NATURAL SHOCKS

TITO CARR

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This story collection is dedicated to practitioners of the ancient art of general medicine, but more so to their patients.

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Preface

The stories in this collection were written over a brief period of time in 2016. It's hard to know why. Maybe the presidential election that year had something to do with it. Are there threads that connect them? Biology certainly, and the results of its 'natural shocks' on the everyday lives of characters who must try to understand and cope as best they can—that is to say, imperfectly—with so many forces beyond their control. Other than that, I can't say there was any conscious design. The short stories of Juan Rulfo were an influence, as can be seen in the focus on the struggles of ordinary, if not humble, people. Consequently the narrative style is rather conventional. Unhip, I'm afraid, which seemed appropriate. And there's obviously an interest in patients and doctors, and in medicine in general. I have to thank my mother for that. She was a pediatrician in Lima, and when we moved to the U.S. she put herself through more years of training to become an endocrinologist. I owe an enormous debt to many other physicians and writers here as well, most notably those who combined the two—Chekhov and William Carlos Williams in particular.

-Tito Carr

TAKING THE STEAM

It's everyone's YMCA now. Not just for the young, or men, or Christians. The old acronym has worn away till only a rune remains—the Y. Whatever the branding, children still razz their friends with shouts by the pool. Young men grunt in the weight room, and women sweat to a Latin beat in aerobics class down the hall. But enough of that. Let's take a break. Down to the steam room to relax, purge some toxins, clear the sinuses. First, stop at the locker room. Put on your swimsuit and shower (required), then we're ready. Careful if you have heart disease or diabetes. If you're on blood pressure medicine, anticoagulants or antihistamines. Vasodilators, vasoconstrictors, sedatives or stimulants, seizure drugs, pain killers, or alcohol. Posted and duly noted. We've been cautioned—the lawyers and insurance companies have had their say. And don't spray water on the ceiling from the hose. Okay? Let's go in.

The door of the steam room swung open and there, through a cloud rushing to escape, appeared a face. A familiar face, masked and framed by the steam. Disembodied so it seemed. Angela blinked. The mist cleared a bit and the craggy features, lined with resignation and a touch of sadness but also, she imagined, a touch of possibility, revealed themselves. Sebastiano. Then his chest and shoulders, sinewy under the sagging skin that covered his defibrillator, his body hairs white, his baggy trunks and short, sturdy legs like those that marched legionaries from forest to desert and back. He seemed to hesitate on the threshold. Seb. But Angie sat there like he hoped she would. He knew she liked to take the steam before lunch. The wet benches were hot, slippery and hard. His body beaded with moisture before he even sat down.

"Hi Angie," he said.

“Hi Seb,” she answered.

They sat quietly for a moment at opposite ends of the cubicle. Sweat was already dripping down the inside of his arms, along his flanks. He glanced at her through the haze. The steam had plumped up Angie’s face, he noticed, smoothed her wrinkles a bit, veiled the spider veins on her ankles. Her large eyes, brown and humid, inspected him in return. She felt him looking, and the silence began to weigh on her like fog settling on a river bank. So much she could say to him on that bank, in the dark, though she doubted he wanted to hear it. Not after all these years. What would be the point? Though she hated silence as much as he welcomed it.

“The room is closed for cleaning next week,” she remarked.

“What you gonna do?” he said.

“I guess it’s that time of year.”

“What you gonna do?” he repeated, shrugging his shoulders, gesturing with his palms up to acknowledge not just the closing, the cleaning, but all the forces in the world beyond his control. The phrase and gesture were so familiar she could have mimicked them perfectly. Some things never change, she thought. Some things. They sat in silence again, slipping cautiously into each other’s company with the heat opening their pores and warming their nostrils, producing the gentle torpor that lets the mind cast off and drift.

“Seb,” she began, and her voice trailed off. “Seb,” she said again, softly. She waited for a response but he was looking down at the floor examining his thickened toenails, resigned to their corrosion. He watched the steam trail from under the bench wondering if perhaps he shouldn’t have come, wondering if she’s annoyed by his intrusion. He was not ignoring her, he did not hear his name. He had left his hearing aides in his locker for safe keeping but there was still sound, a steady, high-pitched ringing, electronic tones that were almost musical. He was used to it. She waited. He finally looked up, and seeing her eyes fixed on his, smiled.

“Sebastiano!” she said, loud and emphatic this time.

“What?” he answered, startled.

“I want to ask you something.”

He recovered quickly, chagrined by his alarm, hoping she hadn't thought him ill at ease. "Sure, go ahead," he said, wondering why she had to speak so loud and thinking it must be her hearing.

"It's a little personal."

"Then maybe you better not ask," he replied, looking away with a vague presentiment. Personal was not his strong suit. He had been guarded all his life. Guarded but curious. It had mostly served him well.

"Maybe I better not." She laid her hands in her lap and sat still.

"I was just kidding," he countered, unsure if she were being coy or not. He was never sure.

Angie hesitated, second guessing her impulse loosened by the torpor, the drifting, gathering her thoughts to recall the words she had been carefully formulating. "Remember when…"

Before she could properly begin, a shadowy figure appeared at the door with thin stick legs projecting from his faded trunks, joint-surgery scars bisecting both knees, his hoary hair tonsured naturally monk-like. Blotches of red dotted his cheeks and nose. He had a large paunch hanging low on his belly like a woman at term, perfectly round, perfectly spherical, with a forward center of gravity that seemed to be drawing him and his stick legs into the room.

"Hi, Fred," said Seb.

"Hi, Seb, Angie," said Fred. "How about this weather?" He plopped down next to Seb. His entrance seemed to trigger a low growl behind the wall. It rose to a groan as if something large and metallic were in pain, drowning out his voice. As the groan faded, a roar from under the bench announced a new round of steam blown into the room, wafting up hot against their ankles. It was too much for Seb. He moved down the bench to avoid being scalded. And here was Angie directly across, in a bathing suit just like the ones she wore when they'd go for a swim and she'd have a pink bathing cap with, what was it, rubber flowers or petals or something, and it would be like in that movie *On the Beach*—no, it was on the beach, but that's not the name of the movie, it was Burt Lancaster and…

"… you think of that?" Fred concluded, as the roar subsided. Seb resigned himself to Fred's presence. He wished Fred would just shut up and take the steam, but knew that was not going to happen. Fred would be talking from his grave, his mouth still moving from the momentum of a lifetime of chatter long after his soul had departed, pointing out facts he had just heard on the news as if they were his own observations. Seb could only hope the cemetery would be far away. But Angie wasn't too hard on him, knowing the shape Fred's wife was in.

The door jerked open and another shade loomed on the threshold, a tall man bent forward at the waist, dragging his feet under mottled legs crossed with swollen, serpentine veins. Once a powerful man no doubt, determined to maintain his balance with each small shuffling step, carefully releasing the door railing to slump onto the bench.

"Hi, Mike," said Fred.

Mike nodded with a vacant look and raised his hand in faint greeting. He recognized the faces floating in the steam, he just couldn't recall their names.

"Hi," said Mike. "Sorry, I can't see you so good."

"You know, this room reminds me what things looked like with my cataracts," said Fred. "I used to think, why isn't the sky so blue anymore?"

"I see colors so much better now," said Angie. "It's amazing what they can do these days."

"Remember those coke-bottle glasses?" asked Fred.

"Those what?" said Mike.

"Coke-bottle glasses. You know, those thick glasses people used to wear when they had their cataracts out."

Mike nodded, but no, he didn't remember.

"Made you look like Mr. Magoo," said Seb.

"Like George Burns, maybe. Mr. Magoo didn't wear glasses," said Fred. "That was the schtick. He couldn't see."

"Quincy," Angie interjected.

"Who's Quincy?" asked Seb.

"Quincy Magoo. That was his name. Quincy."

“I didn’t know that,” said Fred, making a rare admission.

“I thought it was just Mister,” said Seb.

Mike nodded and laughed a remnant of his hearty laugh. Now he remembered. Mr. Magoo. He could see the cartoon face and squinty eyes as if they were coming through the steam, as if the dapper little man were seated in the mist next to Angie, leaning on his cane. He would’ve liked to have a talk with him.

“You know what got him in trouble?” said Angie, looking at all three men in turn. “His vanity.”

“Right,” said Fred, unabashed. “That’s why he wouldn’t wear glasses.”

“Like old people who won’t use a cane,” said Seb.

“Like you, you mean,” said Angie, teasing, but it was no laughing matter for Mike. For the past six months his daughter had been trying to get him to use a walker after she had to call the fire department twice in one week to lift him off the floor. But the reference passed Mike by. He was thinking of cartoons he’d like to see on a large screen in a movie theater after a double feature. Their banter was interrupted by new voices outside the room, drawing their attention. The door opened haltingly, so slow it seemed like half the steam escaped, and two more figures eased their way inside. Two women, one leading the other through the gloom. Their hair styles were identical—short, colored dark with white at the roots, fluffed in an attempt to hide their female balding—as was the identical bowing of their legs. They first woman was taller, but only because her companion was shortened by her dowager’s hump. Mike slid down the bench to make room. The taller woman helped her companion grope for a seat and settled her in the space left by Mike as Angie welcomed them by name. Doris and Rosemary, Rosemary and Doris, sisters, widows, living side by side in a duplex with their daughters. They had only recently begun taking the steam, to improve their metabolism they said, and in hopes of better dreams.

“We were just talking about Mr. Magoo,” said Angie.

“Of course. Mr. Magoo,” said Rosemary, seated next to Mike, catching her breath. After thinking hard for a moment, she asked, “Who did his voice?” She could hear it, closing her eyes while she thought, screwing up her stenciled eyebrows.

"I *loved* that voice," said Doris. She raised a knobby index finger. She could picture his face clear as a bell.

"Jim Backus." said Angie.

"I *love* Jim Backus," said Doris.

"Gilligan's Island," said Rosemary. She loved Jim Backus, too. She loved TV. For years she and Doris had watched reruns together late into the night. Neither of them were good sleepers.

"Gilligan's Island," the other two women agreed.

"Jim Backus: dead or alive?" asked Fred.

"Oh, please. He died a long time ago," said Rosemary.

"Really? He did?" said Mike.

"You mean you didn't get the memo?" said Seb.

"What memo?" said Mike.

They lapsed into silence again at Mike's question, hoping to spare him any embarrassment. Angie shot a look at Seb just to be sure. They had all witnessed the steady decline of his memory, his posture, his gait, over the past year. Fred could remember him playing linebacker in high school. And they all knew him from the police department, long retired as a sergeant after thirty years on the force. He still had his rugged features, a strong chin and fine, straight nose, but his blue eyes, once clear as glass, were washed out as if they'd been laundered too many times, and his lips were collapsing inward on his gums. "You know, this white stuff isn't really steam," said Fred, changing the subject with a fact he'd been meaning to mention for some time.

There was a quizzical silence. Angie gave Fred silent credit for drawing attention away from Mike, though Seb knew Mike's feelings had nothing to do with it. As for Fred's assertion, Seb wasn't going to bite. He wouldn't give Fred the satisfaction. Doris, new to the etiquette of the steam room, finally piped up. "So what is it?"

"Water droplets," said Fred.

"Isn't that steam?" said Rosemary. She seemed disappointed somehow.

"No, steam is a gas. Gases are invisible," Fred explained.

"Thank you, Mr. Wizard," said Seb, wishing Fred would simply evaporate.

Angie made a point of complimenting Fred on his scientific acumen. She enjoyed watching Seb's exasperation—his insecurity, his petty jealousy, so transparent and easily aroused. After all these years it was still too easy.

"So this is really the water droplet room," quipped Doris.

"No, there's steam in here, too," said Fred. "You just can't see it." Rosemary was reassured. She doubted water droplets would improve her dreams.

"He's making this stuff up," said Seb.

"Seb—steam is water vapor, not droplets," Fred affirmed.

"Maybe to you, smart guy. But what I see is steam."

"You're using the word in two different ways," said Angie, speaking like the school teacher she'd once been. And that was the old problem, thought Seb, or a symptom of it. Her and her education. He learned from things he saw and touched. And it wasn't her so much, he recalled, as her friends wondering why she was with him—he knew that's what they were thinking so long ago—and maybe she never thought it, but she would never concede that's what they were thinking. That's why he blamed her. She couldn't see it. She was nice to everybody. He had a problem with that. Why had he bothered to come today? Not for old people's empty chatter. He was disgusted with himself.

Seb stood up to take his leave when Doris, at sea talking states of matter and semantic distinctions, asked of no one in particular: "Did you hear about Doctor Marcellus?" Seb paused, curious. He glanced at Angie and recalled she was about to ask him a question when Fred had barged in, and that was the real reason he wanted to pummel Fred. But the moment, he feared, had passed. Once again. Yet he stopped and let his irritation ebb.

"Yes," said Angie, shifting gears. "My daughter told me. What a shame. Such a young man." They all grunted in agreement behind the sheets of steam.

"Sixty-three."

"He had so much to look forward to."

"Cancer, right?" said Fred. "I heard it was cancer."

"He was a good surgeon," said Doris.

"Good at making money," said Seb, taking his seat again.

“Seb, don’t speak ill,” said Angie.

“I think he operated on half the people in town,” said Fred.

“He was the team doctor for the high school,” said Rosemary. “Very community-minded.”

“Very business-minded, you mean,” said Seb.

“He did both my knees,” said Fred.

“And my rotator cuff,” said Doris.

Seb had had enough, dead orthopedist or not. “I’d never have surgery here, period. You see that?” he insisted, pointing to the thick scar running down the center of his breast bone to the top of his belly. “If someone’s gonna crack my chest, I want the best. Same goes for my back.”

“I had my carotid done here,” said Rosemary. “It worked out fine.”

“That’s ‘cause you probably didn’t need it,” said Seb.

“Seb, stop it,” said Angie. Some things don’t change, she thought, catching the scornful look on his face, that sign of his childish defenses that annoyed her so, along with his stubbornness and his—not laziness. No, he could work as hard as anyone, harder than most. It was his lack of ambition, his pride that wouldn’t let him strike out on his own, a union man all the way he said, when it was really his fear of failure, so unjustified in her estimation. He was never one to admit failure, or his fear.

“I’m just sayin’,” said Seb. “They told me I needed my carotid done, too. Then I got a second opinion and they said I don’t need it.”

“You could have a stroke,” said Angie.

“So what? I don’t feel nothing. Why am I gonna have an operation when I don’t feel nothing? Now if I’m in pain, that’s another thing.”

“That’s why I’m getting my knees done again,” said Fred.

“That makes sense,” said Seb, not that he cared. “But once they take your parts out, they ain’t putting them back.”

“But some things you don’t really need,” said Rosemary. “Like your gallbladder.” She was going to say uterus, when you were finished having children. But the men were there.

“Oh, what a relief that was,” said Doris.

“I had mine done the old way,” said Angie. “I couldn’t believe the pain. I took me a month to get back on my feet.”

“What a shame,” said Doris. “I was back on my feet the next day.”

“It’s amazing what they can do these days,” said Angie.

Mike closed his eyes. He had no idea what they were talking about. He felt his body uncoiling like a tight bandage turned loose, and began sliding down the bench. Seb took the hose and put water in the wall slot for more steam. He wished he could white-out everyone in the room but Angie. The wall groaned again, rattling the vents under the benches. They paused, contemplating old aches and pains as the steam roared up again like smoke rising from fires stoked deep underground, clouding the room, obscuring their faces and bodies, reducing them to silent shades. Seb remembered his wife’s gallbladder surgery when she was pregnant, her large wound and how helpless he felt. He looked across at Angie, the scars on her body now hidden by her swimsuit, by thick clouds of water droplets, by the clouding of memory like cataracts.

“I’m feeling dizzy,” said Rosemary, addressing Doris. “Help me out the door. I think it’s the heat.”

“Here, let me.” Fred stood up a bit too fast and sat down before he fainted.

“That’s okay, Fred. I have to be going anyway.” Doris rose and carefully crossed the small space that separated her from her sister. “It’s her macular degeneration,” she said. “She’s afraid she’ll bump into something.” She took Rosemary’s hand and the two of them crept away, disappearing soundlessly behind the glass door opaque with condensation.

“Are you taking vitamins?” Fred called out, too late for them to hear.

Mike gave a loud snort. He had fallen asleep. His face and ears were beet red, and his head was sinking toward his knees as if being pulled downward by a cord. Seb jumped up and caught him before he slid, slick as an eel, onto the floor.

“C’mon big guy, time to go. Angie, turn on the hose.” He held Mike steady on the bench and doused him with cold water as Fred simply watched and blinked. Mike looked like he’d just returned from a pleasant dream.

“You okay?” asked Angie.

“Just dozing,” said Mike. With great effort he managed a smile. “Guess it’s time to go.” Seb helped him to his feet and walked him to the door. It seemed to Mike that time was different in the steam room these days.

“Hold on, I’ll go with you,” said Fred.

Seb gladly held the door for Fred after Mike passed through. “Don’t know when I’ll see you again, Seb,” said Fred. “I’m going to Florida next week.” Seb nodded and wished him well, pointing out that at their age there was no need to rush back. Fred agreed with him for once. He trudged after Mike’s shadow past the whirlpool and was gone. The cool air outside made Seb realize how long he’d been in the steam room. The heat was fearsome but Angie hadn’t moved, waiting for him. Hoping she was waiting for him. He would oblige. He returned to the bench across from her. His eyes were drawn through the haze to the perspiration trickling down her bare shoulders, and the plumpness that remained of her breasts. Her hair, though grey, was cut short at a smart angle. At that moment her age didn’t seem to matter. She looked striking. He was strangely thrilled to be alone with her.

“You must be hot,” he said.

“I’m roasting,” said Angie. “But I still have a question for you.”

Seb braced himself. “You said that before. I remember.”

“Do you, Seb? That’s my question. Do you remember?”

That was a heavy burden to place on him, he thought. There was too much to remember. Was he supposed to make any sense of it? That was just like her, he remembered, placing the burden on him.

“I remember everything,” he boasted.

“Then tell me, Sebastiano. How come you couldn’t wait for me?” she asked. She looked him squarely in the eye, like a lawyer startling an admission from a witness.

Seb knew he should take a moment to reflect, but blurted out the first words that came to mind: “Because I wanted you.”

“Ha!” scoffed Angie. “It was all about sex, wasn’t it?” She sat back against the wall, resting her case.

“Angie, come on,” said Seb. He couldn’t believe sex was on her mind—on his maybe but not hers, at her age. “We were young.”

“Wasn’t it? I just want to know.” She had crossed her legs, swinging her foot up and down, stirring the cloud that seemed to be swirling around them faster now.

“Maybe, a little,” he said. “I was crazy about you. Is that a crime?”

“It was sex, then,” she concluded once again.

“What you gonna do?” said Seb, shrugging his shoulders, holding his arms out with his palms up. “So I’m human. So sue me.”

Angie brushed off his evasion with a wave of her hand. “If you loved me you could have waited.”

Seb saw his opening. Now it was his turn to look her straight in the eye. “I couldn’t wait because I *was* in love with you.” He could swear he saw her catch her breath.

“Well,” said Angie, softening. “That was a problem.”

“What problem?” Seb did not see how she could take that for a problem.

“You were too fast,” she said.

“What do you mean too fast?” he shot back, a little too hotly, a little too quickly. He didn’t understand. If he seemed too fast, it was because she was too reticent.

“I mean it was over too fast. You think I don’t like sex?”

This was the unexpected stab to his heart. He would have flushed with shame if his face could have gotten any redder. “What did you to expect?” he stammered. “I was just a kid. I couldn’t get near you without getting excited.”

“You weren’t very good in bed Seb, that’s all.”

Seb threw his hands in the air, flinging a spray of droplets around the room. “What a mean thing to say. You didn’t give me much chance.”

“You had your chance, but you had no patience. I would have waited for you.”

“How was I supposed to know how long you’d wait?”

Angie crossed her arms and wagged her head. “You didn’t wait very long, did you? You turned around and married someone else, just like that,” she said, snapping her wet fingers with a soft thump.

“All this waiting business,” said Seb, finally giving rein to his anger. “It seemed like a brush-off to me. What was I good for? Driving you around? Fixing your car? All

this waiting was bullshit." He held up his right hand, squeezing his fingertips together in reproach.

"You always sold yourself short," she said.

"No, that's not true. I'm not what you wanted me to be, that's all. Admit it."

"It was just your stupid pride, Seb. Your stubborn, wounded ego. You don't know what you could have been."

"See, that's what I mean," said Seb, putting both hands to his head as if a bad headache were coming on. "You like to get psychological on me. You and your what if's."

The steam hissed out once more from under the benches, forcing a break in their quarrel as if a boxing round were over and they had returned to their corners. They rested in welcome silence, breathing deeply, feeling the heat salve their wounds, feeling drops of condensation fall from the ceiling on their salty skin like fillips reminding them how ludicrous they were. The longer they said nothing, the more their rancor ebbed in the hot air. Both of them were too weak to hold onto their antagonism for long. When the noise of the in-rushing steam subsided, neither of them would answer the bell. They smiled at each other through the mist. "You know," said Seb slyly, watching the fleshy folds of Angie's legs dangle off the bench, "there's nothing stopping us now. I'm not so fast anymore."

"I'm sure of that," said Angie. "But I think you're too slow for me now, Sebastiano. Besides, you might have a heart attack. I don't want to be responsible for your death."

"Don't worry, Angie. I got my defibrillator," he replied, patting the bulge on his chest. "Besides, what better way to go?"

"Not on top of me, you don't. You had your chance."

"You don't know what you're missing."

"Yes, I do. Come on. It's time for lunch."

It was well past noon. Seb stood up and reached through the steam for Angie's hand, helping her to her feet until she was steady as if they were about to dance. They exited the steam room shrouded by the invisible stuff of water vapor, parting in opposite directions by the whirlpool, he to his locker room, she to hers.

“I’ll see you at Mass, Sebastiano,” said Angie.

“See you at Mass, Angela,” said Seb.

150 HAWTHORNE STREET

Since you're taking my patients, I want to tell you about the building. It's a funny place. People drive past for years without noticing it. It's easy to miss even when you're looking for it. You find yourself a block or two away before realizing you passed right by, even with your phone giving directions. Not that it's hard to see. It's in plain sight behind a small parking lot. There's a 7-Eleven on one side and a muffler shop on the other, pretty good landmarks, but even residents who lived there for years sail right past. Maybe the brick front is too plain. It's just a four-story square with green shutters on the windows and a little awning over the entrance. There's some landscaping, boxwood and perennials that don't do much. It's so plain you forget it's there. But that's deceptive. It's a much bigger place than you'd think. From the street you can't see how far back it goes. You'd be surprised how many people live there. Behind it is another parking lot. That's where visitors park, so you'll have to drive around the side. It's always dark back there, like it's in the shadow of the building no matter what time of day. It's always cold too, even in the summer. And in the winter it's really frigid. So bundle up.

What I notice inside is the silence. Lots of buildings are quiet, but this is different. It's not an empty silence, it's like a place waiting for sound. Waiting so it can grab it. Once in a while you hear footsteps, or a door close. The sound travels through the stairways to the whole building because there's no other sound to stop it. It's as if the building amplifies sound to hold on to it better. When it fades away, there's more silence than before. Not that the place is deserted. Quite the opposite. There haven't been vacancies there as long as I can remember, and there's a long waiting list. You can hear music or a television if you stop and listen close outside the doors. There are smells in the hallway, too—bacon, coffee, cigarette smoke. Always cigarette smoke.

But you never hear a live human voice. You never hear people talking to each other. And I've had a lot of patients there. It's the same on every floor. To be honest, I always felt a little uneasy. Not that anyone ever threatened me, and I've been in much worse places. I think it was the silence. Before I had trouble with my hip I used to take the stairs for exercise. But then I'd hear doors open and feel eyes on my back. When I'd turn around all I'd see is cracks in the doors. So I take the elevator as long as there's no one else in it, but it's tiny and so slow that—I'm sorry. Maybe it's just me. I don't want to alarm you. It's as safe as anywhere else.

No, it's not Section 8 housing. At first I thought so, but it's not. There are all kinds of people. Young, old, single, married. Regular people. But no kids. I've never seen kids there. When people have kids, they leave. And when their kids leave home, they come back. Maybe there's a rule about that. No pets either, unless you count fish. My first patient was a hoarder. I could hardly wait to see her when I started—I was still a young nurse, though I'd been working in hospitals for a while—but I could barely get inside. There were piles of magazines and baskets full of old clothes, broken appliances, toasters and things, all over the floor. There wasn't even a place to sit, except on the piles. Big dusty piles. One day there was so much stuff she couldn't open the door. That's when I called the police. I hated to do that, but she would've starved. There's no way the paramedics could get her out if she had to go to the hospital. She'd been living there for years and her neighbors didn't even know her name. Cecelia. I forget her last name. I managed to track down a daughter in Wisconsin. She was upset that I got in touch with her. She said, "After the things she did to me, I want nothing to do with her." That was sad. I know I'm taking up a lot of your time, but I want to let you know what to expect. Maybe I feel a little guilty leaving.

Summers are stifling there. The air is dead. Nothing moves. The flat roof is like a huge radiator when the sun beats down. So get out of the hallway as soon as you can. Most of the apartments have air-conditioners. Air-conditioners and big TV's. Even if they have nothing else—no pictures on the wall, no family photos, no plants or knick-knacks—they have an air-conditioner and a big screen TV. In winter you never know. The heat is erratic. It could be hot as an oven and then it's hard to breathe. You feel like peeling off your clothes. Or it's freezing and you do the whole visit in your winter coat.

