front of the doorway, but then saw that it was too narrow, and his body was too broad to get through it without further difficulty. In his present mood, it obviously did not occur to his father to open the other of the double doors so that Gregor would have enough space to get through. He was merely fixed on the idea that Gregor should be got back into his room as quickly as possible. Nor would he ever have allowed Gregor the time to get himself upright as preparation for getting through the doorway. What he did, making more noise than ever, was to drive Gregor forwards all the harder as if there had been nothing in the way; it sounded to Gregor as if there was now more than one father behind him; it was not a pleasant experience, and Gregor

pushed himself into the doorway without regard for what might happen. One side of his body lifted itself, he lay at an angle in the doorway, one flank scraped on the white door and was painfully injured, leaving vile brown flecks on it, soon he was stuck fast and would not have been able to move at all by himself, the little legs along one side hung quivering in the air while those on the other side were pressed painfully against the ground. Then his father gave him a hefty shove from behind which released him from where he was held and sent him flying, and heavily bleeding, deep into his room. The door was slammed shut with the stick, then, finally, all was quiet.

II

It was not until it was getting dark that evening that Gregor awoke from his deep and coma-like sleep. He would have woken soon afterwards anyway even if he hadn't been disturbed, as he had had enough sleep and felt fully rested. But he had the impression that some hurried steps and the sound of the door leading into the front room being carefully shut had woken him. The light from the electric street lamps shone palely here and there onto the ceiling and tops of the furniture, but down below, where Gregor was, it was dark. He pushed himself over to the door, feeling his way clumsily with his antennae—of which he was now beginning to learn the value—in order to see what had been happening there. The whole of his left side seemed like one, painfully stretched scar, and he limped badly on his two rows of legs. One of the legs had been badly injured in the events of that morning—it was nearly a miracle that only one of them had been—and dragged along lifelessly.

It was only when he had reached the door that he realised what it actually was that had drawn him over to it; it was the smell of something to eat. By the door there was a dish filled with sweetened milk with little pieces of white bread floating in it. He was so pleased he almost laughed, as he was even hungrier than he had been that morning, and immediately dipped his head into the milk, nearly covering his eyes with it. But he soon drew his head back again in disappointment; not only did the pain in his tender left side make it difficult to eat the food—he was only able to eat if his whole body worked together as a snuffling whole—but the milk did not taste at all nice. Milk like this was normally his favourite drink, and his sister had certainly left it there for him because of that, but he turned, almost against his own will, away from the dish and crawled back into the centre of the room.

Through the crack in the door, Gregor could see that the gas had been lit in the living room. His father at this time would normally be sat with his evening paper, reading it out in a loud voice to Gregor's mother, and sometimes to his sister, but there was now not a sound to be heard. Gregor's sister would often write and tell him about this reading, but maybe his father had lost the habit in recent times. It was so quiet all around too, even though there must have been somebody in the flat. "What a quiet life it is the family lead", said Gregor to himself, and, gazing into the darkness, felt a great pride that he was able to provide a life like that in such a nice home for his sister and parents. But what now, if all this peace and wealth and comfort should come to a horrible and frightening end? That was something that Gregor did not want to think about too much, so he started to move about, crawling up and down the room.

Once during that long evening, the door on one side of the room was opened very slightly and hurriedly closed again; later on the door on the other side did the same; it seemed that someone needed to enter the room but thought better of it. Gregor went and waited immediately by the door, resolved either to bring the timorous visitor into the room in some way or at least to find out who it was; but the door was opened no more that night and Gregor waited in vain. The previous morning while the doors were locked everyone had wanted to get in there to him, but now, now that he had opened up one of the doors and the other had clearly been unlocked some time during the day, no-one came, and the keys were in the other sides.

It was not until late at night that the gaslight in the living room was put out, and now it was easy to see that his parents and sister had stayed awake all that time, as they all could be distinctly heard as they went away together on tip-toe. It was clear that no-one would come into Gregor's room any more until morning; that gave him plenty of time to think undisturbed about how he would have to re-arrange his life. For some reason, the tall, empty room where he was forced to remain made him feel uneasy as he lay there flat on the floor, even though he had been living in it for five years. Hardly aware of what he was doing other than a slight feeling of shame, he hurried under the couch. It pressed down on his back a little, and he was no longer able to lift his head, but he nonetheless felt immediately at ease and his only regret was that his body was too broad to get it all underneath.

He spent the whole night there. Some of the time he passed in a light sleep, although he frequently woke from it in alarm because of his hunger, and some of the time was spent in worries and vague hopes which, however, always led to the

same conclusion: for the time being he must remain calm, he must show patience and the greatest consideration so that his family could bear the unpleasantness that he, in his present condition, was forced to impose on them.

Gregor soon had the opportunity to test the strength of his decisions, as early the next morning, almost before the night had ended, his sister, nearly fully dressed, opened the door from the front room and looked anxiously in. She did not see him straight away, but when she did notice him under the couch—he had to be somewhere, for God’s sake, he couldn’t have flown away—she was so shocked that she lost control of herself and slammed the door shut again from outside. But she seemed to regret her behaviour, as she opened the door again straight away and came in on tip-toe as if entering the room of someone seriously ill or even of a stranger. Gregor had pushed his head forward, right to the edge of the couch, and watched her. Would she notice that he had left the milk as it was, realise that it was not from any lack of hunger and bring him in some other food that was more suitable? If she didn’t do it herself he would rather go hungry than draw her attention to it, although he did feel a terrible urge to rush forward from under the couch, throw himself at his sister’s feet and beg her for something good to eat. However, his sister noticed the full dish immediately and looked at it and the few drops of milk splashed around it with some surprise. She immediately picked it up—using a rag, not her bare hands—and carried it out. Gregor was extremely curious as to what she would bring in its place, imagining the wildest possibilities, but he never could have guessed what his sister, in her goodness, actually did bring. In order to test his taste, she brought him a whole selection of things, all spread out on an old newspaper. There were old, half-rotten vegetables; bones from the evening meal, covered in white sauce that

had gone hard; a few raisins and almonds; some cheese that Gregor had declared inedible two days before; a dry roll and some bread spread with butter and salt. As well as all that she had poured some water into the dish, which had probably been permanently set aside for Gregor's use, and placed it beside them. Then, out of consideration for Gregor's feelings, as she knew that he would not eat in front of her, she hurried out again and even turned the key in the lock so that Gregor would know he could make things as comfortable for himself as he liked. Gregor's little legs whirred, at last he could eat. What's more, his injuries must already have completely healed as he found no difficulty in moving. This amazed him, as more than a month earlier he had cut his finger slightly with a knife, he thought of how his finger had still hurt the day before yesterday. "Am I less sensitive than I used to be, then?", he thought, and was already sucking greedily at the cheese which had immediately, almost compellingly, attracted him much more than the other foods on the newspaper. Quickly one after another, his eyes watering with pleasure, he consumed the cheese, the vegetables and the sauce; the fresh foods, on the other hand, he didn't like at all, and even dragged the things he did want to eat a little way away from them because he couldn't stand the smell. Long after he had finished eating and lay lethargic in the same place, his sister slowly turned the key in the lock as a sign to him that he should withdraw. He was immediately startled, although he had been half asleep, and he hurried back under the couch. But he needed great self-control to stay there even for the short time that his sister was in the room, as eating so much food had rounded out his body a little and he could hardly breathe in that narrow space. Half suffocating, he watched with bulging eyes as his sister unselfconsciously took a broom and swept up the left-overs, mixing them in with the food he had not

even touched at all as if it could not be used any more. She quickly dropped it all into a bin, closed it with its wooden lid, and carried everything out. She had hardly turned her back before Gregor came out again from under the couch and stretched himself.

This was how Gregor received his food each day now, once in the morning while his parents and the maid were still asleep, and the second time after everyone had eaten their meal at midday as his parents would sleep for a little while then as well, and Gregor's sister would send the maid away on some errand. Gregor's father and mother certainly did not want him to starve either, but perhaps it would have been more than they could stand to have any more experience of his feeding than being told about it, and perhaps his sister wanted to spare them what distress she could as they were indeed suffering enough.

It was impossible for Gregor to find out what they had told the doctor and the locksmith that first morning to get them out of the flat. As nobody could understand him, nobody, not even his sister, thought that he could understand them, so he had to be content to hear his sister's sighs and appeals to the saints as she moved about his room. It was only later, when she had become a little more used to everything—there was, of course, no question of her ever becoming fully used to the situation—that Gregor would sometimes catch a friendly comment, or at least a comment that could be construed as friendly. “He's enjoyed his dinner today”, she might say when he had diligently cleared away all the food left for him, or if he left most of it, which slowly became more and more frequent, she would often say, sadly, “now everything's just been left there again”.

Although Gregor wasn't able to hear any news directly he did listen to much of what was said in the next rooms, and whenever he heard anyone speaking he would scurry straight to the appropriate door and press his whole body against it. There was seldom any conversation, especially at first, that was not about him in some way, even if only in secret. For two whole days, all the talk at every mealtime was about what they should do now; but even between meals they spoke about the same subject as there were always at least two members of the family at home—nobody wanted to be at home by themselves and it was out of the question to leave the flat entirely empty. And on the very first day the maid had fallen to her knees and begged Gregor's mother to let her go without delay. It was not very clear how much she knew of what had happened but she left within a quarter of an hour, tearfully thanking Gregor's mother for her dismissal as if she had done her an enormous service. She even swore emphatically not to tell anyone the slightest about what had happened, even though no-one had asked that of her.

Now Gregor's sister also had to help his mother with the cooking; although that was not so much bother as no-one ate very much. Gregor often heard how one of them would unsuccessfully urge another to eat, and receive no more answer than "no thanks, I've had enough" or something similar. No-one drank very much either. His sister would sometimes ask his father whether he would like a beer, hoping for the chance to go and fetch it herself. When his father then said nothing she would add, so that he would not feel selfish, that she could send the housekeeper for it, but then his father would close the matter with a big, loud "No", and no more would be said.

Even before the first day had come to an end, his father had explained to Gregor's mother and sister what their finances and prospects were. Now and then he stood up from the table and took some receipt or document from the little cash box he had saved from his business when it had collapsed five years earlier. Gregor heard how he opened the complicated lock and then closed it again after he had taken the item he wanted. What he heard his father say was some of the first good news that Gregor heard since he had first been incarcerated in his room. He had thought that nothing at all remained from his father's business, at least he had never told him anything different, and Gregor had never asked him about it anyway. Their business misfortune had reduced the family to a state of total despair, and Gregor's only concern at that time had been to arrange things so that they could all forget about it as quickly as possible. So then he started working especially hard, with a fiery vigour that raised him from a junior salesman to a travelling representative almost overnight, bringing with it the chance to earn money in quite different ways. Gregor converted his success at work straight into cash that he could lay on the table at home for the benefit of his astonished and delighted family. They had been good times and they had never come again, at least not with the same splendour, even though Gregor had later earned so much that he was in a position to bear the costs of the whole family, and did bear them. They had even got used to it, both Gregor and the family, they took the money with gratitude and he was glad to provide it, although there was no longer much warm affection given in return. Gregor only remained close to his sister now. Unlike him, she was very fond of music and a gifted and expressive violinist, it was his secret plan to send her to the conservatory next year even though it would cause great expense that would have to be made up for in some other

way. During Gregor's short periods in town, conversation with his sister would often turn to the conservatory but it was only ever mentioned as a lovely dream that could never be realised. Their parents did not like to hear this innocent talk, but Gregor thought about it quite hard and decided he would let them know what he planned with a grand announcement of it on Christmas day.

That was the sort of totally pointless thing that went through his mind in his present state, pressed upright against the door and listening. There were times when he simply became too tired to continue listening, when his head would fall wearily against the door and he would pull it up again with a start, as even the slightest noise he caused would be heard next door and they would all go silent. "What's that he's doing now", his father would say after a while, clearly having gone over to the door, and only then would the interrupted conversation slowly be taken up again.

When explaining things, his father repeated himself several times, partly because it was a long time since he had been occupied with these matters himself and partly because Gregor's mother did not understand everything the first time. From these repeated explanations Gregor learned, to his pleasure, that despite all their misfortunes there was still some money available from the old days. It was not a lot, but it had not been touched in the meantime and some interest had accumulated. Besides that, they had not been using up all the money that Gregor had been bringing home every month, keeping only a little for himself, so that that, too, had been accumulating. Behind the door, Gregor nodded with enthusiasm in his pleasure at this unexpected thrift and caution. He could actually have used this surplus money to reduce his father's debt to his boss, and the day when he

could have freed himself from that job would have come much closer, but now it was certainly better the way his father had done things.

This money, however, was certainly not enough to enable the family to live off the interest; it was enough to maintain them for, perhaps, one or two years, no more. That's to say, it was money that should not really be touched but set aside for emergencies; money to live on had to be earned. His father was healthy but old, and lacking in self confidence. During the five years that he had not been working—the first holiday in a life that had been full of strain and no success—he had put on a lot of weight and become very slow and clumsy. Would Gregor's elderly mother now have to go and earn money? She suffered from asthma and it was a strain for her just to move about the home, every other day would be spent struggling for breath on the sofa by the open window. Would his sister have to go and earn money? She was still a child of seventeen, her life up till then had been very enviable, consisting of wearing nice clothes, sleeping late, helping out in the business, joining in with a few modest pleasures and most of all playing the violin. Whenever they began to talk of the need to earn money, Gregor would always first let go of the door and then throw himself onto the cool, leather sofa next to it, as he became quite hot with shame and regret.

He would often lie there the whole night through, not sleeping a wink but scratching at the leather for hours on end. Or he might go to all the effort of pushing a chair to the window, climbing up onto the sill and, propped up in the chair, leaning on the window to stare out of it. He had used to feel a great sense of freedom from doing this, but doing it now was obviously something more remembered than experienced, as what he actually saw in this way was

becoming less distinct every day, even things that were quite near; he had used to curse the ever-present view of the hospital across the street, but now he could not see it at all, and if he had not known that he lived in Charlottenstrasse, which was a quiet street despite being in the middle of the city, he could have thought that he was looking out the window at a barren waste where the grey sky and the grey earth mingled inseparably. His observant sister only needed to notice the chair twice before she would always push it back to its exact position by the window after she had tidied up the room, and even left the inner pane of the window open from then on.

If Gregor had only been able to speak to his sister and thank her for all that she had to do for him it would have been easier for him to bear it; but as it was it caused him pain. His sister, naturally, tried as far as possible to pretend there was nothing burdensome about it, and the longer it went on, of course, the better she was able to do so, but as time went by Gregor was also able to see through it all so much better. It had even become very unpleasant for him, now, whenever she entered the room. No sooner had she come in than she would quickly close the door as a precaution so that no-one would have to suffer the view into Gregor's room, then she would go straight to the window and pull it hurriedly open almost as if she were suffocating. Even if it was cold, she would stay at the window breathing deeply for a little while. She would alarm Gregor twice a day with this running about and noise making; he would stay under the couch shivering the whole while, knowing full well that she would certainly have liked to spare him this ordeal, but it was impossible for her to be in the same room with him with the windows closed.

One day, about a month after Gregor's transformation when his sister no longer had any particular reason to be shocked at his appearance, she came into the room a little earlier than usual and found him still staring out the window, motionless, and just where he would be most horrible. In itself, his sister's not coming into the room would have been no surprise for Gregor as it would have been difficult for her to immediately open the window while he was still there, but not only did she not come in, she went straight back and closed the door behind her, a stranger would have thought he had threatened her and tried to bite her. Gregor went straight to hide himself under the couch, of course, but he had to wait until midday before his sister came back and she seemed much more uneasy than usual. It made him realise that she still found his appearance unbearable and would continue to do so, she probably even had to overcome the urge to flee when she saw the little bit of him that protruded from under the couch. One day, in order to spare her even this sight, he spent four hours carrying the bedsheet over to the couch on his back and arranged it so that he was completely covered and his sister would not be able to see him even if she bent down. If she did not think this sheet was necessary then all she had to do was take it off again, as it was clear enough that it was no pleasure for Gregor to cut himself off so completely. She left the sheet where it was. Gregor even thought he glimpsed a look of gratitude one time when he carefully looked out from under the sheet to see how his sister liked the new arrangement.

For the first fourteen days, Gregor's parents could not bring themselves to come into the room to see him. He would often hear them say how they appreciated all the new work his sister was doing even though, before, they had seen her as a girl who was somewhat useless and frequently been annoyed

with her. But now the two of them, father and mother, would often both wait outside the door of Gregor's room while his sister tidied up in there, and as soon as she went out again she would have to tell them exactly how everything looked, what Gregor had eaten, how he had behaved this time and whether, perhaps, any slight improvement could be seen. His mother also wanted to go in and visit Gregor relatively soon but his father and sister at first persuaded her against it. Gregor listened very closely to all this, and approved fully. Later, though, she had to be held back by force, which made her call out: "Let me go and see Gregor, he is my unfortunate son! Can't you understand I have to see him?", and Gregor would think to himself that maybe it would be better if his mother came in, not every day of course, but one day a week, perhaps; she could understand everything much better than his sister who, for all her courage, was still just a child after all, and really might not have had an adult's appreciation of the burdensome job she had taken on.

Gregor's wish to see his mother was soon realised. Out of consideration for his parents, Gregor wanted to avoid being seen at the window during the day, the few square meters of the floor did not give him much room to crawl about, it was hard to just lie quietly through the night, his food soon stopped giving him any pleasure at all, and so, to entertain himself, he got into the habit of crawling up and down the walls and ceiling. He was especially fond of hanging from the ceiling; it was quite different from lying on the floor; he could breathe more freely; his body had a light swing to it; and up there, relaxed and almost happy, it might happen that he would surprise even himself by letting go of the ceiling and landing on the floor with a crash. But now, of course, he had far better control of his body than before and, even with a fall as great as that, caused himself no damage.

Very soon his sister noticed Gregor's new way of entertaining himself—he had, after all, left traces of the adhesive from his feet as he crawled about—and got it into her head to make it as easy as possible for him by removing the furniture that got in his way, especially the chest of drawers and the desk. Now, this was not something that she would be able to do by herself; she did not dare to ask for help from her father; the sixteen year old maid had carried on bravely since the cook had left but she certainly would not have helped in this, she had even asked to be allowed to keep the kitchen locked at all times and never to have to open the door unless it was especially important; so his sister had no choice but to choose some time when Gregor's father was not there and fetch his mother to help her. As she approached the room, Gregor could hear his mother express her joy, but once at the door she went silent. First, of course, his sister came in and looked round to see that everything in the room was alright; and only then did she let her mother enter. Gregor had hurriedly pulled the sheet down lower over the couch and put more folds into it so that everything really looked as if it had just been thrown down by chance. Gregor also refrained, this time, from spying out from under the sheet; he gave up the chance to see his mother until later and was simply glad that she had come. "You can come in, he can't be seen", said his sister, obviously leading her in by the hand. The old chest of drawers was too heavy for a pair of feeble women to be heaving about, but Gregor listened as they pushed it from its place, his sister always taking on the heaviest part of the work for herself and ignoring her mother's warnings that she would strain herself. This lasted a very long time. After labouring at it for fifteen minutes or more his mother said it would be better to leave the chest where it was, for one thing it was too heavy for them to get the job finished before Gregor's father got home and leaving it in the middle of the

room it would be in his way even more, and for another thing it wasn't even sure that taking the furniture away would really be any help to him. She thought just the opposite; the sight of the bare walls saddened her right to her heart; and why wouldn't Gregor feel the same way about it, he'd been used to this furniture in his room for a long time and it would make him feel abandoned to be in an empty room like that. Then, quietly, almost whispering as if wanting Gregor (whose whereabouts she did not know) to hear not even the tone of her voice, as she was convinced that he did not understand her words, she added "and by taking the furniture away, won't it seem like we're showing that we've given up all hope of improvement and we're abandoning him to cope for himself? I think it'd be best to leave the room exactly the way it was before so that when Gregor comes back to us again he'll find everything unchanged and he'll be able to forget the time in between all the easier".

Hearing these words from his mother made Gregor realise that the lack of any direct human communication, along with the monotonous life led by the family during these two months, must have made him confused—he could think of no other way of explaining to himself why he had seriously wanted his room emptied out. Had he really wanted to transform his room into a cave, a warm room fitted out with the nice furniture he had inherited? That would have let him crawl around unimpeded in any direction, but it would also have let him quickly forget his past when he had still been human. He had come very close to forgetting, and it had only been the voice of his mother, unheard for so long, that had shaken him out of it. Nothing should be removed; everything had to stay; he could not do without the good influence the furniture had on his condition; and if the furniture made it

difficult for him to crawl about mindlessly that was not a loss but a great advantage.

His sister, unfortunately, did not agree; she had become used to the idea, not without reason, that she was Gregor's spokesman to his parents about the things that concerned him. This meant that his mother's advice now was sufficient reason for her to insist on removing not only the chest of drawers and the desk, as she had thought at first, but all the furniture apart from the all-important couch. It was more than childish perversity, of course, or the unexpected confidence she had recently acquired, that made her insist; she had indeed noticed that Gregor needed a lot of room to crawl about in, whereas the furniture, as far as anyone could see, was of no use to him at all. Girls of that age, though, do become enthusiastic about things and feel they must get their way whenever they can. Perhaps this was what tempted Grete to make Gregor's situation seem even more shocking than it was so that she could do even more for him. Grete would probably be the only one who would dare enter a room dominated by Gregor crawling about the bare walls by himself.

So she refused to let her mother dissuade her. Gregor's mother already looked uneasy in his room, she soon stopped speaking and helped Gregor's sister to get the chest of drawers out with what strength she had. The chest of drawers was something that Gregor could do without if he had to, but the writing desk had to stay. Hardly had the two women pushed the chest of drawers, groaning, out of the room than Gregor poked his head out from under the couch to see what he could do about it. He meant to be as careful and considerate as he could, but, unfortunately, it was his mother who came back first while Grete in the next room

had her arms round the chest, pushing and pulling at it from side to side by herself without, of course, moving it an inch. His mother was not used to the sight of Gregor, he might have made her ill, so Gregor hurried backwards to the far end of the couch. In his startlement, though, he was not able to prevent the sheet at its front from moving a little. It was enough to attract his mother's attention. She stood very still, remained there a moment, and then went back out to Grete.

Gregor kept trying to assure himself that nothing unusual was happening, it was just a few pieces of furniture being moved after all, but he soon had to admit that the women going to and fro, their little calls to each other, the scraping of the furniture on the floor, all these things made him feel as if he were being assailed from all sides. With his head and legs pulled in against him and his body pressed to the floor, he was forced to admit to himself that he could not stand all of this much longer. They were emptying his room out; taking away everything that was dear to him; they had already taken out the chest containing his fretsaw and other tools; now they threatened to remove the writing desk with its place clearly worn into the floor, the desk where he had done his homework as a business trainee, at high school, even while he had been at infant school—he really could not wait any longer to see whether the two women's intentions were good. He had nearly forgotten they were there anyway, as they were now too tired to say anything while they worked and he could only hear their feet as they stepped heavily on the floor.

So, while the women were leant against the desk in the other room catching their breath, he sallied out, changed direction four times not knowing what he should save first before his attention was suddenly caught by the picture on the wall—

which was already denuded of everything else that had been on it—of the lady dressed in copious fur. He hurried up onto the picture and pressed himself against its glass, it held him firmly and felt good on his hot belly. This picture at least, now totally covered by Gregor, would certainly be taken away by no-one. He turned his head to face the door into the living room so that he could watch the women when they came back.

They had not allowed themselves a long rest and came back quite soon; Grete had put her arm around her mother and was nearly carrying her. “What shall we take now, then?”, said Grete and looked around. Her eyes met those of Gregor on the wall. Perhaps only because her mother was there, she remained calm, bent her face to her so that she would not look round and said, albeit hurriedly and with a tremor in her voice: “Come on, let’s go back in the living room for a while?” Gregor could see what Grete had in mind, she wanted to take her mother somewhere safe and then chase him down from the wall. Well, she could certainly try it! He sat unyielding on his picture. He would rather jump at Grete’s face.

But Grete’s words had made her mother quite worried, she stepped to one side, saw the enormous brown patch against the flowers of the wallpaper, and before she even realised it was Gregor that she saw screamed: “Oh God, oh God!” Arms outstretched, she fell onto the couch as if she had given up everything and stayed there immobile. “Gregor!” shouted his sister, glowering at him and shaking her fist. That was the first word she had spoken to him directly since his transformation. She ran into the other room to fetch some kind of smelling salts to bring her mother out of her faint; Gregor wanted to help too—he could save his picture later,

although he stuck fast to the glass and had to pull himself off by force; then he, too, ran into the next room as if he could advise his sister like in the old days; but he had to just stand behind her doing nothing; she was looking into various bottles, he startled her when she turned round; a bottle fell to the ground and broke; a splinter cut Gregor's face, some kind of caustic medicine splashed all over him; now, without delaying any longer, Grete took hold of all the bottles she could and ran with them in to her mother; she slammed the door shut with her foot. So now Gregor was shut out from his mother, who, because of him, might be near to death; he could not open the door if he did not want to chase his sister away, and she had to stay with his mother; there was nothing for him to do but wait; and, oppressed with anxiety and self-reproach, he began to crawl about, he crawled over everything, walls, furniture, ceiling, and finally in his confusion as the whole room began to spin around him he fell down into the middle of the dinner table.

He lay there for a while, numb and immobile, all around him it was quiet, maybe that was a good sign. Then there was someone at the door. The maid, of course, had locked herself in her kitchen so that Grete would have to go and answer it. His father had arrived home. "What's happened?" were his first words; Grete's appearance must have made everything clear to him. She answered him with subdued voice, and openly pressed her face into his chest: "Mother's fainted, but she's better now. Gregor got out." "Just as I expected", said his father, "just as I always said, but you women wouldn't listen, would you." It was clear to Gregor that Grete had not said enough and that his father took it to mean that something bad had happened, that he was responsible for some act of violence. That meant Gregor would now have to try to calm his father, as he did not have the time to explain

things to him even if that had been possible. So he fled to the door of his room and pressed himself against it so that his father, when he came in from the hall, could see straight away that Gregor had the best intentions and would go back into his room without delay, that it would not be necessary to drive him back but that they had only to open the door and he would disappear.

His father, though, was not in the mood to notice subtleties like that; “Ah!”, he shouted as he came in, sounding as if he were both angry and glad at the same time. Gregor drew his head back from the door and lifted it towards his father. He really had not imagined his father the way he stood there now; of late, with his new habit of crawling about, he had neglected to pay attention to what was going on the rest of the flat the way he had done before. He really ought to have expected things to have changed, but still, still, was that really his father? The same tired man as used to be laying there entombed in his bed when Gregor came back from his business trips, who would receive him sitting in the armchair in his nightgown when he came back in the evenings; who was hardly even able to stand up but, as a sign of his pleasure, would just raise his arms and who, on the couple of times a year when they went for a walk together on a Sunday or public holiday wrapped up tightly in his overcoat between Gregor and his mother, would always labour his way forward a little more slowly than them, who were already walking slowly for his sake; who would place his stick down carefully and, if he wanted to say something would invariably stop and gather his companions around him. He was standing up straight enough now; dressed in a smart blue uniform with gold buttons, the sort worn by the employees at the banking institute; above the high, stiff collar of the coat his strong double-chin emerged; under the bushy eyebrows, his

piercing, dark eyes looked out fresh and alert; his normally unkempt white hair was combed down painfully close to his scalp. He took his cap, with its gold monogram from, probably, some bank, and threw it in an arc right across the room onto the sofa, put his hands in his trouser pockets, pushing back the bottom of his long uniform coat, and, with look of determination, walked towards Gregor. He probably did not even know himself what he had in mind, but nonetheless lifted his feet unusually high. Gregor was amazed at the enormous size of the soles of his boots, but wasted no time with that—he knew full well, right from the first day of his new life, that his father thought it necessary to always be extremely strict with him. And so he ran up to his father, stopped when his father stopped, scurried forwards again when he moved, even slightly. In this way they went round the room several times without anything decisive happening, without even giving the impression of a chase as everything went so slowly. Gregor remained all this time on the floor, largely because he feared his father might see it as especially provoking if he fled onto the wall or ceiling. Whatever he did, Gregor had to admit that he certainly would not be able to keep up this running about for long, as for each step his father took he had to carry out countless movements. He became noticeably short of breath, even in his earlier life his lungs had not been very reliable. Now, as he lurched about in his efforts to muster all the strength he could for running he could hardly keep his eyes open; his thoughts became too slow for him to think of any other way of saving himself than running; he almost forgot that the walls were there for him to use although, here, they were concealed behind carefully carved furniture full of notches and protrusions—then, right beside him, lightly tossed, something flew down and rolled in front of him. It was an apple; then another one immediately flew at him; Gregor

froze in shock; there was no longer any point in running as his father had decided to bombard him. He had filled his pockets with fruit from the bowl on the sideboard and now, without even taking the time for careful aim, threw one apple after another. These little, red apples rolled about on the floor, knocking into each other as if they had electric motors. An apple thrown without much force glanced against Gregor's back and slid off without doing any harm. Another one however, immediately following it, hit squarely and lodged in his back; Gregor wanted to drag himself away, as if he could remove the surprising, the incredible pain by changing his position; but he felt as if nailed to the spot and spread himself out, all his senses in confusion. The last thing he saw was the door of his room being pulled open, his sister was screaming, his mother ran out in front of her in her blouse (as his sister had taken off some of her clothes after she had fainted to make it easier for her to breathe), she ran to his father, her skirts unfastened and sliding one after another to the ground, stumbling over the skirts she pushed herself to his father, her arms around him, uniting herself with him totally—now Gregor lost his ability to see anything—her hands behind his father's head begging him to spare Gregor's life.

III

No-one dared to remove the apple lodged in Gregor's flesh, so it remained there as a visible reminder of his injury. He had suffered it there for more than a month, and his condition seemed serious enough to remind even his father that Gregor, despite his current sad and revolting form, was a family member who could not be treated as an enemy. On

the contrary, as a family there was a duty to swallow any revulsion for him and to be patient, just to be patient.

Because of his injuries, Gregor had lost much of his mobility—probably permanently. He had been reduced to the condition of an ancient invalid and it took him long, long minutes to crawl across his room—crawling over the ceiling was out of the question—but this deterioration in his condition was fully (in his opinion) made up for by the door to the living room being left open every evening. He got into the habit of closely watching it for one or two hours before it was opened and then, lying in the darkness of his room where he could not be seen from the living room, he could watch the family in the light of the dinner table and listen to their conversation—with everyone’s permission, in a way, and thus quite differently from before.

They no longer held the lively conversations of earlier times, of course, the ones that Gregor always thought about with longing when he was tired and getting into the damp bed in some small hotel room. All of them were usually very quiet nowadays. Soon after dinner, his father would go to sleep in his chair; his mother and sister would urge each other to be quiet; his mother, bent deeply under the lamp, would sew fancy underwear for a fashion shop; his sister, who had taken a sales job, learned shorthand and French in the evenings so that she might be able to get a better position later on. Sometimes his father would wake up and say to Gregor’s mother “you’re doing so much sewing again today!”, as if he did not know that he had been dozing—and then he would go back to sleep again while mother and sister would exchange a tired grin.

With a kind of stubbornness, Gregor's father refused to take his uniform off even at home; while his nightgown hung unused on its peg Gregor's father would slumber where he was, fully dressed, as if always ready to serve and expecting to hear the voice of his superior even here. The uniform had not been new to start with, but as a result of this it slowly became even shabbier despite the efforts of Gregor's mother and sister to look after it. Gregor would often spend the whole evening looking at all the stains on this coat, with its gold buttons always kept polished and shiny, while the old man in it would sleep, highly uncomfortable but peaceful.

As soon as it struck ten, Gregor's mother would speak gently to his father to wake him and try to persuade him to go to bed, as he couldn't sleep properly where he was and he really had to get his sleep if he was to be up at six to get to work. But since he had been in work he had become more obstinate and would always insist on staying longer at the table, even though he regularly fell asleep and it was then harder than ever to persuade him to exchange the chair for his bed. Then, however much mother and sister would importune him with little reproaches and warnings he would keep slowly shaking his head for a quarter of an hour with his eyes closed and refusing to get up. Gregor's mother would tug at his sleeve, whisper endearments into his ear, Gregor's sister would leave her work to help her mother, but nothing would have any effect on him. He would just sink deeper into his chair. Only when the two women took him under the arms he would abruptly open his eyes, look at them one after the other and say: "What a life! This is what peace I get in my old age!" And supported by the two women he would lift himself up carefully as if he were carrying the greatest load himself, let the women take him to the door, send them off and carry on by himself while Gregor's mother would throw down her

needle and his sister her pen so that they could run after his father and continue being of help to him.

Who, in this tired and overworked family, would have had time to give more attention to Gregor than was absolutely necessary? The household budget became even smaller; so now the maid was dismissed; an enormous, thick-boned charwoman with white hair that flapped around her head came every morning and evening to do the heaviest work; everything else was looked after by Gregor's mother on top of the large amount of sewing work she did. Gregor even learned, listening to the evening conversation about what price they had hoped for, that several items of jewellery belonging to the family had been sold, even though both mother and sister had been very fond of wearing them at functions and celebrations. But the loudest complaint was that although the flat was much too big for their present circumstances, they could not move out of it, there was no imaginable way of transferring Gregor to the new address. He could see quite well, though, that there were more reasons than consideration for him that made it difficult for them to move, it would have been quite easy to transport him in any suitable crate with a few air holes in it; the main thing holding the family back from their decision to move was much more to do with their total despair, and the thought that they had been struck with a misfortune unlike anything experienced by anyone else they knew or were related to. They carried out absolutely everything that the world expects from poor people, Gregor's father brought bank employees their breakfast, his mother sacrificed herself by washing clothes for strangers, his sister ran back and forth behind her desk at the behest of the customers, but they just did not have the strength to do any more. And the injury in Gregor's back began to hurt as much as when it was new. After they

had come back from taking his father to bed Gregor's mother and sister would now leave their work where it was and sit close together, cheek to cheek; his mother would point to Gregor's room and say "Close that door, Grete", and then, when he was in the dark again, they would sit in the next room and their tears would mingle, or they would simply sit there staring dry-eyed at the table.

Gregor hardly slept at all, either night or day. Sometimes he would think of taking over the family's affairs, just like before, the next time the door was opened; he had long forgotten about his boss and the chief clerk, but they would appear again in his thoughts, the salesman and the apprentices, that stupid teaboy, two or three friends from other businesses, one of the chambermaids from a provincial hotel, a tender memory that appeared and disappeared again, a cashier from a hat shop for whom his attention had been serious but too slow,—all of them appeared to him, mixed together with strangers and others he had forgotten, but instead of helping him and his family they were all of them inaccessible, and he was glad when they disappeared. Other times he was not at all in the mood to look after his family, he was filled with simple rage about the lack of attention he was shown, and although he could think of nothing he would have wanted, he made plans of how he could get into the pantry where he could take all the things he was entitled to, even if he was not hungry. Gregor's sister no longer thought about how she could please him but would hurriedly push some food or other into his room with her foot before she rushed out to work in the morning and at midday, and in the evening she would sweep it away again with the broom, indifferent as to whether it had been eaten or—more often than not—had been left totally untouched. She still cleared up the room in the evening, but now she

could not have been any quicker about it. Smears of dirt were left on the walls, here and there were little balls of dust and filth. At first, Gregor went into one of the worst of these places when his sister arrived as a reproach to her, but he could have stayed there for weeks without his sister doing anything about it; she could see the dirt as well as he could but she had simply decided to leave him to it. At the same time she became touchy in a way that was quite new for her and which everyone in the family understood—cleaning up Gregor's room was for her and her alone. Gregor's mother did once thoroughly clean his room, and needed to use several bucketfuls of water to do it—although that much dampness also made Gregor ill and he lay flat on the couch, bitter and immobile. But his mother was to be punished still more for what she had done, as hardly had his sister arrived home in the evening than she noticed the change in Gregor's room and, highly aggrieved, ran back into the living room where, despite her mother's raised and imploring hands, she broke into convulsive tears. Her father, of course, was startled out of his chair and the two parents looked on astonished and helpless; then they, too, became agitated; Gregor's father, standing to the right of his mother, accused her of not leaving the cleaning of Gregor's room to his sister; from her left, Gregor's sister screamed at her that she was never to clean Gregor's room again; while his mother tried to draw his father, who was beside himself with anger, into the bedroom; his sister, quaking with tears, thumped on the table with her small fists; and Gregor hissed in anger that no-one had even thought of closing the door to save him the sight of this and all its noise.

Gregor's sister was exhausted from going out to work, and looking after Gregor as she had done before was even more work for her, but even so his mother ought certainly not to

have taken her place. Gregor, on the other hand, ought not to be neglected. Now, though, the charwoman was here. This elderly widow, with a robust bone structure that made her able to withstand the hardest of things in her long life, wasn't really repelled by Gregor. Just by chance one day, rather than any real curiosity, she opened the door to Gregor's room and found herself face to face with him. He was taken totally by surprise, no-one was chasing him but he began to rush to and fro while she just stood there in amazement with her hands crossed in front of her. From then on she never failed to open the door slightly every evening and morning and look briefly in on him. At first she would call to him as she did so with words that she probably considered friendly, such as "come on then, you old dung-beetle!", or "look at the old dung-beetle there!" Gregor never responded to being spoken to in that way, but just remained where he was without moving as if the door had never even been opened. If only they had told this charwoman to clean up his room every day instead of letting her disturb him for no reason whenever she felt like it! One day, early in the morning while a heavy rain struck the windowpanes, perhaps indicating that spring was coming, she began to speak to him in that way once again. Gregor was so resentful of it that he started to move toward her, he was slow and infirm, but it was like a kind of attack. Instead of being afraid, the charwoman just lifted up one of the chairs from near the door and stood there with her mouth open, clearly intending not to close her mouth until the chair in her hand had been slammed down into Gregor's back. "Aren't you coming any closer, then?", she asked when Gregor turned round again, and she calmly put the chair back in the corner.

Gregor had almost entirely stopped eating. Only if he happened to find himself next to the food that had been

prepared for him he might take some of it into his mouth to play with it, leave it there a few hours and then, more often than not, spit it out again. At first he thought it was distress at the state of his room that stopped him eating, but he had soon got used to the changes made there. They had got into the habit of putting things into this room that they had no room for anywhere else, and there were now many such things as one of the rooms in the flat had been rented out to three gentlemen. These earnest gentlemen—all three of them had full beards, as Gregor learned peering through the crack in the door one day—were painfully insistent on things' being tidy. This meant not only in their own room but, since they had taken a room in this establishment, in the entire flat and especially in the kitchen. Unnecessary clutter was something they could not tolerate, especially if it was dirty. They had moreover brought most of their own furnishings and equipment with them. For this reason, many things had become superfluous which, although they could not be sold, the family did not wish to discard. All these things found their way into Gregor's room. The dustbins from the kitchen found their way in there too. The charwoman was always in a hurry, and anything she couldn't use for the time being she would just chuck in there. He, fortunately, would usually see no more than the object and the hand that held it. The woman most likely meant to fetch the things back out again when she had time and the opportunity, or to throw everything out in one go, but what actually happened was that they were left where they landed when they had first been thrown unless Gregor made his way through the junk and moved it somewhere else. At first he moved it because, with no other room free where he could crawl about, he was forced to, but later on he came to enjoy it although moving about in that way left him sad and tired to death, and he would remain immobile for hours afterwards.

The gentlemen who rented the room would sometimes take their evening meal at home in the living room that was used by everyone, and so the door to this room was often kept closed in the evening. But Gregor found it easy to give up having the door open, he had, after all, often failed to make use of it when it was open and, without the family having noticed it, lain in his room in its darkest corner. One time, though, the charwoman left the door to the living room slightly open, and it remained open when the gentlemen who rented the room came in in the evening and the light was put on. They sat up at the table where, formerly, Gregor had taken his meals with his father and mother, they unfolded the serviettes and picked up their knives and forks. Gregor's mother immediately appeared in the doorway with a dish of meat and soon behind her came his sister with a dish piled high with potatoes. The food was steaming, and filled the room with its smell. The gentlemen bent over the dishes set in front of them as if they wanted to test the food before eating it, and the gentleman in the middle, who seemed to count as an authority for the other two, did indeed cut off a piece of meat while it was still in its dish, clearly wishing to establish whether it was sufficiently cooked or whether it should be sent back to the kitchen. It was to his satisfaction, and Gregor's mother and sister, who had been looking on anxiously, began to breathe again and smiled.

The family themselves ate in the kitchen. Nonetheless, Gregor's father came into the living room before he went into the kitchen, bowed once with his cap in his hand and did his round of the table. The gentlemen stood as one, and mumbled something into their beards. Then, once they were alone, they ate in near perfect silence. It seemed remarkable to Gregor that above all the various noises of eating their chewing teeth could still be heard, as if they had wanted to

show Gregor that you need teeth in order to eat and it was not possible to perform anything with jaws that are toothless however nice they might be. "I'd like to eat something", said Gregor anxiously, "but not anything like they're eating. They do feed themselves. And here I am, dying!"

