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Wrath

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WRATH

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BREATH OF FIRE

After the trouble with the boarding house, Helmuth stayed at Hark's house, which had been her mother's, and her grandmother's, who were said to be witches.

Hark's mother had sworn her to keep the house up, and Hark had agreed. She slept in the junior bedroom on the first floor, just beneath the master bedroom where her mother slept, and each night of her life the weight of the second story settled down upon her like earth atop a casket. The junior bedroom got so dark that she often fell asleep with her eyes open. She awoke from her dreams to the feeling that a firm hand pressed her against her bed.

Hark had sworn a previous oath to her mother never to dabble in the family craft, which her mother had given up long ago, and also to make sure that the house's locked rooms, where the old things were, stayed locked. Hark may have sworn other, smaller oaths, too, that she had, in the course of living an uneventful life, forgotten.

One evening, when Hark was a young girl, she set a spell, a charm for lonely trappers meant to call small things—a sparrow, a mouse, a lover. That morning, a dead mouse lay on the front step. Her mother collected it, dumped it in the trash, and whipped Hark with her father's belt.

"This is to remind you that I am not a fool," she said on the final lash.

Besides this, Hark was an obedient daughter, due in part to her fealty to her mother, in part to her memory of this lashing, in part to the secrecy in which her will survived within her, like a tongue of flame sheltered by a glass shade.

Of Hark's father, Hark knew very little. He had died when she was a baby; in any practical sense, she had never met him. For a while, her mother carried on his memory by setting his picture at the head of the dinner table and burning votive candles beneath it. But then she gave up practices like this and put the picture and the candles away. When she got sick, she said that she regretted the day she had laid eyes on him and attributed to him every misfortune of her life. Hark sat by, wringing washcloths into a pot and mopping her mother's brow and watching the second hand move around the bedside clock, which was decorated with charioteers in relief. Hark blamed her mother's ravings on the medicine she took, which was powerful enough and dangerous enough that the doctor would not leave the bottle.

Still, if Hark's mother gave an order, Hark obeyed, for she was that kind of daughter. Soon, Hark's mother forbade the doctor from the house and made Hark run him off. This Hark did, but gently, explaining to the doctor that she would take it from here.

"It's a wretched business," said the doctor. "I wonder if you know what you're taking on."

Hark said nothing back.

Then the doctor asked her for a drink of water. Hark left the room and returned a moment later with a glass of cloudy water from the kitchen tap.

In her absence, the doctor, alone in the parlor, considered his options. He could overpower Hark, physically or morally, and continue to treat the poor woman upstairs, whom he had known for most of his life in the practice; he could have Hark deposed as the head of the house somehow; perhaps he could lobby the aunts of the family, whom he had met once or twice over the years, to talk sense into this strange young woman. In any case, he felt he must do something. He did not want to abandon Hark to her mother, nor Hark's mother to her death. He had seen Hark born. He was fond of the girl, and feared for her future if he left her now. All this thinking was the work of a moment, for now, Hark returned, passing to him the glass of water, muttering something to him. Together, they watched the pendulum of the grandfather clock go back and forth.

At last, Hark said, "Not thirsty after all?" for the doctor had not drunk any of the water she'd brought him. The doctor returned the glass to her and showed himself out.

He returned to the house many times, always in secret. He might come up its walk but turn back at the first step of the porch, or he might drive past it with his lights out when he had finished his other calls. But for all Hark knew, he vanished from her life. She never saw him again, but once.

Without her medicine, Hark's mother grew wilder and wilder. Hark obeyed her every command, as she always had, except one night, when her mother told Hark to get the old things from the locked rooms. With only a moment's thought, Hark shook her head no.

"Good girl," said her mother.

The night she died, she turned to Hark. She had fallen into a deep sleep some nights ago, from which she had awakened only once or twice. One lamp burned; the room was very dim. The chariot clock had wound down, and, as it was winter, the window was shut with a curtain across it.

"Promise me to keep up this house," said Hark's mother. She had exacted this promise long ago, but now she took Hark by the wrist and went further. "Let no man enter here," she said. "Not this room. Not any of the rooms. Not this house. Not a milkman, not a mailman, not a policeman, not a husband. I should never have married. Oh, I'm happy to have you, my darling, happier than you can know. But a man is a demon. He is a locust. This house is yours now. Keep it safe. Let no man into it. I would never forgive you this. I would rather you burned this house to the ground."

For the first time in her life, Hark was afraid. She could not deny this promise, nor could she keep it. Her eyes searched the room and set upon a framed silhouette of her grandmother, who had also died before Hark was grown, only a little while after her father. Hark might have taken a night to consider it. But death was very near; there were no more nights for her to take. So, Hark swore, in the way she had sworn all her other oaths to her mother; she linked her pinky finger with her mother's, which was as dry as a cinnamon stick. Then, Hark noticed a drawer open. She crossed the room to shut it, and when she returned, her mother was dead. Hark carried the body from the bed to the parlor sofa. The body weighed nothing at all. The bedsheets clung to it like a shroud. She called the city to report the death and sat waiting for men to arrive, pressing her wristwatch to her ear to break the quiet. It had begun to snow.

For years, she kept this final promise with ease. As a girl, keeping up the house

had seemed a large job, even with her mother's help. But now, it seemed a trivial thing. Each morning she wound the clocks and set out scraps for the strays and checked that the locked doors were still locked. There was little more to it. She read her mother's books, starting at the top of the shelf and working down, and then her grandmother's in the same fashion. Years went by. Though the master bedroom could now be hers, she continued to sleep in the junior bedroom. The feeling that the house encased her like so many feet of dirt did not go away.

She did not know how or when Helmuth first appeared in her life, but she guessed he had come the same way all things came to her, as on a wind, like the leaves that blew in the front door and out the back. He was a patron of the local library where she tended special collections and, if needed, shelved books and shooed vagrants away, but that was all she really knew.

In any case, here he was now, with his kit bag over his shoulder, skinny and impatient with her. He held up a small trinket of hers.

"You dropped this," he said, "some ways back."

She took it from him.

"Come on," he said, clapping his bare arms with his hands, "it's cold out here." Hark stood aside and let him in.

He charged into the kitchen, where peas boiled in a pot.

"Peas!" he cried. "I love peas!" He dropped his kit bag to the floor.

Hark fed him the peas, and the dumplings she was steaming, but after eating these he looked around the kitchen, too polite to tell her that he was still famished. She handed him slices of buttered bread until he raised his hand.

He wanted a bath next. The bath was on the second story.

Hark could not say no to him, or to anyone. It was her fault in life, and whenever she felt cooped up in the house, or lonely, she reminded herself of this flaw, and considered that it was for the best that she didn't mix with the world. She feared that what little her family had built up—the house, a name—could be razed by a little breeze.

Helmuth grimaced from digestion pain and unsnapped the button at his throat, revealing a ring of dirt that crossed a purple bruise. Hark had never seen so tall and skinny and nervous a man before. She tried to fix his eyes with hers but he always looked away, and when she stood to lead him up the stairs to the bath, he followed too close for her liking and ran his finger along the banister and straightened a couple crooked pictures.

In the bathroom she pointed out the two taps, showed him the plug, and left him be. On the way down to the porch, where she sat on a step and waited for him to finish, she followed with her eye the trail his fingertip had drawn through the dust, long and straight. The mahogany of the banister shined up at her. The finish on it was still fine.

It was just spring, and a storm was in the sky. Lightning struck the hills twice. Thunder trailed not far behind. This was an ill omen, and, smart though she was, she believed in omens and took them to heart. So she apologized for breaking her promise, addressing her mother and the house and herself, for she had come to think of them all as one.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Rain began to fall. Now, a bolt of lightning struck a far-off tree. She promised herself that if the next bolt struck the weathervane and the house caught fire, she would tuck herself into bed and burn up with it.

Then, she heard Helmuth's footfalls on the stairs behind her. She turned and saw him through the screen. He wore only his undershirt and black pajama pants with a stripe down the side. He opened the door and beckoned her in, pointing to the advancing storm when she did not come at once.

Helmuth was bound by no oaths and kept no secrets, unless one counted his temper and his stutter, which he had spent his life mastering. No one had ever asked him to promise anything. He did not know his mother or his father well; he had left his hometown long ago, swearing never to go back. He learned of their deaths by letters that came to the boarding houses where he kept small, disordered rooms. How the letters had found him, he couldn't guess.

Instead, he was bound by his friends, whom he had met in school, or at this boarding house or that. His friends, like all the men in the city, were rowdy and abusive and prosperous. They were married with lovers, and children, and children by their lovers. Helmuth was the poorest and the meekest and the most nervous of them. They ridiculed his poverty by getting drunk and leaving him behind to settle their tabs with his own money. They exploited his weak nerve by popping paper bags in his ear to make him flinch. And they absolved themselves of guilt by mussing his hair and reminding him that he was a trusty friend.

When he started up with Hark, they harassed him about her, for he had not

brought her around once; no one but Helmuth had yet laid eyes on her.

"Helmuth is ashamed of her," his friends said.

"I'm not," said Helmuth, and he wasn't; because he had never been called upon to make a promise, perchance to break a promise, he had never learned shame.

"So she's too good for us then!" they said. "We see how it is."

There was no winning, so Helmuth clapped his mouth shut. He dared not even speak her name, because, little by little, he had learned of the reputation that surrounded Hark and her house.

"We think you're making it all up," they said finally. "We think you've dreamed her up just to get us off your back." Then they went on about womankind in general, which they held in low regard. They warned him about Hark and said that if he thought a woman could make him happy, he was a bigger fool than they thought. Helmuth excused himself to the bathroom and left through a rear door.

Railroad tracks separated the city from its suburb, where Hark's house was. When Helmuth crossed the tracks by a narrow footbridge, the air chilled. It was a long, quiet walk, with much time for him to think.

He did not think his friends were right about him. But when had he ever been right about anything? Weren't his friends successes, and he a failure? Didn't they know best?

Yet Hark *was* quiet and chaste and withdrawn and of little help to him, except that she kept him company. She was always looking at him from a distance or from a shadow, and what at one hour seemed mysterious in her often seemed ghastly the next. He could never know if these were changes in her disposition or in his own. Perhaps

she was indeed a sea anchor, as his friends said all women were, and that, rather than save Helmuth from his own sorry lot in life, she would only fix him fast to her own.

Helmuth had departed Hark's house very much in love with her, but he returned to it unaccountably angry. His temper was at its limit. He did not want to go up the walk and in, nor slip into bed beside Hark, who was undoubtedly asleep with the nightlight on. But he had nowhere else to go. He was allowed in none of the boarding houses, and his friends were inhospitable types. It was very late. The ascent to the house seemed inescapable, and this feeling, which was very familiar to him, made him angrier still.

In the end, he went up the walk and let himself in with the key in the hollow stone, slipped out of his shoes in the foyer, and went to the junior bedroom, where indeed Hark lay in bed. He had been looking in on her for some time when she lifted herself onto her elbow and turned to face him. Only then did he smile. His anger had given way to sorrow, which it often did, and he always expressed his sorrow by smiling. He undressed to his shorts and got into bed beside her. There he lay awake, more certain than ever that he was a coward through and through.

One morning they awoke and found that their country had declared war in the night.

At once, the city was a tempest of rallies and protests, and even on Hark's remote side street, vans outfitted with megaphones rolled by at midday, announcing the draft numbers that came up in the war department's daily lottery.

Hark and Helmuth sat on the porch, she in the swing bench and he on a step.

The van, trailing crimson crape and lined with blue and yellow piping, called out the day's numbers, ending at one hundred and ninety-eight and rounding the corner.

"What's your number?" asked Hark.

Helmuth took the slip of paper, which had come by mail a few days ago, though he knew his number by heart. "Two hundred," he said. "Don't be afraid," he said. "You'll miss me for a while, but then you'll move on."

He waited for her to respond, but she only set the swing bench rocking with her toe.

"I'm of no use to you," Helmuth said. "I'm of no use to anyone."

"Perhaps you won't get called," said Hark.

"Or perhaps the best use of my life has arrived at last," he said.

He was afraid. The draft slip trembled in his hand. Though he was now silent, he felt his stutter coming on; it rattled his tongue in his mouth.

That night, Hark vanished. Helmuth had grown accustomed to this. She was a private person, and he never intruded on her privacy. But on this night, her absence was intolerable. Helmuth looked in the kitchen and the cellar and the junior bedroom. He went upstairs and set his hand on the doorknob of the master bedroom, in which neither of them, so far as he knew, had ever gone. As he searched, his anger with her increased. He had written her a letter that very morning, explaining his love for her and promising her that the war, which he knew he was destined to fight, would not change him, no matter how long it lasted or what befell him, whether he fought or fled, suffered or prospered, lived or died.

When he did not find her in the common rooms, his temper broke, for he felt

she had abandoned him in their final hours. He took the letter from his pocket, tore it into little pieces, washed them down the kitchen drain, and charged to the hall where the locked doors were, which Hark had asked him never to enter.

When Hark came down from the third story of the house, of which Helmuth knew nothing, for it was invisible from the street and accessible only by a pull-down stair in the master bedroom, Helmuth was in a fury. He had kicked two doors in and was about to kick in a third. In these rooms stood Hark's mother's things, and her grandmother's. Not just the wardrobes full of hoop skirts and bridal gowns, nor the hatboxes in piles, leaking veils of fine black netting from beneath their lids, but the cabinets of correspondence, the shoeboxes bursting with her grandmother's recipes, the folios of the letters her mother had sent her father, and which had returned to her when he had died; in short, the family fortune, which Hark had promised she would defend.

She made no effort to stop him. For one thing, she was weak, having been in the attic all night, long at her work. For another, well, what were her promises now worth?

Helmuth faced her. Steam poured from his open mouth and rose in waves from his bare shoulders. She did not recognize him, nor did he recognize her; in the dark, he saw only her shining eyes, two diamond brooches against a velvet board.

When he calmed down, they got into bed. Because they were so exhausted, they slept soundly.

A few days later, the war department van came down the street, calling out draft numbers one hundred and ninety-nine, then two hundred and one, then up and up.

This surprised him not at all. The following morning, he awoke early, cooked Hark an omelet, wrote her a little note, left the house, went to a recruiting station, and enlisted. He had set the note beside the omelet, which he had put under a dinner bell, and when he thought of Hark awakening to find him gone, he thought also of this note, and his remorse seemed a little less.

All the while Helmuth had packed his kit bag, Hark had not been asleep. He took care to pack quietly, and by this, she knew that he meant to leave her in secret. She at once foresaw the sorrow this would bring her, and yet she did not want to get in his way; he had made up his mind, and she would go along. So she lay there, listening to him tread lightly about the darkened room, and then into the kitchen, and then out the door, which he shut very quietly behind him. She only rose when the house fell quiet. She went down the hallway, where the doors still stood off their hinges, and then into the kitchen, where she saw a plate beneath a bell and a note that Helmuth had left her.

The war lasted longer than anyone, save Hark, thought it would.

Young men departed the city by special trains. These trains wore crimson streamers. The railroad hired a brass band to play at every departure. Perhaps Helmuth had departed on such a train, to the sounds of such a band. Hark did not know and would not guess, and she put these thoughts from her mind. Years passed.

Then, converted freighters began to return to remote platforms, far from the city center. The same young men who had departed years ago disembarked at these platforms, but they weren't young men anymore. They embraced wives and daughters

they did not recognize and who did not recognize them back. The dead were carried out of the rear cars, where there was no one to see.

Hark spent her days at home. From any east-facing window, she could see the smoke of incoming trains, and though she knew Helmuth was not aboard them, neither in the front cars nor the back, she often stopped what she was doing to watch these plumes of smoke approach.