The tenants complain and there's always someone there trying to fix the boiler, but nothing changes. So wear layers. You never know. It seems like that's all there is, summer and winter. I can't remember it ever feeling like spring or fall when I visit that place. You'll see.

I'd go there with you, but I have a lot of charting to do before I leave. If it's not documented it didn't happen, right? I'm slow on the keyboard, not like you. And I have to leave early tomorrow morning. I tried to make it all clear in my notes, but some things you can't put down. That's why I'm telling you this, so you're not surprised when you go there. You can't really talk about a building in your nursing notes. Sorry, I'm getting tired. All these loose ends. Would you like some coffee? I think there's still some in the kitchen. The building did wear me out a little. I know I'm getting older, but it was more than that. It was something that came over me as soon as I walked in. It's hard to say what it was exactly. Not boredom or frustration—and believe me, I've had more than my share. More like doubt. Doubt that the same rules that applied everywhere else applied in there. At least the rules you thought applied everywhere else. Maybe what bothered me was it made me think those rules didn't really apply anywhere. But that's silly. Don't pay any attention to me. The building is just a building, and the patients are like any other patients. It's been hectic getting ready for this move. I'm a little stressed and maybe I'm not thinking clearly. When I get to Las Vegas the first thing I'm going to do is find a spa and have a nice long massage.

You have three patients there now. Two or three is average. I try to batch my visits when I can, but they're usually on different schedules. You always have to confirm. When I first started it seemed like they were never home. Which is a problem, right? Since they're supposed to be homebound. We'd call later to make sure they were okay, and they'd say they were home the whole time and nobody came by. It was a big waste of time, and of course it caused billing problems. So we started discharging them and right away complaints went rolling in to Medicare and the Health Department saying we abandoned them. Like the patients had a direct line to the government. It triggered a big investigation. The upshot was that most of them were really homebound and we shouldn't have discharged them. So we got a huge fine and had to redo all our policies. But the patients were actually home, they just wouldn't

answer the door. That's not what the investigation found, but that's what was going on. That's what they told me later. They said, "We don't have to answer the door if we don't want to." Which is true. After that they let me make my visits. I told you about my first patient, the hoarder. You never know what to expect. Some apartments are so filthy you want to disinfect yourself when you're done. There was a bedbug outbreak a few years ago. They had bug-sniffing dogs go through the whole place. For months my skin itched the moment I drove in the parking lot. It still does sometimes. But some apartments are neat as a pin. Spotless. Everything organized, bright colors, flowers. Artificial flowers, mostly. It's amazing how real they look. No mess, they don't need sunlight. And collectibles like you wouldn't believe.Souvenir plates, pewter spoons, cuckoo clocks, cat figurines, dolls. Troll dolls especially. You name it. Usually in apartments with older women, of course. Young men's apartments are sparse, like a cell. Maybe there's a poster from a movie or a rock group stapled to the wall. Not much clutter.

I don't think anyone ever died there. None of my patients, anyway. At first I was proud of that. I felt like a good nurse when I sent patients to the hospital. Why should I take any chances? If they had a fever or a cough, off they'd go. But I admit I was worried about my liability, too. Especially after the Health Department investigation. So all a patient had to say was they had chest pain or trouble breathing and I'd be dialing 911. Which happened a lot because I had all kinds of patients—cancer, heart failure, strokes, dementia, end-state this and end-stage that. I didn't have to force them. They thanked me. Sometimes their doctor would be upset if I didn't call first, but most of them were happy not to be bothered. You'll find out which ones are which. But I didn't care what the doctor said. If I thought they needed to go to the emergency room, I sent them. It's my license on the line. I saw a lot of them disappear and never come back. After a while that bothered me. I gradually accepted the fact that some of my patients weren't going to get better no matter what. So I started thinking about hospice. A lot of them would have qualified, not just the cancer patients. But hospice wasn't big back then. Finally a lung cancer patient agreed to a consult. After the hospice nurse came to the building, my other patients stopped talking to me. Some of them wouldn't answer their doors. Anyway, the patient refused. To please his wife, mostly. Right away my

visits went back to normal. He went to the university hospital for treatment and never came back. Ended up in a nursing home. I never had a patient in the building go on hospice. Not one. When I'd bring it up they'd wave their hands and say, "I don't want to talk about this right now," or "I'm going to fight this thing." Some got real mad. They said I was taking away hope. Who wants to sound like the voice of doom? So you just do what you can and eventually they'd disappear and then you find out they're in the hospital and that was the last you heard of them. Next thing you knew there was someone else in their apartment like your patient was never there. It seems like there's always an ambulance out front taking someone to the emergency room. No one ever died in their own apartment. Not that I know of, anyway. Maybe that's bad for rentals. Buildings get reputations just like people, you know. When my hoarder patient died, a middle-aged couple moved in. The wife has MS. You'll be seeing her. The husband drinks a little and doesn't say much. He takes good care of her, though. Give him credit, she's not easy. I've had other patients go on hospice. Just none in that building.

I'm afraid I sound a little burned out. Could be, but that's not why I'm leaving. My husband just retired and likes to play golf. We have a daughter in Vegas. Besides, there's no income tax in Nevada. I want to keep working, but I need a change. That building took something out of me. I can still feel it. I put a lot of years into it and don't know what I got out. Questions, mainly. Questions I wasn't looking for. That's why I won't do home care any more. I don't want to find more buildings like that. I hope you get more out of it. But if you don't, take my advice and get away from there. I know I'm holding you up and I have to finish my charts. But hang on, I'm almost done.

We had to do something about patients going back and forth to the hospital. You know, it's one of the quality measures that made us look bad. So—technology, right? Tele-monitoring. We could check their vital signs any time, day or night. We swooped right in and set it up. A few patients said, "I don't want this crap in my place," but most of them went along. But there was one problem. The patients have to step on the scale or put on their blood pressure cuff. They wouldn't do it. They'd forget, they said. They got phone reminders every day and still wouldn't do it. The equipment just sat in the corner. I tried to find out what the problem was. Most of them just shrugged like they didn't know what I was talking about. They honest ones would say, "What's

the point?" Some did use the equipment, but their trips to the hospital were about the same. Real nice stuff, though. State of the art. And it worked well in other places. I should have invested in the company. You're used to all this, though. I probably wouldn't recognize all the new machines in hospitals these days. It's the future, right? Maybe they won't need us anymore. The patients will have cameras in every room and they'll monitor them from India.

Just to let you know, after dark things are different. I never made visits at night, but sometimes in winter it would be dark in the late afternoon when I got there. You can tell the difference. That's when I started to notice sounds. A groan or a murmur. Real faint and far away, and never lasting very long, but they were sounds I never heard during the day. At first I thought some people were home from work early and had the TV on. You know how loud commercials can be. Or maybe having sex. That wasn't it, though. I'd listen by the door of the apartment it was coming from, but it would never repeat. And, like in the daytime, I never heard people actually talking to each other. On the phone, yes, but not two people in the same room. Maybe they whisper. Because couples have to talk to each other once in a while, don't they?

Last year my husband started complaining about the smells I brought home. I never noticed. Maybe I was just used to them. Marijuana for example, from my MS patient. Her place was always full of marijuana smoke. She could've got medical marijuana at a dispensary but said it was too much trouble. Her husband started smoking it, too. They grew their own plants. And tobacco, of course. I knew I came home with my clothes reeking of tobacco. I didn't know I came home smelling of air freshener, and fried chicken, and rose water, and roach spray. How my husband's nose got so sensitive I'll never know. I thought your sense of smell got worse with age. I had to shower at night or he'd sleep on the couch. He said he could still smell it when we were on vacation. I thought he was getting a little strange, but then I started to wonder if it was true. Maybe I'd been going to that building so many years the smells were embedded in my skin. I started to smell them, too—or imagined I did. I couldn't tell which, and at that point neither could my husband. I tried antiseptic soaps. I showered twice a day. I scrubbed my skin with all kinds of exfoliants. It didn't make any difference. No one else could smell it, though. Just me and my husband. When I asked

to be re-assigned my supervisor said, why should I re-assign you when no one else can smell it? Then she asked if I was under any stress. I said no, there's nothing stressing me out except the smells from the building that are driving my husband crazy. She pointed out the employee assistance program was available for this kind of thing. Encouraged me to go. But I didn't get re-assigned. My husband couldn't have used EAP, anyway.

What finally did it was the dreams. I started dreaming I lived in the building. We had a corner apartment on the second floor. I'd come home from work and park in the front, in the tenants' lot. The dreams lasted after I woke up. I'd go to the bathroom and start fixing breakfast before I realized I was in my own house. You might think I was in a daze, but no, I was wide-awake. In the dreams sometimes I looked for the tele-monitoring equipment to weigh myself. Sometimes I dreamed my husband was homebound and I'd be waiting for the visiting nurse, or that he was sick and I had to call an ambulance. So I went to EAP. They referred me to a therapist. I don't like taking pills, but I started something anyway. My doctor changed my blood pressure meds just in case the dreams were a side effect. But my husband started having the same dreams and he'd never set foot in the building. He dreamed about parking in the front lot, too, and about the tele-monitoring equipment. Taking the stairs or the elevator to our corner apartment on the second floor. Maybe he heard so much about it over the years he could picture it as easily as me. He dreamed I was homebound and sometimes he'd have to call the ambulance for me. In both our dreams we never talked to each other. He had smells in his dreams though, and I didn't. That was the only difference. I don't know why I'm saying this. You must think I'm crazy. I'm actually feeling fine. Once we decided to move the dreams got better. We still have them, but not so often. I could say it was the therapy, but it's the same with my husband. So I don't know. You do anything long enough and it's bound to get to you, right? Everyone needs a change now and then. We're really looking forward to Las Vegas—there's lots to do there and no winter. Still, I feel a little guilty. It's hard to let go. Harder than I thought.

So you have my mobile number. Feel free to call if you have any questions about the patients. Like I said, some things you can't put in your notes. I'm going to miss

them. Some of them, anyway. Remember, keep a close lookout for the building when you go. There's a 7-Eleven on one side and a muffler shop on the other. It's easy to drive right past.

THEY ALL DIED

They all died. Not at the same time. Sometimes it seemed like it, though. It was more like over a couple of years. Still, they all died. You expect people to die, but mostly of natural causes. So what happened to my cousin? Carbon monoxide. You ever seen pink cheeks on a dead body? Is that natural? He lived outside town in the woods, more or less. Last winter, when the big storm hit, he lost power and ran his generator in the basemen. To keep the pipes warm, probably. Dumb. Everyone knows that's dumb. He knew it too, but he did it anyway. Go figure. And my husband's Uncle Bob, his uncle by marriage. He kept his spare oxygen tanks in the basement next to the furnace. When they exploded the house caught fire and set off the ammunition on his ping pong table. He burned up in his bedroom but what killed him was a shotgun slug. Figure that one, too. Not that he would have lasted much longer with his emphysema and all. But still, don't keep oxygen tanks near the furnace. And basements—you have to be real careful.

Some did die of natural causes. My brother, for instance. A massive heart attack. He didn't take care of himself, so you could see that one coming. He must have been four hundred pounds when he went. Massive, like his heart attack. Just started a new job and a weight loss program when he keeled over. He was a good ball player when he was young. Strong, and fast for a big guy. But he let himself go. And my friend Marilyn died of lung cancer. Now that's a bad disease. She wasn't my best friend, but we were close. Did you know more women die of lung cancer than breast cancer? I learned that from Marilyn. So where are the pink ribbons? Breasts get all the attention. Women will walk miles for healthy breasts. Men, too. Try to get them to walk for lungs. Some people you expect to die so that's okay, like my ex-husband's grandmother. A

hundred and two, God bless her. Found her dead on the toilet last month, cold as ice. You could say she died of old age. And her husband dropped dead at ninety-four next to his snowblower. I'd call that natural causes but it was a while ago, so he don't really count in the things I'm talking about.

Kelly, down the street, had a stillborn. That counts. That's not a miscarriage, that's a death. They say the baby was perfect otherwise. Perfect little hands and perfect little feet, nice round head with curly hair and everything. Not a mark on him. I think there's a lawsuit on that one. You can't sue when you're a hundred and two, even if they leave you on the john for an hour. I think the government's glad they don't have to pay for you no more. But a baby? Even one that never drew a breath. It tears your heart out. Kelly don't look so good these days. I think her marriage is in trouble. Her husband is a nasty person anyway, but that's off the subject. Who really knows what goes on in other people's marriages. There were two other stillbirths in town last year, nobody I knew, but it makes you wonder.

Then there were the car accidents. There's always car accidents, so I can't say it was all that strange. They're hard to keep track of. That's what kills teenagers, mostly. They don't get real sick unless it's drugs or something. Even then it takes a lot to kill them. But not a car wreck. It happens so fast. One minute you're here, then—wham—you're gone. There's usually one right before high school graduation every year. The whole town is depressed for a week or two. We get tributes to the dead kids in the newspaper, and memorial services at school and church so we can heal. It helps. It's really a shame for the seniors though, since it's a time they should be happy about graduation and all. And the parents, of course. This time there were two. One took my cousin's kid Margie, her youngest. A good kid too, never in trouble. She was a passenger in the back, wasn't wearing a seat belt. Did you know that was legal? The airbags inflated but the car rolled over and the roof caved in. She was with a bunch of kids and they were all drinking. All seniors. The driver lived, walked away without a scratch. Ain't that always the way? Another girl was paralyzed and on a breathing machine. Lived though, so she don't count, and besides she's not related or anything. I forget about the other accident, the other one with teenagers. It had nothing to do with graduation, that's all I remember. But there was one with a guy from work. I didn't know

him that well, but I'm sure he wasn't drinking 'cause he was a Seventh-Day Adventist. Nicest guy. Nice dresser. He might've fell asleep when they were coming back from Six Flags. That's what the paper said. When someone falls asleep at the wheel and they ain't been drinking, you got to wonder what medicine they're on. Seems to me. Him and his wife. The kids survived.

You might think from everything I said I'm used to death. Sure, I seen my share. My father died twelve years ago. He had diabetes and all kinds of problems, strokes mainly. He was such a mess at the end it was a blessing when he went. And a high school boyfriend was killed in the Gulf War, the first one. Killed in a helicopter crash. One of a hundred and forty-five non-combat deaths. I know, I looked it up. There were a hundred and forty-nine combat deaths, too. On our side, anyway. So what's more dangerous, the enemy or our army? But no, I'm not used to it. Only a cold-hearted person would get used to it. You might say, what about soldiers or police, or doctors and nurses? I say it's not the same thing if it's your job and it's not someone close to you. It doesn't mean they're cold-hearted. And even with soldiers I don't think they get used to it, they just accept it. Because, what choice do they have? Though after the last couple of years maybe I am getting used to it. At least not so shocked. Even so, you can't really talk about it much, like whistling past the graveyard. You can mention it, you can announce it like they do on the news, but you can't really talk about it. Too scary. Everybody's scared of dying. Trust me on this. That's why people don't want to think about it, or why they pretend they don't care. Like those people who say, when your number's up your number's up, or when it's my time just let me go. Okay, we'll see how they feel when their time comes. They'll be first in line for a dialysis machine or one of those transplants. Which seems creepy to me, especially a heart transplant because you can feel it and hear it, a dead person's organ inside you. Like people who turn cannibal because they're starving. You might think there are exceptions, like suicide bombers. I say they're so scared of death they want to hurry up and get it over with. You could say they're scared *to* death.

Give me a minute to think 'cause there were more, the things that are harder to talk about. Suicides and such. They seem to come in bunches, don't they? For years you don't hear about them, then it seems like there's one every week. I don't count

attempts. A girl gets upset her boyfriend broke up with her so she takes a handful of Tylenol. That's nothing. No, I mean the ones who blow their brains out in the garage or hang themselves from a pipe in the basement. They're serious. That's what our next door neighbor did, hung himself. It didn't come out of the blue. He was a very intelligent man, though. He could talk to you about anything and tell you things you didn't know. But he had his troubles for a long time. Couldn't keep a job. You don't know if he was depressed and got fired, or was fired and got depressed. Anyway, they said he just started taking medication. Guess that didn't help. You think he felt so bad he just wanted to end his troubles? No, I think there's more to it. What he did to his family. That's mean, the guilt they're living with. He must have known it and didn't give a damn. How do you think his wife felt when she found him there in the garage? If you ask me, he wanted to stick it to them. So I don't feel sorry for him. Maybe that makes me a mean person too, but that's how I feel. There was another suicide, or something like it. It's more personal. I'll get to it, just give me a minute.

And there were murders, too. Two murders—one last year and one the year before. I lived in this town all my life, so I know lots of people and have a bunch of family here. That's why when things happen they affect me. If I moved here a couple years ago and didn't know anybody a murder wouldn't mean much. It's not like I know everybody though, the town's not that small. There are people moving in and out all the time. Still, sometimes I think what happened the last few years is too much. Something's wrong. And then I wonder, is it maybe just coincidence? Or maybe it's just me. The older you get the more stuff happens, or at least the more you pay attention to it. Like the murders. Typical stuff I suppose. Nothing fancy like *Murder She Wrote*, or Sherlock Holmes or anything. My stepdaughter was killed by her ex-husband. That's how much good a restraining order does. Shot her in the kitchen, in front of their kid. We take care of him now. I'm a little old for this but my husband helps. And my best friend's father was killed in a robbery, my girlfriend Joanie. We've been friends since fifth grade so I known him a long time, too. Someone broke into his house and beat him to death. She told him he should find a smaller place, a condo or something, but he said when his time came he'd die in his own home. So he got his wish. Beat him to death with his own rifle before he could load it. I don't think that was such a good idea,

someone with dementia having a gun in the house. I guess these days you call that a home invasion. Joanie keeps beating herself up for not making him move, but I keep telling her it's not her fault. Parents don't listen to their kids. Mine never did. Better than dying in a nursing home, anyway. Sort of. They arrested a guy from out-of-town. The police said he was looking for drugs and got the wrong house. Are those natural causes? Suicides and murder? The wrong house? When you think about it hard, you have to wonder. Maybe they are. Human nature. Not the part we like, but we're part of nature just like cancer and the flu. Now war, when I think about that one I'm not so sure. It's been going on a long time, but if it's natural I got a problem with nature. You could say God made things that way, or the Devil. Same thing. It don't matter how you look at it. My opinion, for what it's worth.

Now the last one, the one I've been putting off. I don't really know where to start so I'll just say it straight out. My son. He died of an overdose. They say that's a peaceful way to go, but I can't help thinking about what it was like for him. When he closed his eyes for the last time and just drifted off, or maybe choked on his vomit. Who knows? It happened right here in town, not that it came out of nowhere. There comes a time when you can't fool yourself any more, so I came to expect the worst. Hoped not, but expected it. I was ready for something bad when I got the news. Still it hit me hard. It's hard to write off your own kid. You know you still love him, but that's not enough. What's enough? I don't know, I could've done some things different. A lot of things I suppose. Too late now. Some people say it's no one's fault though, it's just in the genes. So what are you supposed to do, go crazy? I didn't know he had AIDS. No, that's not quite right. He was HIV positive. I'm not sure how he got it, it could have been a couple of ways. That's no big deal. You can treat that, right? Look at Magic Johnson. But drugs, that's harder. I didn't even see him the last year of his life. I told him I couldn't give him more money and that's the last I heard from him. I'm so angry I can't think about it. All I want to remember is the little boy who liked to help me around the house. His grade school teachers said he was always nice to other kids. He was real cute, too. Big dark eyes like his father. It's not just me, everybody said so. I can't even look at his pictures now. He passed six months ago, but the deaths keep coming. Like they're going to stop.

PERPETRATORS

Manny sat at the kitchen table and waited for his coffee. “She’s crazy,” he said. “What’s wrong with her? All she does is watch TV. The kids run wild, she doesn’t care.” He had dropped by his mother’s house after another argument with his wife. His mother, nodding with her usual sympathy, set a cup of coffee in front of him and shuffled back to the sink in her housecoat and fuzzy slippers. He added three spoonfuls of sugar, paused a moment then added a fourth, watching the coffee swirl as he stirred, thinking back to the argument. It had not gone well.

“You have to be firm with her,” said his mother, gazing out the window over the sink as she rinsed the coffee pot. She had neglected to take her morning pills. Her ankles, thick and leathery beneath the hem of her housecoat, were swelling as the day went on. She watched a squirrel perch on the wooden fence that marked the boundary of her small backyard and nervously eye her bird feeder. “She wants to run the show.”

“I’m firm, believe me,” said Manny. “I don’t let her get away with nothing.”

His mother couldn’t help but laugh. Manny, slight and morose, was the least assertive of her children, though never short on complaints.

“Why are you laughing?” said Manny. “I’m serious.”

His mother brought him a doughnut and joined him at the table. “Of course you are. Marriage is a serious business. But Lynette has a hard head. Almost as hard as yours,” she said, rapping him lightly on the forehead with her knuckles.

“That’s why we fight. We’re both very stubborn.” Manny took a slow sip of his coffee. “That don’t mean I like it.”

“It’s not good for the kids,” said his mother, glancing at the small cut next to his left eye.

“I know that.”

“But does she?”

“I don’t know,” said Manny. “One thing for sure—she likes to push my buttons. I tell her to stop it, but she just don’t listen.”

“Like I said, you got to be firm.”

“I’m firm, believe me. She knows I’m firm.”

“Good,” said his mother. “Then I’m sure you can handle it.” She stood up to signal she was done with the subject. She had heard it all before, many times, and was under no illusions about the behavior of her daughter-in-law. “Before you leave, I need you to move the bird feeder away from the fence.”

Manny went out the back door to move the feeder, pausing to take a calm breath on the bottom step. It felt good to be in the sun, bright and warm, away from the confines of his apartment and the heavy atmosphere that oppressed it on days like this. He reviewed the previous night in fragments, recalling a word here, a gesture there, as he always did following their blowouts. What had started it? The kitchen. The kitchen was a mess. “I just got home,” she said. She’d been home an hour. “I was tired,” she said. She’s always tired. He hated coming home to a mess. She knew that, but she didn’t care. That’s disrespect, Manny reasoned. To be honest, he told himself, his wife was a slob. It was embarrassing. His friends must see what a slob she was. They must be talking about him, right? Saying how he has a lazy wife who disrespects him. So who wouldn’t have a few beers coming home to that? And she couldn’t even do the pizza right, a frozen pizza. All she had to do was heat it in the oven. She couldn’t even handle that. “Then *you* can make the fucking dinner,” she screamed and threw his slice of pizza on the floor. “And *you* can clean the fucking kitchen,” she yelled. “And *you* can pick up the fucking kids,” she said as she hurried them off to bed. That’s what she does, Manny continued, watching the squirrel scurry away. That’s her trick. She makes it sound like it’s my fault.

Manny pulled out the post to the bird feeder easy enough, but the ground was too hard to thrust it in a new spot. He returned to the house for a shovel, annoyed that the chore had turned into a project.

“Ma, why do you have a bird feeder anyway? When seeds fall on the ground you get mice. Then you get snakes.”

“I don’t see no snakes. And if I did, I don’t care. I like to look out the window and see my birds. I like birds. They don’t have troubles.”

“Sure they do. They worry about cats.”

Feeling he’d gotten the best of the exchange when his mother waved him away, Manny set the post firmly in the new hole he dug away from the fence. Always some excuse, he continued, as he finished the job by kicking the excess dirt around the lawn. Like it’s my fault. She didn’t have to scream at me like that. What was I supposed to do, sit back and take it? In front of the kids? Then she hits me back. Now that’s crazy. She knows I can’t let that pass. Besides, he reminded himself, he had to leave no doubt who could hit harder. Manny returned the shovel to the house and went to say good-bye to his mother.

“Bye, Ma. Thanks for the coffee.”

“Remember, you have to be firm,” said his mother, pressing his hand. “Everything will be all right.”

Manny wasn’t ready to go home. He needed time alone, yet felt the need to talk. After a short drive he drifted into a familiar driveway. His friend George, looking even fatter than he remembered, was puttering about the garage like a bear pawing for grubs. George looked up warily. He hadn’t seen Manny in quite awhile. Manny hadn’t seen any of his friends in quite awhile. In truth, he didn’t have many friends. There was his family—an older brother he hadn’t seen since their last argument two years ago, his mother, and two sisters he saw most holidays—but he didn’t trust friends.

“Manny?” said George, his voice rising over music blasting from a large radio on a work bench, finally recognizing the unexpected visitor when Manny eased his slim frame out of the car.

“Hey, George,” said Manny. “I was in the neighborhood.” That seemed very suspicious to George. He was not going to lend Manny any money. “What you up to?” asked Manny, as he strolled into the garage with his hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his sagging jeans.

“Just stuff,” said George. “Washing the car.”

“George, who’s there?” came a voice from the house.

“It’s Manny,” George called back.

“Who?” said the voice, loud and shrill.

George turned down the volume on the radio. “It’s Manny,” he shouted.

“Manny?” shouted George’s wife. “What’s he want?”

“Nothing,” answered Manny. “I was in the neighborhood.”

“George, you have things to do today,” said his wife.

“I know,” said George.

George filled a bucket with water from the garden hose and handed it to Manny. “Here, you can help me.” He filled another bucket for himself, and gave his car a good dousing with the hose. They began washing it from either end, making slow circles with their soapy sponges, working towards each other. “So how are things with you?” asked George. “You working?”