Throughout all this time, Gregor could not remember having heard the violin being played, but this evening it began to be heard from the kitchen. The three gentlemen had already finished their meal, the one in the middle had produced a newspaper, given a page to each of the others, and now they leant back in their chairs reading them and smoking. When the violin began playing they became attentive, stood up and went on tip-toe over to the door of the hallway where they stood pressed against each other. Someone must have heard them in the kitchen, as Gregor's father called out: "Is the playing perhaps unpleasant for the gentlemen? We can stop it straight away." "On the contrary", said the middle gentleman, "would the young lady not like to come in and play for us here in the room, where it is, after all, much more cosy and comfortable?" "Oh yes, we'd love to", called back Gregor's father as if he had been the violin player himself. The gentlemen stepped back into the room and waited. Gregor's father soon appeared with the music stand, his mother with the music and his sister with the violin. She calmly prepared everything for her to begin playing; his parents, who had never rented a room out before and therefore showed an exaggerated courtesy towards the three gentlemen, did not even dare to sit on their own chairs; his father leant against the door with his right hand pushed in between two buttons on his uniform coat; his mother, though, was offered a seat by one of the gentlemen and sat—leaving the chair where the gentleman happened to have placed it—out of the way in a corner.

His sister began to play; father and mother paid close attention, one on each side, to the movements of her hands. Drawn in by the playing, Gregor had dared to come forward a little and already had his head in the living room. Before, he had taken great pride in how considerate he was but now it hardly occurred to him that he had become so thoughtless about the others. What's more, there was now all the more reason to keep himself hidden as he was covered in the dust that lay everywhere in his room and flew up at the slightest movement; he carried threads, hairs, and remains of food about on his back and sides; he was much too indifferent to everything now to lay on his back and wipe himself on the carpet like he had used to do several times a day. And despite this condition, he was not too shy to move forward a little onto the immaculate floor of the living room.

No-one noticed him, though. The family was totally preoccupied with the violin playing; at first, the three gentlemen had put their hands in their pockets and come up far too close behind the music stand to look at all the notes being played, and they must have disturbed Gregor's sister, but soon, in contrast with the family, they withdrew back to the window with their heads sunk and talking to each other at half volume, and they stayed by the window while Gregor's father observed them anxiously. It really now seemed very obvious that they had expected to hear some beautiful or entertaining violin playing but had been disappointed, that they had had enough of the whole performance and it was only now out of politeness that they allowed their peace to be disturbed. It was especially unnerving, the way they all blew the smoke from their cigarettes upwards from their mouth and noses. Yet Gregor's sister was playing so beautifully. Her face was leant to one side, following the lines of music with a careful and melancholy expression. Gregor crawled a little

further forward, keeping his head close to the ground so that he could meet her eyes if the chance came. Was he an animal if music could captivate him so? It seemed to him that he was being shown the way to the unknown nourishment he had been yearning for. He was determined to make his way forward to his sister and tug at her skirt to show her she might come into his room with her violin, as no-one appreciated her playing here as much as he would. He never wanted to let her out of his room, not while he lived, anyway; his shocking appearance should, for once, be of some use to him; he wanted to be at every door of his room at once to hiss and spit at the attackers; his sister should not be forced to stay with him, though, but stay of her own free will; she would sit beside him on the couch with her ear bent down to him while he told her how he had always intended to send her to the conservatory, how he would have told everyone about it last Christmas—had Christmas really come and gone already?—if this misfortune hadn't got in the way, and refuse to let anyone dissuade him from it. On hearing all this, his sister would break out in tears of emotion, and Gregor would climb up to her shoulder and kiss her neck, which, since she had been going out to work, she had kept free without any necklace or collar.

“Mr. Samsa!”, shouted the middle gentleman to Gregor's father, pointing, without wasting any more words, with his forefinger at Gregor as he slowly moved forward. The violin went silent, the middle of the three gentlemen first smiled at his two friends, shaking his head, and then looked back at Gregor. His father seemed to think it more important to calm the three gentlemen before driving Gregor out, even though they were not at all upset and seemed to think Gregor was more entertaining than the violin playing had been. He rushed up to them with his arms spread out and attempted

to drive them back into their room at the same time as trying to block their view of Gregor with his body. Now they did become a little annoyed, and it was not clear whether it was his father's behaviour that annoyed them or the dawning realisation that they had had a neighbour like Gregor in the next room without knowing it. They asked Gregor's father for explanations, raised their arms like he had, tugged excitedly at their beards and moved back towards their room only very slowly. Meanwhile Gregor's sister had overcome the despair she had fallen into when her playing was suddenly interrupted. She had let her hands drop and let violin and bow hang limply for a while but continued to look at the music as if still playing, but then she suddenly pulled herself together, lay the instrument on her mother's lap who still sat laboriously struggling for breath where she was, and ran into the next room which, under pressure from her father, the three gentlemen were more quickly moving toward. Under his sister's experienced hand, the pillows and covers on the beds flew up and were put into order and she had already finished making the beds and slipped out again before the three gentlemen had reached the room. Gregor's father seemed so obsessed with what he was doing that he forgot all the respect he owed to his tenants. He urged them and pressed them until, when he was already at the door of the room, the middle of the three gentlemen shouted like thunder and stamped his foot and thereby brought Gregor's father to a halt. "I declare here and now", he said, raising his hand and glancing at Gregor's mother and sister to gain their attention too, "that with regard to the repugnant conditions that prevail in this flat and with this family"—here he looked briefly but decisively at the floor—"I give immediate notice on my room. For the days that I have been living here I will, of course, pay nothing at all, on the contrary I will consider whether to proceed with some kind of action for damages

from you, and believe me it would be very easy to set out the grounds for such an action.” He was silent and looked straight ahead as if waiting for something. And indeed, his two friends joined in with the words: “And we also give immediate notice.” With that, he took hold of the door handle and slammed the door.

Gregor’s father staggered back to his seat, feeling his way with his hands, and fell into it; it looked as if he was stretching himself out for his usual evening nap but from the uncontrolled way his head kept nodding it could be seen that he was not sleeping at all. Throughout all this, Gregor had lain still where the three gentlemen had first seen him. His disappointment at the failure of his plan, and perhaps also because he was weak from hunger, made it impossible for him to move. He was sure that everyone would turn on him any moment, and he waited. He was not even startled out of this state when the violin on his mother’s lap fell from her trembling fingers and landed loudly on the floor.

“Father, Mother”, said his sister, hitting the table with her hand as introduction, “we can’t carry on like this. Maybe you can’t see it, but I can. I don’t want to call this monster my brother, all I can say is: we have to try and get rid of it. We’ve done all that’s humanly possible to look after it and be patient, I don’t think anyone could accuse us of doing anything wrong.”

“She’s absolutely right”, said Gregor’s father to himself. His mother, who still had not had time to catch her breath, began to cough dully, her hand held out in front of her and a deranged expression in her eyes.

Gregor's sister rushed to his mother and put her hand on her forehead. Her words seemed to give Gregor's father some more definite ideas. He sat upright, played with his uniform cap between the plates left by the three gentlemen after their meal, and occasionally looked down at Gregor as he lay there immobile.

"We have to try and get rid of it", said Gregor's sister, now speaking only to her father, as her mother was too occupied with coughing to listen, "it'll be the death of both of you, I can see it coming. We can't all work as hard as we have to and then come home to be tortured like this, we can't endure it. I can't endure it any more." And she broke out so heavily in tears that they flowed down the face of her mother, and she wiped them away with mechanical hand movements.

"My child", said her father with sympathy and obvious understanding, "what are we to do?"

His sister just shrugged her shoulders as a sign of the helplessness and tears that had taken hold of her, displacing her earlier certainty.

"If he could just understand us", said his father almost as a question; his sister shook her hand vigorously through her tears as a sign that of that there was no question.

"If he could just understand us", repeated Gregor's father, closing his eyes in acceptance of his sister's certainty that that was quite impossible, "then perhaps we could come to some kind of arrangement with him. But as it is ..."

"It's got to go", shouted his sister, "that's the only way, Father. You've got to get rid of the idea that that's Gregor.

We've only harmed ourselves by believing it for so long. How can that be Gregor? If it were Gregor he would have seen long ago that it's not possible for human beings to live with an animal like that and he would have gone of his own free will. We wouldn't have a brother any more, then, but we could carry on with our lives and remember him with respect. As it is this animal is persecuting us, it's driven out our tenants, it obviously wants to take over the whole flat and force us to sleep on the streets. Father, look, just look", she suddenly screamed, "he's starting again!" In her alarm, which was totally beyond Gregor's comprehension, his sister even abandoned his mother as she pushed herself vigorously out of her chair as if more willing to sacrifice her own mother than stay anywhere near Gregor. She rushed over to behind her father, who had become excited merely because she was and stood up half raising his hands in front of Gregor's sister as if to protect her.

But Gregor had had no intention of frightening anyone, least of all his sister. All he had done was begin to turn round so that he could go back into his room, although that was in itself quite startling as his pain-wracked condition meant that turning round required a great deal of effort and he was using his head to help himself do it, repeatedly raising it and striking it against the floor. He stopped and looked round. They seemed to have realised his good intention and had only been alarmed briefly. Now they all looked at him in unhappy silence. His mother lay in her chair with her legs stretched out and pressed against each other, her eyes nearly closed with exhaustion; his sister sat next to his father with her arms around his neck.

"Maybe now they'll let me turn round", thought Gregor and went back to work. He could not help panting loudly with the

effort and had sometimes to stop and take a rest. No-one was making him rush any more, everything was left up to him. As soon as he had finally finished turning round he began to move straight ahead. He was amazed at the great distance that separated him from his room, and could not understand how he had covered that distance in his weak state a little while before and almost without noticing it. He concentrated on crawling as fast as he could and hardly noticed that there was not a word, not any cry, from his family to distract him. He did not turn his head until he had reached the doorway. He did not turn it all the way round as he felt his neck becoming stiff, but it was nonetheless enough to see that nothing behind him had changed, only his sister had stood up. With his last glance he saw that his mother had now fallen completely asleep.

He was hardly inside his room before the door was hurriedly shut, bolted and locked. The sudden noise behind Gregor so startled him that his little legs collapsed under him. It was his sister who had been in so much of a rush. She had been standing there waiting and sprung forward lightly, Gregor had not heard her coming at all, and as she turned the key in the lock she said loudly to her parents “At last!”.

“What now, then?”, Gregor asked himself as he looked round in the darkness. He soon made the discovery that he could no longer move at all. This was no surprise to him, it seemed rather that being able to actually move around on those spindly little legs until then was unnatural. He also felt relatively comfortable. It is true that his entire body was aching, but the pain seemed to be slowly getting weaker and weaker and would finally disappear altogether. He could already hardly feel the decayed apple in his back or the inflamed area around it, which was entirely covered in white

dust. He thought back of his family with emotion and love. If it was possible, he felt that he must go away even more strongly than his sister. He remained in this state of empty and peaceful rumination until he heard the clock tower strike three in the morning. He watched as it slowly began to get light everywhere outside the window too. Then, without his willing it, his head sank down completely, and his last breath flowed weakly from his nostrils.

When the cleaner came in early in the morning—they'd often asked her not to keep slamming the doors but with her strength and in her hurry she still did, so that everyone in the flat knew when she'd arrived and from then on it was impossible to sleep in peace—she made her usual brief look in on Gregor and at first found nothing special. She thought he was laying there so still on purpose, playing the martyr; she attributed all possible understanding to him. She happened to be holding the long broom in her hand, so she tried to tickle Gregor with it from the doorway. When she had no success with that she tried to make a nuisance of herself and poked at him a little, and only when she found she could shove him across the floor with no resistance at all did she start to pay attention. She soon realised what had really happened, opened her eyes wide, whistled to herself, but did not waste time to yank open the bedroom doors and shout loudly into the darkness of the bedrooms: "Come and 'ave a look at this, it's dead, just lying there, stone dead!"

Mr. and Mrs. Samsa sat upright there in their marriage bed and had to make an effort to get over the shock caused by the cleaner before they could grasp what she was saying. But then, each from his own side, they hurried out of bed. Mr. Samsa threw the blanket over his shoulders, Mrs. Samsa just came out in her nightdress; and that is how they went into

Gregor's room. On the way they opened the door to the living room where Grete had been sleeping since the three gentlemen had moved in; she was fully dressed as if she had never been asleep, and the paleness of her face seemed to confirm this. "Dead?", asked Mrs. Samsa, looking at the charwoman enquiringly, even though she could have checked for herself and could have known it even without checking. "That's what I said", replied the cleaner, and to prove it she gave Gregor's body another shove with the broom, sending it sideways across the floor. Mrs. Samsa made a movement as if she wanted to hold back the broom, but did not complete it. "Now then", said Mr. Samsa, "let's give thanks to God for that". He crossed himself, and the three women followed his example. Grete, who had not taken her eyes from the corpse, said: "Just look how thin he was. He didn't eat anything for so long. The food came out again just the same as when it went in". Gregor's body was indeed completely dried up and flat, they had not seen it until then, but now he was not lifted up on his little legs, nor did he do anything to make them look away.

"Grete, come with us in here for a little while", said Mrs. Samsa with a pained smile, and Grete followed her parents into the bedroom but not without looking back at the body. The cleaner shut the door and opened the window wide. Although it was still early in the morning the fresh air had something of warmth mixed in with it. It was already the end of March, after all.

The three gentlemen stepped out of their room and looked round in amazement for their breakfasts; they had been forgotten about. "Where is our breakfast?", the middle gentleman asked the cleaner irritably. She just put her finger on her lips and made a quick and silent sign to the men that

they might like to come into Gregor's room. They did so, and stood around Gregor's corpse with their hands in the pockets of their well-worn coats. It was now quite light in the room.

Then the door of the bedroom opened and Mr. Samsa appeared in his uniform with his wife on one arm and his daughter on the other. All of them had been crying a little; Grete now and then pressed her face against her father's arm.

"Leave my home. Now!", said Mr. Samsa, indicating the door and without letting the women from him. "What do you mean?", asked the middle of the three gentlemen somewhat disconcerted, and he smiled sweetly. The other two held their hands behind their backs and continually rubbed them together in gleeful anticipation of a loud quarrel which could only end in their favour. "I mean just what I said", answered Mr. Samsa, and, with his two companions, went in a straight line towards the man. At first, he stood there still, looking at the ground as if the contents of his head were rearranging themselves into new positions. "Alright, we'll go then", he said, and looked up at Mr. Samsa as if he had been suddenly overcome with humility and wanted permission again from Mr. Samsa for his decision. Mr. Samsa merely opened his eyes wide and briefly nodded to him several times. At that, and without delay, the man actually did take long strides into the front hallway; his two friends had stopped rubbing their hands some time before and had been listening to what was being said. Now they jumped off after their friend as if taken with a sudden fear that Mr. Samsa might go into the hallway in front of them and break the connection with their leader. Once there, all three took their hats from the stand, took their sticks from the holder, bowed without a word and left the premises. Mr. Samsa and the two women followed them

out onto the landing; but they had had no reason to mistrust the men's intentions and as they leaned over the landing they saw how the three gentlemen made slow but steady progress down the many steps. As they turned the corner on each floor they disappeared and would reappear a few moments later; the further down they went, the more that the Samsa family lost interest in them; when a butcher's boy, proud of posture with his tray on his head, passed them on his way up and came nearer than they were, Mr. Samsa and the women came away from the landing and went, as if relieved, back into the flat.

They decided the best way to make use of that day was for relaxation and to go for a walk; not only had they earned a break from work but they were in serious need of it. So they sat at the table and wrote three letters of excusal, Mr. Samsa to his employers, Mrs. Samsa to her contractor and Grete to her principal. The cleaner came in while they were writing to tell them she was going, she'd finished her work for that morning. The three of them at first just nodded without looking up from what they were writing, and it was only when the cleaner still did not seem to want to leave that they looked up in irritation. "Well?", asked Mr. Samsa. The charwoman stood in the doorway with a smile on her face as if she had some tremendous good news to report, but would only do it if she was clearly asked to. The almost vertical little ostrich feather on her hat, which had been a source of irritation to Mr. Samsa all the time she had been working for them, swayed gently in all directions. "What is it you want then?", asked Mrs. Samsa, whom the cleaner had the most respect for. "Yes", she answered, and broke into a friendly laugh that made her unable to speak straight away, "well then, that thing in there, you needn't worry about how you're going to get rid of it. That's all been sorted out." Mrs. Samsa

and Grete bent down over their letters as if intent on continuing with what they were writing; Mr. Samsa saw that the cleaner wanted to start describing everything in detail but, with outstretched hand, he made it quite clear that she was not to. So, as she was prevented from telling them all about it, she suddenly remembered what a hurry she was in and, clearly peeved, called out “Cheerio then, everyone”, turned round sharply and left, slamming the door terribly as she went.

“Tonight she gets sacked”, said Mr. Samsa, but he received no reply from either his wife or his daughter as the charwoman seemed to have destroyed the peace they had only just gained. They got up and went over to the window where they remained with their arms around each other. Mr. Samsa twisted round in his chair to look at them and sat there watching for a while. Then he called out: “Come here, then. Let’s forget about all that old stuff, shall we. Come and give me a bit of attention”. The two women immediately did as he said, hurrying over to him where they kissed him and hugged him and then they quickly finished their letters.

After that, the three of them left the flat together, which was something they had not done for months, and took the tram out to the open country outside the town. They had the tram, filled with warm sunshine, all to themselves. Leant back comfortably on their seats, they discussed their prospects and found that on closer examination they were not at all bad—until then they had never asked each other about their work but all three had jobs which were very good and held particularly good promise for the future. The greatest improvement for the time being, of course, would be achieved quite easily by moving house; what they needed now was a flat that was smaller and cheaper than the current

one which had been chosen by Gregor, one that was in a better location and, most of all, more practical. All the time, Grete was becoming livelier. With all the worry they had been having of late her cheeks had become pale, but, while they were talking, Mr. and Mrs. Samsa were struck, almost simultaneously, with the thought of how their daughter was blossoming into a well built and beautiful young lady. They became quieter. Just from each other's glance and almost without knowing it they agreed that it would soon be time to find a good man for her. And, as if in confirmation of their new dreams and good intentions, as soon as they reached their destination Grete was the first to get up and stretch out her young body.

Ode to Warm Vanilla Sugar

by Rax King

You are unctuous light, you are brown and golden smell, you are the density of pound cake still steaming from the oven. Some people think that brown-and-golden is no smell at all. Some people, cowards, philistines, enemies of all that is subtle in the world, some people ice their pound cake. Drown sugar in butter and spoil the whole thing sweet-rotten. They don't know what you and I know.

What I know is that you are the smell of frightened girlhood just as it teeters over the precipice of the change. You were a pheromonal ideal for us because we did not yet know how to smell like ourselves. What did we know about the earthy odor of unwashed hair, about getting drunk off the right person's neck sweat? What did we, who until recently had played cheerfully enough in dirt, know about what the dirt and grit of being human actually was?

Because listen carefully and you can hear unfamiliar sounds: the scritch-scratching of hair sprouting against gym-class pinnies; the whisper of training bras under shirts that once covered only the nothing that had always been there before. Before, before, before. And of course there is still the cacophony that attends all children everywhere, tiny bones tumbling skin-first onto sidewalk, singsongy speech feeding into tears, the squelching of fat bugs under shoes that may still even have Velcro and not laces. Velcro, for God's sake! What could be more little-girl than that? And yet we were changing, and we knew it, and we could look at our mothers and sisters and think, That's coming for me, too.

We hadn't met you just yet, Warm Vanilla Sugar, though we'd met others like you. Some of us had been licking berry-flavored Wet N Wild off our lips for years. Some of the bolder girls even wore 28AAA facsimiles of bras, complete with lace rosettes or bows between the "cups." The bras supported nothing, but made their wearers feel womanly. That was the game: to feel womanly. To put on all the same ridiculous feather boas and fascinator hats that had always filled our dress-up trunks, but have them look real on us.

Perfumes, body spray, body glitter—these were all extensions of those same girlish impulses to look like women before we'd bothered to take a good look at women. We all missed the subtlety in grown women's performances, the earth-toned makeup palettes without a glitter or green in sight, the sleekness of a woman's pelt fresh from the blow dryer, the necklines that inexplicably didn't always show the maximum amount of cleavage even though they had cleavage, these women, and could have shown it off all day long if they'd wanted to. We little girls understood none of this. "When I have boobs," my friend Maria (whom you may remember from my ill-fated B*Witched tribute performance) once said confidently, "everyone will see them."

So we threw ourselves into the world of substitutes, even as we knew they could only ever be substitutes—if they'd been the adult versions of the things they imitated, then forget it, our parents would never have let us have them.

We painted our eyelids blue and our mouths pink. We stuffed our training bras with tissues and socks. Unable to be women yet, we built woman-golems from ourselves, fearsome and ugly. We clip-clopped around the house in our mothers' heels, our feet pooling at the shoes' bottoms. We attended closely to every word we could hear our parents saying so that our speech was a monstrous blend of slangy playground insults and grown ladies' kaffeeklatsch talk. At nine, I might have described the rude neighbor boy as a

“little shit.” At eleven, I chuckled at his antics, dodging his water balloons and wryly saying, “Oh, he thinks he’s such a card.” My woman’s ear was untrained and couldn’t pick the mild from the profane; I’d become a prepubescent grandma.

You were a key part of that performance, you and your sisters. But for me, once I had you, I needed nothing else. Other girls might favor Cucumber Melon or Sweet Pea, and good luck to them. Me, I found holiness in your smell, beguiling as it was. You baked a cake out of me every time I rubbed you into my skin. You turned me into dessert. What could Cucumber Melon do? Turn its acolytes into cocktails or salad? What could Sweet Pea do? I’d found all the sweetness I thought I’d ever need.

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The funny thing about dessert is that nobody needs it. I never order a slice of cake to satisfy a need, but rather to fulfill some craving, succumb to an impulse. I am tempted, constantly, by dessert, which does little to sustain my body but does wonders for my soul. At diners, I can’t help but genuflect at the cases of elderly-looking apple turnovers and stiff old cannolis. I pause, every time, at the glittering lazy susan overburdened by pies upon pies upon pies. Whenever I make eye contact with the blueberry muffins at coffee shops, suddenly I am one blueberry muffin richer, without even realizing that I’ve ordered one, propelled by pure impulse. I can know that the lemon pound cake at Starbucks has seen better days and still long for it, just as I long for one more line of coke when I know I’ve had enough, just as I long for the love of men who don’t think about me when I’ve gone. As a woman, I succumb constantly to the lure of dessert, in any form. As a kid, I was content just to become it.

Don’t get me wrong: I am still, typically, dessert. I am dessert when I get a text at one in the morning, miss you, from a man I haven’t seen since 2016. I am dessert when I listen to a married man telling his wife on the phone that he’s

alone, totally alone, yes, he promises, no, he's not lying, and the phone call ends, and he doesn't even pretend it's a struggle to make eye contact with me—after all, what about dessert could ever be a struggle? And when I let myself be folded into that lying man's arms, when I let it feel good, I am as dessert as I'll ever be. I am egg whites folded into black batter. A wisp of whipped cream cresting off a mocha, a bead of ice cream melting down a pretty chin, a speck of vanilla bean in a pastry-cream tundra, dessert. I imagine men receiving a menu with me on it, and shutting that menu after the most cursory glance: No, thank you, it's very tempting, but I couldn't possibly.

The more ornamental a person becomes, the less they are able to relax. I'm thinking of dessert, and also of Vargas girls, the wildly popular pinups from the 1940s who couldn't have been more dessert if they'd tried. They dressed (inasmuch as they did dress) not for style but for sex. Their faces showed unmitigated exuberance at the prospect of being eye candy. Their bodies were pinched into corsetry and punishingly tight shorts, but they still arched their backs and pointed their toes with ease, like no human woman in the same getup would be able to.

For the boys at the front during World War II, that was arguably the point. These were not the ladies back home in their unflattering factory wear, smeared with motor oil and sweat and punching time cards. The Vargas girls existed far away from even the suggestion of a workday. Their panties all had matching bras. They were forever reclining on California king-sized beds in some distant, inaccessible hotel room, waiting to be activated. I took them, and not any real women, for my role models. If the Vargas girls had been able to speak, it would have been exclusively in murmurs and purrs. If we could have smelled them, we would have encountered none of the pungency of womanhood, but violets, melting chocolate, strawberry shortcake. Or, maybe, warm vanilla sugar.

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You made the whole mess so much more straightforward: I could be dessert in the most immediate way, without bothering to mold myself into something more tempting on any other level. I could make the room smell like cake without worrying about whether I was, sexually, metaphysically, the cake. I was content to let my skin be dessert because I hadn't yet learned about the ways a woman might torch the crème brûlée of her psyche until she was barely recognizable as human. At eleven, I was plank-flat and shrill and hadn't figured out how to talk around the formidable architecture of my rubber-banded braces. Nothing about me was tempting but my smell, which was really your smell. It belonged, still belongs, to you.

Yes, it belongs to you, and I could argue something similar about so many things that are delectable about me now. This body belongs not to me but to youth; this voice belongs to all the cigarettes I haven't yet smoked; this mouth has been annexed by the men who claim to worship it. I'm not going to be an intoxicating beauty in fifteen years. Other women have the patience for that sort of upkeep, but I freely admit that my plan is to let it all go to hell. Where will it go when it's gone? What will this body be when the last licks of caramelized sugar have been swallowed off its surface?

I don't remember precisely when I stopped wearing you, but I do know why. Some of your coevals were discontinued, but you seem to still be going strong, baking treats out of a whole new generation of raw-batter girls. As a kid, doused in so much of you that I was regularly sent to the bathroom to rinse, I believed that you would be my signature scent forever. But then I sprouted, really sprouted, not just those half-growths of budding breasts and single-digit armpit hair counts that plagued us in the middle school locker rooms with how goddamn slowly they seemed to be proceeding. Once I sprouted, I counted on your magic less. I quickly grew cocky about the magic of my own body after

watching the way it drew stares and whispers. I didn't think I needed something like you anymore. I believed I'd outgrown dessert and didn't yet realize that as a woman, my ideal role was to be dessert forever, unnecessary but so delicious that one couldn't help but desire it.

I remember all the men who have ever appreciated my body and, more pointedly, all the men who have failed to, despite the Vargas girl-like theatrics I've long incorporated into its upkeep. Because frankly, at the end of the day, I don't want to work so hard to look and smell and taste good. I don't want to eat as much pineapple as I currently eat because I read somewhere that it makes one's pussy taste sweeter. I don't want to have a panic attack because I've begun my period two days early while wearing a pair of panties that cost fifty dollars and are the only ones I own that match this bra. I hate leaving the house realizing I've forgotten to spritz myself with perfume and going back home to fix it. I don't want to work so hard for an only occasionally appreciative audience, especially when that audience comprises men I'm attracted to—a demographic that is historically not worth making any special effort for. I particularly remember one man from Tinder, Drew, who had just graduated medical school and was one of those exhausting postgrad drug users who has nothing to say about anything except the exceptional quality and unquestionably fine provenance of his psychedelics. I had sex with him because I'd met him at his apartment and it seemed a waste of a perfectly good lace bodysuit not to have sex with him. I did everything right. Arched my back, pointed my toes, everything Vargas girl perfect, choreographed down to the last detail because I couldn't relax. And afterwards, he reviewed my performance with the same daffy good cheer that he used to speak about his last DMT trip. "That was fun!" he said. "Do you ever think about maybe trying to tone your butt more?" All that effort,

costuming, preparation, and in the end he noticed nothing but one glaring defect.

I wish I'd cussed him out, slapped his face, stormed out of his apartment—in fact, I wish I'd stormed out of his apartment before we had sex, when I'd already decided I didn't really like him. But, caught off guard and pathologically frightened of the ways men react when challenged, I only smiled and said no, I never had, how interesting. And now I hear Drew in my head asking whether I would tone my butt more every time I examine the full length of my naked body in the mirror, which I do often. Looking, as Drew looked, for defects.

As a teenager, I kept thinking I was done becoming. I found my first boyfriend and checked “find life partner” off my internal list. I grew breasts and got my period and checked off “become entire woman.” I was realistic, of course—I knew that my becoming wouldn't be worth much until I went to college, at which point, free from my parents, all my wanting would be over at last. Between the years of fourteen and, well, the present day, I've felt constantly as if I've finally learned my lesson. When my first boyfriend dumped me, I figured I'd learned how to keep the next one around forever. And I figured it after every instance of a man's cruelty or disrespect: that I'd learned what to do differently. Now I'm twenty-eight, a decade and a half into having “learned what to do differently.” What am I actually doing differently? Nothing. Still the same hoarfrost-hearted secret romantic, but with the beginnings of a beer belly; that's something, even if the optimistic teen that I once was would never have put it on a wish list for her life.

When I grew from sweet-tempered girlhood into the glowering sluttiness of my adolescence, I had no place for you anymore. An adult woman's signature aesthetic was meant to be darker and woodsier. I knew the score and spent my first ever paycheck on my first ever bottle of perfume (not the Daisy by Marc Jacobs that I wear now, but something

cheap and nostril-choking). I mean, let's face it, I bought everything. A floor-length nylon gown with crotch-high slits, an ill-fitting Victoria's Secret teddy, a pair of pumps that I didn't bother to practice walking in before I wore them for the first and only time and got only a wreckage of blisters for my trouble. If I'd seen some better variant of the thing on a grown woman, I needed it.

Now I am grown myself, no longer enough of a fool to believe that I'm done becoming, but enough of a fool to believe that the worst is over. I am not quite finished baking, but by now, one can smell the dessert that I'll be when the oven door opens and the toothpick comes out of me clean. I no longer storm about in my mother's heels; I have heels of my own, heels that fit, and I have makeup without any glitter in it, and a lingerie collection that makes a certain sort of man believe in God. I pay my own rent in an apartment where my mother does not live. All of this is what I cling to when men remind me that they will always think of me as the dessert they consume when they're really too stuffed to eat another bite.

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I could return to you if I wanted to. You're still available for purchase, and I'm sure you smell more or less the same, albeit in a less revelatory way now that I can never again smell you for the first time. Forgive me for choosing not to then, especially because I miss you—not in the way that a man misses a woman he texts at one in the morning, but in a truer and simultaneously more fantastical way, because you represent something that I once was and can never be again (so actually, maybe exactly the way a man misses a woman he texts at one in the morning). I am tempted, often, by the desire to go backwards. To return to a silly and optimistic mode that should no longer be available to me, a mode from before I knew every cruel way that I would be treated on my journey towards adulthood. I'd feel pathetic chasing the bite-sized tea cake magic that you once bestowed on my skin, now

that I am no tea cake at all but something heavier and more sinister, something with Valrhona and no flour. I do nothing the way that I did it when I was eleven. Why should I make an exception for you? So as easy as it'd be to reunite with you, it'd be a false reunion. We'd have nothing to do together anymore, you and I.

So I no longer own you. Fair enough! I hope, though, that you'll still permit me my nostalgia for you. I hold you in the highest esteem for what you did for me, allowing me to spray something on my neck and then on one wrist, and mash my wrists together to spread the smell, like I'd watched my mother do at her vanity every day. You bought me time. Like a training bra, you let me play my last games of dress-up before I knew what kind of woman I even wanted to dress up as, before I knew that there were different kinds.

As for the things that haven't changed, I could never hold you responsible for that. I was always destined to be consumable. I was never going to become the sort of person who commands respect. And that's fine. Some days, it's even preferable. I pass through men's lives like the taste of cherry kirsch syrup down the throat. What would I do if I were something meaty and substantive? Grow old with somebody I met in high school, like I once believed I would? Miss out on all this? I'd sooner miss out on the sun.

So I salute you for the grown-up games you allowed me to play without ever calling attention to the indignity of the truth that I was, in fact, still playing games. I salute your smell, rich as bread but sickly as sugar syrup, somehow heavy and fairy-light all at once. Every time I saw you being deployed in a locker room, I failed to salute, and so now I must make up for lost time. You introduced me, fleetingly, to the woman I was going to be. And now that I am her, I remember you with the greatest fondness, confident that, in a way, I couldn't have done it without you.

Mrs. Todd's Shortcut

by Stephen King

“There goes the Todd woman,” I said.

Homer Buckland watched the little Jaguar go by and nodded. The woman raised her hand to Homer. Homer nodded his big, shaggy head to her but didn't raise his own hand in return. The Todd family had a big summer home on Castle Lake, and Homer had been their caretaker since time out of mind. I had an idea that he disliked Worth Todd's second wife every bit as much as he'd liked 'Phelia Todd, the first one.

This was just about two years ago and we were sitting on a bench in front of Bell's Market, me with an orange soda-pop, Homer with a glass of mineral water. It was October, which is a peaceful time in Castle Rock. Lots of the lake places still get used on the weekends, but the aggressive, boozy summer socializing is over by then and the hunters with their big guns and their expensive nonresident permits pinned to their orange caps haven't started to come into town yet. Crops have been mostly laid by. Nights are cool, good for sleeping, and old joints like mine haven't yet started to complain. In October the sky over the lake is passing fair, with those big white clouds that move so slow; I like how

they seem so flat on the bottoms, and how they are a little gray there, like with a shadow of sundown foretold, and I can watch the sun sparkle on the water and not be bored for some space of minutes. It's in October, sitting on the bench in front of Bell's and watching the lake from afar off, that I still wish I was a smoking man.

"She don't drive as fast as 'Phelia," Homer said. "I swan I used to think what an old-fashion name she had for a woman that could put a car through its paces like she could."

Summer people like the Todds are nowhere near as interesting to the year-round residents of small Maine towns as they themselves believe. Year-round folk prefer their own love stories and hate stories and scandals and rumors of scandal. When that textile fellow from Amesbury shot himself, Estonia Corbridge found that after a week or so she couldn't even get invited to lunch on her story of how she found him with the pistol still in one stiffening hand. But folks are still not done talking about Joe Camber, who got killed by his own dog.

Well, it don't matter. It's just that they are different race-courses we run on. Summer people are trotters; us others that don't put on ties to do our week's work are just pacers. Even so there was quite a lot of local interest when Ophelia Todd disappeared back in 1973. Ophelia was a genuinely nice woman, and she had done a lot of things in town. She worked to raise money for the Sloan Library, helped to refurbish the war memorial, and that sort of thing. But all the summer people like the idea of raising money. You mention raising money and their eyes light up and commence to gleam. You mention raising money and they can get a committee together and appoint a secretary and keep an agenda. They like that. But you mention time (beyond, that is, one big long walloper of a combined cocktail party and committee meeting) and you're out of luck. Time seems to be what summer people mostly set a store by. They lay it by, and if they could put it up in Ball jars like preserves, why, they would. But 'Phelia Todd seemed willing to spend time-to do

desk duty in the library as well as to raise money for it. When it got down to using scouring pads and elbow grease on the war memorial, 'Phelia was right out there with town women who had lost sons in three different wars, wearing an overall with her hair done up in a kerchief. And when kids needed ferrying to a summer swim program, you'd be as apt to see her as anyone headed down Landing Road with the back of Worth Todd's big shiny pickup full of kids. A good woman. Not a town woman, but a good woman. And when she disappeared, there was concern. Not grieving, exactly, because a disappearance is not exactly like a death. It's not like chopping something off with a cleaver; more like something running down the sink so slow you don't know it's all gone until long after it is.

“'Twas a Mercedes she drove,” Homer said, answering the question I hadn't asked. “Two-seater sportster. Todd got it for her in sixty-four or sixty-five, I guess. You remember her taking the kids to the lake all those years they had Frogs and Tadpoles?”

“Ayuh.”

“She'd drive 'em no more than forty, mindful they was in the back. But it chafed her. That woman had lead in her foot and a ball bearing sommers in the back of her ankle.”

It used to be that Homer never talked about his summer people. But then his wife died. Five years ago it was. She was plowing a grade and the tractor tipped over on her and Homer was taken bad off about it. He grieved for two years or so and then seemed to feel better. But he was not the same. He seemed waiting for something to happen, waiting for the next thing. You'd pass his neat little house sometimes at dusk and he would be on the porch smoking a pipe with a glass of mineral water on the porch rail and the sunset would be in his eyes and pipe smoke around his head and you'd think—I did, anyway—Homer is waiting for the next thing. This bothered me over a wider range of my mind than I liked to admit, and at last I decided it was because if it had been

me, I wouldn't have been waiting for the next thing, like a groom who has put on his morning coat and finally has his tie right and is only sitting there on a bed in the upstairs of his house and looking first at himself in the mirror and then at the clock on the mantel and waiting for it to be eleven o'clock so he can get married. If it had been me, I would not have been waiting for the next thing; I would have been waiting for the last thing.

But in that waiting period—which ended when Homer went to Vermont a year later—he sometimes talked about those people. To me, to a few others.

“She never even drove fast with her husband, s'far as I know. But when I drove with her, she made that Mercedes strut.”

A fellow pulled in at the pumps and began to fill up his car. The car had a Massachusetts plate.

“It wasn't one of these new sports cars that run on unleaded gasoline and hitch every time you step on it; it was one of the old ones, and the speedometer was calibrated all the way up to a hundred and sixty. It was a funny color of brown and I ast her one time what you called that color and she said it was Champagne. Ain't that good, I says, and she laughs fit to split. I like a woman who will laugh when you don't have to point her right at the joke, you know.”

The man at the pumps had finished getting his gas.

“Afternoon, gentlemen,” he says as he comes up the steps.

“A good day to you,” I says, and he went inside.

“Phelia was always lookin for a shortcut,” Homer went on as if we had never been interrupted. “That woman was mad for a shortcut. I never saw the beat of it. She said if you can save enough distance, you'll save time as well. She said her father swore by that scripture. He was a salesman, always on the road, and she went with him when she could, and he was always lookin for the shortest way. So she got in the habit.

“I ast her one time if it wasn't kinda funny—here she was on the one hand, spendin her time rubbin up that old statue

in the Square and takin the little ones to their swimmin lessons instead of playing tennis and swimming and getting boozed up like normal summer people, and on the other hand bein so damn set on savin fifteen minutes between here and Fryeburg that thinkin about it probably kep her up nights. It just seemed to me the two things went against each other's grain, if you see what I mean. She just looks at me and says, 'I like being helpful, Homer. I like driving, too—at least sometimes, when it's a challenge-but I don't like the time it takes. It's like mending clothes—sometimes you take tucks and sometimes you let things out. Do you see what I mean?'

“ ‘I guess so, missus,’ I says, kinda dubious.

“ ‘If sitting behind the wheel of a car was my idea of a really good time all the time, I would look for long-cuts,’ she says, and that tickled me s'much I had to laugh.”

The Massachusetts fellow came out of the store with a six-pack in one hand and some lottery tickets in the other.

“You enjoy your weekend,” Homer says.

“I always do,” the Massachusetts fellow says. “I only wish I could afford to live here all year round.”

“Well, we'll keep it all in good order for when you can come,” Homer says, and the fellow laughs.

We watched him drive off toward someplace, that Massachusetts plate showing. It was a green one. My Marcy says those are the ones the Massachusetts Motor Registry gives to drivers who ain't had a accident in that strange, angry, fuming state for two years. If you have, she says, you got to have a red one so people know to watch out for you when they see you on the roll.

“They was in-state people, you know, the both of them,” Homer said, as if the Massachusetts fellow had reminded him of the fact.

“I guess I did know that,” I said.

“The Todds are just about the only birds we got that fly north in the winter. The new one, I don’t think she likes flying north too much.”

He sipped his mineral water and fell silent a moment, thinking.

“She didn’t mind it, though,” Homer said. “At least, I judge she didn’t although she used to complain about it something fierce. The complaining was just a way to explain why she was always lookin for a shortcut.”

“And you mean her husband didn’t mind her traipsing down every wood-road in tarnation between here and Bangor just so she could see if it was nine-tenths of a mile shorter?”

“He didn’t care piss-all,” Homer said shortly, and got up, and went in the store. There now, Owens, I told myself, you know it ain’t safe to ast him questions when he’s yarning, and you went right ahead and ast one, and you have buggered a story that was starting to shape up promising.

I sat there and turned my face up into the sun and after about ten minutes he come out with a boiled egg and sat down. He ate her and I took care not to say nothing and the water on Castle Lake sparkled as blue as something as might be told of in a story about treasure. When Homer had finished his egg and had a sip of mineral water, he went on. I was surprised, but still said nothing. It wouldn’t have been wise.

“They had two or three different chunks of rolling iron,” he said. “There was the Cadillac, and his truck, and her little Mercedes go-devil. A couple of winters he left the truck, ’case they wanted to come down and do some skiin. Mostly when the summer was over he’d drive the Caddy back up and she’d take her go-devil.”

