"Turkey Stick" and other stories

Carole J. DeMarinis

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THE TURKEY STICK
AND
OTHER STORIES

By
Carole J. DeMarinis
B.S., Montana State University, 1964

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THE TURKEY STICK

I found Martha on the back stoop, holding a siphon pump at arm's length. She didn't look up but she knew who was there. She always knew. She moved over to make room for me to sit.

"I sure did worry about you kids when that O'Brien boy died of the bulbar," Martha said. It's what she always said first whenever we talked.

"No need to worry. They gave us the gamma globulin, and they watched us. Watched us like hawks worrying chicks." That's what I always said first.

"He shouldn't of swam in that pool. If he'd of waited a week the river'd of been down. River was always clean."

"The river is dangerous. Too many undercurrents and deep holes. People drown in the river." Damn. Why had I said that? My clumsiness surprised me, made it sound as if I'd been raised in the city.

"They don't catch the bulbar in the river. Not in my river." She sighted through the pump at the faded lines of a wall-ball game painted on the side of the milking shed.
Her voice was as thin as a blade of grass.

"Hard to believe how long it's been," I said. "Eighteen years now." I slid my briefcase onto the grass beside me. Martha pretended not to notice it. I'd work my way back to that business later.

Martha turned the pump over and over in her leathery hands. A magpie flew out of the big silver maple tree and coasted over to the neighbor's sheep pasture. I could see the sheep bunched together at the far end of their range, where the land began to slope up toward the bench.

"I can't make out this pump. Can't see why it don't work, just when I need it." With a few deft movements she dismantled the pump and spread the pieces on the boardwalk in front of her. She rested her chest on her knees and tapped her hard fingertips on the weathered grey boards, studying. Martha had made a kind of ritual out of puzzling over that pump. People from Willow Creek had always brought her things to fix, and she had never failed them. So we all came to know that when she claimed the pump had broken down again, it was not fixing she needed to do, but thinking, and she couldn't think with her hands still. I waited until she reassembled the pump and was wiping her hands on a flannel rag from her overalls pocket.

"Your flowers look good this year," I said. "Good color. They'll take a lot of ribbons at the fair."

She looked at me, her dark eyes glinting like steelies.
"Nope," she said. "No ribbons. Told me not to come. Give me a purple rosette and retired me. 'Give other folks a chance,' they said. Guess you missed the fair the past couple years." She turned her eyes to the glowing beds of zinnias, poppies, marigolds, hollyhocks. "They been better," she muttered. She picked up the pump and climbed the steps to the house. "You wear your hair too short," she said.

I waited. The sheep had moved halfway down the pasture toward the house. Two white butterflies chased each other through Martha's flowers. The burn barrel near the shed smoldered. What looked like a chair leg stuck out of the barrel, a charred finger stabbing at the sky.

Martha came to the screen door. "Long's you're here, you might's well have a cup of tea."

"I don't want to put you to any trouble, Martha." I left my briefcase outside.

"Ain't no trouble. Least folks can do is offer folks a cup of tea. Don't mind the laundry. I never iron in the summer." She led me past a pile of clean laundry that filled half of the little screen porch. Near the bottom of the pile I could see swatches of cotton prints from dresses that I had been told Martha hadn't worn since Henry had been gone. "I done up the curtains before the heat set in. The rest'll have to wait till cold. A body's got to pick and choose."

She motioned for me to sit at the little wooden kitchen
table. Her gesture was swift and firm and allowed for no alternatives. I felt uncomfortable. We never had tea in the kitchen. Even when all of us neighbor kids were very young we had tea in the dining room. Martha said it helped us learn our manners and how to take care of nice things. "Your curtains are always crisp, no matter what the season," I said, remembering to use those manners this time. While Martha made the tea, I pressed my back against the wall and craned my neck to look into the dining room. I couldn't see any furniture. "And there's never a spot on your floor, nor a dust goblin hiding in the corner. I don't know how you do it." I sounded like a busy-body. The questions I wanted to ask—Why are we in the kitchen? Where is your furniture? Why have you made everyone in town think you're senile?—stuck in my throat. I was afraid of the answers. I looked at the blue-and-white linoleum sparkling and the white organdy curtains lifting in the breeze through the screens and I felt like a stranger. The kitchen hadn't changed since the day Martha first invited me to one of her afternoon tea parties, but today something was different, something had changed. The props were all the same but I felt as if the room and I were in different time dimensions, as if we were half a beat out of sync.

Martha set a plate of saffron buns on the table. The buns were sliced and buttered. I'd never liked saffron buns, but I could never tell her. "Them's Henry's favorites,
but I guess he wouldn't mind sharing," she said. When we were little, she'd give us buttered bread sprinkled with sugar. Saffron buns were supposed to be a treat for grown-ups and grown-up children, but I'd rather have sugar bread.

"How is Henry?" I asked. It wasn't a question I meant to ask. I hoped I sounded idly curious.

Martha poured the hot tea into delicate porcelain cups. She set out cream and sugar and napkins and little flowered plates, and ignored my question. "Like not to bake in summer," she said, "but Henry's got to have his saffron buns." She sat and held her cup near her lips, blowing to cool the steaming tea. Her eyes were fixed on the wall behind me. Without turning, I knew what she was looking at: a photograph of herself and Henry after two years of marriage, she wearing a print dress and apron with her hair braided and wrapped behind, he wearing overalls and a flannel shirt and a slouch cap and a soft gentle smile. His arm was around her and they were surrounded by her flowers, mostly hollyhocks as tall as their shoulders, and they looked very contented and happy. "And they's got to be fresh," she said over her tea. "Buns don't keep over."

I ate my slice of bun, the saffron flavor curdling in my mouth, the diced citron slimy against my teeth. The bun was stale. "You could win a ribbon for your saffron
buns," I lied. Martha pulled her eyes away from the photograph. They rested on me, blank and uncomprehending. "You could enter the baking category. Instead of flowers. In the fair."

Martha set down her cup without drinking and went to the counter. She took half a dozen saffron buns from the tin bread box and wrapped them in waxed paper. "Them's Henry's favorites, but he wouldn't mind sharing." She tied them with string and held them out to me.

"Martha, I..."

I had missed my chance. I shouldn't have tried to do it right, to follow the gentle formalities. I should have been a hard-edged city person and told her outside, before she joined up with her crisp curtains and her shiny floor and the gray-and-white photograph. I had a job to do and I should have walked right up and taken that pump away from her, and I should have kneeled down and held those clever wrinkled hands, and I should have told her right away before she had a chance to start in about what's-his-name O'Brien and the bulbar and the river. Before she reduced me to a pig-tailed neighbor girl, I should have told her that they'd found Henry's body. Now, faced with the mysterious power of porcelain cups and saffron buns, I was that little girl, and I had lost my chance.

"No, no, Henry won't mind," Martha said, patting my cheek. I tried to catch her eye, to bring her up short
and break through the charade, but she dismissed me by turning her back. "Now I got chores to do. Been real good seein' you. Been a long time." She went out through the porch and down the steps. "It's nice, a little tea in the afternoon," she said. She hurried across the yard toward the milking shed where a black-and-white cow stood patiently. She stopped suddenly and said without turning, "If you see Henry, you hurry him along. It's not like him to be this late. I've got to doctor his eyes." She started walking again, slowly. "Not like him at all."

I watched her and the cow disappear into the shed. I felt stiff and helpless, while my mind churned. I didn't want to believe that she was gone, that she had crossed the line from eccentricity into senility, but what could I think? What was the answer? The people at the courthouse said she was batty, and that for two years she'd been carrying on as if Henry were just dawdling late at the feed store. No one there wanted to come out here to tell her that they'd found him last week drowned and rotting in his pick-up. No one there wanted to serve her the papers that set a deadline for delinquent taxes and warned of confiscation of property. When they called me, I wouldn't believe what they said. I told them they were wrong, that she'd always been different. She's fine, I'd said. I looked at the package of saffron buns in my hand. "Jesus," I said out loud, and slid them into my briefcase.
I stopped at the front corner of the big white house. From force of a very old habit I looked at the fence behind the neatly trimmed lilac bush that grew there. Leaning against the fence was a heavy stick painted white. The turkey stick. When Martha and Henry kept turkeys in the side yard, visitors carried the stick from the lilac bush to the back door and back again to protect themselves from the tom. The turkeys had been gone for years, but the stick was still there, just in case. I picked it up, and remembered the feel and heft of it, and the sound of the turkeys, and the fear. I swished it in the face of an imaginary angry bird. I was about to crack his skull when I looked back toward the milking shed and saw Martha standing in the doorway with a bucket in her hand, watching, as if she'd expected me to stop there.

We looked at each other across the green distance of the yard for a long, long moment before she stepped back into the darkness. I replaced the stick, leaning it carefully against the fence in the exact spot where it had been. A ragged old tomcat nearly as big as a lynx limped out from under the lilac bush. He stretched his arthritic joints and narrowed his yellow eyes at me. We recognized each other. It was incredible that he was still alive. Martha must be feeding him, I thought.

I drove slowly out the long narrow driveway, my tires crunching on the gravel, my educated brain feeling like
empty white paper. I stopped to look at Martha's garden, the best anywhere. It was big and healthy and always ahead of any other in the valley. The pumpkins were nearly ripe and the early corn had been harvested weeks ago. Piles of compost were ready to be spread when the summer rows were empty.

At the end of the driveway I turned left, onto the county road. My decision was aimless; my only desire was to avoid going through the town where all eyes would be asking what had happened.

I found myself on the dirt road along the river, Martha's river. The water was especially low this year on account of a dry winter. It slid lazily along, two or three feet below the high-water line, showing gray borders of rocks covered with dried scum and hellgrammite cases. I could see neat stacks of sawed driftwood and deadfall beside the firepits in the picnic area. Martha's work. Martha's caretaking. She never stopped. I parked and walked around for a long time, adding stray bits of squaw wood to the piles, flipping scraps of bark into the gold sheen of the river.

My date arrived at three, and I wasn't ready. When he knocked, I was sitting on the couch with my hands in my lap folded around my car keys, my briefcase beside me, and my shoes still on. He walked in without waiting for an
answer.

"Hey, babe, you're not dressed. You can't play tennis in that outfit. Did you forget?" He was wearing tennis whites, with a blue sweatshirt tied around his shoulders.

"Hi, Aaron. Did we have a date? I don't..."

He interrupted. "How'd it go out there? Is the old lady crazy or not? What'd she say when you told her?"

"I didn't tell her."

"You didn't? Christ, I should have gone with you. I was going to ask if I could come along. Must be a nice drive out there. All those hills and cows. Really peaceful, isn't it? A good break from this madhouse. Boy, is Bradley going to be pissed."

I stood up. "I have to go someplace, Aaron. I can't play tennis today. Screw Bradley." I picked up my briefcase, then set it back down.

"Hey, it's okay. I understand. Maybe on the weekend. You want me to come along? You look a little shaky."

"No...thanks. I have to go alone. Would you just lock the door when you leave?"

