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The Woman in the Oil Field

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On the west side of Dallas my grandmother, no longer beautiful, sits in a wheelchair in a Catholic nursing home. Her room is across the hall from a bathroom and there is one old man—like her, a resident of the place—who forgets to shut the door when he goes to use the john. My grandmother shouts at him and he looks up, startled; the nurses come to clean his urine off the floor. In a rage he steps into my grandmother’s room but before he can say anything she raises her voice. “What are you sleeping with that shanty woman for?” she yells. She’s confused him with my grandfather Bill, who (family legend has it) ran off with a prostitute, an “oil field woman,” in the thirties. “She teases me,” my grandmother says to the old man. “She comes to me at night and tells me I won’t ever sleep with you again. Then she ties my bed to a gelding and he runs me around a field, fast and dizzy, and the whole time she’s laughing. In the mornings when the women here bathe me she’s outside my window and I try to hide my body but they won’t let me. They want to show her what I’ve become. Do you want her to laugh at me? Am I repulsive to you now?” The nurses smile because she’s mistaken the man, but she has a story to understand and it’s the same one I heard in my mother’s kitchen twenty years ago. Lately, on these hot summer Friday afternoons, trying to convince Grandma June that her husband Bill is dead, I’ve remembered the story and learned new ways to tell it. When I’m older and not the same man, I know I’ll find another way, then another, until I’ve resolved it for myself.
I stop in and see June, regular as a city bus, on Monday and Friday mornings, and stay most of the day. Sometimes she knows I’m here, sometimes she doesn’t. I’ve been back in Dallas now, out of work, for eight and a half months, ever since Boeing’s Seattle plant laid me off with ninety-nine other machinists. When I called last fall to tell my folks about the pink slip, my mom said I should head back south. “It’d be a blessing if you could ease June’s final days,” she said. “I can’t go to Dallas each time she gets to feeling blue—Exxon’s bringing in a new well near Oklahoma City, and they’ve got your father looking after it. Mother’s asking for me but your daddy needs me here,” she said. “Stay with her, Glen. We’ll cover your expenses.”

I thought it over for a day, then figured what the hell—beats hanging in the Seattle rain looking for jobs. Besides, though we’d never spent much time together, I’d always liked June. She was a straight talker. So I threw a pack of clothes into my Chevy and fastened a set of chains to my tires. I rumbled up the Rockies, dipped into the desert, and wound up in Texas again.

On Monday evenings now, when I leave June asleep, I hit the road and don’t turn around until Friday. Six hundred, eight hundred miles a week just to get away from the sick rooms, the musty medicine smells of the Parkview Manor Nursing Home. Tumbleweeds blow across the highways, in all the little towns of West Texas. I remember these towns from my childhood, but I can’t tell them apart anymore now that the damn franchises’ve moved in everywhere. Dairy Queens and Motel Sixes. HBO and Showtime blaring in people’s houses, through the windows. On Friday afternoons, back in Dallas, I tell June I’ve sat with her all week. She doesn’t know the difference if I’m here or away. “You remember yesterday?” I ask. “I read you the newspaper.” She has
a favorite daily column, “The Winds of Time,” by this local hack historian, Larry Kircheval. His articles always start, “Whatever happened to—?” and tell the story of some boring old building or once-important citizen. He irritates the hell out of me, really bares his heart when he writes—“Look at me, how much I know, how much I feel about the past”—but June eats it up. I read her his stuff whenever I’m here. On Saturday mornings my folks call from Oklahoma City and say they’ve tried to reach me all week at my Dallas apartment—an efficiency with only a table and a single bed (“All we can afford for you right now,” Dad says). “We must’ve just missed each other,” I tell them. “I go out for ice cream a lot. It’s turning hot here now. . . .”

This afternoon two irritable old men, bound to their wheelchairs with thick silk straps, sit in the Parkview Manor lobby in front of the big-screen TV. An old cop movie in black-and-white: leering killers, screaming women. The actors’ faces, flattened and pale against the lime-green wall behind the screen, remind me of old photographs I’ve seen in the memory books here, on night stands beside the beds.