I nodded but didn’t speak. In truth, I was afraid to risk another comment. Later I thought it would have taken a lot of comments to shut Homer Buckland up that day. He had

been wanting to tell the story of Mrs. Todd's shortcut for a long time.

"Her little go-devil had a special odometer in it that told you how many miles was in a trip, and every time she set off from Castle Lake to Bangor she'd set it to 000-point-0 and let her clock up to whatever. She had made a game of it, and she used to chafe me with it."

He paused, thinking that back over.

"No, that ain't right."

He paused more and faint lines showed up on his forehead like steps on a library ladder.

"She made like she made a game of it, but it was a serious business to her. Serious as anything else, anyway. He flapped a hand and I think he meant the husband." "The glovebox of the little go-devil was filled with maps, and there was a few more in the back where there would be a seat in a regular car. Some was gas station maps, and some was pages that had been pulled from the Rand-McNally Road Atlas; she had some maps from Appalachian Trail guidebooks and a whole mess of topographical survey-squares, too. It wasn't her having those maps that made me think it wa'n't a game; it was how she'd drawed lines on all of them, showing routes she'd taken or at least tried to take.

"She'd been stuck a few times, too, and had to get a pull from some farmer with a tractor and chain.

"I was there one day laying tile in the bathroom, sitting there with grout squittering out of every damn crack you could see-I dreamed of nothing but squares and cracks that was bleeding grout that night-and she come stood in the doorway and talked to me about it for quite a while. I used to chafe her about it, but I was also sort of interested, and not just because my brother Franklin used to live down-Bangor and I'd traveled most of the roads she was telling me of. I was interested just because a man like me is always uncommon interested in knowing the shortest way, even if he don't always want to take it. You that way too?"

“Ayuh,” I said. There’s something powerful about knowing the shortest way, even if you take the longer way because you know your mother-in-law is sitting home. Getting there quick is often for the birds, although no one holding a Massachusetts driver’s license seems to know it. But knowing how to get there quick-or even knowing how to get there a way that the person sitting beside you don’t know ... that has power.

“Well, she had them roads like a Boy Scout has his knots,” Homer said, and smiled his large, sunny grin. “She says, ‘Wait a minute, wait a minute,’ like a little girl, and I hear her through the wall rummaging through her desk, and then she comes back with a little notebook that looked like she’d had it a good long time. Cover was all rumpled, don’t you know, and some of the pages had pulled loose from those little wire rings on one side.

“The way Worth goes—the way most people go—is Route 97 to Mechanic Falls, then Route 11 to Lewiston, and then the Interstate to Bangor. 156.4 miles.’ ”

I nodded.

“If you want to skip the turnpike-and save some distance-you’d go to Mechanic Falls, Route 11 to Lewiston, Route 202 to Augusta, then up Route 9 through China Lake and Unity and Haven to Bangor. That’s 144.9 miles.’

“You won’t save no time that way, missus,’ I says, ‘not going through Lewiston and Augusta. Although I will admit that drive up the Old Derry Road to Bangor is real pretty.’

“Save enough miles and soon enough you’ll save time,’ she says. ‘And I didn’t say that’s the way I’d go, although I have a good many times; I’m just running down the routes most people use. Do you want me to go on?’

“No,’ I says, ‘just leave me in this cussed bathroom all by myself starin at all these cussed cracks until I start to rave.’

“There are four major routes in all,’ she says. ‘The one by Route 2 is 163.4 miles. I only tried it once. Too long.’

“That’s the one I’d hosey if my wife called and told me it was leftovers,’ I says, kinda low.

“‘What was that?’ she says.

“‘Nothin,’ I says. ‘Talkin to the grout.’

“‘Oh. Well, the fourth—and there aren’t too many who know about it, although they are all good roads-paved, anyway—is across Speckled Bird Mountain on 219 to 202 beyond Lewiston. Then, if you take Route 19, you can get around Augusta. Then you take the Old Derry Road. That way is just 129.2.’

“I didn’t say nothing for a little while and p’raps she thought I was doubting her because she says, a little pert, ‘I know it’s hard to believe, but it’s so.’

“I said I guessed that was about right, and I thought—looking back—it probably was. Because that’s the way I’d usually go when I went down to Bangor to see Franklin when he was still alive. I hadn’t been that way in years, though. Do you think a man could just—well—forget a road, Dave?”

I allowed it was. The turnpike is easy to think of. After a while it almost fills a man’s mind, and you think not how could I get from here to there but how can I get from here to the turnpike ramp that’s closest to there. And that made me think that maybe there are lots of roads all over that are just going begging; roads with rock walls beside them, real roads with blackberry bushes growing alongside them but nobody to eat the berries but the birds and gravel pits with old rusted chains hanging down in low curves in front of their entryways, the pits themselves as forgotten as a child’s old toys with scumgrass growing up their deserted unremembered sides. Roads that have just been forgot except by the people who live on them and think of the quickest way to get off them and onto the turnpike where you can pass on a hill and not fret over it. We like to joke in Maine that you can’t get there from here, but maybe the joke is on us. The truth is there’s about a damn thousand ways to do it and man doesn’t bother.

Homer continued: “I grouted tile all afternoon in that hot little bathroom and she stood there in the doorway all that time, one foot crossed behind the other, bare-legged, wearin loafers and a khaki-colored skirt and a sweater that was some darker. Hair was drawn back in a hosstail. She must have been thirty-four or -five then, but her face was lit up with what she was tellin me and I swan she looked like a sorority girl home from school on vacation.

“After a while she musta got an idea of how long she’d been there cuttin the air around her mouth because she says, ‘I must be boring the hell out of you, Homer.’

“ ‘Yes’m,’ I says, ‘you are. I druther you went away and left me to talk to this damn grout.’

“ ‘Don’t be sma’at, Homer,’ she says.

“ ‘No, missus, you ain’t borin me,’ I says.

“So she smiles and then goes back to it, pagin through her little notebook like a salesman checkin his orders. She had those four main ways-well, really three because she gave up on Route 2 right away-but she must have had forty different other ways that were play-offs on those. Roads with state numbers, roads without, roads with names, roads without. My head fair spun with ‘em. And finally she says to me, ‘You ready for the blue-ribbon winner, Homer?’ .

“ ‘I guess so,’ I says.

“ ‘At least it’s the blue-ribbon winner so far,’ she says. ‘Do you know, Homer, that a man wrote an article in Science Today in 1923 proving that no man could run a mile in under four minutes? He proved it, with all sorts of calculations based on the maximum length of the male thigh-muscles, maximum length of stride, maximum lung capacity, maximum heart-rate, and a whole lot more. I was taken with that article! I was so taken that I gave it to Worth and asked him to give it to Professor Murray in the math department at the University of Maine. I wanted those figures checked because I was sure they must have been based on the wrong postulates, or something. Worth probably thought I was

being silly—"Ophelia's got a bee in her bonnet" is what he says—but he took them. Well, Professor Murray checked through the man's figures quite carefully ... and do you know what, Homer?'

" 'No, missus.'

" 'Those figures were right. The man's criteria were solid. He proved, back in 1923, that a man couldn't run a mile in under four minutes. He proved that. But people do it all the time, and do you know what that means?'

" 'No, missus,' I said, although I had a glimmer.

" 'It means that no blue ribbon is forever,' she says. 'Someday—if the world doesn't explode itself in the meantime—someone will run a two-minute mile in the Olympics. It may take a hundred years or a thousand, but it will happen. Because there is no ultimate blue ribbon. There is zero, and there is eternity, and there is mortality, but there is no ultimate.'

"And there she stood, her face clean and scrubbed and shinin, that darkish hair of hers pulled back from her brow, as if to say 'Just you go ahead and disagree if you can.' But I couldn't. Because I believe something like that. It is much like what the minister means, I think, when he talks about grace.

" 'You ready for the blue-ribbon winner for now?' she says.

" 'Ayuh,' I says, and I even stopped groutin for the time bein. I'd reached the tub anyway and there wasn't nothing left but a lot of those frikkin squirrely little comers. She drewed a deep breath and then spieled it out at me as fast as that auctioneer goes over in Gates Falls when he has been putting the whiskey to himself, and I can't remember it all, but it went something like this."

Homer Buckland shut his eyes for a moment, his big hands lying perfectly still on his long thighs, his face turned up toward the sun. Then he opened his eyes again and for a moment I swan he looked like her, yes he did, a seventy-year-old man looking like a woman of thirty-four who was at

that moment in her time looking like a college girl of twenty, and I can't remember exactly what he said any more than he could remember exactly what she said, not just because it was complex but because I was so fetched by how he looked sayin it, but it went close enough like this:

“ ‘You set out Route 97 and then cut up Denton Street to the Old Townhouse Road and that way you get around Castle Rock downtown but back to 97. Nine miles up you can go an old logger's road a mile and a half to Town Road #6, which takes you to Big Anderson Road by Sites' Cider Mill. There's a cut-road the old-timers call Bear Road, and that gets you to 219. Once you're on the far side of Speckled Bird Mountain you grab the Stanhouse Road, turn left onto the Bull Pine Road-there's a swampy patch there but you can spang right through it if you get up enough speed on the gravel-and so you come out on Route 106. 106 cuts through Alton's Plantation to the Old Derry Road—and there's two or three woods roads there that you follow and so come out on Route 3 just beyond Derry Hospital. From there it's only four miles to Route 2 in Etna, and so into Bangor.’

“She paused to get her breath back, then looked at me. ‘Do you know how long that is, all told?’

“ ‘No'm,’ I says, thinking it sounds like about a hundred and ninety miles and four bust springs.

“ ‘It's 116.4 miles,’ she says.”

I laughed. The laugh was out of me before I thought I wasn't doing myself any favor if I wanted to hear this story to the end. But Homer grinned himself and nodded.

“I know. And you know I don't like to argue with anyone, Dave. But there's a difference between having your leg pulled and getting it shook like a damn apple tree.

“ ‘You don't believe me,’ she says.

“ ‘Well, it's hard to believe, missus,’ I said.

“ ‘Leave that grout to dry and I'll show you,’ she says. ‘You can finish behind the tub tomorrow. Come on, Homer. I'll leave a note for Worth—he may not be back tonight anyway-

and you can call your wife! We'll be sitting down to dinner in the Pilot's Grille in'—she looks at her watch 'two hours and forty-five minutes from right now. And if it's a minute longer, I'll buy you a bottle of Irish Mist to take home with you. You see, my dad was right. Save enough miles and you'll save time, even if you have to go through every damn bog and sump in Kennebec County to do it. Now what do you say?'

“She was lookin at me with her brown eyes just like lamps, there was a devilish look in them that said turn your cap around back'rds, Homer, and climb aboard this hoss, I be first and you be second and let the devil take the hindmost, and there was a grin on her face that said the exact same thing, and I tell you, Dave, I wanted to go. I didn't even want to top that damn can of grout. And I certain sure didn't want to drive that go-devil of hers. I wanted just to sit in it on the shotgun side and watch her get in, see her skirt come up a little, see her pull it down over her knees or not, watch her hair shine.”

He trailed off and suddenly let off a sarcastic, choked laugh. That laugh of his sounded like a shotgun loaded with rock salt.

“Just call up Megan and say, ‘You know ’Phelia Todd, that woman you're halfway to being so jealous of now you can't see straight and can't ever find a good word to say about her? Well, her and me is going to make this speed-run down to Bangor in that little champagne-colored go-devil Mercedes of hers, so don't wait dinner.’

“Just call her up and say that. Oh yes. Oh ayuh.”

And he laughed again with his hands lying there on his legs just as natural as ever was and I seen something in his face that was almost hateful and after a minute he took his glass of mineral water from the railing there and got outside some of it.

“You didn't go,” I said.

“Not then.”

He laughed, and this laugh was gentler.

“She must have seen something in my face, because it as like she found herself again. She stopped looking like a sorority girl and just looked like ’Phelia Todd again. She looked down at the notebook like she didn’t know what it was she had been holding and put it down by her side, almost behind her skirt.

“I says, ‘I’d like to do just that thing, missus, but I got to finish up here, and my wife has got a roast on for dinner.’

“She says, ‘I understand, Homer-I just got a little carried away. I do that a lot. All the time, Worth says.’ Then she kinda straightened up and says, ‘But the offer holds, any time you want to go. You can even throw your shoulder to the back end if we get stuck somewhere. Might save me five dollars.’ And she laughed.

“ ‘I’ll take you up on it, missus,’ I says, and she seen that I meant what I said and wasn’t just being polite.

“ ‘And before you just go believing that a hundred and sixteen miles to Bangor is out of the question, get out your own map and see how many miles it would be as the crow flies.’

“I finished the tiles and went home and ate leftovers—there wa’n’t no roast, and I think ’Phelia Todd knew it-and after Megan was in bed, I got out my yardstick and a pen and my Mobil map of the state, and I did what she had told me ... because it had laid hold of my mind a bit, you see. I drew a straight line and did out the calculations accordin to the scale of miles. I was some surprised. Because if you went from Castle Rock up there to Bangor like one of those little Piper Cubs could fly on a clear day-if you didn’t have to mind lakes, or stretches of lumber company woods that was chained off, or bogs, or crossing rivers where there wasn’t no bridges, why, it would just be seventy-nine miles, give or take.”

I jumped a little.

“Measure it yourself, if you don’t believe me,” Homer said. “I never knew Maine was so small until I seen that.”

He had himself a drink and then looked around at me.

“There come a time the next spring when Megan was away in New Hampshire visiting with her brother. I had to go down to the Todds’ house to take off the storm doors and put on the screens, and her little Mercedes go-devil was there. She was down by herself.

“She come to the door and says: ‘Homer! Have you come to put on the screen doors?’

“And right off I says: ‘No, missus, I come to see if you want to give me a ride down to Bangor the short way.’

“Well, she looked at me with no expression on her face at all, and I thought she had forgotten all about it. I felt my face gettin red, the way it will when you feel you just pulled one hell of a boner. Then, just when I was getting ready to ‘pologize, her face busts into that grin again and she says, ‘You just stand right there while I get my keys. And don’t change your mind, Homer!’

“She come back a minute later with ‘em in her hand. ‘If we get stuck, you’ll see mosquitoes just about the size of dragonflies.’

“ ‘I’ve seen ‘em as big as English sparrows up in Rangely, missus,’ I said, ‘and I guess we’re both a spot too heavy to be carried off.’

“She laughs. ‘Well, I warned you, anyway. Come on, Homer.’

“ ‘And if we ain’t there in two hours and forty-five minutes,’ I says, kinda sly, ‘you was gonna buy me a bottle of Irish Mist.’

“She looks at me kinda surprised, the driver’s door of the go-devil open and one foot inside. ‘Hell, Homer,’ she says, ‘I told you that was the Blue Ribbon for then. I’ve found a way up there that’s shorter. We’ll be there in two and a half hours. Get in here, Homer. We are going to roll.’”

He paused again, hands lying calm on his thighs, his eyes dulling, perhaps seeing that champagne-colored two-seater heading up the Todds' steep driveway.

"She stood the car still at the end of it and says, 'You sure?'"

" 'Let her rip,' I says. The ball bearing in her ankle rolled and that heavy foot come down. I can't tell you nothing much about whatall happened after that. Except after a while I couldn't hardly take my eyes off her. There was somethin wild that crep into her face, Dave-something wild and something free, and it frightened my heart. She was beautiful, and I was took with love for her, anyone would have been, any man, anyway, and maybe any woman too, but I was scairt of her too, because she looked like she could kill you if her eye left the road and fell on you and she decided to love you back. She was wearin blue jeans and a old white shirt with the sleeves rolled up—I had a idea she was maybe fixin to paint somethin on the back deck when I came by—but after we had been goin for a while seemed like she was dressed in nothin but all this white billowy stuff like a pitcher in one of those old gods-and-goddesses books."

He thought, looking out across the lake, his face very somber.

"Like the huntress that was supposed to drive the moon across the sky."

"Diana?"

"Ayuh. Moon was her go-devil. 'Phelia looked like that to me and I just tell you fair out that I was stricken in love for her and never would have made a move, even though I was some younger then than I am now. I would not have made a move even had I been twenty, although I suppose I might of at sixteen, and been killed for it—killed if she looked at me was the way it felt.

"She was like that woman drivin the moon across the sky, halfway up over the splashboard with her gossamer stoles all flyin out behind her in silver cobwebs and her hair streamin back to show the dark little hollows of her temples, lashin

those horses and tellin me to get along faster and never mind how they blowed, just faster, faster, faster.

“We went down a lot of woods roads—the first two or three I knew, and after that I didn’t know none of them. We must have been a sight to those trees that had never seen nothing with a motor in it before but big old pulp-trucks and snowmobiles; that little go-devil that would most likely have looked more at home on the Sunset Boulevard than shooting through those woods, spitting and bulling its way up one hill and then slamming down the next through those dusty green bars of afternoon sunlight she had the top down and I could smell everything in those woods, and you know what an old fine smell that is, like something which has been mostly left alone and is not much troubled. We went on across corduroy which had been laid over some of the boggiest parts, and black mud squelched up between some of those cut logs and she laughed like a kid. Some of the logs was old and rotted, because there hadn’t been nobody down a couple of those roads—except for her, that is—in I’m going to say five or ten years. We was alone, except for the birds and whatever animals seen us.

The sound of that go-devil’s engine, first buzzin along and then windin up high and fierce when she punched in the clutch and shifted down ... that was the only motor-sound I could hear. And although I knew we had to be close to someplace all the time—I mean, these days you always are—I started to feel like we had gone back in time, and there wasn’t nothing. That if we stopped and I climbed a high tree, I wouldn’t see nothing in any direction but woods and woods and more woods. And all the time she’s just hammering that thing along, her hair all out behind her, smilin, her eyes flashin. So we come out on the Speckled Bird Mountain Road and for a while I known where we were again, and then she turned off and for just a little bit I thought I knew, and then I didn’t even bother to kid myself no more. We went cut-slam down another woods road, and then we come out—I swear it—on a nice paved road with a sign that said MOTORWAY B.

You ever heard of a road in the state of Maine that was called MOTORWAY B?”

“No,” I says. “Sounds English.”

“Ayuh. Looked English. These trees like willows overhung the road. ‘Now watch out here, Homer,’ she says, ‘one of those nearly grabbed me a month ago and gave me an Indian burn.’

“I didn’t know what she was talkin about and started to say so, and then I seen that even though there was no wind, the branches of those trees was dippin down—they was waverin down. They looked black and wet inside the fuzz of green on them. I couldn’t believe what I was seein. Then one of em snatched off my cap and I knew I wasn’t asleep. ‘Hi!’ I shouts. ‘Give that back!’

“ ‘Too late now, Homer,’ she says, and laughs. ‘There’s daylight, just up ahead ... we’re okay.’

“Then another one of em comes down, on her side this time, and snatches at her-I swear it did. She ducked, and it caught in her hair and pulled a lock of it out. ‘Ouch, dammit that hurts!’ she yells, but she was laughin, too. The car swerved a little when she ducked and I got a look into the woods and holy God, Dave! Everythin in there was movin. There was grasses wavin and plants that was all knotted together so it seemed like they made faces, and I seen somethin sittin in a squat on top of a stump, and it looked like a tree-toad, only it was as big as a full-growed cat.

“Then we come out of the shade to the top of a hill and she says, ‘There! That was exciting, wasn’t it?’ as if she was talkin about no more than a walk through the Haunted House at the Fryeburg Fair.

“About five minutes later we swung onto another of her woods roads. I didn’t want no more woods right then-I can tell you that for sure-but these were just plain old woods. Half an hour after that, we was pulling into the parking lot of the Pilot’s Grille in Bangor. She points to that little odometer for trips and says, ‘Take a gander, Homer.’ I did, and it said

111.6. ‘What do you think now? Do you believe in my shortcut?’

“That wild look had mostly faded out of her, and she was just ‘Phelia Todd again. But that other look wasn’t entirely gone. It was like she was two women, ‘Phelia and Diana, and the part of her that was Diana was so much in control when she was driving the back roads that the part that was ‘Phelia didn’t have no idea that her shortcut was taking her through places ... places that ain’t on any map of Maine, not even on those survey-squares.

“She says again, ‘What do you think of my shortcut, Homer?’

“And I says the first thing to come into my mind, which ain’t something you’d usually say to a lady like ‘Phelia Todd. ‘It’s a real piss-cutter, missus,’ I says.

“She laughs, just as pleased as punch, and I seen it then, just as clear as glass: She didn’t remember none of the funny stuff. Not the willow-branches—except they weren’t willows, not at all, not really anything like em, or anything else—that grabbed off m’hat, not that MOTORWAY B sign, or that awful-lookin toad-thing. She didn’t remember none of that funny stuff! Either I had dreamed it was there or she had dreamed it wasn’t. All I knew for sure, Dave, was that we had rolled only a hundred and eleven miles and gotten to Bangor, and that wasn’t no daydream; it was right there on the little go-devil’s odometer, in black and white.

“ ‘Well, it is,’ she says. ‘It is a piss-cutter. I only wish I could get Worth to give it a go sometime ... but he’ll never get out of his rut unless someone blasts him out of it, and it would probably take a Titan II missile to do that, because I believe he has built himself a fallout shelter at the bottom of that rut. Come on in, Homer, and let’s dump some dinner into you.’

“And she bought me one hell of a dinner, Dave, but I couldn’t eat very much of it. I kep thinkin about what the ride back might be like, now that it was drawing down dark.

Then, about halfway through the meal, she excused herself and made a telephone call. When she came back she ast me if I would mind drivin the go-devil back to Castle Rock for her. She said she had talked to some woman who was on the same school committee as her, and the woman said they had some kind of problem about somethin or other. She said she'd grab herself a Hertz car if Worth couldn't see her back down. 'Do you mind awfully driving back in the dark?' she ast me.

"She looked at me, kinda smilin, and I knew she remembered some of it all right-Christ knows how much, but she remembered enough to know I wouldn't want to try her way after dark, if ever at all ... although I seen by the light in her eyes that it wouldn't have bothered her a bit.

"So I said it wouldn't bother me, and I finished my meal better than when I started it. It was drawin down dark by the time we was done, and she run us over to the house of the woman she'd called. And when she gets out she looks at me with that same light in her eyes and says, 'Now, you're sure you don't want to wait, Homer? I saw a couple of side roads just today, and although I can't find them on my maps, I think they might chop a' few miles.'

"I says, 'Well, missus, I would, but at my age the best bed to sleep in is my own, I've found. I'll take your car back and never put a ding in her ... although I guess I'll probably put on some more miles than you did.'

"Then she laughed, kind of soft, and she give me a kiss. That was the best kiss I ever had in my whole life, Dave. It was just on the cheek, and it was the chaste kiss of a married woman, but it was as ripe as a peach, or like those flowers that open in the dark, and when her lips touched my skin I felt like ... I don't know exactly what I felt like, because a man can't easily hold on to those things that happened to him with a girl who was ripe when the world was young or how those things felt-I'm talking around what I mean, but I think

you understand. Those things all get a red cast to them in your memory and you cannot see through it at all.

“ ‘You’re a sweet man, Homer, and I love you for listening to me and riding with me,’ she says. ‘Drive safe.’

“Then in she went, to that woman’s house. Me, I drove home.”

“How did you go?” I asked.

He laughed softly. “By the turnpike, you damned fool,” he said, and I never seen so many wrinkles in his face before as I did then.

He sat there, looking into the sky.

“Came the summer she disappeared. I didn’t see much of her ... that was the summer we had the fire, you’ll remember, and then the big storm that knocked down all the trees. A busy time for caretakers. Oh, I thought about her from time to time, and about that day, and about that kiss, and it started to seem like a dream to me. Like one time, when I was about sixteen and couldn’t think about nothing but girls. I was out plowing George Bascomb’s west field, the one that looks acrost the lake at the mountains, dreamin about what teenage boys dream of. And I pulled up this rock with the harrow blades, and it split open, and it bled. At least, it looked to me like it bled. Red stuff come runnin out of the cleft in the rock and soaked into the soil. And I never told no one but my mother, and I never told her what it meant to me, or what happened to me, although she washed my drawers and maybe she knew. Anyway, she suggested I ought to pray on it. Which I did, but I never got no enlightenment, and after a while something started to suggest to my mind that it had been a dream. It’s that way, sometimes. There is holes in the middle, Dave. Do you know that?”

“Yes,” I says, thinking of one night when I’d seen something. That was in ’59, a bad year for us, but my kids didn’t know it was a bad year; all they knew was that they wanted to eat just like always. I’d seen a bunch of whitetail in Henry Brugger’s back field, and I was out there after dark

with a jacklight in August. You can shoot two when they're summer-fat; the second'll come back and sniff at the first as if to say What the hell? Is it fall already? and you can pop him like a bowlin pin. You can hack off enough meat to feed yowwens for six weeks and bury what's left. Those are two whitetails the hunters who come in November don't get a shot at, but kids have to eat. Like the man from Massachusetts said, he'd like to be able to afford to live here the year around, and all I can say is sometimes you pay for the privilege after dark.

So there I was, and I seen this big orange light in the sky; it come down and down, and I stood and watched it with my mouth hung on down to my breastbone and when it hit the lake the whole of it was lit up for a minute a purple-orange that seemed to go right up to the sky in rays. Wasn't nobody ever said nothing to me about that light, and I never said nothing to nobody myself, partly because I was afraid they'd laugh, but also because they'd wonder what the hell I'd been doing out there after dark to start with. And after a while it was like Homer said-it seemed like a dream I had once had, and it didn't signify to me because I couldn't make nothing of it which would turn under my hand. It was like a moonbeam. It didn't have no handle and it didn't have no blade. I couldn't make it work so I left it alone, like a man does when he knows the day is going to come up nevertheless.

"There are holes in the middle of things," Homer said, and he sat up straighter, like he was mad. "Right in the damn middle of things, not even to the left or right where your p'riph'ral vision is and you could say 'Well, but hell-' They are there and you go around them like you'd go around a pothole in the road that would break an axle. You know? And you forget it. Or like if you are plowin, you can plow a dip. But if there's somethin like a break in the earth, where you see darkness, like a cave might be there, you say 'Go around, old hoss. Leave that alone! I got a good shot over here to the left'ards.' Because it wasn't a cave you was lookin for, or some kind of college excitement, but good plowin.

“Holes in the middle of things.”

He fell still a long time then and I let him be still. Didn't have no urge to move him. And at last he says:

“She disappeared in August. I seen her for the first time in early July, and she looked ... ” Homer turned to me and spoke each word with careful, spaced emphasis. “Dave Owens, she looked gorgeous! Gorgeous and wild and almost untamed. The little wrinkles I'd started to notice around her eyes all seemed to be gone. Worth Todd, he was at some conference or something in Boston. And she stands there at the edge of the deck-I was out in the middle with my shirt off-and she says, ‘Homer, you'll never believe it.’

“‘No, missus, but I'll try,’ I says.

“‘I found two new roads,’ she says, ‘and I got up to Bangor this last time in just sixty-seven miles.’

“I remembered what she said before and I says, ‘That's not possible, missus. Beggin your pardon, but I did the mileage on the map myself, and seventy-nine is tops ... as the crow flies.’

“She laughed, and she looked prettier than ever. Like a goddess in the sun, on one of those hills in a story where there's nothing but green grass and fountains and no puckies to tear at a man's forearms at all. ‘That's right,’ she says, ‘and you can't run a mile in under four minutes. It's been mathematically proved.’

“‘It ain't the same,’ I says.

“‘It's the same,’ she says. ‘Fold the map and see how many miles it is then, Homer. It can be a little less than a straight line if you fold it a little, or it can be a lot less if you fold it a lot.’

“I remembered our ride then, the way you remember a dream, and I says, ‘Missus, you can fold a map on paper but you can't fold land. Or at least you shouldn't ought to try. You want to leave it alone.’

“ ‘No sir,’ she says. ‘It’s the one thing right now in my life that I won’t leave alone, because it’s there, and it’s mine.’

“Three weeks later—this would be about two weeks before she disappeared—she give me a call from Bangor. She says, ‘Worth has gone to New York, and I am coming down. I’ve misplaced my damn key, Homer. I’d like you to open the house so I can get in:’

“Well, that call come at eight o’clock, just when it was starting to come down dark. I had a sanwidge and a beer before leaving—about twenty minutes. Then I took a ride down there. All in all, I’d say I was forty-five minutes. When I got down there to the Todds’, I seen there was a light on in the pantry I didn’t leave on while I was comin down the driveway. I was lookin at that, and I almost run right into her little go-devil. It was parked kind of on a slant, the way a drunk would park it, and it was splashed with muck all the way up to the windows, and there was this stuff stuck in that mud along the body that looked like seaweed ... only when my lights hit it, it seemed to be movin.

I parked behind it and got out of my truck. That stuff wasn’t seaweed, but it was weeds, and it was movin ... kinda slow and sluggish, like it was dyin. I touched a piece of it, and it tried to wrap itself around my hand. It felt nasty and awful. I drug my hand away and wiped it on my pants. I went around to the front of the car. It looked like it had come through about ninety miles of splash and low country. Looked tired, it did. Bugs was splashed all over the windshield—only they didn’t look like no kind of bugs I ever seen before. There was a moth that was about the size of a sparrow, its wings still flappin a little, feeble and dyin. There was things like mosquitoes, only they had real eyes that you could see—and they seemed to be seein me. I could hear those weeds scrapin against the body of the go-devil, dyin, tryin to get a hold on somethin. And all I could think was Where in the hell has she been? And how did she get here in only three-quarters of an hour? Then I seen somethin else. There was some kind of a animal half-smashed onto the radiator

grille, just under where that Mercedes ornament is—the one that looks kinda like a star looped up into a circle?

Now most small animals you kill on the road is bore right under the car, because they are crouching when it hits them, hoping it'll just go over and leave them with their hide still attached to their meat. But every now and then one will jump, not away, but right at the damn car, as if to get in one good bite of whatever the buggardly thing is that's going to kill it—I have known that to happen. This thing had maybe done that. And it looked mean enough to jump a Sherman tank. It looked like something which come of a mating between a woodchuck and a weasel, but there was other stuff thrown in that a body didn't even want to look at. It hurt your eyes, Dave; worse'n that, it hurt your mind. Its pelt was matted with blood, and there was claws sprung out of the pads on its feet like a cat's claws, only longer. It had big yellowy eyes, only they was glazed. When I was a kid I had a porcelain marble—a croaker—that looked like that. And teeth. Long thin needle teeth that looked almost like darning needles, stickin out of its mouth. Some of them was sunk right into that steel grillwork. That's why it was still hanging on; it had hung its own self on by the teeth. I looked at it and knowed it had a headful of poison just like a rattlesnake, and it jumped at that go-devil when it saw it was about to be run down, tryin to bite it to death. And I wouldn't be the one to try and yonk it offa there because I had cuts on my hands—hay-cuts—and I thought it would kill me as dead as a stone parker if some of that poison seeped into the cuts.

“I went around to the driver's door and opened it. The inside light come on, and I looked at that special odometer that she set for trips ... and what I seen there was 31.6.

“I looked at that for a bit, and then I went to the back door. She'd forced the screen and broke the glass by the lock so she could get her hand through and let herself in. There was a note that said: 'Dear Homer—got here a little sooner than I thought I would. Found a shortcut, and it is a dilly! You hadn't come yet so I let myself in like a burglar. Worth is

coming day after tomorrow. Can you get the screen fixed and the door reglazed by then? Hope so. Things like that always bother him. If I don't come out to say hello, you'll know I'm asleep. The drive was very tiring, but I was here in no time! Ophelia.'

"Tirin! I took another look at that bogey-thing hangin offa the grille of her car, and I thought Yessir, it must have been tiring. By God, yes."

He paused again, and cracked a restless knuckle.

"I seen her only once more. About a week later. Worth was there, but he was swimmin out in the lake, back and forth, back and forth, like he was sawin wood or signin papers. More like he was signin papers, I guess.

" 'Missus,' I says, 'this ain't my business, but you ought to leave well enough alone. That night you come back and broke the glass of the door to come in, I seen somethin hangin off the front of your car-'

" 'Oh, the chuck! I took care of that,' she says.

" 'Christ!' I says. 'I hope you took some care!'

" 'I wore Worth's gardening gloves,' she said. 'It wasn't anything anyway, Homer, but a jumped-up woodchuck with a little poison in it.'

" 'But missus,' I says, 'where there's woodchucks there's bears. And if that's what the woodchucks look like along your shortcut, what's going to happen to you if a bear shows up?'

"She looked at me, and I seen that other woman in her—that Diana-woman. She says, 'If things are different along those roads, Homer, maybe I am different, too. Look at this.'

"Her hair was done up in a clip at the back, looked sort of like a butterfly and had a stick through it. She let it down. It was the kind of hair that would make a man wonder what it would look like spread out over a pillow. She says, 'It was coming in gray, Homer. Do you see any gray?' And she spread it with her fingers so the sun could shine on it.

" 'No'm,' I says.

“She looks at me, her eyes all a-sparkle, and she says, ‘Your wife is a good woman, Homer Buckland, but she has seen me in the store and in the post office, and we’ve passed the odd word or two, and I have seen her looking at my hair in a kind of satisfied way that only women know. I know what she says, and what she tells her friends ... that Ophelia Todd has started dyeing her hair. But I have not. I have lost my way looking for a shortcut more than once ... lost my way ... and lost my gray.’ And she laughed, not like a college girl but like a girl in high school. I admired her and longed for her beauty, but I seen that other beauty in her face as well just then ... and I felt afraid again. Afraid for her, and afraid of her.

“ ‘Missus,’ I says, ‘you stand to lose more than a little sta’ch in your hair.’

“ ‘No,’ she says. ‘I tell you I am different over there ... I am all myself over there. When I am going along that road in my little car I am not Ophelia Todd, Worth Todd’s wife who could never carry a child to term, or that woman who tried to write poetry and failed at it, or the woman who sits and takes notes in committee meetings, or anything or anyone else. When I am on that road I am in the heart of myself, and I feel like-’

“ ‘Diana,’ I said.

“She looked at me kind of funny and kind of surprised, and then she laughed. ‘o like some goddess, I suppose,’ she said. ‘She will do better than most because I am a night person—I love to stay up until my book is done or until the National Anthem comes on the TV, and because I am very pale, like the moon-Worth is always saying I need a tonic, or blood tests or some sort of similar bosh. But in her heart what every woman wants to be is some kind of goddess, I think—men pick up a ruined echo of that thought and try to put them on pedestals (a woman, who will pee down her own leg if she does not squat! it’s funny when you stop to think of it) —but what a man senses is not what a woman wants. A

woman wants to be in the clear, is all. To stand if she will, or walk ...’ Her eyes turned toward that little go-devil in the driveway, and narrowed. Then she smiled. ‘Or to drive, Homer. A man will not see that. He thinks a goddess wants to loll on a slope somewhere on the foothills of Olympus and eat fruit, but there is no god or goddess in that. All a woman wants is what a man wants—a woman wants to drive.’

“‘Be careful where you drive, missus, is all,’ I says, and she laughs and give me a kiss spang in the middle of the forehead.

“She says, ‘I will, Homer,’ but it didn’t mean nothing, and I known it, because she said it like a man who says he’ll be careful to his wife or his girl wheri he knows he won’t ... can’t.

“I went back to my truck and waved to her once, and it was a week later that Worth reported her missing. Her and that go-devil both. Todd waited seven years and had her declared legally dead, and then he waited another year for good measure—I’ll give the sucker that much—and then he married the second Missus Todd, the one that just went by. And I don’t expect you’ll believe a single damn word of the whole yarn.”

In the sky one of those big flat-bottomed clouds moved enough to disclose the ghost of the moon—half-full and pale as milk. And something in my heart leaped up at the sight, half in fright, half in love.

“I do though,” I said. “Every frigging damned word. And even if it ain’t true, Homer, it ought to be.”

He give me a hug around the neck with his forearm, which is all men can do since the world don’t let them kiss but only women, and laughed, and got up.

“Even if it shouldn’t ought to be, it is,” he said. He got his watch out of his pants and looked at it. “I got to go down the road and check on the Scott place. You want to come?”

“I believe I’ll sit here for a while,” I said, “and think.”

He went to the steps, then turned back and looked at me, half-smiling. “I believe she was right,” he said. “She was different along those roads she found ... wasn’t nothing that would dare touch her. You or me, maybe, but not her.

“And I believe she’s young.”

Then he got in his truck and set off to check the Scott place.

That was two years ago, and Homer has since gone to Vermont, as I think I told you. One night he come over to see me. His hair was combed, he had a shave, and he smelled of some nice lotion. His face was clear and his eyes were alive. That night he looked sixty instead of seventy, and I was glad for him and I envied him and I hated him a little, too. Arthritis is one buggardly great old fisherman, and that night Homer didn’t look like arthritis had any fishhooks sunk into his hands the way they were sunk into mine.

“I’m going,” he said.

“Ayuh?”

“Ayuh.”

“All right; did you see to forwarding your mail?”

“Don’t want none forwarded,” he said. “My bills are paid. I am going to make a clean break.”

“Well, give me your address. I’ll drop you a line from one time to the another, old hoss.” Already I could feel loneliness settling over me like a cloak ... and looking at him, I knew that things were not quite what they seemed.

“Don’t have none yet,” he said.

“All right,” I said. “Is it Vermont, Homer?”

“Well,” he said, “it’ll do for people who want to know.”

I almost didn’t say it and then I did. “What does she look like now?”

“Like Diana,” he said. “But she is kinder.”

“I envy you, Homer,” I said, and I did.

I stood at the door. It was twilight in that deep part of summer when the fields fill with perfume and Queen Anne’s Lace. A full moon was beating a silver track across the lake. He went across my porch and down the steps. A car was standing on the soft shoulder of the road, its engine idling heavy, the way the old ones do that still run full bore straight ahead and damn the torpedoes. Now that I think of it, that car looked like a torpedo. It looked beat up some, but as if it could go the ton without breathin hard. He stopped at the foot of my steps and picked something up—it was his gas can, the big one that holds ten gallons. He went down my walk to the passenger side of the car. She leaned over and opened the door. The inside light came on and just for a moment I saw her, long red hair around her face, her forehead shining like a lamp. Shining like the moon. He got in and she drove away. I stood out on my porch and watched the taillights of her little go-devil twinkling red in the dark ... getting smaller and smaller. They were like embers, then they were like flickerflies, and then they were gone.

Vermont, I tell the folks from town, and Vermont they believe, because it’s as far as most of them can see inside their heads. Sometimes I almost believe it myself, mostly when I’m tired and done up. Other times I think about them, though—all this October I have done so, it seems, because October is the time when men think mostly about far places and the roads which might get them there. I sit on the bench in front of Bell’s Market and think about Homer Buckland and about the beautiful girl who leaned over to open his door when he come down that path with the full red gasoline can in his right hand—she looked like a girl of no more than sixteen, a girl on her leamer’s permit, and her beauty was terrible, but I believe it would no longer kill the man it turned itself on; for a moment her eyes lit on me, I was not killed, although part of me died at her feet.

Olympus must be a glory to the eyes and the heart, and there are those who crave it and those who find a clear way

to it, mayhap, but I know Castle Rock like the back of my hand and I could never leave it for no shortcuts where the roads may go; in October the sky over the lake is no glory but it is passing fair, with those big white clouds that move so slow; I sit here on the bench, and think about 'Phelia Todd and Homer Buckland, and I don't necessarily wish I was where they are ... but I still wish I was a smoking man.

Especially Heinous

272 Views of Law & Order SVU
By CARMEN MARIA MACHADO

season 1

“Payback”: Stabler and Benson investigate the murder and castration of a New York City cab driver. They discover that the victim assumed the identity of another man years before because he was wanted by police. In the end, Stabler discovers that the stolen identity of the man in question was also stolen, and he and Benson have to begin the investigation all over again. That night, as he unsuccessfully tries to sleep, Stabler begins to hear a strange noise. A deep drumming, two beats. It seems like it’s coming from his basement. When he investigates the basement, it sounds like it’s coming from outside.

“A Single Life”: Emily couldn’t bear getting dressed alone anymore. The solitary donning of shoes broke her heart. The unlocked front door, through which any neighbor could wander, would have been an afterthought, but there was no thought, after.

“Or Just Look Like One”: Two underage models are attacked while walking home from a club. They are raped and murdered. To add insult to injury, they are confused with two other raped and murdered underage models, who coincidentally are their respective twins, and both pairs are buried beneath the wrong tombstones.

“Hysteria”: Benson and Stabler investigate the murder of a young woman who is initially believed to be a prostitute and

the latest in a long line of victims. “I hate this goddamned city,” Benson says to Stabler, dabbing her eyes with a deli napkin. Stabler rolls his eyes and starts the car.