For all those years, Hark kept up the house. She had replaced the doors and locked them long ago. After this, she did little more than wind the clocks and feed the strays and bury the occasional dead mouse they brought her.

Well, that is not entirely true. But Hark's life was strange, and its terms and duties were understood only by Hark and the other women of her family, the few that were left. One can say only this much; each day that Helmuth was gone, Hark went into the master bedroom, which was just as it had been the day her mother died, and pulled down the attic stair by its string, and went up onto the third story and pulled the stair up behind her; and that when she returned, she was like the young men who came off the trains. She was in a stupor with no knowledge of herself. She blinked into the dim of the master bedroom, wondering whose things these were, and where was the master of this house. When she went to the bathroom to bathe, she looked in the mirror, shedding water from her body onto the tiles and waiting for her name to come to the tip of her tongue.

For a time, she set small spells to safeguard Helmuth. But they were only the spells she'd learned in girlhood, nothing more than charms. She knew that Helmuth was well beyond their help and that they were of no use to anyone except herself.

So she contended herself only to call him up in her mind, and she lived each day for the small comfort of remembering his face, a comfort that diminished little by little as he shrank from her memory until, one afternoon, she could not think of him at all. She descended the attic stair, sat on the parlor sofa, and cried, and pleaded into her hands.

She had none of her mother's power, nor her grandmother's. The smallest thing took all her energy. When she opened her eyes, the parlor of her house greeted her, and an older life, the one she had lived before Helmuth ever came into it, stood before her. She wiped her eyes, slipped on her shoes, and went to the grocer's, which was full of old women in black gowns and rubber-soled pumps. They looked at Hark through black veils, recognizing her as one of them. Hark bought her groceries, said hello when she was said hello to, and hurried home.

That night, she lay awake, which was unusual. She begged Helmuth to return. Then she opened her eyes to the ceiling.

"You win," she said, and the house settled in above her.

All those years, Helmuth did nothing but sit in a small outbuilding in a cow pasture and wait for his orders to come.

At first he wrote Hark letter after letter, neither addressing nor signing them, for this was against the rules of war. They made a pile at the bottom of his kit bag, which he emptied into the field when it filled up. Then he ceased writing letters and simply waited, unpacking and repacking his parachute, sighting and re-sighting his rifle on the stumps of trees that had been felled to clear the ground for grazing. The

thought sometimes crossed his mind that his orders would never come, that the war had been called off and the war department had forgotten that he was here.

Then, one night, an officer arrived by airplane, a great bomber that landed in the open field. The officer disembarked and crossed the pasture, holding his cap to his head and carrying a leather attaché case. He shook Helmuth's hand, bade Helmuth sit, and remained standing with his hands behind his back.

"This is it," the officer said, handing Helmuth a stack of papers. In it were his orders, a release for his personal possessions, a checklist by which he could make specifications for his own funeral, and a map on waterproof paper. Helmuth read the orders, released his possessions to Hark, and signed his name.

This was nearly the last he thought of Hark for many years. The officer squeezed his shoulder and ordered him to the bomber, in which Helmuth's squad-mates sat. The bomber lifted from the pasture. Through a small window, Helmuth saw it from above, a little thatch of green dotted with tiny grazing cows.

"Goodbye," Helmuth said to the cows.

Then the bomber, high in the air, crossed from Helmuth's own country to the enemy's, between which lay a border of burning acres, a glowing reef delimiting two lakes of darkness. Into that darkness his squad-mates, each on a count of three, now tumbled, their bodies diminishing quickly beneath him, tiny motes against the black of the land below.

"Goodbye," he said again, and he leapt, falling so long that he thought the earth below him might never arrive, and this was the last he thought of Hark for many, many years.

Helmuth would tell no one about this part of his life. When he reunited with his friends after the war, he wore his civvies and kept mum; they wore their crimson fatigues and their velvet berets and sported show swords at their sides and exchanged stories about the frontlines. Then they turned to Helmuth. But his missions had been top secret, and he said nothing at all, even though they teased him and teased him. Getting not a word from him, they agreed that he had probably spent the whole war shoveling manure.

He did not even tell Hark, to whom he also returned, though she often asked him about the war, sometimes late at night, urgently, waking him while he slept. This secrecy caused them a little strife. Hark recalled the long-ago night when Helmuth had kicked her doors in. But then, perhaps to avenge secrecy with secrecy, Hark declined to tell Helmuth about the fire that had swept the city while he was away. The fire had spared very little, not even the children's hospital. Hark's house was darkened by soot on the southern face, and when Helmuth asked her about this, she attributed it to age and wear.

For a time they lived peaceably. Then Helmuth fell ill. It was a matter with his lungs, which had never recovered from a certain event in the war. Hark called a doctor, and the doctor examined Helmuth, but even to the doctor, Helmuth would say nothing about how his lungs had gotten so bad. The doctor exhorted him to talk; this was life-and-death business. But Helmuth said nothing. For a moment, the doctor thought to question Hark. But she had changed very little since he had seen her last, and he knew he was no match for her. He departed shaking his head. He looked over his shoulder at Hark. She waved him on.

Soon, Helmuth could no longer sleep beside Hark in the junior bedroom, and one afternoon, she helped him up to the second story and laid him in the master bed, which was twice as big as Hark's and stuffed with goose down.

What had all the fuss about this room been for? Helmuth wondered. This was a terrific place to get well. There were potted plants that climbed the sills, and a breeze that came through the window, and a lovely clock beside the bed. The secrecy had been for nothing; there was no secret worth keeping after all. But by now, Helmuth was too weak to tell his secrets.

Helmuth died in this room. Of the years after his death, there is little to say.

But a night before he died, this happened: Hark sat beside Helmuth. He was in terrible pain, gasping and tearing for breath. His pain terrified Hark, and to calm herself, she began to talk.

Helmuth could not hear her, for he was much nearer death than Hark could know. Instead, he dreamed a waking dream, as those near death are said to do, and it was a dream he had really lived.

In it, he lay in a bomb crater in a ruined city. Gunfire converged on him from all sides. His squad-mates lay about him, dead or dying. He was certain he would die here. The thought did not trouble him much, for he had done and seen such things that he no longer thought his life, or any life, worth living.

"Goodbye," he said. He found he was speaking to Hark. Then, a fleet of friendly bombers passed overhead, dropping incendiary bombs from their hatches.

This became a famous atrocity, for which both countries were held to blame. The fire burned for many days, razing the clock factories and the knackeries and the

orphanages. A ceasefire was called, and both armies cooperated to contain the blaze, but it was hopeless. Long after the war, and after many grueling and complicated trials, several generals and admirals went to the gallows.

When the fire subsided, Helmuth emerged from his crater. He was sure he was dead, and when he came through the fog, his countrymen and his enemies stood by in disbelief, certain that he was a ghost, for not so much as a housecat had escaped the burning city.

All this Helmuth dreamed while Hark continued to speak:

"I was alone for many years, more years than I can count. I thought of you, and then I didn't. I was no longer able. But my life went on, and it sometimes occurred to me that you promised me that it would do just that, and whenever I thought of this, I laughed, or I cried, depending on the day.

"But I have always found nighttime intolerable. I did then, and do, and will for the rest of my life. It's why I sleep so soundly, I think . . . "

She prattled on for a bit, and then stopped, embarrassed with herself. Helmuth turned from one side to the other, his lips writhing. In fear, Hark went on:

"In fact I have cast only three spells in all my life."

This was not entirely the truth. But it was certainly not a lie, and saying it filled her with sorrow and relief, for those three spells seemed at once like a sorry, small number and a great multitude. She told Helmuth of the lonely trapper's call, and then she put her hand over her mouth, for her hand had begun to tremble.

HELL

In Hell, a boy comes down a crimson dune at sunset to bring you cola in a glass bottle and a glass of crushed ice on a wicker tray. Ms. Wolfe raises her arms and embraces him around the neck, kissing him on the cheek and presenting him to Mr. Danfee and another few, saying to them, “Is he not the most marvelous specimen you have ever seen? I mean is he simply not?” She runs her hand over his bare arms, which have the appearance of twisted hickory cords.

“Shall I open it for you now or should you like to wait?” the boy says of the bottle, and if anyone goes for their wallet, he holds up a hand. “But sir!” he says with incredulity, or, “But madam! It is taken care of, of course!”

“But you must stay!” says Ms. Wolfe as he turns to go, the bottles of cola dispensed to the little tables planted in the sand. “You must watch Mr. Danfee lose this next trick!” and she takes the boy firmly by the wrist, too firmly, for one of the bottles tumbles from his tray and he catches it nimbly with his free hand, spilling not a drop.

“Not now, alas,” says the boy, “but soon!”

Ms. Wolfe falls upon him with blows and tearing at the eyes. “Turn me down will you?” she cries. The melee upends the game of whist from the little dais, and

tokens tumble into the sand, and cola foams into the surf from a capsized bottle, and Mr. Danfee comes to his feet saying, “Marjorie!” while tearing at his hair. Mr. Danfee cares only for whist. He would play it until he starved. On his knees he picks the tokens from the sand and says that he will never find them all, he will have to order a new set, and it will come out of Marjorie’s pocket one way or another.

It is no problem for the boy to liberate himself from Ms. Wolfe. He is hale and strong—you might wonder if he was a shipwright among his people before he took on this line of work, you might imagine him lashing palm timber with leathern cords and rowing through this archipelago from jetty to jetty, bringing kola nuts to his kin—and she is a dowager in her silver years, encumbered by time and also by bangles on her wrists and rings on her knuckles and gold beads around her neck. Even at this violent moment the boy retains some of his natural grace, with which he endeavors to move at all times, no matter the obstacle before him. He wishes above all things to be cordial and timely and elegant in his duties, and he dusts sand from his forearms and lifts Ms. Wolfe up, for she has fallen at his feet and has begun begging him to stay, offering to him stories of her youth if only he will stay, and he smiles at her, and says, “Soon, I promise! I will watch whatever you like and I will hear all your stories,” and thus he confers his grace upon Ms. Wolfe—he knows that grace is like the divine fire and a soul is like a piece of palm bark, and that one spark of that fire can ignite a great inferno that will leap from frond to frond—and she straightens her hair. “A promise is something I suppose,” she says.

A new game of whist is underway. All of Mr. Danfee’s anger is forgotten, and he looks into his fan of cards. But so is his lust for the game forgotten, for he is already

thinking ahead to the next game, and to this end he winks at his partner, with whom he is about to take a trick. Ms. Wolfe circles the dais, looking at this hand and that, and she says, "I once took as a lover a general of Salazar's, who played canasta. Now there is a gentleman's game! He went to the firing squad after the war and declined the blindfold, and it was said that his final words were of me, a claim that is supported by a notebook of odes he left behind, for which I have sent away. I will show them to you in time." Now something across the gulf—a sound, a smell (somewhere below the curve of the Earth a forest is being cleared and burned)—has taken her attention, and there is a silent interlude, for the cards are now shuffled and the new hands dealt and the wagers placed and all are lost in thought and calculation, deaf to her, deaf to the washing of the tide, deaf to the whine of a motorized saw, impervious to the smell of burning palms. Now unsteady on her feet, Ms. Wolfe lowers herself into her chair and raises her hands to her mouth, just as the first tricks are being taken.

The boy gives this group wide berth for his return to the clubhouse—by day it serves as a luncheon cafeteria and sometimes, if there is call for it, as a banquet hall, but it is in any case an aluminum quonset hut—so that he can look upon them in the star light. They cannot see him against the rise of the dune, which is now black. He sees their bodies in their chairs, looking over the bay at something, and he cannot tell at what, nor who is whom in the falling darkness.

In the morning, skiffs come. The skiffs are piloted by men in white caps and white neckerchiefs, men of whom it is widely said they do not give a damn for a passenger's comfort. In each boat there is a captain and a first mate, and they deal only with the boy, whose morning job it is to make sure everyone boards the right skiff.

Some head for the island to the east, on which there is a humble church, others for an island farther to the east, where there is a magnificent zoo. Ms. Wolfe is inconsolable. She has not slept. Nightmares have followed her to this island. Mr. Danfee, whose bungalow neighbors Ms. Wolfe's, says to anyone who will listen that she is spirit ridden and that he has been lobbying in vain for a change of bungalow. Ms. Wolfe plugs her ears and puts her head between her knees. "Stop," she says, "stop." "A man must sleep!" Mr. Danfee says to the boy. "She awakens at all hours, crying out names!" The boy puts a pink band around Mr. Danfee's wrist. This signifies to the skiff captains that he is bound for the church. "And she sleepwalks! Once I awoke and she was at my door, calling me 'dear' and 'my darling' and she cooked me a dinner and asked about my day, and all the while her eyes were rolled back to the whites!" "Yes Mr. Danfee," says the boy, "yes, yes."

But there are two who have not come to the quonset hut for the brunch hour. They are Peter Gunny and Jenny Whale. They are lovers, and they think their affair is a marvelous secret. Last night they fell asleep together in tears, Peter saying to Jenny that he did not know himself anymore, and Jenny holding him and shushing him quiet, and when they awoke at first light, Peter rose, nude, magnificently sculpted, and looked out his bungalow window at the brightening surf, battered by rushes of blowing rain, and said, "Let's stay in. Let's stay in and forget our problems. Isn't that why we came here? Let's make love and eat canned peaches and tonight we'll sit on the beach and watch the stars come out." He slipped a ring from his finger and threw it out the window, where it landed noiselessly in the sand. And indeed they had made a go of it, making love and then opening a can of peaches with syrup and drinking the syrup, and

once Jenny said, “I wish we had a TV, magazines, something.” Then, after making love again, she pushed him aside, trembling, near orgasm, terrified of him, and said, “I can’t! I can’t!” She pressed her clothes to her body. They were full of sand. “Oh God!” Jenny cried out. “It’s only me!” Peter said, but when she looked at him, he knew that she saw someone else, a terrible beast, a demon. She ran from his bungalow and he watched her go, and he was sitting on the edge of his bed when there was at his door a light, cordial rapping. It was the boy—that infernal boy, smiling, his teeth straight and fine, because this archipelago’s water system is rich in fluoride—and Peter thought, “I would like to smash your face until your brains come out your nose.” “Ah Mr. Gunny!” the boy said, holding something up to the light. “You have lost this?”

Nothing much interesting happens at the church, except that it is the only place where you see the natives of the archipelago. When you first reach the jetty you see their palm canoes beached, and you see mothers with their children and husbands with their numerous wives walking in a neat row, the wives arranged by seniority, with the junior wife often lagging and the senior wife looking back on the rest. And among the church goers—Ms. Wolfe is here now, praying loudly, Mr. Danfee is here, praying silently—there is one, Dr. Rubalev, who comes to talk to the natives, for he was a dabbler in the natural sciences during life, and also an occultist who held seances and exorcised devils from his daughter and his wife and spoke of Alexander and Kublai Kahn as if they were personal friends. But these natives speak a pidgin that is unsuited to the great questions. Fine for trading beads and pelts, perhaps, but ask them about the archipelago, its dimensions, its currents and tides, the means of their survival, their

connection to landborn people, their knowledge of the great continents, their stories of the stars, their place in the hemisphere, their proximity to their gods, their knowledge of the true God, the degree to which this knowledge has penetrated this remote place, the fates of their eternal souls, and they smile and hold out a child, or withdraw with a shaking head. Dr. Rubalev can get nowhere with them, and he finds himself beside the boy, who lights a votive candle and stands before it with clasped hands.

"Clearly they are fools," Dr. Rubalev says in despair. "But what I could do with news of this tribe! May I tell you a story of a certain tribe of natives in my homeland? Perhaps they are not unlike your own people."

"It would be an honor to hear such a story," says the boy, and he bids Dr. Rubalev sit on a wooden stool.