“Yeah,” said Manny, much to George’s relief.

“How are the kids?” asked George.

“They’re good,” said Manny. “Real good.”

“And Lynette?”

“She’s good. You know, the usual.”

They finished soaping the car and George hosed off the suds. He found two towels and handed one to Manny. “We don’t see her around anymore.”

Manny shrugged. “She’s been busy. Besides, she don’t like to go out much.”

George paused and looked at Manny over the roof of the car. “That’s a change,” he said.

“People change,” said Manny.

They continued wiping, listening to the radio and the slow sounds of Saturday morning unfold on George’s block. Manny wiped intensely, so meticulous it was obvious he had something on his mind. “George,” he finally asked, stepping back to examine the shine on his side of the car. “What’s wrong with women these days?”

George grunted as he crouched by the fender on the other side, slightly out of breath. His knees were beginning to ache. “These days? What’s changed?”

“No,” said Manny. “I’m serious. They don’t listen.”

“Some do, some don’t,” said George. “What’s your point?” George was growing impatient. He had chores to do and no interest in watching Manny dance around his problem, whatever it was.

“You ever do things, but sometimes you wish you didn’t? But you know you had to?”

Manny’s question was too obscure for George. He couldn’t be bothered deciphering it. “Sure, doesn’t everybody?” was the readiest reply that came to mind. He had to get to the supermarket before noon.

“I don’t know,” said Manny, reflecting on George’s answer. “Some people don’t have to do them in the first place. You know, they don’t have to straighten things out for other people.”

“What’s your point?” said George once again. And, trying to conclude the discussion by cutting to the chase despite his intention to avoid it, added, “You having troubles with Lynette?”

“Me? No. Lynette and me are fine.”

“Then what’s the problem, Manny?”

“Nothing,” said Manny. “I was thinking of somebody else. Everybody has problems once in a while.”

“That’s right,” said George.

“No big deal,” said Manny.

“George, when are you going to the store?” called his wife from the kitchen.

“Now,” he called back. “Manny, I gotta go.”

George said a brief good-bye, and abandoning any pretense of hospitality shooed Manny out the driveway. Manny left with his question unanswered, less eager to return home than when he arrived. Driving away, his anger smoldered at the lack of respect shown by George’s wife, interfering when he had serious business to discuss, and at the way George accommodated her. He realized why he hadn’t seen George much the past few years. George had changed. Big as he was, the man was pussy-whipped, Manny concluded. Manny had other reasons to delay his return home. He wanted to give Lynette a chance to straighten out her attitude and clean up the

apartment. Their fights always left him downhearted as well as defiant. From George's house he found himself driving to the mall, but the parking lot was filled with weekend shoppers and he didn't feel like mixing with a crowd. Crowds made him nervous these days. He circled the lot and exited, traveling down a wide avenue of new strip malls and big box stores that gradually tapered to a quiet two lane road as it left town. Farmhouses stood on remnants of their land among the twisting lanes of new developments, like old folks on the edge of a playground. The openness gave him a sense of relief. He left the highway and drove along the river, breathing easier. His thoughts calmed further at the sight of sunlight glinting off the water, reflecting the blue of the sky, without a soul in sight. He sighed and vowed to be more patient. I shouldn't have hit her in front of the kids, he thought. But she should know better than to provoke him. Why can't she control herself, he wondered? Even so, he wanted to show that he still cared, even when she messed up. He should bring her a gift, he decided. Something for the kitchen, something to make her work a little easier. Then maybe she'd try harder. He turned the car back toward town with a fresh resolve. The river reversed its course, and the noon sky hurried toward him. He would show her he still cared, but first he needed a beer. There was a sports bar at the mall where he could relax a bit. Then he would face the crowds and shop.

The bar was empty when Manny arrived, quiet and cool as a cavern. By the time he finished his second beer it was beginning to fill with shoppers drifting in for lunch. A college football game played on the screen overhead, nearly life-sized it seemed. Manny tried to follow the flow of the game, but found himself distracted as the alcohol relaxed his mood, conjuring in him a renewed affection for Lynette augmented by each sip. She wanted to be a good wife, he mused, and a good mother. But she was a weak person. She needed help to stay on track, someone with a firm hand.

"You married?" he asked the bartender.

"Twice," said the bartender.

"Then you know something about women," said Manny.

"Not much," said the bartender. "Only what they tell me."

“My wife’s a good woman,” said Manny, ordering another beer. The bartender pulled another glass-full from the tap and waited for Manny to continue. “She’s a good woman,” he repeated. “I should treat her better.” The bartender raised his eyebrows and nodded, knowing it best to remain opaque after such comments, easing away toward customers at the other end of the bar.

The tavern continued to fill as the afternoon wore on. Football filled the screens that surrounded the room, plays unfolding in furious haste, replays slowed to a violent dance. All the bar stools were taken now as Manny nursed his fourth beer. There was chatter everywhere. Sporadic cheers erupted to celebrate tackles and touchdowns. Manny was happy to be part of the weekend relaxation, anonymous and unremarked. He was relaxed yet considerate enough to wait for a commercial on the TV overhead before raising his glass to the man next to him in a toast. “Here’s to good wives.”

The man next to him clinked his mug and rejoined, “To good wives. Whoever they are.” They chugged their beers and laughed.

“Mine ain’t perfect,” said Manny, “but she’ll do.”

“I’ll drink to that,” said the man on the stool next to him. They clinked glasses and chugged once more. “If she lets you spend Saturday in a bar, she’s okay in my book.”

Something in the man’s offhand remark triggered Manny’s sudden urge to be home. He hadn’t realized he’d been gone so long. He looked around the dimly lit room as play returned to the screens. Clusters of men laughing at tables with large pitchers of beer, chatting couples sipping glasses of wine, a row of silent customers strung out along the bar. It felt much lonelier than when he first arrived with the place to himself, a hollow feeling in the middle of his chest. He needed to express something to Lynette to make that feeling go away. Not an apology exactly, but something to make it clear that he wanted to help her and set things right. Or maybe it was an apology.

“I gotta go,” he said to the bartender, pulling out a handful of cash to pay the tab.

“Going home to the little woman?” said the man next to him.

“I got things to do,” said Manny.

“Whatever,” said the man, not taking his eyes off the TV screen.

Manny lurched out of the sports bar, disoriented by the sudden brightness of the mall and the crush of shoppers swarming around him in the crowded corridor. In his rush to escape he forgot about a gift for Lynette, and felt lost in the parking lot searching for his car when struck by a sudden apprehension. What if she wasn't home? What if he came back to an empty apartment? He imagined her packing off the kids god-knows-where without the least regard for him and his feelings. He grew angry at the thought she might not give him the chance to set things right, grew mad at himself for wasting time and money at the bar. What came over him, talking to strangers like that? He was a very private person. Nobody needed to know his business. Maybe she wasn't home he reiterated, still not sure where he parked, wandering randomly up and down the aisles until he finally spotted his car in a far corner. Maybe she really wasn't such a good wife; maybe she'd never learn. He threw himself into the driver's seat and pounded the steering wheel, gunned the engine and raced out of the lot, hardly concerned he was driving under the influence.

When Manny charged into his apartment, he found his wife stretched out on the living room sofa glued to the TV while the kids chased each other over the furniture.

"You're home," he said, surprised.

"Of course I'm home," said Lynette. "Someone has to be here. Where the hell were you all day?" A bruise on her left cheek was barely visible under her blemish balm and blush.

"I stopped by my mother's," said Manny. "Then I went to the mall." For some reason he patted his trouser pockets as he realized he'd forgotten to buy her a gift. "I wanted to get you something to say I'm sorry for last night. Something for the kitchen."

"For the kitchen?" she said, sitting up and fiddling with the remote. "Like what?"

"I'm not sure. I looked around for a while. Then I decided to ask you first," he ad-libbed. "To make sure it's something you want."

"You're at the mall all day and you don't get nothing? All day?"

Manny didn't want to hear it. This wasn't going the way he had hoped. He wandered into the kitchen to collect his jumbled thoughts and noticed the table was

clear, the sink empty, the dishes all clean and neatly stacked. He wished he'd remembered the gift.

"I don't need nothing for the kitchen," shouted Lynette, lying back on the sofa and propping her feet on the coffee table. "I could just use some help around this place."

Manny pulled a beer from the refrigerator and took a seat at the kitchen table. "Turn that thing down," he shouted to her in the other room. "I can't hardly hear you."

Lynette could not hear him either and wasn't listening anyway. The kids had started bickering. She yelled at them to shut up and turned the TV louder. Manny knew it was up to him to straighten things out, as always. He drank and listened, fighting hard to keep his temper in check until a sad drowsiness fell on him like a dead weight. "I need a rest," he said. "Turn the damn thing down, will you?" He'd straighten things out later. Or maybe, after his rest, things would be better.

Lynette kept the volume where it was as Manny dragged himself to their bedroom and slammed the door. Displayed in front of him, like the aftermath of a storm, were wet towels strewn on the floor among Lynette's crumpled underclothes. The bed was unmade. A half-empty can of soda stood on the nightstand, and chip crumbs were strewn like streaks of sand on the pillows and sheets. He heard the TV blaring through the apartment's thin walls and hollow doors as if Lynette had turned up the volume once again. He knew he had to be firm, and he wanted to sleep. She gave him no choice. He charged out of the bedroom. The kids scattered as she rose to meet him.

HER INTERN

The hospital looks like a fortress built by children of different ages using different sets of blocks. Any stranger passing by, witnessing so many drab, utilitarian styles of the past half-century with different hues of stone, brick, and metal, would have no doubt such a mishmash could only be a hospital. It towers above a neighborhood of large ramshackle houses partitioned into small apartments. The wealthier town-folk who once lived there moved on to newer, more fashionable quarters generations ago. The apartment dwellers who replaced them make the best of it, sleeping each night through the wail of ambulances and flashing lights. Late summer had slipped away hardly noticed. From vents high on its ramparts, among antenna spikes and satellite dishes arrayed like weeds, the hospital blows trails of vapor high in the air. Higher still, above the neighborhood and the town, the first glow of daylight gives the place a seductive clarity.

Andrea the resident eyed her intern warily. Cowboy, she thought. The intern eyed her back. They stepped off the elevator and turned left into a long corridor. The floor shone dull and empty under a line of ceiling lights. Dull but slick. It was a hard floor, a floor with no give to it. You needed good shoes to walk a floor like that all night, shoes that could take a pounding. When their call shift started the intern said, “I hope we get a code.” Andrea wasn’t sure how to answer. She merely raised her eyebrows and said, “You hope?” They walked down the hallway, the intern keeping half a step behind. The resident slowed her pace to see what he would do. The intern slowed his pace, keeping half a step behind, strutting as he always did with his chest out, his chin held high. Even with her shoulders hunched as she shuffled along, Andrea stood half a

head taller. She was a gangly young woman. Despite her glasses and her stoop, she looked to be younger than her intern, and she was. They arrived at the nurses station. Third shift was underway. It was quiet and still. Her intern wore good running shoes. Andrea made a note to get some new shoes. Comfortable ones. They settled at a cluttered counter to discuss their new admission.

"He needs a spinal tap," said the intern.

"I don't think so," said the resident. "Just treat the pneumonia."

"You sure?" said the intern. "If you think lumbar puncture, do it," he quoted from his medical school apocrypha.

"His mental status changes aren't new," said the resident.

"Okay," said the intern. "Your call. If you want to risk it."

Cowboy, thought the resident. "Just watch his CO_2. Don't give him too much oxygen." She assumed this was obvious. The patient was a chronic lunger. It was after midnight and Andrea was hungry. She always got hungry when she was sleep deprived. There was leftover pizza in the residents' lounge. "We're finished here. I'm going to the call room," she said. She exited the pneumonia patient's chart and stood up. "You coming?"

"No. I have things to follow-up," said her intern.

They parted ways with mutual relief. Before he left the floor, the intern tracked down the new admission's nurse and told her to call him for the slightest change in the patient's condition. For any change at all. She seemed eager, attentive. New to the job maybe, fresh out of nursing school.

"Yes, doctor."

"Please, call me Allan."

If he had his way, he confided to her, they would be more aggressive. The patient would get a spinal tap. From her studied attention he was sure he'd made an impression. He planned to flirt with her before the end of her shift, and marched away briskly with his head up, his chest out, fingering the stethoscope slung around his neck. It was a slow night. Boring, in fact. He wasn't happy. Except for meeting a new young nurse, he felt his time was being wasted.

Dr. Allan Lascher, the intern, had no patience for rounds. He learned by doing, not talking. He knew what it was like to be in the real world beyond the classroom, in the world of acts and decisions. And so he would rather work the long nights and weekends and holidays of internship than plod along in morning rounds that he called ‘a mass of shifting dullness’. He welcomed the hours on-call for the freedom they afforded him. There was more room to breathe, and fewer people to slow him down. More chances for procedures. See one, do one, teach one—the house officer apocrypha that was part of his book. The pockets of his white coat bulged with folded bits of paper, notes, small instruments, pocket guides of every sort. In the stairwell he visualized the actions he would perform in the next code. He was disturbed by the last one, by the way the resident ran it. He would have done things differently. He would have kept it going longer. Much longer, as long as it took. His ringtone announced a new page. It was his resident telling him they forgot to ask the new admission’s code status. He shook his head. ‘Fuck that crap,’ he muttered, entering the stairwell on his way upstairs to check a patient with a bowel obstruction.

The young nurse, diligent and true to her word, was keeping an eye on the new admission for the slightest change in his condition. Her patient inhaled deeply behind his oxygen mask. With each long exhalation there was a rumble in his chest, deep and coarse, that triggered a wet cough and a tongue full of thick gray phlegm. He lifted the mask and spit weakly into a tissue, leaving the mask askew on his nose. “Mr. Rivera, it won’t do you much good there,” said the nurse, slipping the mask back in its proper place before he could wipe his mouth. Mr. Rivera lifted his eyes toward her blurry face and nodded. His English wasn’t so good. He couldn’t quite hear her over the hiss of oxygen, but sensed nonetheless she wanted him to acknowledge something. He was focused on his breathing, one breath at a time, making sure he continued to breathe in and breathe out, letting nothing distract him. After listening to his lungs the nurse checked his oxygen saturation, and with a gentle pat on the hand told him it was fine. He was barely aware that she had been there. He kept the mask in place and gradually felt less hunger for air. He began to drift off toward daybreak as his breathing slowed

and the rumble in his chest seemed farther away. He'd been working hard for a long time, and a nice long rest would be welcome.

"You still need that tube," said Allan the intern, speaking to the woman with the small bowel obstruction. She was grey-haired, obese, wide-awake despite the hour. "Why did you pull it out?"

"It was bothering me," she said.

"I need to put it back."

"No, I want it out," she insisted.

"Fine," said Allan, taking a moment to plan his next move. He turned away and looked out the window of the patient's room. The town lights glowed like dying embers. He was glad this boring night would be over soon. "Then let me examine you," he offered, returning to her bedside with a stratagem.

The patient reluctantly pulled up the front of her gown. Surgical scars stretched tight across her bloated belly. Bending forward, Dr. Lascher unslung the stethoscope from his neck and listened closely for the tinkling of her bowels, his eyes narrowed in a pose of careful consideration. He pushed firmly on her abdomen until she winced. It felt like a beach ball.

"Your intestines are still blocked. They can swell up and rupture if I don't put in this tube. That would be a real disaster." He paused for effect, and to be sure she was listening. "Honestly, the irritation from the tube is nothing compared to a ruptured gut. That's a painful way to go." He gave his words another moment to sink in, then added with a shrug, "I'm not making things up here. It's for you own good." That did the trick. She acquiesced out of gratitude, not fear. He held the bridge of her nose firmly with one hand and slid the lubricated end of the tube in her nostril with the other while she squeezed the side rails of the bed as hard as she could, letting out a series of soft little grunts like a pigeon cooing. Before he could finish his pager went off, its high-pitched beeps more insistent than commands. He stopped, cursed softly, excused himself while the patient waited clutching the bed rails with the tube half in, and checked the message. The nurse with the new pneumonia admission. He would call back as soon as he could. One thing at a time. He returned to the tube insertion. When he felt it

advanced far enough, he stopped and listened with his stethoscope. Assured now it was probably in her stomach and not her lungs, he attached it to wall suction and watched for the return. A green, bilious fluid oozed into the tube and snaked its way to the plastic receptacle plugged over the bed. Good for now. He shed his gloves and answered the page.

"Mr. Rivera's hard to arouse," said the nurse. "He doesn't look good."

"Who?" said the intern.

"Rivera, the new admission you told me to keep an eye on." Allan looked at his watch: 6:00 a.m., still time to do a spinal tap. He told the nurse to get the tray ready and he'd be there shortly. No need to bother his resident, he reasoned. He'd let Andrea sleep and notify her when he was about to start. He ordered an abdominal film and blood work on the patient with the SBO. As he was about to search the computer for Rivera's labs, a code announcement boomed over the ceiling speaker at the nurses station. A moment later it repeated on his phone as he flew down the stairs.

Andrea the resident looked at her notes, rubbed her eyes, looked at her notes again, yawned, and tried to recapture her last thought. Something about a blood gas, the Henderson-Hasselbalch equation, medical school, an exam. The links of her associations were weakened from fatigue. I wish I'd done more teaching today she told herself, glancing at her watch as she leaned back on her chair in the residents' lounge. She was prone to self-recriminations. Her eyelids closed slowly of their own accord as, neither asleep nor awake, she ruminated on her decisions of the past twenty-two hours. Doses, rates, levels. Too much or not enough. Tests that should be done, tests that weren't necessary. What did she miss? *Primum no nocere.* Sure. Let it go. It will be over soon. Sign out and go home. She had fallen into a light, restless sleep when the code was announced. Her eyes started open and for a moment she was frozen to the chair. Then her mind snapped open, she raced to the door and tripped down the stairwell to the room in question. There was a crowd around the new admission with pneumonia. In the middle of the scrum, standing over the patient, her intern held two paddles like catcher's mitts against the patient's chest. "Clear," ordered Lascher in a

firm, clear voice. The patient's chest heaved and fell back on the bed. Andrea looked at the rhythm strip, then back at her intern. "We need to intubate," said Allan.

"Sorry I'm late. We had a code at change of shift. One of the new admissions. Lascher's with him in ICU. He'll be there awhile, so we might as well get started. Here's the list. It was a slow night until the code. Way too slow. That should have been a clue. I don't know what's with Lascher. I told him to watch the patient's CO_2. Just a stupid intern mistake? I don't know. I had this feeling all night he was blowing me off. I think he was pissed because I wouldn't let him do a spinal tap. Doesn't like anyone telling him what to do because what, he was in the Marine Corps or something? My fault. I should've kept him on a short leash…Right. The patient. Intubated, on a vent. Stable for now on pressors. More or less. And get this, he's DNR. The family's up there and they're not happy. I still have to tell the attending. I told Lascher to check his code status but he never got around to it. Now I'm the one in deep shit. And get this, he told me he doesn't think anybody in this hospital should be DNR. I'm going to report that. He loves codes, by the way."

Mr. Rivera, intubated and immobilized, lay prone in his ICU bed swathed in technology. His chest rose and fell to the sighs of the ventilator. Tubing twisted across his mottled skin. A crumpled sheet covered his torso and legs down to his dusky feet. HIs wife stood blinking at the bedside, flanked by two daughters and a son, distracted by the constant gong of alerts, numbers flashing on screens, lines traced and retraced like zig-zagging comets on the monitors overhead.

"Gilberto," she said, taking his hand. "Gilberto, can you hear me?" She bent closer to her husband's face, sensing a slight pressure from his hand. "Can he hear me?" she asked, looking up at the intern dressed in blue scrubs on the other side of the bed fingering his stethoscope like a rosary.

"I'm not sure," said Allan.

"Is he in a coma?" asked one of the daughters.

"Not exactly," said Allan. "He's heavily sedated."

The nurse at the head of the bed, setting up an infusion pump, broke in. “Yes, he can hear you.”

“He didn’t want to be on a breathing machine again,” said Mrs. Rivera, choosing to address the doctor over the nurse. “But maybe it’s for the best?”

Dr. Lascher’s attention was drawn to the patient’s eyes, fixed dimly on the ceiling. He appeared puzzled by the question left hanging in the air. He placed his stethoscope gently on the patient’s chest, narrowed his eyes and listened solemnly as if the answer were there.

LADY'S THISTLE

"You need to stay home today," said Kelly.

"I can go, Mom. I'm okay."

"No, you're not. You look terrible. I'm not letting you go."

"All right."

Teresa went back to her room and logged onto her computer. Downstairs in the kitchen her mother gave a sigh of relief. It's not easy looking out for a sick child, especially one who doesn't know her limits. Kelly promptly phoned Teresa's school to let them know her daughter was ill, then dialed her work to let them know she would not be coming in. As she waited for someone to answer, she looked out the living room window at a Japanese maple in her front yard fluttering in the wind, worried its feathery leaves were too delicate for the weather. She was about to hang up when her supervisor finally answered. From the tone of voice at the other end she knew her announcement had met a frosty reception. She was not concerned. The Family Leave paperwork for her daughter's condition was all in order, properly submitted, and Kelly knew the law.

Kelly and her daughter lived in a white cape on a quiet cul-de-sac. It was plain but comfortable, and more than enough for the two of them. Moles tunneled across their thin front lawn, but the foundation plantings were newly mulched and the flower beds well-tended. It had neither charm nor disrepair to draw attention to itself, which suited Kelly just fine. They had moved so many times Kelly knew exactly the kind of house she was looking for, and they had settled into this one with enough time to unpack before the school year started.

Teresa, at the computer, felt tired. Nothing new, just the usual heaviness in her bones. After a few minutes online she was exhausted and lay on her bed to rest. Her

thin limbs projected like twigs from the shorts and tee-shirt that served as her nightwear. She lost track of time but didn't sleep. It was mid-morning when her mother appeared at the door with a tray, dressed as if expecting company and beaming like a proud hostess.

"I thought you might like something to eat," said her mother. Teresa sat up, and her mother placed the tray in her lap. Toast and a banana.

"Maybe I'm dehydrated," said Teresa.

Her mother returned to the kitchen and brought her a can of diet soda with a glass full of ice. She set them on the tray and caressed her daughter's smooth, downy cheek as Teresa chewed a piece of toast with dutiful bites. Her mother's hand felt cold.

"You need to rest," said Kelly as the phone rang. They ignored the intrusion until the answering machine picked up. Someone from Teresa's high school. The words were indistinct, but the tone was clearly insistent.

"I better check that," said Kelly, returning downstairs.

Teresa spat the doughy wad of toast into her napkin, unpeeled the banana and wrapped its flesh in the napkin as well. She slid the bundle under her bed as she heard her mother mounting the stairs.

"It's your school."

"I thought you called them."

"Of course I did. They said they need a doctor's note. Something about ten absences."

"Already? That many?"

"Do you want the rest of your toast?"

"No, I'm full. My stomach feels funny."

"I'll call the doctor's office. You rest."

Kelly did not like the school's attitude. They should have shown more concern. She had hoped this school would be different, but it was turning out like all the others. And she was upset the doctor did not return her call until noon. She had told the receptionist it was important. "My daughter's not feeling well. I made her stay home. She needs a note for school," she said when the doctor was finally on the line.

The doctor was not very helpful. “I’m not sure what she has. I wouldn’t know what to say. Can you bring her in this afternoon?”

Kelly could barely contain her exasperation. “She’s too weak for that. I know when my child is sick. She just needs a note.”

“I understand,” said the doctor. “But we need to see her first.”

“Are you saying you won’t write her a note? With her condition? You know how bad she gets.” The inconvenience was galling. The school’s indifference was one thing, but from a doctor it was unacceptable. It was clear to Kelly the doctor never had a child of her own with a serious medical condition.

“We’d be happy to write a note after we see her,” said the doctor.

Kelly was offended by wastes of time and money, and the last thing she wanted was another co-pay. “Okay. When?” The doctor put her through to the receptionist to make an appointment.

“Teresa, we have a doctor’s appointment at three o’clock. They won’t write a note unless they get paid,” called her mother from the bottom of the stairs.

“Yes, Mom.”

“We can go shopping afterward. How would you like that?”

“Sure, Mom.”

Kelly opened her laptop to check the balance in her checking account.

A physician’s assistant, still new to the practice, scrolled quickly through Teresa’s chart. She was seeing Teresa for the first time. “Are you still taking your anti-depressant?” she asked, her eyes fixed on the computer screen.

“No,” answered Kelly for her daughter. “It upset her stomach.” Teresa sat subdued.

“Are you taking any other medicine?”

“Just vitamins,” said Kelly. “Some kava-kava, St. John’s wort, fish oil. All natural.”

“I’m not taking the fish oil,” said Teresa, her head bowed.

The PA recorded the supplements in the medication list. “Have you gone for the referral to Youth Services?” she continued, hoping to draw an answer from Teresa.

“No,” said Kelly. “We tried to get an appointment but they never called back.” That was also duly noted in the chart. “We’re not going to a place that doesn’t have their act together.”

The PA finally looked up from the screen to address Teresa’s mother directly. “Are you okay stepping out for a minute while I examine Teresa?” she asked.

“I’d rather not,” said Kelly, forcing a smile. “I want to know what’s going on with my daughter. Anything she’d say to you she would say to me. Isn’t that right, Teresa?”