“Wanderlust”: The old DA irons her hair before court, the way her mother showed her. After she loses the case, she packs three changes of clothes in a suitcase and gets into her car. She calls Benson from her cell phone. “Sorry, buddy. Hitting the road. Not sure when I’ll be back.” Benson pleads with her to stay. The old DA tosses the cell phone onto the road and pulls away from the curb. A passing taxi reduces it to splinters.

“Sophomore Jinx”: The second time the basketball team covered up a murder, the coach decided that he’d finally had enough.

“Uncivilized”: They found the boy in Central Park, looking like no one had ever loved him. “His body was crawling with ants,” Stabler said. “Ants.” Two days later, they arrest his teacher, who as it turns out had loved him just fine.

“Stalked”: Benson and Stabler aren’t allowed to notch any of the precinct’s furniture, so they each have their own private system. Benson’s headboard has eight scores that run along the curved oak edge like a spine. Stabler’s kitchen chair has nine.

“Stocks and Bondage”: Benson takes the bag of rotten vegetables out of the trunk when Stabler isn’t looking. She throws it in a garbage can and it hits the empty bottom, wet and heavy. It splits open like a body that’s been in the Hudson.

“Closure”: “It was inside of me,” the woman says, pulling the bendy straw out of shape like a misused accordion. “But now it is outside of me. I would like to keep it that way.”

“Bad Blood”: Stabler and Benson will never forget the case where the outcome was so much worse than the crime.

“Russian Love Poem”: When they bring the mother up to the stand, the new DA asks her what her name is. She closes her eyes, shakes her head, rocks back and forth in her chair. She begins to sing a song softly under her breath, not in English, the syllables rolling out of her mouth like smoke. The DA looks to the judge for help, but he is staring at the witness, his eyes distant as if he is lost inside of his own head.

“Disrobed”: A disoriented, naked, pregnant woman is discovered wandering around Midtown. She is arrested for indecent exposure.

“Limitations”: Stabler discovers that even New York ends.

“Entitled”: “You can’t do this to me!” the man shouts as he is escorted to the witness stand. “Don’t you know who I am?” The DA closes her eyes. “Sir, I just need you to confirm that you did tell police that you saw a blue Honda fleeing the scene.” The man pounds his open hand on the witness stand in defiance. “I do not recognize your authority!” The mother of the dead girl begins screaming so loudly that her husband carries her out of the courtroom.

“The Third Guy”: Stabler never told Benson about his little brother. But he also never told her about his older brother, which was more acceptable, because he didn’t know about him, either.

“Misleader”: Father Jones has never touched a child, but when he closes his eyes at night, he still remembers his high school girlfriend: her soft thighs, her lined hands, the way she dropped off that roof like a falcon.

“Chat Room”: Convinced that her teenaged daughter is in danger from cyber predators, a father takes a crowbar to the family computer. He throws the remaining pieces into the fireplace, strikes a match. His daughter complains of a light head, a burning in her chest. She calls him “Mom” with tears in her voice. She dies on a Saturday.

“Contact”: Stabler discovers that his wife believes she saw a UFO, back when she was in her early twenties. He lies awake all night, wondering if this explains the memory loss, the PTSD, the night terrors. His wife wakes up weeping and screaming, on cue.

“Remorse”: At night, Stabler makes a list of the day’s regrets. “Didn’t tell Benson,” he scrawls. “Ate more burrito than I had room for. Misspent that gift card. Hit that guy harder than I meant to.” His wife comes up behind him and rubs his shoulder idly before crawling into bed. “Haven’t told my wife today. Will probably not tell her tomorrow.”

“Nocturne”: The ghost of one of the murdered, misburied underage models begins to haunt Benson. She has bells for eyes, tiny brass ones dangling from the top of each socket, the hammer not quite touching the cheekbone. The ghost does not know her own name. She stands over Benson’s bed, the right bell tinkling faintly, and then the left, and then the right again. This happens for four nights in a row, at 2:07 a.m. Benson starts sleeping with a crucifix and pungent ropes of garlic because she does not understand the difference between vampires and murdered teenagers. Not yet.

“Slaves”: The precinct’s interns are monsters. When it’s slow, they dick around on the phones. Into the dial tones, they chirp “SVU, Manhattan’s rapiest police department!” They have theories about Stabler and Benson. They place bets. They plant lilacs (Benson’s favorite) and daisies (Stabler’s) in the other’s lockers. The interns drug Benson’s

and Stabler's coffees and then, after they fall asleep in the back room, the interns shove the cots close together and place both the detectives in compromising positions. Benson and Stabler wake up, their hands on each other's cheeks, both wet with tears.

season 2

“Wrong is Right”: Benson wakes up in the middle of the night. She is not in her bed. She is in her pajamas, in the dark. Her hand is on a handle. A door is open. A confused-looking panda is watching her with dewy eyes. Benson shuts the door. She passes two llamas chewing thoughtfully on the sign for a hot dog stand. In the parking lot of the zoo, her car is idling against a cement post. She changes into the spare set of clothes she keeps in the trunk. She calls it in. “Eco-terrorists,” she tells Stabler. He nods, jots down something in his notebook. “Do you smell garlic?” he asks.

“Honor”: Stabler dreams that a man at a Renaissance Faire insults Stabler's wife, and Stabler punches him in his self-satisfied face. When Stabler wakes up, he decides to tell his wife this story. He rolls over. She is gone. Stabler has never been to a Renaissance Faire.

“Closure: Part 2”: “It's not that I hate men,” the woman says. “I'm just terrified of them. And I'm okay with that fear.”

“Legacy”: Over breakfast, Stabler's daughter asks him about Benson's family. Stabler says that Benson doesn't have a family. “You always say that family is a man's one true wealth,” says Stabler's daughter. Stabler thinks about this. “It's true,” he says. “But Benson is not a man.”

“Baby Killer”: Benson keeps the condoms in her nightstand drawer refreshed, and throws the expired ones

away. She dutifully takes her pill at the same time every morning. She makes dates and always keeps them.

“Noncompliance”: The girl-with-bells-for-eyes tells Benson to go to Brooklyn. They can communicate, now, with the bells. Benson taught herself Morse code. Benson never goes to Brooklyn, but she agrees. She rides the train late at night, so late that there is only one man in her car, and he is sleeping on a duffel bag. As they shoot through the tunnels, the man looks blearily at Benson, then unzips his duffel bag and vomits into it, almost politely. The vomit is white, like cream of wheat. He re-zips the bag. Benson gets off two stops too early, and ends up walking through Crown Heights for a very long time.

“Asunder”: Stabler works out every morning at the precinct. He does tricep curls. He does crunches. He jogs on a treadmill. He thinks he hears his daughter’s voice crying his name. Startled, he trips on the treadmill and his whole body slams against the cinderblock wall. The path rolls toward him in endless loops.

“Taken”: “It was dark,” says Stabler’s wife. “I was walking home alone. It was raining. Well, not really raining. Spitting, I guess. Misting. It was misting and the light from the streetlamps was all pooled and golden, and thick, even, like it was a solid. And I was breathing deeply and it felt healthy, healthy and right to be walking through that night.” Stabler hears the drumming again. It shakes the water glass on the nightstand. Stabler’s wife doesn’t seem to notice.

“Pixies”: “Get out!” Benson screams, hurling pillows at the girl-with-bells-for-eyes. She’s brought a friend this time, a small girl with hair in tight cornrows and no mouth. She gets out of bed and tries to push them away, but her hands and upper body go through both of them as if they are nothing. They taste like mildew in her mouth. She remembers being

eight and kneeling before the humidifier in her room, taking in the steam like it was the only way she could drink.

“Consent”: “Stabler?” says Benson carefully. Stabler looks up from his raw knees. Benson unfolds the tiny square alcohol wipe and hands it to him. “Can I sit here? Can I help?” He nods wordlessly, lets her rub his knees. He hisses pain through his teeth. “What did you do?” she asks. “The treadmill? Are these from the treadmill?” Stabler shakes his head. He can’t say. He can’t.

“Abuse”: More regrets. The lines crowd the page. “Showed Benson my skinned knees. Allowed her to assist me. Not sure who I was thinking about when I had sex with my wife tonight.”

“Secrets”: The girl-with-bells-for-eyes tells Benson to go to Yonkers. Benson refuses and begins to burn sage in her apartment.

“Victims”: Her apartment is so crowded with ghosts that, for the first time since she can remember, Benson stays at someone else’s place for the night. Her date is an investment banker, a boring and stupid man with a fat, piss-mean tabby who tries to suffocate Benson with her bulk. Benson hates him, but what else can she do?

“Paranoia”: “I am not suppressing anything!” Stabler’s wife yells at him. “Tell me about the night with the aliens,” says Stabler. He is trying to learn. He is trying to figure it out. “It was misty,” she says. “It was spitting.” He hears the banging again, the tone, sounding from somewhere in the house. “Yes, I know, I know,” Stabler says. “The light pooled around the lamp posts.” “There were so many iron gates. I walked past them and ran my fingers over their loops and whorls, and then my fingers smelled like metal.” “Yes,” said Stabler. “But then what?” But his wife is asleep.

“Countdown”: The serial killer promises that there is a bomb hidden under a bench in Central Park. “Do you know how many benches there are in Central Park?” shouts Stabler, clutching an intern by his shirt collar. They send policemen to Central Park to chase people off benches like they are pigeons, or the homeless. Nothing happens.

“Runaway”: The girl-with-bells-for-eyes sends Benson into every borough. Benson rides the train. Eventually, she has seen every stop at least once. She is beginning to memorize the murals, the water stains, the smells. 59th Street smells like a urinal. Cortelyou smells, unnervingly, like lilacs. For the first time in a while, Benson thinks about Stabler. Back in her apartment, the girl-with-bells-for-eyes tries to tell Benson a story. *I was a virgin. When he took me, I popped.*

“Folly”: “There is a case,” says the captain. “A young boy has accused his mother of hitting him with a toilet plunger. This is a tricky one, though. The boy is the son of a political heavyweight with deep pockets. He golfs with the mayor. His wife is—Benson? Benson, are you listening?”

“Manhunt”: Stabler has determined that he is not even a little bit gay. He swallows his disappointment. His mouth tastes like orange peel.

“Parasites”: “Oh fuck,” says Stabler’s wife. “Fuck. Sweetie, the kids have lice. I need your help.” They stand the kids in the tub. The oldest daughter rolls her eyes. Her mother helps her scrub her scalp, and the youngest whines that the shampoo burns. Stabler feels serene for the first time in months.

“Pique”: “The victim has ties to the modeling industry,” says the captain. “But we’re having trouble tracking down where she lived. She might have come from another country. She was only fourteen.” He hangs her autopsy photo on the

bulletin board, her face flat and pale. The thumbtack pops into the cork and Benson jumps in her chair.

“Scourge”: Stabler hears it again. The sound, the drumming. It seems to come from the break room. When he goes there, it sounds like it is coming from the interrogation room. Inside the interrogation room, he hears it again. He bangs his hands on the two-way mirror, imitating the sound, hoping to lure it, hoping to see it, but all is quiet.

season 3

“Repression”: In the middle of a sermon, Father Jones begins screaming. His parishioners look on in fear as he clings to the pulpit, wailing a name over and over. Convinced that this is an admission of guilt of some kind or another, the diocese calls Benson and Stabler. In his office, Benson knocks a pen off his desk, and Father Jones dives after it, howling.

“Wrath”: Benson reaches up from her bed, like a baby. The girl-with-bells-for-eyes stands over her, like a mother. Benson grabs at the bells, pulls them as hard as she can, and the ghost-girl jerks violently, and every lightbulb in Benson’s apartment explodes, covering the carpet with glass.

“Stolen”: First it’s a candy bar. The next day, a lighter. Stabler wants to stop, but he has long since learned to choose his battles.

“Rooftop”: “Just tell me what you remember, Father.” *Click*. “She hated water and grass, so we picnicked on the top of her apartment building. She lived in that building with her mother. I loved her. I lost myself in her body. We lay a blanket over the gravel. I fed her orange slices. She told me that she was a prophet, and that she had a

vision that one day, I would take an innocent life. I said no, no. She climbed up onto the cement wall that bordered the roof. She stood there and declared her vision again. She said she was sorry. She didn't even fall like I expected. She simply knelt into the air."

"Tangled": Stabler finds Benson sleeping in the back room at the precinct on a sagging cot. She wakes up when the door opens. She looks like she has "run the gauntlet," which is something Stabler's mother used to say before she died. Come to think of it, it's the last phrase Stabler can remember her speaking.

"Redemption": Benson accidentally catches a rapist when she Google-stalks her newest OKCupid date. She can't decide whether or not to mark this in the "success" ("caught rapist") or "failure" ("date didn't work out") column. She marks both.

"Sacrifice": Benson leaves her handsome date at the table, in the restaurant, waiting for the drinks. She walks down an empty side street. She takes off her shoes and walks down the center of the road. It is too hot for April. She can feel her feet darkening from the blacktop. She should be afraid of broken glass but she is not. In front of a vacant lot, she stops. She reaches down and touches the pavement. It is breathing. Its two-toned heartbeat makes her clavicle vibrate. She can feel it. She is suddenly, irrevocably certain that the earth is breathing. She knows that New York is riding the back of a giant monster. She knows this more clearly than she has ever known anything before.

"Inheritance": The phrase "run the gauntlet" is stuck in Stabler's head, like water dipping and sluicing around his inner ear. He presses the muscles at the hinge of his jaw and cracks it. The crack takes the place of the single syllable of "run." He does it again. *Crack* the gauntlet. Run the *cracklet*. Run.

“Care”: Stabler is worried about Benson, but he cannot tell her.

“Ridicule”: Benson does her twice-monthly grocery trip. She drives her car to a grocery store in Queens and buys three hundred dollars worth of produce. It will make her fridge look like the garden of Eden. She will not eat it while she gnaws on chewy French toast in the Styrofoam container from the diner. The produce will, predictably, rot. Her fridge will smell overwhelmingly like dirt. She will collect it in garbage bags and throw it in the public trashcan near the station before her next trip.

“Monogamy”: Stabler wakes up one night to find his wife staring at the ceiling, tears soaking the pillow next to her head. “It was spitting,” she says. “My fingers smelled like metal. I was so scared.” For the first time, Stabler understands.

“Protection”: Benson crosses the street without looking. The taxi driver slams on his brakes, his bumper stopping a hairwidth from Benson’s shins. When she looks through the windshield, she sees a teenage boy in the passenger seat, eyes closed. When he opens then, the sun glints off the curves of the bells. The taxi driver screams at Benson as she stares.

“Prodigy”: “Look at me, Dad!” Stabler’s daughter says, laughing, twirling. As clearly as if he is watching a movie, he sees her in two years’ time, swatting a boyfriend’s hands away in a backseat, harder and harder. She screams. Stabler starts. She has fallen to the ground and is clutching her ankle, crying.

“Counterfeit”: “You don’t understand,” says Father Jones to Benson. There are dark curves under his eyes, sacs the color of bruised apples. He is wearing a terrycloth bathrobe that says “Susan” in machine-stitched cursive letters on the breast pocket. “I can’t help you. I’m having a crisis of faith.”

Benson puts her hand on the door. “I’m having a crisis of function,” she says. “Tell me. What do you know about ghosts?”

“Execution”: The medical examiner pulls back the sheet from the dead girl’s face. “Raped and strangled,” she says, her voice hollow. “Your murderer pressed their thumbs into the girl’s windpipe until she died. No prints, though.” Stabler thinks that the girl looks a little like his wife’s high school photo. Benson is certain she can see the jelly of the girl’s eyes receding beneath their closed lids, certain she can hear the sound of bells. In the car, they are both quiet.

“Popular”: They question everyone they can think of: her friends and enemies. The girls she bullied, the boys who loved her and hated her, the parents who thought she was wonderful and the parents who thought she was bad news. Benson stumbles into the precinct late, bleary-eyed. “My theory,” she says, drinking her coffee slowly, with shaking hands, “my theory is that it was her coach, and my theory is that the missing underwear will be found in his office.” The search warrant is issued so quickly that they find the underwear in his top desk drawer, still damp with blood.

“Surveillance”: Benson doesn’t know how to explain to Stabler the heartbeat beneath the ground. She is certain that she can hear it all the time now, deep and low. The girls-with-bells-for-eyes have taken to knocking before coming in. Sometimes. Benson takes taxis to far-away neighborhoods, gets down on her hands and knees on the street and the sidewalk and once, in a woman’s vegetable garden that took up her entire postage-stamp lawn. She can hear it everywhere. The drumming, echoing, echoing in the deep.

“Guilt”: Benson can translate the bells well, now. She pulls her pillow over her head until she can barely breathe. *Give us voices. Give us voices. Give us voices. Tell him. Tell him. Tell him. Find us. Find us. Find us. Please. Please. Please.*

“Justice”: Benson gets a pack of small children. Their bells are especially tiny, the ring higher than most. Benson is drunk. She holds her bed, which feels like an amusement park ride, pitching and rolling. *We will never ride the Tilt-a-Whirl again, ever. Get up! Get up!* they command her. She puts her head on her cell phone and uses speed-dial. “My theory,” she says to Stabler, “my theory is that I have a theory.” Stabler offers to come over. “My theory,” she says, “my theory is that there is no God.” The children’s bells ring so furiously that Benson can’t even hear Stabler’s reply over the din. When Stabler comes over and lets himself in with the spare key, he finds Benson bent over the toilet, heaving, crying.

“Freed”: “It’s the whole city,” Benson says to herself as she drives. She imagines Stabler in the seat next to her. “I’ve been all over. It’s the whole fucking city. The heartbeats. The girls.” She clears her throat and tries again. “I know it sounds crazy. I just have a feeling.” She pauses, then says, “Stabler, do you believe in ghosts?” Then, “Stabler, do you trust me?”

“Denial”: Stabler finds the police report for his wife’s rape. It’s so old that he has to call in a favor from a guy in the records department. The sound of the paper scraping against the thin manila envelope slows Stabler’s heart.

“Competence”: Stabler and Benson respond to a report of a rape in Central Park. When they get there, the mutilated body has already been taken to the medical examiner’s office. A confused junior cop is busy rolling yellow crime scene tape from tree to tree. “Weren’t you just here?” he asks them.

“Silence”: Benson and Stabler grab beers at a pub down the street from the station. They hold the frosted mugs in their hands, leave handprints on the glass that look like angels. They say nothing.

season 4

“Chameleon”: Abler and Henson respond to a report of a rape in Central Park. They examine the mutilated body. “Cult,” says Abler. “Occultists,” says Henson. “A cult of occultists,” they say in unison. “Take the body away.”

“Deception”: Henson sleeps through every night. She awakes refreshed. She eats a bagel with cream cheese for breakfast, and with it a mug of green tea. Abler tucks in his kids and spoons his wife, who laughs in her sleep. When she wakes, she relates to him the very funny joke from her dream, and he laughs, too. The children make pancakes. The hardwood floors are flooded with pools of light.

“Vulnerable”: For three days in a row, there is not a single victim in the entire precinct. No rapes. No murders. No rape-murders. No kidnappings. No child pornography made, bought, or sold. No molestations. No sexual assaults. No sexual harassments. No forced prostitution. No human trafficking. No subway gropings. No incest. No indecent exposures. No stalking. Not even an unwanted dirty phone call. Then, in the gloaming of a Wednesday, a man wolf-whistles at a woman on her way to an AA meeting. The whole city releases its held breath, and everything returns to normal.

“Lust”: Abler and Henson are sleeping together, but no one knows. Henson is the best lay that Abler’s ever had. Henson’s had better.

“Disappearing Acts”: “What are you doing here again?” the victim’s grandmother asks them. Benson looks at Stabler, and Stabler at Benson, and they turn, confused, back to her. “I already told you everything I know,” the old woman says, waving a gnarled hand at them dismissively. She slams the door so hard a flowerpot jumps off the porch railing and lands in the lawn. “Did you come and see her?” Benson asks

Stabler. He shakes his head. “You?” he asks her. Inside, a Mills Brothers record starts up with pops and scratches. *Shine little glow-worm, glimmer, glimmer.* “No,” Benson says. “Never.”

“**Angels**”: Abler’s sons bring home perfect grades and don’t even need braces. Henson’s many lovers bring her to increasingly ascending levels of ecstatic transcendence *vis-à-vis* the clitoris, *vis-à-vis* asking her what she wants, *yes*, what she, *yes*, what, *yes yes yes fuck yes.*

“**Dolls**”: The bells ring, ring, ring through the night, the peals stripping skin from Benson’s body, or that’s how it feels, anyway. *Faster, faster, go faster.* “I need to sleep,” Benson says. “I need to sleep to go faster.” *That makes no sense. We never get to sleep. We never sleep. We tirelessly pursue justice at all hours.* “Don’t you remember needing sleep?” Benson asks wearily from her unwashed sheets. “You were human, once.” *No no no no no no no.*

“**Waste**”: There are so many notches in Benson’s headboard—so many successes, so many failures, maybe she should have kept them apart?—the wood looks like it’s been chewed away by termites. When the two-tone beat sounds, the chips and shavings tremble on her carpet and nightstand.

“**Juvenile**”: “Five-year-olds murder six-year-olds,” Benson says dully, the skin beneath her eyes dusky ash from lack of sleep. “People are monsters, and we are all lambs just waiting to be killed. We are monsters and victims at the same time, and only experience will tip the scale one way or the other. This is the world we live in, Stabler.” She sips noisily on her Diet Coke. She tries to look away from Stabler’s wet eyes.

“**Resilience**”: Benson watches a lot of TV on her days off. She gets an idea. She spreads a line of salt along her

threshold, on the windowsills. That night, for the first time in months, the bell-children stay away.

“Damaged”: Stabler rubs his wife’s shoulders. “Can we talk?” She shakes her head. “You don’t want to talk?” She nods. “You want to talk?” She shakes her head. “You don’t want to talk?” She nods. Stabler kisses her hair. “Later. We’ll talk later.”

“Risk”: Abler and Henson solve their ninth case in a row, and their captain takes them out for celebratory steaks and cocktails. Abler gnaws down hunks of steak too big for his gullet, Henson polishes off one dirty martini after another. Ten of them. Eleven. A man on the opposite side of the restaurant, who has been nibbling bird-like on a Caesar salad, begins to choke. He turns blue. A stranger delivers the Heimlich, and a half-chewed wad of meat lands on the table of a lifelong teetotaler who is starting to feel a little strange. “I feel like I’ve had twelve drinks,” she says, giggling, hiccupping. She has. Henson drives Abler home, and they laugh. Thirteen blocks from the restaurant, they grope at each other, kissing as they stumble out of the car. Henson puts Abler’s hand on her breast, and her nipple tightens.

“Rotten”: Some crazy person keeps leaving sacks of perfectly good produce in a trashcan. Henson frequently finds herself pulling it out, taking it home, scrubbing the beets good and hard. How crazy. What a weird thing to go to waste.

“Mercy”: The gunman lets all of the hostages go, including himself.

“Pandora”: Benson is lonely without the bells. Her apartment is so quiet. She stands in her doorway, staring down at the white line. She takes her big toe and probes it. She remembers being at the beach with her mother when she was a child and burning her feet on the hot, smooth sand.

She pushes her toe, breaking the line, and says, “Oops,” but doesn’t really mean it. The children come rushing at her like a flash flood rolling through a narrow gorge. Their bells ring chaotic, gleeful and rapturous and angry, like a swarm of euphoric bees. They tickle her skin with their desperation. She has never felt so loved.

“Tortured”: *You are the only one we trust*, the bell-children say to Benson. *Not that other one.* Benson assumes they mean Stabler.

“Privilege”: Abler and Henson notice the bullet casing buried in the dirt. They notice the smear of blood near the doorframe, the orientation of the street. They look at each other and know that they’re each calculating the sunlight on this avenue at the time of the crime. By the time they get inside, they know to arrest the wife. They don’t even have to ask her any questions.

“Desperate”: “If you are dead, you can see everything,” Benson says to the bell-children. “Tell me who the doppelgängers are. Why are they so much better at everything than me and Stabler? Tell me, please.” The bells ring and ring and ring.

“Appearances”: Benson sees Henson coming out of the precinct. Her stomach gnarls. The same face, but prettier. The same hair, but bouncier, somehow. She must find out what kind of product she uses. Before she kills her.

“Dominance”: “You’re a lunatic,” Henson says, struggling against the handcuffs, and ropes, and chair, and chains. Benson leaves Stabler another message. “My partner is going to come and get me, you’ll see,” Henson says. “He’ll come for me.”

“Fallacy”: “Stabler will come and back me up. He knows what you’ve been doing. Stealing our cases. Pretending to be us.”

“Futility”: Stabler pulls out his cell phone as the ringtone dies. *14 New Voicemails*. He can’t do it, he can’t. The phone buzzes in his hand like an insect. *15*. He turns it off.

“Grief”: Abler comes for Henson. Of course he does. He loves her. Benson watches as he gently unties the ropes, unwraps the chains, unlocks the handcuffs, and lets her stand up from the chair on her own. Benson is holding her gun in her hand. She unloads three bullets into each of them, not expecting much. They keep moving as if nothing is happening except the funny foxtrot of their feet.

“Perfect”: “Detective, how can you *not* account for bullets missing from your gun? What are you listening to? Benson! [...] No, I can’t hear it. [...]There’s no sound, what are you talking about?”

“Soulless”: “Father Jones,” Benson says, her forehead pressing into the rough carpet in his foyer, “something is really wrong with me.”

season 5

“Tragedy”: Miles away from the precinct, a teenage boy and his seven-year-old sister drop dead in the middle of their walk home from school. When they are autopsied, bullets are pulled from the purple meat of their organs, though there are no entrance wounds on either of their bodies. The medical examiner is baffled. The bullets *clink clink clink clink clink clink* in the metal dish.

“Manic”: The DA laughs and laughs. She laughs so hard she coughs. She laughs so hard she pees a little. She falls down onto the floor and does a little half-roll, still laughing. There is a knock on the bathroom door, and Benson pushes open the door uncertainly. “Are you all right? The jury has come back. Are you...are you okay?”

“Mother”: “Your mother has called five times in the last two days,” Stabler’s wife says to him. “Please call her back so I can stop making excuses for you.” Stabler looks up from his desk, where the manila envelope is resting, so anemically thin he wants to scream. He looks over at the mother of his children, the hollow at the base of her throat, the fine fringe of her eyelashes, the fat zit on her chin that she is probably minutes from popping. “I need to talk to you,” he says.

“Loss”: “You have to understand,” says Father Jones. “I loved her. I loved her more than I have loved everything. But she was sad, so sad. She couldn’t bear to be here anymore. She saw too much.”

“Serendipity”: Father Jones shows Benson how to pray. She clasps her hands together like a child, because that is the last time she’s tried it. He talks about opening her mind. She pulls her knees up to her chest. “If I open my mind any further, they’ll crowd out everything.” When he asks her what she means, she just shakes her head.

“Coerced”: “I made it up,” the woman says dully. Benson looks up from her yellow legal pad. “Are you certain?” she asks. “Yes,” the woman says. “Start to finish. I certainly made it up from start to finish.”

“Choice”: Outside of the courtroom, protesters shove and shout, the wooden dowels of their signs knocking noisily against one another. It sounds like percussion. The worst percussion. Benson and Stabler use their bodies to shield the woman, who sobs and shuffles. Benson looks left, looks right.

Shots. The woman crumples. Her blood runs down a storm drain, and she dies with her eyes half-open, an interrupted eclipse. Benson and Stabler feel the beat at the same time, down beneath the pavement, beneath the screaming and the panicked crowd and the signs and the woman dead, dead, there it is, the *one-two*, and they look at each other. “You can hear it, too,” Stabler says hoarsely, but before Benson can answer, the shooter takes out a protester. Her sign falls facedown in the blood.

“Abomination”: The DA rolls down the hill in her dreams, stumbling, tumbling, rumbling down, down in the deep. In her dream, there is thunder, but the thunder is the color of rhubarb and it comes in twin booms. Every time the thunder sounds, the grass blades change shape. Then, beneath her body, the DA sees Benson, lying on her back, touching herself, laughing. The DA dreams her clothes off, and dreams herself rolling her body against Benson’s, and the thunder rolls, too, except not really, it’s more walking. *Dum dum. Dum dum. Dum dum.* The DA comes, and wakes. Or maybe wakes, then comes. In the afterburn of the dream, she is alone in her bed, and the window is open, the curtains fluttering in the breeze.

“Control”: “Why did you look it up?” Stabler’s wife asks. “Why? All I wanted was to bury it. I want it to be hidden. Why did you do it? Why?” She cries. She pummels her fists into a giant, overstuffed throw pillow. She begins to walk from one end of the room to the other, holding her arms so tightly to her torso that Stabler is reminded of a man who once came to the precinct, covered in blood. He held his arms like this, too, and when he let them drop, his wounded abdomen opened up and his stomach and intestines peeked out, like they were ready to be born.

“Shaken”: “Hey,” Benson says to the DA, smiling. The DA’s hands squeeze tightly into themselves. “Hi,” she says quickly

before spinning on her heel and walk-running in the opposite direction.

“Escape”: The girl staggers into the precinct with nothing on her body but a burlap sack. She tries to talk, but the words that come out are nonsense. Stabler gives her a cup of water. She drinks it in a single gulp, and then vomits onto his desk. The contents: said water, four nails, splinters of plywood, and a laminated slip of paper with a code on the side that seems to indicate it came from a library book. She keeps talking. Words tumble out, but in an order that makes no sense. The words are long, and real, Stabler discovers, flipping through a dictionary. But the sentences make no sense. None at all.

“Brotherhood”: Stabler only ever wanted daughters when he first married his wife. He’d had a brother. He knew. Now, he is paralyzed with fear for them. He wishes they were never born. He wishes they were still floating safely in the unborn space, which he imagines to be grayish-blue, like the Atlantic, studded with star-like points of light, and thick, like corn syrup.

“Hate”: Stabler’s wife has not spoken to him since the manila folder. She chops vegetables with a large knife, and he would rather she stick it in his gut than continue the sparking silence. “I love you,” he says to her. “Forgive me.” But she keeps chopping. She puts clean slits in the stippled plastic cutting board. She lops off the heads of carrots. She undoes the cucumbers.

“Ritual”: Benson goes to a New Age shop in the Village. “I need a spell,” she says to the proprietor, “to find what I am seeking.” He taps a pen against his chin for a few moments, and then sells her: four dried beans of unknown origin, a small white disk that proves to be a sliver of rabbit bone, a tiny vial that appears empty—“the memory of a young

woman losing her virginity,” he says—a granite basin, a wedge of dried red clay from the banks of the Hudson.

“Families”: Stabler invites Benson over to his house for Thanksgiving. Benson offers to help pull the guts from the turkey, something she always wanted to do as a child. Stabler’s wife gives her a bright orange bowl, leaves to attend to her squabbling daughters. Benson notices that Stabler’s wife is not speaking to Stabler. She sighs, shakes her head. Benson sticks her hand deep into the turkey’s guts. Her fingers push through gristle and meat and bones and close around something. She pulls. Out of the turkey comes a string of entrails, on which are suspended tiny bells, slick with blood. The meal is a great success. There is a photo of it on Stabler’s hard drive. Everyone is smiling. Everyone is having a very nice time.

“Home”: Benson and Stabler go to the New York Public Library. They show the feral girl’s photo to the librarians. One of them says she doesn’t know her, but her eyes drift upwards when she says this. Benson knows that she is lying. She follows the librarian to the break room and shoves her up against a vending machine. Inside, bags of chips and pretzels rustle. “I know you know her,” Benson says. The woman bites her lip, then takes Benson and Stabler down to the basement. She pushes open a metal door to an old boiler room, from which hangs a broken padlock. A cot stands against a far wall, stacks and stacks of books make a tiny metropolis all over the floor. Benson flips open a cover, then another. All of them have a red stamp: WITHDRAWN. The librarian pulls the gun out of Stabler’s holster. Stabler shouts. Benson turns around just in time for a fine red mist to paint her skin.

“Mean”: “How could you possibly let her get your gun?!” Benson yells at Stabler. “How could you be looking at books when there was an insane kidnapping librarian in the

room?!” he yells back at her. “Sometimes,” she starts angrily, but her voices trails off.

“Careless”: The captain takes the last photo down from the bulletin board. He wants a drink more than he has in many years. “All it would have taken,” he says, his voice rising with every syllable, “for ONE WOMAN to survive would have been my detectives not being ASLEEP,” here he slams the photo down on the desk with more force than had actually killed her, “on the JOB.” Benson looks down at her legal pad, where she had anagrammed and anagrammed the serial killer’s clue, never succeeding.

“Sick”: This is how it went. The girl was sick with prophecy. She touched the arm of young Ben Jones, later to be Father Jones, before she knelt herself to death off a Brooklyn rooftop. He carried it inside of his body for decades. Stabler was the one to restrain him when he freaked out during Mass, and now had it, too. He sees his daughters, projected into their terrifying futures. He sees his wife, living long and always remembering. He cannot see Benson, though. Something shades his vision. She is smoke, elusive.

“Lowdown”: Stabler is grocery shopping with his oldest daughter when he sees a man picking up apples, examining them closely, and setting them back down on the pile. He recognizes him. The man looks up. He recognizes Stabler, too. He calls him by his first name, except it’s not his first name, really. “Bill!” he says. “Bill!” He looks at Stabler’s daughter. Stabler grabs her arm and pulls her into the next aisle. “Bill,” the man says, sounding excited, knocking over a display of corn tortillas. “Bill! Bill! Bill!”

“Criminal”: A man in a ski-mask robs a bank with a plastic gun and gets fifty-seven dollars. The teller saves the day by slicing off his face with the machete that he keeps under his counter.

“Painless”: “Don’t you worry,” the gynecologist says to Stabler’s wife. “This isn’t going to hurt one bit.”

“Bound”: Benson decides to try the spell. She combines the ingredients like the man had shown her. She crushes the beans and the bone. She uncorks the bottle. “Tip it fast,” he’d told her, “and catch it under your pestle, or else it’ll float up and away.” She turns the bottle toward the mortar, but suddenly her brain convulses and she is remembering something that never happened, a screaming, burning pain, a dark room lined with windows, curtains drawn, a cold, black table. She stumbles blindly backwards and knocks over the mortar and pestle. She falls to the floor and trembles, shakes. When it finally passes, she sees the girl-with-bells-for-eyes staring back at her. Ringing back at her. *The first of many times*, she says. All night, Benson dreams, dreams, dreams.

“Poison”: One afternoon, at her desk, Benson feels the telltale tickling. She shifts in her chair. She crosses and uncrosses her legs. On the way home, she stops at the drugstore on the corner. In her bathroom, she squats. She walks carefully to her bed and gets horizontal. She feels the bullet melting inside of her, making her better. The girl-with-bells-for-eyes comes to the side of her bed, bells swinging wildly like she is a church caught in a stiff wind. *Come on*. “I can’t.” *Why not?* “I can’t get up. I can’t move. I can’t even cough.” *What is happening to you?* “You wouldn’t understand.” *Get up*. “I can’t.” The core of her is soothed and calmed and she cannot move or else everything will come out. The girl-with-bells-for-eyes gets as close to the bed as she can without walking through it. She begins to glow. Benson’s bedroom is filling with light. Across the street, a man with a telescope lifts his head from the eyepiece, gasps.

“Head”: “Okay, so, here’s my theory,” Stabler says to Benson when she gets back into the car with the coffees. “Human organs. They are wet and thick and fit together like

pieces of a puzzle. It's almost like someone zipped open human skulls before birth and slopped them in there like oatmeal. Except that's not possible." Benson looks at Stabler and squeezes her cup so hard a little fart of scalding coffee runs down her hand. She looks behind her. She looks back at him. "It's almost like," he says thoughtfully, "they were grown on the inside, and are meant to be shaped together." Benson blinks. "It's almost like," she says, "we grow. In the womb. And keep growing." Stabler looks excited. "Exactly!" he says. "And then, we die."

season 6

"Birthright": Stabler's daughters get into a fight over a bowl of soup. When Stabler gets home, the oldest daughter has an ice pack on her forehead and the youngest is kicking her feet above the tiled kitchen floor. Stabler goes into the bedroom, where his wife is lying on her back, staring at the ceiling. "They're your daughters," she says to Stabler. "Not mine."

"Debt": Benson and Stabler don't play Monopoly anymore.

"Obscene": Benson buys twice as much produce as normal, and doesn't even wait for it to rot. She throws a ripe vegetable in every garbage can in a twenty-block radius. It feels good to spread it out like this, the wasting.

"Scavenger": After the body is removed, Benson and Stabler stand around the dried pool of blood. A policewoman comes into the bedroom. "The landlord is outside," she says. "He wants to know when he can get to cleaning the apartment up for rental." Benson pokes the stain with her foot. "You know what'd get this out?" Stabler looks at her, his eyebrows knit. "OxiClean™. It'd get this stain right out" she continues. "You could rent this place next week." Stabler

looks around. “The landlord isn’t here yet,” he says, slowly. “OxiClean™ would get this right out,” she says again.

“Outcry”: Only after the sixth small black girl goes missing does the police commissioner finally make a statement, interrupting the season finale of a popular soap opera. The enraged letters start coming soon after. “Are *you* going to tell me if Susan’s baby belongs to David or not, Mister Police Commissioner???????” says one. Another person sends anthrax.

“Conscience”: The drumming won’t stop. Stabler considers that it is his conscience making that horrible, horrible sound.

“Charisma”: Benson likes her Tuesday night date too much to go home with him.

“Doubt”: Father Jones prepares to deliver the Eucharist. The first people in line look like Stabler and Benson, except different. Wrong, somehow. When he lays the wafer on the first’s tongue, the man closes his mouth, smiles. Father Jones feels forgiveness melting down the back of his own throat. The woman, then, too, takes it, smiles. Father Jones almost chokes this time. He excuses himself. In the bathroom, he rocks back and forth on his feet clutching the counter and weeping.

“Weak”: Stabler works out three times a day, now. He insists on jogging to crime scenes instead of using the squad car. Whenever he takes off from the station, his button-down and tie tucked into bright red running shorts, Benson goes and gets herself a coffee from the bodega, reads a newspaper, and then drives to the crime scene. Stabler always arrives a few minutes later, his fingers pressed against his pulse, shoes striking the pavement in an even rhythm. He jogs in place while they interview witnesses.

“Haunted”: On the subway, Benson thinks she sees Henson and Abler on a train running the opposite direction. They blast past each other in a blaze of butter yellow light, the windows flashing by like frames on a filmstrip, and Henson and Abler appear to be in every one, moving jerkily like they are rotating through a phenakistoscope. Benson tries to call Stabler, but there’s no signal below the earth.

“Contagious”: Benson stays home with swine flu. Her fever reaches 103°; she hallucinates that she is two people. She reaches over to the opposite pillow, years empty, and feels for her own face. The girls-with-bells-for-eyes try to make her soup, but their hands pass through the cupboard handles.

“Identity”: Stabler offers to take the girls out for Halloween. He goes as Batman, buys a hard plastic mask. The girls roll their eyes. Before they go out, his wife faces him. She reaches up and snatches the mask off his face. He seizes it back from her and slides it back on. She pulls it off again, so hard the band snaps and catches his face. “Ow,” he says. “What are you doing that for?” She shoves the mask into his chest. “Doesn’t feel very nice, does it?” she hisses through clenched teeth.

“Quarry”: The man takes out his rifle, braces it against his good shoulder, and squeezes the trigger with all the seductive force of a beckoning. The bullet strikes the missing woman’s neck, and she goes down, loosed of her life before she lands in the leaves and sends them up like ashes.

“Game”: The man lets out another sobbing woman. As she begins to run for the woods, he realizes he’s tired and wants to go make some dinner. He takes a few steps toward the tree line, and she joins her sister.

“Hooked”: “I choose this life,” the prostitute says to the social worker with the worried eyes. “I do. Please put your

energy into helping girls who aren't here by choice." She is so right. She is murdered, anyway.

"Ghost": A prostitute is murdered. She is too tired to become a spirit.

"Rage": A prostitute is murdered. She is too angry to become a spirit.

"Pure": A prostitute is murdered. She is too sad to become a spirit.