A slow ceiling fan swirls dust motes across the lobby floor. Brown summer horseflies light on the old men’s cotton sleeves. They’re wearing yellow pajamas—standard Parkview dress—and leather slippers. They don’t like each other: I can see that. Both are new arrivals here, never met before today, but while the movie hums at high volume these two guys’ re giving each other the glare. June’s asleep; I’ve stepped into the lobby to stretch my legs, to get a Coke from the patio machine out front. As I’m sorting dimes I hear one old bird rasp at the other, “You son of a bitch,” and suddenly they’re both throwing punches. The rubber wheels
of their chairs squeal against each other and scuff the red tile floor. These fellows' re too weak to really hurt each other, but the nurses panic and glide them toward separate corners of the room. “Mr. Davis! Mr. Edwards!” shouts one of the nurse's aides. On the television screen, a masked burglar jimmies a window.

Good for you, I think, watching the old men grimace and cough. Don't let the fire go out. (I swear I've heard—late at night, when only Nurse Simpson's on duty, Nurse Simpson who lets me stay if June's had a hard evening—I swear I've heard the sounds of sexual pleasure, whether from memory—a murmuring in sleep—or actual contact, I can't tell.)

I go to check on June. She's awake now, lying in bed, clutching her box of Kleenex. She's nearly blind; if she pats around on the sheet and can't find her Kleenex she cries. Her hands are tiny and claw-like, tight with arthritis. Sometimes, to exercise or just to pass the hours, she rolls and unrolls a ball of blue yarn.

I ask her if she wants some apple juice.

“Yes,” she says.

I turn the crank at the end of the bed to raise her up; hold the cup, guide the straw into her mouth. Her teeth are gone.

“You tell him to talk to me,” she says.

“Who?” I ask.

“Stubborn old man.” She waves at a chair by the wall. “He's been sitting there all afternoon reading that damn paper and he won't talk to me.” Her voice cracks. “Where's your whore today, old man? Off with someone else?”

I stroke the papery skin of her arms, offer more juice. She's ninety-two years old. Since Bill died she's had two other husbands (divorced one, outlived the other), six grandkids and three careers (store owner, upholsterer, quilt-maker). But now, near the end of
her life, it's this one incident—Bill and the oil field woman—that clogs her mind. She's been jealous for sixty years.

She sips her juice. Her head seems to clear. "Glen?" she says. "I'm here."

"Bill's not really sitting in that chair, is he?"

"No, June."

"He's dead?"

"That's right."

"When?"

"When did he die? A long time ago—1962 or '63, I think it was."

"I remember now. In a drunk tank."

"Yes."

Sunlight spreads, first bright then pale, through her peach-colored curtains. An air-conditioning vent above her bed flutters a poster taped loosely to the wall. Last week a Catholic church group, on their regular visit, left these posters in all the rooms: a little girl hugging a kitten. The caption reads, "I Know I'm Special—God Don't Make No Junk."

"Can I get you something else, June?"

"French fries."

"All that grease?"

"Get me some goddamn French fries!"

I don't know how she chews the silly things with just her gums, but she does. "All right," I say. "I'll be back."

I drive a few blocks to a Burger King. The streets here on the west side are lined with sexy new cigarette ads—enormous, rolling breasts filling billboards. I lift my foot off the gas pedal and coast in my lane, staring, more lonely than horny, at the huge women floating like helium balloons over the start-stop traffic. By

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the time I return to the rest home the sun’s set. The red light from
the Coke machine on the patio pours through June’s window.
She’s sitting up in bed, in the near-dark, twining yarn. From the
big-screen TV canned laughter echoes down the hall. The curtains
rustle from the air vent. June’s squinting, trying to catch the
movement. I don’t know how much she can see. She shushes me.
“That whore is there at the window,” she whispers. I dangle a
French fry under her nose. “She’s laughing,” June says. “Listen.”

Nurse Simpson pokes her head into the room, says, “How we
doing?”

June says, “Bitch.”

“We’re fine,” I tell the nurse. “But maybe I’d better stay here	onight.”

She nods. “I’ll bring the cot,” she says.

I first heard about June’s whore late one night in my mother’s
kitchen. I was twelve. Mother suspected my sixteen-year-old sis­
ter was in trouble, smoking dope, driving into dark fields with
boys in dirty pants. “When I was her age I could’ve wound up that
way,” Mom said. “It would’ve been easy. Now your sister.”