Teresa nodded. “I’d feel better if my mom stayed in the room,” she said. Her mom stayed.

At the end of the exam, the PA said, “I’m not sure what’s going on with her. I’d like to order a few tests and an ultrasound.”

“She just had an ultrasound two months ago,” said Kelly. “Don’t you look at the record before you see a patient?”

The PA clicked through a series of screens until she found the report. In fact Teresa had two ultrasounds and a CT scan in the past year. “Just the blood tests then.” She sent a lab order through the computer and handed Kelly a handwritten note for Teresa’s school. Kelly examined it carefully.

“It says she’s excused for one day only,” said Kelly. “Are you sure she’ll be okay tomorrow? I don’t want anything to happen to her. Dr. Mueller knows how bad she can get.” Kelly had learned years ago that she could not depend on the system. Advocating for her daughter was second nature.

The PA took the note back and added another day to the excuse. “Please make an appointment to follow up with Dr. Mueller,” she said.

With the school note finally in hand, mother and daughter drove to the mall. Kelly circled the parking lot until she found a spot close to an entrance. It felt good to be out of the house. They strolled unhurried through the airtight halls almost like sisters at play, their conversation lost in the hum and murmur rising from the levels below. Past the sunglasses hut, the foreign language course kiosk, the phone store, sports apparel, home furnishings and jewelry, losing track of time, until they came to a shop with skin care products. It was one of the few indulgences they allowed themselves. Once inside

they sampled some mint oil and white tea balm. They lingered over the fragrances of the rain forest, felt mineral creams and vanilla lotions. They could appreciate their medicinal benefits. Antioxidants, anti-inflammatories, anti-aging formulas. Something for face, eyes, hands, feet, neck. So many options, so many agendas for health and beauty. At length they chose a Lady's Thistle cream to share between the two of them. Something to boost the immune system.

"It's a little pricey," said Kelly. "But we're worth it."

The next day, Kelly dropped off the medical note at her daughter's school. "Here," she said, vindicated, tossing the paper on the counter in the administration office. "You can pay for the doctor's visit if you don't believe me," she said to no one in particular. The staff paused in the midst of their clerical duties and cocked their heads, curious what little drama might unfold. They resumed their work disappointed when Kelly turned away and marched out the door. Kelly was pleased with the display of her dignity.

Teresa, back in school, felt a headache coming on. A steady pressure on the top of her skull. She knew how this worked. If she did nothing, by noon it would squeeze so hard behind her eyeballs she'd be in tears. She slipped into a toilet stall between classes and texted her friend Connor. Twenty minutes later she was in his pick-up truck driving away.

"I had to get out. I was going to die."

"Like I don't know," said Connor.

"Let's just drive for a while." Teresa rolled down the window and let the wind swirl about her face. She turned up the radio and closed her eyes. Connor was talking but she couldn't hear him. She waited for the pain to ease. Each time the car slowed she felt the blood rush to her face like a wave crashing on a rock. With each curve of the road she felt dizzy and wished she could throw up.

"Take me home," she said.

"What?"

Teresa rolled up the window. "Take me home," she repeated.

"I thought you wanted to do something," said Connor.

“No. Just take me home.” Connor reluctantly turned around at the next corner.

“Stay with me,” said Teresa.

“Sure,” said Connor.

There was a familiar truck in the driveway when Teresa’s mother returned from work.

“Hi, Mrs. Bauer,” said Connor.

“What are you doing here?” said Kelly. “Where’s Teresa?”

“She’s in the bathroom. I think she’s vomiting.” A toilet flushed and Teresa appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Hi, Mom.”

“For God’s sake, why didn’t you call me?” said Kelly.

“I’m okay. I didn’t want to bother you.”

Kelly chased Connor out the door and put her daughter to bed.

After the incident with Connor, Kelly insisted her daughter stay home from school the next week. Teresa spent most of her time in bed with a variety of pains—dull and sharp, shooting and stabbing, never quite the same from one day to the next—too weak for anything but visits to her chatrooms. Her absence finally prompted a referral to the school’s student support team for truancy. Teresa was going to be held back, they said. Kelly was neither surprised nor unprepared. How could someone in Teresa’s condition, even as intelligent as she was, keep up with schoolwork? She referred the team to Teresa’s doctor to learn the full extent of her daughter’s condition. Dr. Mueller, however, had not seen Teresa personally in over six months. She demurred. She hedged. Finally she announced she could not provide excuses for Teresa unless Teresa was also under the care of a mental health professional. Once again she recommended the local Youth Services, but Kelly would have none of that. She found a natural therapist who specialized in chronic fatigue.

“Teresa needs a prescription for an anti-depressant,” said Kelly, on the phone to Dr. Mueller a month after the support team intervened. “A different one that won’t upset her stomach.”

“I thought she was seeing a therapist,” said the doctor.

“She is,” said Kelly. “She said I should ask you for a prescription.”

“So she’s not a psychiatrist,” the doctor concluded.

“She’s a licensed therapist,” said Kelly.

“I need your permission to speak with her,” said Dr. Mueller. “I have to discuss Teresa’s condition before I prescribe. Then I want to see Teresa myself. I still think she needs a psychiatrist.” Kelly reluctantly gave permission and made an appointment for her daughter. Dr. Mueller called in a prescription for an anti-depressant. Two weeks later Kelly cancelled the appointment. She said she had to work and Teresa had no transportation.

“How long has it been since your last period?” The physician’s assistant, the same one Teresa had seen for her school note, was concerned about her vomiting. Her mother had rushed her to the doctor’s office when Teresa collapsed on the stairs.

“I’m not pregnant,” said Teresa.

“Are your periods regular?” Behind her computer screen, the PA hurriedly checked the risks of anti-depressants in pregnancy.

“She’s not pregnant,” said Kelly.

The PA glanced at Mrs. Bauer and returned her attention to Teresa. “So how long has it been?”

“Six months,” said Teresa. Her mother startled, thinking of Connor, but kept her composure and conviction.

“That’s from the stress of her illness,” said Kelly. “It’s about time someone found out what’s wrong with her.”

The pregnancy test was negative. The PA sent the urine specimen to be tested for chlamydia, just in case.

“She needs to see a specialist,” said Kelly, steeling herself for the usual resistance, prepared to advocate once again as the only person with serious concern for her daughter’s welfare.

“Sure. Which one would you like?” asked the PA. Kelly thought the young woman’s tone flippant even if she was, in fact, asking for Kelly’s preference. Or maybe she really had no idea which one to choose.

“How should I know?” said Kelly “Isn’t that your job?”

The PA picked one. “Let’s start with gynecology.”

“I don’t want to see a gynecologist,” said Teresa.

They settled on a gastroenterologist. The stomach seemed like a logical place to start.

Connor pulled his truck into the Bauer’s driveway and checked his phone once more. There was something about Teresa’s text that didn’t sit right. It was not her usual summons. No one answered his knock, but the front door was open. He found Teresa in the den, reclining on a sofa in front of the TV, calm and distant, with slash marks laddered up both forearms and small trickles of blood pooling in her upturned palms. A nail file lay at her feet. He froze, repulsed. She seemed amused by his reaction.

“What are you doing here?” she said.

“You texted me,” he answered.

“Really?” Teresa laughed softly. She struggled to get to her feet and fell back on the sofa.

“I’m calling 911,” said Connor.

“It’s not that serious,” said Teresa. “It’s not like I want to kill myself. I feel better now.” She stood up, light-headed, falling back on the couch once more. Connor made his phone call. He helped her to the kitchen sink, washed the clotted blood off her arms and wrapped them in paper towels. An empty pill vial lay on the counter.

“The doctors don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she murmured. “They think it’s stress. Maybe I’m just crazy,” she added, and laughed. “You better call my mom.”

With her thoughts racing far ahead of her, Kelly rushed from work to the emergency room with a sense of vindication—of relief even—underlying her fear. She found Teresa propped on a gurney watching TV in a back room, with thick dressings wound around her forearms like gauntlets covering stitches that closed the deeper

wounds. Connor was gone. Kelly was grateful for that, at least. A nurse informed her that someone from the crisis intervention team would be there soon. Kelly did not like the nurse's attitude. She could have shown more concern.

"I'm okay, Mom," said Teresa. "I don't know why they're making such a big deal."

"I'm taking you home," said her mother. "Then we're going to a real hospital where they know what they're doing."

Kelly went to the nurse's station and informed the staff she was taking her daughter home, just as a counselor from the crisis team arrived to make her assessment. An hour later, with Teresa hospitalized on an emergency certificate, Kelly took down the name of every staff member she encountered, announcing they would all be named in the law suit she was bringing against the hospital. Risk management was promptly informed, and twenty-four hour-a-day attendants assigned to Teresa's room on the psych floor. Her urine tested positive for marijuana, and for her mother's benzodiazepines.

Teresa was in the hospital for a week. Her stitches were removed, her medication changed, her follow-up arranged at Youth Services. Kelly administered Teresa's pills punctually and rubbed Lady's Thistle on her scars twice a day. Teresa felt more tired than ever—her bones still ached, she complained.

"I don't think you should go to school today," said her mother. "I'll stay home and look after you."

Teresa dragged herself upstairs and back to bed. The curtains in her room were drawn. From the far wall came a dim glow from the screen saver on her computer. She lay supine and rigid with her eyes open trying to make out patterns on the ceiling, and saw a vault of random dots. Downstairs, inspecting her image in the bathroom mirror, Kelly applied their Lady's Thistle cream to the crow's feet sprouting at the corners of her eyes, and the hint of wrinkles on her neck. A little pricey, she thought. She rubbed the cream into her skin in slow circles making sure it entered each pore, until reaching the end of her meditation. She turned to the window. It was clear what they had to do.

Teresa needed a better school and better doctors. Maybe they should downsize to a condo. She sighed. Moving again would be a lot of work.

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

- We don't have the money.

- But he's not safe.

- We have to do something.

- He wants to be in his own home. Don't you get it?

- Of course I get it. Are you going to stay with him?

- No. Are you?

- You know damn well I can't. I have kids. I have to work.

- So what about assisted living?

- They said he needs twenty-four hour care.

- How much would that cost?

- God, I hate to think.

- He could sell the house.

- And give all his money to some lousy nursing home?

- At least he'd be safe.

- I'll stay with him.

- You're going to dress him and get him to the bathroom?

- If I have to.

- He can't be alone, you know.

- We could hire someone, maybe a few hours a day.

- He doesn't want strangers in the house.

- We should talk to a lawyer.

- Forget that. They'd eat up all his savings.

- It'd be worth it if they got him covered.

- He's not poor enough for Medicaid. I already checked that out.

- He could give us the house.

- Too late for that. Five years too late.

- It don't matter. He never would've done it anyway.

- I don't think all his money should go to strangers.

- Me either. We should keep him in his own home. That's what he wants, anyway.

- I said I'd stay with him.

- He can afford help a few hours a day, can't he?

- Maybe.

- We could all chip in a little.

- Speak for yourself.

- Get me up.

- Hold on a minute.

- Get me *up*.

- I'm coming. Give me a second.

- Get me to the bathroom right now, dammit.

- Don't move. I don't want you falling again.

- Hurry *up*!

- Hold your frickin' horses, old man. I said I'm coming.

- You don't do nothing. Nobody does nothing.

- Not again.

- Get me to the bathroom.

- That's disgusting.

- I told you. You don't listen.

- You stunk the place up again.

- No thanks to you.

- Okay. Get up. I'll change you on the bed.

- You don't do nothing for me.

- I don't do nothing? What do you know, you're senile.

- If your sisters were here, they'd take care of me.

- Do you see my sisters here? I'm the one who takes care of you.

- Get me to the bathroom.

- I'm putting you to bed. Come on. I have to clean you off.

- Help me.

- You couldn't hold it another minute? Another frickin' minute?

- I'm so ashamed.

- You should be. Stop crying.

- Help me.

- I am helping you. More than you ever helped me.

- You think so? Then why do you stay?

- Someone has to be here. You want to go to a nursing home?

- I'm not going to no nursing home. I know what they did to your mother.

- Come on, I'll clean you up.

- Get out of here. I don't need your help.

- I should let you sit in it.

- Leave me alone.

- Okay, change yourself.

- Nobody helps me.

- We should leave him in the nursing home.

- Get real. It would cost a fortune.

- So what? He's just going to fall again. Medicare will cover it.

- His Medicare ran out.

- I mean Medicaid.

- Sure. After he sells the house and pays the nursing home. Then they'll cover him if he signs over his pension. Maybe. I told you I already checked that out.

- He can keep his house. My girlfriend's father did.

- No, he can't. Only if Mom was alive. Or if I get my disability. Go ask the social worker.

- You're trying that again? For what, drugs?

- Hell, no. It's my back. I don't do drugs anymore.

- Your back? Right. I don't care. Do what you want. I just want to be done with it. I'm tired of dealing with this shit.

- You think I'm not?

- Screw the money. I never expected a dime from him anyway.

- I don't think the nursing home's doing a good job. He needs more rehab.

- And how would you know?

- He should be doing better. He's weaker than when he went in.

- And you know that from where, California?

- He wants to stay in his own home.

- He doesn't have a clue.

- That's not what the judge said.

- The judge is an idiot.

- He knows he wants to be in his own home. He knows the risk. That's all the court cares about.

- Okay. They said he has to have a home health aide when you're not there. How do we pay for that?

- The state might pay part of it.

- How much?

- I don't know. We have to send an application.

- How long will that take?

- I don't know.

- And what if they don't?

- He has some savings left.

- I can pitch in.

- I can't. Sorry, I just can't.

- How much money are we talking about?

- He has enough for six months. That's if you come on weekends and give me a break.

- Then what?

- I don't know. We figure that out when we get there.

- I say we sell the house and be done with it.

- And where am I gonna live?

- That's not my problem. Get a job and find your own place.

- You stay with him and I'll get a job right now.

- You know I can't do that.

- Yeah, I know you can't do that.

- Who called them?

- Called who?

- I said who called them, old man?

- Who?

- Protective services. Who called them?

- Get outa here. I don't know what you're talking about.

- I don't want any more frickin' social workers in this house.

- What social workers?

- It must have been my sister.

- What?

- Maybe it was the hospital. Forget it. You don't know nothing.

- Why are you yelling at me?

- Because you're a deaf old man.

- Stop yelling at me.

- Why? You always yelled at me.

- That's because you don't listen.

- That's because you're a mean old fuck.

- Why are you saying this? I didn't do nothing.

- That's right, you didn't do nothing.

- What's the problem?

- You're the problem.

- Can I get you something?

- No. Not a damn thing. Get away from me.

- Some coffee?

- No.

- How about TV? What you want to watch?

- I want you out of here.

- It's okay. I won't bother you.

- Get out of my house, you black monkey.

- Don't mind him, he don't know what he's saying.

- I don't want no black monkey in my house.

- Maybe I should go.

- No, it's okay. He gets like that. He don't mean nothing. He'll calm down.

- Where you going?

- Dad, she's here to help you.

- Don't leave me.

- Don't worry. I'll be back. You need someone with you.

- Don't leave me with strangers.

- I have to go.

- I'm worried about Dad.

- We're all worried about Dad. He's getting worse.

- I mean about his care.

- What about it?

- Is he eating? Is he dirty? Have you seen any bruises on him?

- Why don't you come and check if you're so concerned.

- I want to know what you're doing about it.

- Me? I'm with him every weekend. The social workers have been over this with us.

- I don't trust his home health aides.

- Either do I. But they're the ones taking care of him.

- They could be stealing.

- Stealing what, his diapers? If you're so concerned, take him to Encinitas with you.

- You know he wouldn't go.

- Why? Have you asked him?

- Get real.

- Then shut up.

- I'll be out there in June. Then I'll see what kind of care he's getting.

- Fine. Just don't tell me what to do. I've been here the whole time. You don't do a fucking thing.

- At least I care.

- The hell you do.

- More than you.

- Come on, time to get out of bed.

- No. Leave me alone.

- I made some oatmeal. You have to eat something.

- I'm not hungry.

- You want to lie there, fine.

- When is your mother getting back?

- What?

- I need to tell her something.

- Dad, she's not coming back.

- Why not? I need to tell her something. There's negroes in the house. Africans. They're stealing her jewelry.

- Mom's dead, remember? Dead.

- What?

- Forget Mom. It's time for your pills.

- I don’t want no pills. Where’s your mother?

- You have to take them.

- Get them away from me. They’re poison. You’re trying to poison me.

- It’s the same pills you take every day. Since when did you have a problem?

- You can have my money. I don’t care. Just leave me alone.

- What’s wrong with you?

- Who are you? What do you want?

- That’s it. I’m calling an ambulance.

- I won’t go to no hospital. They’ll poison me.

- I can’t handle this bullshit.

- I’m freezing. Get me a blanket.

- You’re a sick old man. I’m calling an ambulance.

- So now you want him in a nursing home?

- I can’t handle him no more.

- He hasn’t changed.

- It don’t matter. I can’t handle him. You can take him if you want.

- What about the house?

- What *about* the house?

- We have to sell it.

- No we don’t.

- He has to spend down. How else is he going to get covered?

- I got my disability. It’s my house now.

- What?

- He gave it to me.

- He can’t do that. Not for Medicaid.

- Yes, he can. He did. It’s my place now. Check the law.

- It was supposed to be divided up equal, all three of us.

- Yeah, his assets. But he don’t have none.

WE WANT EVERYTHING

"The lot was full. We had to park two blocks down.”

Nursing homes are busy on Sunday afternoons. And now, with snow plowed into piles higher than the ground floor windows, there were fewer parking spaces than usual.

"We couldn't even find one on the street. Frank just dropped us off. He's still looking.”

More people crowded in the room, leaning against the radiator for warmth and searching for chairs. The women wore long black dresses draped over the tops of their high-heeled boots. The men wore ties, and wingtip dress shoes or black tassel loafers despite the weather. Church clothes. They encircled a man lying in bed supine and rigid with his torso tilted upward forty-five degrees. He looked neither young nor old, nor middle-aged, nor ageless. Interminable, perhaps. A conspicuous tube filled with straw-colored fluid ran from the plastic bag hung at his bedside to a place deep under his covers. From the foot of the bed a sinewy, cold foot projected with a heel pad Velcroed to his ankle. The dark skin of his shins was mottled with scars and black blotches, and the line of his shin bone looked sharp as a sword. A handsome woman held forth in the midst of the gathering, her matronly qualities on display at the bedside for all to see. “How you feeling, baby?" she asked gently.

The man in the bed blinked. The woman smiled and looked up at the faces surrounding her.

"See, he knows we're here." The visitors nodded and murmured in agreement.

"Uh hum."

Frank entered the room and removed his hat. "Man, it’s cold out there." From the window he could see the hard glint of snow that covered the picnic tables in the courtyard.

“Hello, Robert," said Frank to the man in the bed. "How are you?"

The woman at the bedside answered, “He's happy we’re here."

"Gloria says you're happy we’re here," said Frank, leaning down and speaking directly in his ear.

The man in the bed blinked once more.

"See, I told you so,” said Gloria.

Frank was happy to let Gloria interpret for his brother Robert, the silent man propped up in bed. After all, she came to see him every day. She had scrutinized the meaning of every twitch and tremor. But Frank wanted to be sure his brother knew he was there.

"Does your back hurt?" she asked. Robert remained stiff and still. She asked again louder, articulating clearly, spacing out each word. ”DOES…YOUR… BACK… HURT?" He blinked. "See, I knew it. I saw the bedsore yesterday." A new murmur erupted in the room.

“How’d he get that?” asked a young man leaning back on the radiator, twirling his wool hat on his index finger.

"From *neglect*," said Gloria, with an authority that had everyone in the room nodding again.

"So what should we do about that?" asked Frank.

"I already complained to the head nurse," she said. "And I'm talking to the administrator tomorrow. I spoke to the doctor on the phone. He didn't even know about it. Said he won’t be here till Tuesday."

The murmur grew louder.

“Till Tuesday?”

"That's not right."

“He don’t deserve this.”

“He need a better place."

"Damn right."

She silenced them with a wave of her hand. ”I told them I'm going to notify the state,” she said. “And you know I will.” There was another round of nods and murmurs.

"What good will that do?" said the young man by the radiator, still twirling his hat.

“What good do *you* do?” said Gloria.

……

"The whole family was here this weekend,” announced the charge nurse, a woman near retirement age with a seen-it-all air of simultaneous dismissal and acceptance. She was surrounded on her desk by paper charts the size of dictionaries. “They think he had another stroke."

The nursing home medical director, not far from retirement himself, stood at the counter above her, signing his way through a thick stack of forms with hardly a glance. ”And just how could they tell?" he asked, pausing to peer at her over his reading glasses.

"They said he looked weaker."

"Weaker than what?" said the doctor, returning to his forms as he continued speaking. "He can't stand. Can't sit. Can't speak, can’t swallow…”

"They said his right hand is weaker."

“Like I said, weaker than what?… And what if he did have another stroke?”

"I don't know, you're the doctor."

The implications ran quickly through the medical director’s mind to a simple conclusion. "It's not like we'd do anything different.”

"His wife said she wants an MRI."

"She's not his wife."

"His fiancee then, his girlfriend. Whoever she is."

“Whoever she is has no legal standing. The brother's next of kin."

"I know. But when I ask the brother something, he says talk to her. She makes all the decisions."

“And I’ve told her his prognosis. Several times. She doesn't get it. More like she doesn't want to get it.” The nurse looked up at him, waiting for an answer to the question she had not yet bothered to ask. “Okay, I’ll talk to her,” said the doctor, as if it

were his idea. “Much as I'd like to have as little to do with her as possible. There's absolutely no point in getting an MRI. You have to draw the line somewhere.” He signed the last form with a flourish and jammed the pen in his pocket.

“Thank you. She should be here this afternoon. That’s my pen, by the way. You can keep it if you want. ” The nurse returned to her pile of charts.

The nursing home was not far from Gloria’s condo, but traffic or weather could easily double her travel time. Like this Tuesday afternoon, she was stuck behind a school bus. There had been a light snow the night before but the roads were clear. She was on her way to speak her mind to the doctor about the bedsore and the stroke and the MRI. She hadn’t liked this doctor’s care from the start. The man acted concerned, she noted, but didn’t want to do much. Like it wasn’t worth it. Meaning Robert wasn’t worth it. Or maybe *she* wasn’t worth it. She expected an argument over the MRI. There was little they could do that would surprise her. She had been fighting for Robert since his first stroke. For his disability, for his Medicaid, for his therapy, for home health services. And after his second stroke, fighting for placement in a decent facility where he could get his strength back so he could come home, when everyone told her they should just put him in a nursing home and be done with it. And he did come home and she did take care of him until his amputation, and she had lost track of how many strokes he must have had because the CT scans and the MRI’s showed so many, old and not so old. So what good is this whole system, all these doctors and nurses and administrators and fancy machines and medicine if they can’t actually *do* something. And why can’t they, or better yet, why *won’t* they? Traffic finally started to move after the bus turned off at the middle school. The trees were still dusted white, but piles of snow in the passing strip malls and gas stations had turned grey as if speckled with lead. The roads were sand-streaked brown. And fighting with Social Security. She never had a run-in with the people at the window, they all tried to be helpful, it was only the security guards, one in particular, who dragged her out because she wouldn’t stop eating in the waiting room when she was diabetic and had been sitting there for two hours. Fighting for spousal benefits after she had been with him for twenty years and had been caring for him for the past five and now couldn’t marry him because they said

he couldn't give consent when she knew damn well he would tell them he wants to marry her, would shout it from the rooftops, if he could. If he could talk, or write, or even nod.

And the shame of it all, she thought, glancing at the dashboard clock in fear the doctor might have left by the time she got there, is they will never have any idea what kind of man he was. Any idea. How good-looking, or how strong, or how funny, or how he made love to her like no other man she had ever known, a memory so fierce she had to fight the urge to climb naked in his bed every time she was there so she could feel his body full against hers, tube and all. And he was still handsome, even lying there with his amputation and his liquid diet you could see that, how fine his muscles were, and she will never let herself forget the way he made her feel loved and no one will ever be able to understand what she felt or why she felt it or what she feels now. They will never see what she sees. She knows that. They see a black man with a stroke. A man on a tube. A mute, rigid, decomposing human remnant. So she doesn't want to hear about it, she will make sure he gets that MRI. She will do whatever it takes.

The medical director met Gloria in a corner of the nursing home's empty solarium. They sat at a table surrounded by the glittering white of sunshine reflecting off the new snow of the courtyard. Light streaming through the window glass had warmed their chairs. They were alone as two people in quarantine.

"So what are our goals here?" asked the doctor.

"You tell me," said Gloria.

"First of all, to make him comfortable. And maintain his dignity."

Gloria snorted. "Maintain his dignity? When someone has to wipe his butt? How about making him better?"

"I'm afraid that's not possible," said the doctor, trying and failing to return her frank gaze. "Sorry, I'm just giving you my honest opinion. I wish we could."

"If you can't, maybe we should find someone who can. Or someplace where he doesn't get bedsores."

"Yes, the bedsores. A good point. That should never have happened. We'll make sure we do something about that. But I doubt his medical condition will get better

someplace else." After a moment of reflection, he added, "If you want to transfer him though, that's up to you."

"Damn right it is," said Gloria. "I'm looking into it."

"Have you considered hospice?" offered the doctor.

"Hospice?" Gloria recoiled with a laugh and caught her breath. "That's for people going to die. Are you telling me Robert is about to die?"