"In my homeland," says Dr. Rubalev, "the fate of the savage is a great disgrace. They live on arid land which was theirs for many centuries but which, after terrible military losses, they were forced to buy back from their conquerors at extortionate prices. I came to this place in my youth, for I had heard that these people still conversed with spirits and devils, and that the women sometimes married ghosts and brought children out of these unions, and indeed when I arrived and passed through the gate the first thing I came upon was a bonfire, only it was not a bonfire, but a funerary pyre, and atop it was a bier, and a small bier at that, for I learned that the departed was a young boy who had hanged himself.

"And around this fire, his fellows walked in a shambling chain, and they were in a stupor of death, and they wore paint on their faces, and they spoke up to heaven and exhorted the dead soul to remember them to their ancestors, and they wished him

well among his new kin, and these incantations finished, they began again from the start. And I stayed a full day and a night with them, and I learned some of their tongue, until there was a terrible misunderstanding, for these people are sick with drink and they go about insensible day and night and they fight among each other even when no offense has been committed, and before long, a man took me by the wrist and cried out, 'Thief! Thief!' and their chief was summoned, and the chief assembled his people, and to them he gave a great address. The chief asked me what my business was, and I said that I had come to learn of his people's ways and to see the methods by which they crossed the spirit divide, from the world of men to the world of ghosts, and to see what the dispositions of their gods were, and what tongue they spoke. And the man, who still held me fast, said, 'See? It is just as I told you!'

"This chief dressed in the modern way, and he had read modern books, and were he to walk into this room right now, he would look upon these folk—" Dr. Rubalev gestures at the natives filling a collection plate with wooden beads, "—with pity. And yet a demon came into him upon looking at me, and he called me a devil, and he threw me to the ground and ordered my tongue cut out, and his people went into a frenzy and would have done it had it not been for the intercession on my behalf of a young woman, whose name I shall never forget, not if I live a thousand eternities . . . " Dr. Rubalev has begun to weep, and he bends himself on the stool and cries out the name "Anna," saying, "Anna! Oh Anna! Give me but some small sign! I am a ghost without you, and to think, I never laid eyes on you again, but ran from your land and did not look back . . . " On and on he goes in this way, saying that he has tried all his life to reach her, to catch some glimpse of her ghost, but that the ghost world is like a

crowded train station in a great city, and one can spend an eternity chasing after scraps of cloth and bits of paper and half-familiar faces, and that his search has led him here, and that if these people do not speak to him, he will have words with the spirits with whom he is still friendly, and he will incite the true God to smite these folk and their pitiful church, and see if he doesn't!

The boy laughs. “Dr. Rubalev, you interrupt the services! Come, come,” and he leads the poor man, who is so overcome that he can hardly stand on his own legs, toward the door, but Dr. Rubalev tears himself free, and says, “Unhand me, savage! Filthy beggar! What do you know of my life? Of your own life? Nothing!” And he begins to upend idols and cast them onto the ground, and he takes an icon from the wall and strikes it over his knee, and Ms. Wolfe stands in her pew and cries out for someone to stop him, that he has gone mad, and Mr. Danfee tells Ms. Wolfe to sit down and to be quiet, and the boy, knowing better than to interfere with Dr. Rubalev’s tantrums, smiles at this demonstration, and when it is over, Dr. Rubalev scrabbles at the ground, saying to himself again, “Anna, oh Anna.” The native men and women bring their children to Dr. Rubalev’s side in order to behold him, and in their mother tongue they chatter, and only the boy speaks back to them for only he knows what they say, and when he has conversed with his people for some time, Dr. Rubalev turns to him and demands that he translate their remarks at once, and the boy smiles and says, “It is not for your ears, Dr. Rubalev. But if you would be so kind . . . ” and he offers the doctor his arm, who takes it, and together they go from the church to the beach, and the boy points at the skiffs and the sailors and the doctor’s fellows, who are readying to return, and at the sky, for at last the weather has turned.

But this is the most interesting thing to happen in this church in many years. It is a humble place, built to venerate humble gods, to transport humble prayers to spirit masks carved out of palm wood. When it rains—and how it rains in Hell, great tearing rains that strip the trees of their fronds—the rainwater falls through the holes in the roof as if it were open to the sky. And when the sun shines—and it does in Hell as in no place else—the church gets as hot as a kiln furnace. You wouldn't want to come here. You would prefer by far to go to the zoo, which is magnificent. And on that very afternoon, Peter Gunny and Jenny Whale board a skiff and cross the gulf, the captain tacking angrily into a headwind, and they do not speak to each other but to themselves, aloud, so as to be overheard. Jenny looks into the water and says, “If I throw myself in and the sharks eat me, what then?” Peter holds his ring out over the face of the sea. “I will do it if you ask me to,” he says.

At the zoo they disembark and continue in this vein. They come upon a stand selling hot nuts in paper bags, very much like those he used to buy for his daughter when she was a child—his daughter! Here she is. “My God,” he says, “Sandra! What are you doing here? Get away, for God’s sake, get away!” He pushes her aside but she is in her adolescence and a good gymnast and can outmuscle him in any test of strength and so his push does not budge her. She looks at him with puzzlement, a bit hurt, and says, “Daddy, what’s wrong?” She is in her unitard and her hands are covered in white rosin, and so are her forearms, and her elbows, in fact she is covered in rosin, her skin white and dry and ashen, and Peter falls to his knees before her. “Don’t look at me,” he says, “Don’t look.” He covers his nakedness with his hands. Jenny comes to his side, panicked, calling out for help. “Get away from me!” he says to her. “Look what you

have brought me to!" And now there is someone shaking Peter by the shoulders and calling his name, and it is the boy, that infernal boy. Peter rises to his full height—somehow, he has doubled himself over the rail of the polar bear's enclosure—and says, "You! Leave me be. Leave me alone. How can a man keep a thought in his head with you at his back all the time?" "Master Gunny," says the boy, smiling, "you would have gone into the polar bear's enclosure! And you have spilled your treats!" The paving stones are covered in the hot nuts. "Fuck these treats!" cries Peter, kicking them. The boy laughs. "But they are delicious, Master Gunny, and you love them!" "They're terrible," cries Peter. "I hate them!" But he is exhausted now, and Jenny takes him aside, away from the boy. "Come on," she says. She is worried for his sanity. Peter hides his eyes behind his hand. "If I could just get one moment's sleep," he says. "We'll sleep tonight," she says. "I have no doubt we will," he says. "We certainly won't fuck I'm sure of that." Jenny winces, not just at this remark, for she is used to such remarks from him and from all the lovers she has had, but also at the pain between her legs, because their earlier lovemaking was rough and was carried out with little regard for her, he had simply climbed aboard and fucked her, a quick, dry, stinging fuck with no talk which left him flushed and annoyed and her a bit peckish. She had reached down and found on the ground the can of peaches in syrup, and later they had fucked again in much the same manner. For this is Peter's appeal to her, this is the appeal of all men to her: he takes what he wants and does not say please, and no matter how much he takes he is still famished, and he looks on the world as a thing that has been made a present to him, and he considers it a lowly present hardly worth accepting. She sighs and thinks of her own husbands, of which she has had a few, and

of which Peter knows nothing—this being the arrangement they struck, and though he violates this agreement, she doesn't want to, not yet, she doesn't want to be like Ms. Wolfe, who cries out in her sleep and grasps at the men who pass by her beach chair, no, that door is closed and she is at the moment happy for it—and thinks what a misbegotten thing her life has been, and that these men have been little more than cut gems upon which she has gazed with a wonder that would never return to her. But there is time to change! There is! She is young yet, she is beautiful, she can dismantle this machine of her desire! She looks over at Peter, her concern for him gone, for he seems sensible again—how quickly these boys knit—and leads him to the leopard cage. "Here kitty kitty!" she says to it. The leopard paces behind its bars, looking out, and she turns to Peter and recites a poem to him, a poem that she wrote when she was a girl and still did such things, and the poem is about just such a leopard as this, in just such a cage, looking out at two lovers on holiday, but its eyes cannot see past the bars for all its years held captive, except for once in a great while, when its eyes dilate, the world beyond the bars comes to it, and it can see for a moment these two lovers looking back, holding hands, speaking intensely about something in their strange tongue, and then its eyes pin once more, and the world vanishes, and this is a great tragedy, but also part of the beast's noble spirit, the reason we hold it in such esteem. "Who wrote that?" he asks, but now, she hears their names being called from the beach. "That fucking guy," says Peter, and she squeezes his arm and they turn from the leopard and withdraw. On the skiff once more, Peter holds his ring out over the water. "It was good at one point. But that was like in another life, or a dream. I can't remember it now. I should do it. I should just do it." She stays his hand. "No," she

says. “Keep this ring. There is time to remember. It may come back to you yet.” The boy walks up the deck and down it, offering out slickers, for the sea is rough and full of chop. Jenny takes two from him, and he smiles. He says to her, “Do not worry Miss Whale, I will not tell a soul.”

In Hell, you are encouraged to stargaze, for the night sky is full of stars, and a boy comes down the dune with telescopes, fancy, powerful telescopes with barrels as big around as artillery guns, and because of a weird chill tonight he has also brought alpaca blankets, and he slides one over Ms. Wolfe’s shoulders, and one over Mr. Danfee’s, who grumbles at it, for his whist partners are gone, and he is left alone beside Ms. Wolfe, who begins to speak, and Mr. Danfee puts his eye to the eyepiece, once the boy has put it together, and he looks into the sky, for there is one star that has been interesting him of late, and through the eyepiece it burns his eye to look at, for it is no star, but a planet entirely engulfed in flame. He will not speak to Ms. Wolfe, he simply will not. And yet a man cannot simply be a statue, he must speak, particularly if he a story to tell, and this is the story he would tell:

“I was once a young man in the city, and I had come there by train, fleeing my home, because I came from small minded people, whose minds seemed to shrink a little every day. And during this train journey the war broke out, and none of us had gotten news of it, so that when we reached the city, it was already afire, and the sky was full of smoke and the streets were full of people, and the police, themselves in a panic, clubbed everyone they saw and fought for their lives and in the end were shattered and run off. This fire burned for many days, and I took shelter in a kind of

bunker with strangers. And for a time we shared our food. But I had brought none, and the money, as you must remember—not to presume on your age, madam, but surely you remember these terrible times—instantly proved to be without value, and the shops had been looted, and when the food ran low, older boys than me said that I should get no share, since I had put nothing in. I resolved to go hungry. I thought that if I went without food and didn't complain, I would win their respect. But morning came, and still they withheld food from me. I thought of leaving the bunker. But when I looked around, I heard moans and the crackling of fire and the rush of heat and the gusts in my face of insects, which were fleeing the fires that burned the city level, and I trembled with fear. Again I went without food, and again in the morning they denied me food, and this time they cursed me and tried to run me off, for now no one had a full belly and all tempers were short. And that night, my hunger awoke me, and I looked over at the sleeping bodies, and oh, the thoughts I thought, after only two nights hungry, and had I only known the hardships to come, if I could meet that boy and tell him what was yet to come . . . And yet my stomach cried out, and I prayed to God, and I asked Him to put food before me, and that if He did this I would spend my life exalting Him, but that if He did not, then I would renounce Him and I would become the devil's scourge, and having made Him this proposition, I felt the pockets of my slumbering fellows, but they were empty. And I went away from that alley and into the street, and the fires had swept the streets clean, and there were bodies in the gutters, burned black, and yet there was one that moved among the ash, a young girl, and she reached out to me. She was in her death agony, and she reached out to me, for help . . . But what help could I give? Oh, oh . . . " Here, he turns to Ms. Wolfe. "Forgive me!"

he says. “I do forgive you, I do, my dear, my darling!” cries Ms. Wolfe, and they embrace. Now the boy returns. “Are you cold, Mr. Danfee? I can give you another blanket.” “I’m fine,” says Mr. Danfee. “Are you too close to the water? I can move you back.” “I’m far enough, thank you,” says Mr. Danfee. “But something obviously bothers you. What is on your mind? You can tell me. You can tell me anything.” But Mr. Danfee has put his eye to the eyepiece once more; his vision is full of fire.

In Hell, a boy—a young man, really—goes by canoe across the gulf. It is very late at night. This crossing is a dangerous one, because there are other tribes here, and they are at war with one another, and the war has grown so desperate that the belligerents no longer care if they kill the innocent with the guilty. And so this young man must wait for clouds to block out the star light, so that he may row in safety and peace. He cares nothing for this war, so long as it does not keep him from his work. He has family on an island across the gulf, and they have been waiting for just such a dark night to have a feast in his honor, for it was recently his birthday. Also—and this is a minor thing hardly worth mentioning, for he is not a man who tires of his work, of bringing this and that, of listening and never speaking. He would never, for example, take Dr. Rubalev by his shoulders and say to him, “Will you shut up? Will you for one moment shut up? Has it occurred to you that I too might have words burning in my mouth?”—it is one thing to be among kith and another to be among kin. He steers his canoe now this way and now that, cutting the water with an aluminum oar, and before he sights his home island, he casts a look behind him, and he can just see the island from which he departed, and he wishes to turn around, for there is certainly some small

thing yet undone—perhaps Ms. Wolfe is chill, or Master Gunny is in a mood, or perhaps a rat has got into a bungalow, some little thing that only he can see to—

But a man must draw a line! He cannot live entirely for others. He aims the bow of the boat at the island ahead, on which he was born and raised. Once there, he will beach his boat, and his mother and his father and his brothers and his sisters will come from the island interior naked, as demons are said to do, and they will kiss him on the lips and he will step from his clothes and leave them on the shore, and he will go with his family along beaten paths and they will ask him about his work and about the strangers with whom he now lives and he will say, “They are the chickens in my coop,” which in his mother tongue has a very certain meaning.

PENDRAGON

While my mother was between men, she took me to an open house. She did things like this. We followed the realtor through the rooms for a while before my mother sent me off. “Little girl!” pleaded the realtor, but I no longer answered to that call. When I heard my mother whistle, I returned to her side. The realtor extolled the extravagance of the master bedroom, which was indeed extravagant; it had a master porch and a master bathroom with little gold taps. My mother took me up in her arms and I whispered in her ear.

“The basement please!” my mother demanded. The realtor thanked everyone for coming and said he must make ready for the next tour. “The basement please,” said my mother when everyone had filed out. “Miss,” said the realtor. “Now look here,” said my mother. “I intend to buy this house. In fact I am prepared to begin arrangements on the spot, here and now. Perhaps you do not know a sale when you smell one. But I do, and I insist that you show me the basement at once.”

The realtor produced a ring of keys and led us to the basement door and opened the door, saying of the basement that there was an explanation of sorts for what we would see, and that no one could blame him for omitting this room from the open house. He was but a

junior rep after all, just making his bones, and he needed whatever sales he could get. Of course he had no intention of keeping this room from us! Or from anyone! No! No, no! No, the truth would have come out at its appointed time, as all truths ultimately must! Didn't we agree that a truth out of season did no one any good? All the while he obstructed our descent of the basement stair, so that he looked up at us, leaning on the bannister as if beseeching the mercy of a high judge. "Oh you darling boy," said my mother, petting his hair. And down we went, and there in the basement was not washer and dryer nor weevils and webs, but a giant hole!

After a look down and in, my mother told me to go upstairs and wait for her, which I did, and here is some of what I heard:

"And how do you mean to explain this?"

"I assure you, this house is entirely up to code. You won't find one red mark on the survey. In fact I implore you, hire your own inspectors. They will tell you just what I am telling you now; that, odd though this feature may be, it poses not one structural threat to the home itself. You will be so happy here."

"I expect I will. But where does it lead?"

"Ha ha. A ha. Now there is a question."