I had not been to the buffalo jump in many years. The pishkun. The place where the rocks ran with blood. I was grateful that the parking lot was empty. When I got out of the car I caught sight of my reflection in the window. Maybe Martha was right. Maybe the hair was a little too
short.

I crossed the lot and hurried down the slope in front of the visitors' observation point. I didn't read the plaques. I knew what they said. I knew how the men on foot waved blankets to stampede a buffalo herd, and how they formed two lines to funnel the terrified beasts toward the cliff. I knew how the stupid bison followed their leader, bunched tight, heads down and nostrils hissing, and how they all hurtled off the edge, their flailing hooves pounding silent thunder in the air. I knew the women scrambled onto the rocks slippery with bloody foam, and onto the smashed animals, skinning and butchering and giggling, and I knew that if a herd didn't come near the pishkun the band could starve.

I crossed a narrow dry stream bed, its ancient gravel as fine as pearls, and then the land began to climb steeply. The trail was crude and rocky, purposely unimproved. It skirted the side of the bluff, switching back through outcroppings of scrubby brush. Gnarled Douglas firs clung to vertical banks. I looked toward the boulders where all those buffalo had fallen and died. "Analysis of fossil remains indicates that the pishkun was in use as long ago as..." Suddenly I couldn't remember. Three thousand years? Four?

I crawled the last twenty feet up the trail, coming out on top of the bluff about halfway between the jump and
the mouth of a narrow wooded valley that had served as a chute for the stampeding herds. The area was wide and flat. There were no boulders and no trees. The native grasses grew tight against the ground, which sloped slightly toward the cliff. It was a perfect runway.

I walked to the cliff's edge, as I always did, and the vertigo, as it always did, lightened my feet. The urge to jump was as strong as ever, pounding in my ears. I braced my arms against an imaginary wall and looked down at two hundred feet of sheer cliff face and another two hundred feet of roily boulders, now soft yellow in the late sunlight. I backed up and turned away.

It took several minutes to find the teepee rings. Finally I stepped inside one of the circles of half-buried stones and sat down. The light on the bluff slid over into orange. Down on the valley floor it had already reached lavender, and purple-blue under the trees and beside the stacks of baled hay. There was no sound at all.

I tried to listen. Over and over I tried to clear my mind of questions and still my tapping foot. I imagined a book and I turned its pages until I reached the last one, which was blank. I imagined a white square with a black dot in the center and I made the black dot grow until it covered the square. A sound shattered the black.

It was the buzz of a nighthawk's wings. Startled, I looked up into a pale gray sky, the light nearly gone. The
bird hovered, searching for another insect, another bite of food. I remembered the charred finger of wood pointing up out of Martha's burn barrel, and I recognized it. It was the graceful carved leg of the stool Martha always sat on to shell her peas.

"She knows!" I whispered. "Of course she knows!"

I ran to the trail. Memories surged into me, filling me. Everything I had learned from her and about her had been carefully, foolishly filed away. Now I realized what she was doing. I didn't have to tell her anything: she knew that Henry was dead. She had always known and she was preparing her own death as she had always told us she would. She was cleaning up after herself, leaving a tidy space behind. For two years she had fooled the valley into thinking she was crazy, so that she could work undisturbed. She had often told us about families and friends who had turned against each other, had hauled each other into court, all for the want of a table or a vase or a bit of jewelry. She had always told us that she would leave in peace and leave peace behind her.

I went down the dark trail fast—stumbling, sliding, falling, a pleasant entertainment for the ghosts that chuckled in the twisted firs, amused at my slowness of mind.

I started for Martha's at dawn, carrying with me a little package for her. The morning was clear and sunny,
but the light seemed pale, no real heat in it. Summer was gone, in spite of what the calendar said. As I drove I saw gardens with old blankets spread over the tomato plants. The first frost could come any night now.

I stopped in the turn-around of Martha's drive. There was something different. Just since yesterday, something had changed. There were no sheep in the pasture, but there weren't always. I looked beyond the pasture and the meadow and the railroad tracks and saw a long dark ribbon in the sky over the road. Ducks in the flyway. Thousands and thousands of ducks, going south.

Halfway through the side yard, I turned back to the front of the house. The sitting room curtains were down. The lace panels. That's what the difference was. Martha never wasted time.

I hurried to the back door and knocked. I didn't see her in the yard anywhere. I waited. I pressed my nose against the screen and called, just like always. The big pile of ironing was gone. Two years worth of clean, wrinkled laundry had disappeared. I could see the refrigerator door propped open and the handle removed. Forever caring about the children.

I hurried across the yard to the burn barrel. Nothing in it now but a drift of feathery gray ash. I looked into the milking shed, though I was sure she wouldn't be there. I looked across the yard at the flowers whose colors blazed
like stars, and around the back corner of the shed I found Martha with her 30.06 rifle raised to her shoulder. The black-and-white milk cow and the old brown plow horse each stood in a deep rectangular pit dug in the earth. The cow chewed her cud quite peacefully. Martha fired and old Annie One-Eye lurched forward onto her knees. She thought to rise but only scooted her nose into the dirt. Then her large hindquarters twisted over and she was on her side and quiet.

The blow from the rifle butt spun Martha around, nearly knocked her down. She looked stunned, the lights in her eyes clouded by pain. The gun rocked carelessly at waist level, pointed in my direction. She gained her feet and snapped the bolt open, ejecting the shell. She slammed the bolt shut and I cried out, "No!"

There was a commotion from the startled horse. He began to nicker, to climb the plank runway out of his pit. "No!" I shouted again, this time at him. Martha swung the rifle up and fired, hitting a little high on the head. He staggered back, his eyes streaked with red and pleading apology for his rudeness. She cleared the chamber and fired again, on target, dead center. He sank down, grumbling, and rolled onto his side. His heavy legs twitched. His loyal blood pumped into the dirt, turning it into thick fertile ooze.

Martha threw the rifle into the pit with him and stood
looking at the two old friends lying quiet in their graves. I raised my gaze to the brown treeless hills and thought of Aaron, and the idyllic image he had of country life. I thought of him sitting at his desk talking about swimming holes and peaceful meadows. I thought of Bradley, our boss, the County Attorney. My heart pounded in my throat. The damned endless mob of ducks chattered overhead.

"You made good time," Martha said finally. "You must have left at first light."

"I wanted to be here," I said. "I didn't know how much time there was." I took deep, even breaths and clenched my fists.

"There's some," she said, and turned to the shed where two shovels were leaned.

"You knew I'd be back," I said, taking the shovel she held out to me. "I didn't even know myself." I plunged the shovel into the mound of fill. I could tell by the weeds growing on it that it had been piled for a long time.

"You're a sweet girl with a good heart. You know about things. You've always known about things." Tears streaked my face as we threw dirt onto the dead cow.

"Some things has got to be done," Martha said after a bit. "Old Jess there, he was too old to plow for more'n half an acre at a stretch, and I'd sooner see him turned into compost than glue. And what can you do with an old one-eyed cow that's never had but one set of hands on her?"
Martha shoveled slowly but steadily. "She was a sweet milker, though, old Annie One-Eye was. I ever tell you how I happened to come by her?"

"Please tell me," I answered, wanting to hear it again.

"We was up on the bench, me and old Jess, and we come across her. She was just a calf then and been bit by a rattlesnake. The whole side of her little head was all swole up. Her eye looked the size of a melon, all bulged out and putrid. Well, I took her home and I scraped that eye out and drew out the poison's best I could with raw potato and then I took her on over to the Nelsons--that's Red Nelson--them that owned her. He said she wasn't no good to him no more and I could have her if I wanted since I gone to all that trouble over her." We finished at the first grave and moved over to the second. Martha looked back to old Annie One-Eye. "My Lord, but she was a sweet milker," she said.

We shoveled in silence for a few minutes. Then Martha said, "The snakes was moulting when she got bit. They strike at anything when they's moulting. Blind and mad, they get. I sure did worry about you kids when the snakes was moulting."

We finished our task. Martha leaned the shovels against the milking shed and started for the yard. She had changed her outfit today. For two years she had worn Henry's flannel shirts and overalls, but today she was
wearing one of her cotton print dresses and an apron, freshly ironed, with her hair braided and wrapped behind like in the picture, like she always used to look.

We passed the big compost pit. I saw Jess and Annie's hay in it, and the clean laundry, and the crisp kitchen curtains and the lace panels from the sitting room, all wetted down and sprinkled with manure. "Martha, you've known all along about Henry, haven't you?"

"Yes," she answered, "I been knowin' he was dead ever since he went. Dead in my river." She stopped near the flower beds and slipped her hands into her apron pockets. "They found him at the headwaters, didn't they?"

"Yes, in that deep channel just past the willows. The water's down. Some boys fishing..."

Martha began to gather a bouquet. "And he was just sittin' there, wasn't he, in the truck, just like he was drivin'?"

"Yes." It didn't matter if he wasn't.

"I knew that's how he was. I knew he went over easy." I took a huge armload of flowers from her and she started on another. "Me and Jess we followed his tracks before that big storm covered them up. We saw what happened, how he veered off when he shouldn't of. It was his eyes, you know, they needed doctoring. He got on that thin ice..." She stopped mid-sentence. She held a rose-pink zinnia and fingered the petals.
"Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"Weren't no good in that. Folks'd of got lost or frostbit in that storm, tromping around out there looking for someone they couldn't of helped anyhow." She put all the flowers into a bucket of water that stood ready. "So me and Jess, we just come on home and I started cleaning up. Looks like I made it just in time." She put her hands on her hips and looked at me sharply. "You bring me some lawyer papers today?"

"No," I answered. I hung my head like a forlorn child, embarrassed at my profession. "I left them home."

"There, there, don't you fret. Ain't you that makes the laws," Martha said. She took my hand and patted it. She looked so much like the picture, except that her hair was white now and her dark eyes, after two years without Henry, were terribly, terribly sad.

"Martha," I asked, "couldn't we go inside and have a cup of tea?"

"No, child, not today. No more tea parties." She picked up the bucket of flowers and walked slowly toward the house. I was struck by how small she looked. Was it just that I had grown up to be taller than she? Or had her fiber shrunk with constant use, and was she now continuing to shrink, to tighten and harden and curl into herself like a drying seed, until she could disappear among the pebbles on the ground? I felt that I could cradle
her in one arm.

She stopped but didn't turn around. "You're the only one come." She sagged and I hurried to take the flower bucket from her.

"The other kids are gone away," I said. "They don't know."

"No," she said, "they don't know." She sank down onto the stoop and rested her arms across her knees. The shoveling had cost her a lot.

I sat beside her. "How soon, Martha?"

She smoothed the calico over her knees. "Soon," she answered. "I ain't et in three days. The house is ready for 'em. Nothing in there to fight over. They won't turn our things into bones for the dogs to worry." She smiled.

A breeze shuddered the leaves of the silver maple. There was a chill edge in it. "You can't stay here," I said.

"No, I can't. They won't let a body die in peace."