“What way do you mean?” I asked.

She told me the story then: “When she was young, your
Grandma June was very beautiful. My father’s a fortunate man
to’ve touched her. He was an oil worker in the East Texas fields,
and not too smart, not too good or bad. At Christmas he drove
home to Dallas bringing us store-wrapped gifts, and slept with us
in the house. Your grandmother kept him busy with the vege­
tables for dinner or the furnace or anything else that needed
looking after. At night he combed her blonde hair and when he
got through his hands seemed to take on her fair color and not the
deep black they always seemed to be. But that’s me, you know, because I know his hands weren’t black. He washed the oil off—I never even saw crude oil—but he worked in the fields and I see him now, dark, in my mind.

“The woman who took him from us wasn’t beautiful like your grandmother but she slept in the shanties by the fields and sooner or later he found her, like they all did I suppose, all the men who worked in the East Texas fields. It wasn’t uncommon to see women strapping on their shoes at night and heading for the fields because there was money to make and they knew it. So he found her sooner or later. If he came home at Christmas he didn’t work around the house anymore. Then he didn’t come at all and he was with her, we knew. My brother Bud was old enough to take care of us now so he said, ‘Don’t worry,’ but I knew he’d be lost, like Daddy. The fields were the only place for him to go.”

One night, driving home for the weekend, Bud ran his car off the road two miles south of a rig he’d been wildcatting. He never regained consciousness, Mother said.

“Did he ever see your father?” I asked her.

“No, and he didn’t meet a woman of his own. He wasn’t the type to take up with that sort, and anyway we’d heard the shanty woman was dead by now, killed by some old boy who didn’t want to pay for her. They found her half-burned in the Mayberry Field, dress off, doused with gas.”

“What happened to Grandfather Bill?” I asked.

“We heard about him, sick and dying, in a Kilgore clinic years later.” My mother rubbed her throat; she’d gone dry. As in many family stories, the initial point had been lost in the telling. I never understood her fear about becoming the kind of woman she’d described. Maybe she’d been tempted to follow the oil workers
herself when she was young, to raise money for June who'd had to scramble for cash after Bill disappeared. In fact, my mother didn't leave home until she met my father—who also eventually wound up in the fields. (My sister, more level-headed than Mother ever gave her credit for being, turned out fine. She's married now and living in Houston.)

That night, twenty years ago, sitting with me in her kitchen, my mother laughed sadly. "I don't know what's so damned attractive about the oil fields, but every man in my life has been drawn to them."

I remember thinking, Not me. I won't be trapped by that hard-packed Texas ground.

"Bud was such a good kid," she said. "There was no need for it, no need for it at all... when he ran his car off the road, people said the marks looked like he'd swerved to miss something, but there weren't any tracks in the dirt."

At twelve, I was already familiar enough with my mother's grim tales to know they usually ended with guilt or remorse. I knew what Bud had swerved to miss on the road that night. I knew why Mother worried about my father when he worked late. The oil field woman would haunt my family from now on.

My father's a quiet man, and shy, and even if the shanties still stood during his wildcatting days he wouldn't have gone to them for the world. But the Mayberry Woman, as she was known in the fields, came to the oil workers now, the way she'd come to Bud and stood like fog in the middle of the road. She didn't say why she came. Maybe she was looking for her money, though what could it mean to her now?

In 1963 my father moved up in the small oil company he worked for. He stopped going to the fields. He bought an air
conditioner and a new car for us, and paid off the mortgage on June’s Dallas home. In the evenings we watched television. Dad said the country would never recover from Oswald’s rifle in the window. No one told me stories at night to put me to bed. My mother fretted about my sister, my father read the paper. In time I began to realize it was up to me: I’d been given a version of a story, though I was too young to know how to tell it.