"Intoxicated": The girl-with-bells-for-eyes—the first one who had sought Benson's sour sleep breath and twitching eyelids all that time ago—comes into Benson's bedroom. She walks into the bed. She takes her fingers and presses them into Benson's mouth. Benson does not wake up. The girl pushes herself, in and in, and when Benson's eyes open, Benson is not opening them. Benson is curled up in the corner of her mind, and she sees through her eyes distantly, like they are windows on the opposite side of a lengthy living room. Benson-who-is-not-Benson walks around the apartment. Benson-who-is-not-Benson takes off her nightgown and touches her grown woman's body, inspecting every inch. Benson-who-is-not-Benson puts on clothes, hails a cab, and knocks on Stabler's door, and even though it is 2:49 a.m, Stabler does not look even a little bit sleepy, though he is confused. "Benson," he says. "What are you doing here?" Benson-who-is-not-Benson grabs his t-shirt in her hand and pulls him toward her, kissing him with more force and hunger than Stabler has ever felt in his own mouth. She releases his shirt. Benson cries into the darkened walls of her own skull. Benson-who-is-not-Benson wants more. Stabler wipes his mouth with his hand and then looks at his fingers, as if expecting to see something. Then he shuts the door. Benson-who-is-not-Benson returns to her apartment. Benson looks up from her knees to see the girl-with-bells-for-eyes standing in front of her. "Who is driving?" she asks

thickly. The bells ring. *No one*. And indeed, Benson's body is lying heavy as an unanimated golem on the bed. The bells ring. *I'm sorry*. The girl-with-bells-for-eyes sinks her fingers into Benson's head, and

“Night”: Benson wakes up. Her head is throbbing. She rolls over onto the cool side of the pillow, her dream ebbing away from her like a rubber duck bobbing gently out to sea.

“Blood”: The butcher takes a hose to the floor, and the blood spirals and sinks down the drain. It wasn't animal blood, but he has no way of knowing what it was his assistant was cutting up. The evidence is destroyed. The girls remain lost forever.

“Parts”: “Is it me, or is this steak kind of gamey?” Benson's date says to Benson. She shrugs and looks down at her scallops. She prods one with a knife and it parts a little in the center, like a mouth opening, or worse. “It's just... a weird flavor,” he says. Another bite. “But good, I guess. Good.” Benson can't remember what he does for a living. Is this their second date, or their third? He chews with his mouth open. She invites herself to his apartment.

“Goliath”: Stabler takes another long pull of his whiskey. He slumps in his armchair. Upstairs his wife sleeps, sleeps, dreams, wakes up, sleeps more, hates him, wakes, hates him, sleeps. He thinks of Benson, the way she stood there, the way her clothes looked put on funny, the way she drank from him like she was dying of thirst, the dreamy way her hand ran over the metal fence, over the iron-tipped gate like she was asleep, like she was high, like she was a woman in love, in love, in love.

season 7

“Demons”: Shadows pass over the marbled halls of justice, through the police station, across crowded and empty streets. They slide up walls and through grates and under doors and arc through glass windowpanes. They take what they want, leave what they want, and some cry, and some don’t. Life is created and destroyed. Mostly destroyed.

“Design”: “If this child is part of The Plan, then The Plan was that I would be raped. If this child is not part of The Plan, then my rape was a violation of The Plan, in which case The Plan is not a Plan at all, but a Polite fucking Suggestion.” Benson reaches out for her, but the woman looks down at the water, kneels from the railing, and is gone.

“911”: “Look, it’s just that I’m walking around feeling like I’m going to vomit out my own toenails, and I want to die, and I want to kill someone, sometimes, and I feel like I’m on the verge of dissolving into a puddle of organs and slop. Organ slop. “Um, that’s...that’s...I’m sorry. Look, I just called to report a vandal in my neighborhood.”

“Ripped”: They find the actress hours after her disappearance, tied to the mast of a ship in New York Harbor, a reproduction musket laced between the coils of rope and wedged between her voluminous breasts. Her Renaissance Faire corset is half-unlaced, her shirt torn. He wanted her to fight back, she tells Stabler. He wanted her to slap him, and call him a scoundrel, and then to marry him. He called himself Reginald.

“Strain”: Benson gets the flu. She vomits up: spinach, paint shavings, half a golf pencil, and a single bell the size of her pinky nail.

“Raw”: At Benson and Stabler’s favorite sushi restaurant, they have stopped using plates and started using models. Benson pinches a red swatch of tuna from the hipbone of a brunette who seems to be trying very hard not to breathe.

The owner stops by the table, and seeing Benson's frown, says, "Cheaper than plates, you know." Stabler reaches for a piece of eel, and the model takes a sudden breath. The meat eludes his chopsticks—once, twice.

"Name": All over the city, pedestrians stop mid-stride, a small weight lifted from bodies, a memory snuffed. A barista, marker poised over a cup, asks a man the same question in ten seconds. He stares at her, blinks. "I don't know," he says. In graves and ditches, in morgues and mortuaries, in rushes and bogs, dipping and rolling on the skins of rivers, names trace the bodies of the dead like flames along kindling, like electricity. For four minutes, the city becomes filled with the names, with their names, and though the man cannot tell the barista that Sam wants his latte, he can tell her that Samantha is not coming home but she is somewhere, though she is nowhere, and she knows nothing, and everything.

"Starved": Stabler tries to convince his oldest daughter to eat something, anything. She takes the paper napkin in seven small bites.

"Rockabye": After the girls are asleep, Stabler sits next to his wife, who is cocooned under the blankets of their bed. Even her face is swaddled. Stabler gently pokes at the opening in the comforter, and soon the tip of her nose is revealed, a heart of skin around her eyes. She is crying. "I love you," she says, "I do. I am so angry with you. But I do love you." Stabler takes her into his arms, her whole cloth burrito self, and rocks her in his arms, whispering *sorry, sorry* into her ear. After he turns out the light, she asks him to cover her face again. He lays the tucked bits back over her, lightly.

"Storm": The air roils. The clouds rush at the city as if they have been waiting.

“Alien”: A new police commissioner rides into town. He makes big promises. His teeth are the color and shape of Chiclets, too even. Stabler keeps trying to tally the number of teeth that show when the police commissioner smiles for the camera, but he loses count every time.

“Infected”: When the girls-with-bells-for-eyes come to Benson’s door, they are silent. When Benson finally opens the door to go to the gym, they are there, filling the hallway. Their bells rock, but no sound comes out. When Benson gets close, she realizes that someone has unhooked the hammers. The bells swing back and forth and back and forth, and they are quieter than they have ever been.

“Blast”: Stabler takes his wife dancing. He is surprised that she agrees. Past the doors of the salsa club, she is lithe and hot, sweating, spinning. He has not seen her this way since they were young, since just before they were married. The glaze of sweat and the smell of her turns him on, cracks open his want in a way that he’d forgotten existed. They dance close. She slides her hand down the front of his pants, bites her lip, kisses him. Deep inside his body, something beats. *Dum dum, dum dum*. A heartbeat, almost. Even. They take a cab home, and in their bedroom rip her dress getting it off, and they have not done this in years, this, this, and she digs her nails into his back and whispers his name, and they have not been like this since those years before, since that time long ago, before before, but after. He calls her name.

“Taboo”: After she comes, Benson’s arm cramps hard, like her muscle is folding itself in half. She rubs her forearm and bites her lip. She listens to the distant throbbing of salsa music coming from an apartment across the street. A film of sweat seals her guilt like Saran Wrap™.

“Manipulated”: The precinct’s interns sense that something has changed between Benson and Stabler, but they don’t know what. They track their movements in a

repurposed notebook from a biochem class. They take photos of them with their cell phones. They sprinkle Spanish fly into the coffee machine. They summon a demon with blood from their own bodies and ash from a cathedral votive and a squirrel bone and white chalk and bundles of dried sage. They beg the demon for his help. Annoyed, he takes one of them back to hell with him, punishment for making him come so far.

“Gone”: “Lucy, do you know where Evan is?” Stabler asks her. “He’s never this late.”

“Class”: “Lucy, do you know where Evan is? He’s never missed biochem before.”

“Venom”: Benson drains her coffee. Her mouth burns a little. She feels woozy. She lies down in the back room.

“Fault”: In her dream, Benson hears the heartbeat. She is on an empty New York City street. There is no breeze. The pavement does move, though, like something is breathing. Benson begins to follow the sound of the heartbeat, down the street. She sees a dark doorway, a sign above it that reads “Shahryar Bar & Grill.” Inside, the counters are polished and gleam dark red. The bottles and glasses gleam like the surface of a river, and every time the sound comes they shake slightly. There is a door tucked in the corner, a strip of light glowing beneath it. Laughter. Benson thinks it sounds like it did when she was a girl, and her mother had a cocktail party and Benson had to sit in her bedroom, a plate of tiny appetizers and half a cup of apple juice resting on her nightstand. She nibbled a mushroom that was full of something melted, and then drank her juice, and she could hear laughter on the other side of the door, glasses clinking, voices going loud and soft and loud again. She tried to read a book but ended up in her bed in the dark, listening to the voices that were so far and so close, picking out her mother’s bray in the din like pulling a loose thread of elastic from the

band of your underpants, pulling, tightening, ruining them. That is what she feels now, the voices on the other side of the door. She reaches for the handle, the distance between her hand and it halving with each passing nanosecond, the metal cold even before her hand touches it. When Benson wakes up, she is screaming.

“Fat”: “Just one more bite,” Stabler begs his oldest daughter. “Just one, baby. Just one carrot. Let’s start with one carrot.” He sees her being carved away, the way the wind shapes a dune into nothing. “One. Just one.”

“Web”: Benson Googles. <<dead girls bells eyes missing hammers>> <<girls bells eyes>> <<girl ghost bells eyes>> <<ghosts broken>> <<what happens if I see a ghost?>> <<what makes a ghost?>> <<ghost fixing>> For months, the ads in her browser try to sell her: brass bell sets, ghost hunting equipment, video cameras, CDs of bell choirs, dolls, shovels.

“Influence”: The new police commissioner looks up from his blotter. Across from him, Abler and Henson are not taking notes. They have perfect memories. “Make it so,” says the new police commissioner. “Make it so.”

season 8

“Informed”: Benson is sure that her smartphone is smarter than she is, and she finds it deeply upsetting. When it gives her information, she puts it close to her face, says “NO,” and does the opposite.

“Clock”: The DA watches the hour and minute hands pinching time between them. When the judge asks her if she has any questions for the witness, she shakes her head. At home, Henson is waiting for her, curled up on the couch with

a copy of *Madame Bovary*, chewing on a piece of hair, laughing at all the right places. They make dinner together. They watch the rain.

“Recall”: A story is delivered over and over again on the 24-hour news channels. Tainted vegetables, they say. Bok choy, broccoli, celery, Brussels sprouts, all tainted, dirty, bad, wrong. Benson catches the tail end of a report as she forks stir-fry straight out of the pan. “Return produce to your local stores for a full refund,” the reporter says, looking grave. Benson looks down at the pan. She finishes every scrap of green. She goes to her fridge and begins to prepare more.

“Uncle”: “Dad,” says Stabler’s youngest, “who is Uncle E?” He looks up from his newspaper. “Uncle E?” “Yes,” she says. “A man came up to me after school today. He said his name was Uncle E and that he was my uncle.” Stabler hasn’t spoken to his younger brother, Oliver, in ten years. He’s pretty sure Oliver still lives in Bulgaria. “You shouldn’t talk to strangers, baby,” Stabler says. “We’re going to have Mom walk you home from school from now on.”

“Confrontation”: At the courthouse, Stabler looks up from the bathroom sink and sees Abler standing behind him. Abler smirks. Stabler swings around, half-soaped fists raised. The bathroom is empty.

“Infiltrated”: “Look, Benson,” Henson says from the other end of the line. Her voice sounds tinny and far away, as if she is standing over Benson’s body while Benson dies. “The thing is, you are suffering. You don’t want to suffer anymore, do you?” Benson leans the earpiece harder against her shoulder, and the plastic casing slips along the grease of her unwashed face. She does not answer. “It’s just that,” Henson continues, “we could make this all stop, you know. The girls. The sounds. The wanting.” Benson looks up. Stabler is shuffling through a stack of folders, absently scratching his jaw, humming a catchy Latin beat under his breath. “All you have

to do is bring him to us. Bring him to us, and we can all call a truce.”

“Underbelly”: Benson traces the call to a warehouse in Chelsea. Once there, she and Stabler use bolt-cutters to get inside. The hallway is dark. A single lightbulb, the filament struggling to burn, hangs from the ceiling. Benson and Stabler pull out their guns. They grope along the walls with their free hands until they reach another door. A big room, now, big as an airplane hanger, empty. Their footsteps echo. Benson sees another door on the other side of the room. It looks different. The strip beneath it glows red. She can feel her heart knocking loudly in her chest. *Dum dum. Dum dum. Dum dum.* She realizes that the sound is bigger than she is, that it is coming from outside of her, around her. She looks at Stabler, panicked, and he looks confused. “Are you all right?” he asks her. She shakes her head. “We have to go. We have to go *now*.” He gestures to the door on the other side of the room. “Let’s check out that door.” “No.” “But Benson—” “No!” She grabs his arm, and pulls him. They erupt into the sunshine.

“Cage”: The rapist is raped. The raped are rapists. “Some days,” the prison doctor says to a resident as they stitch up a torn rectum, “I wonder if the bars make the monsters, and not the other way around.”

“Choreographed”: The courtroom. A hallway. Six doors. In and out of each set—detectives, police officers, lawyers, judges, the damned. People go in one set of doors and come out another. Benson and Stabler miss Henson and Abler every single time.

“Scheherazade!”: “Let me tell you a story,” Henson whispers to the DA as they curl up in her bed, the air heavy with the smell of sex. “When it’s over, I’ll tell you what you want to know about Benson, about Stabler, about all of it. Even about the sounds.” The DA mumbles her assent, feeling

drowsy. “The first story,” Henson whispers, “is about a queen and her castle. A queen, her castle, and a hungry beast that lives below.”

“Burned”: Father Jones senses the demon, though he cannot see it. From his bed, he smells sulfur, he feels the evil sitting on his chest. “What do you want?” he asks. “Why are you here?”

“Outsider”: The forensic psychologist is asked to come in on a case involving a serial rapist and murderer who dismembers his victims like they are middle-school frog dissections. “It makes more sense to him than you might think,” he says evenly as he watches the man laugh from the other side of the double-sided window. Stabler frowns. He distrusts the psychologist’s judgment.

“Loophole”: Benson buys a thousand bells and removes their hammers. She tries to give them to the girls-with-bells-for-eyes, but the hammers don’t take. She tries drawing them on a piece of paper, but the ink runs when pressed into their faces. The girls crowd into her kitchen, so many of them, and so bright, that the neighbor that spies on Benson with his telescope is certain that her apartment is on fire, and calls the fire department. Benson sits in her wicker chair, her hands resting on her knees. “All right,” she says. “Come in.” And they do. They walk into her, one at a time, and once inside she can feel them, hear them. They take turns with her vocal cords. “Hello,” Benson says. “Hello!” Benson says. “This feels really good,” Benson says. “What should we do first?” Benson says. “Now, wait,” Benson says. “I’m still me.” “Yes,” Benson says, “but you are legion, too.” In the distance, sirens tear up the night.

“Dependent”: “Did you know that Evan was kidnapped?” Benson asks the captain. He taps his sobriety coin on the varnished wood. “Who’s Evan?” “The intern! The intern. The intern that used to sit at that desk!” She points at Lucy, who

is weeping softly in her rolling chair. Every snuffle pushes her back a millimeter until she is almost in the hall.

“Haystack”: Benson promises Lucy that she will look for Evan. She visits all of his normal haunts. The girls crowd in her head, talk to her. “He’s not here,” they say. “He’s Elsewhere. He’s swallowed.” When Benson tells Stabler about her search, he sighs deeply. “He’ll get spit up somewhere,” he says knowingly. “Just not here.”

“Philadelphia”: Evan the intern was annoying everyone in hell, so the demon sent him back. He overshot his target, though, and accidentally deposited him in Pennsylvania. Evan decides to stay. He never liked New York anyway. Too expensive. Too sad.

“Sin”: Father Jones absolves the blooming trees and flowers. As their pollen is carried off, and begins to clog people’s lungs, Father Jones smiles. The coughs of redemption.

“Responsible”: Lucy the intern looks down at the slip of paper in her hand, where Benson had scribbled Father Jones’s address. When she looks up again, the front door opens, and Father Jones leans against the frame, looking exhausted. “Come in, child,” he says. “It seems we have a lot to talk about.”

“Florida”: Over the course of three weeks, five different people catch and cut open five different gators in the Everglades. Inside each belly, an identical left arm—sparkling purple jelly bracelet, chipped green polish, thin white scar where the pinky meets the palm. When they run the prints, they trace the arm back to a missing girl in New York. The medical examiner looks at the five arms lined up next to each other. Spooked, she discards four of them. “Remaining body unrecovered,” she writes in her notes. “Victim presumed deceased.”

“Annihilated”: Benson finally sits down and counts. She goes through files, paper and computer. She tallies, hatchmarks in groups of five, and covers pages and pages and pages. She goes home, flipping the blade out of her pocketknife as soon as the door closes behind her. She begins to dig into the kitchen table, the edges of the cupboards, counting, counting, counting, losing count, finding it again.

“Pretend”: Stabler pushes open Benson’s door. She is lying on the kitchen floor, arms outspread, facing the ceiling. Around her, the chairs and tables and footstool are all chewed to pieces. “There are so many of them,” Benson whispers. “So, so many.” Stabler kneels down next to her. He strokes her hair gently. “It will be okay,” he says. “It will be okay.”

“Screwed”: The DA calls in sick, again. “The sixty-fifth story,” Henson whispers into her ear, “is about a world which watches you and me and everyone. Watches our suffering like it is a game. Can’t stop. Can’t tear themselves away.”

season 9

“Alternate”: On a Tuesday, Stabler’s wife returns from the store to find a man who looks like her husband sitting on the stoop. He turns out his palms apologetically. “I lost my keys,” he says. She sets down the sack of groceries on the ground, fumbles for her own. She watches him out of the corner of her eye. He looks just like Stabler. His smile leaves the same tiny indent to the left of his mouth. But he is not her husband. Something in her brain is screaming: he is not her husband. The door swings open. Inside, her youngest comes out of her bedroom and wipes sleep from her eyes. She points to the man. “That’s Uncle E!” she shouts. Stabler’s wife grabs a heavy vase from the side table and whirls

around, but he is already out the door, down the street, running full-speed, and then, gone.

“Avatar”: In the back row of the movie theater, Henson’s arm creeps over the DA’s shoulder. The DA looks at Henson’s face in the flickering half-dark. Here, more than anywhere, she looks just like Benson. She kisses her mouth.

“Impulsive”: In the cop bar, Wilson Phillips plays. Stabler looks annoyed, but Benson grins at the memory from her adolescence. She mouths the words while training her eyes on her beer. She bobs her head at every mention of “reckless” and “kiss.”

“Savant”: The boy turns out lists and lists of the missing, dating back to before his birth, chronologically by the date of their disappearances. He draws thick black lines through most of them, though not all. His mother doesn’t understand the names, or the lines, and burns the lists on the grill in their backyard.

“Harm”: When Stabler’s wife tells him about Uncle E, he instructs her to take the kids and go to her mother’s house in New Jersey. He sits on the stoop and waits for Abler to come back. He fantasizes about taking a brick to Abler’s head. His cell phone rings. “You think I’d ever visit the same place twice?” Abler purrs. Stabler tries to think, hard, about where Abler and Henson will be. But he cannot see. He cannot see at all.

“Svengali”: The DA kisses Henson, their twelfth hour of fucking, sleep, fucking, sleep. She hums promises into her ear. Father Jones shows Lucy how to keep demons away. Stabler stalks New York, searching for Abler, tense as piano wire, vibrating with rage. Benson takes herself and the girls inside her out on the town for dancing, for sweaty bottles of beer, to show them all a good, good time.

“Blinded”: Benson dreams that Henson and Abler seize her eyeballs and pull them out slowly, the nerve bundles stretching and drooping like Silly Putty.

“Fight”: Stabler would just straight-up challenge them, but he doesn’t even know where to throw down his gloves.

“Paternity”: The dirty truth is, Benson doesn’t have a father.

“Snitch”: Without the interns to do their nefarious bidding, the gods turn to other tricks.

“Streetwise”: All Benson knows is that she’s sure the street is breathing. The girls tell her what she needs to know. She is right to be afraid.

“Signature”: Full of girls, Benson finds scrawling her own name to be almost impossible.

“Unorthodox”: “I don’t care what the evidence says,” the judge chuckles. “You’re obviously innocent. Obvious! Get out of here, you.”

“Inconceivable”: Stabler goes and visits his wife and daughters at his mother-in-law’s. He and his wife watch *The Princess Bride* with the girls. They both fall asleep before the end. On the couch together, piled high with pillows, dark but for the glow of the screen, Stabler and his wife look at what they have made.

“Undercover”: “What have you learned?” the new police commissioner asks Henson and Abler. He is not a religious man, but the expressions on their faces so unnerve him that he crosses himself, which he has not done since he was a child.

“Closet”: The DA steps out into the sunshine, blinking, shielding her face. She almost bumps into Benson, who is strolling down the sidewalk. Benson smiles at her. “Haven’t seen you around in a while. Have you been sick?” The DA blinks and reflexively wipes her mouth, catching the smear of lipstick that doesn’t belong to her. “Yes,” she says. “No. Yes, a little.”

“Authority”: Alone in his family’s house, Stabler drinks five old fashioned. He is disturbed by how easy it is. He thinks about his daughters, his wife. His brother, suddenly, his baby brother. He struggles to remember his baby brother, who flits through his synapses like a sketch. Suddenly certain of something, Stabler runs out into the street and stares up at the sky. “Stop,” he begs. “Stop reading. I don’t like this. Something is wrong. I don’t like this.”

“Trade”: In a graveyard, Benson begins to dig. Her spine aches and her muscles freeze and twitch and burn. She digs up the first girl, then the second. She slides one coffin left, one coffin right. She drops them under their correct, respective names. Inside of her, two girls speak. “Thank you,” Benson says. “Yes, thank you,” Benson says. Her mind clears a fraction. She breathes. It is easier.

“Cold”: Stabler meets Benson in her apartment. She is sitting in a pile of wood chips that used to be her kitchen table. She takes a long, languorous swallow of beer and smiles a watery smile. “My theory,” she says. “Our theory. Our theory is that there is a God, and he is hungry.”

season 10

“Trials”: “I am so tired,” the DA confesses to her boss. “I’m tired of losing cases. I’m tired of turning rapists back onto the street. I’m tired of winning, too. I’m tired of justice.”

Justice is exhausting. I am a one-woman justice machine. It's too much to ask of me. Can we stage my death? Or something?" She does not tell the truth: she wants to see what Benson will do at her funeral.

"Confession": Stabler and his wife go for a walk, in New Jersey. They walk along a dirty beach—with shoes, so as not to cut their feet with broken bottles. "He locked me in the room," she says to him. "He turned the lock and smiled at me. I couldn't move. He hadn't tied me up, but I couldn't move. That's the worst part. No excuse. You fight to put names on all of your dead, but not every victim wants to be known. Not all of us can deal with the illumination that comes with justice." She dips her head, and he remembers the first time he met her. "Also," she says softly, "you should know that Benson loves you."

"Swing": Stabler pushes his youngest higher and higher. He thinks about what his wife said. "Off, Daddy! I said off!" He realizes she is shrieking at the top of her lungs. She, his daughter, not his wife. And certainly not Benson. Definitely not Benson.

"Lunacy": Benson doesn't think about the moon very often, but when she does, she always undoes her top four buttons, tilts her throat up to the sky.

"Retro": An old woman kills a local deli owner. She tells Benson and Stabler that he raped her when they were teenagers. They don't have the heart to tell her that he was a twin.

"Babes": All of the Hooter's waitresses get pregnant at once. No one will say why. "This is not really a case," Benson says, exasperated. Stabler doodles on his pad—a picture of a tree. Or maybe it's a tooth?

“Wildlife”: Deer, raccoons, rats, mice, cockroaches, flies, squirrels, birds, spiders, all of them, gone. Scientists take notice immediately. The state pours money into research. Where are they? Where did they go? What does it mean that they are missing? What would it take for their return?

“Persona”: Benson likes her date, but the girls inside her screw it up by referring to themselves in the collective. “It’s the *royal* ‘we’!” she howls after his retreating back.

“PTSD”: Every night, Benson dreams about the girls’ deaths. She slips in and out of stabbings and shootings and stranglings and poisonings and gags and ropes and *No, no, nos*, all lucid, and cut with Benson’s normal dreams: sex with Stabler, apocalypses, teeth falling out, teeth falling out of Benson onto Stabler while they fuck on a boat as the Flood wipes everything away.

“Smut”: The DA watches the 24-hour news networks for 24 hours.

“Stranger”: “What do you mean?” Stabler breathes into the phone. “Three birth certificates to Joanna Stabler in that ten-year stretch,” the receptionist says. “Oliver, you, and an Eli.” “I don’t have a brother Eli,” Stabler says. “According to this, you do,” she says, sucking noisily on a large wad of gum. Stabler hates it when people chew gum.

“Hothouse”: Benson covers her apartment in flowerpots and long troughs full of black dirt, laying them among the destroyed remnants of her furniture, her list, her rules. She plants basil and thyme and dill and oregano and beets and spinach and kale and rainbow chard. The sound of pattering water released from a watering can is so beautiful she wants to cry. Time to make something grow.

“Snatched”: A tiny Dominican girl is taken off the street by a man in a grey coat. She is never seen again.

“Transitions”: Every time Benson flips her bedroom light on and off, she hears the sound. *Dum dum*. She feels it in her teeth.

“Lead”: When she is tired, Benson lets the girls take over. They run her body all over town, buying hard lemonades and shimmying her chest at bouncers and, once, before Benson can take over again, kissing a busboy sweetly on his mouth, a mouth that tastes like metal and spearmint.

“Ballerina”: She dances four nights a week for two years. He buys a ticket for every show, sits in the mezzanine, never goes backstage for an autograph. She always gets the uneasy sensation that she is being watched, aggressively, but never knows who it is.

“Hell”: Father Jones sends Lucy the intern out into the world, infected as Stabler was. He kneels from the rooftop of his building, and takes the demon with him.

“Baggage”: “Yes,” Stabler’s mother says to him over the phone, carefully. “I did have an older son. Eli. But I haven’t seen him since you were a child.” “Where did he go?” Stabler asked. “Why did you never say?” “Some things,” she says, her voice thick with tears, “are better left unsaid.”

“Selfish”: The medical examiner can’t bring herself to admit that sometimes, *she’s* the one who wants to be cut open, to have someone tell her all of her own secrets.

“Crush”: “I really care about you,” Stabler says. “And I know how you feel. I’m sorry that I’ve led you on. I’m sorry I haven’t been forthright. But I love my wife. We were going through a patch, but I love her. And I love my daughters. I should have told you after we kissed. I should have said that it wouldn’t go anywhere.” “We kissed?” Benson says. She probes her memories, and only comes up with dreams.

“Liberties”: “I mean, not...not *everybody*,” the constitutional scholar scoffed, looking equal parts amused and scandalized. “Can you imagine if *everyone* had those rights? Anarchy.” Abler smiles, and pours him another drink.

“Zebras”: Benson wakes up in the zoo again. She scales the wall, not caring that she trips the alarm, not caring that as she runs, cop cars are cruising, flashing, looking for her and only her. She is barefoot, her feet bleed, the street breathes, the street heats, the street is waiting, and what else is waiting? Beneath, beneath, beneath.

season 11

“Unstable”: Stabler listens to Benson. She tells him everything—the ghost girls and their now-silent bells—and things he already knows—the heartbeats from the ground, and its breathing, and her love. He looks around at the apartment full of plants, more greenhouse than home. “You’re saying they’re inside of you now.” “Yes.” “Right this minute.” “Yes.” “Do they tell you things?” “Sometimes.” “Like what?” “They say, ‘Ow, yes, no, stop it, that one, help us, there, but why, but when, I’m hungry, we’re hungry, kiss him, kiss her, wait, okay....’ Also, I bought some bells.” She points to a ravaged cardboard box, overflowing with packing peanuts and glints of brass. Stabler frowns. “Benson, how can I help?”

“Sugar”: The handsome older gentleman folds his cloth napkin in half before dabbing his mouth. “What I’m saying,” he says to Benson, who can’t stop staring, “is that if this continues, I will expect you to quit your job. Naturally, you’ll be compensated above and beyond your current salary. I’ll just expect you to always be available.”

“Solitary”: Benson trims her plants, and bats away regret over saying “No.”

“Hammered”: Benson wakes up to see Henson standing over her bed. She is holding a garbage bag, and she is grinning. She dumps the contents over Benson’s bed, and they tumble out like ghostly river shrimp. The stolen hammers from the girls’ bells. They weigh nothing and yet Benson can feel them, somehow. Inside her head, the girls explode in chatter. When the points of light stop flashing in Benson’s eyes, she realizes that Henson has left. She tries to pick up the hammers, and they dissolve in her fingers like fog.

“Hardwired”: The DA comes over to Benson’s apartment to talk about a case. “I like your greenhouse,” she says. Benson blinks, disbelieving. Then, she smiles shyly, offers to show her the plants. She shows the DA how to rewire a heat lamp. They laugh into the night.

“Spooked”: “You just gotta learn to live with it,” the bored officer says to the woman sitting in the chair across from him, shaking.

“Users”: Everyone on the web forum wakes up to find a jagged crack up the length of their bathroom mirrors.

“Turmoil”: Abler and Henson reverse the stoplights, flood bathrooms, and steal the interior workings of all deadbolts.

“Perverted”: “You can’t stop me,” the note, pinned to the body, reads. “I control everything. —THE WOLF.” Benson and Stabler start a new file. Stabler cries.

“Anchor”: They can’t prove the naval officer was responsible because the evidence isn’t waterproof.

“Quickie”: The DA finally throws Henson out of her bed. “You’re not her,” she says, her voice heavy with sadness. “One more story,” Henson says, leaning against the doorframe. “Don’t you want to hear just one more? It’s a good one. It’s a real doozy.”

“Shadow”: If the day had been sunny and not overcast, she would have seen him coming. Everyone blames the weatherman.

“P.C.”: “It’s just that,” the guy says, pumping his head confidently, “my sense of humor is pretty subversive, you know? I, like, don’t submit to the P.C. brigade. I like to think of myself as a rebel.” For the first time in ages, Benson leaves her date. She’s desperate, but not that desperate.

“Savior”: One night, Lucy knocks on Benson’s door. “Your gun,” she says. Benson frowns at her. “What?” Lucy seizes the gun from Benson’s holster. Benson makes a grab for it, but not before Lucy smears something on the handle. “A gift from Father Jones,” she says, handing it back to her.

“Confidential”: “It’s been nice having her come around,” Benson says to her plants, referring to the DA. Benson hates diaries. “She’s really great company. Really great.” She imagines that the plants are arching toward her voice.

“Witness”: There isn’t one. The DA can’t try the case.

“Disabled”: Stabler goes to visit his wife and children. He worries that Abler is following him. He stops his car. He drives back to New York. He takes a train. He hitchhikes to the house.

“Bedtime”: Stabler’s wife curls against him. She breathes into his ear. “When do you think we can leave my mother’s place?” she asks. “When we catch Uncle E,” he says. He feels

her face pull into a sleepy smile. “What do you think Uncle E stands for, anyway?” she asks blearily.

“Conned”: Stabler tackles Abler to the ground. “I know who you are!” Stabler says into his ear. “You’re my brother, Eli. Uncle E, indeed.” Abler chuckles from beneath him. “No,” he says. “I’m not. I just called myself that to fuck with you. Eli died in prison, years ago. Your brother was a rapist. Your brother was a monster.” Benson pulls Stabler off. “Don’t listen to him,” she says. “Don’t.” Abler grins. “Do you want me to tell you who Henson is? She’s—”

“Beef”: The hamburger doesn’t give a fuck who it kills.

“Torch”: A girl is raped, murdered, and lit on fire. She comes into Benson’s head screaming, smoke curling off her burned skin, not understanding. It is the longest night of Benson’s life thus far.

“Ace”: Abler and Henson sense what is coming. They fuck, they eat, they drink, they smoke. They go dancing, foxtrotting on the chairs; a gavotte across the finished walnut. When the Beasley family comes home, there are heelmarks in the soft wood of their dining room table, and half of the plates are broken.

“Wannabe”: Copycat mischief-makers reverse street signs and tie people’s shoelaces together. When Stabler falls over a fifth time, he slams his fist down on his floor. “THAT. IS. IT.”

“Shattered”: “Don’t you understand?!” Abler howls as Benson and Stabler struggle to their feet. “We didn’t do this. This was not us. The women. All of the women.” Henson howls with laughter. “You thought this was all some vast conspiracy, but it’s not. The women—no, you’ve done them on your own. The heartbeat.” Benson pulls her gun from her holster and unloads a clip into both of them. Abler falls over immediately, an expression of surprise on his face. Blood

gurgles from Henson's mouth, drips in a long stream down her chin. "Just like in the movies," Benson breathes.

season 12

"Locum": Without Henson and Abler, Benson and Stabler don't know what to do with themselves. They go back, slowly, to old files. The missing girls and women. The dead. "Let's get them out," Stabler says, newly confident. "Let's set them free."

"Bullseye": "The reason we didn't catch him before is because his alibi was foolproof. But now, we know."

"Behave": They start responding to "no."

"Merchandise": They arrest the madam who had permitted so many of her girls to be drowned. "Not by my hands!" she howls as they drag her to the squad car. "Not by my hands!"

"Wet": Benson doesn't know how she knows, but she does. They walk the length of the Hudson. They locate eight missing bodies—different murderers, different years. She names them as the gurneys go rumbling past her.

"Branded": They catch the serial brander. His victims pick him out of a lineup, strange smiles pushing through their burned faces. "How did you catch him?" one woman asks Benson. "Good old-fashioned police work," she says.

“Trophy”: “I’m looking for a wife,” Benson’s date says. He is handsome. He is brilliant. She stands up, folds her napkin on the table, and pulls three twenties from her wallet. “I have to go. I just...I have to go.” She runs down the street. She breaks a heel on her shoe. She skips the rest of the way.

“Penetration”: “No.” “Yes.” “No.” “No?” “No.” “Oh.”

“Gray”: Benson plants some flowers.

“Rescue”: Benson and Stabler take out the kidnapper before he even reaches his destination.

“Pop”: Benson and Stabler think they hear gunfire, but when they come bursting out of the diner, it’s just tiny fireworks lighting up windows three stories over their heads.

“Possessed”: “Not for much longer,” Benson says, to herself, in her sleep.

“Mask”: Stabler and his wife dance all over the house, mouse masks on their faces. The girls stare at the scene in horror, and run to their rooms, where one is busy forgetting and the other is remembering what will, one day, be a chapter in her well-received memoir. Father Jones didn’t just touch Stabler and Lucy, you know.

“Dirty”: The DA comes and helps Benson sweep up the wood chips from her floor. They clean the windows. They order pizza and talk about first loves.

“Flight”: The city is still hungry. The city is always hungry. But tonight, the heartbeat slows. They fly, they fly, they fly.

“Spectacle”: On a Wednesday, they catch so many bad guys that Benson throws up seventeen girls in one afternoon. She laughs as they spill out of her, tumble into her vomit like oil slicks, and dissipate into the air.

“Pursuit”: They chase. They catch. No one gets away.

“Bully”: The last girl clings to the inside of Benson’s skull. “I don’t want to be alone,” Benson says. “I don’t, either,” Benson says, “but you need to go.” Stabler comes into Benson’s apartment. “Her name is Marcela Tietra. She was twelve. She was raped by her father, and her mother did not believe her. Her father killed her. He buried her on Brighton Beach.” Inside, the girl shook her head, as if to dislodge the sand in her hair. “Go,” Benson says. “Go.” The girl smiles and doesn’t, her bells barely rocking. “Thank you,” Benson says. “You’re welcome,” Benson says. There is a sound—a new sound. A sigh. And then, she is gone. Stabler hugs Benson. “Goodbye,” he says, and so is he.

“Bombshell”: The DA comes to Benson’s door. Benson’s head, newly clear, feels like a vacant airplane hanger, a moor. Expansive, but empty. The DA reaches her hand up to Benson’s face, and traces her jaw with the barest weight. “I want you,” she says to Benson. “I’ve wanted you since the first time I met you.” Benson leans forward and kisses her. The heartbeat is a hunger. She pulls her inside.

“Totem”: “In the beginning, before the city, there was a creature. Genderless, ageless. The city flies on its back. We hear it, all of us, in one way or another. It demands sacrifices. But it can only eat what we give it.” Benson strokes the DA’s hair. “Where did you hear that story?” she asks. The DA bites her lip. “From someone who always seemed to be right,” she says.

“Reparations”: Stabler and his wife talk it over. They decide to take the girls and go far, far away. “A new place,” he says, “where we can have any names we want. Any histories.”

“Bang”: A bomb goes off in Central Park. It was beneath a park bench the whole time. No one is sitting on the bench when it detonates, and the only casualty is a passing pigeon.

The serial killer sends a note to Benson and Stabler. All it says is “Oops.”

“Delinquent”: Benson and the DA are both late to work, and smell like each other. Stabler sends in his resignation by express post.

“Smoked”: The DA and Benson roast vegetables on the grill, laughing. The smoke rises up and up, drifts over the trees, curls past birds and rot and blooms. The city smells it. The city takes a breath.

Executive Producer
DICK WOLF

The preceding story was fictional. No actual person or event was depicted.

Hills Like White Elephants

by Ernest Hemingway

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.

"What should we drink?" the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

"It's pretty hot," the man said.

"Let's drink beer."

"Dos cervezas," the man said into the curtain.

"Big ones?" a woman asked from the doorway.

"Yes. Two big ones."

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have."

"I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything."

The girl looked at the bead curtain. "They've painted something on it," she said. "What does it say?"

"Anis del Toro. It's a drink."

"Could we try it?"

The man called "Listen" through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.

"Four reales."

"We want two Anis del Toro."

"With water?"

"Do you want it with water?"

"I don't know," the girl said.

"Is it good with water?"

"It's all right."

"You want them with water?" asked the woman.

"Yes, with water."

"It tastes like licorice," the girl said and put the glass down.

"That's the way with everything."

"Yes," said the girl. "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe."

"Oh, cut it out."

"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."

"Well, let's try and have a fine time."

"All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?"

"That was bright."

"I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?"

"I guess so."

The girl looked across at the hills.

"They're lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees."

"Should we have another drink?"

"All right."

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.

"The beer's nice and cool," the man said.

"It's lovely," the girl said.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."

The girl did not say anything.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural."

"Then what will we do afterward?"

"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."

"What makes you think so?"

"That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy."

The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads.

"And you think then we'll be all right and be happy."

"I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people that have done it."

"So have I," said the girl. "And afterward they were all so happy."

"Well," the man said, "if you don't want to you don't have to. I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to. But I know it's perfectly simple."

"And you really want to?"

"I think it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to."

"And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?"

"I love you now. You know I love you."

"I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?"

"I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry."

"If I do it you won't ever worry?"

"I won't worry about that because it's perfectly simple."

"Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't care about me."

"Well, I care about you."

"Oh, yes. But I don't care about me. And I'll do it and then everything will be fine."

"I don't want you to do it if you feel that way."

The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.

"And we could have all this," she said. "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

"What did you say?"

"I said we could have everything."

"We can have everything."

"No, we can't."

"We can have the whole world."

"No, we can't."

"We can go everywhere."

"No, we can't. It isn't ours any more."

"It's ours."

"No, it isn't. And once they take it away, you never get it back."

"But they haven't taken it away."

"We'll wait and see."

"Come on back in the shade," he said. "You mustn't feel that way."

"I don't feel any way," the girl said. "I just know things."

"I don't want you to do anything that you don't want to do—"

"Nor that isn't good for me," she said. "I know. Could we have another beer?"

"All right. But you've got to realize—"

"I realize," the girl said. "Can't we maybe stop talking?"

They sat down at the table and the girl looked across at the hills on the dry side of the valley and the man looked at her and at the table. "You've got to realize," he said, "that I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you."

"Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along."

"Of course it does. But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want any one else. And I know it's perfectly simple."

"Yes, you know it's perfectly simple."

"It's all right for you to say that, but I do know it."

"Would you do something for me now?"

"I'd do anything for you."

"Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?"

He did not say anything but looked at the bags against the wall of the station. There were labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights.

"But I don't want you to," he said, "I don't care anything about it."

"I'll scream," the girl said.

The woman came out through the curtains with two glasses of beer and put them down on the damp felt pads. "The train comes in five minutes," she said.

"What did she say?" asked the girl.

"That the train is coming in five minutes."

The girl smiled brightly at the woman, to thank her.

"I'd better take the bags over to the other side of the station," the man said. She smiled at him.

"All right. Then come back and we'll finish the beer."

He picked up the two heavy bags and carried them around the station to the other tracks. He looked up the tracks but could not see the train. Coming back, he walked through the barroom, where people waiting for the train were drinking. He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train. He went out through the bead curtain. She was sitting at the table and smiled at him.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

"I feel fine," she said. "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine."

I'm a Mad Dog Biting Myself for Sympathy

by Louise Erdrich

Who I am is just the habit of what I always was, and who I'll be is the result. This comes clear to me at the wrong time. I am standing in a line, almost rehabilitated. Walgreens is the store in downtown Fargo. I have my purchase in my arms, and I am listening to canned carols on the loudspeaker. I plan to buy this huge stuffed parrot with purple wings and a yellow beak. Really, it is a toucan, I get told this later in the tank.