Now I became bored and went outside, and then my mother re-emerged, slipping her sunglasses over her eyes. The realtor stood at the screen door, waving, smiling, smoothing his hair to his scalp. There was some further controversy by telephone; my mother listened for a long time and then threatened to hire her own inspectors indeed, see if she didn't! This settled the matter. We moved in very soon after, and I asked my mother if should I keep out of the basement.

"Why should you keep out of the basement?" she said. "This is your home now. You may go wherever you wish. Eat breakfast in the bathtub. Pee into the kitchen sink. There are new rules now, and the new rules are that there are no rules. By all means, be in the basement."

And for a while I obeyed. But strange though the basement was, its appeal was only fleeting. If you held your face over the edge of that hole, you got a chilly breeze upward, stiff enough to hold your hair back. And if you breathed in through your nose, you got a soapy smell, like mashed earthworms after a rain, or just the rain itself. If you whistled into it, you heard your whistle echoing down, until there was nothing. But there wasn't much more to it than this.

"But aren't you worried that I'll fall in?" I said one night. I ate dinner, she drank wine.

"Do you plan to fall in?" she said. "Is that a thing you intend to do?"

I said that I didn't think so.

"Then I reject the question. In this house we shall do only what we mean to do!" She raised her glass. "Excelsior!" And I raised my own, and we touched their rims. That night she fell asleep on the couch with the TV on, snoring, and though I tried to move her to her own room, I couldn't. She was wont to do this lately.

Once or twice I asked her, where did it lead? The hole.

"To China," she said. "To an identical basement in China. And if you fall into the hole, you will become a part of that household, only you will walk on the ceiling. If you drop a penny, it will fall into the sky. Life is much more difficult there. You would be unhappy there. You are always dropping things. And if you went into that hole, you would

soon find yourself penniless. No, don't go." And another night, when the house—or something like it—was getting the better of her: "It leads straight to Hell. Hell has sprung a leak and it is right here under us." And another such night: "It leads nowhere. It is a pit with no bottom." She returned her head to her hand. Paperwork lay before her, perhaps taxes or bills. I couldn't see her eyes.

So it was nothing, the basement, and I put it out of my mind entirely. I thought not one thought about it. My mother was often out nights, and sometimes she came home delirious and hauled me up out of bed with an embrace around the neck, waltzing me through the rooms like a cornsilk doll. So I began to read my mother's books, which were very old, beginning with the oldest and working up—Malory! and Geoffrey of Monmouth! and the German fellow, and the Bristol fellow who had fits and spoke in divine verse!—I ran my finger over their gold-stitched names. I also got in the habit of only pretending to sleep, but really lying in the darkness, listening through the darkness for any sound of my mother, her footfalls on the porch, her key in the lock. If I had not developed this habit I would never have heard, one certain evening, what I heard, if I can be said to have heard it at all, which was neither footsteps, nor the sigh of the opening door. Yet I knew my mother was suddenly in the house as if by sorcery. The whole house was dark, and my hair stood up. I shut my book, which lay open on my chest. What if she was in some trouble? We were often in trouble. The world was full of danger for us. We were stolen down to the underworld by devils, or else our heads were cut off outright, or else we were burned on a pyre and our ashes got mixed into the dog's dinner, or else we were put up in high towers with just our spinning wheels, and often these places were defended by dragons and hellhounds and serpents with fangs of flowing poison. But what were serpents to Sigurd?

Did Sigurd not laugh at serpents? Were serpents not as worms to him, and did he not just kind of kick them aside with his mailed boot and snatch up Brünnhilde in his arms? I must master my fear, I said, and I must go into that darkness, and so I did, and there she was, my mother, in the basement, looking down, down . . . I touched her shoulder and she fell into my arms. “Oh Frankie,” she said. “Oh Frankie, I am so lonely, so very lonely. Will no one ever love me?”

“I love you,” I said. “I will love you forever.” And I embraced her. Later, when she had dried her eyes, she said to me, “That’s enough.”

In the end we moved out of that house. When we drove away, my mother looked back at it and spat out the window. “I must have been out of my mind!” she said, and away we went. I had a white streamer on a plastic pole, which I held out of the window into the breeze.

We were not very much longer for each other. There were other houses, one after another, and at a point I said, “Enough!” “So you are going,” said my mother. “Very good. You will get me your address so that I may send your things after you.” I said she needn’t bother; I had everything I would need here in this case. She removed the baking sheet from the oven and swept two chicken Kievs into the garbage. “I shall have no more need of eating, nor drinking,” she said. “Frankly it will be a relief.” There wasn’t much more to say. I promised to return one day. “Return to what?” she said. “I expect I shall be far away by then. You give me back my life, darling.” And she gave me a kiss on each cheek, which were somehow wet. When my things did come by mail, the return address hadn’t changed. “Ha!” I said. And yet I sat looking at it for a time.

And there were among those things you will never guess what; those very old

books that I had long ago gotten halfway through! “My word,” I said, holding one up to the boy, the Malory, which now wore a thick coat of dust that saddened me. “I read this when I was only a girl.” He took it from me. He was such a grabby one. “Did you like it very much?” he said. “Oh very much yes.” “Then I will read it,” he said. “I will read it and learn everything about it.” And indeed he must have read it, because soon he proposed and supplied me with a bridal gown of fine black lace and a hennin with black lappets, and up we went to a top floor condo in a highrise with many, many floors. This was all despair for me. “Oh it’s all wrong!” I said one evening, in the deep of our marriage. “Do you understand nothing?” I snatched the books from him—he was such a slow reader—and hid them away for good. Some time later I came upon him in the kitchen. I had come to apologize for some trifling disagreement. But before I could speak he turned to face me, and he took the blade of a little fruit knife with which he’d been paring peaches and with it he cut his own throat. His blood came down his chest in a great rush. And though much of this is now a blur—it was so long ago now!—I recall the most ghastly thing, that the slash on his throat writhed as he drew his breaths, and it was like a second mouth, toothless and mute . . . He didn’t die but he very well might have. When he was well, we divided our things. This left the matter of the condo, which he considered foregone. “It is a house of horrors to me now,” he said. This was a delicate thing; I protested and refused and exhorted him to be sensible. I said that it was a house of horrors to me as well, and I spoke sideways of “the accident,” so that he might at once remember it and forget it. But in fact I have been very happy here. The view is exquisite; the whole of the city lies at my feet, and it is a great dominion. I have remodeled every inch of this apartment over the years. If he had died where he had stood, and were his ghost to come into this room to haunt me, he

would be most bewildered.

And I am proud to say that I have not had the troubles with men my mother had. A man displeases me and poof! he is gone from my sight at once. If there is something he feels he must know, I point to this spot in the kitchen, where now stands an exquisite dishwasher, and say, "Would you believe that on this very spot I watched a man cut his own throat? He did it in my name and lived to tell the tale of it." Woe betide the man who enquires any further than this. We are so different, my mother and I. I look for her letters, but they don't come. "Good!" I say. "I am pleased when the dead stay dead."

But an age elapses and the sea gives up her dead, the furrows give up their dead, the shores and the gallows give up their dead, and a letter does eventually come, and the letter is very simple. I call her to verify its facts. "Oh I have been all over!" she says. "I have been to Crete and to Brittany and to the Barbary Coast." But she says her time is at hand. Her days as a shuttlecock are over, and frankly she is lonely for me. After our little talk I return to my book, and by chance the book is open to a certain engraving by the French fellow that I like, of the poor souls entering the Iron City. It is dusk in my room, because I have built for my bed a canopy of fine mesh, in order that here it shall always be dusk, gloaming, no matter the hour. I have packed a case to visit her. There it sits, the very case I packed when I first set out from home. I will pack this case once each week until my mother is dead.

I return, my mother is old, so old that the case falls from my hand, and my hand flies to my mouth, and I embrace her and lift her in my arms and she weighs nothing—nothing!—and when our valedictions are done, I whisper to her that I have kept my promise at last. "Barely," she says, and her voice is like the beating of a hummingbird's

heart.

For a time I amuse her with stories of my life, about which she knows nothing. “Yes yes,” she says, “but tell me about your boys and your men. It has been an age.” And I say, “What is to tell? There once were many and now there are few.” “Let us go back in our minds,” she says, “you and I. I am curious to know if you have done better than I did.” So I tell her about a certain young man from the building trade who was very anxious about his mind. He called himself an imbecile and wouldn’t hear otherwise. After making love, he once took an interest in the book I was reading and tried to peer at it over my shoulder. It happened to be a picture book, and he ran his finger up and down the length of a tower, which was being cut in two by a bolt of lightning, the top half tumbling into the surf. “Oh my dear boy,” I said. He was morose for a week, and then he said very carefully over dinner, “You think I am dumb.” “What!” I cried, stifling laughter. “You think I am dumb,” he said, “and that my being dumb makes me easy to govern. You ride over me roughshod. I am a laughing stock among my fellows.” “My darling, my darling, come here!” I embraced him, and soon he was asleep in my arms. But not long after, he broke in and knocked my walls in with a hammer. “You may outsmart me,” he roared, “but you will not outsmart this!” And he raised his hammer over his head, to brain me! “Indeed not!” I cried, and I stood, great with wrath, and he was powerless before me. “Be gone!” I said!

But of this next part, I say nothing to my mother: in the end it took two neighbors of mine to haul him out, and he howled down the cement stairwell, until his voice was like a demon’s, hooting up from Hell. This was an embarrassment. “Are you all right?” asked the neighbors upon returning. “I am perfectly well thank you.” “You don’t look all right.

You look kind of messed up. Here: let us help you." They began to pick up shards of the wall. "Be gone!" I said. "Be gone, all of you! Be gone and never return!" There are moments now, moments in the elevator, moments in the lobby . . . But a woman must always hold her head up; she must carry herself as if her mouth is full of blood. Of the young man and the fruit knife I also say nothing to my mother, who nods off while I talk. She looks at me with a little fire in her drooping eye. But talking wears her out, and so does listening. We have so little to say.

But! This reminds me of so much! For me, talking is like a river running through a lake, at once draining it and filling it up. I say, "What about that hole?" "What hole?" says my mother. "That hole in that basement of ours, with the breeze blowing up. What a strange thing! Whatever did the inspectors say about it?" "I don't remember any hole." Later she comes to her wits; the inspectors had never come to see the basement at all. That had been an idle threat. The talk drops between us like a felled partridge. I have been gone a long time, after all, and when I am with her, it is like we have only ever known each other by description.

A DEATH

Margaret and George were not in love; in fact they doubted the existence of love. She was an architect and he was a playwright. Some of their first conversations were about how many more cathedrals, how many more masterpieces of the theater there might be if architects and playwrights pursued their craft instead of love. They had no plans to marry, nor to have children; they considered marriage and children obstacles to easily avoid. Over the years, they began to succeed, at first slowly, and then quickly. Margaret applied for an apprenticeship with a famous, controversial architect. He accepted her. She would have to travel. A farce of George's sold to a major drama publisher, and a theater on the east coast commissioned a new play from him. He, too, would have to travel. Margaret and George spent the summer with each other, preparing themselves for their separation. They lived together in a spacious apartment with a view of the river, and they worked together in an office, he at his desk and she at her table. George wrote a new treatment, Margaret drafted fantastic new designs. Occasionally, one would look up at the other and feel a faint misgiving pass through them. All their lives, they had regarded the future with vague, impersonal hope, as if it were an obedient dog that would not come to them until they called it. Now, it was here. George imagined a room without Margaret's table. Margaret

imagined a house without the sound of George's typing. They were sad, and though they resolved never to voice their sadness, they each detected the sadness in the other. The summer was brilliant and warm. They did all their favorite things together. But a gloom had come over them and would not lift. Sometimes they hoped the hour of separation would never arrive, sometimes they hoped it would arrive at once. It arrived at its appointed moment. They parted without tears, hesitating only briefly, George at his car and Margaret in the doorway, each looking at the other with a regret that they conquered by waving goodbye and turning aside.

The theater supplied George with an apartment. Margaret went to live on the architect's estate. For a while, George was deeply disoriented. He looked at the treatment he had written over the summer and found it indecipherable. The play's humor seemed incongruous with the world as he now saw it, which was darkly and without hope. He started work on a new treatment that quickly developed into a four-act play. It was a tragedy, and it was full of death and profanity. He knew the theater might reject it, but it came out of him quickly and he refused to stanch it. Margaret, too, became listless and temperamental, and her designs, which had always drawn themselves without her influence, took on a bizarre aspect. She drew impossible, foreboding citadels with sharp spires and iron buttresses, or she drew houses raised on stilts in a crashing sea, or other things like this. The designs reflected a deep unrest of which she was only partially aware. They fascinated her, and though she feared that her mentor would find them absurd and would perhaps release her, she could not stop them coming out. Each night when she stood up from her drafting table, she felt the cold of the room, and of her life on the estate, enter

her. She would lie down in bed and fall asleep at once.

That winter, George submitted his play to the theater. A few days later, the director took him out to dinner. The director was a kind and gentle man. He expressed surprise at the play George had turned in. His voice was merry but his eyes showed strain.

"I didn't think you were of such a serious mien," said the director.

"Neither did I," said George.

"Do you suppose you'll keep on in this vein?" said the director. "The tragic, and not the comic?"

"With any luck," said George.

The director nodded, and they talked about other things. That weekend, George got a letter from the director; the theater had declined his play and would renege on his commission. The letter was apologetic and polite. It said that George could live out the month in the apartment, but then he would have to go. He read the letter with a sardonic humor and resolved to keep it forever. He felt it was the first piece of truly good fortune in his life. He began work on another new play that afternoon and worked blindly and without rest. It was finished by the following week. George sent the play out to agents and theaters. Some responded, others didn't. The respondents were curious, but their curiosity came to nothing. By the spring, George was broke and sick. He took a job teaching drama and composition at a small community college. The work was beneath him, and his students were unruly and disinterested. But their unruliness and boredom inflamed him and concentrated the value of his free time, which he devoted to his plays. His work was now byzantine and radical and impossible to stage, but the meanness of his circumstances made him certain that it was all the more worth writing. He produced three full plays that

spring, lost weight, and grew a beard. His sickness progressed. The thought of seeing a doctor never occurred to him. This sickness would pass, or it wouldn't. The term ended; he gave no grade higher than a B minus. He sent his new plays to agents and got only one response; it praised his industry and asked him not to submit again. He saved this letter too, hanging it beside the other above his work desk. If he fatigued while writing, or if he doubted himself, or if he looked up from his keyboard, perhaps expecting to see Margaret's drafting table across from him, he would behold these letters and renew himself to his purpose.

Then, unaccountably, George's grip on reality faltered. He would fall asleep sitting upright and awaken in strange places with no memory of himself. He wondered if he would die. The thought of this prospect hurried away from him as quickly as it had hurried toward him. One night, he found himself on a park bench. Many people passed him by. He looked at them. They were, he assumed, going about the wretched chores of their miserable lives, chores he had abjured long ago. He laughed. A few people turned at the sound of his laughter, which was wracking and creaky and induced him to cough. They dismissed him as mad and hurried along.

Among them, George saw a woman. She was just a streak of color in the corner of his eye, but he came to his feet and followed her. She walked with long strides. It strained him to keep up.

"Margaret!" he called. His voice was hoarse and weak. "Margaret!" Tears started into his eyes. A cold wind forced them down his cheeks. At a red light, he caught up with her. He took her by the arm and wheeled her around. It was Margaret all right, and she was just as she had been when he had seen her last, standing in the doorway of their apartment

building. He embraced her. He said her name over and over and admitted to her that he had been miserable without her; he had been wrong to leave her. He had been wrong to renounce love. He had come to worry that leaving her had sealed his doom. But now he had found her. He would never make such a mistake again as long as he lived.