For a long time the story stayed inside me. When I was a little older (but still too young to know how to begin) I scared myself with it. Watching meteors one dusk in a mesquite-ridden field I had the sense that the Mayberry Woman was just behind a bush. I wouldn’t go to her. A few yards away, on the highway, diesel trucks signalled one another with their horns. I hoped she’d know the drivers were stronger men than I was, full of hard little pills to keep them awake. They’d give her more of whatever it was she was looking for than I could. Presently a jeep loaded with Mexican boys pulled up to the edge of the field. The sky had turned coal-black. A spotlight in the back of the jeep flashed on and the boys fired at cottontail rabbits cowering in the mesquite. I sank into myself. The shots didn’t come my way. As they hunted, the boys sang a story of their own:

La pena y la que no es pena; ay llorona
Todo es pena para mi.

The story was similar to mine: an airy woman, damp with sweat and talcum and cheap perfume, walked the streets of a Mexican town, touching the faces of children, seducing men from the taverns, lying with them in the back seats of rusted cars.

The hunters laughed and didn’t even want the dead rabbits. I imagined that, years from now, after they’d forgotten this night,
they'd remember the story they were singing. La Llorona was more embedded in their minds than the spotlight and the guns, and I felt a kind of kinship with them.

This morning I overhear two nurses in the hall, whispering about me. One says, “It’s awful the way he leaves his grandma each week, then comes back and tells her he’s been here the whole time.”

“She doesn’t know one way or the other. Her poor old noodle just comes and goes,” the second woman says.

“Still, he oughtn’t to lie to her that way.”

Last night a woman died in the room next to June’s. It was the first time I’d ever heard a death-rattle. Her last breaths came gurgling out of her throat like water draining in a sink. Nurse Simpson cleared her out of her bed, an ambulance pulled up outside the building’s back entrance, and that was it.

Now June’s clutching and unclutching a Kleenex in her hand. I open the curtains to let in the light. The two nurses who’ve been whispering enter the room with a pill cart. Tiny color snapshots of all the Parkview residents have been arranged in rows on the tray, next to little paper cups full of capsules and pills. Orange, red, yellow, green. One of the nurses finds June’s photo, picks up her cup. Her pills are gray. “Get those things away from me,” June says, covering her mouth with the Kleenex.

“Junie, now, be a good girl—"

“Trying to poison me with that crap.”

The nurse forces the pills into June’s mouth with quick sips of juice. “Ought to try to walk a little today,” she says, squeezing June’s feet. “Work your legs some.”

“I walked for ninety years. Leave me alone.”

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The nurse's white blouse is spotted with large yellow stains. Someone's breakfast. She gives me a hurried look, and I know she's the one who disapproves of me.

"Thank you," I say as she replaces June's cup on the tray.

The pills always knock June out. While she sleeps I flip through a stack of Kodak prints my mother sent us last week. Family snapshots. A picture of Mom in her high school cheerleading outfit; her graduation portrait. June pruning roses in her yard. There aren't any pictures of Bill. June destroyed them all years ago, when he left.

An alarm bell rings in the lobby. I go to see what's happened. Mr. Edwards has tried to escape. He's rammed open the back door, the ambulance entrance, with his wheelchair. He has an old fedora on his head and a blue sweater draped across his shoulders; otherwise he's naked. Briefly, I find myself rooting for him but the nurses catch him as he rounds the patio. "Sons of bitches!" he shouts, spurring his chair like a pony.

At lunch the Soup of the Day smells like Mercurochrome. June won't eat it. I bring her a ham and cheese sandwich from Burger King. She's lucid and calm. "Where's your wife, Glen? Didn't you get married?" she says.

The question catches me off guard. "No. Well, yes."

"Shoot, boy." She cackles then coughs. "Are you in or out?"

"We split up about a year ago," I tell her. "She's in New Mexico now." Marge and I only lived together for a few months in a small apartment near Puget Sound. Mom had told June we were married; she wouldn't have understood the kind of loose arrangement we had.

"What was the problem?" June asks.

"I don't know. I didn't make enough money to suit her."
“What is it you do?”
“I’m a welder.”
“That’s right, that’s right. Making airplanes.”
“You want these fries?”
She holds out her hand. “I never understood why you moved way the hell up there anyway. What’s wrong with Texas?”
“Nothing’s wrong with Texas. I just didn’t want to work in the oil fields.” I brush a horsefly off the sandwich paper. “I heard it was pretty out west so I went.”
“There’s worse jobs than the oil fields,” June says.
I laugh. “Sure there are. It’s just—”
“What?”
“I don’t know, June, it seemed kind of aimless to me. Bill, Bud, even Dad. Moving around from patch to patch. . . .”
“Are you better off making airplanes?”
“No.” I squeeze her hand. “Not really. You want the rest of this?”
“Tastes like tar.” She says she’s tired. I tell her I’m going to run into town but I’ll be back this evening. I drive to my apartment and pack a handful of clothes.