You think you know everything about yourself—how much money it would take, for instance, to make you take it. How you would react when caught. But then you find yourself walking out the door with a stuffed toucan, just to see if this happens, if do-do occurs. And it does, though no one stops me right at first.

My motive is my girlfriend's Christmas present. And it is strange because I do have the money to pay for a present, though nothing very big or elaborate. I think of Dawn the minute I see the bird, and wish I'd won it for her at a county fair, though we never went to a fair. I see myself throwing a half-dozen softballs and hitting every wooden milk jug, or maybe tossing rings. But those things are weighted on loaded wrong and that's another reason I never could have won this toucan for Dawn, because the whole thing's a cheat in general. So what the hell, I think, and life's the bird.

Outside in the street it is one of my favorite kind of days, right there in the drag middle of winter when the snow is a few hard gray clumps and a dusty gray shows on the boulevards. I like the smell in the air, the dry dirt, the

patches of water shrinking and the threat of snow, too, in the gloom of the sky.

This usual rubber-neck turns to look at me. This bird is really huge and furry, with green underneath its floppy wings and fat stuffed orange feet. I don't know why they'd have a strange thing like this in Walgreens. Maybe a big promotion, maybe some kind of come-on for the holiday season. And then the manager yells at me from the door. I am halfway down the street when I hear him. "Come back here!" Probably pointing at me, too, though there is no reason, as I stick out plenty and still more when I run.

First I put the bird underneath my arm. But it throws off my balance. So I clutch it to my chest; that is no better. Thinking back now I should have ditched it, and skipped off through the alleys but disappeared. Of course, I didn't—otherwise none of all that happened would have happened. I sit the bird on my shoulders and hold the lumpy feet under my chin and then I bear down, like going for the distance or the gold, let my legs churn beneath me. I leap crabs, dodge among old men in long gray coats and babies in strollers, shoot up and over car hoods until I come to the railroad depot and, like it is some sort of destination, though it isn't, I slip in the door and look out the window.

A gathering crowd follows with the manager. There is a policewoman, a few local mall-sitters, passersby. They are stumbling and talking together and making big circles of their arms, to illustrate the toucan, and closing in.

That's when my stroke of luck, good or bad is no telling, occurs. The car drives into the parking lot, a solid plastic luggage rack strapped on its roof. A man and a woman jump out, late for a connection, and they leave the car running in parallel. I walk out of the depot and stand before the car. At that moment, it seems as though events are taking me somewhere. I open up the hinges on the plastic rack, stuff in the bird. No one seems to notice me. Encouraged, I get in. I put my hands on the wheel. I take the car out of neutral and

we start to roll, back out of the lot. I change gears, then turn at the crossroads, and look both ways.

I don't know what you'd do in this situation. I'll ask you. There you are in a car. It isn't yours but for the time being that doesn't matter. You look up the street one way. It's clear. You look down the other, and a dump of people still are arguing and trying to describe you with their hands. Either way, the road will take you straight out of town. The clear way is north, where you don't know anyone. South, what's there?

I let the cat idle.

My parents. It's not like I hate them or anything. I just can't see them. I can close my eyes and form my sister's face behind my eyelids, but not my parent's faces. Where their eyes should meet mine, nothing. That's all. I shouldn't show up at the farm, not with the toucan. Much less the car. I think a few seconds longer. The bird on the roof. It is for Dawn. You could say she got me into this, so Dawn should get me out. But she doesn't live in Fargo anymore, she lives south. She lives in Colorado, which complicates everything later for it means crossing state lines and all just to bring her that bird, and then another complexity, although at the time I don't realize, occurs when the woman at the depot, the one who has left the car, appears very suddenly in the rearview mirror.

I have just started moving south when I hear a thump from behind. It is so surprising. Just imagine. She is there on the trunk, hanging on as though by magnetics. She reaches up and grabs the hitches on the roof-top luggage rack, gets a better grip, and sprawls across the back window. She is a little woman. Through the side-view, I see her blue heels in the air, the edge of a black coat. I hear her shrieking in an inhuman desperate way that horrifies me so much I floor the gas.

We must go by everyone fast, but the effect is dreadful, so slow. I see the faces of the clump of people, their mouths falling open, arms stretching and grasping as I turn

the corner and the woman rolls over and over like a seal in water. Then she flies off the trunk and howls then more in her rush so they heap on the ground. She is in their arms. They put her down as though she is a live torpedo and keep running after me.

“Scandinavians,” I think, because my grandmother’s one, “they don’t give up the ghost.” I just want to yell out, tell them. “OK, so it’s stolen. It’s gone! It’s a cheap stuffed bird anyway and I will park the car. I promise.”

I start talking to myself. “I’ll check the oil in Sioux Falls. No sweat.” Then the worst thing comes about, and all of a sudden I understand the woman with her eyes rearing back in her skull, her little heels pointed in the air. I understand the faces of the people in the group, their blurting voices, “b... . . . b... . . . baby”.

As from the back seat, it wails.

I have my first real tension, disbelief. I have taken the scenic route at a fast clip, but I know the view anyway. I am down near the river and have decided from there I will take 30 and avoid the Interstate, always so well patrolled. I park and turn around in a frantic whirl. I revolve twice in my seat. And I still can’t see the baby. I am behind on the new equipment. He sits in something round and firm, shaped like a big football, strapped down the chest and over the waist, held tight by a padded cushion. Above his face there is a little diamond attachment made of plastic, a bunch of keys and plastic balls that dangle over of reach.

I have never seen a child this little before, so small that it is not a child yet. Its face is tiny and dark, almost reddish, or copper, and its fingers, splayed out against its cheeks, are the feet of a sparrow. There is a bottle of milk in a hag beside it. I put the end in its mouth and it sucks. But it will not hold the bottle. I keep putting the end in its hand, and it won’t grasp.

“Oh screw it,” I finally say, and gun tight out of there. It’s cry begins again and I wish I knew how to stop it. I have

to slow down to get through some traffic. Sirens rush ahead on their way to the Interstate, passing in a squeal which surprises me. This car, this pack on top, I am so obvious. I think I'll maybe park at the old King Leo's, get out, and run. But then I pass it. I think it will be better if I get down south around the South Dakota border, or in the sandhills, where I can hide out in cow shelters. So I do go south. Over me the sky is bearing down and bearing down, so I think now maybe snow will fall. A White Christmas like the music in the drugstore. I know how to drive in snow and this car has decent tires, I can feel them. They never lose grip or plane above the road. They just keep rolling, humming, below me, all four in this unified direction, so dull that after some time it all seems right again.

The baby drops off, stops crying. It shouldn't have been there, should it. I have to realize the situation. There is no use in thinking back, in saying to myself, well you shouldn't have stole the damn bird in the first place, because I did do that and then, well as you see, it is like I went along with the arrangement of things as they happened.

Of course, around halfway down there is a smokey waiting, which I knew would happen, but not whether it would be before or behind me. So now my answer comes. The officer's car turns off a dirt road and starts flashing, starts coming at me from the rear. I take it up to eighty and we move, move, so the frozen water standing in the fields flashes by like scarves and the silver snow whirls out of nowhere, to either side of us, and what rushes up before us is a heat of road and earth.

I am not all that afraid. I never am and that's my problem. I feel sure they will not use their weapons. I keep driving and then, as we take a turn, as we come to a railroad crossing, I hear the plastic roof rack snap open. I look through the rearview by reflex, and see the bird as it dives out of the sky, big and plush, a purple blur that plunges its yellow beak through the windshield and throws the state

police off course so that they skid, roll over once, come back with such force the car righted itself. They sit there in shock.

I keep on going. The pack blows off and I reason that now the car is less obvious. I should have thought about that in the first place, but then the bird would not have hatched out and demolished the police car. Just about this time, however, being as the toucan is gone, I begin to feel perhaps there is no reason to go traveling this way. I begin to think I will just stop at the nearest farm, leave the car and the baby, and keep hitting south. I begin to think if I show up at Dawn's, even with nothing, on a Christmas Eve, she will not throw me out. She will have to take me, let me stay there, on the couch. She lives with someone now, a guy ten years older than me, five years older than her. By now he has probably taken her places, shown her restaurants and zoos, gone camping in the wilderness, skied. She will know things and I will still be the same person that I was the year before. And I am glad about the toucan, then, which would have made me look ridiculous. Showing up there like a kid in junior high school with a stuffed animal, when her tastes have broadened. I should have sent her chocolates, a little red and green box. I was wishing I had. And then I look past the road in front of me and realize it is snowing.

It isn't just like ordinary snow even from the first. It is like that rhyme or story in the second grade, the sky falling and let's go and tell the king. It comes down. I think to myself, well, let it come down. And I keep driving. I know you'll say it, you'll wonder, you'll think what about the child in back of him, that far baby, only three weeks old, little Mason Joseph Andrews? Because he does have a name and all, but what could I know of that?

I talk to it. I am good at driving in the snow but I need to talk while I'm driving. I'll tell this now, it doesn't matter. I say, "You little bastard you, what are you doing here!" It is my state of mind. I put the window open. Snow whites out the windshield and I can't see the road in front of us. I watch the miry coming up to follow the yellow line which is

obscured by a twisting blanket. I am good at this though I need my concentration, which vanishes when he bawled. My ears are full. He roars and I hear the sound as wind, as sounds that came out of its mother. I hit the plastic egg and feel the straps give, feel the car give on the road. I swerve into another car's tracks, weave along the dotted yellow, and then under me is snow and still I keep going at a steady pace although the ground feels all hollow and uncertain. The tracks narrow into one, and then widen, so I suddenly realize this: I have followed a snowmobile trail and now I am somewhere off the road. Immediately, just like in a cartoon, like Dumbo flying and he realizes that he isn't supposed to be up in the air, I panic and get stuck.

So now I am in awful shape, out there in a field, in a storm that could go on for three more minutes or three more days. I sit there thinking until the baby gets discouraged and falls asleep. And get this. It is a white car. Harder to see than ever. And not a bit of this did I ever think or plan for. I can't remember what they say in the papers every fall, the advice about what to do when a blizzard hits. Whether to stay on the road, with the cat, or set out walking for help. There is the baby. It is helpless, but does not seem so helpless. I know now that I should have left the car run, the heater, but at the time I don't think. Except I do rip that dangle of toys off its seat and tie it on the aerial when I go out, and I do leave its blankets in there, never take any. I just wrap my arms around my chest and start walking south.

By not stopping for a minute I live through the storm, though I am easy to catch after it lets up, and I freeze an ear. All right, you know that baby wasn't hurt anyway. You heard. Cold, yes, but it lived. They ask me in court why I didn't take it along with me, bundled in my jacket, and I say, well it lived, didn't it? Proving I did right. But I know better sometimes, now that I've spent time alone here in Mandan, more time running than I knew I had available.

I think about that boy. He'll grow up, but already I am more to him than his own father because I taught him what I

know about the cold. It sinks in, there to stay, doesn't it? And people. They will leave you, no matter what you say there's no return. There's just the emptiness all around, and you in it, like singing up from the bottom of a well, like nothing else, until you harm yourself, until you ate a mad dog just biting yourself for sympathy, because there is no relenting, and there is no hand that falls, and there is no woman to come home to take you in her arms.

I know I taught that boy something in those hours I was walking south. I know I'll always be inside him, cold and black, about the size of a coin, maybe, something he touches against and skids. And he'll say, *what is this*, and the thing is he won't know it is a piece of thin ice I have put there, the same as I have in me.

The Dead

by James Joyce

Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet. Hardly had she brought one gentleman into the little pantry behind the office on the ground floor and helped him off with his overcoat than the wheezy hall-door bell clanged again and she had to scamper along the bare hallway to let in another guest. It was well for her she had not to attend to the ladies also. But Miss Kate and Miss Julia had thought of that and had converted the bathroom upstairs into a ladies' dressing-room. Miss Kate and Miss Julia were there, gossiping and laughing and fussing, walking after each other to the head of the stairs, peering down over the banisters and calling down to Lily to ask her who had come.

It was always a great affair, the Misses Morkan's annual dance. Everybody who knew them came to it, members of the family, old friends of the family, the members of Julia's choir, any of Kate's pupils that were grown up enough, and even some of Mary Jane's pupils too. Never once had it fallen flat. For years and years it had gone off in splendid style as long as anyone could remember; ever since Kate and Julia, after the death of their brother Pat, had left the house in Stoney Batter and taken Mary Jane, their only niece, to live with them in the dark gaunt house on Usher's Island, the upper part of which they had rented from Mr Fulham, the corn-factor on the ground floor. That was a good thirty years ago if it was a day. Mary Jane, who was then a little girl in short clothes, was now the main prop of the household, for she had the organ in Haddington Road. She had been through the Academy and gave a pupils' concert every year in the upper room of the Antient Concert Rooms. Many of her pupils belonged to the better-class families on the Kingstown and Dalkey line. Old as they were, her aunts also did their

share. Julia, though she was quite grey, was still the leading soprano in Adam and Eve's, and Kate, being too feeble to go about much, gave music lessons to beginners on the old square piano in the back room. Lily, the caretaker's daughter, did housemaid's work for them. Though their life was modest they believed in eating well; the best of everything: diamond-bone sirloins, three-shilling tea and the best bottled stout. But Lily seldom made a mistake in the orders so that she got on well with her three mistresses. They were fussy, that was all. But the only thing they would not stand was back answers.

Of course they had good reason to be fussy on such a night. And then it was long after ten o'clock and yet there was no sign of Gabriel and his wife. Besides they were dreadfully afraid that Freddy Malins might turn up screwed. They would not wish for worlds that any of Mary Jane's pupils should see him under the influence; and when he was like that it was sometimes very hard to manage him. Freddy Malins always came late but they wondered what could be keeping Gabriel: and that was what brought them every two minutes to the banisters to ask Lily had Gabriel or Freddy come.

"O, Mr Conroy," said Lily to Gabriel when she opened the door for him, "Miss Kate and Miss Julia thought you were never coming. Good-night, Mrs Conroy."

"I'll engage they did," said Gabriel, "but they forget that my wife here takes three mortal hours to dress herself."

He stood on the mat, scraping the snow from his goloshes, while Lily led his wife to the foot of the stairs and called out:

"Miss Kate, here's Mrs Conroy."

Kate and Julia came toddling down the dark stairs at once. Both of them kissed Gabriel's wife, said she must be perished alive and asked was Gabriel with her.

"Here I am as right as the mail, Aunt Kate! Go on up. I'll follow," called out Gabriel from the dark.

He continued scraping his feet vigorously while the three women went upstairs, laughing, to the ladies' dressing-room. A light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat and like toecaps on the toes of his goloshes; and, as the buttons of his overcoat slipped with a squeaking noise through the snow-stiffened frieze, a cold, fragrant air from out-of-doors escaped from crevices and folds.

"Is it snowing again, Mr Conroy?" asked Lily.

She had preceded him into the pantry to help him off with his overcoat. Gabriel smiled at the three syllables she had given his surname and glanced at her. She was a slim, growing girl, pale in complexion and with hay-coloured hair. The gas in the pantry made her look still paler. Gabriel had known her when she was a child and used to sit on the lowest step nursing a rag doll.

"Yes, Lily," he answered, "and I think we're in for a night of it."

He looked up at the pantry ceiling, which was shaking with the stamping and shuffling of feet on the floor above, listened for a moment to the piano and then glanced at the girl, who was folding his overcoat carefully at the end of a shelf.

"Tell me, Lily," he said in a friendly tone, "do you still go to school?"

"O no, sir," she answered. "I'm done schooling this year and more."

"O, then," said Gabriel gaily, "I suppose we'll be going to your wedding one of these fine days with your young man, eh?"

The girl glanced back at him over her shoulder and said with great bitterness:

"The men that is now is only all palaver and what they can get out of you."

Gabriel coloured as if he felt he had made a mistake and, without looking at her, kicked off his goloshes and flicked actively with his muffler at his patent-leather shoes.

He was a stout tallish young man. The high colour of his cheeks pushed upwards even to his forehead where it scattered itself in a few formless patches of pale red; and on his hairless face there scintillated restlessly the polished lenses and the bright gilt rims of the glasses which screened his delicate and restless eyes. His glossy black hair was parted in the middle and brushed in a long curve behind his ears where it curled slightly beneath the groove left by his hat.

When he had flicked lustre into his shoes he stood up and pulled his waistcoat down more tightly on his plump body. Then he took a coin rapidly from his pocket.

“O Lily,” he said, thrusting it into her hands, “it’s Christmas-time, isn’t it? Just ... here’s a little....”

He walked rapidly towards the door.

“O no, sir!” cried the girl, following him. “Really, sir, I wouldn’t take it.”

“Christmas-time! Christmas-time!” said Gabriel, almost trotting to the stairs and waving his hand to her in deprecation.

The girl, seeing that he had gained the stairs, called out after him:

“Well, thank you, sir.”

He waited outside the drawing-room door until the waltz should finish, listening to the skirts that swept against it and to the shuffling of feet. He was still discomposed by the girl’s bitter and sudden retort. It had cast a gloom over him which he tried to dispel by arranging his cuffs and the bows of his tie. He then took from his waistcoat pocket a little paper and glanced at the headings he had made for his speech. He was undecided about the lines from Robert Browning for he feared they would be above the heads of his hearers. Some

quotation that they would recognise from Shakespeare or from the Melodies would be better. The indelicate clacking of the men's heels and the shuffling of their soles reminded him that their grade of culture differed from his. He would only make himself ridiculous by quoting poetry to them which they could not understand. They would think that he was airing his superior education. He would fail with them just as he had failed with the girl in the pantry. He had taken up a wrong tone. His whole speech was a mistake from first to last, an utter failure.

Just then his aunts and his wife came out of the ladies' dressing-room. His aunts were two small plainly dressed old women. Aunt Julia was an inch or so the taller. Her hair, drawn low over the tops of her ears, was grey; and grey also, with darker shadows, was her large flaccid face. Though she was stout in build and stood erect her slow eyes and parted lips gave her the appearance of a woman who did not know where she was or where she was going. Aunt Kate was more vivacious. Her face, healthier than her sister's, was all puckers and creases, like a shrivelled red apple, and her hair, braided in the same old-fashioned way, had not lost its ripe nut colour.

They both kissed Gabriel frankly. He was their favourite nephew, the son of their dead elder sister, Ellen, who had married T. J. Conroy of the Port and Docks.

"Gretta tells me you're not going to take a cab back to Monkstown tonight, Gabriel," said Aunt Kate.

"No," said Gabriel, turning to his wife, "we had quite enough of that last year, hadn't we? Don't you remember, Aunt Kate, what a cold Gretta got out of it? Cab windows rattling all the way, and the east wind blowing in after we passed Merrion. Very jolly it was. Gretta caught a dreadful cold."

Aunt Kate frowned severely and nodded her head at every word.

“Quite right, Gabriel, quite right,” she said. “You can’t be too careful.”

“But as for Gretta there,” said Gabriel, “she’d walk home in the snow if she were let.”

Mrs Conroy laughed.

“Don’t mind him, Aunt Kate,” she said. “He’s really an awful bother, what with green shades for Tom’s eyes at night and making him do the dumb-bells, and forcing Eva to eat the stirabout. The poor child! And she simply hates the sight of it!... O, but you’ll never guess what he makes me wear now!”

She broke out into a peal of laughter and glanced at her husband, whose admiring and happy eyes had been wandering from her dress to her face and hair. The two aunts laughed heartily too, for Gabriel’s solicitude was a standing joke with them.

“Goloshes!” said Mrs Conroy. “That’s the latest. Whenever it’s wet underfoot I must put on my goloshes. Tonight even he wanted me to put them on, but I wouldn’t. The next thing he’ll buy me will be a diving suit.”

Gabriel laughed nervously and patted his tie reassuringly while Aunt Kate nearly doubled herself, so heartily did she enjoy the joke. The smile soon faded from Aunt Julia’s face and her mirthless eyes were directed towards her nephew’s face. After a pause she asked:

“And what are goloshes, Gabriel?”

“Goloshes, Julia!” exclaimed her sister. “Goodness me, don’t you know what goloshes are? You wear them over your ... over your boots, Gretta, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Mrs Conroy. “Guttapercha things. We both have a pair now. Gabriel says everyone wears them on the continent.”

“O, on the continent,” murmured Aunt Julia, nodding her head slowly.

Gabriel knitted his brows and said, as if he were slightly angered:

“It’s nothing very wonderful but Gretta thinks it very funny because she says the word reminds her of Christy Minstrels.”

“But tell me, Gabriel,” said Aunt Kate, with brisk tact. “Of course, you’ve seen about the room. Gretta was saying...”

“O, the room is all right,” replied Gabriel. “I’ve taken one in the Gresham.”

“To be sure,” said Aunt Kate, “by far the best thing to do. And the children, Gretta, you’re not anxious about them?”

“O, for one night,” said Mrs Conroy. “Besides, Bessie will look after them.”

“To be sure,” said Aunt Kate again. “What a comfort it is to have a girl like that, one you can depend on! There’s that Lily, I’m sure I don’t know what has come over her lately. She’s not the girl she was at all.”

Gabriel was about to ask his aunt some questions on this point but she broke off suddenly to gaze after her sister who had wandered down the stairs and was craning her neck over the banisters.

“Now, I ask you,” she said almost testily, “where is Julia going? Julia! Julia! Where are you going?”

Julia, who had gone half way down one flight, came back and announced blandly:

“Here’s Freddy.”

At the same moment a clapping of hands and a final flourish of the pianist told that the waltz had ended. The drawing-room door was opened from within and some couples came out. Aunt Kate drew Gabriel aside hurriedly and whispered into his ear:

“Slip down, Gabriel, like a good fellow and see if he’s all right, and don’t let him up if he’s screwed. I’m sure he’s screwed. I’m sure he is.”

Gabriel went to the stairs and listened over the banisters. He could hear two persons talking in the pantry. Then he recognised Freddy Malins' laugh. He went down the stairs noisily.

"It's such a relief," said Aunt Kate to Mrs Conroy, "that Gabriel is here. I always feel easier in my mind when he's here.... Julia, there's Miss Daly and Miss Power will take some refreshment. Thanks for your beautiful waltz, Miss Daly. It made lovely time."

A tall wizen-faced man, with a stiff grizzled moustache and swarthy skin, who was passing out with his partner said:

"And may we have some refreshment, too, Miss Morkan?"

"Julia," said Aunt Kate summarily, "and here's Mr Browne and Miss Furlong. Take them in, Julia, with Miss Daly and Miss Power."

"I'm the man for the ladies," said Mr Browne, pursing his lips until his moustache bristled and smiling in all his wrinkles. "You know, Miss Morkan, the reason they are so fond of me is——"

He did not finish his sentence, but, seeing that Aunt Kate was out of earshot, at once led the three young ladies into the back room. The middle of the room was occupied by two square tables placed end to end, and on these Aunt Julia and the caretaker were straightening and smoothing a large cloth. On the sideboard were arrayed dishes and plates, and glasses and bundles of knives and forks and spoons. The top of the closed square piano served also as a sideboard for viands and sweets. At a smaller sideboard in one corner two young men were standing, drinking hop-bitters.

Mr Browne led his charges thither and invited them all, in jest, to some ladies' punch, hot, strong and sweet. As they said they never took anything strong he opened three bottles of lemonade for them. Then he asked one of the young men to move aside, and, taking hold of the decanter, filled out for himself a goodly measure of whisky. The young men eyed him respectfully while he took a trial sip.

“God help me,” he said, smiling, “it’s the doctor’s orders.”

His wizened face broke into a broader smile, and the three young ladies laughed in musical echo to his pleasantry, swaying their bodies to and fro, with nervous jerks of their shoulders. The boldest said:

“O, now, Mr Browne, I’m sure the doctor never ordered anything of the kind.”

Mr Browne took another sip of his whisky and said, with sidling mimicry:

“Well, you see, I’m like the famous Mrs Cassidy, who is reported to have said: ‘Now, Mary Grimes, if I don’t take it, make me take it, for I feel I want it.’”

His hot face had leaned forward a little too confidentially and he had assumed a very low Dublin accent so that the young ladies, with one instinct, received his speech in silence. Miss Furlong, who was one of Mary Jane’s pupils, asked Miss Daly what was the name of the pretty waltz she had played; and Mr Browne, seeing that he was ignored, turned promptly to the two young men who were more appreciative.

A red-faced young woman, dressed in pansy, came into the room, excitedly clapping her hands and crying:

“Quadrilles! Quadrilles!”

Close on her heels came Aunt Kate, crying:

“Two gentlemen and three ladies, Mary Jane!”

“O, here’s Mr Bergin and Mr Kerrigan,” said Mary Jane. “Mr Kerrigan, will you take Miss Power? Miss Furlong, may I get you a partner, Mr Bergin. O, that’ll just do now.”

“Three ladies, Mary Jane,” said Aunt Kate.

The two young gentlemen asked the ladies if they might have the pleasure, and Mary Jane turned to Miss Daly.

“O, Miss Daly, you’re really awfully good, after playing for the last two dances, but really we’re so short of ladies tonight.”

“I don’t mind in the least, Miss Morkan.”

“But I’ve a nice partner for you, Mr Bartell D’Arcy, the tenor. I’ll get him to sing later on. All Dublin is raving about him.”

“Lovely voice, lovely voice!” said Aunt Kate.

As the piano had twice begun the prelude to the first figure Mary Jane led her recruits quickly from the room. They had hardly gone when Aunt Julia wandered slowly into the room, looking behind her at something.

“What is the matter, Julia?” asked Aunt Kate anxiously. “Who is it?”

Julia, who was carrying in a column of table-napkins, turned to her sister and said, simply, as if the question had surprised her:

“It’s only Freddy, Kate, and Gabriel with him.”

In fact right behind her Gabriel could be seen piloting Freddy Malins across the landing. The latter, a young man of about forty, was of Gabriel’s size and build, with very round shoulders. His face was fleshy and pallid, touched with colour only at the thick hanging lobes of his ears and at the wide wings of his nose. He had coarse features, a blunt nose, a convex and receding brow, tumid and protruded lips. His heavy-lidded eyes and the disorder of his scanty hair made him look sleepy. He was laughing heartily in a high key at a story which he had been telling Gabriel on the stairs and at the same time rubbing the knuckles of his left fist backwards and forwards into his left eye.

“Good-evening, Freddy,” said Aunt Julia.

Freddy Malins bade the Misses Morkan good-evening in what seemed an offhand fashion by reason of the habitual catch in his voice and then, seeing that Mr Browne was grinning at him from the sideboard, crossed the room on rather shaky legs and began to repeat in an undertone the story he had just told to Gabriel.

“He’s not so bad, is he?” said Aunt Kate to Gabriel.

Gabriel's brows were dark but he raised them quickly and answered:

"O, no, hardly noticeable."

"Now, isn't he a terrible fellow!" she said. "And his poor mother made him take the pledge on New Year's Eve. But come on, Gabriel, into the drawing-room."

Before leaving the room with Gabriel she signalled to Mr Browne by frowning and shaking her forefinger in warning to and fro. Mr Browne nodded in answer and, when she had gone, said to Freddy Malins:

"Now, then, Teddy, I'm going to fill you out a good glass of lemonade just to buck you up."

Freddy Malins, who was nearing the climax of his story, waved the offer aside impatiently but Mr Browne, having first called Freddy Malins' attention to a disarray in his dress, filled out and handed him a full glass of lemonade. Freddy Malins' left hand accepted the glass mechanically, his right hand being engaged in the mechanical readjustment of his dress. Mr Browne, whose face was once more wrinkling with mirth, poured out for himself a glass of whisky while Freddy Malins exploded, before he had well reached the climax of his story, in a kink of high-pitched bronchitic laughter and, setting down his untasted and overflowing glass, began to rub the knuckles of his left fist backwards and forwards into his left eye, repeating words of his last phrase as well as his fit of laughter would allow him.

Gabriel could not listen while Mary Jane was playing her Academy piece, full of runs and difficult passages, to the hushed drawing-room. He liked music but the piece she was playing had no melody for him and he doubted whether it had any melody for the other listeners, though they had begged Mary Jane to play something. Four young men, who had come from the refreshment-room to stand in the doorway at the sound of the piano, had gone away quietly in

couples after a few minutes. The only persons who seemed to follow the music were Mary Jane herself, her hands racing along the keyboard or lifted from it at the pauses like those of a priestess in momentary imprecation, and Aunt Kate standing at her elbow to turn the page.

Gabriel's eyes, irritated by the floor, which glittered with beeswax under the heavy chandelier, wandered to the wall above the piano. A picture of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet* hung there and beside it was a picture of the two murdered princes in the Tower which Aunt Julia had worked in red, blue and brown wools when she was a girl. Probably in the school they had gone to as girls that kind of work had been taught for one year. His mother had worked for him as a birthday present a waistcoat of purple tabinet, with little foxes' heads upon it, lined with brown satin and having round mulberry buttons. It was strange that his mother had had no musical talent though Aunt Kate used to call her the brains carrier of the Morkan family. Both she and Julia had always seemed a little proud of their serious and matronly sister. Her photograph stood before the pierglass. She held an open book on her knees and was pointing out something in it to Constantine who, dressed in a man-o'-war suit, lay at her feet. It was she who had chosen the name of her sons for she was very sensible of the dignity of family life. Thanks to her, Constantine was now senior curate in Balbrigan and, thanks to her, Gabriel himself had taken his degree in the Royal University. A shadow passed over his face as he remembered her sullen opposition to his marriage. Some slighting phrases she had used still rankled in his memory; she had once spoken of Gretta as being country cute and that was not true of Gretta at all. It was Gretta who had nursed her during all her last long illness in their house at Monkstown.

He knew that Mary Jane must be near the end of her piece for she was playing again the opening melody with runs of scales after every bar and while he waited for the end the resentment died down in his heart. The piece ended with a

trill of octaves in the treble and a final deep octave in the bass. Great applause greeted Mary Jane as, blushing and rolling up her music nervously, she escaped from the room. The most vigorous clapping came from the four young men in the doorway who had gone away to the refreshment-room at the beginning of the piece but had come back when the piano had stopped.

Lancers were arranged. Gabriel found himself partnered with Miss Ivors. She was a frank-mannered talkative young lady, with a freckled face and prominent brown eyes. She did not wear a low-cut bodice and the large brooch which was fixed in the front of her collar bore on it an Irish device and motto.

When they had taken their places she said abruptly:

“I have a crow to pluck with you.”

“With me?” said Gabriel.

She nodded her head gravely.

“What is it?” asked Gabriel, smiling at her solemn manner.

“Who is G. C.?” answered Miss Ivors, turning her eyes upon him.

Gabriel coloured and was about to knit his brows, as if he did not understand, when she said bluntly:

“O, innocent Amy! I have found out that you write for *The Daily Express*. Now, aren't you ashamed of yourself?”

“Why should I be ashamed of myself?” asked Gabriel, blinking his eyes and trying to smile.

“Well, I'm ashamed of you,” said Miss Ivors frankly. “To say you'd write for a paper like that. I didn't think you were a West Briton.”

A look of perplexity appeared on Gabriel's face. It was true that he wrote a literary column every Wednesday in *The Daily Express*, for which he was paid fifteen shillings. But that did not make him a West Briton surely. The books he received for review were almost more welcome than the paltry cheque. He loved to feel the covers and turn over the

pages of newly printed books. Nearly every day when his teaching in the college was ended he used to wander down the quays to the second-hand booksellers, to Hickey's on Bachelor's Walk, to Webb's or Massey's on Aston's Quay, or to O'Clohissey's in the by-street. He did not know how to meet her charge. He wanted to say that literature was above politics. But they were friends of many years' standing and their careers had been parallel, first at the university and then as teachers: he could not risk a grandiose phrase with her. He continued blinking his eyes and trying to smile and murmured lamely that he saw nothing political in writing reviews of books.

When their turn to cross had come he was still perplexed and inattentive. Miss Ivors promptly took his hand in a warm grasp and said in a soft friendly tone:

"Of course, I was only joking. Come, we cross now."

When they were together again she spoke of the University question and Gabriel felt more at ease. A friend of hers had shown her his review of Browning's poems. That was how she had found out the secret: but she liked the review immensely. Then she said suddenly:

"O, Mr Conroy, will you come for an excursion to the Aran Isles this summer? We're going to stay there a whole month. It will be splendid out in the Atlantic. You ought to come. Mr Clancy is coming, and Mr Kilkelly and Kathleen Kearney. It would be splendid for Gretta too if she'd come. She's from Connacht, isn't she?"

"Her people are," said Gabriel shortly.

"But you will come, won't you?" said Miss Ivors, laying her warm hand eagerly on his arm.

"The fact is," said Gabriel, "I have just arranged to go——"

"Go where?" asked Miss Ivors.

"Well, you know, every year I go for a cycling tour with some fellows and so——"

"But where?" asked Miss Ivors.

“Well, we usually go to France or Belgium or perhaps Germany,” said Gabriel awkwardly.

“And why do you go to France and Belgium,” said Miss Ivors, “instead of visiting your own land?”

“Well,” said Gabriel, “it’s partly to keep in touch with the languages and partly for a change.”

“And haven’t you your own language to keep in touch with —Irish?” asked Miss Ivors.

“Well,” said Gabriel, “if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language.”

Their neighbours had turned to listen to the cross-examination. Gabriel glanced right and left nervously and tried to keep his good humour under the ordeal which was making a blush invade his forehead.

“And haven’t you your own land to visit,” continued Miss Ivors, “that you know nothing of, your own people, and your own country?”

“O, to tell you the truth,” retorted Gabriel suddenly, “I’m sick of my own country, sick of it!”

“Why?” asked Miss Ivors.

Gabriel did not answer for his retort had heated him.

“Why?” repeated Miss Ivors.

They had to go visiting together and, as he had not answered her, Miss Ivors said warmly:

“Of course, you’ve no answer.”

Gabriel tried to cover his agitation by taking part in the dance with great energy. He avoided her eyes for he had seen a sour expression on her face. But when they met in the long chain he was surprised to feel his hand firmly pressed. She looked at him from under her brows for a moment quizzically until he smiled. Then, just as the chain was about to start again, she stood on tiptoe and whispered into his ear:

“West Briton!”

When the lancers were over Gabriel went away to a remote corner of the room where Freddy Malins' mother was sitting. She was a stout feeble old woman with white hair. Her voice had a catch in it like her son's and she stuttered slightly. She had been told that Freddy had come and that he was nearly all right. Gabriel asked her whether she had had a good crossing. She lived with her married daughter in Glasgow and came to Dublin on a visit once a year. She answered placidly that she had had a beautiful crossing and that the captain had been most attentive to her. She spoke also of the beautiful house her daughter kept in Glasgow, and of all the friends they had there. While her tongue rambled on Gabriel tried to banish from his mind all memory of the unpleasant incident with Miss Ivors. Of course the girl or woman, or whatever she was, was an enthusiast but there was a time for all things. Perhaps he ought not to have answered her like that. But she had no right to call him a West Briton before people, even in joke. She had tried to make him ridiculous before people, heckling him and staring at him with her rabbit's eyes.

He saw his wife making her way towards him through the waltzing couples. When she reached him she said into his ear:

"Gabriel, Aunt Kate wants to know won't you carve the goose as usual. Miss Daly will carve the ham and I'll do the pudding."

"All right," said Gabriel.

"She's sending in the younger ones first as soon as this waltz is over so that we'll have the table to ourselves."

"Were you dancing?" asked Gabriel.

"Of course I was. Didn't you see me? What row had you with Molly Ivors?"

"No row. Why? Did she say so?"

"Something like that. I'm trying to get that Mr D'Arcy to sing. He's full of conceit, I think."

“There was no row,” said Gabriel moodily, “only she wanted me to go for a trip to the west of Ireland and I said I wouldn’t.”

His wife clasped her hands excitedly and gave a little jump.

“O, do go, Gabriel,” she cried. “I’d love to see Galway again.”

“You can go if you like,” said Gabriel coldly.

She looked at him for a moment, then turned to Mrs Malins and said:

“There’s a nice husband for you, Mrs Malins.”

While she was threading her way back across the room Mrs Malins, without adverting to the interruption, went on to tell Gabriel what beautiful places there were in Scotland and beautiful scenery. Her son-in-law brought them every year to the lakes and they used to go fishing. Her son-in-law was a splendid fisher. One day he caught a beautiful big fish and the man in the hotel cooked it for their dinner.

Gabriel hardly heard what she said. Now that supper was coming near he began to think again about his speech and about the quotation. When he saw Freddy Malins coming across the room to visit his mother Gabriel left the chair free for him and retired into the embrasure of the window. The room had already cleared and from the back room came the clatter of plates and knives. Those who still remained in the drawing-room seemed tired of dancing and were conversing quietly in little groups. Gabriel’s warm trembling fingers tapped the cold pane of the window. How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone, first along by the river and then through the park! The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table!

He ran over the headings of his speech: Irish hospitality, sad memories, the Three Graces, Paris, the quotation from

Browning. He repeated to himself a phrase he had written in his review: "One feels that one is listening to a thought-tormented music." Miss Ivors had praised the review. Was she sincere? Had she really any life of her own behind all her propagandism? There had never been any ill-feeling between them until that night. It unnerved him to think that she would be at the supper-table, looking up at him while he spoke with her critical quizzing eyes. Perhaps she would not be sorry to see him fail in his speech. An idea came into his mind and gave him courage. He would say, alluding to Aunt Kate and Aunt Julia: "Ladies and Gentlemen, the generation which is now on the wane among us may have had its faults but for my part I think it had certain qualities of hospitality, of humour, of humanity, which the new and very serious and hypereducated generation that is growing up around us seems to me to lack." Very good: that was one for Miss Ivors. What did he care that his aunts were only two ignorant old women?

A murmur in the room attracted his attention. Mr Browne was advancing from the door, gallantly escorting Aunt Julia, who leaned upon his arm, smiling and hanging her head. An irregular musketry of applause escorted her also as far as the piano and then, as Mary Jane seated herself on the stool, and Aunt Julia, no longer smiling, half turned so as to pitch her voice fairly into the room, gradually ceased. Gabriel recognised the prelude. It was that of an old song of Aunt Julia's—*Arrayed for the Bridal*. Her voice, strong and clear in tone, attacked with great spirit the runs which embellish the air and though she sang very rapidly she did not miss even the smallest of the grace notes. To follow the voice, without looking at the singer's face, was to feel and share the excitement of swift and secure flight. Gabriel applauded loudly with all the others at the close of the song and loud applause was borne in from the invisible supper-table. It sounded so genuine that a little colour struggled into Aunt Julia's face as she bent to replace in the music-stand the old leather-bound songbook that had her initials on the cover.

Freddy Malins, who had listened with his head perched sideways to hear her better, was still applauding when everyone else had ceased and talking animatedly to his mother who nodded her head gravely and slowly in acquiescence. At last, when he could clap no more, he stood up suddenly and hurried across the room to Aunt Julia whose hand he seized and held in both his hands, shaking it when words failed him or the catch in his voice proved too much for him.

“I was just telling my mother,” he said, “I never heard you sing so well, never. No, I never heard your voice so good as it is tonight. Now! Would you believe that now? That’s the truth. Upon my word and honour that’s the truth. I never heard your voice sound so fresh and so ... so clear and fresh, never.”

Aunt Julia smiled broadly and murmured something about compliments as she released her hand from his grasp. Mr Browne extended his open hand towards her and said to those who were near him in the manner of a showman introducing a prodigy to an audience:

“Miss Julia Morkan, my latest discovery!”

He was laughing very heartily at this himself when Freddy Malins turned to him and said:

“Well, Browne, if you’re serious you might make a worse discovery. All I can say is I never heard her sing half so well as long as I am coming here. And that’s the honest truth.”

“Neither did I,” said Mr Browne. “I think her voice has greatly improved.”

Aunt Julia shrugged her shoulders and said with meek pride:

“Thirty years ago I hadn’t a bad voice as voices go.”

“I often told Julia,” said Aunt Kate emphatically, “that she was simply thrown away in that choir. But she never would be said by me.”

She turned as if to appeal to the good sense of the others against a refractory child while Aunt Julia gazed in front of her, a vague smile of reminiscence playing on her face.

“No,” continued Aunt Kate, “she wouldn’t be said or led by anyone, slaving there in that choir night and day, night and day. Six o’clock on Christmas morning! And all for what?”

“Well, isn’t it for the honour of God, Aunt Kate?” asked Mary Jane, twisting round on the piano-stool and smiling.

Aunt Kate turned fiercely on her niece and said:

“I know all about the honour of God, Mary Jane, but I think it’s not at all honourable for the pope to turn out the women out of the choirs that have slaved there all their lives and put little whipper-snappers of boys over their heads. I suppose it is for the good of the Church if the pope does it. But it’s not just, Mary Jane, and it’s not right.”