She stood up. "They'd come in and pack me off somewheres with strangers. Make me sit in a room or lay in a bed all day." She shook her head and sat down again. "Ain't goin' that way. Goin' up to the old house. They ain't smart enough to look up there. And you won't tell 'em." She folded her arms over her knees and rested her forehead on them. "It won't be long. I been poorly most of a year now." The flowers were very near her and seemed to shine
all their sunset colors gently onto her gray bent-over figure.

We sat, calm and quiet. The sheep in their pasture appeared and disappeared like magic. I could never see them move, they were just there or not there, as if they were being played with like flannelboard cut-outs. A game. Just like a game. A rage of protectiveness rose in me as I watched Martha resting and dying. She didn't deserve any less than old Jess and Annie.

"Get ready," I said.

"What?" She was startled; she had been asleep.

"Get ready. I'm going to take you up on the bench, up to the old house." Her sleepy eyes focussed on me, and glistened like two dark rocks in the river. "Do what you have to do. I'm going to pick the rest of the flowers," I said.

I found a couple of buckets and coffee cans to hold all the rest of the flowers. I loaded them into my car. Martha walked around the whole place, stopping in every shed, putting a hand on every tree. She stood for a long time near Jess and Annie. We left after noon.

The old house on the bench overlooked the whole valley: the farms, the little town, even--on the far eastern edge--the city where I worked. It had a one-story section of hand-hewn boards that was low to the ground and had been
tight against the weather, with tiny windows and a narrow
door; and a two-story section of milled boards, that had
gables and dormers and a screen door decorated with turn-
ings, and a three-sided bay with real glass windows from
St. Louis. It had been a grand house and when we'd played
in it Martha had told us over and over how it had looked
when it was young, and had made up stories about the people
who'd lived in it and the people who'd abandoned it. Those
last people had gone off suddenly in the night, leaving
behind only a 1943 calendar and a bent-wood rocker and not
a word to anyone. It was a wonderful mystery that all the
children loved.

I was shocked to see the house ruined and collapsing
into itself. Big holes gaped in the roof and the ridge
poles sagged. The walls were bent in as if it had been
squeezed around the middle. I feared that the floor would
not hold us.

I helped Martha inside and we walked cautiously into
the parlor. We heard the tick-tick of small animal feet.
"You'll want to sit in the bay," I said.

"Yes, in the bay. That will be nice. I can watch
the valley." Martha stood and looked around the room,
remembering, while I dragged the rocker into the bay and
got my old army blanket from the car to spread over it.
I found a stick and knocked the cobwebs and remaining
shards of glass out of the bay window frames. Then I
brought in all the flowers and arranged them in rows under the windows, in a fragrant semi-circle at her feet. She gave them a pleased, critical look and held out her arms to me. I stepped into them and she hugged me with surprising strength. I held her and bent to kiss the top of her head.

"There's a parcel for you at the other house," she said. "You stop by and pick it up on your way back. Mind you don't forget." She was still hanging on.

"I won't forget. I was going to stop by there anyway, to see if...if there's anything that needs doing."

"Yes...yes...there might be somethin' I ain't done." She put her hands on my waist and moved me away from her. She looked up at me and smiled, a caretaker's pride shining in her eyes.

"Good-bye, Martha," I said. My little-girl throat ached to cry, but I knew I must not. She let go of me and sat down to watch the valley. I opened the box I'd brought from home and took out skeins of red and yellow and green yarn and a crochet hook, and put them in her lap. She regarded them for a moment, then found an end of yarn, looped it over her fingers and the hook, and began to rock. She leaned her head back and rocked and watched the valley, the hook and the yarn and the fingers needing no guidance. The flowers gleamed in the dingy room.

I raked the dirt smooth over Jess and Annie and
seeded it with rye grass. I cleaned the shovels and stood them in the oily sand pit. I scoured the milking stanchion, then hosed down the whole shed, inside and out. I kept busy all afternoon, though I couldn't find anything important that Martha hadn't taken care of. Finally I stood in the yard cleaning my shoes and looking at the empty house. The last of the traveling ducks disappeared into the southern horizon. There was nothing left but to go inside.

Every room was completely empty, with shining floors and scrubbed woodwork. There was not a stick of furniture, not a rug, not a piece of bric-a-brac for the valley folks to haggle over. I walked through all the rooms, my footsteps amplified and echoing. Through the dining room, the sitting room, and the sewing room downstairs. Through the storeroom and the two bedrooms upstairs, the two bedrooms with the connecting closet. I remembered crawling through the closet, over the rows of boots and shoes, under the long winter coats, through the wall into the other closet, the other room. And Martha always there, always knowing where we'd come out.

I sat in the closet, right in the center where the wall should have been. Martha had done, was doing, what she always said she would do. And I was helping. There would be a lot of trouble about it, but I knew that it was right. They would say that she had no right to destroy all her things—to smash all the china and burn all the furni-
ture—because they could have been auctioned to help pay the back taxes. But they still had the house and the land; they'd bring in plenty of money.

They would say that only a crazy person would bury her clothes in the compost pit and shoot her poor defenseless animals. And they'd say that I must be crazy for leaving that poor old soul up there to die. No, not crazy: criminal. There would be a lot of trouble. At best Bradley would fire me. At worst, he'd prosecute. I felt cold and frightened.

I ran downstairs, clattering through the rooms. I pulled open the kitchen door and stopped, gripping the frame. The parcel. It was there on the counter, waiting for me, and I had seen it. I closed the door and leaned back against it. I looked at the package wrapped in a brown paper bag and tied with string. My name was on it, written in blue crayon.

I picked it up and walked outside to my car where I set it on the hood and unwrapped it. Inside were the delicate porcelain cups and the little flowered plates, and at the bottom, wrapped in layers of outing flannel, was the picture. The gray-and-white photograph of Martha and Henry after two years of marriage.

I walked over to the garden and looked up toward the bench. The orange and purple sunset light was dying into
gray. From where I stood I could see the turkey stick leaning against the fence, and sitting near it the old tomcat, indifferently awaiting the hunter's night. The last chore that needed doing.

It would be clean; I knew he could not run.

I heard the buzz of a nighthawk's wings. I pulled up a spent bean plant and kicked some compost into the hole. The old cat sat and blinked. I walked toward the stick, as Martha knew I would.
Elaine stood at the edge of the deep, gummy hole that used to have an outhouse over it and counted frogs. Pleasant June, in the hole, picked her way from rock to rock carrying a fistful of wild flags from the meadow which she stuck one by one next to every crevice she found.

"What are you doing that for?"

"For all the little animal things that got sucked down into these cracks. It's a commemorate. Like Prentice."

"Robert and Justin'll just pull 'em out."

"No, they won't. They won't come near this hole. You ever seen 'em here?" She looked up at Elaine with the lid of her left eye, her weak eye, pinched shut. The legs of her overalls and the sleeves of her striped shirt were rolled up into thick cuffs. Her knobby bare toes curled against the rock she stood on.

"They would if they weren't always chasing Sugar Babe."

"They ain't chasin' her...they're chasin' Zero to stop him from bitin' her ankles."
"Looks the same to me." Elaine squinted at the meadow and made binoculars with her fingers, pressing her eyeglasses tight against her face. She could see the four dark shapes on the other side of the acre: the red mare, Sugar Babe, galloping zig-zag patterns between the black line of the windbreak and the silver line of the creek; the curly-tailed chow dog snapping at her heels; and the two boys, Pleasant June's brothers, running wild and sailing dried cow pies at the horse, the dog, the magpies. "They're gonna get in Dutch," Elaine said. "Don't they have double chores to do?"

Today was a double-chore day because yesterday had been Visit Day. Every three months a lady from the State Children's Home came to see if Mr. and Mrs. Henderson were taking good care of Pleasant June and Robert and Justin. On those days the children wore the good clothes that Mrs. Henderson kept in her closet and got to sit at the table and have Kool-Aid and white-bread-sandwiches-cut-in-half for lunch instead of standing around the oil heater in the kitchen holding bowls of soup. On those days Mrs. Henderson smiled a lot and fusséd over Pleasant June's hair and got red in the face when the lady handed her the check for being a foster parent. Yesterday the Visit Lady hadn't arrived until very late afternoon and the children had played all day in their good clothes and then didn't have time to do their chores and Mrs. Henderson had been so
angry that after she waved good-bye to the State car she
snatched up a stalk of rhubarb and whipped the backs of
Pleasant June's bare legs with the leaf all the way from
the end of the driveway to the back porch.

"Lot you know about it," Pleasant June said. "Mom
ain't even home. Find me another rock. I need another
step for that side." The hole was about six feet deep and
eight feet across. The outhouse had been gone for a long
time, since old Mr. Henderson died, but no one had ever
considered filling it in. Weather and decay had combined
to turn the contents into a neutral gray mass. Some parts
of the sides had crumbled, making the pit wider and shallower
than it had been originally, but where Pleasant
June was pointing it was very deep: an air pocket had
collapsed under that edge of the hole's floor and the
jagged black crevasse it left appeared to have no bottom.

Elaine stuck her hands into her jeans pockets and
kicked at a chunk of rotten two-by-four half-buried in the
sod. She pulled out one hand and looked at the palm.
"I've got a lucky penny." She tossed it in the air a few
times. "How come your mom's not here?" She put the penny
back into her pocket.

"She's gettin' wallpaper...now get me that rock!"
Pleasant June looked at the few limp flags in her hand and
threw them up onto the grass. "And get me some more flow-
ers, too, cuz these are dead." She bent down and pulled
at a rock she had already stepped on. It came loose with a wet, breathing sound.

Elaine took a few steps around the edge. "Can we go inside?" It had been two years since Mrs. Henderson had called Elaine's mother to say that she was "getting some children" and to ask if "the sweet little girl" could come over to play with them, but until yesterday Elaine had never been in any room of the Henderson house except the kitchen. Then, while her foster mother was talking to the Visit Lady, Pleasant June had sneaked Elaine into the front room to show her what had been done. What caught her eye most, rather than all the bright new things Pleasant June pointed out, was a drawing of a naked man holding a spear and wearing a bunch of grapes or something where his underpants should be. It had been drawn by one of the Hendersons' "real" sons, and Pleasant June told her she wasn't supposed to look at it.

"Door's locked." Pleasant June hugged the rock against her stomach like a baby.

Elaine took a few more steps around the edge. "What does she need wallpaper for?"

"You dummy!" Pleasant June shouted. She threw the rock down hard near the sink-hole, splattering herself with muck. The fourteen frogs Elaine had counted flew into the air and disappeared. "I told you before: Prentice is coming home!"
"Yeah. But she already varnished the floor and calcimined the walls and put up new drapes and..."