"No," said the doctor. "Not right this minute. But he's near the end of his life."

"Who are you to say? Only God knows that."

The doctor rubbed his forehead and continued, "Granted. But we have a pretty good idea. What do you think *Robert* would want done at the end of his life?" he asked, making his emphasis clear.

"Robert's a fighter. He wants to live."

It had been a long time since the doctor was prone to say the first thing that popped into his mind, and he was not about to do so now. "Okay," he said, lowering his voice as if someone in that empty space might overhear. "But I need to discuss some important questions so we're all on the same page. If he takes a turn for the worse, do you still want him to go to the hospital?"

"Of course."

"Even if there's a good chance he'll die there?"

"Not if they take care of him right."

"He could die no matter what they do."

"He could live, too."

The doctor moved on to his main concern. "And what if he stops breathing, or his heart stops. Do you want him resuscitated? That could mean electric shocks, or having a tube down his throat so he could be on a breathing machine. It could cause him a lot of distress. Even if he gets all that, there's not much chance he'd survive."

Gloria rose slowly from her chair with the gravity of a mother superior about to dismiss a meddling priest. "Doctor," she drawled, "I've had this conversation before. I know all that. So why do you keep bringing it up? Whose interests do you represent, anyway? Let me make it clear to you. We want everything that can be done for him. I said Robert's a fighter. If he can survive, he will. We appreciate your comfort measures,

but that's not enough. So don't be taking any shortcuts here. We want you to treat him like you'd treat anyone else. Now shouldn't he get an MRI?"

"No," replied the doctor, finally rising from his chair to face her. "I wouldn't get an MRI on anyone in his condition. But if it makes you feel better, okay. I don't think it will tell us anything new."

"How do you know unless you do it?"

An hour past the scheduled time for his MRI, as Robert Privott waited on a stretcher in the radiology holding area, an astute young patient care technician arranging his sheet noticed he felt warm. Empowered by mandatory video workshops from the hospital's quality consultants to use her own initiative in situations like this, and inspired by regular safety meetings within her department, she took his temperature and informed the nurse he had a fever. The nurse confirmed the fever and duly notified the radiologist. The radiologist said he should be transferred to the emergency room immediately. From the emergency room he was admitted to the hospital for a kidney infection. When his blood pressure dropped he was transferred to the intensive care unit. When it stabilized he was transferred out. He was discharged from the hospital back to the nursing home on two antibiotics, a new antidepressant, stronger pain medicine, a wound-vac for his bedsore, and a higher dose of his muscle relaxer for spasms in his arms and legs. Before he left he also got his MRI. The official report said, "essentially unchanged". For her diligence, the patient care technician was awarded a certificate of special recognition and a week's worth of meal passes in the hospital cafeteria.

Gloria sat in the nursing home solarium once again.

"We're here because we want to address your concerns," began the nursing home administrator. "Please, why don't you start and tell us about them."

Gloria, Frank, the nursing home administrator, the director of nursing, the social worker, the head physical therapist, the nutritionist, a pharmacist, and the nursing home medical director sat around a long table set up expressly for the meeting. Coffee

and doughnuts sat on a side table by the windows. A freezing rain tapped at the glass, and outside the crusted snow was shadowed gray.

"I told you about the bedsores," said Gloria. "That was bad enough. I reported that to the state."

"We reported it to the state, too," said the nursing director.

"Then he got his kidney infection. I'd like to know how he got that. And I'd like to know why you all didn't know about it. They had to find that out at the hospital. Now he's not the same since he came back. He's weaker and he doesn't notice things like he used to. If he didn't get that kidney infection he wouldn't be this way. So I'm concerned he's not getting good care here. Proper care. I have a lawyer looking into all this. And I want him transferred someplace else as soon as possible."

"That's right," said Frank. "That's what we want."

Robert Privott lay in bed with the pale light of midwinter falling on his newly shaved cheeks, numb to its passive warmth. The objects in his room—a dresser, an old CD player, an emesis basin on the bedside table—seemed incoherent. His heart beat steadily. His blood filtered through his kidneys and his bowels made their slow waves. Formula dripped into his feeding tube from a half-empty bag above his bed. An electric pain jolted him where his left foot used to be, as if two bare wires had momentarily crossed. And deep below his brain, beneath the grey matter and the white matter, the lobes, nuclei, ventricles and lacunae, lesions, scars, tangles, and mangled circuits, his humors perceived a voice his neural memory had lost. "I won't give up." The door swung open and the EMT's wheeled a gurney alongside his bed. They hoisted his dead weight with a transfer mat and slid his rigid body into position for transport to his new facility. When they had adjusted the straps snugly over the blankets layered on top of him, they eased him carefully through the door. "I won't give up on you, Robert," said Gloria, holding his hand as the gurney made its way down the hall. His eyes began to water from the brightness of the ceiling lights, and a twitch pulled down the corners of his mouth into a faint grimace.

TIME-OUT

I like to open things and see what's inside. Like the vacuum cleaner. There's a lot of stuff in a vacuum cleaner. Lots of dirt and things inside the dirt. You can blow in the hose like a horn and brush your hair with the brushes. I tried to use it like a scooter. That doesn't work so good. People think I want to break things, but they're wrong. I just like to take them apart. When I go in a room I want to know what's in it. Not just see it and smell it. That happens anyway. I have to touch and taste it, too. That's why I open drawers and pull things out. I climb on the counter to see what's up there. I like to feel the window. It makes me feel better. But I don't put things in my mouth much now. I'd like to, but it makes my mom real mad. That's why I'm in time-out. I have to stand here facing the wall. The dirt in the vacuum cleaner tastes like shoes. That's not a bad taste. I wonder what the wall tastes like. If I lick it my mom will yell at me. She don't like me licking the walls, so maybe she'll let me out. I like it better when she yells at me.

In school you have to behave. That's hard if you're curious. I don't try to be, it just happens. They sent me to my doctor 'cause I don't listen. That's what they say, I don't listen, but I do. I can hear them. My doctor's okay. She lets me play with stuff in her room, like the light to look in your ears and the thing for blood pressure. She lets me listen to her heart. She doesn't even mind if I eat the white paper that's on the table, but my mom stops me when I do that. She asked my mom a bunch of questions. Then I got some medicine. It gave me headaches at first. I had to hit my head on the refrigerator to make them go away. My mom didn't like that. Once I hit it so hard she took me to the hospital for x-rays. A kid at school told me x-rays give you super powers. I've been waiting, but so far nothing. The headaches stopped, though. Maybe the x-rays did that. I don't think the medicine worked because I yelled at my teacher

more. I don't know why. I wasn't mad. I just had to yell because everything was jumping inside me. Then I'd get a time-out. The other kids would make fun of me and I'd yell at them and get another time-out. Then I'd push them and the school calls my mom to come get me.

They sent me back to the doctor. My mom filled out a lot of forms. A lot. The doctor looked at them and still didn't know what to do so she sent me to another doctor. He had toys in his office. He wanted to watch me play with the toys, but I didn't feel like it. He didn't listen to my heart or look in my ears or nothing. He asked my mom and me lots of questions about my dad. That made me mad. I don't like strangers asking me about my dad. I pulled my mom off her chair and told her we had to go. She got mad and yelled at me. On the way out she smacked me on the head. A few days later a lady showed up at the house and started snooping around and asked a bunch of questions. My mom looked scared, the way she looks when my dad is around. That's when my mom started to put me in time-out instead of smacking me. They taught her that. She still smacks me, but not as much. And it never bothered me, anyway. Not like the time-outs. The time-outs make me feel like I'm in jail. Like I'm tied up.

When my mom was in jail my sister and me stayed with her friend Jeanine. Jeanine is okay and we liked it there. But Mom really missed us. When she got out she wanted us back. So we had to change schools again. She took us to the doctor to make sure we had all our shots and get some forms filled out. My mom was always taking us to the doctor to get forms filled out. She goes to court a lot, too. They want a lot of forms. And to get help with food and stuff you have to fill out a lot of forms. She's good at it. I'm sure we got all our shots, 'cause we were there so much. My sister hates shots and cries before the nurse even comes in the room with the needles. My mom used to tell her if she don't behave, she'd take her to the doctor to get a shot. I don't mind so much because it don't really hurt and I get a prize every time I go. If I ask the nurse, sometimes I get two prizes, and sometimes I get one just for going with my sister. Like a pinwheel or a flashlight. I'd take it apart when we got home. Mom would get mad at me because she thinks I broke it, but all I did was take it apart.

The lady who came to our house asked me if anybody hits me. The doctors all ask me if anybody hits me. Sometimes the teachers ask me if anybody hits me. Sometimes other kids hit me. Sometimes I hit them. Sometimes my sister hits me. Sometimes I hit her. She's littler than me, so I don't hit her real hard. Just enough to make her stop bothering me. That's it. My dad yells at me when he comes over, but only when I do something wrong. He's strict. He don't hit me, though. Why do they keep asking? When I think about that I'd like to hit this wall. But I'd rather lick it. It tastes like chalk. It makes my tongue dry and sticky. My mom didn't see me lick it so I'll do it again. I want to get out of here. It's hard to breath feeling tied up. My dad don't hit my mom, either. Not much anyway. He just yells at her, too. He calls her stupid and says she can't do nothing right. But how does he know, he don't even live here. She does lots of things he can't see. Like have my shots up-to-date. My mom knows how to get things done but she gets scared easy. When she's scared, her eyes are big and round. That's why I know. She says she yells when she's worried.

When my mom was in jail they gave me some new medicine. They said I wouldn't feel so bad she wasn't around. I don't know. I still felt pretty bad about not seeing her. But things were okay at Jeanine's. She has two kids and I had somebody to play with after school. They have an Xbox. Except I didn't sleep so good. The school was real different, too. I hate it when I don't know what's going on. Then I start putting things in my mouth. I ate a whole pencil once. My sister and me got along then. She missed Mom even more than I did. They didn't give her medicine, though. Her eyes are a different color from mine but we have the same dad.

I'm supposed to be facing the wall. I imagine I'm in a tomb. I'm a mummy, all wrapped up. My mouth is covered with mummy tape and I can't open it. It's real dark and there are skeletons in here with me. Snakes and scorpions. We're buried under a pyramid. No one will find me for a thousand years. When the tomb is finally opened there are no people on the planet, just zombies. I really scare myself with this game and I have to turn around. Then mom yells at me and makes me face the wall again. I'm supposed to be thinking about my behavior, but I always think about being a mummy. I like to scare myself.

I'm in a special class in school now. The class for dumb kids. I don't think I'm dumb but maybe I am. Not as dumb as some of the other kids. I'm fat, though. I didn't used to be. I got fat when they gave me medicine to calm down. That's what my lady doctor said, it was the medicine. They didn't stop my old pills either, just kept giving me new ones. I didn't want to take them, but my mom said it was like vitamins for my brain. I was hungry all the time. I couldn't stop eating. My mom couldn't stop me either. The doctor with the toys in his office said I had to keep taking the medicine and get more exercise. Last year I played football, because they tell fat kids to play football. My mom and dad are small, though. I don't think I'm going to grow up to be a big football player, just fat. My job was to push the other kids around. I liked that. But I didn't always push them the right way and the coach got mad and wouldn't let me play and then my mom took me off the team. One time I got sent to the hospital after I pushed some kids in class and pushed the teacher when she tried to stop me. They took me to the office and I bit the nurse. The people at the hospital said I needed to stay, only they had to find a special hospital for me. My mom came and took me home. We got another visit from a lady who looked around the house and they asked me more questions about if any one hit me or if I feel afraid of anyone. All because I pushed some kids. They started it. And the teacher should've got mad at the other kids, not me. I'd do the same thing again, but maybe I wouldn't bite the nurse. She didn't do nothing to me. I was just mad. I don't think the new medicine did much, except make me fat.

Last summer my mom told the toy doctor she couldn't handle me no more. That's after my dad was coming around a lot and I started hitting my sister. So he sent me to a program. It was in a different town and Jeanine had to take us 'cause we don't have a car. It looked like a park. It had grass and big trees and everyone walked around quiet. I never seen a place so quiet. They asked me a bunch of questions and my mom filled out more forms. This was a strange new place, so I had to check it out. When my mom left I went to a room with some other kids. Most of them were fat, too. I put a book in my mouth so I could taste it. One of the teachers tried to pull it out, so I bit

down hard and she pulled me on the floor with it. That made me mad. I tore the pages out of the book and when they tried to stop me I hit one of the teachers and they sent me home. They wouldn't let me back. I spent most of the summer on my Nintendo. My mom got me some new games and I tried not to bother anyone as long as they left me alone. I didn't get much exercise so I got fatter, so fat the toy doctor sent me back to my real doctor for blood tests. But I wouldn't let them take my blood. I never screamed so loud.

The big problem started this year. The doctor with the toys said he couldn't see me no more. He always tried to be my friend but I didn't like him. It was the way he talked, like he wanted to be my dad or something. I think he wanted to trick me and find out if I was doing something bad. Maybe he got mad at me 'cause I wouldn't talk to him. He'd ask a question and then wait real quiet a long time but I still wouldn't say nothing. Mom said he was trying to help me, I don't know. But I didn't like him. He said the drugs weren't working and he didn't know why and he didn't know what to do. I needed a higher level of care. That's what he told my mom. A higher level of care. So he sent me back to my real doctor and told her she had to give me my medicine. I could see that made her mad. She said she couldn't give it to me. I guess she don't know how, cause she's not a toy doctor. So I didn't get any medicine. That's when things got bad.

They got bad with my sister. I don't know what happened. We used to play together a lot when I was little. Just us two, like we were friends. My mom wasn't home much and grandma wouldn't take care of us, so it was just us two. Back then my sister didn't mind if I took her toys apart. She was good at video games, too. Then she started school and things changed. She didn't like the things I liked. It changed more when Mom started taking her to cheerleading. At first it seemed okay when I was in football. She got some new friends there. They didn't like me. I didn't like them, either. But it got worse when I stopped playing football, 'cause she still liked cheerleading and Mom liked it too. She stopped playing Nintendo with me. She didn't let me take her toys apart. I started eating dirt from the vacuum cleaner again. Mom tried to stop me but I couldn't help it. It made me feel calmer somehow. I really needed it when my

medicine ran out and none of my doctors would give it to me. I broke my mom's phone trying to take it apart and started eating the paint on the window sill. I couldn't sleep and I couldn't keep still, like there was electricity running through my arms and legs all the time. I was real tired but my brain just kept working. It was like a game going super fast and I couldn't control it. I didn't know what I was doing half the time. Really. I did things I didn't know I did even when I was doing them. It was like someone else did it and I was watching them. I did some things to my sister. I think they were bad, but I don't remember. The TV said she hated me. It said she was going to get me, so I had to do something. Maybe I tied her up. Maybe I did some other things the TV told me to do. My sister was real scared of me. I liked that. But I scared my mom, too. That made me feel bad. Real bad, after the fire. But it wasn't me, it was the TV made me do it. And it was just some shoes that burned up in the closet. Then things got better when the lady doctor gave me my medicine again. Then she gave me less. Then she stopped it. I was happy 'cause I could sleep now. I lost weight. I didn't need to eat dirt from the vacuum cleaner any more. I just do it once in a while because I like the taste. That's why I'm in time-out. I don't think I'll lick the wall again. I'll just stand here and pretend I'm a mummy.

ONE DAY AT A TIME

"Hey, Tom. You awake?" Tom's roommate, the man whispering from the bed by the window, obviously was. His hoarse stage whisper carried all the way down the hall to the nurse's station. Tom, in the bed by the door, kept quiet. He was irritated by this sudden disturbance. He wanted a few moments to enjoy the relief he felt from his new plan—a simple, straightforward one that nonetheless should solve his problem. He was just drifting off. A cart rumbled down the hall. "Noisy fucking place. I can't sleep here," his roommate continued, despite Tom's silence. This time Tom grunted a vague agreement, roused from his thoughts by the certainty his roommate would keep talking no matter what he did. "You know what I'd like? A cigarette," the guy added. Tom's roommate couldn't keep still, day or night. A man without boundaries. Tom looked at him lying face up with the back of the bed so high he was almost sitting, the bulge of his large belly and the tubing behind him in silhouette under the window looking out at the lights of the town. "What I'd give for one lousy cigarette. This place is a dump. They don't treat you right. I got better service at the VA."

"I said I'd leave if he didn't stop. I know, I said it before." Tracey paused to let her sister speak, but her sister said nothing. No agreement, no surprise, just listening patiently on the other end of the line in Florida, a thousand miles away, to the latest news about Tom in the hospital. So Tracey continued, "This time I meant it. Lying around the house all day feeling sorry for himself. I can't work all night and come home to that. He must know I was serious 'cause he did it. Stopped, just like that. God knows how. Scared, probably. Tom's always scared of something. Just sat on the couch staring at the TV but he wasn't even watching. Never changed the channel. Just sat there till the shakes started like I knew they would. So I called 911 right away but by the time they got here he was already seeing things, hallucinating like the last time

when they sent him home from the hospital after five days. Can you believe that? Five days. They used to keep him a month, but not now. Now they dump him right back on me. What good does that do? But this time I mean it, I'll leave him." Her sister invited her to come down and stay with her, as she had done many times before. She would pray for Tracey, and for Tom.

Tom reclined in the chair at his bedside with his eyes closed. A pillow was fluffed behind his neck and a blanket lay on his lap. The pangs of a deep hunger were beginning to consume him. Hunger like an open pit, in a space bigger than his gut. A hole that would pull him in if he didn't fill it. He couldn't remember the last time he ate. Two days, three? It didn't matter. He showed her. He showed her what he would go through. Everyone thinks drunks have no will power, he remarked. They had no idea what he could do. People like his daughter, they don't have a clue. Won't even talk to him. Could a weak-minded person go through all this? The awful taste in his mouth was almost gone. The taste of metal and rotting fruit, like musty earth baking in the sun that was baked into his tongue. The same odor that seemed to come from his skin. He opened his eyes. A doctor hovered at the foot of his bed, making rounds. “Mr. Roy?” She looked to be about his daughter's age, maybe younger. He liked women doctors—young ones, anyway. Even if she was colored. She looked like she was concerned. The young ones usually do, like they want to do a good job and be your friend even if they don’t really know what to do. He wasn't prejudiced when it came to women doctors.

She asked the usual questions. He assumed she must have seen his records, and made sure to take that into account in his replies. “I got depressed when they repossessed my tools,” he said, at the first opportunity to mention it. He searched for her reaction but she said nothing, standing over him in her white coat, nodding, looking down the length of her long, straight nose from black eyes that shone as if they were polished. "I know it was a bad idea. I guess I was trying to forget my problems," looking away from her and glancing back, trying to read those eyes. She nodded again to show she was listening, perhaps wondering: Why did you stop like that? Why are you putting us through all this? Thinking of his past admissions, identical to this one, and the expense of all his hospital stays, all the while keeping eye contact, noting his

quick change from regret to indignation. "I got two payments left on my truck and now they want to repossess it. Two more payments." He watched her struggle with the empathy she was trained to express, as if she doubted the empathy that came naturally to her. "They wouldn't listen." She nodded. He was not aware that the cost of his hospital stay was at least as much as a new set of tools and a brand new pick-up truck. She was.

"You've been through a lot," she said, referring to his days in intensive care before he was stable enough for transfer to her medical floor. Things could be worse, she knew. He had insurance and a home. She could get him out of there.

"Yeah, I been through a lot."

"Things are looking better," she said. "You should be well enough to go soon. Have you thought about rehab?"

"Excuse me. Excuse me," insisted Tom's roommate from behind the thin curtain separating their beds. The doctor glanced behind it and saw a large young man sitting upright, wide-eyed, flushed and slightly tremulous, the redness of his beefy arms framing an array of tattoos. "Sorry for interrupting, but if you want rehab, I know a good place," he said. She thanked him and assured him the hospital would take care of it. "Just trying to help my buddy here," he said as she drew the curtain again.

"We appreciate that," she said.

"I'm still weak," said Tom. "I don't think I'm ready to go. I need a few more days."

"That's right," called his roommate from behind the curtain. "Don't let them push you out till you're ready. You got rights."

"Don't worry," said the doctor. "We won't discharge you till we're sure you're okay. One day at a time."

"Can you ask the nurse to order me another breakfast?" Tom asked. "I need to get my strength back. I been losing weight." The doctor agreed. She knew you don't eat much with a quart of vodka a day.

When Tom was in the critical care unit he knew what he felt on his skin was not real, the creeping and crawling, but not so the things he saw. Tiny winged creatures

lining the wall, real ones, and tiny angels speaking to him in words he didn't understand, swarming hot and fiery above and below him. They swirled about the ceiling like mad fairies, bright as diamonds, and fused at his bedside into glowing human forms. "Let's try some BiPAP." It sounded sinister, like his boss's voice, but even in his altered state he knew it must have been a doctor. An edgy murmur like the buzz of cicadas filled the room, rose steadily until it drowned out the group that babbled at his bedside, and subsided to a murmur again when he was alone. He might have slept. A strange animal wrapped around his face and forced its breath down his throat. Sheets of light burst from his eyes when he awoke. His wife was not there, nor his daughter, nor his sons. Just the tiny angels coming and going, monitors flashing their numbers, the cicadas, the feeling his bones would burst, and nurses injecting tubes with medicine as they made strange remarks from what seemed another planet. How could he respond when his mind had deserted him? When it was outside the window, parked in the night sky like a traitor switching sides, and his belly wanted to gush a river. It wanted to fill the room with its stream and shrink him to a fetus, floating in a pool of cool sparks. Yesterday. Or the day before. Or maybe it all happened years ago. If it even happened. The nurses kept telling him what day it was. Writing it in big red letters on the grease board on the far wall. It seemed to matter to them. Yes, he had done it. For her, for his wife.

People complain about hospital food, Tom mused, but I never do. "Sorry to trouble you again. Could I get another cup of coffee?" See, I always ask nice. Nurses don't like nasty drunks, or complainers. I tried to clue my roommate in, but he don't get it. Me, I do whatever they ask. They like that. Collect my urine? Sure. Get a pneumonia shot? Sure, go right ahead. "I couldn't make the payments because I lost my job. Now I can't work." See how that goes? You can't make payments because you're not working and then they take your tools and your truck so you can't work. "Well, I was drinking on the job. I admit that. I'm not trying to fool nobody. I'll tell you straight, 'cause you're trying to help me, right?" Men doctors don't like bullshit. They judge you quick. It seems like there's a new doctor every day. I think they do that on purpose. "Not till noon, though. Maybe my work slipped some in the afternoon but I was fine all

morning. I don't think I'm ready to go yet. My legs are real weak. I get these headaches and I'm dizzy when I stand up."

His wife came to see him just after morning shift change. She could see the sun's disk on the eastern edge of town as she pulled into the parking lot. Across the street, a thin beam of light shone like a stray beacon from the slate of the Methodist church steeple. She got a good spot, only a short walk from the lobby. She had come straight from work at the nursing home and was still wearing her shapeless uniform as if she worked in pajamas.

"I can't stay long," she said. "I need some sleep. I just want to say I think rehab's a good idea."

He cut her off immediately, raising both hands in protest. "Rehab? Forget it. They don't do nothing. Besides, I got no transportation." He turned away. His face burned red and he could feel his heart racing and his mind fogging up again. "I'm not going back there." He was not a joiner. It had done him no good the other times.

"No, not that kind of rehab," she said. "Like in a nursing home. Just a few weeks to get your strength back. I don't want you home till you can take care of yourself."

He took a deep breath and fell back on the pillow. He had planned to go straight home when they discharged him. To start over. With her, with Tracey. What more proof did she want? "Ok, I'll think about it."

The day nurse appeared with his medication. "How are you today? Having any pain?"

"My back," said Tom. "An eight, maybe a nine. And I got a headache."

"Here, this should help," she said, handing him the pills. "Would you like some ibuprofen?" she added, looking at the screen as she started making entries in the computer.

"It hurts really bad. I need something stronger."

"Then let your doctors know and maybe they'll order something else."

"I can't take him home, not like this," said Tracey. She was too tired to explain.

The nurse took a moment to finish her entries before replying. "We'll see what physical therapy says. Then discharge planning will be in touch with you."

"I got to go," said Tracey. The nurse wheeled her computer stand out the door and Tracey followed her down the hall. They chatted about Tom's appetite for a minute at the nurse's station before she left. The parking lot was filling up by the time she got there, and traffic was slow driving home. When she finally arrived, she fried two eggs for a breakfast sandwich. Just like the last time, she thought. Then she lay in bed exhausted, unable to sleep. Florida was so flat and humid, and there were so many old people there.

Soon after his wife left, Tom was helped to the chair beside his hospital bed. His breakfast lay on a white styrofoam plate set on the bedside table over his lap. He poured syrup on his dry pancakes, cut them with his plastic knife, and froze open-mouthed with a sudden thought about his wife. You can't leave me, he concluded, unfreezing and taking the bite. No way. It wouldn't be right. Not after what I did for you. He took a sip of orange juice, wondering when the doctor would show up.