The girls on Cedar Springs Boulevard don’t want to work for their money. I’ve asked before—every damn night when I first got to town and felt so low. Ten minutes, sixty bucks.

Before I hit the road I stop at Ojeda’s on Cedar Springs and order a taco. A pug-nosed girl, fourteen or fifteen, in red heels and a black jacket, taps the restaurant window. Long purple nails. I shake my head, ladle salsa onto my plate. “I love you,” she mouths through the glass. I hold up three fingers. “Thirty bucks,” I say. She laughs and moves down the walk, swaying like a dancer.
I've often wondered what caught Bill's eye in the oil field, when the shanty woman first showed up. A twist of hips, a toss of the head?

I eat and read the paper. Today Kircheval's column—June's favorite—starts, "Years ago, on a tall building in downtown Dallas, the Mobil Oil Company erected a revolving red Pegasus, rearing and about to take flight. The city's preservation committee protects the sign now because Mobil abandoned the flying horse as its trademark over a decade ago."

Kircheval's sad that few old Dallasites recall the name of the company that lifted the sign onto the building, and fewer still remember the original legend of Pegasus.

"So many losses," he goes on. "Like Jack Ruby's bar—can anyone find it now? A few people point out the grassy knoll, but that's all. No one talks about it. No one talks about the sky we can't see behind the streetlights." I imagine him, poor sentimental bastard, sitting at a scratched wooden desk in the newspaper office, surrounded by World War Two press photos of Ernie Pyle ("Now there was a journalist!").

"Have we forgotten about the Dipper scooping down out of the north?" he asks. "Have we forgotten falling stars and all the things that used to scare us?"

I-20 West through Ft. Worth, Abilene, Big Spring, Midland-Odessa, runs—a straight shot—past refineries and rigs. Flames breathe fiercely out of steel-plated towers and drums; around the processing plants the air smells flat, like warm asparagus.

Last month, on one of my escape-runs, I filled out job applications with Exxon and Arco. As much as I'd hate to give myself
to Oil, to fasten my gaze on the ground, I realize I'll need someplace to go when June passes on.

When I was a kid I wanted to ride the pumps in the fields. They bucked up and down like the wild-maned rodeo broncos I saw on TV, or like coin-operated horses in front of the dime stores Mama used to shop.

This afternoon thick blue thunderheads mass together in the east. A faint smell of rain mingles with sand in the air. I stop in Abilene for a D.Q. Dude and some onion rings. The Dairy Queen is overrun with high school majorettes. They're wearing green and yellow uniforms and hats with plumes. Big, strapping Texas girls: I'm reminded of the picture of my mother when she was a cheerleader.

Back on the highway I pass the ripped screens of drive-in movie theaters, closed for years. Actors' faces, wide as John Deere tractors, used to kiss and sing here, floating above me like cloudbanks on the horizon.

The rain lets go as I pass the Big Spring cut-off. Semis swish by me, kicking up spray and dust. I stop for gas, a couple of cold Coors. At Midland I turn west toward New Mexico. Watching my blinker flash green, I realize what I'm doing. All these lonely trips I've taken, all the times I've strayed from Dallas—practice runs. For thousands of miles, back and forth through veils of Texas dust, I've been working up my nerve.

Marge and I haven't spoken in nearly a year, since she took up with Calvin Reynolds. Cal's an old Boeing buddy of mine, an engineer. After the big lay-offs in Seattle he got a job at one of the labs in Los Alamos and talked Marge into going with him. By then she and I were pretty well finished, anyway.
The beer's made me sleepy so I check into a cinder-block motel—The Rayola—just outside of Monahans. A rusty sign above the office door shows a cowboy in pajamas and a nightcap sitting up in bed, still wearing his boots, twirling a lariat.