"She wants that livin' room to be perfect when Prentice comes home and it ain't none a' your business!" She stepped onto the rock she had thrown down. "If you don't get me a rock and them flowers right this minute you ain't ever gonna play in the Terraplane ever again!" She clamped her hands onto her hips and glared up at Elaine with her good eye flashing. Pleasant June was going to be a seventh-grader--a year older than Elaine--and she made herself the boss of every younger child in her territory. She knew the facts of life and Elaine didn't, and she told Elaine just enough to keep her dying to hear more without giving away the secret completely. They would sit in the front seat of the old gray coupe, invisible behind windows turned white with cracks, and Pleasant June would pretend to drive while Elaine braided clover chains and teased for answers to her questions. Sometimes she would ask the same question over again and Pleasant June would give a different answer and then Elaine wouldn't know what to think because she was afraid to ask her mother which was the truth and embarrassed to confess her ignorance to any of her school friends.

Last week Pleasant June had tied her hair back and pretended to be a Roman soldier and had made Elaine wear the clover chains on her head and around her neck and be
the harlot. The soldier told the harlot how evil she was and threatened to stone her to death or throw her to the wolves if she didn't repent. Then the harlot had to lie down in the dark space behind the seat and couldn't come out until she told the soldier she was sorry. Elaine had asked what she was supposed to be sorry for and Pleasant June had unpinned her hair and run her fingers through it before she narrowed her eyes and answered, "I'll tell you when you grow up."

Elaine looked over to where the Terraplane bulged up out of a tangle of quack grass and nightshade vines. Then she looked back at Pleasant June and bit some dried skin off her bottom lip. "My mother said Prentice stepped on a mine and there wouldn't be enough of him left to send home from Korea so there's only gonna be a bag of sawdust in his coffin."

Pleasant June shrieked and scooped up a handful of the slick gray muck and threw it at Elaine. "That ain't true! Your mother's a liar and a harlot! Your mother's goin' to Hell for talkin' like that!" She scooped up a double handful and when she threw it she slipped off the rock and slid down into the sink-hole up to her chest and was stuck. Her cry of terror raised a flock of crows out of the windbreak and made Elaine feel like she was going to throw up.

"Elaine! Get me outta here!" she screamed. "It's
pulling me down!" Elaine hesitated a moment, then turned and sprinted toward the meadow, yelling for the boys. They saw her and she kept yelling and motioned for them to come. In reply they threw some cowpies in her direction and ran the other way, wiggling their behinds obscenely at her. She ran toward the house, then remembered no one else was home. Her throat hurt because she wanted to cry to her mama and daddy to help her and she still felt sick because she was happy that Pleasant June was stuck like a plug in the sink-hole and she didn't really care if she never got out.

There was a board on the ground near the concrete goldfish pond where Mr. Henderson would sit and read his Bible and watch the bristly, humpbacked fish. Elaine dug her fingers under the edge of it and just then one of the slimy orange creatures rose out of the shadow at the bottom of the pond and swiveled a bulging eye at her and then puckered his lumpy mouth over and over as if trying to suck her into the water and she thought of the new orange satin pillows on Mrs. Henderson's couch and of how they were Prentice's favorite color but he would never get to see them and she dumped a load of boxes off the board and ran with it to the hole.

Pleasant June was trying to swim free. She stroked in a furious dog-paddle, clawing for handholds. The sound she made was alternately a high-pitched squeal, like a
scared pig, and a guttural chuckle, like the grumbling of a nervous horse. Her straggly dark hair was gray where it hung down and stuck in the mud. One of the frogs returned and sat some distance away on a warm, dry rock with his back to her.

Elaine reached the edge and tried to hand the board down to Pleasant June. "Here!" she hollered. "Here, take this!"

"You left me!" Pleasant June screamed. "You run off and left me all alone to get sucked down to Hell! You're just like everyone else, you filthy harlot! You bring that board down here!"

"No, you take it." Elaine kneeled and held the board closer to Pleasant June. It was within her reach, but she turned her face into the shadow behind her and refused to look at it.

"No! No, I can't git it! You gotta bring it down!" Elaine drew the board back and stood up, cradling it, chewing on her lower lip. "If I die it's gonna be your fault, Elaine Collins!"

"I can't...I don't wanna come down there. I'm scared."

Pleasant June slapped the shiny mud in front of her. Gray freckles dotted her thin, hard face. "I'm gonna pray to Jesus to make you die a harlot and go to Hell forever if you don't git down here and gimme that board!" She stopped struggling. Her rage burst out in a banshee-like
wail that caused the four runners in the far meadow to turn and look her way, as if it were a call to them.

Elaine's heart pounded when she heard that scream, but she didn't move. She watched intently as a bee flew around to all the wilting purple-and-white flags. Then she watched the frog watching the bee. He sat perfectly still except for his eyes, as if that made him an invisible observer. She wished she could be invisible and could watch Pleasant June down in the hole, struggling and maybe dying, and not have to help. Elaine didn't believe in Hell, but Pleasant June did and maybe that's how it worked—that there was a Hell if you believed there was and maybe that old muck-hole would swallow her up and shoot her right on down to Hell—with all the harlots. Or maybe the sink-hole was big enough to be a mine, like the mine that got Prentice, and maybe in a minute Pleasant June would get blown up and there'd only be little pieces left like elbows and kneecaps and ear lobes and they'd put them into a bag with sawdust and bury it at night under the Terraplane.

The frog leaped up into the grass and Elaine's heart leaped with him. She ran around till she was behind Pleasant June and then threw the board over the girl's head so that it landed with a splat in front of her, throwing long streaks of gray over her face and hair. Pleasant June growled and pressed down with both hands onto the board, using the leverage to drag her torso out of the sink-
hole. She got a knee loose to where she could kneel on a rock and with a little more scrambling and clawing she was free. Elaine backed away toward the driveway, her cheeks pale and her teeth clamped painfully onto her lip.

"You're in for it, Miss Elaine. You pushed me in the shit-hole and you're gonna git it good. I'm gonna sic Zero on you and he'll..." Pleasant June looked up over the edge and drew in her breath with a loud braking sound.

"Lookit what you did to Dad's fish stuff! I'm tellin' and he's gonna blister you!"

Elaine jabbed a forefinger against the bridge of her glasses. They slid too high and hung momentarily on her eyebrows, while she blinked to keep tears from running onto her cheeks. "I'm not a harlot," she choked.

Pleasant June clambered up onto the sod and stood covered with muck but triumphant. She saw the tears glitter in Elaine's eyes and guessed she was back on top. Her loss of power had been temporary, a bit of slack that had run through her hand. She lowered the lid on her weak eye and pointed a finger at Elaine. "An' you gimme back that lucky penny. You found it in our house yesterday an' you stol'd it an' now you give it back."

Elaine turned and ran a dozen steps. The move surprised both girls. They both knew that Pleasant June could catch Elaine easily and beat her up whenever she wanted, but Elaine had defied her and Pleasant June hadn't chased.
Instead she made her voice as fierce as she could and yelled again: "You give that penny back. You stol'd it an..."

Elaine snapped around to face her. They were thirty feet apart but Pleasant June could see that there was a look on Elaine's face that she had never seen there. "Did not steal it. I found it in town."

"You ain't been to town."

"Have to. Went to church on Sunday."

"You don't go to church. You're a heathen."

"Do too! And Sunday School, too!"

"It ain't our church so it don't count. Sun don't shine on your church." Pleasant June scraped a handful of muck from her overalls, buried a rock in it, and threw it at Elaine. It fell short, and Elaine gave herself the gleeful pleasure of sticking out her tongue at Pleasant June before she turned and ran down the driveway. "I'm gonna pray to Jesus to make you..." Elaine mashed her fists into her ears so she wouldn't have to hear the rest of it. After a few more steps she turned around to yell back.

She stood, then, with her mouth open but didn't speak. The sun had fallen to a point just opposite her, near the horizon, and everything between her and its red-orange glare was a black silhouette. She saw the outline of the windbreak and the jumble of boxes near the goldfish pond
and Pleasant June with her hands on her hips and Sugar Babe galloping full-tilt at Pleasant June's back.

The lunging black shape grew rapidly bigger and there was a flaring orange corona behind its head. The dog was a black and ragged fury at its heels, and Elaine was sure that blood was flying from the savage teeth. Pleasant June was screaming curses and didn't know the danger she was in. Elaine darted a look past the running figures to the meadow which was half-gone into shadow and saw the two boys strolling toward the house and when she looked back at Sugar Babe the mare seemed to have grown as big as a locomotive. She knew that in a moment Pleasant June would be trampled. She flung out her arms and ran toward her and sang one long, high, desperate syllable. Her outstretched fingers quivered in the dying orange light.

Pleasant June turned in time to see the mare veer off and gallop toward the creek. The dog ran past her and she kicked at it absently. When she turned back, Elaine could see that she was pale and that the skin stretched over her bony face was even tighter than usual. Pleasant June cleared her throat to say something, but didn't. She started moving toward the house, walking backwards, not turning her back on Elaine. She felt her way cautiously with muddy bare feet.

"I'm not a harlot," Elaine said, very softly. Pleasant June stopped walking and frowned at her, questioning.
Elaine thought about repeating it, but their attention was caught by the sound of a car turning into the driveway.

The car was a very long black station wagon with curtains on all the back windows. Even in the twilight the polished body gleamed. It moved very slowly, crunching along the gravel all the way to the back door.

When the motor stopped it was so quiet that Elaine could hear the tiny high-pitched cry of a kill-deer from across the meadow. She saw Robert and Justin disappear into the root cellar. No one got out of the car. She and Pleasant June didn't move.

A front window of the car rolled down and a man's voice yelled. "Hey, is this the Hendersons' place?" Pleasant June didn't answer. "Hey, you kids...we're looking for Hendersons'. Is this it?"

Pleasant June moved as if she were asleep. She went through a patch of thistles and didn't notice. Elaine walked, too, sideways, through the lush screen that surrounded the Terraplane, until she bumped into its scarred chrome grille. Then she ducked down and sneaked around to the side away from the house, found the missing window and crawled through.

The inside of the car was like a dark cave with soft walls. Elaine liked the feel of the plush horsehair upholstery and she kneeled on the seat and rubbed her fingers over a spot that wasn't worn at all while she peered through
a triangle of glass that was still transparent. Two men in dark suits were standing at the front of the long car, talking to Pleasant June. Robert was edging along the wall of the house, out of their sight. Justin wasn't visible.

Elaine sat down on the seat and hugged herself. She'd never been in the Terraplane alone; Pleasant June wouldn't allow it. She ran her hand around the tortoise-shell steering wheel and traced the outlines of the dashboard gauges with her finger. She picked up a drying clover wreath and slipped it over her head, then opened the top button of her blouse and tucked the lapels inside the way Pleasant June had made her do when she played the harlot. She opened another button and tucked the fabric down farther, exposing her chest down to the vaguely swelling mounds of her breasts. She shoved the clover wreath down inside her blouse and writhed at the scratchy pleasure it gave her. She heard car doors slam and kneeled to look out again.

Two more men had gotten out of the car and all four of them had put on white gloves and opened the back door. Robert and Justin were hiding behind Pleasant June who was trying to make them stop hanging on to her. She elbowed them and swung her heels at their shins but when the four men came along the side of the hearse carrying a burnished pink coffin the three children froze. Elaine remembered that the new drapes in the living room were the same shade
of pink. She wondered how it happened that Prentice had arrived before the new wallpaper.