His roommate was finally asleep, muzzled by a CPAP mask. Outside his door the corridor was in shadows. An alarm sounded down the hall—a soft, monotonous chime, insistent as needle pokes. Tom heard the tread of rubber soles and then there was silence. He could think again. He was thinking about work, about being a good mechanic all those years. He had worked on engines since he was a kid. First small ones, like lawnmowers, then his first car when he was sixteen. He had a feel for them, could almost tell what was wrong just by the sound and smell. But now he wasn't so sure. Maybe it wasn't just drinking on the job, maybe there was something more going on. It was harder to figure things out, harder to keep his mind going step by step in the right direction. It kept wanting to veer off like a kid at a carnival. He had trouble remembering things. He got lost driving home from the mall last month, a mall he'd been going to for twenty years. Maybe that's when you're disabled, he thought. When you can't get your strength back. Or your skills. Or your wits. He turned the idea around to review it from another angle. Was that so bad? It's not like he didn't want to work. That's what happens when you're disabled—you just can't. Bad nerves, bad back. And his blood pressure. Not his fault, really. He'd like to see other people work as hard as he did. His condition started to make sense. Maybe it would make sense to his

daughter, too. Maybe she would start speaking to him once he had it all straightened out. So the plan became clear. He would apply for disability as soon as he got home, and if they gave him any trouble he'd get a lawyer. He had pulled his weight long enough. More than his weight. Tracey'd be happy with his plan. And no more drinking, he vowed. I'm done with that.

Tom awoke to a commotion on the other side of the room. His roommate stood by the window with his naked butt hanging out the back of his hospital gown, cursing the nurse who wrapped a dressing around his arm. The front of the gown was soaked red, drops of blood lined his sheets and the floor. The nurse tried her best to calm him.

"I don't care," said his roommate. "I want my clothes. I'm leaving." He had pulled out his IV, letting it drip a puddle of saline on the floor.

"I'll call a doctor to come talk to you," she said. "Then you can sign out AMA if you want. I'll get the forms."

"I'm not signing anything," said the man. "And I'm not talking to no doctor."

Two security guards appeared at the doorway. "Everything all right in there?" Tom's roommate flopped back on his bed. "Yeah, everything's hunky-dory. Just get me my things and I'm outta here."

The nurse finished taping the dressing and helped him change his gown while the security guards posted themselves just outside the room.

"These people are trying to kill me," he told Tom when the nurse left. "Nobody knows what they're doing. Besides, I got to get to the bank."

An aide brought the man his clothes. When he was dressed, the nurse returned with his pills. "The doctor should be here soon," she said. "She'll go over the policy with you."

"Forget it. I'm not waiting for nobody." He turned to Tom. "So long, buddy. If I were you I'd get my ass outa here, too." His nurse and the security guards escorted him to the hospital entrance, then hurried back to complete their documentation before they were called to something else.

Tracey started packing the day Tom was transferred to a nursing home. She was going to Florida to stay with her sister, who'd been telling her for years she was welcome anytime. She had never considered it before, afraid her sister was just being polite, and even more afraid of what would happen to Tom if she went. But this time was different. It didn't matter why. This time Tom was on his own. She would put her sister's sincerity to the test. She knew she'd have to go to church down there, but church-going went with the territory. That was okay. She wasn't one to be filled with the spirit and fall on the floor, but if her sister and brother-in-law wanted to, that was okay too. They were good people, just different. And after she had a long rest and got the lay of the land she'd find a job down there and get her own place. She looked out her bedroom window. A thick layer of clouds covered the sky, clouds grey as ash stretching from horizon to horizon, weighing on the earth so hard she felt she could hardly stand up straight. Leaves like burnt scraps of paper clung to the spruce tree in her backyard. The days were short, and that always got her down. She had her own share of aches and pains. The less she saw of winter the better, she thought, imagining a little garden apartment in a complex with a courtyard and a swimming pool. He'll be okay when he gets his disability. If he stops drinking, he can come visit. Then we'll see. She would take it one day at a time.

HOW COULD THIS HAVE HAPPENED?

"How could this have happened?" Not a simple question. In truth, Manfred Clarke did not think this could have happened. But he was asking just in case.

"How could this have happened?" he asked again. "I felt good. I was playing soccer with my grandkids. Now you say I need to go to the hospital?"

His doctor was clear and emphatic. "Yes."

"But why? How do you know that?"

"Your lab tests are off the charts. Your kidneys aren't working."

"They were fine. I felt good."

Not exactly. His nephrologist recommended a fistula three months ago so he'd be ready for this moment. Manfred had politely refused. "Why they want me to go through that?" he asked his wife, suspecting money at the root of it somewhere. And when he went to an emergency room in New Jersey after feeling dizzy at the soccer game, they wanted to admit him when they saw how bad his kidneys were. He stormed out of the ER in a hospital gown, his response less polite than his refusal to the kidney doctor. When he got home and had the same tests repeated they were even worse. Not exactly fine and not exactly good.

"It was just a matter of time. They finally gave out." At every visit for the past year his internist had tried to prepare him for this outcome. Manfred assumed his PCP was exaggerating for effect, as most doctors do.

"But I eat right, and I exercise every day. I take all my medicine like I'm supposed to. How could this have happened?"

"Listen to the doctor, Manfred," said his wife. "You know you're not feeling well."

"How you know that?" said Manfred. "I just need some rest to get my strength back."

“Rest isn’t going to do it,” said his doctor. “We knew this would happen eventually. You need to go to the hospital. Things won’t get better by themselves.”

“Manfred, you need to go to the hospital,” said his wife.

“Listen to your wife,” said the doctor.

“I’ll go,” said Manfred. “but I don’t like it. Those tests are wrong. I’m not sick. How could this have happened?” His doctor didn’t know where to begin.

Manfred sat on the edge of the hospital bed with his bare legs dangling over the cold vinyl floor, the bottom of his shapeless gown resting mid-thigh. A wound dressing like a bulky white tumor was taped to the right side of his neck over the catheter for his emergency dialysis. He felt worse. He had done what they asked of him—gone straight to the hospital, started the treatment—and now he felt worse. Plus his neck was sore. He didn’t know any of the doctors there. He didn’t know that his PCP did not see patients in the hospital. He didn’t know that another doctor was covering for his nephrologist. He told himself these new doctors must know what they’re doing. They’re smart people. They studied a long time. But they didn’t know him. And he felt worse.

“Something’s not right,” he said.

His wife went to the other side of the bed and tied his gown loosely around his neck. His back, bare down to the middle of his buttocks, still lay exposed where the two hems of the gown separated. She tried to close them but they were stuck under his thighs.

“What’s not right?” she asked.

“I think they put the tube in wrong. I can feel it.”

Mrs. Clarke had been there for two hours, waiting for his doctors to make their rounds. She waited two hours more before the young hospitalist finally appeared—a slight woman in a white lab coat, obviously pregnant, wearing ballet flats that made her seem even shorter that she actually was. Manfred tried his best to smile at her.

“How are you, doctor?” he said. “I hope you have good news for me.”

The doctor smiled back. “So far so good,” she said. “Your lab results are getting better. How do you feel?”

“I feel fine, doctor. Just fine. I want to go home,” said Manfred.

“The catheter is bothering him,” said his wife. “He thinks there’s something wrong with it.”

“How is it bothering you?” asked the doctor.

“My neck is a little sore, that’s all,” said Manfred. “When can I go home?”

“They checked the placement after the procedure,” said the doctor, turning to Mrs. Clarke. “It was good.”

“Then why is it bothering him?” she asked.

The doctor found Manfred’s nurse, and together they removed the dressing to inspect the insertion site.

“The skin looks okay,” they said. “It’s working fine. Don’t worry. We’ll keep an eye on it.”

“When can I go home?” he asked again.

“I don’t know,” said the hospitalist. “That’s up to your kidney doctor.”

As soon as the doctor left, Manfred said, “I think the tube is touching my spine. It makes my legs hurt. They did something wrong.”

“Why didn’t you tell the doctor?” asked his wife.

“She just wants to tell me everything’s okay. She’s not the boss. She don’t want to criticize the other doctors.”

“Then tell the kidney doctor.”

“I will, but what if he don’t listen? I have to get out of here. Help me to the bathroom.”

His wife helped him slide his feet onto the floor and steadied him as he gained his balance. Pain shot up from his heels as if hot needles had been jabbed into them. He shuffled to the bathroom on his wife’s arm, wincing with each slow step, and leaned his weight against the sink. “I’m okay,” he said, closing the door firmly behind him. He looked in the mirror and was startled by the image staring back. He barely recognized it. The eyes were not his, but his father’s. His skin was ashen, as if powdered. He was sure this had happened since he came to the hospital, since they put in the catheter and started running his blood through that machine. He hadn’t looked this way last week when he was playing soccer with his grandkids. What had they done to him? Why were they doing it? He rotated carefully, inch by inch, taking small, dainty steps

until he stood over the toilet clenching the grab bar. How he longed to feel a full, steady stream empty from his bladder. He waited and waited. “Manfred, are you all right in there?” called his wife. Finally a few drops dribbled into the bowl. To her relief, she heard the sound of the toilet flushing, and a moment later water running in the sink.

Manfred woke to the squeeze of a blood pressure cuff. At first it seemed the stuff of a fitful dream. There was a shadowy figure looming over him. He was yanked from a boat into a rough sea. As he sank under the waves he felt his limbs drift away from his body. The cuff inflated once more, which roused him enough to realize he was in a bed. “Sorry, Mr. Clarke,” said the med tech. “I need to take your blood pressure again.” The result was the same. She promptly called his night nurse to the room.

“How are you feeling?” the nurse asked. She was not just making polite conversation. Manfred was awake enough to know the tone of her voice was worrisome. When he hesitated to reply, he realized that the fitfulness of his dream had not left him. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to say. “Manfred,” she repeated, “how are you feeling?” Again he didn’t answer, searching for the right words. “Your blood pressure is up,” said the nurse.

Now he understood what was happening. It was a familiar story. “I told them not to change my medicine,” he blurted out. “Every time they do that, my blood pressure goes sky high. How come no one listens to me?”

The nurse checked his heart and lungs. “I’ll let the doctor know right away. We’ll give you something to bring it down.”

Soon the headache started. He was plied with an array of drugs for the next three hours. With every dose, he said, “I told them not to change my medicine.” Doctors had been arranging and rearranging them for the past thirty years. Now these new doctors started mucking around, messing everything up.

“I need something for my headache,” he said when the night shift doctor appeared. The doctor examined his eyes, checked his strength and his reflexes. “It will get better when your pressure comes down. I ordered some Tylenol.”

Tylenol, another joke, thought Manfred Clarke. I have to get out of this place. He was sure they were going to kill him.

The next day Manfred was too weak to get out of bed. His body felt cold and numb. By the time the nephrologist made his rounds, Manfred had figured out the problem. “I talked to my brother,” he said. “He said it’s the line in my neck. There must be something wrong with it. Everything is connected, you see. That’s why I feel so tired. It’s making my feet swell up. My brother explained it all to me. He’s a massage therapist. He knows how the body works.”

His nephrologist nodded. “Yes, I see. But you need the line for now. When the fistula’s ready we’ll take it out. That will take a while, though.”

“But I feel weaker. It’s giving me headaches.”

“That must be something else. Tell Dr. Kim. You’re scheduled for dialysis tomorrow, then as far as I’m concerned you can go home. We’ll schedule your sessions as an outpatient.”

“It’s the line, doctor. Everything in the body is connected.”

“Don’t worry,” said his kidney doctor, patting him on the shoulder. “Everything’s going to be fine.” In his progress note the nephrologist suggested a psychiatry consult, but he would leave that decision to the hospitalist.

The next day, as soon as Manfred was home, his wife got him a wheelchair. “I’m not going back there,” he said. “I was all right till I went to the hospital.”

“He’s not right,” said Mrs. Clarke. “He says he won’t go back.”

His internist, on the other end of the phone, was reading through her husband’s discharge summary as they spoke. “I see they changed his blood pressure medicine. And he was scheduled for dialysis today.”

“He didn’t go. He says he’s too weak. He stopped taking his medicine. He says it’s poisoning him.”

“Then he needs to come to the hospital.”

“He won’t go. He wants his brother to take him to New Jersey.”

“Put him on the phone, I need to talk to him.” She passed the phone to her husband. “Hello, Mr. Clarke? I hear there’s a problem.”

“Yes, doctor. A big problem. Nobody listens to me. I was fine until I went to the hospital. I don’t mean any disrespect. I know you want to help. But I can’t go back there. I’m going to find a doctor in New Jersey and get this line out.”

“You can’t travel in your condition,” said his doctor. “It’s not safe.”

“My brother will take me. He knows about these things.”

“Is your brother there? Let me talk to him.”

“He’s not here yet.”

“Then let me speak with your wife.” Mrs. Clarke came back on the line. “Mrs Clarke, you can’t let him do this.”

“I know, doctor, but you know how he is. I try to talk to him but he won’t listen. Once his mind is made up there’s nothing you can do. He’s always been that way.”

“Then have him come to my office.”

“Okay doctor, I’ll try.”

His wife did her best to coax him, but Manfred made it clear that was out of the question. “Why should I see him? He’s the one who put me in the hospital and started all this.” He used his arms to push himself up from his wheelchair, rose halfway to a standing position and fell back. “How could this have happened? I’ve always been strong. I never had any problems like this.”

His wife listened without saying a word. She remembered all the years of doctor visits and tests and medication, of headaches and dizziness, of trips to the emergency room and hospital stays. But it’s true he was strong, a man who had been athletic all his life, a champion sprinter in his youth. And his stubbornness had gotten them through their share of tough times. Who was she to say?

The gray sky hung low. It was raining. The street in front of their house was hushed by a steady downpour. Manfred’s brother pushed him to the car in his new wheelchair with a blanket spread on his lap, while his wife trotted alongside with an umbrella. Manfred looked at his hands. They had a sallow hue. His father’s hands, he thought, not his own. He had never felt like an old man before, and did not feel like one now. Tired, but not old. Tired like someone else. His brother helped him into the back seat of the car where he could lie down.

Out of earshot for a moment as they stowed the wheelchair in the trunk, Manfred's wife took the opportunity to whisper to her brother-in-law, "He needs to go to a hospital."

Manfred's brother seemed to understand. When he was settled in the driver's seat he turned to Manfred and said, "I'll take you to the hospital in Englewood."

"No," said Manfred. "No hospitals. Just find me a doctor to take out this tube." He continued to stare at his hands. They seemed to have shrunken since he got in the car. The joints now showed like his grandfather's knuckles. "Hurry up, or I'll pull the tube out myself." His brother laughed, but his wife feared he would do it. They set off carefully, avoiding sudden turns, for the two hour drive to Englewood where his brother lived. They planned to drop him at the emergency room there and hope the hospital would keep him. Manfred closed his eyes as they merged onto the interstate and the car accelerated to highway speed. He imagined himself running to the steady beat of the windshield wipers. He was running on grass in the park where he played soccer with his grandchildren. He felt himself running faster, breaking into a sprint, and then he was racing full speed on the wet, packed sand of a crescent beach lined with palm trees. He was a boy running with his father. There were riders on horseback in the distance. They were coming toward him through the surf as he drifted off, and in a daydream no longer, the horses were riderless and at full gallop.

"Manfred, are you all right?" His wife strained her neck turning to examine him in the back seat. She was alarmed when she realized he'd grown silent.

"I'm fine," said Manfred, quickly roused at the sound of her voice. "Just resting." He was reclining on a pillow with his eyes closed. "I've been running. I feel good."

"You need to rest," she said. "We'll wake you when we get to Englewood."

He roused again when they stopped for gas after exiting the highway in New Jersey. "Where are we?" he asked.

"Almost there," said his brother. "Can we get you something from the store?"

"Turn around," said Manfred. "I want to go home."

"But we're already in New Jersey," said his wife. "Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I changed my mind," he said. "I want to go home. Just take me home."

“Wait here a minute,” said his wife. “We’ll be right back.” She opened the umbrella and walked her brother-in-law out of earshot to discuss their next move. “What do you think?” she asked.

“If that’s what he wants, that’s what we should do,” said Manfred’s brother.

“Why did he change his mind?” she asked.

“I don’t know, maybe he feels better.”

She had her doubts. She could not see any reason why he would, but he seemed more comfortable than he had since starting dialysis.

“Do you think he knows what he’s doing?” she asked.

“I told him he needs to get that line out. That’s what he should do. That’s what made him sick.”

“Okay,” said Mrs. Clarke, “let’s ask him again.”

They returned to the car. He was sitting up now, waiting for them.

“Damian says you should have the line out. We’re in New Jersey and we can find a doctor here. Are you sure you want to go home?”

He looked at her quizzically. “Of course I want to go home. New Jersey is not my home.” He sighed deeply and smiled at her as if she should know better.

“Manfred, that tube in your neck is making you sick. You need to get it out,” said his brother.

“Don’t worry,” said Manfred. “It will be all right. Take me home now.” The issue was settled. They turned around and reversed their route. “Thank you,” said Manfred, repeating, “It will be all right.”

Manfred’s wife talked to quell her doubts. Her husband’s silence still worried her. Every few minutes she glanced at him in the back seat, and each time he was sitting up straight, regarding her without saying a word. She would rather hear him complaining.

“You know, when we were first married,” she told her brother-in-law, “Manfred slept in his socks. His feet were always cold. Isn’t that right Manfred?” She paused, giving him a chance to chime in, but he remained silent, staring out the side window with the trace of a smile on his face.

“When he was a boy he always had big feet,” added Manfred’s brother. “The biggest feet in the family.”

“Not as big as James,” their son, said Mrs. Clarke. “We almost went broke buying shoes for that boy.” But Manfred did not join in, did not seem to even hear them, still gazing out the window at the wet, colorless landscape as if searching for something lost along the road.

The slow cadence of the windshield wipers seemed to sap her strength. Traffic was heavy. Visibility grew worse from the mist kicked up by trucks and the steady stream of cars that passed them. Manfred’s wife was tired of talking and turned on the radio. The music did not soothe or distract her, did not keep her from thinking the trip a waste of time. A dangerous waste. If he dies, she concluded, it’s his own fault. She looked at her brother-in-law behind the steering wheel and thought him a fool. He had no business putting idiotic notions in her husband’s head. But if her husband didn’t want to listen to the doctors, that was his business. She had done everything she could. Her anger smoldered steady as the rain that splattered the asphalt, turning the highway into a haze of soft, dull forms. She was through making excuses for him.

When they arrived home it was raining harder. Manfred’s wife and brother opened the rear doors of the car from either side and stooped inside to help him. They waited, but he didn’t move. He sat still and heavy with his eyes open wide, straight as a board. The rain drummed loud on the roof of the car, and their feet blocked the rivulets that streamed around them down the driveway.

NOT AGAIN

Evan paced the room, slapping his forehead. I can't believe it, he thought. It didn't take him long to get to the other wall. He was tall and slender, an athlete with long graceful strides. I can't fucking believe it, he mumbled. He didn't like people getting over on him. He was outraged when people betrayed his trust—pissed at their moral failing, and disappointed by his own naiveté. He wished to be street-wise when he was really a soft touch, and that bothered him. He paced, and second-guessed himself, and paced, and ruminated. He hated to be wrong. He wanted his judgment, in fact, to be perfect.

"Damn, I can't believe it," he finally said aloud.

"Believe what?" asked Derek, seated at his workstation with his back to Evan as he typed away on his laptop.

"I can't believe this guy got over on me." Evan continued to pace, cradling his computer in one arm.

"Got over about what?"

"His pain meds. But he had such a good story, and he seemed like a good guy."

Derek nodded as he swiveled around in his chair. Stephanie, on the other side of the room, swiveled too, and Evan stopped his pacing in the middle of the floor to acknowledge the gathering. They all had their stories.

"Doctor shopping?" asked Derek.

Evan dropped in a chair and slouched back, staring at the ceiling, his long frame stretched over either end.

"I wish."

"Tox screen?" asked Stephanie.

"Worse."

“OD’d?” said Derek.

“Nope,” said Evan.

“Diversion,” said Derek and Stephanie together.

“Bingo!”

Evan turned the computer screen toward them. “Front page of the paper. Busted. With three assault rifles and a handgun in his van. Along with my pills.”

Stephanie and Derek jumped off their chairs to get a better look at the screen.

“Shit,” said Derek, scanning the text. “They say his prescriptions were from a doctor here in town.”

“No shit,” said Evan. “Now who would that be?”

Evan’s phone beeped, announcing a page. Call the administrative office directly. Someone from the newspaper wanted to speak with him.

All in all, a very bad day for young doctor Evan. First the newspaper, then the police. An hour reviewing the chart with risk management. His patient, the one busted, had signed a narcotics contract, which was good. Evan had ordered the toxicology screen, also good. But there were no results. Evan had ordered it again, but the patient hadn’t gone. In his last chart note Evan wrote that he would not keep prescribing opioids unless the patient got the test, but still. It was too late for that.

“I should have known. All this bullshit about back pain and car accidents,” Evan told the risk manager. But the guy had done a stint in the Navy. He was an athlete. They talked about sports together. Always so polite and neatly dressed. Evan now rued the day the patient showed up in his office, carrying a thick sheaf of records from the physician who started prescribing him oxycodone years ago. There must have been good reason for that, Evan remembered thinking at the time. Some valid indication. It all seemed so legit. He usually had trouble getting records of any kind. The guy had made it too easy. “I should have referred him to a pain clinic,” he said.

“Stop beating yourself up,” said the risk manager.

Easy for the her to say. Her name was not in the papers, or the butt of the latest hospital jokes, or on a prescription for drugs being sold to god-knowns-who. Kids in the park, truck drivers, pregnant women. So Evan spent that evening poring over the

charts of every patient who had ever gotten an opioid prescription from him. Back pain, headaches, leg pain, arthritis, shoulder pain, bone pain, whole body pain, phantom pain. He checked them against the state's record system, looking for doctor shopping and ER visits. He checked for signed narcotics contracts and drug screen results. He made a list of those who were suspicious, who made him uncomfortable, whose conditions were questionable, who just didn't need it, and vowed to do something about them. Except his hospice patients, of course. The danger there, he reminded himself, was just the opposite.

A week later Evan sat in an exam room facing a cheerless, middle-aged woman who regarded him suspiciously. Her dour expression contrasted strangely with her fancy jewelry. "I don't think this is the right medicine for you," he said.

"No? Why not? It's the only thing that helps," she answered, her tone changing from grim to hostile.

"It's not standard treatment for your condition." Evan was always uncomfortable with patients like this. He felt ineffective no matter what he did. He cringed whenever he saw them on his schedule, like the patient in front him. He was still cringing when he saw her In the exam room. "If your rheumatologist thinks you need narcotics, he should prescribe them."

"My rheumatologist retired a year ago," said the woman." He said my PCP could prescribe them."

"As your PCP, I don't think it's safe," Evan countered. "There are longterm side effects."

"I'm aware of that," said the woman. "But it's the only thing that helps. You have no idea what the pain is like. Sometimes it's so bad I can't get out of bed."

"I'd be happy to refer you to a pain clinic," he offered.

"I don't need a pain clinic," she shot back, jangling her bracelets as she crossed her arms and slumped down in her chair. "I just need my pain medicine. Are you going to help me or not?"

“I want to help you,” said Evan. “That’s why I’m concerned about your safety. So let’s cut down your dose—gradually, very gradually—and try some other things. Like more exercise. And have you thought about a chiropractor, or acupuncture?”

“I tried a chiropractor. It didn’t help. And I’m not doing acupuncture. Besides, my insurance won’t cover it.”

“Then let’s just stick with exercise,” said Evan firmly, “and I’d like to increase the dose of your anti-depressant.”

“It hurts too much to exercise. And right now I’m not depressed. When I am, it’s only because of the pain.”

“It’s for your pain, not depression,” he clarified.

“Okay, so what about my pain medicine?”

“Like I said, let’s slowly taper the dose.”

The woman uncrossed her arms, lowered her voice and leaned toward him. “You’re trying to make me sound like some drug seeker. Believe me doctor, I am not a drug addict. I have a painful medical condition. Are you saying you won’t prescribe the only thing that helps?”

But young doctor Evan was determined, and young doctor Evan stuck to his guns. He prescribed a lower dose of opioids to a very unhappy patient, confident in the wisdom of his plan. The next day his medical director summoned him to her office. The patient had phoned to say she was filing a ‘formal complaint’ with the health department, claiming Evan had shown willful disregard for her suffering and now she was much worse, thanks to his negligence. The medical director had a few questions for him.

“Was there any suspicion of drug abuse?” she asked.

“No, not exactly,” said Evan.

“She never lost her prescriptions or asked for refills before they were due?”

“No.”

“Her drug screens were okay?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“She didn’t want to increase the dose?”

“No.”

“Then I’m not seeing a big problem here,” said the medical director.

Evan could feel himself flushing. It was humiliating being called to the principal’s office like this. He hated having his judgment questioned. “Opioids are not the standard of care,” he said. “And in the longterm, I don’t think it’s safe.”

“I understand,” said the medical director, softening her tone, “but there are trade-offs here. Sometimes dependence is acceptable if it helps the patient function.”

Evan sighed and bit his tongue. No shit, he almost said. He hated these hoary platitudes. “Right. So what do you want me to do?”

“Nothing special. I’ll ask if she wants to transfer to someone else. If not, I would re-evaluate your treatment next time you see her.”

“This is such bullshit,” said Evan, pacing again. “Damned if you do and damned if you don’t.”

Derek swiveled in his chair. “Dude,” he said pointedly. “You can’t win. Just accept that.”

“No, I can’t accept that,” said Evan.

“Then what are you going to do?”

“The right thing,” said Evan.