She had worked herself into a passion and would have continued in defence of her sister for it was a sore subject with her but Mary Jane, seeing that all the dancers had come back, intervened pacifically:

“Now, Aunt Kate, you’re giving scandal to Mr Browne who is of the other persuasion.”

Aunt Kate turned to Mr Browne, who was grinning at this allusion to his religion, and said hastily:

“O, I don’t question the pope’s being right. I’m only a stupid old woman and I wouldn’t presume to do such a thing. But there’s such a thing as common everyday politeness and gratitude. And if I were in Julia’s place I’d tell that Father Healey straight up to his face....”

“And besides, Aunt Kate,” said Mary Jane, “we really are all hungry and when we are hungry we are all very quarrelsome.”

“And when we are thirsty we are also quarrelsome,” added Mr Browne.

“So that we had better go to supper,” said Mary Jane, “and finish the discussion afterwards.”

On the landing outside the drawing-room Gabriel found his wife and Mary Jane trying to persuade Miss Ivors to stay for supper. But Miss Ivors, who had put on her hat and was buttoning her cloak, would not stay. She did not feel in the least hungry and she had already overstayed her time.

“But only for ten minutes, Molly,” said Mrs Conroy. “That won’t delay you.”

“To take a pick itself,” said Mary Jane, “after all your dancing.”

“I really couldn’t,” said Miss Ivors.

“I am afraid you didn’t enjoy yourself at all,” said Mary Jane hopelessly.

“Ever so much, I assure you,” said Miss Ivors, “but you really must let me run off now.”

“But how can you get home?” asked Mrs Conroy.

“O, it’s only two steps up the quay.”

Gabriel hesitated a moment and said:

“If you will allow me, Miss Ivors, I’ll see you home if you are really obliged to go.”

But Miss Ivors broke away from them.

“I won’t hear of it,” she cried. “For goodness’ sake go in to your suppers and don’t mind me. I’m quite well able to take care of myself.”

“Well, you’re the comical girl, Molly,” said Mrs Conroy frankly.

“*Beannacht libh*,” cried Miss Ivors, with a laugh, as she ran down the staircase.

Mary Jane gazed after her, a moody puzzled expression on her face, while Mrs Conroy leaned over the banisters to listen for the hall-door. Gabriel asked himself was he the cause of her abrupt departure. But she did not seem to be in ill humour: she had gone away laughing. He stared blankly down the staircase.

At the moment Aunt Kate came toddling out of the supper-room, almost wringing her hands in despair.

“Where is Gabriel?” she cried. “Where on earth is Gabriel? There’s everyone waiting in there, stage to let, and nobody to carve the goose!”

“Here I am, Aunt Kate!” cried Gabriel, with sudden animation, “ready to carve a flock of geese, if necessary.”

A fat brown goose lay at one end of the table and at the other end, on a bed of creased paper strewn with sprigs of parsley, lay a great ham, stripped of its outer skin and peppered over with crust crumbs, a neat paper frill round its shin and beside this was a round of spiced beef. Between these rival ends ran parallel lines of side-dishes: two little minsters of jelly, red and yellow; a shallow dish full of blocks of blancmange and red jam, a large green leaf-shaped dish with a stalk-shaped handle, on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds, a companion dish on which lay a solid rectangle of Smyrna figs, a dish of custard topped with grated nutmeg, a small bowl full of chocolates and sweets wrapped in gold and silver papers and a glass vase in which stood some tall celery stalks. In the centre of the table there stood, as sentries to a fruit-stand which upheld a pyramid of oranges and American apples, two squat old-fashioned decanters of cut glass, one containing port and the other dark sherry. On the closed square piano a pudding in a huge yellow dish lay in waiting and behind it were three squads of bottles of stout and ale and minerals, drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms, the first two black, with brown and red labels, the third and smallest squad white, with transverse green sashes.

Gabriel took his seat boldly at the head of the table and, having looked to the edge of the carver, plunged his fork firmly into the goose. He felt quite at ease now for he was an expert carver and liked nothing better than to find himself at the head of a well-laden table.

“Miss Furlong, what shall I send you?” he asked. “A wing or a slice of the breast?”

“Just a small slice of the breast.”

“Miss Higgins, what for you?”

“O, anything at all, Mr Conroy.”

While Gabriel and Miss Daly exchanged plates of goose and plates of ham and spiced beef Lily went from guest to guest with a dish of hot floury potatoes wrapped in a white napkin. This was Mary Jane’s idea and she had also suggested apple sauce for the goose but Aunt Kate had said that plain roast goose without any apple sauce had always been good enough for her and she hoped she might never eat worse. Mary Jane waited on her pupils and saw that they got the best slices and Aunt Kate and Aunt Julia opened and carried across from the piano bottles of stout and ale for the gentlemen and bottles of minerals for the ladies. There was a great deal of confusion and laughter and noise, the noise of orders and counter-orders, of knives and forks, of corks and glass-stoppers. Gabriel began to carve second helpings as soon as he had finished the first round without serving himself. Everyone protested loudly so that he compromised by taking a long draught of stout for he had found the carving hot work. Mary Jane settled down quietly to her supper but Aunt Kate and Aunt Julia were still toddling round the table, walking on each other’s heels, getting in each other’s way and giving each other unheeded orders. Mr Browne begged of them to sit down and eat their suppers and so did Gabriel but they said they were time enough so that, at last, Freddy Malins stood up and, capturing Aunt Kate, plumped her down on her chair amid general laughter.

When everyone had been well served Gabriel said, smiling:

“Now, if anyone wants a little more of what vulgar people call stuffing let him or her speak.”

A chorus of voices invited him to begin his own supper and Lily came forward with three potatoes which she had reserved for him.

“Very well,” said Gabriel amiably, as he took another preparatory draught, “kindly forget my existence, ladies and gentlemen, for a few minutes.”

He set to his supper and took no part in the conversation with which the table covered Lily’s removal of the plates. The subject of talk was the opera company which was then at the Theatre Royal. Mr Bartell D’Arcy, the tenor, a dark-complexioned young man with a smart moustache, praised very highly the leading contralto of the company but Miss Furlong thought she had a rather vulgar style of production. Freddy Malins said there was a negro chieftain singing in the second part of the Gaiety pantomime who had one of the finest tenor voices he had ever heard.

“Have you heard him?” he asked Mr Bartell D’Arcy across the table.

“No,” answered Mr Bartell D’Arcy carelessly.

“Because,” Freddy Malins explained, “now I’d be curious to hear your opinion of him. I think he has a grand voice.”

“It takes Teddy to find out the really good things,” said Mr Browne familiarly to the table.

“And why couldn’t he have a voice too?” asked Freddy Malins sharply. “Is it because he’s only a black?”

Nobody answered this question and Mary Jane led the table back to the legitimate opera. One of her pupils had given her a pass for *Mignon*. Of course it was very fine, she said, but it made her think of poor Georgina Burns. Mr Browne could go back farther still, to the old Italian companies that used to come to Dublin—Tietjens, Ilma de Murzka, Campanini, the great Trebelli, Giuglini, Ravelli, Aramburo. Those were the days, he said, when there was something like singing to be heard in Dublin. He told too of how the top gallery of the old Royal used to be packed night after night, of how one night an Italian tenor had sung five encores to *Let me like a Soldier fall*, introducing a high C every time, and of how the gallery boys would sometimes in their enthusiasm unyoke the horses from the carriage of

some great *prima donna* and pull her themselves through the streets to her hotel. Why did they never play the grand old operas now, he asked, *Dinorah*, *Lucrezia Borgia*? Because they could not get the voices to sing them: that was why.

“Oh, well,” said Mr Bartell D’Arcy, “I presume there are as good singers today as there were then.”

“Where are they?” asked Mr Browne defiantly.

“In London, Paris, Milan,” said Mr Bartell D’Arcy warmly. “I suppose Caruso, for example, is quite as good, if not better than any of the men you have mentioned.”

“Maybe so,” said Mr Browne. “But I may tell you I doubt it strongly.”

“O, I’d give anything to hear Caruso sing,” said Mary Jane.

“For me,” said Aunt Kate, who had been picking a bone, “there was only one tenor. To please me, I mean. But I suppose none of you ever heard of him.”

“Who was he, Miss Morkan?” asked Mr Bartell D’Arcy politely.

“His name,” said Aunt Kate, “was Parkinson. I heard him when he was in his prime and I think he had then the purest tenor voice that was ever put into a man’s throat.”

“Strange,” said Mr Bartell D’Arcy. “I never even heard of him.”

“Yes, yes, Miss Morkan is right,” said Mr Browne. “I remember hearing of old Parkinson but he’s too far back for me.”

“A beautiful pure sweet mellow English tenor,” said Aunt Kate with enthusiasm.

Gabriel having finished, the huge pudding was transferred to the table. The clatter of forks and spoons began again. Gabriel’s wife served out spoonfuls of the pudding and passed the plates down the table. Midway down they were held up by Mary Jane, who replenished them with raspberry or orange jelly or with blancmange and jam. The pudding

was of Aunt Julia's making and she received praises for it from all quarters. She herself said that it was not quite brown enough.

"Well, I hope, Miss Morkan," said Mr Browne, "that I'm brown enough for you because, you know, I'm all brown."

All the gentlemen, except Gabriel, ate some of the pudding out of compliment to Aunt Julia. As Gabriel never ate sweets the celery had been left for him. Freddy Malins also took a stalk of celery and ate it with his pudding. He had been told that celery was a capital thing for the blood and he was just then under doctor's care. Mrs Malins, who had been silent all through the supper, said that her son was going down to Mount Melleray in a week or so. The table then spoke of Mount Melleray, how bracing the air was down there, how hospitable the monks were and how they never asked for a penny-piece from their guests.

"And do you mean to say," asked Mr Browne incredulously, "that a chap can go down there and put up there as if it were a hotel and live on the fat of the land and then come away without paying anything?"

"O, most people give some donation to the monastery when they leave." said Mary Jane.

"I wish we had an institution like that in our Church," said Mr Browne candidly.

He was astonished to hear that the monks never spoke, got up at two in the morning and slept in their coffins. He asked what they did it for.

"That's the rule of the order," said Aunt Kate firmly.

"Yes, but why?" asked Mr Browne.

Aunt Kate repeated that it was the rule, that was all. Mr Browne still seemed not to understand. Freddy Malins explained to him, as best he could, that the monks were trying to make up for the sins committed by all the sinners in the outside world. The explanation was not very clear for Mr Browne grinned and said:

“I like that idea very much but wouldn’t a comfortable spring bed do them as well as a coffin?”

“The coffin,” said Mary Jane, “is to remind them of their last end.”

As the subject had grown lugubrious it was buried in a silence of the table during which Mrs Malins could be heard saying to her neighbour in an indistinct undertone:

“They are very good men, the monks, very pious men.”

The raisins and almonds and figs and apples and oranges and chocolates and sweets were now passed about the table and Aunt Julia invited all the guests to have either port or sherry. At first Mr Bartell D’Arcy refused to take either but one of his neighbours nudged him and whispered something to him upon which he allowed his glass to be filled. Gradually as the last glasses were being filled the conversation ceased. A pause followed, broken only by the noise of the wine and by unsettlings of chairs. The Misses Morkan, all three, looked down at the tablecloth. Someone coughed once or twice and then a few gentlemen patted the table gently as a signal for silence. The silence came and Gabriel pushed back his chair.

The patting at once grew louder in encouragement and then ceased altogether. Gabriel leaned his ten trembling fingers on the tablecloth and smiled nervously at the company. Meeting a row of upturned faces he raised his eyes to the chandelier. The piano was playing a waltz tune and he could hear the skirts sweeping against the drawing-room door. People, perhaps, were standing in the snow on the quay outside, gazing up at the lighted windows and listening to the waltz music. The air was pure there. In the distance lay the park where the trees were weighted with snow. The Wellington Monument wore a gleaming cap of snow that flashed westward over the white field of Fifteen Acres.

He began:

“Ladies and Gentlemen,

“It has fallen to my lot this evening, as in years past, to perform a very pleasing task but a task for which I am afraid my poor powers as a speaker are all too inadequate.”

“No, no!” said Mr Browne.

“But, however that may be, I can only ask you tonight to take the will for the deed and to lend me your attention for a few moments while I endeavour to express to you in words what my feelings are on this occasion.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it is not the first time that we have gathered together under this hospitable roof, around this hospitable board. It is not the first time that we have been the recipients—or perhaps, I had better say, the victims—of the hospitality of certain good ladies.”

He made a circle in the air with his arm and paused. Everyone laughed or smiled at Aunt Kate and Aunt Julia and Mary Jane who all turned crimson with pleasure. Gabriel went on more boldly:

“I feel more strongly with every recurring year that our country has no tradition which does it so much honour and which it should guard so jealously as that of its hospitality. It is a tradition that is unique as far as my experience goes (and I have visited not a few places abroad) among the modern nations. Some would say, perhaps, that with us it is rather a failing than anything to be boasted of. But granted even that, it is, to my mind, a princely failing, and one that I trust will long be cultivated among us. Of one thing, at least, I am sure. As long as this one roof shelters the good ladies aforesaid—and I wish from my heart it may do so for many and many a long year to come—the tradition of genuine warm-hearted courteous Irish hospitality, which our forefathers have handed down to us and which we in turn must hand down to our descendants, is still alive among us.”

A hearty murmur of assent ran round the table. It shot through Gabriel’s mind that Miss Ivors was not there and that she had gone away discourteously: and he said with confidence in himself:

“Ladies and Gentlemen,

“A new generation is growing up in our midst, a generation actuated by new ideas and new principles. It is serious and enthusiastic for these new ideas and its enthusiasm, even when it is misdirected, is, I believe, in the main sincere. But we are living in a sceptical and, if I may use the phrase, a thought-tormented age: and sometimes I fear that this new generation, educated or hypereducated as it is, will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day. Listening tonight to the names of all those great singers of the past it seemed to me, I must confess, that we were living in a less spacious age. Those days might, without exaggeration, be called spacious days: and if they are gone beyond recall let us hope, at least, that in gatherings such as this we shall still speak of them with pride and affection, still cherish in our hearts the memory of those dead and gone great ones whose fame the world will not willingly let die.”

“Hear, hear!” said Mr Browne loudly.

“But yet,” continued Gabriel, his voice falling into a softer inflection, “there are always in gatherings such as this sadder thoughts that will recur to our minds: thoughts of the past, of youth, of changes, of absent faces that we miss here tonight. Our path through life is strewn with many such sad memories: and were we to brood upon them always we could not find the heart to go on bravely with our work among the living. We have all of us living duties and living affections which claim, and rightly claim, our strenuous endeavours.

“Therefore, I will not linger on the past. I will not let any gloomy moralising intrude upon us here tonight. Here we are gathered together for a brief moment from the bustle and rush of our everyday routine. We are met here as friends, in the spirit of good-fellowship, as colleagues, also to a certain extent, in the true spirit of *camaraderie*, and as the guests of —what shall I call them?—the Three Graces of the Dublin musical world.”

The table burst into applause and laughter at this allusion. Aunt Julia vainly asked each of her neighbours in turn to tell her what Gabriel had said.

“He says we are the Three Graces, Aunt Julia,” said Mary Jane.

Aunt Julia did not understand but she looked up, smiling, at Gabriel, who continued in the same vein:

“Ladies and Gentlemen,

“I will not attempt to play tonight the part that Paris played on another occasion. I will not attempt to choose between them. The task would be an invidious one and one beyond my poor powers. For when I view them in turn, whether it be our chief hostess herself, whose good heart, whose too good heart, has become a byword with all who know her, or her sister, who seems to be gifted with perennial youth and whose singing must have been a surprise and a revelation to us all tonight, or, last but not least, when I consider our youngest hostess, talented, cheerful, hard-working and the best of nieces, I confess, Ladies and Gentlemen, that I do not know to which of them I should award the prize.”

Gabriel glanced down at his aunts and, seeing the large smile on Aunt Julia’s face and the tears which had risen to Aunt Kate’s eyes, hastened to his close. He raised his glass of port gallantly, while every member of the company fingered a glass expectantly, and said loudly:

“Let us toast them all three together. Let us drink to their health, wealth, long life, happiness and prosperity and may they long continue to hold the proud and self-won position which they hold in their profession and the position of honour and affection which they hold in our hearts.”

All the guests stood up, glass in hand, and turning towards the three seated ladies, sang in unison, with Mr Browne as leader:

For they are jolly gay fellows,
For they are jolly gay fellows,
For they are jolly gay fellows,
Which nobody can deny.

Aunt Kate was making frank use of her handkerchief and even Aunt Julia seemed moved. Freddy Malins beat time with his pudding-fork and the singers turned towards one another, as if in melodious conference, while they sang with emphasis:

Unless he tells a lie,
Unless he tells a lie.

Then, turning once more towards their hostesses, they sang:

For they are jolly gay fellows,
For they are jolly gay fellows,
For they are jolly gay fellows,
Which nobody can deny.

The acclamation which followed was taken up beyond the door of the supper-room by many of the other guests and renewed time after time, Freddy Malins acting as officer with his fork on high.

The piercing morning air came into the hall where they were standing so that Aunt Kate said:

“Close the door, somebody. Mrs Malins will get her death of cold.”

“Browne is out there, Aunt Kate,” said Mary Jane.

“Browne is everywhere,” said Aunt Kate, lowering her voice.

Mary Jane laughed at her tone.

“Really,” she said archly, “he is very attentive.”

“He has been laid on here like the gas,” said Aunt Kate in the same tone, “all during the Christmas.”

She laughed herself this time good-humouredly and then added quickly:

“But tell him to come in, Mary Jane, and close the door. I hope to goodness he didn’t hear me.”

At that moment the hall-door was opened and Mr Browne came in from the doorstep, laughing as if his heart would break. He was dressed in a long green overcoat with mock astrakhan cuffs and collar and wore on his head an oval fur cap. He pointed down the snow-covered quay from where the sound of shrill prolonged whistling was borne in.

“Teddy will have all the cabs in Dublin out,” he said.

Gabriel advanced from the little pantry behind the office, struggling into his overcoat and, looking round the hall, said:

“Gretta not down yet?”

“She’s getting on her things, Gabriel,” said Aunt Kate.

“Who’s playing up there?” asked Gabriel.

“Nobody. They’re all gone.”

“O no, Aunt Kate,” said Mary Jane. “Bartell D’Arcy and Miss O’Callaghan aren’t gone yet.”

“Someone is fooling at the piano anyhow,” said Gabriel.

Mary Jane glanced at Gabriel and Mr Browne and said with a shiver:

“It makes me feel cold to look at you two gentlemen muffled up like that. I wouldn’t like to face your journey home at this hour.”

“I’d like nothing better this minute,” said Mr Browne stoutly, “than a rattling fine walk in the country or a fast drive with a good spanking goer between the shafts.”

“We used to have a very good horse and trap at home,” said Aunt Julia sadly.

“The never-to-be-forgotten Johnny,” said Mary Jane, laughing.

Aunt Kate and Gabriel laughed too.

“Why, what was wonderful about Johnny?” asked Mr Browne.

“The late lamented Patrick Morkan, our grandfather, that is,” explained Gabriel, “commonly known in his later years as the old gentleman, was a glue-boiler.”

“O now, Gabriel,” said Aunt Kate, laughing, “he had a starch mill.”

“Well, glue or starch,” said Gabriel, “the old gentleman had a horse by the name of Johnny. And Johnny used to work in the old gentleman’s mill, walking round and round in order to drive the mill. That was all very well; but now comes the tragic part about Johnny. One fine day the old gentleman thought he’d like to drive out with the quality to a military review in the park.”

“The Lord have mercy on his soul,” said Aunt Kate compassionately.

“Amen,” said Gabriel. “So the old gentleman, as I said, harnessed Johnny and put on his very best tall hat and his very best stock collar and drove out in grand style from his ancestral mansion somewhere near Back Lane, I think.”

Everyone laughed, even Mrs Malins, at Gabriel’s manner and Aunt Kate said:

“O now, Gabriel, he didn’t live in Back Lane, really. Only the mill was there.”

“Out from the mansion of his forefathers,” continued Gabriel, “he drove with Johnny. And everything went on beautifully until Johnny came in sight of King Billy’s statue: and whether he fell in love with the horse King Billy sits on or whether he thought he was back again in the mill, anyhow he began to walk round the statue.”

Gabriel paced in a circle round the hall in his goloshes amid the laughter of the others.

“Round and round he went,” said Gabriel, “and the old gentleman, who was a very pompous old gentleman, was

highly indignant. ‘Go on, sir! What do you mean, sir? Johnny! Johnny! Most extraordinary conduct! Can’t understand the horse!’”

The peal of laughter which followed Gabriel’s imitation of the incident was interrupted by a resounding knock at the hall door. Mary Jane ran to open it and let in Freddy Malins. Freddy Malins, with his hat well back on his head and his shoulders humped with cold, was puffing and steaming after his exertions.

“I could only get one cab,” he said.

“O, we’ll find another along the quay,” said Gabriel.

“Yes,” said Aunt Kate. “Better not keep Mrs Malins standing in the draught.”

Mrs Malins was helped down the front steps by her son and Mr Browne and, after many manœuvres, hoisted into the cab. Freddy Malins clambered in after her and spent a long time settling her on the seat, Mr Browne helping him with advice. At last she was settled comfortably and Freddy Malins invited Mr Browne into the cab. There was a good deal of confused talk, and then Mr Browne got into the cab. The cabman settled his rug over his knees, and bent down for the address. The confusion grew greater and the cabman was directed differently by Freddy Malins and Mr Browne, each of whom had his head out through a window of the cab. The difficulty was to know where to drop Mr Browne along the route, and Aunt Kate, Aunt Julia and Mary Jane helped the discussion from the doorstep with cross-directions and contradictions and abundance of laughter. As for Freddy Malins he was speechless with laughter. He popped his head in and out of the window every moment to the great danger of his hat, and told his mother how the discussion was progressing, till at last Mr Browne shouted to the bewildered cabman above the din of everybody’s laughter:

“Do you know Trinity College?”

“Yes, sir,” said the cabman.

“Well, drive bang up against Trinity College gates,” said Mr Browne, “and then we’ll tell you where to go. You understand now?”

“Yes, sir,” said the cabman.

“Make like a bird for Trinity College.”

“Right, sir,” said the cabman.

The horse was whipped up and the cab rattled off along the quay amid a chorus of laughter and adieus.

Gabriel had not gone to the door with the others. He was in a dark part of the hall gazing up the staircase. A woman was standing near the top of the first flight, in the shadow also. He could not see her face but he could see the terracotta and salmon-pink panels of her skirt which the shadow made appear black and white. It was his wife. She was leaning on the banisters, listening to something. Gabriel was surprised at her stillness and strained his ear to listen also. But he could hear little save the noise of laughter and dispute on the front steps, a few chords struck on the piano and a few notes of a man’s voice singing.

He stood still in the gloom of the hall, trying to catch the air that the voice was singing and gazing up at his wife. There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something. He asked himself what is a woman standing on the stairs in the shadow, listening to distant music, a symbol of. If he were a painter he would paint her in that attitude. Her blue felt hat would show off the bronze of her hair against the darkness and the dark panels of her skirt would show off the light ones. *Distant Music* he would call the picture if he were a painter.

The hall-door was closed; and Aunt Kate, Aunt Julia and Mary Jane came down the hall, still laughing.

“Well, isn’t Freddy terrible?” said Mary Jane. “He’s really terrible.”

Gabriel said nothing but pointed up the stairs towards where his wife was standing. Now that the hall-door was

closed the voice and the piano could be heard more clearly. Gabriel held up his hand for them to be silent. The song seemed to be in the old Irish tonality and the singer seemed uncertain both of his words and of his voice. The voice, made plaintive by distance and by the singer's hoarseness, faintly illuminated the cadence of the air with words expressing grief:

O, the rain falls on my heavy locks
And the dew wets my skin,
My babe lies cold....

"O," exclaimed Mary Jane. "It's Bartell D'Arcy singing and he wouldn't sing all the night. O, I'll get him to sing a song before he goes."

"O do, Mary Jane," said Aunt Kate.

Mary Jane brushed past the others and ran to the staircase, but before she reached it the singing stopped and the piano was closed abruptly.

"O, what a pity!" she cried. "Is he coming down, Gretta?"

Gabriel heard his wife answer yes and saw her come down towards them. A few steps behind her were Mr Bartell D'Arcy and Miss O'Callaghan.

"O, Mr D'Arcy," cried Mary Jane, "it's downright mean of you to break off like that when we were all in raptures listening to you."

"I have been at him all the evening," said Miss O'Callaghan, "and Mrs Conroy too and he told us he had a dreadful cold and couldn't sing."

"O, Mr D'Arcy," said Aunt Kate, "now that was a great fib to tell."

"Can't you see that I'm as hoarse as a crow?" said Mr D'Arcy roughly.

He went into the pantry hastily and put on his overcoat. The others, taken aback by his rude speech, could find nothing to say. Aunt Kate wrinkled her brows and made

signs to the others to drop the subject. Mr D'Arcy stood swathing his neck carefully and frowning.

"It's the weather," said Aunt Julia, after a pause.

"Yes, everybody has colds," said Aunt Kate readily, "everybody."

"They say," said Mary Jane, "we haven't had snow like it for thirty years; and I read this morning in the newspapers that the snow is general all over Ireland."

"I love the look of snow," said Aunt Julia sadly.

"So do I," said Miss O'Callaghan. "I think Christmas is never really Christmas unless we have the snow on the ground."

"But poor Mr D'Arcy doesn't like the snow," said Aunt Kate, smiling.

Mr D'Arcy came from the pantry, fully swathed and buttoned, and in a repentant tone told them the history of his cold. Everyone gave him advice and said it was a great pity and urged him to be very careful of his throat in the night air. Gabriel watched his wife, who did not join in the conversation. She was standing right under the dusty fanlight and the flame of the gas lit up the rich bronze of her hair, which he had seen her drying at the fire a few days before. She was in the same attitude and seemed unaware of the talk about her. At last she turned towards them and Gabriel saw that there was colour on her cheeks and that her eyes were shining. A sudden tide of joy went leaping out of his heart.

"Mr D'Arcy," she said, "what is the name of that song you were singing?"

"It's called *The Lass of Aughrim*," said Mr D'Arcy, "but I couldn't remember it properly. Why? Do you know it?"

"*The Lass of Aughrim*," she repeated. "I couldn't think of the name."

"It's a very nice air," said Mary Jane. "I'm sorry you were not in voice tonight."

“Now, Mary Jane,” said Aunt Kate, “don’t annoy Mr D’Arcy. I won’t have him annoyed.”

Seeing that all were ready to start she shepherded them to the door, where good-night was said:

“Well, good-night, Aunt Kate, and thanks for the pleasant evening.”

“Good-night, Gabriel. Good-night, Gretta!”

“Good-night, Aunt Kate, and thanks ever so much. Good-night, Aunt Julia.”

“O, good-night, Gretta, I didn’t see you.”

“Good-night, Mr D’Arcy. Good-night, Miss O’Callaghan.”

“Good-night, Miss Morkan.”

“Good-night, again.”

“Good-night, all. Safe home.”

“Good-night. Good-night.”

The morning was still dark. A dull yellow light brooded over the houses and the river; and the sky seemed to be descending. It was slushy underfoot; and only streaks and patches of snow lay on the roofs, on the parapets of the quay and on the area railings. The lamps were still burning redly in the murky air and, across the river, the palace of the Four Courts stood out menacingly against the heavy sky.

She was walking on before him with Mr Bartell D’Arcy, her shoes in a brown parcel tucked under one arm and her hands holding her skirt up from the slush. She had no longer any grace of attitude but Gabriel’s eyes were still bright with happiness. The blood went bounding along his veins; and the thoughts went rioting through his brain, proud, joyful, tender, valorous.

She was walking on before him so lightly and so erect that he longed to run after her noiselessly, catch her by the shoulders and say something foolish and affectionate into her ear. She seemed to him so frail that he longed to defend her against something and then to be alone with her.

Moments of their secret life together burst like stars upon his memory. A heliotrope envelope was lying beside his breakfast-cup and he was caressing it with his hand. Birds were twittering in the ivy and the sunny web of the curtain was shimmering along the floor: he could not eat for happiness. They were standing on the crowded platform and he was placing a ticket inside the warm palm of her glove. He was standing with her in the cold, looking in through a grated window at a man making bottles in a roaring furnace. It was very cold. Her face, fragrant in the cold air, was quite close to his; and suddenly he called out to the man at the furnace:

“Is the fire hot, sir?”

But the man could not hear with the noise of the furnace. It was just as well. He might have answered rudely.

A wave of yet more tender joy escaped from his heart and went coursing in warm flood along his arteries. Like the tender fire of stars moments of their life together, that no one knew of or would ever know of, broke upon and illumined his memory. He longed to recall to her those moments, to make her forget the years of their dull existence together and remember only their moments of ecstasy. For the years, he felt, had not quenched his soul or hers. Their children, his writing, her household cares had not quenched all their souls' tender fire. In one letter that he had written to her then he had said: “Why is it that words like these seem to me so dull and cold? Is it because there is no word tender enough to be your name?”

Like distant music these words that he had written years before were borne towards him from the past. He longed to be alone with her. When the others had gone away, when he and she were in their room in the hotel, then they would be alone together. He would call her softly:

“Gretta!”

Perhaps she would not hear at once: she would be undressing. Then something in his voice would strike her. She would turn and look at him....

At the corner of Winetavern Street they met a cab. He was glad of its rattling noise as it saved him from conversation. She was looking out of the window and seemed tired. The others spoke only a few words, pointing out some building or street. The horse galloped along wearily under the murky morning sky, dragging his old rattling box after his heels, and Gabriel was again in a cab with her, galloping to catch the boat, galloping to their honeymoon.

As the cab drove across O'Connell Bridge Miss O'Callaghan said:

"They say you never cross O'Connell Bridge without seeing a white horse."

"I see a white man this time," said Gabriel.

"Where?" asked Mr Bartell D'Arcy.

Gabriel pointed to the statue, on which lay patches of snow. Then he nodded familiarly to it and waved his hand.

"Good-night, Dan," he said gaily.

When the cab drew up before the hotel, Gabriel jumped out and, in spite of Mr Bartell D'Arcy's protest, paid the driver. He gave the man a shilling over his fare. The man saluted and said:

"A prosperous New Year to you, sir."

"The same to you," said Gabriel cordially.

She leaned for a moment on his arm in getting out of the cab and while standing at the curbstone, bidding the others good-night. She leaned lightly on his arm, as lightly as when she had danced with him a few hours before. He had felt proud and happy then, happy that she was his, proud of her grace and wifely carriage. But now, after the kindling again of so many memories, the first touch of her body, musical and strange and perfumed, sent through him a keen pang of lust. Under cover of her silence he pressed her arm closely to

his side; and, as they stood at the hotel door, he felt that they had escaped from their lives and duties, escaped from home and friends and run away together with wild and radiant hearts to a new adventure.

An old man was dozing in a great hooded chair in the hall. He lit a candle in the office and went before them to the stairs. They followed him in silence, their feet falling in soft thuds on the thickly carpeted stairs. She mounted the stairs behind the porter, her head bowed in the ascent, her frail shoulders curved as with a burden, her skirt girt tightly about her. He could have flung his arms about her hips and held her still, for his arms were trembling with desire to seize her and only the stress of his nails against the palms of his hands held the wild impulse of his body in check. The porter halted on the stairs to settle his guttering candle. They halted too on the steps below him. In the silence Gabriel could hear the falling of the molten wax into the tray and the thumping of his own heart against his ribs.

The porter led them along a corridor and opened a door. Then he set his unstable candle down on a toilet-table and asked at what hour they were to be called in the morning.

“Eight,” said Gabriel.

The porter pointed to the tap of the electric-light and began a muttered apology but Gabriel cut him short.

“We don’t want any light. We have light enough from the street. And I say,” he added, pointing to the candle, “you might remove that handsome article, like a good man.”

The porter took up his candle again, but slowly for he was surprised by such a novel idea. Then he mumbled good-night and went out. Gabriel shot the lock to.

A ghostly light from the street lamp lay in a long shaft from one window to the door. Gabriel threw his overcoat and hat on a couch and crossed the room towards the window. He looked down into the street in order that his emotion might calm a little. Then he turned and leaned against a chest of drawers with his back to the light. She had taken off

her hat and cloak and was standing before a large swinging mirror, unhooking her waist. Gabriel paused for a few moments, watching her, and then said:

“Gretta!”

She turned away from the mirror slowly and walked along the shaft of light towards him. Her face looked so serious and weary that the words would not pass Gabriel’s lips. No, it was not the moment yet.

“You looked tired,” he said.

“I am a little,” she answered.

“You don’t feel ill or weak?”

“No, tired: that’s all.”

She went on to the window and stood there, looking out. Gabriel waited again and then, fearing that diffidence was about to conquer him, he said abruptly:

“By the way, Gretta!”

“What is it?”

“You know that poor fellow Malins?” he said quickly.

“Yes. What about him?”

“Well, poor fellow, he’s a decent sort of chap after all,” continued Gabriel in a false voice. “He gave me back that sovereign I lent him, and I didn’t expect it, really. It’s a pity he wouldn’t keep away from that Browne, because he’s not a bad fellow, really.”

He was trembling now with annoyance. Why did she seem so abstracted? He did not know how he could begin. Was she annoyed, too, about something? If she would only turn to him or come to him of her own accord! To take her as she was would be brutal. No, he must see some ardour in her eyes first. He longed to be master of her strange mood.

“When did you lend him the pound?” she asked, after a pause.

Gabriel strove to restrain himself from breaking out into brutal language about the sottish Malins and his pound. He

longed to cry to her from his soul, to crush her body against his, to overmaster her. But he said:

“O, at Christmas, when he opened that little Christmas-card shop in Henry Street.”

He was in such a fever of rage and desire that he did not hear her come from the window. She stood before him for an instant, looking at him strangely. Then, suddenly raising herself on tiptoe and resting her hands lightly on his shoulders, she kissed him.

“You are a very generous person, Gabriel,” she said.

Gabriel, trembling with delight at her sudden kiss and at the quaintness of her phrase, put his hands on her hair and began smoothing it back, scarcely touching it with his fingers. The washing had made it fine and brilliant. His heart was brimming over with happiness. Just when he was wishing for it she had come to him of her own accord. Perhaps her thoughts had been running with his. Perhaps she had felt the impetuous desire that was in him, and then the yielding mood had come upon her. Now that she had fallen to him so easily, he wondered why he had been so diffident.

He stood, holding her head between his hands. Then, slipping one arm swiftly about her body and drawing her towards him, he said softly:

“Gretta, dear, what are you thinking about?”

She did not answer nor yield wholly to his arm. He said again, softly:

“Tell me what it is, Gretta. I think I know what is the matter. Do I know?”

She did not answer at once. Then she said in an outburst of tears:

“O, I am thinking about that song, *The Lass of Aughrim*.”

She broke loose from him and ran to the bed and, throwing her arms across the bed-rail, hid her face. Gabriel stood stock-still for a moment in astonishment and then

followed her. As he passed in the way of the cheval-glass he caught sight of himself in full length, his broad, well-filled shirt-front, the face whose expression always puzzled him when he saw it in a mirror and his glimmering gilt-rimmed eyeglasses. He halted a few paces from her and said:

“What about the song? Why does that make you cry?”

She raised her head from her arms and dried her eyes with the back of her hand like a child. A kinder note than he had intended went into his voice.

“Why, Gretta?” he asked.

“I am thinking about a person long ago who used to sing that song.”

“And who was the person long ago?” asked Gabriel, smiling.

“It was a person I used to know in Galway when I was living with my grandmother,” she said.

The smile passed away from Gabriel’s face. A dull anger began to gather again at the back of his mind and the dull fires of his lust began to glow angrily in his veins.

“Someone you were in love with?” he asked ironically.

“It was a young boy I used to know,” she answered, “named Michael Furey. He used to sing that song, *The Lass of Aughrim*. He was very delicate.”

Gabriel was silent. He did not wish her to think that he was interested in this delicate boy.

“I can see him so plainly,” she said after a moment. “Such eyes as he had: big, dark eyes! And such an expression in them—an expression!”

“O then, you were in love with him?” said Gabriel.

“I used to go out walking with him,” she said, “when I was in Galway.”

A thought flew across Gabriel’s mind.

“Perhaps that was why you wanted to go to Galway with that Ivors girl?” he said coldly.

She looked at him and asked in surprise:

“What for?”

Her eyes made Gabriel feel awkward. He shrugged his shoulders and said:

“How do I know? To see him, perhaps.”

She looked away from him along the shaft of light towards the window in silence.

“He is dead,” she said at length. “He died when he was only seventeen. Isn’t it a terrible thing to die so young as that?”

“What was he?” asked Gabriel, still ironically.

“He was in the gasworks,” she said.

Gabriel felt humiliated by the failure of his irony and by the evocation of this figure from the dead, a boy in the gasworks. While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous, well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror. Instinctively he turned his back more to the light lest she might see the shame that burned upon his forehead.

He tried to keep up his tone of cold interrogation, but his voice when he spoke was humble and indifferent.

“I suppose you were in love with this Michael Furey, Gretta,” he said.

“I was great with him at that time,” she said.

Her voice was veiled and sad. Gabriel, feeling now how vain it would be to try to lead her whither he had purposed, caressed one of her hands and said, also sadly:

“And what did he die of so young, Gretta? Consumption, was it?”

“I think he died for me,” she answered.

A vague terror seized Gabriel at this answer as if, at that hour when he had hoped to triumph, some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world. But he shook himself free of it with an effort of reason and continued to caress her hand. He did not question her again for he felt that she would tell him of herself. Her hand was warm and moist: it did not respond to his touch but he continued to caress it just as he had caressed her first letter to him that spring morning.

“It was in the winter,” she said, “about the beginning of the winter when I was going to leave my grandmother’s and come up here to the convent. And he was ill at the time in his lodgings in Galway and wouldn’t be let out and his people in Oughterard were written to. He was in decline, they said, or something like that. I never knew rightly.”

She paused for a moment and sighed.

“Poor fellow,” she said. “He was very fond of me and he was such a gentle boy. We used to go out together, walking, you know, Gabriel, like the way they do in the country. He was going to study singing only for his health. He had a very good voice, poor Michael Furey.”

“Well; and then?” asked Gabriel.

“And then when it came to the time for me to leave Galway and come up to the convent he was much worse and I wouldn’t be let see him so I wrote him a letter saying I was going up to Dublin and would be back in the summer and hoping he would be better then.”

She paused for a moment to get her voice under control and then went on:

“Then the night before I left I was in my grandmother’s house in Nuns’ Island, packing up, and I heard gravel thrown up against the window. The window was so wet I couldn’t see so I ran downstairs as I was and slipped out the back into the

garden and there was the poor fellow at the end of the garden, shivering.”

“And did you not tell him to go back?” asked Gabriel.

“I implored of him to go home at once and told him he would get his death in the rain. But he said he did not want to live. I can see his eyes as well as well! He was standing at the end of the wall where there was a tree.”

“And did he go home?” asked Gabriel.

“Yes, he went home. And when I was only a week in the convent he died and he was buried in Oughterard where his people came from. O, the day I heard that, that he was dead!”

She stopped, choking with sobs and, overcome by emotion, flung herself face downward on the bed, sobbing in the quilt. Gabriel held her hand for a moment longer, irresolutely, and then, shy of intruding on her grief, let it fall gently and walked quietly to the window.

She was fast asleep.

Gabriel, leaning on his elbow, looked for a few moments unresentfully on her tangled hair and half-open mouth, listening to her deep-drawn breath. So she had had that romance in her life: a man had died for her sake. It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life. He watched her while she slept as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife. His curious eyes rested long upon her face and on her hair: and, as he thought of what she must have been then, in that time of her first girlish beauty, a strange, friendly pity for her entered his soul. He did not like to say even to himself that her face was no longer beautiful but he knew that it was no longer the face for which Michael Furey had braved death.

Perhaps she had not told him all the story. His eyes moved to the chair over which she had thrown some of her clothes. A petticoat string dangled to the floor. One boot stood upright, its limp upper fallen down: the fellow of it lay upon

its side. He wondered at his riot of emotions of an hour before. From what had it proceeded? From his aunt's supper, from his own foolish speech, from the wine and dancing, the merry-making when saying good-night in the hall, the pleasure of the walk along the river in the snow. Poor Aunt Julia! She, too, would soon be a shade with the shade of Patrick Morkan and his horse. He had caught that haggard look upon her face for a moment when she was singing *Arrayed for the Bridal*. Soon, perhaps, he would be sitting in that same drawing-room, dressed in black, his silk hat on his knees. The blinds would be drawn down and Aunt Kate would be sitting beside him, crying and blowing her nose and telling him how Julia had died. He would cast about in his mind for some words that might console her, and would find only lame and useless ones. Yes, yes: that would happen very soon.