Another car turned into the driveway and started honking. It was the Hendersons in their faded blue sedan. They drove fast enough to raise a cloud of dust, and honked until they pulled up behind the hearse.

Mrs. Henderson leaped out and ran at the men in the dark suits. She stopped suddenly, reached out to touch the coffin, then leaned backwards against the hearse and cried into her hands. Mr. Henderson strode up, spoke briefly with the men, then brushed through the children to unlock the back door. A moment later he appeared at the front door and yelled something and then ran out signalling for the men to follow him.

Elaine sat back down and listened. She couldn't hear words, but she knew what was happening. She heard Mrs. Henderson raise her voice, scolding. Then she heard the boys whining and Pleasant June back-talking. Then there were scuffling sounds and some slaps and the boys crying. The last thing she heard from the direction of the house was Mrs. Henderson boo-hooing her way loudly to the front door.

Elaine climbed into the dark space behind the seat and lay on her back. The space was narrow and deep with just enough room for her to stretch out. It wasn't cushioned like the seat, but it was lined with the same plush up-
holstery, and Pleasant June had stolen a blanket from her brothers and folded it there for a mattress. Elaine closed her eyes and remembered everything she could about the Hendersons' front room: the newly varnished floor, the sparkling white walls, pink drapes, new slipcovers with big flowers that matched the drapes, and orange satin pillows that didn't match anything. She wondered if what her mother had said about the bag of sawdust could be a mistake. Was he all there or not? Was that coffin as comfortable as the Terraplane?

She remembered the drawing of the naked man and wondered if it was Prentice who had taken off his clothes so his brother could draw him, or if the brother had just imagined someone. She took off her glasses and put her hands over her eyes to make it darker and tried to be Prentice who had never seen the new stuff in the front room. After a minute or two, she decided that there was no way that you could imagine up something you'd never seen and that Prentice couldn't possibly know what had been done for him—even if he was all there. It puzzled her that Mrs. Henderson hadn't figured that out.

She opened her eyes and stared up at the dome light. Without her glasses and in the dim gray twilight, she had trouble keeping it in focus. It seemed to grow and then recede, its translucent white shell mysteriously alive. It glows like a pearl, she thought, and she wished it were a
jewel so that she could wear it as an ornament. She unbuttoned her blouse the rest of the way so that it fell open and she arranged the wreath so that it encircled her breasts. She stretched both arms above her head, found the window crank and held on tight, breathless, waiting for the first stone.
The naked man in the easy chair looked as if he were covered in the same worn pink velvet as the furniture. His modest rolls of flesh matched the welting on the cushion. A thatch of white hair on the very top of his head looked like an antimacassar, spread to keep the fabric clean.

"He's not coming," said his wife, scuffing her fuzzy pink mules as she crossed to the picture window. "He won't be able to make the road." She tucked a stray curl under the elastic of her hairnet and then folded her arms under her sagging naked breasts.

"Don't worry, he'll be here. Fiddle with the rabbit ears, will you? The picture's fading again." He took a nail clipper from the small table next to his chair and began to cut his toenails. The horny nails snapped like twigs when they gave way, and brownish-yellow crescents flew into the gloomy corners of the dim room. "Don't worry, that's all."

The woman padded into the kitchen and put on a pink and white gingham cobbler's apron. A pink feather duster
stuck out of the pocket. She took it out and ran it along
the counter as she walked to the back door, where she hung
it on a pink plastic hook.

"Yes, well, it's all right for you not to worry, isn't
it?" She spoke softly, to be sure he wouldn't hear. "But
I've got things to take care of. How many potatoes should
I put on, for instance? I can only assume he'll be here
for dinner...no one thought to tell me. And what if he
doesn't care for potatoes? They're out of fashion now, you
know. It's all yogurt and sprouts nowadays." She began
to empty the voluminous apron pocket onto the counter next
to the sink. She took out crumpled Kleenexes, little spiral
notebooks, pencils, pill bottles, nylons, a packet of semi-
moist cat food, and a scalpel with a plastic cap over the
blade. She opened a drawer and scraped everything except
the scalpel into it. "Mac," she called, "here's the cutter
you were looking for." She waved it in the air, then re-
turned it to her pocket.

There was a loud "Damn!" from the living room, then
Mac appeared holding a dissecting needle with an angel
fish stuck on it. "Did you feed these guys today?" The
fish's delicate, translucent fins flapped pitifully in
rhythm with Mac's bouncy step.

The woman nodded, not looking at him or the fish.

"How many times did you feed them? Huh, Carm? How
many times?" He got a plastic sandwich bag and flicked
the fish into it.

Carm shrugged her shoulders, now looking down at her Tropical Pink toenails.

Mac stabbed the dissecting needle into a Brillo pad on the sink. "Did you feed them fish food, Carm, or cat food? Huh, Carm?" He frisked her, spinning his hands on her breasts and slipping his hand into her crotch when he checked the apron pocket.

She giggled and pulled back. "Fresh!" she hissed.

Mac pulled open the freezer door and whistled. "Geez, these things are starting to pile up. Sure hope he makes it." He tossed the dead angel fish into a popsicle box overflowing with other little dead fish.

"Will he want potatoes?" his wife asked.

"Potatoes? Hell, yes. He's a real meat-and-potatoes man. Always has been."

He started back to the living room but stopped to hook his fingers over the top of the door frame and lift himself till his head grazed the frame. He hung there for several seconds, looking like a drained side of beef. Then he dropped like a cat into a crouch and sprang across the entire width of the hallway and into the living room.

"Show off," Carm said under her breath.

"Hey, Carmie, did I hear you say you'd found that cutter I wanted? Where is it?" He was back in the easy chair, flipping through a TV schedule.
"Right here...in my pocket," Carm said. She walked into the room and handed him the scalpel. "Didn't you feel it?"

"Aw, shucks, ma'am, ya got me so excited I fergot what I was doin'?"

"Admit it: you're losing your touch." She walked to the window again and looked up at the sky, frowning.

"The hell I am!" He threw down the TV schedule and strode to the TV where he repositioned the rabbit ears and retaped a sheet of aluminum foil draped over one arm of it. "Dammit. I'm either going to have to get a thirty-foot mast or take out one of those mountains."

"It's going to be dark in a couple of hours. He can't make the road. There's no question about it," Carm said. She put her hand into the apron pocket and used the pocket to dust a marksmanship trophy on the window seat. "Would you mind eating leftover potatoes tomorrow? Mac?" There was no answer. "Oh, for heaven's sake, Mac, c'mon out and answer me." She went to the easy chair and leaned over the back of it just as Mac leaped from behind a bookcase, caught her wrist, and twisted her arm, gently, up against her back.

"Just remember, doll, when you've got a touch like mine, you don't lose it."

"Let me go, you old fool. One of these days you're going to catch your foot on that bookcase and I'm going to
have to vacuum up your pieces. Wait...what's that? What's that sound? Is he here?"

There was a clattering sound outside the front door, and then a knock. Mac went to answer it while Carm hurried around smoothing table runners and setting right the pillows on the couch.

When Mac yanked the door open he confronted a young black man in a sleek navy blue ski suit. The man had just propped a pair of cross-country skis next to the front porch and was pulling off his gloves. "Man," he said, "they didn't tell me about this."

"Oh," Mac said, standing rigidly erect and flexing his pectoral and abdominal muscles self-consciously, "you mean the flesh?" He had tucked his sex between his legs and so resembled a cleaned-up Greek statue.

"No, I mean the snow. Or rather the lack of it. No one told me you were having a frigging drought. Jesus, I damn near wrecked my skis. Two-hundred dollar Rossignols! Mind if I come in?"

"Well, no, not at all. Are you..." Mac cleared his throat and tried to give a hand signal behind his back to Carm. "Are you lost? We'd be happy to direct you out, or let you use the phone. Perhaps a hot cup of coffee?" Mac put his hand on the man's shoulder and steered him toward the kitchen, intending to prevent his meeting Carm.

Carm, for her part, had missed the hand signal and
was eager to greet the caller. She plunged into the hall with her arms extended. "Oh, you made it. We were so... But you're not John. Where's John? Have you brought John with you?" She stood on tiptoes and peered over the man's shoulder.

Mac stepped in front of her. "Carm, darling, this gentleman was out skiing and got lost. I've offered him the use of the phone and a cup of coffee. Would you be a dear and pour for him?"

"Oh... well... yes, of course. I'd be delighted. We have so few visitors up here, you know." She led the way into the kitchen. "Please excuse the disarray. I've been making winter pickles, you know, and canning always turns things topsy-turvy. Was it nice skiing? I always thought I'd like to ski, but Mac here..." Her tiny pink buttocks smiled out at the men through the split at the back of her apron.

"I'm afraid you don't understand," the young man interrupted. He unzipped his jacket, reached inside, and drew out a box of tropical fish food. Mac and Carm exchanged a look. "I think this will serve to introduce me."

"What's that you've got there?" Mac asked. "Fish food? Odd thing for a skier to carry, wouldn't you say, Carm? Thought Hershey bars were the usual survival food. Some new theory, I suppose..."

"The fish food is ninety-nine and forty-four-one-
"Does it float?" Mac asked in a stern, clipped tone.
"Sinks like a rock," the young man answered, taking off his jacket.
"What kind of rock?" Carm asked, talking to the coffee pot.
"Silver-dollar silica."
"Where's John?" Mac asked, taking a step toward the black man. He was the taller of the two by at least three inches, and he drew himself up and used his height to full, menacing advantage.

The young man sat down and unlaced his boots. "He's got the flu. I volunteered to sub for him because I thought I could get in some great skiing. Man, they should have told me."

Mac relaxed. "Well, welcome to our home," he said. "Sounds like you're OK. What's your name, son?" He put out his hand and the young man stood up and shook it.

"Roger," he said. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. I've heard a lot about you."

Mac beamed. "This is my wife, Carmelina. My wife and partner."

Carm shook Roger's hand, too. "You don't talk right, do you?" she asked, her round face as guileless as a cherub's.

"Ma-an, I can't be goin' through these changes. Mr.
Johnny T, he my main man. Is that what you expected?"

Carm smiled brightly and nodded. "Yes, that's it. That's how Rafe Amberton used to talk. You probably didn't know Amberton."

"Sorry, ma'am, but I grew up in Montana. Nobody talks like that up there."

"Well, never mind. Do you like potatoes?"

"I prefer rice, ma'am, if it's all the same to you."

Mac was circling around Roger with his arms crossed and his brow furrowed, assessing the man's physical appearance. "Oh, of course! Amberton liked rice...with pork chops and gravy and some kind of greens. Oh, dear, we don't have any pork chops, Roger." Carm's face clouded in sincere disappointment.

"That's all right, ma'am. I meant Chinese-style rice, with stir-fried vege..."

Mac had made two complete circuits of Roger, even passing between him and Carm as they spoke. When he got behind him again, he yelled and leaped and caught him in a full-Nelson. Roger's arms stuck out like a scarecrow's, his hands dangling like empty gloves.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Mac. Knock it off. Leave the poor boy alone," Carm scolded.