For a while I sit smoking, staring at David Letterman and the tan brick wall of my room. I drop ashes into a motel glass. It was wrapped in clear plastic when I first picked it up, but now I notice a lipstick stain on its rim. A ghostly kiss. I lie awake, listening to rain wash the streets and tap my curtained window.

West of Odessa there used to be a meteor crater. I remember seeing it as a kid: a rock-bowl, perfectly smooth, carved deep into the planet. Now it's filled nearly to the lip with dirt and old hamburger wrappers. The oil boom's over in this part of Texas—the parks are overgrown, the rigs are left standing just for show. Ghost towns. Most of the fields are depleted. If you pump oil out of the ground too fast, my father told me once, the salt domes under the soil will collapse, and sinkholes open in the land, spreading through weeded lots, rippling under highways, shattering concrete. In the past, whole communities have disappeared, he said. Swing sets, dress shops, signs . . . .

Roswell, New Mexico. I push open the phone booth door, slip a quarter out of my pocket. Jet planes hurtle across the sky, into or out of a nearby Air Force base. From the booth I watch their vapor trails and wonder if I welded any of that sun-warmed metal.

For a moment, as I grip the receiver, I want to free myself like a hawk, like a flying horse, from the ground's heavy pull.

Cal answers the phone. I haven't thought of what to say to him so I just ask for Marge.
“Glen?” he says.
“Yeah. It’s me.”

He takes a breath. He doesn’t know what to say, either. “Hold on a minute,” he tells me. “I’ll see if she’s here.”

I watch a man in a car dealership across the street from me try to sell a young couple a used Toyota.

Marge comes on the line with a fake-cheery voice. “Glen! How the hell are you?”

“Okay.” I tell her about June. “I’m living in Dallas now.”

“So you’re sightseeing?”

“I thought I’d come see you. I miss you.”

“Oh,” she says. I can picture her lips—the way they pucker when she talks. I can picture the kind of dress she’s wearing, baggy and bright. Every day I’ve seen her in my mind the way June glimpses, everywhere she looks, the woman in the oil field.

“I don’t know, Glen, it’s kind of a loopy time around here—Cal’s daughter Lynn is coming for a visit tomorrow. I’m kind of nervous, you know, we’ve never met before. There’s some good movies in town we can take her to. And we’ve stocked up on Spaghetti-Os. She loves Spaghetti-Os.”

The familiar ring of Marge’s voice makes me prickly and hot, but her cool tone—she’s closing me out even as she’s drawing me back in—infuriates. I rub the booth glass with the flat of my thumb, pressing harder with each long stroke.

Lenny, Jack, Cal: she sang the names like a nursery rhyme the night I heard I was fired. I came home weary from the plant, ready to pick a fight, got drunk, asked her who she’d been sleeping with since we’d moved in together. We both knew how matters stood.

“What about you?” she said.

Shirley, Florence, Joy. . . .
I thought I was ready for whatever hard things Marge had to
tell me that night, but you’re never really prepared for the full, fat
weight of jealousy.

“Anyway, I hope your grandma gets better,” she tells me now
on the phone.

“She won’t get better. She’s old,” I say.

“Right.”

“You still don’t listen, baby.”

“Glen—”

“Did you keep that little T-shirt, the one I bought you on the
coast? With the whales on it? I bet Cal likes it, right?”

“Glen, don’t start.”

“Okay. So . . . .”

“I better go. Cal’ll need his lunch.”

“Fuck him,” I say.

“I’m going to go now, Glen.”

“You too.” I hang up the phone. The sound barrier cracks. Jets
thunder over the desert.

On Friday afternoon the rest home is quiet. Water trickles inside
a brown plastic air conditioner wedged into a window by the back
door where the ambulance came again this morning. Mr. Davis.

The nurses play Hearts or Spades at the main desk in the lobby.

June’s been sleeping. Now she blinks her eyes. “Glen?”

“I’m here, June.”

“Where’ve you been?”

“By your bed. All afternoon.”

“What about yesterday?”

“Don’t you remember?”
“No.” She sits up. I fluff her pillows. “Do you have the paper?” she asks. “Read me old what’s-his-name.”

Today Kircheval shares with his readers the complete history of Ft. Worth’s sewage system. I glance at the column, hesitate, then say, “He’s not in the paper today, June. Must be on vacation.”