A struggle broke his reverie. The woman liberated herself from his arms and shouted for the police. Passersby interceded and held George against a wall. They interviewed him but found him insensible. They asked the woman if she knew him. She said she didn't. A policeman arrived and took George aside. He saw at once that George was indigent. He asked the woman if she wanted George arrested. She shook her head no and hurried off. The policeman released George and left him sitting on a retaining wall that bounded a public park. The policeman said he would return in an hour, and that if George were still there, he would be arrested for vagrancy. When the policeman returned, George was gone. A snow had begun to fall.

Margaret's winter had gone differently. She waited for her designs to become practical but they refused. She designed a skyscraper built entirely of glass, and a graveyard full of elaborately carved crypts, each depicting an age of her life. One of the crypts bore several drawings of George, which she imagined in bas-relief. She rarely left the estate, and when she did, she regarded the nearby city's modest skyscrapers and libraries and schoolhouses as the ersatz furnishings of a zoo enclosure. When she slept, she dreamed of new designs, and she awoke in a hurry to set them down before they vanished from her mind. Her mentor assured her that she could take as much time as she needed, but she detected an impatience growing in him. He would pause before leaving a room she was in; his valedictions were colder and less certain of her. She knew that time was short;

either her work must change or her relationship with him must vault its professional bounds and afford her time to come to her senses. One night she looked on her designs with an unfeeling eye, perhaps to see some sense in them. On the contrary; they seemed more outlandish than ever. They embarrassed her, but they also moved her. Looking at them, she felt a kinship with their draftsman, whoever she might be. She could never show these designs. It would be her professional death. Margaret began eating dinners with her mentor at an enormous oak table in his kitchen. He was a polite, severe dinner partner. He ate in small bites and struggled to make conversation. If she asked about him, he looked at his plate and gave perfunctory, unrevealing answers.

One night over dinner, her mentor inquired about her designs. She said nothing. They finished dinner in silence, and when he stood to clear the plates, she embraced him around the neck and kissed him on the mouth. Thus began their love affair. He was older than she, but she told herself that he was still handsome. He was certainly brilliant. The affair progressed quickly and soon became intimate. She discovered that he was like two men who could not stand to be in the same room with each other. By day, he was cordial and awkward and doting. In bed, he was sadistic and abusive. He beat her and degraded her. Sometimes this aroused him, and sometimes it didn't. Margaret returned to her room every night feeling empty and flat, such as she had never felt in her life. By and by, she regarded her body as a meaningless thing and the misfortunes that befell it meaningless in kind. Her designs became stranger. The weeks became months. Her mentor begged to see her work. His pleas were desperate and personal. Whenever he begged her this way, she seduced him to bed. By the lowest days of winter, he had unraveled. He was moody and sullen and confused. The mystery of her was driving him mad. Over dinner one evening in

spring, he got drunk.

"Who are you?" he said. "My pupil or my lover?"

"Can't I be both?" Margaret said.

"Perhaps you can," he said, refilling his glass. "Right now, you are neither." He ran his finger around the rim of his glass. Then he said, as if under duress, "I love you."

Margaret opened her mouth but could not answer this declaration. Her mentor nodded, drained his glass in one swallow, and said, "I demand that you show me your designs at once. I pay you to do them. They are not yours to hide from me. Give them to me now." He was neither angry nor sad.

She went to her room and took up a handful of her designs. She turned through the pages. Tears came to her eyes. Who had done these magnificent drawings? She had always thought herself clever and strong-minded, but never ingenious or brilliant. These drawings defied her; they were alien and bizarre and redolent of a will within her that she could not see by any other means.

Her mentor came to the bedroom door. She turned to him.

"You would take these from me?" she said.

"They are mine," he said, "not yours."

"Will you keep them?" she said.

"I will do whatever I please with them," he said.

In a swift motion, she tore the stack of pages in half, and then in half again. He crossed the room and grabbed at the bits of paper. Margaret screamed and struck him across the face. The melee was brief. When it was over, Margaret had destroyed some half of these designs. The rest he took away. She lay on the bed. She did not sob or tremble, but

tears ran from her eyes as if under their own power. The night passed, and in the morning she packed her things and bought a train ticket east. The trip took two days, during which she hardly moved. She didn't eat. She looked out the window at the changing scenery—now oak forest, now bald hills, now wetland—without feeling. She reached the coast and went at once to a theater and asked to see the director. The director met her in the lobby. When he saw her, he gave a small start, and he spoke to her gently, as though he were afraid of upsetting her. She asked after George. The director nodded warily and said that the commission had fallen through and that, the last he knew, George was teaching at a local college. Margaret inquired after George at the college, but they told her that he had taught a single term of classes and left. They referred her to a bookstore, and the bookstore referred her to a bar, and the bar said that he had been fired, and good riddance. Where was he now? Who knew. Who cared. She found an apartment in the city and got a job in a grubby bistro serving tables. She left her address unlisted. She imagined letters from old friends and colleagues roving the country, searching for her in vain. She sent her mentor only one letter, instructing him to throw out any mail that came for her and to do as he wished with the things she had left behind. She worked with an automaton's diligence. Her mind rioted with ideas and visions, but she refused to set them down, and in any case she had not brought her drafting things with her. She dreamed of these designs as she always had, but as the days went by and the designs found no escape from her mind into the world, she dreamed less and less vividly. When awake, her mind felt less crowded. By the start of autumn, it was empty. She awoke one morning to an inner stillness such as she had never felt before. She felt sadness and relief, and she considered that another age of her life, perhaps the penultimate age, had ended, and a new age, the final age, had begun.

She met men and had affairs. Some of the affairs verged on love, she thought, but never quite. She tried to give herself up to them completely, but she had little left to give. She had nothing to say in conversation, and invariably, her lovers got bored and left her, offering her their regrets that it couldn't work out. The supply of lovers diminished, which bothered her only a little. She had come to regard romance as bothersome. Her newfound solitude suited her. Every so often, a strange will sometimes possessed her, and she would attend a play alone and find herself overwhelmed by sorrow, even if the play were a comedy. She would watch the players and, whatever the topic, imagine that they acted out scenes from her own life, or a life such as hers might have been had it taken a different course. This always saddened her, but she emerged from these plays happy to have induced this sadness and certain that some cinder of herself still glowed among her ashes.

Then, an epidemic struck the city. It began on an evening in spring, and by the following morning, the city was in ruin. The disease presented as a tropical fever, and it progressed so quickly that many died in their beds before they could call for help. The governor issued a quarantine. Marines arrived to enforce it. Martial law was declared. On the second night of the epidemic, the streets were empty, save for policemen and soldiers. Margaret occasionally heard marching in the streets or the wail of an ambulance siren. Besides this, the city was silent. People waited in their houses and their apartments to see whether they would fall ill and die. Margaret watched the city from her apartment window with fascination. The skyscrapers were empty. The streets were empty. The traffic lights changed over but there was no traffic. The radio gave bulletins, which were graver each day; the disease had swept west, sparing only remote towns and villages. Doctors and hospitals stood by, dumbfounded; they could provide palliative care and then watch and

wait, like everyone else. Margaret heard this news indifferently; it concerned the world of flesh, about which she no longer cared. One day, the radio read aloud the names of the confirmed dead. She listened with a terror that she would hear George's name. Besides this moment of terror, she felt nothing.

On the fifth day of the quarantine, Margaret got sick. She awoke in a cold sweat. She tried to sit up but the pain in her joints, in particular her neck, pressed her back into her bed. From the reports on the radio, she knew what lay ahead. Her fever would escalate, impervious to medicine and rest, until she would begin to hallucinate, and then fall into a fugue, and then either die, or live. She estimated that she had perhaps a few hours more of sound-mindedness. She lifted herself from the bed and decided that she first would clean her apartment, and then she would write a letter, and then she would lie down again and sleep a while. She kept an orderly apartment, but there were still books to return to their shelves and plates to return to their cupboards and fingernail parings to put in the trash. Margaret felt bright, as if she were a small lighted room in a house that was going dark.

When the apartment was clean, she sat down to write the letter, but the pen fell from her hand and she could not hold up her head. She told herself that she would sleep a moment and finish the letter when she awoke. She rose to return to bed but knew at once that she would not accomplish the journey. It was some ten or fifteen yards, and she had strength for only a few steps. She lay down on the floor and shut her eyes. She fell asleep and dreamed, and in the dream, she was a young woman. She was in the office she had once shared with George, her first true love. It was a summer afternoon, and the office was full of light. A fern they had bought together had overgrown its pot; its fronds harassed her at her drafting table. She lifted her head and looked at George, who sat at his desk, writing

a new play. He was a mystery to her, and she to him, but his work was simple and funny. Soon, they would make a plain dinner and eat it and talk of trivial things, and he would become an ordinary stranger whose value to her she could not understand. But now, looking at his back as he set down words that she might someday read, or might someday not, she felt that she understood him a little, and thereby understood herself. She opened her mouth to speak, but it was the sort of dream where one tries to speak and finds she cannot. So she turned back to her drafting board.

Margaret did not die, but lay under a curse of sleep for two days, during which time the epidemic ended. As quickly as it had come, the disease departed the city; the governor lifted the quarantine and the marines returned to their bases in the countryside. Now, firemen and policemen and civilian volunteers began the work of checking houses and apartments for the sick and the dead. They found more of the latter than of the former, and many of the sick they dared not move, for they were in their death agonies and would not survive being touched. Thus the rescuers had the privilege of seeing the states of people who, by the disposition of this disease, had been granted a window of time in which to prepare themselves for death. Some of these scenes were ghastly and craven. But others were poignant; the dead had written letters and drawn simple pictures of nearby flowers, or had turned onto their sides, as if to sleep more comfortably. They found Margaret on her floor with her hands at her breast. A fireman took her in his arms. She weighed very little. Her clothing may once have fit her well, but she had shrunk within it and it hung loosely from her frame. He carried her gently, taking the stairs one at a time so as not to wake her. Yet she woke and looked at him.

"George!" she said. "You've come!" She put her arm around the fireman's neck

and pressed her lips against his cheek. The force of her kiss made him dizzy. He took her into the street and laid her on a cot. She fell back asleep, though with a little smile. After a time, a doctor asked the fireman if he knew the woman. He did not know how to answer. Nurses wheeled her away, and the fireman returned to Margaret's building. As had been the case in every other building, most of its occupants were dead. He worked as if in a swoon of love. That night, he thought not of the bodies he had discovered, nor of the sick who had died before his eyes and in his arms, but of the kiss from the starved woman who, he knew, would live. In time, his life took up an ordinary course. He lived in the firehouse and, when called, rushed to a scene of peril with no thought for himself. But his life did not feel ordinary. It felt sad where it once had not, and he went on, full of thoughts and wonderings about the woman he had saved.

Within a year, it was as if the epidemic had never struck. Margaret recovered in a hospital, where doctors drew her blood in an effort to determine the nature of this disease, should it ever return. Upon her release, she went back to her apartment and saw the letter she had begun. She had gotten no further than the valediction, which read, "My dearest George." She sat at the table looking at it, wondering what the body of the letter might have disclosed had sickness not interceded when it did.

In time, she met a man and married. He was kind and quiet. He wanted a child, and for a time they tried to conceive. Then, a doctor told them that the disease had rendered Margaret infertile. Her husband took this news quietly. He also had come near death during the epidemic. He had not expected to live, and so the dream of being a father died in him peacefully, as had many of his other dreams. Margaret was a mystery to him, a mystery he was only occasionally tempted to plumb. They had set a room of their house

aside as a nursery, which she now converted into an office. It had a desk for drawing and writing, and she decorated it with potted plants. She inhabited this room for hours at a time. Sometimes, her husband passed this door and halted. If he threw open this door, what would he see? But he was a gentle, intuitive man. In his youth, perhaps he would have acted. But now, he felt that secrets were for their masters to keep. He could live his life without indulging this curiosity, and so he did.

One day the paper carried the obituary of a famous, controversial architect. The obituary made no impact on Margaret's husband, but Margaret read it with obvious sorrow.

"What is it?" asked her husband.

She told him the story of her affair with the architect. This telling was summary and dispassionate, but it brought her close to other topics on which her words deserted her. She sat in silence, the story, by her reckoning, only half told. Her husband—so kind, so patient, so gracious, such a good, humane keeper—looked at her. She could not return his gaze. Would he ask her to go on? A door separated them. Would he open it?

He would not.

At the one-year commemoration of the end of the epidemic, a memorial went up. Margaret and her husband visited it but laid no wreaths or bouquets as others did. They looked at the monument with puzzlement. The monument was a bronze depicting a nurse and a patient, both looking skyward with courage and alarm. Margaret and her husband agreed that those events felt long past, and that their lives before it were like stories they had heard secondhand. The memorial included the names of the dead. Margaret looked for George's name. It was absent. Perhaps he had died; perhaps he

had disappeared. Her husband called her name, and she came. That evening, she did a drawing of a potted primrose with which she had decorated her office. The drawing was very detailed and faithful to its subject.

PORTCULLIS

Benjamin Pale came from a small Kansas town called Wheatear. Wheatear was a town of no distinction, except that it had once suffered a bizarre tragedy. One autumn, the summer warmth refused to break, and the little children of Wheatear were still going about in shorts and bare feet in November. They departed one morning to the schoolhouse, which sat up a hill from Wheatear, a walk of perhaps two miles. By midday, the weather showed no sign that it would change, and when a thunderhead appeared in the western sky, the folk of Wheatear shut their windows and their doors, as if for a spring rain. After the final lesson, the children departed the schoolhouse and descended the hill. A few minutes after their departure, the year's first winter storm struck Wheatear like the blow of a hammer. The snow fell all at once, and the wind was so strong that drifts of snow blew up as high as the windowsills. By the time the folk of Wheatear could retrieve their boots and coats from the cellars and closets, the storm had passed. All around them lay a sea of new-fallen snow, waist deep and blown smooth by the wind. There was no sign at all of their children. The folk climbed the hill to the schoolhouse, hoping to find their children within. They found only the schoolmaster, absorbed in a book. The storm had been so sudden and so quiet that the schoolmaster had taken no notice of it. The folk demanded to know where

the children had gone. The schoolmaster said that he had released them only a little while ago. When he saw the folk covered in snow and chattering with cold, and saw the white of the Earth behind them, he fainted.

From the top of the hill, the folk looked all around. At first they saw nothing. Then, they saw a small field of moguls a ways down the hill and afield of Wheatear. They went to the moguls and tore through the snow with their bare hands. Each mogul was a child, snowed over and frozen. In the storm, they had become disoriented and had strayed from the path to Wheatear. Their summer caps were still on their heads. Many were barefoot. Their eyes and their mouths were halted in expressions of mild surprise. Their hands and their pockets were full of snow.

The folk withdrew in agony and returned home. They wailed into the night, and the little bodies lay on the hillside until morning, when shame brought the folk of Wheatear outdoors again, to collect them. The bodies were buried singly, which required that the fence that bounded the Wheatear cemetery be moved out to make room for the graves. Their souls were commended en masse in a single funeral, at which all their names were read aloud and honored with a ring of the church bell; the pastor decided it best for the grief to come from him in one blow, just as the storm had done from Heaven.

Some years later, anarchists assassinated the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand. The following summer, the *Lusitania* was sunk, and history called upon Wheatear to give what it could to the war abroad. Wheatear gave barley and rubber and tin and bought war bonds, but what the War Department needed was sons of fighting age, of which Wheatear had none. It had only babies and toddlers, who had been born into grieving families. For these families, the war was a distant thing and the winter storm of many years ago still an

emergency. When the war ended, Wheatear took no pleasure in the peace, considering it a temporary thing, as had been that unseasonably long autumn. Nor did Wheatear take a share of the national prosperity, to which it felt no claim. The mood of grim triumph and celebration and relief passed Wheatear by; Wheatear pulled its grief back over itself like a quilt it had kicked off in the night.