"Break it," Mac commanded. "C'mon, let's see you break it. You look pretty small, but I learned long ago never to be deceived by appearances." He lifted Roger off
the floor. "Hell, I just saw a thing on TV about the world champion bull rider who's a hundred-and-thirty pound kid from Watts. Go ahead, break it."

"If you don't mind, sir, I'd rather not try. They don't give us commando training anymore, and you'd probably break my neck." Roger's voice thinned to a whisper as Mac pushed his chin into his chest.

"Darn it, Mac, this isn't John. He doesn't know how to play your games. Now let him go," Carm said. She reached between the two men and yanked Mac's white pubic hair. Mac yowled and shoved Roger stumbling across the kitchen.

"Dammit, Carmelina, that's not fair! You promised not to do that anymore!" He doubled over, holding his hands over the hurt spot.

"Everything's fair in this business. Now, Roger, you were saying something about Chinese rice? Come, sit at the table and drink your coffee. Or would you prefer tea?"

"Yes, thank you, I would. Herbal, if possible. I was talking about stir-fried vegetables." He rotated his head and bounced his shoulders up and down. "Are you all right, sir?"

Mac was dragging himself theatrically toward the table, still cradling his pain. He eased himself onto a chair.

"Well, what the hell do they teach these days. Tea party manners?"

"Mac, don't be rude. Roger's telling me about China.
Go on, dear." She put a kettle of water on to heat.

Roger looked from one face to the other, hesitating. Mac was still wincing, apparently involved with his pain, so he spoke to Carm.

"It's Chinese-style cooking, called stir-frying. You just cut up whatever vegetables you have into bite-size pieces and cook them quickly in a wok, or a large frying pan, in a little oil. They retain their color and nutrients that way. Then you serve them with rice and a little tamari. You can use a little meat, too, if you have any."

Carm clapped her hands in delight. "Oh, show me, show me. It sounds lovely." She hopped to the refrigerator, her long breasts chucking lightly against the pink and white apron. She began piling plastic bags of vegetables on the counter.

"I asked you a question, son," Mac said, "and I didn't hear any answer: just what do they teach you these days?" He placed his hands flat on the table with the tips of both thumbs and both forefingers touching, forming a Christmas tree inside them. The hands were very large, with perfectly manicured nails, and there was a tiny tattoo on the first knuckle of each finger. The tattoos were pictures of tropical fish.

"We work mostly on endurance, sir...running and circuit training. Aerobics and isokinetics, not so much on isotonics and self-defense anymore."
"They teach you how to run away, huh, instead of how to stand and fight? No wonder the place is going to hell. Christ, in my day..."

"He's not interested in your day, Mac, so hush. He's going to show us how to make a stir-fry. Are these all right, Roger?"

Roger's mouth fell open and he walked to the counter to handle the vegetables. "These are fantastic! Where did you get such a treasure? I haven't seen produce like this since...since the last time I was in the Pike Place Market."

Carm smiled proudly. "Oh, Mac makes it down in his little workshop. I sometimes think he has a magic wand." She patted a head of cabbage.

Roger looked at Mac, a bunch of identical-sized perfectly smooth carrots in his hand.

"Hydroponics," Mac said gruffly. "A man's got to do something between visits from you guys. And speaking of that"--he stood up--"I suppose you want to see the merchandise."

He took the popsicle box from the freezer and dropped it unceremoniously on the table. "Seventy-three, here... plus a couple of dozen more still swimming...if Carm hasn't been near them. What's your order?"

Roger reached under his sweater and took out a notepad. "All you've got," he read. "And I'm supposed to give you the message that Motorola has come up with a
new chip that has a gate propagation delay of only one nanosecond."

"What...! Gimme that paper." Mac snatched the notepad from Roger and read it. "'Sesame oil, bandaids, bok choy, detergent.' Huhn. Code. Pretty clever, you little spook. You had me going for a minute there. You understand, of course, that we always have to be alert for cracks in our security." He handed the pad back to Roger.

"Yes, sir, and I understand that old habits die hard, especially old speech habits." Roger stood up. "Now if I may have the merchandise, I have a pick-up to meet."

"Oh, please don't leave," Carm pleaded. "You must excuse Mac. He's a brilliant man, but he can be very clumsy sometimes. Please stay for dinner. You haven't shown me how to do the stir-fry!"

"Sorry, ma'am. I have a schedule to keep." Mac shoved the popsicle box toward him. Roger lifted up a baggie and looked at the fish in it. "I don't understand. I'm supposed to pick up an order of chips. This looks like a dead angel fish."

"It is, son, but it's a very valuable dead angel fish. He's carrying something in his little body that relieves us of any worry about what Motorola is doing in the way of gate propagation." He dumped all the fish onto the table.

"But, sir, I can't carry a bunch of dead fish with me. I'm on skis till I get to the pick-up point. They'll
"Oh, stop whining, for God's sake. John always brought an ice chest full of beer. He should have told you not to try it on foot. Or skis...snow or no snow. Here...you show Carm how to do that Chink cooking, and I'll go clean up your chips. And while I'm gone,"--he lowered his voice dramatically--"keep your hands off my wife." He winked salaciously, then spun on his heel and strode grandly out of the room. His heavy muscles flexed hard with each step, and shaped his buttocks into firm cantaloupes.

Carm and Roger stood at the kitchen counter. She washed and dried vegetables and he chopped them. He used the chopping knife with such skill that his hands flashed like a magician's, fast enough to fool the eye.

"My, you certainly handle that knife like a pro...almost like Koji at that lovely little sushi shop in Tokyo."

"Is this what he did?" Roger executed a series of intricate moves with the knife, swishing and twirling it and flipping it into the air.

"Yes! That's it exactly. Are you a Japanese chef?"

"No," Roger chuckled. "It's just something I wanted to learn. Here's something else." He slipped off his boots and told her to toss a carrot into the air. She did,
and he leaped and caught it between his feet, fell back onto one hand, and flipped it to her before springing back onto his feet.

"My," she said, "that was nice. I haven't seen anyone do that in such a long time." She turned her back to him, whispered "Show off," and got on her hands and knees to rummage in a cupboard.

Roger whistled out a lungful of air, then rotated his little finger in his ear. "When were you in Tokyo?" he asked. She didn't answer. Her apron parted as she kneeled and he looked at the soft pink curves of her body. "If I were Matisse," he murmured, "I'd paint you."

Carm sat back on her haunches. "Never mind the fresh talk, young man. You ought to have gotten better training from John—he never forgot himself. Is this what you need?" She held up a wok with a cooking ring and several tools in it. It looked unused.

"Yes! That's a beauty. And you let me think you didn't know about Chinese cooking." He took the wok and held out his hand to help her up. She got up easily, unassisted.

"I don't. Can't cook potatoes in it. The Chinese must not eat potatoes, or they would have made a different kind of pot."

She stood with her arms folded, looking out the window above the sink, while he set up the wok.

"We'd better start the rice," he said.
"I suppose you want to know why," she said, still looking out the window. Her view was of a gentle snowy slope, a forest, and a mountain ridge—all painted in pale blue dusk.

"Well, it'll take about a half an hour for it to cook, and the veg..."

"Mac is one of the most brilliant men in America, but he can't think with his clothes on. Simple as that. Some people need a cigarette, he needs air on his skin." She faced him. "Have you ever lived in Silicon Valley?" He nodded. "Then you understand perfectly." She turned toward the window again.

"No, I'm sorry, but I don't understand at all." He began opening and closing cupboards. "Where's the rice?"

"Oh, for heaven's sake! You can certainly understand why no one would willingly live in Silicon Valley, and the only other thing you have to know is that the company wouldn't let Mac work nude in his lab." She narrowed her eyes as she spoke, and on her last word she hit the light switch and they were in the dark. "Sh-h-h. Stop that racket!"

"What's going on? What do you see out there?" Roger was into his boots and jacket in seconds. He leaned over the sink next to Carm.

"There! And there! People moving and not wanting to be seen. I've got to call Mac." She pushed a button
under the windowsill. "Oh, dear, he'll be so upset with me. I should have seen them sooner. I must be losing my touch. Oh, my lord, there he is! Oh, Mac...!"

Several dark-clad figures had darted out of the forest and disappeared behind a large rock outcropping, half-way up the slope to the house. Skirting around through a patch of underbrush that would let him emerge behind the figures was Mac, wearing a loincloth and with his face blackened. His pale arms and legs and torso were clearly visible to Carm and Roger as they watched him run in a semi-crouch.

"0-o-h shit!" Roger moaned. "Damn his ass! They'll get him!" He grabbed Carm by the shoulders. "You've got a radio, right? OK, get on it fast. And show me how to get out the back way. MOVE!"

By the time Roger was into the underbrush, the shouting had started. Most of it was coming from Mac, in the form of war whoops. The rest was frantic Japanese.

A man in black, on snowshoes and loaded with a large radio pack, emerged from behind the rocks and struggled uphill. He was whimpering. Roger tripped him easily and sent him unconscious with a karate chop.

He eased himself around the edge of the outcropping and saw a man lying in the snow. Mac stood with his hands on his hips and one foot on the man and he was taunting the other three men. They were arguing excitedly among
themselves in Japanese. Roger understood, and heard two of them insist that the big naked white guy was of no use to them anymore because he had obviously gone crazy, and since they had lost the advantage of surprise they wanted to run for it. The third man was yelling at them to shut up, and claiming that the big naked white guy had always been crazy but that it didn't make any difference, and they could take him without surprise, three against one.

Roger slipped around the rocks and came out behind the arguing men. At that moment Mac began reciting "Gunga Din" at the top of his voice, and moving like a robot toward them. Their arguing dissolved into gibberish. Roger glided over to them and took out one with a karate kick. The other two turned on him and Mac leaped on one and caught him in a sleeper hold that had him out in ten seconds. The last one lurched toward the woods, stumbling over his own snowshoes and yelling something about the Geneva Convention. Roger caught him easily and dragged him back.

"Guess they taught you a little more than you let on," Mac said. "Thanks for your help, son. Well done."

"Yes, sir. They also taught us to keep our mouths shut...sir. Low profile, blend in, don't be noticed." He handcuffed the man and pushed him down on his back.

Mac looked into the man's face. "Why, that's Louie! Shame on you, Louie, for going along with such a dumb stunt."
The man answered in urgent Japanese.

"What's that? Talk English, Louie. You know how to talk English."

"He can't, sir. He says he's so scared he can't remember how. He says all his English words flew away like frightened pigeons. You know him?"

"Oh, sure. Louie's been trying to get me to work for his company for years. They're really panicked now because Mitsubishi is taking over more and more of the market. Guess that's why they tried this little kidnap caper."

They heard a helicopter approaching. "Christ, I can remember when all we had to worry about was their fighter planes."

"That'll be my pick-up, sir. John will be here in two days for that order of chips, and my skis."

"You're not taking the chips?"