And, by his own reckoning at least, that is what he proceeded to do when he saw a new patient two weeks later who wanted something for his “neuropathy pain”. The man, in his late forties but with a haggard look that made him seem much older, described the constant pain in his legs in great detail, pointing to them with a series of grimaces and groans. He had a host of other problems, too—high blood pressure, heartburn, fatigue, dizziness—that he attributed to his pain, and a long list of medications that had given him bad reactions. The examination of his legs was equivocal, at best. Both the nature and the cause of these symptoms, thought Evan, were very unclear. He tried to wrap up the visit by discussing the tests he wanted to order before starting treatment.

“Can’t you give me something for it now?” asked the patient, finally coming out with his request. “They gave me this in the emergency room.” He pulled an empty vial

of oxycodone from his pocket, prescribed from an emergency room in another town. “They said I could get a prescription at my doctor’s office if I needed more.”

Why am I not surprised, thought Evan, resigned to running late for the rest of the morning. But there was no way around it—doing the right thing took time. He carefully explained their practice policy on opioids for chronic pain, making it clear he would not prescribe anything until he got the patient’s old records, a urine toxicology screen, and a signed controlled medication contract. The patient did not look happy. “What can I take in the meantime?” he asked.

Evan gave his recommendations for non-narcotics.

The patient snorted. “That’s like taking water sugar pills. They don’t do a thing.”

“Then we’ll see what the tests show and take it from there,” said Evan.

The patient rose sullenly from his chair and hobbled, wincing, to the door. “I almost forgot,” he said, pausing as he reached for the door knob. “I need a refill for Xanax. I’m almost out.”

As he ushered him out of the exam room, Evan explained that Xanax fell under the same policies and the same medication contract. He would have to get records and test results first. He beckoned a medical assistant to direct the patient to the bathroom to give his urine sample. The encounter had drained him, but Evan felt good about doing the right thing. Two days later all the studies came back normal except the drug screen. So Evan half-expected the patient to no-show for his next appointment, and was a little uneasy when the man arrived on schedule. Evan, steeling himself, sat the patient down and confronted him straight away before he was sidetracked by any new complaints.

“Your urine tested positive for cocaine and benzodiazepines,” he said.

The man didn’t flinch. “I told you I was taking Xanax,” he said. “I had a prescription for it. The cocaine—that was just a one time thing. I was at a bachelor party.”

“The cocaine’s a problem,” said Evan. “I can’t prescribe narcotics when you’re using drugs. That’s our office policy. I can refer you for treatment.”

“I don’t need any fucking treatment,” said the patient, snarling as he rose from his chair. “And I don’t abuse any fucking drugs. It was just a fucking bachelor party.”

“Sorry,” said Evan, staying resolute, thinking, “gotcha,” as the patient ended the session by walking quite normally out of the exam room and slamming the door. It was such a pathetic attempt Evan almost felt bad for the guy. But he had prevailed. It didn’t matter that he was cursed out as a lousy fucking doctor to all the patients in the waiting room. He had done the right thing. He had, in fact, triumphed.

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Ronald propped his feet on the arm of the couch and adjusted a pillow behind his head. Through the passage to the dining room he could see his mother lying in her hospital bed. Her chest rose and fell, with long pregnant pauses between each breath. It was hard to tell if she was awake or asleep. She could go hours without saying a word. A health aid would be arriving soon to bathe her, and he needed a few minutes rest. He didn’t sleep well, and even on the few occasions when he did he still felt exhausted the next day. It was the stress, he knew, taking a sip of tea to wash down his blood pressure pill. His stomach had been acting up. He had a pill for that, too. It was the stress, non-stop, for the past two years, since his mother was diagnosed with her cancer. He didn’t want her to die at home, but that was her wish. More than her wish. Her demand. She didn’t care about what she was putting him through, he complained to the nurse, to his colleagues and his friends, to anyone else who would listen. It was too much.

“Mom, the aide will be here soon,” he said, clasping his hands behind his head and staring at the ceiling. His mother moaned and mumbled something he didn’t understand. “Are you having any pain?” he asked. She moaned and mumbled again, and he could make no more sense of it than he had the first time. “Okay, wait a minute.” He sighed and swung himself off the couch. He took a small key from his pocket and unlocked a box in the dresser next to her bed that contained a stack of syringes. The least suspicion of pain was grounds for treatment, and the hospice team had instructed him well. “One for you,” he whispered, gently pulling open her mouth and shooting the clear liquid onto her tongue. He took another syringe for himself to the kitchen where he knew she couldn’t see him, opened his mouth and did the same.

The medicine gave a spicy burn to his tongue and the inside of his cheeks. Then he returned to the bedside and carefully recorded two doses of morphine for his mother in the hospice medication log. In a few moments he was feeling better. He liked the name of the bundle of meds the hospice nurse dropped off—Comfort Pack. And he liked Chelsea, the young woman who came twice a week to bathe his mother. And he liked the older hospice nurse who came once a week to check on her, and the chatty social worker, and the smiling chaplain. They were all nice people. And he was feeling very nice. He went to the dining room to check on his mother. She was calm. He took a syringe from the drawer and went back to the kitchen for another dose.

Chelsea, the home health aide, arrived a few minutes later. “How is she today?” she asked, as Ron ushered her into the dining room.

“The same,” he said. “Maybe a little weaker. She doesn’t say much.”

“As long as she’s comfortable,” said Chelsea.

“As long as she’s comfortable,” he said, a mantra he’d repeated countless times, the hospice shibboleth that bound the whole team together. “She’s all yours. I’m going out for a smoke.” He did not want to see his mother’s naked flesh any more than he had to.

“Sure, take a break,” said Chelsea. “I’ll be fine.” She came around to the bedside and took his mother’s hand, leaning over to speak directly in her ear. “Good morning, Mary. How are you? Ready for a bath?”

He went to the back porch and lit a cigarette, taking the first drag deep into his lungs. If she doesn’t die soon, he affirmed, I’m going to lose my mind. And if she does, he concluded, expelling a stream of smoke with a harsh cough, I’m going to lose my mind. He laughed aloud at the simple paradox, and coughed some more, and laughed again. It felt good to summarize his feelings so succinctly. It felt good to taste the tobacco. It felt good to be outside in the fresh air. He did not want to go back inside.

“All done,” said Chelsea after she changed the sheets and straightened up the makeshift bedroom. “Anything else I can do?” Some days she stayed to tidy up the kitchen or do the laundry.

“No, but thanks,” said Ronald. She’d been there long enough as far as he was concerned. He was eager to get her on her way.

“Really, it’s no problem,” said Chelsea. “I have time.”

“I appreciate that. But we’re fine. Don’t worry about it.” He escorted her toward the front door. Chelsea stopped at his mother’s bedside on her way out and smoothed the covers.

“Bye, Mary. See you Friday.” Mary smiled at her, or at least Chelsea thought so.

As soon as the aide was gone, Ron made straight for the box in the dresser by his mother’s bedside. He removed the syringes, one after another, squirting their contents into his mouth. It didn’t matter any more that his mother could see him. Her head rocked from side to side, her eyes narrowed to tiny slits. She gurgled, trying to clear her throat, making guttural sounds as the syringes dropped to the floor next to her, one by one, with a soft tapping sound like the clicking of a grandfather clock.

Evan checked a message waiting in his queue—something from the hospice nurse. Your patient Mary Watts, it said, has been admitted to the inpatient hospice unit. Too bad, thought Evan, knowing she wanted to die at home. He looked through his schedule to find a convenient time to visit, concluding he should go directly from work after office hours. There was no point in putting it off. If she was in the hospice unit, chances were she wouldn’t last long. So he did his best to stay on schedule, but when he finally scooted out of the office and rushed to the hospital he found her quite stable, freshened up in a light, airy room with flowers and cookies on the bedside table. Asleep, but without moans or gasps, let alone signs of agonal twitching. The nurse said she had even eaten lunch.

“Why did she come in?” he asked.

“Didn’t you hear?” asked the nurse. “Her son’s in the hospital. He OD’d on her morphine.”

“Wait,” said Evan, hoping he hadn’t heard her right. “He what?”

“OD’d on her morphine. The social worker found him on the floor next to her bed. His mother was in agony.”

The nurse went on about Mrs. Watts’ pain, but Evan stopped listening as he processed the news. “So what happened to him?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said the nurse. “I think he’s in ICU. She keeps asking why he doesn’t come visit. We told her he’s sick.”

Evan stepped back against the wall, trying to take it all in. This epidemic was no earthquake or hurricane. It was the slow steady rise of flood waters. He remembered the feeling he once had as boy at an ocean beach, playing in the surf. A wave crashed over him and dragged him down, and he fought toward the surface out of breath, not knowing which direction he was struggling.

MISS KRISTIN'S CLASS

Anita glanced at the girls on the other side of the room. What drew her attention was Hannah, the shortest girl in the cluster. Hannah surveyed the room as if it belonged to her, a small, calm point in the midst of tumult. Before Anita could look again, the teacher called the class to form a circle in the middle of the room. Miss Kristin made them face the flag hanging on its pole by the door, showing once again how to place their right hand over their heart while her assistant—an older woman with less enthusiasm—adjusted them to the correct attitude. Miss Kristin led them in the pledge. When it was over, she singled out Anita and had her remain standing hostage-like while the others sat in their assigned places on the floor.

"We have a new student joining us today," announced Kristin. "This is Anita. Hi, Anita."

"Hi, Anita," echoed the class.

"Let's all welcome her."

Miss Kristin, clapping the rhythm, lead them in their welcome song. Anita stood at attention with a frozen smile and endured her introduction without flinching. From the other side of the circle, neither clapping nor singing, Hannah stared at her like a sphinx. Anita sat down as soon as she could, quickly looking away so she would not have to meet those eyes. "Now give your neighbor a high five," said Miss Kristin. Jeffrey, the boy to her left, made Anita uneasy. He waited for Anita to hold up her hand, then slapped it so hard it burned. She turned to Maddie, the girl on her right, who coughed and sniffed up the greenish discharge draining from her nose. Anita tapped the girl's hand lightly, recoiling from its moist, messy touch. Another boy, opposite, broke the students' circle, jumping up to high-five the teacher. "No, Jason," Kristin said firmly. "Not me, just your neighbors. Go back and find your neighbors." Jason returned

to his place and smacked the palms of the children around him. Anita had Maddie raise her hand again and slapped it, prompting another hoarse, phlegmy cough that sprayed droplets like rain. “Does anyone know what day it is?” asked Miss Kristin. Anita knew, but kept quiet. Jason blurted out “Sunday!” to a burst of laughter from the children around him. Finally Hannah volunteered the correct day, launching the class into a review of the days of the week. And after days of the week it was time for numbers. Miss Kristin put a disc in the CD player, and the class counted to fifty with a number song. They broke into small groups to count some more. But Anita knew her numbers. She was bored, and looked around the room for something to occupy her while the others worked. She noticed one of Hannah’s companions having trouble counting past eleven, and left her place to offer help. When Hannah saw what was happening she raced from the other side of the room.

“Go away,” said the girl to Anita, as soon as Hannah arrived. “Don’t talk to me.”

“I can help you,” said Anita.

“No, you can’t,” said Hannah. The two girls turned their backs on Anita, covering their mouths to giggle while Anita stayed rooted to the spot. Hannah glanced back. “Don’t look at us,” she said, and the other girl repeated, like an echo off the wall, “Don’t look at us.” The teaching assistant had watched the whole exchange, stepping in to mediate after the scene played out. “Hannah, that’s not nice. Anita’s new here. How would you feel?” The TA led Anita back to Jeffrey and had them count together.

Hannah said to her companion, “You can’t count past eleven.”

The other girl said, “Yes, I can.” Hannah dared her, but she couldn’t.

Anita kept away from Hannah’s troupe the rest of the week, watching them cautiously from her spot across the room. Hannah wasn’t afraid of anyone, she noted, not even Miss Kristin. She saw what happened when Kristin tried to stop Hannah from yelling at one of Hannah’s followers. “Miss Kristin, you’re mean,” said Hannah, and that was the end of it. But Anita did not spend her time alone. She worked with the children on either side of her in the big circle. Maddie’s nose continued to run, clear now, and she still coughed in fits. Jeffrey shouted all day like he was playing outdoors. At times he laughed at nothing, as if he saw something others didn’t, and had little interest in

what went on in the class. Anita thought him stupid when he didn't listen to her. But she wanted friends, and he didn't mind joining her whenever she asked. Maddie with the runny nose cried a lot. Sometimes she cried at nothing. Anita tried to help her, but she cried anyway. So Anita left her alone and she cried even more. The TA was always trying to calm her down or cheer her up, and getting tissue for her nose, which dripped a constant stream when she cried.

"Hannah! Hannah's here!" Hannah had just arrived at school with her mother. Two girls ran up squealing, waving their hands above their heads, and hugged her. Following behind in the hallway, Anita held her grandmother's hand tight and shied away from the entrance to the classroom. As soon as Anita's grandmother left, one of the girls came up to Anita and said, "Nobody likes you."

"Yes they do," said Anita.

"No they don't," said the girl.

"I have lots of friends," said Anita. "More than you."

The other girl ran to Hannah. Hopping from one foot to the another, she blurted out, "Anita says she has more friends than me!" Hannah smiled. "No, she doesn't. You're stupid if you think so." But Hannah watched Anita all morning, as Anita was well aware.

It was quiet after lunch, before nap time. A drizzle dampened the day. Anita sat at a low, round table drawing pictures with her circle-mates. She drew a picture of her house with her grandmother at the door, and of her front yard with flowers in it, and of herself in the front yard wearing a party dress. She chose colors for the dress with great care—pink for the top and yellow for the bottom—absorbed in filling all the space within the lines, when Hannah appeared with a drawing of her own.

"I want to show you a picture I made," said Hannah. Anita laid down her crayon and made way for her. Hannah sat in Anita's chair and rolled out the drawing on the table top. "That's me, on the playground," she said, pointing to a girl in the middle of the frame. Jeffrey and Maddie moved closer, looking over her shoulders. "And these are my friends," she said, pointing to a line of smaller stick figures, arms out straight,

with fingers projecting like rays from their hands. “You’re not here, because you don’t have any friends.”

Jeffrey shouted, “She does too.” Maddie snorted, “She’s my friend.” Anita moved closer to get a better look at Hannah’s picture, pressing hard against Hannah’s small shoulder as she leaned over the table.

“You draw like a baby,” said Anita.

“No, I don’t,” yelled Hannah. “You do.”

“Your picture is ugly,” said Anita.

Without warning, Jeffrey pushed Hannah away, grabbed her drawing and ripped it in two before Hannah could react. “I don’t like your picture,” he said. Hannah rushed back, clawing at Jeffrey’s hands for the torn halves of her drawing while she screamed for the teacher. “Miss Kristin! Look what he did!” She finally managed to shove Jeffrey far enough away to grab Anita’s drawing, crush it in a ball and toss it across the room. The TA came to separate them as a crowd of children gathered, pushing and craning their necks to see what the excitement was about. Miss Kristin gave Jeffrey and Hannah time-out’s, in different corners, and the rest of the day was unusually calm.

Kristin asked for a word with Hannah’s mother after school. “I don’t know what happened. That’s not like her,” said Hannah’s mother. “She must have been provoked.”

“I’m not pointing fingers,” said Kristin. “I see this as a learning opportunity.”

“Did you talk to Jeffrey’s mother, too?”

“I will,” said Miss Kristin.

“And who is this new girl?” asked Hannah’s mother. “Hannah told me she started it. Are you talking to her mother, too?”

“Yes, to her grandmother,” said Kristin. “I already did.”

“Her grandmother? That figures,” said Hannah’s mom, with a knowing look. “I won’t tolerate anyone bullying my daughter. If it happens again, I’m going to the principal and insist they be moved to another class.”

It was a mild day on the playground. The sand was dry, the grass was green and soft. “Hannah’s a baby,” said Anita. She was talking to Maddie with the runny nose,

loud enough so one of Hannah's group could overhear her as she played nearby. The girl edged closer to hear more. "She doesn't know how to draw," Anita continued. When she felt the time was right she went straight up to the girl who was listening and said, "Hannah said she doesn't like you anymore. But you can play with us." The girl joined them, and before long she called over another girl. When Hannah saw what was happening she stormed across the playground with the rest of her companions.

"You can't play with her," she said to the two who had joined Anita.

"You're not the boss," said Anita.

"Yes, I am," said Hannah.

"They can play with me," said Anita.

"No, they can't," Hannah screamed.

The TA overheard the end of the conversation and reported it straight away to Miss Kristin. Miss Kristin had a long chat with Hannah about sharing friends. But Miss Kristin had a hunch she had not heard the last of it, and reported the incident to the principal. The next morning Hannah's mother burst into the principal's office, demanding that Anita be moved to another class.

"Let's not over-react," said the principal, expecting her visit. "This kind of thing happens all the time. They're impulsive at this age. They're still learning how to get along."

"That Anita is a little liar," said Hannah's mother. "If she doesn't stop picking on Hannah I'm holding you personally responsible."

The principal leaned forward on her desk and spoke thoughtfully. "It's important they learn to work things out. They'll have to negotiate relationships the rest of their lives. We can't insulate them from that. Don't worry, they'll be fine."

Hannah's mother let the principal know how unsatisfied she was with that approach. It missed the point, she said. She spent the rest of the day researching other schools in town.

Maddie was no longer the girl with a runny nose. Her cough had eased and her nose was clear. It was after lunch, before nap time, on another quiet, rainy day. She colored a picture she had drawn of her and Anita on the playground. It showed the sun

bright yellow overhead, with puffy clouds in the sky. There were other children in the picture, small and obscure beside the two figures who dominated the scene. When she finished she rushed over to present it to Anita.

"I made this for you," she said.

"You draw like a baby," said Anita, and walked away.

Maddie looked across the room for Hannah and her companions, but Hannah was gone.

WEIGHTLESS

Isabel, the medical student, needed home visits for her rotation requirements. Capobianco, the local doctor who supervised her, was glad to have the company. “It’s a two-fer,” he explained—Mrs. Butler and Cheryl, mother and daughter, longstanding patients of his. They turned left at the village green, passed the Doric portico of the Congregational Church, and started up Ridge Street. The road narrowed between boarded-up factories of red weathered brick. Dented air-conditioners hung out their backsides between broken window panes on the upper floors. “They used to make pianos here,” said Capobianco. “And over there,” pointing to an abandoned building on the other side of the street, “lenses for bomb sights.” An old water tower high above them tilted at an angle like a jaunty hat, perched over the buildings on rusted girders crossed by a skein of power lines. Snaking vines choked the bottom of its struts. American flags hung limp in the heavy summer air, stuck like warnings signs on the telephone poles that lined the road. Just beyond the old piano factory stood two tall hemlocks on a manicured lawn, followed by their destination, a house with a worn gravel driveway and a paint-stripped Camaro in the front yard. The house was ample, three stories with a sunroom on one side, outside walls of brown shingle worn to streaks of gray. Lilac bushes masked the first floor windows, but the water rot of the window frames showed plainly on the floors above. It was shaded by an arc of tall oaks, and the lawn needed mowing.

“Her nephew lives in back,” said Dr. Capobianco, pointing to a small trailer enclosed by shrubs and witch hazel at the end of the drive. Isabel sensed eyes peering at them from behind its window shades as they walked to the house, and heard the muffled sound of angry drum beats in the distance. Capobianco knocked on the front

door. They waited. A television was turned up loud. When no one answered, Isabel pressed the doorbell.

"It doesn't work," said Capobianco. "I'll call her." He took out his cell phone and dialed. "Hello, Cheryl? It's Dr. Capobianco. We're here. Yes, at the door."

A moment later a large woman appeared. Tall and thick-necked, with broad shoulders. Heavy-breasted, round-bellied, wide-hipped. Startlingly large, filling the doorway, with the vacant look of someone awakened from a deep sleep. She was dressed in sweat pants and a baggy t-shirt, with flip-flops too small for her feet, and her blond, matted hair was swept behind her ears.

"Good morning," said the doctor. "Cheryl, this is Isabel. She's a medical student working with me."

"What?" said Cheryl. The TV was blasting through the doorway.

"I'm Isabel," shouted the student, extending her small hand upward.

Cheryl had already turned away and they followed her into the house. She moved slowly, raising her massive legs with effort and swinging them side to side with each step like heavy oars. The entranceway smelled of cats, and the walls seem coated with a brown tarry film. Isabel's throat began to tingle. She reminded herself to be observant. She glanced at a bathroom on her right and saw a floor strewn with kitty litter. Through the door to the living room she spotted an unmade bed, and a wheelchair folded in the corner. Cheryl lead them to a room on the other side of the hallway with a dining table surrounded by bins of clothes and piles of magazines. Daylight showed through chinks in the exposed wall slats. "Ma, the doctor's here." An older woman sat at the table in her bathrobe, facing a TV that rested on an old dresser against the far wall. An oxygen concentrator sat in the corner, idle. Cheryl took the TV clicker from the table and lowered the volume.

"Ma, the doctor's here," said Cheryl again. Her mother tamped out a cigarette in the ashtray, coughed, and waved her greeting. She was a large women too, but not nearly as large as Cheryl. The doctor and his student cleared clothes and newspapers from the dining room chairs to make room for themselves and joined her at the table. A slight young woman, shy as a small child at the sight of strangers, appeared from the

kitchen with a can of soda and a baby bottle, disappearing up the stairs without a word as a baby began to cry in a room above them.

"That's Madison, my granddaughter," said Mrs. Butler. "She just broke up with her boyfriend."

"She's my brother's kid," said Cheryl.

They heard footsteps in the room above and a minute later the baby stopped crying.

"Cheryl needs a scooter," said Mrs. Butler. "One of those electric ones."

"What about your walker?" Capobianco asked Cheryl. "Walking is good exercise for you."

"Somebody took it," said her mother.

"I left it in front of the supermarket and somebody took it," Cheryl explained.

"So how's your breathing?" Dr. Capobianco asked Mrs. Butler, deflecting a discussion of the scooter. "Are you using your oxygen?"

"Sometimes," she said. "When I get out of breath."

"And your CPAP?"

"The mask don't fit right. I need a new one."

The doctor pulled a blood pressure cuff and an oximeter from his bag, handing them to his student. Isabel produced a small bottle of sanitizer from her pocket and rubbed it on her hands.

"Are you using your inhalers?" The doctor had Mrs. Butler demonstrate her technique for Isabel's benefit.

"Cheryl, how are your blood sugars?" he said.

Cheryl shrugged. "Up and down. Don't ask me why. I don't eat a thing." She handed him her glucometer and he checked the readings.

"Why don't you take their vital signs," he instructed Isabel. When she had finished, they proceeded to the kitchen to check the week's pills set out in separate organizers. Instructor and student discussed each one in turn—two for blood sugar, three for blood pressure, two for cholesterol, one for asthma, one for fluid, two for mood, one for thought. Indications, doses, side effects, interactions known and guessed at. A long-haired tabby jumped on the counter, stood on the organizer and

nudged the doctor's hand. A red harlequin appeared on the floor and rubbed her sooty flank against Isabel's leg.

"I don't think those cats are helping your allergies," said the doctor when they returned to the dining room.

"They're not really cats," said Cheryl. "They're wizards. They just appear in cat bodies."

"Well, the cat bodies aren't helping your allergies."

"They're clean. Aren't they clean?"

Her mother nodded. "Cats are clean."

"Make sure you change the kitty litter," said the doctor. The smell was not subtle. Capobianco motioned for Isabel to sit down at the table and seated himself between his patients. He tipped his chair back and crossed his arms to indicate he was settling in for a little chat. "Are you still thinking about that operation?" he asked, addressing Cheryl.

"What operation?" said Cheryl.

"The weight loss surgery."

Cheryl smiled, showing the large gap from a missing tooth in the top row. She was suddenly alert, her eyes lit with a secret certainty. "I don't need it," she said, speaking in a low, rushed mumble as if reciting a message. "I'm getting a new body tonight. I'm going to choose one from the seventh ring of death and bring it back to life." Turning to Isabel she explained hurriedly, "I have special powers. I travel to graveyards in my sleep and fight with warlocks to bring dead people back to life. The warlocks injected me with pus from the corpses and that's why I have diabetes. This isn't my real body. I just borrowed it to fool them. When I get my new one I'm moving to Florida. That's why it don't matter if I smoke," she concluded.

"Cheryl's a white witch," added the doctor.

"She ain't moving to Florida," said Mrs. Butler.

"Yes I am, Ma. I'll leave my old body here and come visit."

Cheryl escorted them to the front door and gave Dr. Capobianco a hug. "Take care, honey," she said, then extended her hand to Isabel, "Nice to meet you."

As soon as they were in the car Isabel reached for her hand sanitizer. Her throat felt raw and dry.

"Do you really think she's a candidate for surgery?" said Isabel.

"Maybe," said Capobianco. "She could get off everything but her psych meds. And she wouldn't need one of those damn scooters. Do you have any idea how much they cost?"

"But isn't she high risk?"

"Sure. She's high risk either way."

"She seems like a very difficult patient," said Isabel.

"Cheryl?" said the doctor. "She's a sweetheart."

Dr. Capobianco pulled in the driveway of the Butler house once again. The Camaro hadn't moved. "Her husband was a foreman at the piano factory," he said, referring to Cheryl's father. He paused and grimaced as he stepped out of the car. "It's my knee." Nasir, his new student, paused with him. Nasir carried the equipment bag. His knees did not hurt. Nasir ran marathons. A young man the doctor did not recognize stood in the doorway of the trailer behind the house. Capobianco waved, but the young man retreated inside without returning his greeting. Cheryl waited for them on the stoop in a new black tunic sweater and tight knit leggings. Her hair was brushed smooth to her shoulders and she wore a thick layer of cherry red lipstick.