The air of the room chilled his shoulders. He stretched himself cautiously along under the sheets and lay down beside his wife. One by one they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dimly with age. He thought of how she who lay beside him had looked in her heart for so many years that image of her lover's eyes when he had told her that he did not wish to live.

Generous tears filled Gabriel's eyes. He had never felt like that himself towards any woman but he knew that such a feeling must be love. The tears gathered more thickly in his eyes and in the partial darkness he imagined he saw the form of a young man standing under a dripping tree. Other forms were near. His soul had approached that region where dwell the vast hosts of the dead. He was conscious of, but could not apprehend, their wayward and flickering existence. His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling.

A few light taps upon the pane made him turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

Hello, 911?

By Samantha Irby

Hello, 911? There's a middle-aged dad standing next to the yogurts in Trader Joe's actively strumming a guitar and trying to make meaningful eye contact with every harried person trying to get a box of Pastry Pups on a dismal Saturday afternoon, and everyone other than me seems to be maintaining a relaxed and happy exterior despite the fact that this is terribly embarrassing and he is singing Bob Marley. Please get me out of here. All I wanted was a bag of reasonably priced shelled nuts sold to me by a relatively attractive retired shoe salesman in a faded Hawaiian shirt. Is that really too much to fucking ask?

Hello, 911? I am the first person at this party.

Hello, 911? I've been lying awake for an hour each night for the past eight months, reliving a two-second awkward experience I had in front of a casual acquaintance three years ago.

Hello, 911? Is some invisible force going to push me down this flight of stairs?

Hello, 911? I was watching that show "Greenleaf," on the Oprah network, and these two characters were riding in a car and having a passionate conversation, and dude turned to lady and I was gripped with what can only be described as stomach-churning panic as my entire body clenched in anticipation of the car jumping the curb and crashing through the plate-glass window of a laundromat, because the dude took his eyes entirely off the road for at least twelve

seconds. When was the first movie made? 1888? And, after all those years of practice, people still can't film a realistic conversation in a moving car? The driver's eyes need to be on the Toyota in front of him, Oprah Winfrey. I'm going to have a fucking stroke.

Hello, 911? This takeout place doesn't have online ordering.

Hello, 911? Which line is moving faster, the one I'm in or that other line, and do you think I should switch? Does it matter? It's not like I have anywhere to be, but just standing here makes me feel like my organs are going to burst out of my skin. I can't prove it, but I think this line is moving incrementally slower. Why does that make me feel like I'm losing a race? Should I just stay where I am, or do you think it's O.K. if I ease over to Lane 8 in a way that silently telegraphs to the checkout girl, "I'm not mad, just having an inexplicable panic attack, please ignore me"? If I move to that other line, will the Target gods smite me by throwing a clearance-rack shirt with a missing price tag into that lady's cart? Why did I even come here?

Hello, 911? What if I fall asleep on this bus?

Hello, 911? That lady caught me taking a selfie and walked away before I could convincingly pretend to be holding my phone at this angle for some other reason.

Hello, 911? It's eleven-thirty at night and I've got an important meeting (LOL) tomorrow morning at nine-thirty. I set my alarm for eight. That should give me plenty of time, right? Google Maps says it's probably going to take seventeen minutes to get there from my hotel, barring any major traffic, but what if the Lyft driver is late? Alternatively, what if the doorman can't find a cab? I'm planning to go down at nine. Does that leave enough time for me to get eggs from room service? But they run late sometimes, right? Should I risk it? It's midnight now and I think I'll be hungry in the morning,

but what if I'm not? Then I'm stuck waiting for eggs I don't want. Maybe I should set my alarm for eight-thirty. I definitely want to sleep off this Xanax, but does that give me enough time to take an actual crevice-cleaning, hair-washing shower? Should I be honest about who I really am as a person and factor in twenty minutes of bedside-sitting-and-staring-into-space time? It's twelve-thirty, but to be safe I'm going to set the alarm for seven-thirty. Should I attempt to impress these people with eye makeup, or do they not care because they are serious businesspersons? Let me just go ahead and set my phone for 6:55, so I have plenty of time to contour and blend (i.e., totally fuck it up and wipe it all off while crying). Since I'm up, it wouldn't hurt to iron my pants, just in case I can't hide my legs under a table. Why does everyone want to "meet" on couches these days? An electric chair would be more relaxing. Wait a minute—it's already one o'clock?!

Hello, 911? My friend just left me a voice mail.

Hello, 911? My brain is a prison, and anxiety is the warden. I am besieged by an undeniable urge to peel off my skin like the layers of an onion until death claims me and I find relief in its cool embrace, and I know it took me a long time to finally call and I'm not a hundred per cent sure that this qualifies as an emergency, but I think I've reached my limit and I might need some help.

O.K., sure, I'll hold. ♦

The Day Before the Revolution

by Ursula Le Guin

THE SPEAKER'S VOICE was as loud as empty beer-trucks in a stone street, and the people at the meeting were jammed up close, cobblestones, that great voice booming over them. Taviri was somewhere on the other side of the hall. She had to get to him. She wormed and pushed her way among the dark-clothed, close-packed people. She did not hear the words, nor see the faces: only the booming, and the bodies pressed one behind the other. She could not see Taviri, she was too short. A broad black-vested belly and chest loomed up, blocking her way. She must get through to Taviri. Sweating, she jabbed fiercely with her fist. It was like hitting stone, he did not move at all, but the huge lungs let out right over her head a prodigious noise, a bellow. She cowered. Then she understood that the bellow had not been at her. Others were shouting. The speaker had said something, something fine about taxes or shadows. Thrilled, she joined the shouting—"Yes! Yes!"—and shoving on, came out easily into the open expanse of the Regimental Drill Field in Parheo. Overhead the evening sky lay deep and colorless, and all around her nodded the tall weeds with dry, white, close-floreted heads. She had never known what they were called. The flowers nodded above her head, swaying in the wind that always blew across the fields in the dusk. She ran among them, and they whipped lithe aside and stood up again swaying, silent. Taviri stood among the tall weeds in his good suit, the dark grey one that made him look like a

professor or a playactor, harshly elegant. He did not look happy, but he was laughing, and saying something to her. The sound of his voice made her cry, and she reached out to catch hold of his hand, but she did not stop, quite. She could not stop. “Oh, Taviri,” she said, “it’s just on there!” The queer sweet smell of the white weeds was heavy as she went on. There were thorns, tangles underfoot, there were slopes, pits. She feared to fall, to fall, she stopped.

Sun, bright morning-glare, straight in the eyes, relentless. She had forgotten to pull the blind last night. She turned her back on the sun, but the right side wasn’t comfortable. No use. Day. She sighed twice, sat up, got her legs over the edge of the bed, and sat hunched in her nightdress looking down at her feet.

The toes, compressed by a lifetime of cheap shoes, were almost square where they touched each other, and bulged out above in corns; the nails were discolored and shapeless. Between the knob-like anklebones ran fine, dry wrinkles. The brief little plain at the base of the toes had kept its delicacy, but the skin was the color of mud, and knotted veins crossed the instep. Disgusting. Sad, depressing. Mean. Pitiful. She tried on all the words, and they all fit, like hideous little hats. Hideous: yes, that one too. To look at oneself and find it hideous, what a job! But then, when she hadn’t been hideous, had she sat around and stared at herself like this? Not much! A proper body’s not an object, not an implement, not a belonging to be admired, it’s just you, yourself. Only when it’s no longer you, but yours, a thing owned, do you worry about it— Is it in good shape? Will it do? Will it last?

“Who cares?” said Laia fiercely, and stood up.

It made her giddy to stand up suddenly. She had to put out her hand to the bed-table, for she dreaded falling. At that she thought of reaching out to Taviri, in the dream.

What had he said? She could not remember. She was not sure if she had even touched his hand. She frowned, trying to force memory. It had been so long since she had dreamed about Taviri; and now not even to remember what he had said!

It was gone, it was gone. She stood there hunched in her nightdress, frowning, one hand on the bed-table. How long was it since she had thought of him—let alone dreamed of him—even thought of him, as “Taviri”? How long since she had said his name?

Asieo said. When Asieo and I were in prison in the North. Before I met Asieo. Asieo’s theory of reciprocity. Oh yes, she talked about him, talked about him too much no doubt, maundered, dragged him in. But as “Asieo,” the last name, the public man. The private man was gone, utterly gone. There were so few left who had even known him. They had all used to be in jail. One laughed about it in those days, all the friends in all the jails. But they weren’t even there, these days. They were in the prison cemeteries. Or in the common graves.

“Oh, oh my dear,” Laia said out loud, and she sank down onto the bed again because she could not stand up under the remembrance of those first weeks in the Fort, in the cell, those first weeks of the nine years in the Fort in Drio, in the cell, those first weeks after they told her that Asieo had been killed in the fighting in Capitol Square and had been buried with the Fourteen Hundred in the lime-ditches behind Oring Gate. In the cell. Her hands fell into the old position on her lap, the left clenched and locked inside the grip of the right, the right thumb working back and forth a little pressing and rubbing on the knuckle of the left first finger. Hours, days, nights. She had thought of them all, each one, each one of the Fourteen Hundred, how they lay, how the quicklime worked on the flesh, how the bones touched in

the burning dark. Who touched him? How did the slender bones of the hand lie now? Hours, years.

“Taviri, I have never forgotten you!” she whispered, and the stupidity of it brought her back to morning light and the rumpled bed. Of course she hadn’t forgotten him. These things go without saying between husband and wife. There were her ugly old feet flat on the floor again, just as before. She had got nowhere at all, she had gone in a circle. She stood up with a grunt of effort and disapproval, and went to the closet for her dressing gown.

The young people went about the halls of the House in becoming immodesty, but she was too old for that. She didn’t want to spoil some young man’s breakfast with the sight of her. Besides, they had grown up in the principle of freedom of dress and sex and all the rest, and she hadn’t. All she had done was invent it. It’s not the same.

Like speaking of Asieo as “my husband.” They winced. The word she should use as a good Odonian, of course, was “partner.” But why the hell did she have to be a good Odonian?

She shuffled down the hall to the bathrooms. Mairo was there, washing her hair in a lavatory. Laia looked at the long, sleek, wet hank with admiration. She got out of the House so seldom now that she didn’t know when she had last seen a respectably shaven scalp, but still the sight of a full head of hair gave her pleasure, vigorous pleasure. How many times had she been jeered at, *Longhair*, *Longhair*, had her hair pulled by policemen or young toughs, had her hair shaved off down to the scalp by a grinning soldier at each new prison? And then had grown it all over again, through the fuzz, to the frizz, to the curls, to the mane. . . . In the old days. For God’s love, couldn’t she think of anything today but the old days?

Dressed, her bed made, she went down to commons. It was a good breakfast, but she had never got her appetite back since the damned stroke. She drank two cups of herb tea, but couldn't finish the piece of fruit she had taken. How she had craved fruit as a child badly enough to steal it; and in the Fort—oh, for God's love stop it! She smiled and replied to the greetings and friendly inquiries of the other breakfasters and big Aevi who was serving the counter this morning. It was he who had tempted her with the peach, "Look at this, I've been saving it for you," and how could she refuse? Anyway she had always loved fruit, and never got enough; once when she was six or seven she had stolen a piece off a vendor's cart in River Street. But it was hard to eat when everyone was talking so excitedly. There was news from Thu, real news. She was inclined to discount it at first, being wary of enthusiasms, but after she had read the article in the paper, and read between the lines of it, she thought, with a strange kind of certainty, deep but cold, Why, this is it; it has come. And in Thu, not here. Thu will break before this country does; the Revolution will first prevail there. As if that mattered! There will be no more nations. And yet it did matter somehow, it made her a little cold and sad—envious, in fact. Of all the infinite stupidities. She did not join in the talk much, and soon got up to go back to her room, feeling sorry for herself. She could not share their excitement. She was out of it, really out of it. It's not easy, she said to herself in justification, laboriously climbing the stairs, to accept being out of it when you've been in it, in the center of it, for fifty years. Oh, for God's love. Whining!

She got the stairs and the self-pity behind her, entering her room. It was a good room, and it was good to be by herself. It was a great relief. Even if it wasn't strictly fair. Some of the kids in the attics were living five to a room no bigger than this. There were always more people wanting to

live in an Odonian House than could be properly accommodated. She had this big room all to herself only because she was an old woman who had had a stroke. And maybe because she was Odo. If she hadn't been Odo, but merely the old woman with a stroke, would she have had it? Very likely. After all, who the hell wanted to room with a drooling old woman? But it was hard to be sure. Favoritism, elitism, leader-worship, they crept back and cropped out everywhere. But she had never hoped to see them eradicated in her lifetime, in one generation; only Time works the great changes. Meanwhile this was a nice, large, sunny room, proper for a drooling old woman who had started a world revolution.

Her secretary would be coming in an hour to help her despatch the day's work. She shuffled over to the desk, a beautiful, big piece, a present from the Nio Cabinetmakers' Syndicate because somebody had heard her remark once that the only piece of furniture she had ever really longed for was a desk with drawers and enough room on top . . . damn, the top was practically covered with papers with notes clipped to them, mostly in Noi's small clear handwriting: Urgent. — Northern Provinces. — Consult w/R. T.?

Her own handwriting had never been the same since Asieo's death. It was odd, when you thought about it. After all, within five years after his death she had written the whole Analogy. And there were those letters, which the tall guard with the watery grey eyes, what was his name, never mind, had smuggled out of the Fort for her for two years. The Prison Letters they called them now, there were a dozen different editions of them. All that stuff, the letters which people kept telling her were so full of "spiritual strength"—which probably meant she had been lying herself blue in the face when she wrote them trying to keep her spirits up—and the Analogy which was certainly the solidest intellectual

work she had ever done, all of that had been written in the Fort in Drio, in the cell, after Asieo's death. One had to do something, and in the Fort they let one have paper and pens. . . . But it had all been written in the hasty, scribbling hand which she had never felt was hers, not her own like the round, black scrollings of the manuscript of Society Without Government, forty-five years old. Taviri had taken not only her body's and her heart's desire to the quick-lime with him, but even her good clear handwriting.

But he had left her the Revolution.

How brave of you to go on, to work, to write, in prison, after such a defeat for the Movement, after your partner's death, people had used to say. Damn fools. What else had there been to do? Bravery, courage—what was courage? She had never figured it out. Not fearing, some said. Fearing yet going on, others said. But what could one do but go on? Had one any real choice, ever?

To die was merely to go on in another direction.

If you wanted to come home you had to keep going on, that was what she meant when she wrote "True journey is return," but it had never been more than an intuition, and she was farther than ever now from being able to rationalize it. She bent down, too suddenly, so that she grunted a little at the creak in her bones, and began to root in a bottom drawer of the desk. Her hand came on an age-softened folder and drew it out, recognizing it by touch before sight confirmed: the manuscript of Syndical Organization in Revolutionary Transition. He had printed the title on the folder and written his name under it, Taviri Odo Asieo, IX 741. There was an elegant handwriting, every letter well-formed, bold, and fluent. But he had preferred to use a voiceprinter. The manuscript was all in voiceprint, and high quality too, hesitations adjusted and idiosyncrasies of speech normalized. You couldn't see there how he had said "o" deep

in his throat as they did on the North Coast. There was nothing of him there but his mind. She had nothing of him at all except his name written on the folder. She hadn't kept his letters, it was sentimental to keep letters. Besides, she never kept anything. She couldn't think of anything that she had ever owned for more than a few years, except this ramshackle old body, of course, and she was stuck with that. . . .

Dualizing again. "She" and "it." Age and illness made one dualist, made one escapist; the mind insisted, It's not me, it's not me. But it was. Maybe the mystics could detach mind from body, she had always rather wistfully envied them the chance, without hope of emulating them. Escape had never been her game. She had sought for freedom here, now, body and soul.

First self-pity, then self-praise, and here she still sat, for God's love, holding Asieo's name in her hand, why? Didn't she know his name without looking it up? What was wrong with her? She raised the folder to her lips and kissed the handwritten name firmly and squarely, replaced the folder in the back of the bottom drawer, shut the drawer, and straightened up in the chair. Her right hand tingled. She scratched it, and then shook it in the air, spitefully. It had never quite got over the stroke. Neither had her right leg, or right eye, or the right corner of her mouth. They were sluggish, inept, they tingled. They made her feel like a robot with a short circuit.

And time was getting on, Noi would be coming, what had she been doing ever since breakfast?

She got up so hastily that she lurched, and grabbed at the chairback to make sure she did not fall. She went down the hall to the bathroom and looked in the big mirror there. Her grey knot was loose and droopy, she hadn't done it up well before breakfast. She struggled with it a while. It was hard to keep her arms up in the air. Amai, running in to piss,

stopped and said, "Let me do it!" and knotted it up tight and neat in no time, with her round, strong, pretty fingers, smiling and silent. Amai was twenty, less than a third of Laia's age. Her parents had both been members of the Movement, one killed in the insurrection of '60, the other still recruiting in the South Provinces. Amai had grown up in Odonian Houses, born to the Revolution, a true daughter of anarchy. And so quiet and free and beautiful a child, enough to make you cry when you thought: this is what we worked for, this is what we meant, this is it, here she is, alive, the kindly, lovely future.

Laia Asieo Odo's right eye wept several little tears, as she stood between the lavatories and the latrines having her hair done up by the daughter she had not borne; but her left eye, the strong one, did not weep, nor did it know what the right eye did.

She thanked Amai and hurried back to her room. She had noticed, in the mirror, a stain on her collar. Peach juice, probably. Damned old dribbler. She didn't want Noi to come in and find her with drool on her collar.

As the clean shirt went on over her head, she thought, What's so special about Noi?

She fastened the collar-frogs with her left hand, slowly.

Noi was thirty or so, a slight, muscular fellow with a soft voice and alert dark eyes. That's what was special about Noi. It was that simple. Good old sex. She had never been drawn to a fair man or a fat one, or the tall fellows with big biceps, never, not even when she was fourteen and fell in love with every passing fart. Dark, spare, and fiery, that was the recipe. Taviri, of course. This boy wasn't a patch on Taviri for brains, nor even for looks, but there it was: she didn't want him to see her with dribble on her collar and her hair coming undone.

Her thin, grey hair.

Noi came in, just pausing in the open doorway—my God, she hadn't even shut the door while changing her shirt! She looked at him and saw herself. The old woman.

You could brush your hair and change your shirt, or you could wear last week's shirt and last night's braids, or you could put on cloth of gold and dust your shaven scalp with diamond powder. None of it would make the slightest difference. The old woman would look a little less, or a little more, grotesque.

One keeps oneself neat out of mere decency, mere sanity, awareness of other people.

And finally even that goes, and one dribbles unashamed.

"Good morning," the young man said in his gentle voice.

"Hello, Noi."

No, by God, it was not out of mere decency. Decency be damned. Because the man she had loved, and to whom her age would not have mattered—because he was dead, must she pretend she had no sex? Must she suppress the truth, like a damned puritan authoritarian? Even six months ago, before the stroke, she had made men look at her and like to look at her; and now, though she could give no pleasure, by God she could please herself.

When she was six years old, and Papa's friend Gadeo used to come by to talk politics with Papa after dinner, she would put on the gold-colored necklace that Mama had found on a trash heap and brought home for her. It was so short that it always got hidden under her collar where nobody could see it. She liked it that way. She knew she had it on. She sat on the door-step and listened to them talk, and knew that she looked nice for Gadeo. He was dark, with

white teeth that flashed. Sometimes he called her “pretty Laia.” “There’s my pretty Laia!” Sixty-six years ago.

“What? My head’s dull. I had a terrible night.” It was true. She had slept even less than usual.

“I was asking if you’d seen the papers this morning.”

She nodded.

“Pleased about Soinehe?”

Soinehe was the province in Thu which had declared its secession from the Thuvian State last night.

He was pleased about it. His white teeth flashed in his dark, alert face. Pretty Laia.

“Yes. And apprehensive.”

“I know. But it’s the real thing, this time. It’s the beginning of the end of the Government in Thu. They haven’t even tried to order troops into Soinehe, you know. It would merely provoke the soldiers into rebellion sooner, and they know it.”

She agreed with him. She herself had felt that certainty. But she could not share his delight. After a lifetime of living on hope because there is nothing but hope, one loses the taste for victory. A real sense of triumph must be preceded by real despair. She had unlearned despair a long time ago. There were no more triumphs. One went on.

“Shall we do those letters today?”

“All right. Which letters?”

“To the people in the North,” he said without impatience.

“In the North?”

“Parheo, Oaidun.”

She had been born in Parheo, the dirty city on the dirty river. She had not come here to the capital till she was twenty-two and ready to bring the Revolution. Though in those days, before she and the others had thought it through, it had been a very green and puerile revolution. Strikes for

better wages, representation for women. Votes and wages— Power and Money, for the love of God! Well, one does learn a little, after all, in fifty years.

But then one must forget it all.

“Start with Oaidun,” she said, sitting down in the armchair. Noi was at the desk ready to work. He read out excerpts from the letters she was to answer. She tried to pay attention, and succeeded well enough that she dictated one whole letter and started on another. “Remember that at this stage your brotherhood is vulnerable to the threat of . . . no, to the danger . . . to . . .” She groped till Noi suggested, “The danger of leadership?”

“All right. And that nothing is so soon corrupted by power-seeking as altruism. No. And that nothing corrupts altruism —no. O for God’s love you know what I’m trying to say, Noi, you write it. They know it too, it’s just the same old stuff, why can’t they read my books!”

“Touch,” Noi said gently, smiling, citing one of the central Odonian themes.

“All right, but I’m tired of being touched. If you’ll write the letter I’ll sign it, but I can’t be bothered with it this morning.” He was looking at her with a little question or concern. She said, irritable, “There is something else I have to do!”

When Noi had gone she sat down at the desk and moved the papers about, pretending to be doing something, because she had been startled, frightened, by the words she had said. She had nothing else to do. She never had had anything else to do. This was her work: her lifework. The speaking tours and the meetings and the streets were out of reach for her now, but she could still write, and that was her work. And anyhow if she had had anything else to do, Noi would have known it;

he kept her schedule, and tactfully reminded her of things, like the visit from the foreign students this afternoon.

Oh, damn. She liked the young, and there was always something to learn from a foreigner, but she was tired of new faces, and tired of being on view. She learned from them, but they didn't learn from her; they had learnt all she had to teach long ago, from her books, from the Movement. They just came to look, as if she were the Great Tower in Rodarred, or the Canyon of the Tulaevea. A phenomenon, a monument. They were awed, adoring. She snarled at them: Think your own thoughts! —That's not anarchism, that's mere obscurantism. —You don't think liberty and discipline are incompatible, do you?— They accepted their tongue-lashing meekly as children, gratefully, as if she were some kind of All-Mother, the idol of the Big Sheltering Womb. She! She who had mined the shipyards at Seissero, and had cursed Premier Inoilte to his face in front of a crowd of seven thousand, telling him he would have cut off his own balls and had them bronzed and sold as souvenirs, if he thought there was any profit in it—she who had screeched, and sworn, and kicked policemen, and spat at priests, and pissed in public on the big brass plaque in Capitol Square that said **HERE WAS FOUNDED THE SOVEREIGN NATION STATE OF A-IO ETC ETC**, pssssssssss to all that! And now she was everybody's grandmama, the dear old lady, the sweet old monument, come worship at the womb. The fire's out, boys, it's safe to come up close.

“No, I won't,” Laia said out loud. “I will not.” She was not self-conscious about talking to herself, because she always had talked to herself. “Laia's invisible audience,” Taviri had used to say, as she went through the room muttering. “You needn't come, I won't be here,” she told the invisible audience now. She had just decided what it was she had to do. She had to go out. To go into the streets.

It was inconsiderate to disappoint the foreign students. It was erratic, typically senile. It was unOdonian. Psssssss to all that. What was the good working for freedom all your life and ending up without any freedom at all? She would go out for a walk.

“What is an anarchist? One who, choosing, accepts the responsibility of choice.”

On the way downstairs she decided, scowling, to stay and see the foreign students. But then she would go out.

They were very young students, very earnest: doe-eyed, shaggy, charming creatures from the Western Hemisphere, Benbili and the Kingdom of Mand, the girls in white trousers, the boys in long kilts, warlike and archaic. They spoke of their hopes. “We in Mand are so very far from the Revolution that maybe we are near it,” said one of the girls, wistful and smiling: “The Circle of Life!” and she showed the extremes meeting, in the circle of her slender, dark-skinned fingers. Amai and Aevi served them white wine and brown bread, the hospitality of the House. But the visitors, unpresumptuous, all rose to take their leave after barely half an hour. “No, no, no,” Laia said, “stay here, talk with Aevi and Amai. It’s just that I get stiff sitting down, you see, I have to change about. It has been so good to meet you, will you come back to see me, my little brothers and sisters, soon?” For her heart went out to them, and theirs to her, and she exchanged kisses all round, laughing, delighted by the dark young cheeks, the affectionate eyes, the scented hair, before she shuffled off. She was really a little tired, but to go up and take a nap would be a defeat. She had wanted to go out. She would go out. She had not been alone outdoors since—when? Since winter! before the stroke. No wonder she was getting morbid. It had been a regular jail sentence. Outside, the streets, that’s where she lived.

She went quietly out the side door of the House, past the vegetable patch, to the street. The narrow strip of sour city dirt had been beautifully gardened and was producing a fine crop of beans and ceëa, but Laia's eye for farming was unenlightened. Of course it had been clear that anarchist communities, even in the time of transition, must work towards optimal self-support, but how that was to be managed in the way of actual dirt and plants wasn't her business. There were farmers and agronomists for that. Her job was the streets, the noisy, stinking streets of stone, where she had grown up and lived all her life, except for the fifteen years in prison.

She looked up fondly at the façade of the House. That it had been built as a bank gave peculiar satisfaction to its present occupants. They kept their sacks of meal in the bomb-proof money-vault, and aged their cider in kegs in safe deposit boxes. Over the fussy columns that faced the street carved letters still read, "National Investors and Grain Factors Banking Association." The Movement was not strong on names. They had no flag. Slogans came and went as the need did. There was always the Circle of Life to scratch on walls and pavements where Authority would have to see it. But when it came to names they were indifferent, accepting and ignoring whatever they got called, afraid of being pinned down and penned in, un- afraid of being absurd. So this best known and second oldest of all the cooperative Houses had no name except The Bank.

It faced on a wide and quiet street, but only a block away began the Temeba, an open market, once famous as a center for black-market psychogenics and teratogenics, now reduced to vegetables, secondhand clothes, and miserable sideshows. Its crapulous vitality was gone, leaving only half-paralyzed alcoholics, addicts, cripples, hucksters, and fifth-rate whores, pawnshops, gambling dens, fortune-tellers,

body-sculptors, and cheap hotels. Laia turned to the Temeba as water seeks its level.

She had never feared or despised the city. It was her country. There would not be slums like this, if the Revolution prevailed. But there would be misery. There would always be misery, waste, cruelty. She had never pretended to be changing the human condition, to be Mama taking tragedy away from the children so they won't hurt themselves. Anything but. So long as people were free to choose, if they chose to drink flybane and live in sewers, it was their business. Just so long as it wasn't the business of Business, the source of profit and the means of power for other people. She had felt all that before she knew anything; before she wrote the first pamphlet, before she left Parheo, before she knew what "capital" meant, before she'd been farther than River Street where she played rolltaggie kneeling on scabby knees on the pavement with the other six-year-olds, she had known it: that she, and the other kids, and her parents, and their parents, and the drunks and whores and all of River Street, were at the bottom of something—were the foundation, the reality, the source. But will you drag civilization down into the mud? cried the shocked decent people, later on, and she had tried for years to explain to them that if all you had was mud, then if you were God you made it into human beings, and if you were human you tried to make it into houses where human beings could live. But nobody who thought he was better than mud would understand. Now, water seeking its level, mud to mud, Laia shuffled through the foul, noisy street, and all the ugly weakness of her old age was at home. The sleepy whores, their lacquered hair-arrangements dilapidated and askew, the one-eyed woman wearily yelling her vegetables to sell, the half-wit beggar slapping flies, these were her countrywomen. They looked like her, they were all sad,

disgusting, mean, pitiful, hideous. They were her sisters, her own people.

She did not feel very well. It had been a long time since she had walked so far, four or five blocks, by herself, in the noise and push and striking summer heat of the streets. She had wanted to get to Koly Park, the triangle of scruffy grass at the end of the Temeba, and sit there for a while with the other old men and women who always sat there, to see what it was like to sit there and be old; but it was too far. If she didn't turn back now, she might get a dizzy spell, and she had a dread of falling down, falling down and having to lie there and look up at the people come to stare at the old woman in a fit. She turned and started home, frowning with effort and self-disgust. She could feel her face very red, and a swimming feeling came and went in her ears. It got a bit much, she was really afraid she might keel over. She saw a doorstep in the shade and made for it, let herself down cautiously, sat, sighed.

Nearby was a fruit-seller, sitting silent behind his dusty, withered stock. People went by. Nobody bought from him. Nobody looked at her. Odo, who was Odo? Famous revolutionary, author of Community, The Analogy, etc. etc. She, who was she? An old woman with grey hair and a red face sitting on a dirty doorstep in a slum, muttering to herself.

True? Was that she? Certainly it was what anybody passing her saw. But was it she, herself, any more than the famous revolutionary, etc., was? No. It was not. But who was she, then?

The one who loved Taviri.

Yes. True enough. But not enough. That was gone; he had been dead so long.

"Who am I?" Laia muttered to her invisible audience, and they knew the answer and told it to her with one voice.

She was the little girl with scabby knees, sitting on the doorstep staring down through the dirty golden haze of River Street in the heat of late summer, the six-year-old, the sixteen-year-old, the fierce, cross, dream-ridden girl, untouched, untouchable. She was herself. Indeed she had been the tireless worker and thinker, but a blood clot in a vein had taken that woman away from her. Indeed she had been the lover, the swimmer in the midst of life, but Taviri, dying, had taken that woman away with him. There was nothing left, really, but the foundation. She had come home; she had never left home. “True voyage is

return.” Dust and mud and a doorstep in the slums. And beyond, at the far end of the street, the field full of tall dry weeds blowing in the wind as night came.

“Laia! What are you doing here? Are you all right?”

One of the people from the House, of course, a nice woman, a bit fanatical and always talking. Laia could not remember her name though she had known her for years. She let herself be taken home, the woman talking all the way. In the big cool common room (once occupied by tellers counting money behind polished counters supervised by armed guards) Laia sat down in a chair. She was unable just as yet to face climbing the stairs, though she would have liked to be alone. The woman kept on talking, and other excited people came in. It appeared that a demonstration was being planned. Events in Thu were moving so fast that the mood here had caught fire, and something must be done. Day after tomorrow, no, tomorrow, there was to be a march, a big one, from Old Town to Capitol Square—the old route. “Another Ninth Month Uprising,” said a young man, fiery and laughing, glancing at Laia. He had not even been born at the time of the Ninth Month Uprising, it was all history to him. Now he wanted to make some history of his own. The

room had filled up. A general meeting would be held here, tomorrow, at eight in the morning. "You must talk, Laia."

"Tomorrow? Oh, I won't be here tomorrow," she said brusquely. Whoever had asked her smiled, another one laughed, though Amai glanced round at her with a puzzled look. They went on talking and shouting. The Revolution. What on earth had made her say that? What a thing to say on the eve of the Revolution, even if it was true.

She waited her time, managed to get up and, for all her clumsiness, to slip away unnoticed among the people busy with their planning and excitement. She got to the hall, to the stairs, and began to climb them one by one. "The general strike," a voice, two voices, ten voices were saying in the room below, behind her. "The general strike," Laia muttered, resting for a moment on the landing. Above, ahead, in her room, what awaited her? The private stroke. That was mildly funny. She started up the second flight of stairs, one by one, one leg at a time, like a small child. She was dizzy, but she was no longer afraid to fall. On ahead, on there, the dry white flowers nodded and whispered in the open fields of evening. Seventy-two years and she had never had time to learn what they were called.

Me Talk Pretty One Day

By David Sedaris

At the age of forty-one, I am returning to school and having to think of myself as what my French textbook calls "a true debutant." After paying my tuition, I was issued a student ID, which allows me a discounted entry fee at movie theaters, puppet shows, and Festyland, a far-flung amusement park that advertises with billboards picturing a cartoon stegosaurus sitting in a canoe and eating what appears to be a ham sandwich.

I've moved to Paris in order to learn the language. My school is the Alliance Française, and on the first day of class, I arrived early, watching as the returning students greeted one another in the school lobby. Vacations were recounted, and questions were raised concerning mutual friends with names like Kang and Vlatnya. Regardless of their nationalities, everyone spoke what sounded to me like excellent French. Some accents were better than others, but the students exhibited an ease and confidence I found intimidating. As an added discomfort, they were all young, attractive, and well dressed, causing me to feel not unlike Pa Kettle trapped backstage after a fashion show.

I remind myself that I am now a full-grown man. No one will ever again card me for a drink or demand that I weave a floor mat out of newspapers. At my age, a reasonable person should have completed his sentence in the prison of the nervous and the insecure--isn't that the great promise of adulthood? I can't help but think that, somewhere along the way, I made a wrong turn. My fears have not vanished. Rather, they have seasoned and multiplied with age. I am now twice as frightened as I was when, at the age of twenty, I allowed a failed nursing student to inject me with a horse tranquilizer, and eight times more anxious than I was the day my kindergarten teacher pried my fingers off my

mother's ankle and led me screaming toward my desk. "You'll get used to it," the woman had said.

I'm still waiting.

The first day of class was nerve-racking, because I knew I'd be expected to perform. That's the way they do it here--everyone into the language pool, sink or swim. The teacher marched in, deeply tanned from a recent vacation, and rattled off a series of administrative announcements. I've spent some time in Normandy, and I took a monthlong French class last summer in New York. I'm not completely in the dark, yet I understood only half of what this teacher was saying.

"If you have not *meismslsxp* by this time, you should not be in this room. Has everybody *apzkiubjxow*? Everyone? Good, we shall proceed." She spread out her lesson plan and sighed, saying, "All right, then, who knows the alphabet?"

It was startling, because a) I hadn't been asked that question in a while, and b) I realized, while laughing, that I myself did *not* know the alphabet. They're the same letters, but they're pronounced differently.

"Ahh." The teacher went to the board and sketched the letter *a*. "Do we have anyone in the room whose first name commences with an *ahh*?"

Two Polish Annas raised their hands, and the teacher instructed them to present themselves, giving their names, nationalities, occupations, and a list of things they liked and disliked in this world. The first Anna hailed from an industrial town outside of Warsaw and had front teeth the size of tombstones. She worked as a seamstress, enjoyed quiet times with friends, and hated the mosquito.

"Oh, really," the teacher said. "How very interesting. I thought that everyone loved the mosquito, but here, in front of all the world, you claim to detest him. How is it that we've been blessed with someone as unique and original as you? Tell us, please."

The seamstress did not understand what was being said, but she knew that this was an occasion for shame. Her

rabbity mouth huffed for breath, and she stared down at her lap as though the appropriate comeback were stitched somewhere alongside the zipper of her slacks.

The second Anna learned from the first and claimed to love sunshine and detest lies. It sounded like a translation of one of those Playmate of the Month data sheets, the answers always written in the same loopy handwriting: "Turn-ons: Mom's famous five-alarm chili! Turnoffs: Insincerity and guys who come on too strong!!!"

The two Polish women surely had clear notions of what they liked and disliked, but, like the rest of us, they were limited in terms of vocabulary, and this made them appear less than sophisticated. The teacher forged on, and we learned that Carlos, the Argentine bandonion player, loved wine, music, and, in his words, "Making sex with the women of the world." Next came a beautiful young Yugoslavian who identified herself as an optimist, saying that she loved everything life had to offer.

The teacher licked her lips, revealing a hint of the sadist we would later come to know. She crouched low for her attack, placed her hands on the young woman's desk, and said, "Oh, yeah? And do you love your little war?"

While the optimist struggled to defend herself, I scrambled to think of an answer to what had obviously become a trick question. How often are you asked what you love in this world? More important, how often are you asked and then publicly ridiculed for your answer? I recalled my mother, flushed with wine, pounding the table late one night, saying, "Love? I love a good steak cooked rare. I love my cat, and I love . . ." My sisters and I leaned forward, waiting to hear our names. "Tums," our mother said. "I love Tums."

The teacher killed some time accusing the Yugoslavian girl of masterminding a program of genocide, and I jotted frantic notes in the margins of my pad. While I can honestly say that I love leafing through medical textbooks devoted to severe dermatological conditions, it is beyond the reach of

my French vocabulary, and acting it out would only have invited unwanted attention.

When called upon, I delivered an effortless list of things I detest: blood sausage, intestinal pâté, brain pudding. I'd learned these words the hard way. Having given it some thought, I then declared my love for IBM typewriters, the French word for "bruise," and my electric floor waxer. It was a short list, but still I managed to mispronounce IBM and afford the wrong gender to both the floor waxer and the typewriter. Her reaction led me to believe that these mistakes were capital crimes in the country of France.

"Were you always this *palicmkrexjs*?" she asked. "Even a *fiuscrzsws tociwegixp* knows that a typewriter is feminine."

I absorbed as much of her abuse as I could understand, thinking, but not saying, that I find it ridiculous to assign a gender to an inanimate object incapable of disrobing and making an occasional fool of itself. Why refer to Lady Flesh Wound or Good Sir Dishrag when these things could never deliver in the sack?

The teacher proceeded to belittle everyone from German Eva, who hated laziness, to Japanese Yukari, who loved paintbrushes and soap. Italian, Thai, Dutch, Korean, Chinese--we all left class foolishly believing that the worst was over. We didn't know it then, but the coming months would teach us what it is like to spend time in the presence of a wild animal. We soon learned to dodge chalk and to cover our heads and stomachs whenever she approached us with a question. She hadn't yet punched anyone, but it seemed wise to prepare ourselves against the inevitable.

Though we were forbidden to speak anything but French, the teacher would occasionally use us to practice any of her five fluent languages.

"I hate you," she said to me one afternoon. Her English was flawless. "I really, really hate you." Call me sensitive, but I couldn't help taking it personally.

Learning French is a lot like joining a gang in that it involves a long and intensive period of hazing. And it wasn't just my teacher; the entire population seemed to be in on it. Following brutal encounters with my local butcher and the concierge of my building, I'd head off to class, where the teacher would hold my corrected paperwork high above her head, shouting, "Here's proof that David is an ignorant and uninspired *ensigiejsokhjx*."

Refusing to stand convicted on the teacher's charges of laziness, I'd spend four hours a night on my homework, working even longer whenever we were assigned an essay. I suppose I could have gotten by with less, but I was determined to create some sort of an identity for myself. We'd have one of those "complete the sentence" exercises, and I'd fool with the thing for hours, invariably settling on something like, "A quick run around the lake? I'd love to. Just give me a minute to strap on my wooden leg." The teacher, through word and action, conveyed the message that, if this was my idea of an identity, she wanted nothing to do with it.

My fear and discomfort crept beyond the borders of my classroom and accompanied me out onto the wide boulevards, where, no matter how hard I tried, there was no escaping the feeling of terror I felt whenever anyone asked me a question. I was safe in any kind of a store, as, at least in my neighborhood, one can stand beside the cash register for hours on end without being asked something so trivial as, "May I help you?" or "How would you like to pay for that?"

My only comfort was the knowledge that I was not alone. Huddled in the smoky hallways and making the most of our pathetic French, my fellow students and I engaged in the sort of conversation commonly overheard in refugee camps.

"Sometimes me cry alone at night."

"That is common for me also, but be more strong, you. Much work, and someday you talk pretty. People stop hate you soon. Maybe tomorrow, okay?"

Unlike other classes I have taken, here there was no sense of competition. When the teacher poked a shy Korean woman in the eyelid with a freshly sharpened pencil, we took no comfort in the fact that, unlike Hyeyoon Cho, we all knew the irregular past tense of the verb "to defeat." In all fairness, the teacher hadn't meant to hurt the woman, but neither did she spend much time apologizing, saying only, "Well, you should have been paying more attention."

Over time, it became impossible to believe that any of us would ever improve. Fall arrived, and it rained every day. It was mid-October when the teacher singled me out, saying, "Every day spent with you is like having a cesarean section." And it struck me that, for the first time since arriving in France, I could understand every word that someone was saying.

Understanding doesn't mean that you can suddenly speak the language. Far from it. It's a small step, nothing more, yet its rewards are intoxicating and deceptive. The teacher continued her diatribe, and I settled back, bathing in the subtle beauty of each new curse and insult.

"You exhaust me with your foolishness and reward my efforts with nothing but pain, do you understand me?"

The world opened up, and it was with great joy that I responded, "I know the thing what you speak exact now. Talk me more, plus, please, plus."