"No, sir."

"You just came up here to work on us...right?"

"Uh...yes, sir. John would like you to be ready by noon on Wednesday, sir, if you don't mind."

"Of course I mind! I don't want to go back there. I hate it there! Any concessions?"

"Something might be arranged. I'll do what I can."

"One-way glass and locks on the doors would take care of it. I can't wear a fucking suit, Roger."

"How about a caftan?"
"A what?"

"Never mind. I'll do what I can."

Mac looked down at Louie shivering in the snow.

"You're sure we have to go back?"

"Your cover's blown, sir. You've known all along what a risk it was to work in such an isolated spot."

"Yes, you did take care of our cover, didn't you?"

Roger tried to protest. "I had a mission, sir: to convince you to come home."

Mac continued as if he hadn't heard. "They knew we were in the area. They just didn't know which mountain to climb. Then they saw you on your skis and knew you'd lead them to this"--he tapped his head--"pot of gold. You get an F on Blending In, son."

"But lots of blacks ski!"

"These people don't know lots of blacks. They watch Americans on TV. You ever see a black skier on Wide World of Sports?" Several signal flares erupted at the side of the house. "Hey, there's my partner, bringing in your bird, Roger. Great little gal, Carm...always knows just what to do. She show you how she can walk on her hands and juggle oranges with her feet?"

Roger cleared his throat. "Uh, no, sir, she didn't show me that...sir."

"A little shy, I guess. Always a little shy around new people. Well, c'mon, son, let's round up the bad guys."
He strode away from Roger, his loincloth fluttering like a flag.
The bus fish-tailed on an icy downgrade and Ruth's head banged against the window. In her dream it was a door. There was a room with peeling wallpaper and a door that opened inward. She knew the door was hung wrong, but she kept pushing out against it anyway. She threw herself at it and hit her head. When she startled awake her upper lip was coated with perspiration and there was a starry pain in her right armpit.

She checked her watch and calculated. It had been nearly two hours since the last pill. She slid her hand inside her coat to the armpit and felt comfort from the touch. She looked out the window to see if she could guess from the landscape how close to Helena they were. It was too dark to see anything but the markers at the edge of the highway.

It had been at least eight years since she'd been over this road. She'd promised to visit her old roommate often, but there had been only that one trip. Ginny had bought sensible black shoes (nun's shoes, Ruth remembered)
and a sensible black hat and a hideous gun-metal grey coat. She had explained that her job was to call on the elderly shut-ins who couldn't make it to church services, and to take them the previous Sunday's bulletin, chat for a few minutes, say a little prayer with them, and leave them cheerful. She'd shown Ruth her log book, and made her read the descriptions of the invalids and the entries in which she'd evaluated her performance. Ruth wanted to ask where her guitar was, and why there weren't any rainbow posters on the walls of her basement apartment, but an indefinably distant look on Ginny's face made her unable to articulate the question.

The intense, intuitive friendship they'd had in college faded into a Christmas-card acquaintanceship. This year there'd been a wedding invitation along with the card. It was inconvenient for Ruth to make the trip because they were taking inventory at Woolworth's and she'd have to work until fifteen minutes before the bus left, and she'd arrive in the middle of the night. But when she'd read the invitation she knew she'd go. Last year she might have thought twice; this year there was no question. Ginny had included a note saying that she especially hoped Ruth could make it because she wanted so much to see her. Wants me to see her, is more like it, Ruth thought, and she'll want to tell me all about the wonderful plans they have. Mother would have had a fit...weddings always
annoyed her...so foolishly expensive.

Ruth's legs were cold because she had used her lap robe to wedge the wedding gift and her cosmetic case into the seat next to her. She could have held them on her lap, or she could have put the case under her feet and the gift on her lap, and wrapped the robe around all of them. But she hadn't wanted to talk to anyone. People who sat with someone when a bus was nearly empty only wanted to talk about themselves. She didn't feel like listening. The blocked seat gave her a secure, protected feeling.

The bus hit the outskirts of town and slowed. She couldn't believe they had arrived already. It was a much shorter trip than she'd expected. The whole Christmas season had seemed shorter than usual, too. She wondered if all time would begin to compress now and if she'd get caught in the self-pity trap of fretting because she hadn't had time to do all the things she'd wanted. She'd fight that one, because she'd always believed that people got exactly the time they needed.

The Helena depot was smaller than she remembered, and worse still, it was closed. "What if someone wanted to sit in the waiting room until the next bus?" she asked the man who was dragging cardboard boxes out of the baggage compartment. He was wearing a hooded parka zipped up so far that only his eyes showed.
"Then they'd have to go sit in the coffee shop at the hotel. There ain't no bus till morning anyway. Where you goin'?

"Nowhere. Here."

"Shoulda had somebody pick you up." He slammed down the baggage door and shuffled back to where a gas hose was propped against the bus.

"Yes, she thought, that would have been sensible, wouldn't it? But who could I ask to come out in the middle of the night? I don't know anyone here except the bride, and you couldn't really say that I know her. Not anymore.

The coffee shop was bright and warm and empty. Ruth had planned to sit in the bus depot and read and doze till morning. It didn't make sense to pay for a room for half a night. Then she would have had a little breakfast and walked to the church to see if she could help with last-minute details--set up tables or unfold chairs or iron shirts--whatever it was that needed doing right before a wedding. She had been getting by on less and less sleep lately, and hadn't thought one night without going to bed at all would make that much difference. Now she felt a little adrift because of the forced change in plan, and a little less convinced of the rightness of her being there.

She sat at the counter and put the case and the gift
on stools on either side of her. She took her book and her wallet out of her coat pockets and set them on the counter. She ran a finger along the edge of one sleeve where it was just beginning to show wear. The coat was a bright grey tweed. **Definitely not gun-metal,** she thought.

There was no waitress around, so she opened her book and flipped through the pages. It was an anthology of poetry. Ginny had given it to her when they were roommates, and she still had not read every poem in it.

The waitress came out of the kitchen with an arm-load of stainless steel parts wrapped in a towel. She spread them on the counter and began to dry them and to fit them back into the soft-ice-cream machine. She appeared not to notice Ruth. When she finished she dried her hands, lit a cigarette, and walked down the counter.

"What'll you have?" she asked, letting smoke seep out the sides of her mouth.

"Tea, please. Hot tea...and a cinnamon roll." The waitress turned away. "And please don't put the bag into the water. I like it to be a delicate amber color. If it gets too dark it..." The waitress kept walking, absorbed in a world she squinted at through the veil of smoke around her head. She brought back a hottle with a cup upside down over it and a teabag on the cup. Ruth thought the cinnamon roll looked disgustingly wrinkled.
She snapped open her wallet and rifled the thick sheaf of bills in it. There was nothing smaller than a twenty. "I'm sorry, I don't have anything smaller." She tried to smile at the waitress, but the woman wouldn't look at her. She brought the change and disappeared into the kitchen again.

Ruth checked the time. She lowered the teabag into the bottle and took it out quickly when the water was barely colored. It wasn't time for a pill yet. As soon as she thought of the medication, she was aware of the pain under her arm. Sometimes she felt like taking more than one pill, because they left so much pain even when they worked. A few times she had considered taking all of them at once, but she believed that would be morally wrong. Perhaps when it gets worse I'll change my mind.

She pulled the wad of bills halfway out of her wallet and looked at it. It pleased her that Woolworth's still paid in cash, so that she hadn't had to go to the bank in weeks. She'd closed her account after her last visit to the doctor, and now all those tellers down there wouldn't be able to keep track of where she was spending her money. Now the whole town wouldn't know how much it was costing her to die.

Five women burst into the coffee shop. They were carrying bowling bags and were noisy and excited. They yelled for the waitress and she popped out of the kitchen
carrying a huge tray of fresh, hot rolls. Ruth could smell the fragrance of the cinnamon and the warm raisins, and she could almost taste the frosting that hung over the edges in thick white scallops and teardrops. She looked at her own untouched roll, small and stale, cringing on the plate in front of her, and she felt very sad.

_I could have waited, she thought. Tonight I have plenty of time, and I could have waited for a fresh roll. We could have chatted, and I would have listened to anything you wanted to tell me about yourself. I had plenty of time._

The waitress made a sign and the bowling team looked over at Ruth. She realized then that she was intruding on a ritual. This was a community of night people, a gathering of kindred spirits. At this moment, whatever husbands or households they had elsewhere in the sleeping city were less dear to them than these people with whom they shared the darkness.

Ruth gathered her things to leave. As an afterthought she wrapped the stale roll in a napkin and put it into her pocket.

_It had gotten colder. Ruth stood outside the hotel and wrapped her lap robe around her shoulders and tucked the cuffs of her mittens up inside her sleeves. The_
streetlights had icy green haloes and their light turned everything a ghastly purplish green. The only neon lit at that time of night was the pink HOTEL and a pale blue SHOE REPAIR in the next block.

She would have to walk to the church right now. She remembered from high school visits to it that there was a lounge downstairs with several couches. No one would mind if she stayed there. She looked left and right and couldn't tell which way to go. The street followed a gulch—Last Chance Gulch—and it curved and cut off her vision of what lay beyond the next block and a half. The women in the coffee shop probably knew, but when she looked through the window at them she knew that she couldn't go back inside. They were laughing and hugging and shoving each other with such abandon that she would not be able to get their attention. Their circle was complete and they wouldn't even hear her.

She turned left and walked briskly, regretting that the lights in the Christmas displays were turned off. The cosmetic case had been her mother's and she'd always kept it packed with anything she might need for an overnight. It began to feel heavy almost immediately. The wedding gift, wrapped in red foil and decorated with a sprig of holly, and with a heavy twine carrying-handle knotted around it, was very light, and the imbalance was uncomfortable. She switched them from hand to hand.
frequently, and soon realized she could not keep up the pace she had set. At corners she obediently stopped for red lights and set both burdens on the sidewalk so that she could flex her arms and fingers and slide a comforting hand under her right arm.

One corner was at the top of a rise, and she turned to look back down the Gulch at all the darkened houses and buildings she had left behind. No one's there, she thought. Isn't that what Bishop Berkeley said? If I can't see them, they're not there: I'm all alone. The silence was so intense she felt as if her ears were stuffed with cotton. Then the mechanism in the stop light control box whirred and startled her. She smiled a tight-lipped smile and said out loud, "Even if I can see them."

The street got steeper and she began to perspire. She felt unaccountably weak. Maybe it's the medication, she thought. The doctor didn't mention weakness, but then I didn't mention a midnight stroll.

In the next block she saw what convinced her she'd chosen the wrong direction. It was an abandoned store with a gaping black hole where the front window had been. In front of it was a bench, one corner of it propped up with bricks from the store front. She leaned against the building she'd stopped near, a yellow building with no windows. If the weather were nice, she thought, they'd
be sitting there, leering. There'd be a whole bunch of them, if it weren't so cold, throwing their bottles into that old store, and wetting their pants and spitting in the street. They probably sleep in that store, when it's not so cold, and pee all over the floor in there. Nobody cares if they do. All the churches are on the other side of town.