Benjamin Pale had been born into such a grieving Wheatear family. He had left Wheatear as soon as he was able and had come at once to Kansas City, where he enrolled in the medical college, got his degree, completed his residency, married his undergraduate sweetheart, joined a practice as a pediatrician, ascended through the practice, took the practice over, prospered, and grew old. Now, he was an old man, old enough that he thought his hardships were behind him, but not so old that he didn't look forward to his future. Of Wheatear, he thought nothing at all. He had never returned. Of his youth, he also thought nothing at all, but though the two things were separate, they mixed in his memory and became strangely synonymous. In any case, he had survived them both, just as he had survived the few disturbances that had come into his adult life. There had been another world war, and there had been the untimely prospect of having children with his wife. These had approached and approached and then passed over him, like clouds. Now, the sky above him was open.

One afternoon, Benjamin came home from the office early and found his wife at the kitchen table, looking out the window with the telephone beside her.

"What is it?" Benjamin asked.

She faced him. Her cheeks were wet. Her eyes were pink from crying. "It's silly," she said, smiling and wiping her cheeks. "It's nothing."

She did not divulge until dinner. “It *is* silly,” she said. “I got a phone call. Do you remember Peter?” She said Peter’s last name, and it immediately departed Benjamin’s mind.

“I’m sorry, no, I don’t think I do, no,” said Benjamin when she had described him. She insisted that he did. Apparently, they both had known Peter in college.

“Well, he’s died,” said Benjamin’s wife. “His wife called.” She was frustrated with him, but there was little he could do for that. If he didn’t remember the man, he didn’t remember the man.

Her grief was real. She cried while she did the dinner dishes, and Benjamin took the telephone into another room and made reservations at a restaurant she loved. He said nothing of the reservations as they lay in bed that night. Though she breathed slowly, as if asleep, he knew she was awake, thinking of this Peter.

“I didn’t know you were so close with Peter,” said Benjamin.

“You’ve remembered him?” she said.

“No,” he said.

“I’m not,” she said. “I wasn’t.” She began to cry a little more. Then, she fell asleep.

Benjamin didn’t share her grief. He hardly remembered this man, although, lying awake, he supposed he did remember something; there had been a Peter, he guessed. Benjamin thought he could even recall the man’s face and his physique, but nothing in sharp focus. Benjamin could not rescue this man from the dark of his memory; either the man didn’t want to come forward or Benjamin didn’t care enough to pursue him. Benjamin turned from one side to the other and slept fitfully. At breakfast the next morning, his wife said nothing of Peter, except to tell Benjamin about the funeral

arrangements. Then, with the occasional silences that had come to fall between them in idle chat over the years, she talked of her plans for the day, the errands she would run to a seamstress and to a nursery for tomato seeds, the room of the house she would re-arrange that evening. Benjamin found himself unusually absorbed by her talk. These remarks had nothing at all to do with Peter, and yet, to Benjamin, there seemed to be some part of Peter in them; some shadow of his life, and his death, of which Benjamin knew nothing, had fallen over his wife.

Benjamin worked that day with distraction, stifling his temper. After his last appointment, he stayed late. He fell into a conversation with a younger doctor, a man named Edmund Herring. The topic of the conversation was trivial. But during this conversation, which lasted scarcely more than five minutes and was a conversation in passing, it occurred to Benjamin that he would one day retire and be obliged to hand the practice over to Edmund. On his drive home, he recalled nothing of the conversation, though it must have interested him at the time. He remembered only the sudden nearness to him of his own retirement, and of being usurped by Edmund, and that in a fit of distress he had cut the conversation off abruptly, perhaps rudely. At dinner, his wife made no mention of Peter, and Benjamin made no mention of anything, really. They ate, they watched television, they retired to bed, they lay down, just as they had done every night for almost fifty years. And yet nothing about this night was anything like those other nights. Benjamin lay awake again, furious, frightened, unsure if his wife was also awake, or if she slept. In the darkness, he saw the shapes of his furniture, in particular his raincoat on a hook, the familiar shapes of his life, if his life now had any. And yet in the darkness, they might be anything. He watched a small square of moonlight passing across the

bedspread. It gave him comfort, even as it drew the room's shadow across him.

The funeral was on the following Saturday; his wife wore white. Benjamin approached the casket. An old man lay within it. Benjamin supposed he knew the man. But then, it had been so long. This man could be any man. Peter's wife came and visited. She was of an age with Benjamin's wife, and she alternately cried and laughed as she recounted the facts of Peter's recent life. Benjamin was eager to have the funeral behind him; by chance, the dinner reservations were for that night. He still had said nothing of them, and he had hope that the surprise would dispel the gloom that had come over his wife. They drove home in silence. Benjamin turned the radio on and tried to talk to her a little, but she gave only perfunctory answers and asked him to turn the radio down a bit, or off. At home, he told her of the dinner reservations. She nodded, went upstairs, and returned to the stairhead in a black dress.

The restaurant had once been a fine French restaurant. He and his wife had celebrated many moments of good fortune there, and, though they had not been in many years, it had remained in his mind an oasis. It was on a boardwalk with a view of the river. He drove toward these memories of his; he remembered especially that each table was lit by a candle poured into an old wine cask, and that waiters appeared from shadow with dishes and then vanished into shadow, like phantoms. The sight of the restaurant as they arrived in its parking lot shocked him. The windows were now chased with red neon. The restaurant's name was spelled out in flickering lights, some of which had burned out. The candles on the tables had been replaced by orange electric bulbs designed to mimic candlelight, and they burned too brightly to conceal how worn the carpet was, how the wallpaper peeled, and how young and green their waiter was. The restaurant was crowded,

and the clientele was loud and rough. Benjamin felt that he and his wife were overdressed. Halfway through their meal, his wife set down her fork and began to talk fondly about the funeral. It had been a lovely service, she said. It had gotten her thinking about her own life. That was what funerals were good for, she supposed. They were for the living, not the dead. Anyway, she would make some changes. Benjamin listened past this talk, and then threw his napkin down atop his plate.

"I don't want to talk about Peter," said Benjamin. "I didn't even know him. If I knew him, I didn't care about him. No more talk about Peter. I want us to have a good time."

He had the plates taken away and ordered wine and told the waiter they would take it out on the boardwalk. But once there, he had nothing to say. He could think only of Peter, and also of Edmund Herring.

"Forget it," said Benjamin. "Forget I tried." He was a little drunk, though he had only a little wine, perhaps two glasses.

That night in bed, he turned to his wife. They lay beside each other. He was desperate to speak to her. He had much on his mind, but she was asleep.

Time passed. The funeral fell behind them. It seemed to no longer operate on his wife, nor on him. That winter, his usual fatigue came over him. But it didn't lift in the spring as it usually did. He saw a doctor for it, and the doctor urged him to take walks.

"Weak tea," said Benjamin to the doctor, whose youth disgusted him.

All spring, the fatigue advanced on him. It occurred to Benjamin that he might die of it. He was of two minds about this: sometimes he thought as a doctor, who knows that death is always near, and sometimes he thought as a man, who thinks that death is a

misfortune that befalls other lives. He was a man by birth, but he was a doctor by trade, and he could ignore this better sense for only so long. He could only sometimes, with great effort, forget that his sense of his life was now yoked to his sense of death; he could not think of one without thinking of the other. Only with great concentration could he ignore the lengthening shadows cast by ordinary things, from which he had averted his eyes all his life. His wife was younger than him by ten years; she was still agile and beautiful. And yet he now saw a shadow that fell behind her; the shadow was decline and death, in which he had preceded her. When he was beside her, he appreciated the warmth of her hand less and less, and thought more and more of the hour when death would take one of them and leave the other. He slept only lightly, so that his dreams mixed with the dark of the room and he could not tell one from the other. In this state, he felt dark figures surrounding his bed, as if keeping him company. Among them were certain personages he recognized, of whom he had not thought in years. When he was still a resident, polio had broken out. What an awful disease. Benjamin had never seen such suffering, nor had he ever felt so powerless, so dwarfed by so great an enemy. Healthy children had fallen dead before his eyes. They visited him now. There were also the little children of Wheatear in their shorts and caps and unshod feet. Among them was his brother, who had died in the Wheatear snowstorm and whom Benjamin had never met. He appeared to Benjamin as a handsome young boy, just as Benjamin had seen him in the photographs his mother and father had kept above the fireplace. His fatigue continued its advance, and it weakened his ability to fend off these figments, which came to rule his thoughts day and night. He would resist this fatigue, by God, and reverse it! And yet, he made little concessions to it; he took fewer appointments, he read fewer books, he went to bed earlier and got out of bed later, always

to the feeling that he had only lightly dozed, and yet had dreamed.

One morning in summer, over a breakfast of salted grapefruit halves, his wife suggested that he retire.

"It would give us time to live," she said. "Think of the things we could do." She talked about Europe in particular. Benjamin could see that she had given this a lot of private thought.

Benjamin revolted at it all.

"'Time to live,'" he said bitterly.

He shamed her for mentioning his retirement and went to the office with a show of great energy, slamming the door behind him. He was cheery with his patients, and he was cheery with Edmund, so cheery that Edmund regarded Benjamin with open alarm.

That night, he saw his wife through the kitchen door. He had come there perhaps to say something to her, perhaps just to see her; upon sight of her, he lost all memory of his mission. She had dropped a teacup. She was sweeping its shards into a pan. The following afternoon, he came to Edmund's office on some minor business. He saw the younger doctor in a moment of repose. His back was to Benjamin, and he was studying a patient's chart, making small sounds of contemplation to himself. "Mm. Hm."

A sadness overtook Benjamin and lasted into the night. Awake in bed, he looked into the darkness. He saw dimly the shape of his bureau.

"Very well," he said. He said it to himself, in address of many things at once. The next morning, he took his wife's hand as she stood from the breakfast table, at which they were once again eating salted grapefruit.

"What?" she said. Benjamin could not exactly say what.

That day, he announced his retirement to Edmund. Edmund barked in disbelief and asked Benjamin how well he'd thought it through. Benjamin said he had thought it all through; the practice would go to Edmund, if he wanted it. Edmund accepted. They made arrangements.

Over the next weeks, word of Benjamin's retirement got around, and old patients came to see him and thank him. They owed their lives to him, they said, and the lives of their children.

"Nonsense," said Benjamin.

"How can we ever repay you?" they said in their ways.

"Live well," he said.

He said goodbye to them, and they to him, and their goodbyes were casual and glad, as if they were goodbyes only for the moment.

There was a little party in the office. Old colleagues of Benjamin's came, men with whom he had been a resident, and of course the office staff, the secretaries and nurses and doctors Benjamin had brought on over the years. Edmund brought champagne, and though Benjamin drank it sparingly, it went immediately to his head. Benjamin was a quiet, contemplative drunk. He sat by and watched his wife field his well-wishers. The champagne conferred upon the scene a radiance that flattered his wife to him, and yet saddened him, too. She smiled and laughed; she strode about and chatted.

Soon, Edmund called on Benjamin to make a speech. Benjamin had rehearsed what he would say. He had even written himself little notes. He began the speech as planned. But then he departed from it, almost without meaning to, and found himself speaking extemporaneously, generally, of his departure from Wheatear. No one knew anything

about this part of his life, nor of Wheatear, nor of the winter storm by which Benjamin had known his hometown. He wanted to tell everything, but soon he lost his purpose, which had only a moment ago shined to him like a sea beacon. He sat to the sound of light applause, and music began to play.

That night, he got sick. “The champagne,” he said when he was done retching.

This had been a Friday. Benjamin spent Saturday and Sunday in bed. His wife flitted about the house, and on Monday, when he seemed a little better, she confessed to him a plan she had long hatched in secret; they would go to Italy and walk a part of the Via Francigena. She showed him the literature she had collected and told him the history of this pilgrimage.

He knew that he would not go with her, that his fatigue had become a mortal thing. Yet he saw that his wife was awakened to a new age of her life, for which she had waited many years beside him in patience and loyalty. So he humored her; he bought two air tickets to northern Italy and made arrangements with a hostel in Lombardy, at the very top of the Italian leg of the Francigena. He found a company that did group tours and reserved two spots. He accompanied his wife on shopping excursions to buy fashionable luggage, a camera, Italian phrasebooks, and other things like this. On these outings, she chattered like a sparrow, and he learned things about her that he had never known, or that he had known and forgotten. On one such outing, she made reference to Peter, and of her long-ago affair with him, before she had met Benjamin.

“I had no idea,” Benjamin said.

“You did,” she said, “you’ve just forgotten.”

His mind followed hers. Then, when he was in bed awake, it went its own way and

followed her remarks elsewhere. He recalled, among other things, that she had been a literary scholar of promise when they had met, and that she had given up her graduate work to marry him.

Soon, he excused himself from these outings on the pretense that she should have a little pleasure of her own, without him. One afternoon, when their departure was near and his wife was away, he called the airline and cancelled his ticket. He called the hostel in Lombardy and said that there would be only one guest after all. Still, he waited a few days more to break the news to her.

"I'm sorry, my darling," he said one morning, "but I'm just not quite myself yet. This fatigue. I'll be terrible company. I'll slow you down and ruin your good time with my complaining. You must go. Go and come back and tell me everything about it."

She argued with him and threatened to stay and nurse him. He dismissed this and told her that it was too late to cancel her ticket and her reservation and her place on the walking tour. But her mirth was gone, and Benjamin knew that his campaign to spare her undue sorrow had failed. She looked at him with fear, and to him, it was something like the fear with which he had once gazed on Peter's corpse. When he reminded her of the adventure she was about to have, she smiled at him, falsely, to send his mind at ease.

"I don't want to go," she said when the trip was very near. "Not without you."

"You must," he said.

"I won't," she said.

Yet she did go, and she returned, tanned, her hair, which was only a little gray, lightened by the sun. He reviewed her photographs with pleasure, and listened to her account of the walk as much as he was able, for he had begun to come and go. His health

had approached collapse while she was gone. Once or twice, he had thought his death was near, and for that he was thankful; he did not want to subject his wife to a long ordeal.

In fact, his death was still some ways off. His decline was not abrupt, but long and gradual, and he made it as one who descends a stair in darkness, sure that each step is the final step and that the stair will soon reach its landing. One night, he coughed up blood. His wife dialed the paramedics. While in the hospital, they received his diagnosis, which was now terminal. Perhaps there had once been treatments that could have reversed his condition, or at least forestalled it. But not anymore. The hospital kept him two nights and returned him home.

"Forgive me," he said one night.

"For what?" she said, though he saw on her face that she understood him perfectly.

He began to slip away more often, and more deeply. His experience of this was rather like being etherized, which he had been once, as an undergraduate, to have his wisdom teeth out. During that procedure, he had talked aloud, and so he did now. But only some of this speech was waking speech; dozes stole him away, so that little of what he said was intelligible to his wife, who kept watch at his bedside. One night, he emerged from this state and knew that the moment of his death was at hand. He looked at her, and then out the window. It was winter; a light snow drifted beyond the windowpane. He became possessed of a need to apologize to her. But for what? For not having given her children; for the life he had taken away from her without meaning to, and for the life he would soon give her in return; for having come out of Wheatear and into the world, like a storm into a sunny afternoon. Other small moments of unkindness occurred to him.

"Go," he said. "Go."

But she was accustomed to him saying things like this in his sleep, and she stayed. Benjamin closed his eyes.

He spent his last days asleep. During his sleep, scenes from Wheatear visited him, often of the departure of the children from the schoolhouse, just before the storm had struck, and also of the schoolmaster removing from his desk a leather-bound book and beginning to read. A clamor would soon rouse him; he would set down his finger to mark his place, as if to soon resume his reading.