"Hi, honey," said Cheryl.

They passed a bathroom floor mopped clean and a bed in the living room neatly made. The ashtrays on the dining room table were empty. The tabby and the harlequin curled up on the dining room chairs like throw pillows, and the piles and bins had been rearranged to make a wider path to the kitchen.

"You have a nice house," said Nasir, though daylight still showed through the exposed wall slats. Cheryl grinned and thanked him.

Dr. Capobianco formally introduced his student to Cheryl and her mother. This time Mrs. Butler wore her nose prongs and had the oxygen running. They waited while she coughed a glob of white phlegm into a tissue and displayed it for them.

"That looks okay. How's your CPAP?" asked the doctor.

“The mask don’t fit right. I need a new one.”

“I know. No one came to adjust it?”

“They said I’m not due yet.”

When they finished examining Mrs. Butler they turned their attention to Cheryl. “You look well,” said her doctor.

“I feel good,” said Cheryl, smiling as proof. “I’m getting the surgery.” The news was a surprise to Capobianco. The last he’d heard the surgeon wouldn’t touch her.

“I have to stay in this body to hide my powers. Some black witches are trying to stop me. They don’t like me bringing corpses back to life,” she explained to Nasir. “They’re the ones who put pus from the dead bodies in my blood. I’m not going into another dimension till I get to Florida.”

Capobianco was puzzled. “Did Rodrigues change his mind?”

“No,” said Cheryl with her hoarse, scanning speech, “He wouldn’t operate on me. He’s scared of my powers. So I found a doctor in Springfield. He didn’t have a problem.” Cheryl gave Dr. Capobianco his name.

Capobianco knew that Rodrigues, the local surgeon, had good results, but was very selective. “I don’t know this guy,” he said, referring to the surgeon in the city, “Are you scheduled yet?”

“I need a bunch of tests and stuff first. I’m on a new diet. And I stopped smoking.” She smiled wider, the gap in her front teeth set off dark against the lipstick.

“That’s awesome. How did you do it?” asked Nasir, his interest pricked for the first time.

“The patches.” She pulled down her tank top to show the nicotine patch on the expanse of her chest. “And I won my battle with the warlocks. They don’t bother me no more. The doctor in Springfield gave me antibiotics for the pus in my veins.” Something Capobianco had always refused to do.

“Your blood sugars are better, too,” said Capobianco, scrolling through her readings.

Madison came downstairs with the baby in her arms and stood behind her grandmother. She looked like she hadn’t slept, her slimness accentuated by the dark circles under her eyes.

“Madison’t afraid to ask, but could you check the baby?” asked Mrs. Butler. “He’s spitting up a lot. And Madison don’t eat a thing.”

Madison said nothing as she handed her baby to the doctor and returned to her spot behind her grandmother. Capobianco and Nasir examined him on the dining room table, the teacher carefully explaining each part of the exam. A web of blue veins showed on the baby’s thin, pale belly. “You need to bring him to the office,” Capobianco concluded. “We need to weigh him.” Madison nodded and took the baby back. “Make an appointment for yourself, too. You look exhausted.”

As they wrapped up their visit, Capobianco asked, “Is there someone new living in the trailer?”

“That’s Ronnie’s stepson,” said Mrs. Butler. “Ronnie took him in when his mother moved away. Don’t ask me why.”

On the drive back to his office Capobianco gave Nasir his impression. “What a difference,” he remarked. “Cheryl’s shrink changed her meds last month. Before, she was snowed like a zombie. Now look at her.”

“What about the baby?” asked Nasir.

“I’m not sure,” said Dr. Capobianco. “But the mother looks depressed.”

It began to rain, fat drops splattering hard against the roof of the car. The rainfall darkened the streets and streaked the brick of the old factories, dripping through their collapsed roofs and broken windows. The sidewalks on Main Street were deserted. Capobianco pointed out the spot where the train station had once stood, burned to the ground years after the railroad went bankrupt for the last time. There was talk of making the old rail line a hiking trail, he said, but the project was bogged down in law suits. They hurried back to the office. It looked like it was going to pour.

“I haven’t seen her in a while,” Capobianco explained to Louis, his latest medical student. “First she was in the hospital in Springfield for her surgery. She got a post-op pneumonia there and stayed another week. Then she went to a nursing home for a month. Five days after she got home she was admitted to psych.” Capobianco jammed on the brakes. He had almost gone past the house. “Frankly, I don’t know how she lived this long. I thought the surgery might give her a second chance, but now this.”

The Camaro in the front yard was gone. There was no sign of anyone in the trailer behind the house. They waited at the front door in the heavy shade of the oaks. The yard was silent. No pulse of music, no droning TV. Cheryl's mother met them at the door, leaning hard on her walker. "She's not doing so good," Mrs. Butler whispered as she waved them in. "I told her not to get that operation. That surgeon in Springfield's a quack. He'd operate on anyone." The smell of cat urine and tobacco had returned. It seeped from the air into the walls and furniture.

They found Cheryl slumped in a wheelchair, connected to her mother's oxygen machine. She had clearly lost weight. The true contours of her face had begun to show, and the lines of her shoulders and belly had slimmed. She continued staring down at the floor as Capobianco greeted her and introduced his new student.

"She's so weak," said Mrs. Butler. "She won't eat a thing. Won't even take her vitamins."

The doctor was alarmed. He had seen Cheryl sick before, but this was different. "Your mother's right" said Capobianco. "You don't look so good. Are you having trouble breathing?"

"No," said Cheryl.

"I put the oxygen on to give her more energy. She doesn't want to move," said her mother. "She just sits there."

"I don't feel like moving," said Cheryl, raising her eyes briefly to glance at them as she slumped further in the chair.

"But what about your powers?" said Capobianco, trying to lighten the tone.

"What powers?" Cheryl whispered, adding mechanically, almost inaudibly, "They stole them when they operated. It was all a trick. They operated on my brain. I know, I saw the brain surgeon when they put me under. A warlock. My head still hurts."

"Is that why you won't eat?" asked Capobianco.

Cheryl gestured faintly at Louis. "I can't talk about it with him here."

"It's okay," said Capobianco. "He's a medical student. He's with me."

"She can't talk about it with him here," said Mrs. Butler.

There was an awkward silence. Dr. Capobianco looked at Louis apologetically. "I'm sorry, Louis. Could you wait outside a few minutes?"

With the student gone, the doctor pulled his chair in front of Cheryl and looked at her closely. “What’s bothering you?” he asked.

“I’m losing weight,” said Cheryl.

“Yes, I can see,” said the doctor. “What’s wrong with that?”

“I don’t like it,” said Cheryl.

“Why not?” said Capobianco. “Before you know it, you’ll be shopping for a new wardrobe.”

“I don’t want a new wardrobe,” said Cheryl. “I was going to get a new body and now I can’t get rid of this one.”

“You’re getting a new body,” said the doctor, trying to reassure her. “A healthier one.”

“I don’t want to be thin,” said Cheryl. “Bad things happen when you’re thin.”

Capobianco knew better than to argue with delusions, but couldn’t help asking, “Like what?”

“It’s men,” said her mother, breaking into the conversation. “Let’s not beat around the bush. It’s men she’s worried about. She’s afraid when she’s thin, men will be after her.”

Cheryl turned away with a groan and covered her face with her hands. She remained that way the rest of the visit, mute and rigid, face to the wall. When Capobianco concluded she would say no more, he called Louis back.They examined her as best they could and looked at her medication. There were lots of new pills and new doses to reconcile.

Mrs. Butler pulled the doctor aside on their way out. “I can’t take care of her,” she whispered. “It’s too much. She’s going to hurt herself.”

Capobianco was wondering the same thing. “What about your granddaughter? Can she help?” he asked.

“Madison?” Mrs. Butler shook her head. “She moved out. She had problems with Ronnie’s stepson. We had to call the cops.”

The doctor paused a moment to consider his options. “Okay, I’ll call Cheryl’s psychiatrist,” he said, resigning himself to a task he knew could take the rest of the day.

There was no student with Capobianco this time. He drove to see Mrs. Butler by himself. He wished he had company, though. He liked talking about the town—the iron forge in colonial days, the factory for coffin trimmings during the Civil War. There were rumors a Chinese company was looking at land for a fertilizer plant. The abandoned piano factory on his right hadn't changed, though the vines had crept higher on the struts of the water tower. It was a nice time of year. His knee felt better. The September breeze was warm and pleasant on his cheek as he stepped out of his car in the Butler's driveway. Cheryl was no longer there. She was placed in a group home after her last hospital stay. Her weight loss had continued as had her flashbacks to the sexual abuse of her childhood. The front door was open so he let himself in. Mrs. Butler was at her usual spot at the dining room table, facing a dark TV screen against the wall. "Hello, Mrs. Butler," he said. "I was afraid something happened to you."

"I'm not doing so good," said Mrs. Butler.

"I know," said the doctor. She looked smaller, as if she had shrunk or the house grown larger.

"I couldn't handle Cheryl no more."

"I know," Capobianco repeated. Mrs. Butler's eyes welled with tears. Capobianco handed her a tissue from a box on a TV tray.

"I miss her. She was my best friend."

"You did the best you could. But I'm worried about you. I don't think you're safe here by yourself."

"No, I can manage," said Mrs Butler. "Ronnie looks in on me."

A cat strolled out from the kitchen, the tabby with its tail held high like a striped walking staff, brushing its flanks against the chair legs where they sat. It curled against Mrs. Butler's ankle, arching its back until she reached down and scratched it behind its ears. It purred for a moment, sniffed the air and padded off to the bathroom. Mrs. Butler turned her head to listen until she heard the tabby paw its kitty litter with firm, reassuring strokes. Then she turned back to face the dark TV screen. Her breaths were shallow. Their rasping blended with the sound of the oxygen machine, a delivery van passing down the street, a small airplane low overhead. Capobianco noticed streaks of

light shining through the chinks in the wall as he took out his blood pressure cuff and strapped it to her arm.

"Your pressure's a little high," said the doctor. "Do you need any refills?"

VALENTINE'S DAY

"Ready for dessert?" The server, Austin, stood by with his pad and pen. No shorthand for Austin, no memory tricks. He printed each letter clearly, focused as a dentist doing root canal. Each word stood out neat as type.

Izzy looked up at Austin. "You got any ice cream?" Izzy had been in the same seat for nine years. No one else would even think of sitting there, out of respect—Izzy's seat of honor.

"Of course," said Austin. "What kind would you like?"

"Spumoni," said Izzy. Sometimes ice cream bothered his colostomy, sometimes it didn't.

"I'm not sure we have any. Hold on a minute, I'll check." Austin hurried to the kitchen and back. "Sorry Izzy, no spumoni. I tried to save you some. Somebody must've took it." Austin was home from college. He'd gone on a football scholarship but blew out his knee in the pre-season. The surgery went fine, but he'd never play football again.

"What kind do you have?" asked Izzy. He wouldn't chance it for just any ice cream.

Austin ran through the menu. "Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry,…and I think there's some Rocky Road."

"Rocky Road," said Izzy.

"Rocky Road for Izzy," said Austin. "And Carl, what about you?"

Carl sat next to Izzy, their backs to the wall with a clear view of the dining room like seniors sizing up the high school cafeteria. He had a lazy smile that was suspicious for alcohol, and a tendency to nod off during dinner.

“What kind of ice cream do you have?” asked Carl. His voice was surprisingly deep from such a frail-looking body. His table manners, except for the catnaps, were impeccable.

“Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and Rocky Road,” Austin repeated.

“Do you have any spumoni?”

“No, Carl. We’re all out. How about chocolate?”

“No thank you, Austin,” said Carl. “No dessert for me.” Carl was not put out. If there was no spumoni, he was content to return to his room and fall asleep.

Austin went around the table counter-clockwise. “And Flo, what about you? Any dessert?”

“Spumoni,” said Flo. Flo was so hunched over she stared directly at the table from her wheelchair.

“Austin said they’re all out of spumoni,” said Izzy.

“What?” said Flo.

“They’re out of spumoni,” said Izzy, like it was news.

“No spumoni?” said Flo, rotating her head toward Izzy as she adjusted the prongs on the nasal cannula that had become skewed on her upper lip.

Austin shook his head and spoke louder. “No. Sorry, Flo. All out.”

“What kind do you have?” asked Flo.

“Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and Rocky Road.”

“Any pistachio?”

“No, just what I said.”

“Then give me a scoop of chocolate and a scoop of strawberry. Not too big.”

Austin wrote it down on his pad, recording Flo’s order verbatim with the word ‘scoop’ written out twice, clear as could be.

“And you, Betty? Any dessert?” Betty was new to the table. She had moved to the facility a month ago, just in time to take over an empty seat when one of the regulars moved to Texas to be near her son. The jury was still out on Betty. That didn’t phase her. She showed up regular as clockwork.

“I’ll have the peach cobbler,” she said.

“Me, too,” said Betty’s daughter, who had joined her for lunch. The daughter turned to Izzy. “Betty tells me you just turned a hundred. Congratulations.” Betty had arrived in time for the birthday celebration three weeks ago. “You must be the oldest person here.”

Izzy scowled and pointed across the room with his lips. “Frank’s two months older than me.” Frank’s table was on the other side, near the door to the kitchen. His sole lunch companion was a blind woman whose red and white folding cane rested against the back of her chair. Frank had hardly touched his food and hadn’t spoken a word the entire meal. Rumor had it he was Buddhist.

“How long have you been here?” asked Betty’s daughter.

“Nine years,” said Izzy. “Since my wife died.”

“It’s such a nice place. You must like it.”

They were interrupted by a tall, hefty man who loomed high above them at the edge of the table. Ed, the chef.

“Hello, Ed,” said Carl.

“Hi fellas. Flo, Betty. How was the fish?”

“Very nice,” said Betty’s daughter.

“How was what?” said Flo.

“So-so,” said Izzy.

“The fish,” said Carl.

“Needed more salt,” said Izzy.

“My biggest critic,” said Ed, laying a hand on Izzy’s shoulder.

“More salt,” said Flo, turning her head to catch a glimpse of Ed.

“I’ll look into that,” said Ed. “Tough crowd,” he added, addressing Betty’s daughter. “Enjoy your dessert, everybody. Izzy, we’ll get you more spumoni,” he added, cocking his index finger at Izzy, seeming pleased with his own good nature as he moved on to the next table.

Izzy turned to Betty’s daughter. “I like salmon, but you have to know how to cook it. Ed don’t know how to cook salmon.”

“A little butter, a little lemon,” said Carl.

“That’s right,” said Izzy, “but you got to know how to cook it.”

Nina, the activities director, followed close in Ed's wake on her daily rounds. "Hi, everybody. Remember, two o'clock, we're trying something new. Dominoes. Carl, how about joining us?"

"I'll have to check my schedule," said Carl.

"And don't forget Valentine's Day. We want your wedding pictures, everybody. Just give them to Renee at the front desk. Last year we had such a nice display, we want to do it again. I'm looking at you, Izzy."

Izzy slid his walker, stepped, slid again and stepped, until he was in the elevator. "Hi Izzy," said the woman next to him as she pressed the button for his floor. "How did you like the salmon?"

"So-so," said Izzy.

"Oh," she said. "I thought it was good."

"You have to know how to cook it."

"Maybe you like it different."

The elevator doors parted and Izzy shuffled into the hallway. He could feel his heart beat was normal. He had his pacemaker checked a month ago. Interrogated. It was still good. They told him it should last another three years. He pushed lightly and his unlocked door swung open. He paused a minute for balance, looking in. The walls of his small one-bedroom unit were hung with landscapes and portraits, mostly of his wife, all done by him, painted during vacations in Maine. He made his way to the bedroom, folded his walker and set it against the wall. Backing slowly to the right position, he let himself drop on the bed and removed his hearing aids, placing them neatly in a small plastic case on his bedside table despite the numbness of his fingers. Then with practiced concentration, steadying himself to marshal his strength, he swung his legs onto the bed. His legs. He couldn't remember the last time he could straighten them. Not dead weight exactly, but still. He pulled a blanket up to his waist and lay back, staring at the ceiling. A wedding picture. Last year he couldn't find one, or maybe didn't want to. As a rule he didn't like photographs. They only captured the moment. He felt there's something false about that, something dishonest. His last portrait of his wife hung on the wall opposite his bed. It showed the wrinkles on her neck and the

puffiness under her eyes in plain detail. Her lips were thin. Her nose, slightly arched, was still strong. Her chin had a soft, pleasing curve. She wore a white bucket hat with a bow, and no makeup. The smooth crescents of her eyelids drooped to the top of her pupils. Her skin was pale. She gazed down and away, pensive, as if trying to recall something, as if unconcerned with the painter in front of her. She seemed tired but not unhappy. Maybe she had been posing too long and needed a rest—a summer afternoon nap, a lazy vacation nap in Maine. He could look shamelessly at her while she averted her eyes.

"Here, I found something." Izzy leaned on his walker by the desk in the front lobby, waiting for Renee to get off the phone. He reached into a pouch hanging from the front crossbar to produce an old framed photograph.

Renee, the receptionist, was wondering why he had come all the way to her end of the building. Her eyes widened with delight. "Izzy, you found it. Let me see."

He gave the photo one last look and handed it to her as if relinquishing his private thoughts.

"Izzy, you're amazing. Just look at that handsome couple," said Renee. She called to two nurses aides who were chatting in the hallway. "Ladies, come look at this. Can you believe it?"

Izzy went sliding toward the dining room. "Remember to come by tomorrow and see the display," Renee called after him. "We'll put yours right in the middle. Beautiful. We have more pictures than last year. And wait till you see the flower arrangement."

He waved to her without looking back and continued down the corridor. It was tough going. Halfway to the dining room he felt his legs give out, and he managed to collapse discreetly into one of the chairs that lined the wall. While he waited to regain his strength he nodded at the slow procession of walkers and wheelchairs that crept past him en route to the dining room for the second seating, greeting each passer-by by name. Carl spotted him from the back of the queue and took a seat at his side. Carl was still a vigorous walker. He took long strides, his arm swing loose and easy as a balance wheel. "Did you hear anything about Flo?" he asked.

"No," answered Izzy. "What about her?"

“She wasn’t at breakfast,” said Carl, his voice booming through the hallway loud enough to turn heads. Izzy had skipped breakfast that day, looking for his photo. But he often skipped breakfast, or took something in his room. Flo was a breakfast regular.

“Let’s see if she makes it to lunch,” said Izzy, thrusting himself upright with the full strength of his arms. His legs felt a bit better. Together they found their table at the far end of the room. Betty was waiting for them, but no sign of Flo. Her chair remained vacant throughout the meal.

“Ready for dessert?” Austin stood with his pad and pen at the ready.

“Spumoni,” said Izzy.

“Spumoni for Izzy,” repeated Austin. “Carl, any dessert?”

“Spumoni please, Austin.”

“Spumoni for Carl.”

“And for you, Betty?”

“I’ll take spumoni, too,” said Betty.

“Three spumonis.”

Ed the chef was punctual with his mid-day rounds, joined by Nina at their table. Carl and Betty complimented Ed on the lasagna. Izzy had little to say one way or the other.

“I saw your wedding picture, Izzy,” said Nina. “What a lovely bride and groom. And I have Betty’s and Carl’s too. We’re going to have such a special Valentine’s Day. Don’t forget, there’s a wine and cheese reception.”

“Have you seen Flo?” asked Izzy.

Nina leaned toward him, cupped her hands around her mouth and dropped her smile. “I heard she’s in the hospital,” she whispered as Ed slipped away.

“She what?” said Izzy.

“Nina said she’s in the hospital,” said Carl.

“The hospital,” said Betty.

“They took her last night,” said Nina, straightening up, speaking now in her normal tone. “Trouble breathing.”

“The hospital,” said Izzy. “When’s she coming back?”

“I don’t know,” said Nina. “Soon I hope.”

“Sometimes people go and they never come back,” said Carl.

“You got that right,” said Izzy.

“I’m sorry she won’t be here for Valentine’s Day,” said Betty.

“That don’t matter,” said Izzy. “She never married.”

Nina smiled again, reminded them of the wine and cheese, and moved on to the next table with Ed.

Izzy woke still dressed in his clothes from the day before. His shoes were off and he was covered with a quilt, though he couldn’t remember how. He raised his head just enough to see the portrait of his wife hanging on the opposite wall. She was still there, averting her eyes. He hadn’t slept well, but there was nothing unusual in that. He forgot to make arrangements to visit Flo. He must remember to see if the van could take him to the hospital that afternoon. Valentine’s Day. He closed his eyes and lay back on the pillow, regretting that his wedding photo was on display, exposing his life to the comments of strangers. He pictured his wife’s body full and firm in her gown. The camera captured that. Her lips too, full and firm. He summoned the memory of his desire for her and how it suffused his days. He tried to feel it but there was nothing. Nothing in his blood or in his nerves. He tried to imagine it and had more success. He could picture her young body, and he could feel the touch of her hand and her breasts. But he couldn’t feel the memory. He could not recall what desire felt like, he could only recall its power, the power that filled so much of his waking life, and colored his most sensible thoughts—until when? Was it still there when he painted the portrait hanging in front of him, with her fullness gone and her skin pale and creased? He thought so. And for what, exactly? For a son who died before he did? No, it didn’t have to be for something. It was for itself. Yet it was strange to feel nothing after such power. Such nothing. Not that he missed it. Do you miss hunger when you’re not hungry? But he was curious to return for just a moment to remember how it felt. With his wife. Just one moment for old times’ sake, a widower’s quaint notion on Valentine’s Day. Maybe Nina had won, he thought. Maybe the Renee’s of the world were right.

He remembered Flo in the hospital and suddenly feared he may be too late, well aware you didn’t always get a second chance at these things. He went to swing his

legs off the bed. They wouldn't move. He tried again, but nothing happened. They lay there disconnected, as if someone had set two logs against his hips. He was puzzled. Did they simply refuse to move, or had he forgotten how to move them? He tried to think through the process for moving legs. There wasn't much to it, they simply moved when you moved them. Maybe if he waited. Maybe if he fell asleep, when he woke they would move again like they did yesterday. But he couldn't sleep. Maybe it had something to do with his clothes. He loosened his belt and undid his shirt. He waited. Still nothing. Turning on his side and bending forward inch by inch, he managed to reach far enough to grip his thighs. He rubbed and squeezed them as best he could. He slapped them, and when they didn't respond he pushed them. They were stiff and heavy, and hardly budged. He tried again. They wouldn't move. He couldn't remember what it was like to move his legs.

Izzy's stretcher rolled out the front door into the light of a cloudless day, down the entrance ramp toward an ambulance waiting at the curb. The breath of the EMT's burst white in the cold air as they pushed him. He shut his eyes against the brilliance of the sun, but its glare pierced his lids. He turned his head for a last look at the building and saw Nina and Renee waving from the vestibule. The assisted living transport van was parked next to the ambulance. As they hoisted him into the ambulance bay, he saw a woman in a wheelchair being lowered to the pavement, tethered to an oxygen tank. "Flo," he tried to call, but could only muster a hoarse whisper. He smiled faintly and tried to wave, forgetting that his hand was strapped to his side. He mouthed a silent apology for not visiting. Flo's eyes were fixed on the ground as they wheeled her into the building. Nina welcomed her in the lobby with a yellow rose and led her to the Valentine's Day display. Flo raised her head for a moment, nodding weakly as her eyes rested on the center photo, on Izzy's bride with her wedding bouquet.

"Ready for dessert?" The new server, Kyle, stood by with his arms clasped behind his back. No pad and pen for Kyle, no delays while he wrote down their orders. His memory was sharp. He trusted it. He took computer classes at the community college.

Flo turned her head toward the sound of his voice. “You got any ice cream?”

“Of course,” said Kyle. “What kind would you like?”

“Pistachio,” said Flo. She had barely touched her mac and cheese.

“Pistachio for Flo,” said Kyle. “And for you, Betty?”

“Spumoni,” said Betty.

“Sorry, Betty. No more spumoni.”

“Then pistachio.”

“Two pistachios…Carl?”

“What kind of ice cream do you have?” asked Carl.

“Vanilla, chocolate, strawberry, and pistachio,” said Kyle.

“Pistachio,” said Carl.

“And Leonard? Any dessert?”

Leonard, new to the facility, was a bit confused. He hadn’t decided yet.

Across the room at his table by the kitchen, Frank sat wordlessly with his blind dinner companion. He had barely touched his food.

The chef, Rafael—Ed’s replacement after Ed moved to Reno—stopped at their table and looked down at Flo. “How was everything? Did you like the mac and cheese?”

Everyone nodded but Flo.

“Very nice, Rafael,” said Carl. “Just one suggestion. You might try broccoli spears instead of stewed tomatoes. For a little variety.”

“OK, Carl,” said Rafael. “I’ll make a note of that. Mac and cheese with broccoli for Carl.”

After Rafael came Nina. “Everyone ready for the Christmas party tomorrow? There’s caroling in the game room this afternoon. We’re serving egg nog and cider. Carl, we need your baritone.”

Carl nodded but declined to commit.

They finished their ice cream in silence. Without looking up, Flo set her spoon on the table and announced, “Izzy always said the mac and cheese was better at the hospital.”