“I need a story,” she says. “Expect me to lie here all day, just worrying and waiting for that woman to show, with nothing else on my mind—”

“I’ve got a story, June.” I pull my chair up close to the bed. “A better story than Kircheval could tell. Want to hear it?”

“What’s it about?”

“I think it’s about . . . .” I stare at the poster on her wall, the little girl hugging the kitten. I feel silly that a gooey scene like this can move me, the way Kircheval touches a nerve in June, but it does. “I think it’s about redemption.”

June licks her dry lips. “I don’t like religious stories.”

“No no, this isn’t like that.” I get her a glass of water. “This one’s about a woman in an oil field, but she was a good woman, June, not like the ladies you’ve heard of.”

“A good woman?”

“A very good woman. Men came to her—”

“Bet they did.”

“—and she’d turn them away. Said, ‘You got a wife and kids back home. Don’t mess with that.’ ”

“Who is this woman?”

“She’d bring folks together again, folks who’d lied to each other and said hurtful things. Told the ladies at home, ‘Your man’s brave in the fields, works hard all day, so don’t you bad-mouth him for not being around.’ And she’d tell the men stories of their women, how they sacrificed raising the children, but how nice
and bright they all were, how much they all missed him, and the
men'd smile and watch oil gush out of the ground—"

"Damned old oil, ruined everybody's life . . . ." June says.

"No, June, the oil was good. Built factories and schools . . . this
lady I'm telling you about, the Mayberry Woman they called
her—"

"Mayberry? That ain't the story."

"It is, June."

"She was a bad woman. Awful old bitch."

"No, she was good. Listen. Listen. She used to bathe in oil, in
a solid gold tub with these lion-claw feet made of brass, see? She
rubbed thick crude on her arms like she was lathering herself in
riches. Then she bottled up her fortune and shared it with every­
one in Texas, men and women both."

June's breathing evenly now. Her hands lie still on her tissues.

"See, it's all right, June," I say. "It's always been all right, if you
remember it this way."

The parking lot fills with noise. A Catholic youth group—eight
ten-year-old girls with their mothers—bursts into the nursing
home, giggling and shouting. The girls are carrying bunny rab­
bits—"fuzzy little friends for our friends here at the home," one
says. They dump the rabbits into the laps of three or four women
in wheelchairs. "Is it Easter?" a deaf old woman asks.

"No," the tallest mother says. She seems to be in charge. "We
thought you'd like to pet them."

"Is it Christmas?"

Mr. Edwards glares at the bunnies as though he'd like to kill
them.

I offer to wheel June into the lobby so she can feel the soft fur,
but she doesn't want to. She smells like the sweet roll she had for

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breakfast. The air from her window cools us, rattles the newspaper; its sections lie scattered in a chair.

Her eyes cloud up, like marbles. I can see her mind's about to gallop off to the East Texas fields. She sleeps for a while. I sit and wonder where to head next Monday. New Mexico's out. West Texas has changed. Kansas, maybe, up through Oklahoma. Boomer Sooner.

When June wakes she tries to convince me that the shanty woman has murdered Bill and buried him here at the home.

"Where?" I say.
"On the patio. By the Coke machine."
"Would you like Nurse Simpson to check for you?"
"Bitch won't tell me."
"Why not?"
"She was sleeping with him, too."
"Nurse Simpson? I don't think she's Bill's type."
"Don't kid yourself," June says. "They're all his type."

She pounds around on the sheet for her Kleenex. When I give her the box she won't let go of my hand. The room's grown dark. Outside, sparrows squabble with a blue jay for space in a flowering plum tree.

"I should've killed him myself," June mutters. "Day he told me he's leaving. . . ."

Her hand begins to tremble in mine. "Shhh," I say.
"Don't shush me, old man. Just get out of this house."

She tries to shove me away. In the shadows I watch her face and think none of us ever recovers from the first time we listen to someone else's sadness. We spend our lives refuting or repeating, trying to come to terms with the tales we've heard.
June looks at me. She pulls a wad of Kleenex from her box. "She's out there," she says, knotting the tissues. "She's out there waiting for me."

I say, "I know, June. But we don't have to go to her just yet." I smooth her hair and tell her again my story of the woman in the oil field.