Benjamin was also visited more than once by a small moment from his recent past, which had been of little importance to him at the time. It was the night before his wife's departure for Italy. He watched her pack the case they had bought together. She packed it slowly and carefully, laying into it first her underwear and her brassieres and her slips, and then her trousers and her blouses, which he had seen her wear every day of their marriage.

Then she laid in it two articles that he had never seen before. He did not know how they had come into her life. The first was a golden sunhat with an enormous brim. The second was a black bathing suit, covered in white dots. She closed the trunk over them and fastened it.

Then, some little thing occurred to her; some item that needed retrieving from another room, some little arrangement she might make for his comfort and safety while she was away.

"Oh!" she said, and she went to the door.

Benjamin called her name. Upon hearing her name in his own ear, he realized that it had been a very long time since he had spoken it aloud, that it had become a mislaid thing in his life. She turned and faced him, and for a moment he held her gaze.

He had come into this habit of late, of taking her measure before a trivial departure from the house, or even from the room, for they were now of an age where any departure, no matter how brief, might be final.

WRATH (excerpt)

Emily Chalk was born in a small, unhappy town called Tinwire. When she was still a baby, some ordinary strife came between her mother and her father. After some resistance to it, they agreed that the strife, though ordinary, was impossible to reconcile; perhaps later, but not now. Emily's father left her mother with a promise to return. Some time after, they formally divorced. The feud over alimony went in her mother's favor, but the struggle exhausted her. For the first years of Emily's life, Emily sensed the absence of her father and the gloom of the house by instinct, the way an animal might, seeing only its general shapes; the way her mother wore her hair in a long flat tail that she refused to cut, the streaks of gray within it that lengthened over the years like new canals, the sound of her stride from one room to another, light and slow and barefoot.

Then, Emily awakened into her life. This awakening took place on a dreary afternoon in autumn. She was in her bedroom, diagraming sentences in a workbook. She lifted her head from her workbook in a jerk, as if harkened by a cathedral bell, and turned her eyes to her bedroom window, which gave her a view of Tinwire; of its low, flat buildings, none above four stories, some built of brick but most built of concrete, some with peaked roofs but most with flat roofs; of an unhilled, treeless pasture beyond; of

prevailing flatness, matched only by the flatness of the sky above, which was full of gray cloud and with which the land of Tinewire converged in the far-away distance. A single freight truck went up a narrow road lined by ditches; besides this, the street, and all of Tinwire that she could see, was empty. She looked back down at her workbook. A sentence awaited her: "A gallant-looking Frenchman, in a blue overcoat, capless, and with a frowning red face, had been defending himself against the hussars." The sentence had seemed simple and meaningless only a moment ago. But now, it seemed urgent and real, and the work of diagraming it filled her with sorrow; the sentence seemed a living thing, and by dividing it into its nouns and verbs, she would kill it. The sorrow filled her up, and at once a sequence of certainties came to her; that her father was gone for good; that Tinwire was no longer a happy place, if it had ever been; that she was already of a height with her mother, and that her mother's spirit, which was laconic and slack, was not within her; that she was in part of someone else's make and not just her mother's; that a world beyond Tinwire existed. These were things Emily had long felt. Now, they were things she understood. There, before her, lay the sentence, awaiting her attention. The sight of it made her feel dreadfully lonely and afraid. She hurried quietly from the room, down the dim stairs, and found her mother in the wicker chair, also looking out a window through the drawn-back curtains. Emily stood for a while, hoping that her mother would turn and regard her. She wanted desperately to be seen. But something out there—perhaps a bird—fixed her mother's attention and would not release it. "Perhaps she is also having an awakening," though Emily. She waited, and while waiting, she inspected her mother as she never quite had before, in particular the fall of her tail down her back. Her hair was to her waist these days. Like the sentence in her workbook and the dismal view of Tinwire, it had

long been a feature of Emily's world, devoid of deep meaning. But now, she saw that it measured her mother's sorrow to the inch. The hair was more black than gray now, and Emily knew that one day, it would go gray all over. Emily turned, mounted the stair, and returned to her workbook. She diagramed the sentence, pushed the workbook aside, and sat still in her chair, unsure how to fill the rest of her afternoon. Beyond the window, a lower and darker bank of cloud advanced upon her. She looked at it and then looked away from it.

This had been the work of some five minutes, yet she knew that the first moment of her life had come and gone.

That autumn, there were wildfires somewhere west. Also that autumn, Emily began to read.

Of course she had read before, but only idly and under orders; assigned things, instructive things, narrow, juvenile novels with engravings, or fat, interminable novels in which she took no pleasure at all. She had read *David Copperfield* and *Tom Sawyer* and *A Room with a View* and other books like this, books by long-dead writers whose lives seemed imaginary, whose environs seemed impossibly far from Tinwire, and in whose words she saw no connection at all to herself. But that autumn, smoke from the wildfires swept into Tinwire, choking the streets and blackening the trees; a layer of soot fell across the cars and streets. The radio insisted that the fires posed no threat to Tinwire but urged parents to keep their children indoors; the smoke could bother their lungs. So Emily spent this autumn in her room or in her school library, of whose contents she was newly aware. She went one afternoon to her mother's bookshelf, which she had never much noticed

before, and selected a book at random and began to read it. The book was a volume of a many-volume set from which the other volumes were missing. It was called *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. She read it through the night, and through the next day, to the sound of insects battering her bedroom window in their flight from the fires.

At this time, her mother began to talk a bit about the community college one town over, and about the future in general. The fires seemed to have given her a little interest in life.

"Maybe you could learn typing there, something useful," she said, "if you want, I don't know." She had gotten a pamphlet from the college. She pushed it on Emily one night at dinner, which they ate a little table for two in the kitchen. Emily said nothing; she was very near the end of the volume, and she had that very morning put in a request at the library for all the others. She took the pamphlet to her room and set it among the little books her teachers had assigned her, her Spanish textbooks, her algebra worksheets, a pile of things she would get to later. She finished her book that weekend; the other volumes had not yet arrived. She took the pamphlet from the top of the pile on which she had set it and looked it over. It was a pitiful thing; it disgusted her to look at. Its town was called Molasses. What was Molasses compared to Rome? She looked out her window and imagined that the smoke was the smoke of a great siege, the herald of an advancing army that would lay waste to Tinwire; that would burn the flat little buildings to their foundations; that would root up everything in her mother's garden and salt the backyard earth. She sometimes dreamed of this, and in the dream, she saw her father, whose face she had only seen in pictures; he appeared as a great Centurion general at the head of a

rampaging army. He wore a plumed helmet and a suit of bronze mail and a red cape fastened at the shoulder with a gold medallion; he rode a black horse from which a black caparison flowed behind him; and he put all the Tinwire men to the sword and took Emily off with him, slinging her up onto the rump of the horse and saying to her in a gentle voice, “Come on, Em. Let’s go.”

The fires passed with the coming of winter, and in the sudden cold and snow, many things seemed clear to Emily. Her appetite for books was insatiable, and her tastes were taking shape. She had no interest in modern literature. It bored her. Its concerns were trivial, and they seemed to be written by people who thought they would live forever and could thus spend their attention on little things, like love, and adultery, and ennui. Their authors, she assumed, knew hardship only secondhand; their fathers had not likely left their families behind, never to return, nor had they been raised by mothers like Emily’s, who whittled their own lives down to little nubs, staring out windows and spending up someone else’s money. No; Emily liked bloody stories. She cared only for stories about death and anger. She read Aeschylus, and Homer, and Swift, and the Shelleys. From them, she learned to hate Tinwire, and she learned to hate her mother, and to long for her father’s return. His absence from her life was not just a painful void but a grave injustice for which she felt her mother somehow to blame. Only when Emily was between books, or when she ate a silent dinner with her mother, or walked from her house to school and back, did she feel the still and quiet and cold of Tinwire envelop her. She had begun to keep a diary, and one day, near the end of February, she wrote in it a small entry:

“There’s no sense in love,” it said. “Love is a flaw in our spirits. The world does not know love; only we know love.”

She read this back to herself. She acknowledged its melodrama. But the entry frightened and dazzled her. She put the diary beneath her pillow and fell asleep full of pride in herself.

By the spring term of her sophomore year, her life had changed utterly. The work of reading required solitude, and though she was never a social girl, she now withdrew even further, keeping up only the friendships that had arisen between her and a few librarians, and one of her English teachers, who encouraged her in everything. Things were now clearer still, made clearer somehow by the crisp, cold wind that came unimpeded across the flat Tinwire prairie: she would go off to college, and not to the community college in Molasses, but to the state university in the state capital, which was Lincoln. She had looked into it; she would go into the classics. She was now silent, intractably silent, and she was deaf and blind to Tinwire, to her home, to her mother, all of which had, since she had beheld them so strangely on so ordinary a night some two years ago, become temporary accessories of her life; they were changeless things, and dead. Occasionally, a student, usually a girl, a shy or homely girl, would make Emily an overture of friendship, or her mother would come to Emily's door and look in and mutter some little question that Emily scarcely heard and never answered. Emily saw in their overtures a threat to the solitude that she now cherished. She declined them.

The summers and autumns of her junior and senior years were uneventful. Then, in the winter of her senior year, she made her application to the state college in Lincoln. She had mailed away for the application, and filled it out. Now she held the envelope, in which her application sat, in the jaw of the corner mailbox; she need only release it, return home, and await the reply. And indeed, she did release it, and the reply came in March, accepting

her with a full scholarship, and she accepted, made arrangements in Lincoln, and left Tinwire that summer.

But for a moment, she hesitated. Of course, she had thought of one day leaving. But that prospect, and all other prospects belonging to the future, seemed far off, eternally in transit toward her, never really to arrive. Releasing the envelope required courage that she was suddenly unsure she had. She looked around the intersection and saw the homes, situated squarely on their wide lawns. Flags hung from the porches, and in a few of the lighted windows she saw little scenes, as if they were paintings on a museum wall, of humble dinners, of old husbands and wives watching television. A sorrow went through her, like a little cloud. But on its heels was the anger that had become her companion of late; it charged down on her like a horde of mounted marauders. She released the envelope and let slam the mailbox hatch.

Between her March acceptance and her August departure, there was a melancholy interval. During this interval, Emily read very little and devoted attention to her mother in a way she never had. She said nothing of her coming departure to her mother until it was far too late for anyone to do anything about it, and during this time, a small friendship began between them. It was a mild, cold friendship, but it was a friendship. Emily called her mother by her name, which was Catherine. Their friendship lasted the summer.

"Did you know," said her mother, "that I was almost a historian?"

They were in the backyard, sitting in chaises longues side by side, drinking iced tea. It was a warm evening in May; that morning, Emily had confirmed her place in a freshman dormitory. She would soon confess her departure. Emily turned to her mother.

"I didn't know that," she said, "no."

"I was almost a lot of things," said her mother.

She said no more of this. Soon it was twilight, and a chill came on. They went inside and shut off the backyard light. The following morning, Emily told her mother about her plan to leave. They sat at the kitchen table. Her mother nodded and left the room.

"It'll never be the same between us," said her mother several weeks later, watching Emily pack her suitcase. It was now August. Her voice had no inflection; she spoke as if to herself. Emily did not know how to interpret this prophecy, but it immediately proved true; they resumed their usual silence.

The night before Emily's departure, there was a murder in Tinwire, the first in many, many years. It was no one Emily or her mother knew; just some roughneck dispute on the edge of the town that had gone bad. Yet it had happened, and talk of it came between Emily and the goodbye she had planned to give her mother.

"I'll come back during breaks, and over the summers," she said, but she heard the falsehood in her own voice, and she knew her mother heard it too. Even as Emily spoke, her mind was far away, racing over the road toward Lincoln, which Emily would drive in the car she had bought a few weeks ago with the bit of money her father had set aside for her.

They parted cordially. Emily drove from Tinwire to Lincoln without stopping, except to gas up and use the bathroom.

For a while, Emily kept up the friendship by letter, but life in the city, and in college, and among her books, restored her anger. Their letters became hostile, and by winter break, when Emily might return for a visit, they fell out. There was no hope in that

friendship. There was no hope in that town. There was no sense in anyone pretending. Emily sent a final letter.

"I won't be back," she wrote. "Ever. As for my room, do whatever you want with it. Throw out my things or sell them."

For a while, letters came from her mother. Emily read them for a while, but they were like *David Copperfield* and *Tom Sawyer* and *A Room with a View* had once been to her; they were simply things written by someone else, somewhere else, an ordinary stranger in an ordinary place. She stopped reading them and threw them out unopened, and soon, they stopped coming, except at Christmas and Easter and the Fourth of July.

The college was the University of Nebraska, and it had a rule that every honors student, which Emily was, must write an honors thesis in their major field. By her sophomore year, Emily had declared an English major and conceived of her thesis topic; it would treat motifs of the underworld and of the demonic possession of women in classic literature. And she had a title for it: *Demons.*

There was at the college a senior professor in the English department named Mr. Granger. He was very old, and his life's work was behind him. Emily had not taken his classes. She knew him only by reputation; he was known as an aloof professor and a dismissible poet, and it was said that he had given up on his poetry and his teaching immediately upon achieving tenure. He taught freshman poetry surveys that challenged no one. He was a commercial poet who had once been considered for laureate, and he had not published in Emily's lifetime. She checked out a book of his from the library and read as much of it as she could stand to. It was nauseating stuff, expressive of a dead spirit. It was

all about the exteriors of things—spring birds on tree boughs and things like this. She closed the book and looked at his name, stitched into the spine with gold thread. The book itself was old and careworn, yet its card showed that it had been checked out only a dozen times in almost twenty years; the wear was not from use, it seemed, but from time.

The following morning, she went to his office. She found him inside it, reading a typewritten manuscript. He was bald and plump, and he wore spectacles, through which he squinted down at the words on the page. The words were in lined verse; he had marked the page with lots of red ink. She announced her presence, and he looked up at her. His eyes were small and enclosed in shadow, like chips of soap in filthy dishes.

"Yes?" he said. Emily began to introduce herself. "Yes, yes?" he said, waving his hand. She asked him to be her thesis advisor. He looked at her for a while. "Fine, very well," he said. He returned his attention to the manuscript, and Emily showed herself out. By the end of her sophomore year, she had had no further contact with him.

Then, over the summer, she submitted her proposal to him. A letter from him reached her a few days later; he demanded an appointment with her at once.

Though it was summer and his classes were out, his office was badly disordered, as if he were furiously at work on a project of infinite duration. His bookshelves leaned in on him as they had not seemed to do in spring. Several volumes had fallen to the floor and lay there, open. His desk was covered in papers. Mr. Granger himself seemed smaller, a minor feature of the room. He seemed agitated by the books that crowded over him and the papers that stared up at him, and when he looked up at her, he grimaced.

"Ms. Chalk," he said, and he retrieved her proposal from the pile of papers in front of him. He read it aloud in full, occasionally shaking his head and interjecting with

derision. “No. No. No.” Then, he tossed her proposal down.

“It won’t do,” he said. “The premise is unfit. It’s unclear. And it’s too ambitious. You’re a junior now. That leaves you four terms to research and draft. It simply cannot be done. You will do harm to the subject. You’ll work in haste. Anyway, it’s been done. The topic has been exhaustively examined.” He named a couple of books and their authors. “Have you read these?” he said. “Or even heard of them?”

“No,” said Emily.

He grunted, pushed her proposal across the desk to her, and said that he would not sponsor her unless she changed course. Emily took the proposal in her hands and looked down at it. Then she stood, thanked him, and left his office.