Without seeing or hearing anything, she realized that someone was behind her. He might have been there since she started walking, or he might have just found her when she stopped. She stood away from the wall. Her heart beat rapidly and with a fullness that pushed up against her throat, and made the scarred place under her arm respond with a raw pulse of its own.

She stood, wanting to turn and run, but not wanting to face him. His hand slid under hers on the handle of the cosmetic case and he took it from her. "Come," he said, "I'll show you the way."

She didn't move, didn't even breathe. She knew she should scream, but at the same time knew that there was no one to hear her. She could run, but where? What safety could she run to? He took her arm and she went with him. Even through her heavy coat she could feel an insistent strength that had a coiled power behind it.

They turned into a dark alley. She balked, and he tightened his grip and walked as quickly and surely as
if he could see. Ruth made out a vaguely lit shape and when they got closer she saw that it was a shelter made of appliance boxes. A blanket served as door, and he held it aside for her and nodded for her to enter.

Inside there was a kerosene lantern on a cardboard box, several stacks of bundled newspapers, and a mattress with a blanket over it. The floor was covered with layers of cardboard.

He stepped in behind her and set down the cosmetic case, then strode across the shelter and stood with his back to her and his arms crossed so extremely that he appeared to be two people hugging. He wore only a T-shirt and jeans patched with tape. His dark brown hair and beard were long and tangled. He was barefoot.

"What took you so long?" he asked. When she didn't answer he spun around and asked again, louder. "What took you so long?"

His eyes were brilliant turquoise, piercing even in the dim light. She was simultaneously terrified and seduced by them. She could love them forever, or be destroyed by them. They controlled her and she played her part back to them.

"I had to work...and...the traffic was heavy." He frowned and turned away from her again. Immediately he turned back.

"I'm hungry. Did you bring food?" She shook her
head, then remembered the cinnamon roll, took it from her pocket and handed it to him. He snatched it and stuffed nearly all of it into his mouth. Then some old training flooded back to him, some old preaching about sharing, and he tore off a piece and handed it back to her. He motioned for her to eat it and made encouraging sounds around the dough in his mouth. Ruth ate her piece, grateful that it was small. When he finished he wiped his arm across his mouth. "What else did you bring me? Did you bring me a present?"

Ruth looked at the red foil box and answered, "No." He made a clicking sound, like a machine, then a rapid huff-puff breathing. Frightened, Ruth looked at him, and saw that the jewel-like eyes were glistening wet and that he was rubbing the palms of his hands very hard down the front of his shirt.

"Yes!" she said quickly. "Yes. I was only teasing." She took off her mittens, kneeled, and opened her cosmetic case, hoping to find something in it that would calm him. Over the open lid she saw his bare feet. They were dark and cracked and skeletal, like mummy feet. She reached under the tray in her case and found the pair of pink satin boudoir slippers her mother had always kept there. They were tucked into each other and wrapped in tissue paper. They had never been worn.

She held the slippers out to him. He looked at them
hunggrily, his fists opening and closing. "Unwrap it," he said. "Please...unwrap it." She took off the tissue and separated the slippers. She held them out, one on each palm. He moaned with delight and stepped forward shyly to take them. He put them on and stood close to the lantern, looking at them and stroking them.

Ruth knew without looking at her watch that it was past time for a pill. She had broken a cold sweat and the pain moving down her right arm felt like a steel rod piercing the marrow. She closed the case and stood up. The pain rocketed to her head and exploded in a shower of sparks. She started to fall. Instantly, he was at her side, and caught her, and led her to a stack of newspapers. "Here, sit here," he said, gentle as a nurse.

"Do you have any water?" she whispered. He shook his head. She took the pill bottle from her pocket and looked at the pills. They aren't very big. I can do it without water. I'll have to. She gathered saliva and put one into her mouth. Fighting the urge to gag, she swallowed it, then looked at the bottle rattling in her hand and swallowed another. The second one was easier. When she relaxed from the effort, she realized her whole body was shaking.

He knelt beside her. "They've turned off the water because I didn't pay the bill. And they made Ma and
Charlie move. How long is your pass?"

"I don't have a pass," she said.

He made a sound like a small dog crying, and rocked back and forth on his heels. He extended his hands in front of him and dug his nails into his palms. "They'll get you, they'll get you. You should have asked!" His teeth started to chatter. Ruth reached out and touched the knuckles of his right hand. The fingers uncurled slowly and the palm was full of blood. She shuddered. The entire right side of her body shared the racking pain of his nails.

"Where...where are Ma and Charlie?" she asked.

He fell onto his side and pulled his knees up to his chest. He shook violently. "They led me the wrong way...the house...I had to work and the traffic was heavy." He ripped at his hair and his beard. "The door was locked and they wouldn't let me in." He cried out like a child, like a child whose fingers have been shut in a door. Then he was still. Ruth took the lap robe off her shoulders and spread it over him. The bright, cheerful colors were offensive. He cried out again: "It's too heavy! It hurts!" Then, his voice down to a whisper: "I hurt...I hurt."

Ruth sat watching him, and feeling the pain pills rescue her. First she stopped shaking, then relief rose in her like water, inch by inch, till it filled her
with a pleasant, lukewarm feeling, and she thought that if she looked into a mirror she would see azure waves lapping behind the lenses of her eyes. Never since her surgery had she gone so long without medication. She didn't want to do it again.

The man stopped moaning and lay still. She had thought he was a boy because he was so pitifully thin and small-looking, and because he sounded so like a child when he cried. But as he lay there she studied his face and decided that he was probably around thirty, around her age. Two of us, she thought. Why the two of us?

It entered her mind that she could sneak away while he had his eyes closed. Instantly, his eyes popped open. "I can live with you," he said.

The double-dose of pills had made her so calm that the suggestion was not even shocking. The calm blue water sounded in her voice when she spoke. "No, you can't. I'm dying."

He jumped to his feet. "No! No!" he screamed. "They won't let you! You left without a pass and they'll take you back and heal you!" He lunged for her and his crusted fingernails grazed her face as she wrenched herself out of the way and stumbled clumsily against a cardboard wall. He froze where he stood, arms outstretched to where she had been. His fingers curled into
his palms and he began to sing:

O western wind, when wilt thou blow
That the small rain down can rain?
Christ, that my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again!

The abject sweetness of his voice made tears rush
to Ruth's eyes and a lump as hard as a fist rise in her
throat. He continued to stand, whimpering, with his arms
outstretched and she saw, this time, strings of thick
scar tissue knotted over the large veins in his wrists
and forearms. One of the scars was smeared with scabby
blood.

She knew the song: Ginny had sung it, Ginny who
was getting married today. They had sung a lot of songs
together, made a lot of plans. They would be each other's
bridesmaids, would name children after each other.

Ruth stepped in front of the man and took hold of
both his hands. She forced him to hold her hands and she
pulled on his arms till he looked straight at her, and
then she began to sing:

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,
All the cops have wooden legs,

She slid her feet in a sidestep, a little slow, a
little stiff. He was confused and he stumbled as she
dragged him along.

"Watch me! Watch me!" she said. "Look at my feet."
She warmed up and moved faster, adding a little hop to
the step.
And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth,
And the hens lay softboiled eggs,

He caught on quickly, and together they picked up
the tempo, sashaying across the shelter and back, over
and over.

The farmers' trees are full of fruit,
And the barns are full of hay,

He began to sing with her. Together they sang at
the tops of their voices, and danced as if they were at
a hoedown, lifting their knees high and stomping their
feet. The cardboard walls quaked.

Oh, I'm bound to go where there ain't no
snow,
Where the sleet don't fall and the wind
don't blow,
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

They held hands tightly and skipped round and round
in a circle. Their wide-open mouths were laughing and
singing and filled with tears. When the song ended, they
stopped dancing, and stood looking at each other for a
moment. Then the man started to shake, and when he let go
of her hands he fell in a heap, like a marionette cut
loose.

Ruth eased herself to the floor and watched him.
He breathed heavily, as if asleep. She pulled the holly
off the red foil package and broke it in two. She laid
her hands on her knees, palms up, each with a piece of
holly in it, and slowly curled her fingers until she felt
the holly thorns bite into flesh. Then she pressed
against the thorns, crushing the pain deeper, until her nails stabbed into her palms, and she continued to press as hard as she could, and felt her body begin to rock forward and back, as if she were attached to the earth's pendulum. A moan escaped from the cage of her throat and beat its wings against the roof, trying to reach the cold, black night.

Light came through the seams of the shelter, and the man's breathing changed, became shallow and anxious, as if he'd awakened in a strange bed and could not remember why he was there, could not place the shadows dancing on the walls nor the figurines arranged on the dresser nor the lilac fragrance of the sheets.

Ruth crawled to her cosmetic case and took out the tray, and a shower cap, a hairbrush, a wash cloth. At the bottom was a plastic tortoise-shell-colored box. Her wounded hands trembled as she opened the lid and took out the safety razor with the tortoise shell handle. She started to unscrew the top and dropped it, her fingers stiff and unwilling. She picked it up again, held it tightly, and unscrewed it until she was able to slide out the blade. She laid the thin leaf of steel on her palm and looked at it, forcing herself to breathe slowly, regularly. She set it on the red foil box and carefully repacked the cosmetic case.
She knew the man was awake, though he hadn't moved. His knees were locked against his chest. She crawled over to him and held his hair back from his eyes. When he looked at her, the brilliant color was clouded, and he frowned and tensed his body as if to spring.

"Wait," she said. "Look at this. Do you know what this is?" She held the blade between two fingers, at a point where he could focus on it. He looked, and the clouds disappeared. His body relaxed. He nodded his head slightly, his hair making a rasping sound against the cardboard. His eyes, the beautiful turquoise eyes, glittered like priceless gems.

"I'm going to leave this right here," she said. "Do you understand?" He nodded again. She set the razor blade on the cardboard a foot in front of his eyes. He shoved one hand out and rested two fingers on the dark grey rectangle of the blade. The fingers were thin and pale; the skin stretched over them looked like parchment.

"I'll stay with you," she said. He didn't move, and if he said anything, she did not hear it.

She sat with her back to him and the book of poetry in her lap. When it was time she took two more pills, swallowing them easily. When it was very light, the man's legs slid away from his chest into a comfortable resting position, and she heard again the stillness she had heard on the street during the night, as if her ears were
stuffed with cotton.

She covered the man with her lap robe, and picked up the cosmetic case. She left the red foil gift because she did not want to give it. It was mundane—placemats and napkins—the expression of a conservative emotion she no longer felt. She would look, instead, for a treasure. Perhaps a music box, one that held a fragile, exquisite song. She lifted the door blanket and stepped outside. The sky was a thin blue color, very far away.

She turned and let go of the blanket. Just before it closed she caught sight of the pink satin boudoir slippers glowing like roses in the gloom of the shelter. She jammed her hands into her pockets and felt her wallet and the pill bottle. She didn't know how long it would take to find another perfect gift, but she knew that there would be time enough.

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