For a night, she fell into despair. She read over her proposal and supposed she saw it as he had. But, as ever, her despair was chased away by great anger. By morning, she had dismissed him. His objections were feeble and unfounded; he seemed simply to not like her. She went to the English department and asked a proctor if there were ways she might get around Mr. Granger should he make good on his threat. The proctor said there were ways; but she might just as easily choose a different advisor.

“No,” said Emily. “I want him. But I want to make sure that I can get around him if it comes to it.”

The proctor smiled at her. “There are ways,” he said. “There are always ways.” They talked a bit longer, and when Emily charged from the English building onto the open campus, she knew that she was well liked, and that Mr. Granger was not. She worked on *Demons* without cease, almost without pause, through her junior year. When her energies flagged, she imagined Mr. Granger in his miserable office, his bald pate peeping up from

the tops of meaningless papers, or from around columns of teetering books. As her research advanced, she conceived of him as a demon, rather like those about which she read. By writing her thesis, she imagined that she might kill him.

Somehow, Emily Chalk had become popular. She couldn't quite tell how; she was as indifferent to her classmates as she had been in high school. But indifference seemed to work on these people like an aphrodisiac, and she found herself at the center of a group of underclassmen that overwhelmed campus restaurants and coffee shops like a plague of locusts. She went on dates. Some of her dates became lovers, some did not, and in any case, she did not keep her lovers long, and she had no real friends. She was thought eccentric and odd, and she was known only so well.

To Emily, these friends and lovers were little more than features of the world, like boulders or canyons or pine trees. Only *Demons* had meaning to her—the personages and scenarios of myths, the landscapes of the underworlds, the expressions these personages and scenarios and landscapes found in the writings of pitiful, confined people, who feared themselves spiritually dead, who imagined that they had become ghosts in limbo while they yet lived—these populated her inner life and occupied her mind. Opening a book or making a note in a pad was, for Emily, and act of love; entering a cafe and hearing her name called was a joyless chore that she felt she must keep up, lest she disappear from the world.

In her group, there was a young man named John Pine. No one knew him well. No one knew how he had gotten mixed up with them, but it was not the sort of group to expel strangers. The group tolerated him and occasionally made fun of him in his absence; he

was shy and quiet and serious. Emily did not take much notice of him, except occasionally, when she noticed that his gaze had fallen upon her. In his eyes, she saw none of the usual feelings for her; there was no fear, nor lust, nor confusion, nor contempt. His look was like a cold wind blowing through her.

One afternoon, in the summer between her junior and senior years, she and a few others saw a movie in the campus arthouse. When the movie let out, the group broke up with merry goodbyes. Emily walked home. She took a route she didn't usually take; it brought her past the new football stadium, which was only half built. She was thinking of the film and wondering if it had any connection to her. She often had to think of things in this way now. Her life had two discrete aspects, it seemed; the exterior and the interior. She valued only the latter, and yet she recognized that the two were doomed to a feudal relationship that would forever cause her grief. She walked along, sunk in thought. Cranes and derricks surrounded the stadium and cast long shadows around her. Among them, she saw the shadow of someone walking behind her. She turned. It was John Pine. He stood some paces back.

"Will you go out with me?" he asked. His voice was cold and uninflected; it expressed no particular interest in her.

"No," she said. She turned and hurried along, taking several turns toward brighter, busier streets. When she looked behind her again, he was gone.

The encounter disturbed her strangely. She avoided the group for a while, and when she returned to it in the autumn of her senior year, he was gone. No one made any mention of him, and Emily did not ask after him. It was like he had never been there at all.

But her mind sought him out. She saw him in the pages of her research, and even in

the pages of her own thesis, which had now taken shape. She imagined him as a ghost, such as often haunted governesses in Victorian novels, just as she imagined Mr. Granger as a lower demon chained to his master's throne. She did not want to see John, not exactly. But by November, when it seemed that he truly had left her life, she became inconsolable. She devoted herself to *Demons* and by the final exams of the fall term, she had made a year's progress on it. It grew wild. It overran the terms of her proposal and touched on political and social matters; the plight of womankind in general, the means by which men invoked demonic possession and its daughters and granddaughters—hysteria, lunacy, madness, strong-mindedness—to tame unruly women. She did not go out; she refused the calls that came for her at the honors house, where she had lived since the end of her freshman year with a handful of other bright young women. She neglected all other coursework. Her professors, who liked her and feared for her, interceded, but she repelled them, saying that they would understand everything when she submitted her thesis. If they persisted, she demanded stoutly and angrily to be let alone. Her housemates occasionally appeared at her bedroom door, asking her strangely if she was hungry, or thirsty, or if she would like to take a walk. She ordered them gone, too. She had no appetite and no thirst. Occasionally, a leg cramp forced her to take a walk, and she glided through the winter campus, feeling incorporeal and bright. Sometimes, she walked by the football stadium, in a faint hope that she would see John Pine.

At the start of winter recess, her housemates returned to their hometowns. Their goodbyes with Emily were uneasy, and they parted from her with looks of dismay. There was no friendship between them, but they showed her a concern,the kind one shows an injured animal.

"Nonsense," she said to them, "you go on and have a good break." She waved goodbye to them from the honors-house porch. When they were gone at last, she went into their rooms and looked through their closets and paged through their notebooks and examined the pictures that decorated their walls. She didn't know why she did this, really; the curiosity had just popped up in her, and she saw no good reason to deny it.

Some of the pictures were of boyfriends who, she guessed, would become fiancés, and then husbands. In time, her housemates would be borne away; they would cease to be scholars; they would become wives, and then mothers. They would forget their lives. They would forget themselves. The ideas in these notebooks, the ambitions recorded in these diaries, the sketches in these drawing pads, the paintings on these easels, would become the dismissible figments of a dream from which their creators had fully awakened. They would grow old and die. Their obituaries would be small and ordinary. These thoughts occupied her that night, and the next. She tried to work on *Demons* but couldn't. She slept, but lightly.

One morning, she awoke from just such a light sleep, during which she had dreamed of her father, which she had not done in a long time. The dream was like a certain myth she had been studying lately, of the Lord of Hell, who had sired a daughter with a human woman. This poor woman had stolen the child away from him, and hoped to hide him in a cave. The Lord had raged in Hell, and finally took human shape again, to reclaim his daughter and restore her to an iron throne and to put onto her head a crown of iron spikes and to install her as his queen. In Emily's dream, her father was this Lord. He stood before her on a sheet of black rock; he opened his arms, and his arms were covered in crow's feathers. She went to him, and they embraced.

Emily went into the kitchen and made herself a cup of tea. While it steeped, she returned to her room and dressed to go out. She left the house for campus without drinking the tea. It was gloaming, grey and cold. The parks were empty, the grass frozen and covered in ice. It had not snowed much this winter; the trees stood black and bare.

The campus of the University of Nebraska occupied both sides of a riverbank, and a footbridge connected these two banks. This bridge was infamous for suicides. Every year, the college paper carried the news that a student had thrown himself into the river, and there were stories from the college's early days, too, of lovers, doomed by circumstance, jumping off the footbridge together. Emily soon came to this bridge, crossed to its midpoint, and went to its balustrade. She looked over the edge. The river was iced over, but a barge had come through, cleaving a black seam.

After a time—she did not know how much or how little—a young man tackled her around her waist and hauled her away from the balustrade—she had climbed over it—and sat her on a bench. A small crowd gathered. A policeman came. The policeman questioned the young man, who said that Emily had been about to throw herself from the bridge. How did he know? She had climbed over the railing. The policeman asked Emily if this was true. She gave no answer.

An ambulance took her to the hospital. The nurses were aghast at her condition. She was near death. She was malnourished and filthy. She was dehydrated. She refused food and water, so they hydrated her intravenously and fed her by force; this involved inserting a hollow wire up her nose, down her throat, and into her stomach. Emily resisted this with all her strength, which, given her condition, was superhuman. The nurses put a sedative into her IV. Under its influence, she fell into a fugue. She was neither awake nor

asleep, yet she dreamed; her dreams involved figures from her thesis, figures from books, figures from her life. They involved Mr. Granger and John Pine and her mother. They involved Sheol and Limbo and Hades and Hell. The sedative made it impossible for her to resist these dreams, in which she was not author, but subject.

When the doctors were satisfied that Emily was no longer on the edge of death, they moved her to the hospital's psychiatric ward. A psychiatrist took her off the sedative in order to interview her. He asked her about Tinwire, and about her mother, and about her friends, and about her love life. Did she fantasize about death? Did she want to die? Did she hurt herself in order to get emotional relief? Was she often angry? Was she often sad? She gave crafty, half-true answers and only occasionally lied outright. Yes, she was often angry. Wasn't he? Yes, she was often sad. Wasn't he? Yes, she fantasized about death. Did he not? He asked her if she heard voices. No, she said.

He set down the pad in which he had been writing and looked at her.

"Don't think I don't know what you're up to," he said wearily. "If you won't speak to me frankly and honestly, there are means at my disposal. There are drugs I can give you that will make you tell me the truth. Or I could keep you here until your better judgment compels you to talk to me. After all, Ms. Chalk, I only want to help you. You've had a very close call. The spring term is about to begin; think of your schoolwork. Do you want all that time and effort to go to waste?" He went on and on; she was sick, he said, and that was that. And there was medicine to cure her, if only she would take it. Would she refuse penicillin for an infection?

His threats were idle. Shortly after this interview, and another just like it, Emily was released. She had been in the hospital for a week, during which an unseasonal thaw

had come. She walked home, taking a little pleasure in the snowmelts that trickled in the gutters. The tea she had left out had grown a skin of mold. She tried to work, but she couldn't; her thesis demanded anger, and she felt only sorrow, and fear; fear of herself, and fatigue, too, and not just fatigue but exhaustion.

A few days later, her housemates returned. They remarked with relief at how well she now looked; the recess must have been productive and restful for her. They returned to their work, and Emily returned to hers. No path to the end of *Demons* presented itself. Reading it, she found it frightening and indecipherable. She could see a couple easy ways to finish it, and she chose one. She worked steadily but without feeling. By the middle of spring, she decided she had finished. At the defense, Mr. Granger revolted against it. He called it sloppy and informal and disturbing, just as he had predicted it would be. He smiled crookedly at her, and she could see that he took the failure of her thesis as a personal triumph. His censure meant nothing to her. The others on the committee were younger than he and did not have tenure; they said that her thesis was radical, even brilliant. Their praise did not move her either. When it was time for Emily to speak, she said simply that her thesis could speak for her. The committee approved her defense with decoration; Mr. Granger took his defeat silently. In the following days, a few from the committee sought her out or stopped her in the hall and encouraged her to consider graduate programs in literature; they looked at her with admiration and said that she might make contributions. She graduated on time and with honors. She did not attend commencement.

Emily's first summer out of college was a strange one. She answered an ad in the

paper and rented a room in a house that was far from campus. Her landlady was an elderly widow, whom Emily rarely heard or saw. Emily never thought of her professors, or her old friends, or of her mother, or of Tinwire. She took a job managing the classics collection of a public library. For a while, she set *Demons* on her desk, as if to continue it. Then she put it in the bottom drawer of her desk, and it vanished from her mind. She did not read, except occasionally, and only trivial, brief novels that once would have degraded her intellect. Their characters and scenarios departed her thoughts as soon as she set the books down. She rarely finished them. They offered her no pleasure, only dim comfort. After a while, she ceased reading altogether.

Yet Mr. Granger remained distinct in her mind. By thinking of him, she could think of the last few years of her life. Hatred of him had motivated her for almost four years; under its influence, she had produced *Demons*. Now, he was gone from her life, and her hatred of him was supplanted by sympathy for him, and even gratitude. He had hated her, but she had hated herself. The more she thought of him, the more she felt that a decisive battle of her life had ended in truce. She still had squalls of unrest, in which she abjured sleep and food and water. But they were less frequent and less torrid. She missed them, in the same way that she missed Mr. Granger. During one such squall, she sent away for literature from graduate colleges and queried a few publishers regarding *Demons*. By the time the responses arrived, her squall had passed. She set the pamphlets and letters aside and resolved to read them later. Fatigue retook her. It commanded her to sleep, but sleep did not cure it. A year went by, and then another.

Then, on a beautiful day in spring, she awoke with a sudden desire to see the campus, perhaps to see Mr. Granger, or anyone she knew. She dressed and took a bus.

The campus had changed little. She went to Mr. Granger's office but it was locked.

"He's on leave," said the office secretary. Emily knew her; they had lived together at the honors house. If she recognized Emily, she gave no sign of it; she turned her head down to the fashion magazine in front of her. Emily noticed that she wore an engagement ring with an enormous sapphire.

Emily went to the campus library and looked at the rows of books she had read. She went to the footbridge, which was crowded with students crossing from one bank to the other. She went to the balustrade and looked into the open water. The rowing team was at the riverbank, just slipping She struggled to recall the morning, now three years behind her, when she had come here in a moment of bizarre oblivion. Had she really meant to throw herself in? Had she really gone momentarily mad? Was she now sane? Was this—numb, stupefied comfort—sanity? She did not know, she could not remember; the facts of that day on the bridge offered themselves readily, but her true memories of it eluded her. She reached after them, but they scattered from her. Would this be the course of her life? The march of the future into the past? Perhaps this campus, these books, these buildings, these moments were, like her mother and like Tinwire, ports of call from which she was destined to depart and never return. She turned from the balustrade and returned the way she had come.

But before leaving campus, she saw a young man on a park bench. His manner fixated her. He turned through a book in his lap, oblivious to the green, to the trees through which the sunlight fell, to the sparrows and finches that nested in them. His movements were precise and mechanical. She approached him and saw that it was John Pine. For a while he took no notice of her; he was absorbed by his book. Then he raised his head and

regarded her.

"Hello, Emily," he said. He looked at her as he had always done, deeply and without interest. He had not aged. His face was preternaturally youthful. Its smoothness and lack of expression reminded Emily of a wooden mask. They chatted, and he asked her out to a drink. She accepted. The following weekend, they met at a bar called the Pegasus and drank beer. He asked her about her studies, and she described her thesis to him. To her surprise, he had some knowledge of the subject and asked her about certain books, all of which she had read. His questions were direct and neutral, yet they led her away from her thesis and toward her life. Soon, she was describing her youth to him, and the moment at which she had awakened, the first moment of her life.

"It was an ordinary afternoon, really," she said. "I was working on something. Grammar, I think. Yes, I was diagramming a sentence." At once, memory of the sentence returned to her, and she recited it:

"'A gallant-looking Frenchman, in a blue overcoat, capless, and with a frowning red face, had been defending himself against the hussars.'" Emily laughed. "Isn't it funny what you remember and what you don't?"

She went on:

"Daddy had already been gone for a long time, then. Mother said he would come back. I don't think she ever believed that. I think she always knew. I don't know why she lied. I would have understood. I was a smart kid."

"Maybe she wanted you to feel better," said John.

Emily shook her head. "Well, I didn't," she said.

She was deep in thought now, about her mother, of whom she had not thought in

many years; she thought of her mother's descent into ennui, the circumstances of their estrangement, the years of her childhood during which she felt nothing, thought nothing, experienced nothing, except for an inarticulate anger that she had been forced to live in the first place, the sleep from which she had brutally awakened. She said some of this, but not all of it. He listened to her carefully. These aspects of her life had once felt like high tragedies. But as she heard herself describe them, they seemed commonplace. Soon, the bar lights went up and the bartender announced last call. John thanked her for the evening and asked if he could see her again. She agreed. They dated through the spring and into the summer. The affair progressed slowly. He learned everything about her; it was short work that left Emily feeling small. What she had once taken for the true materials of her soul were, in fact, loans from books and stories common to anyone who cared to read them. Yet she was pleased to be known, and the presence of John at her side on a boulevard, or across a restaurant table from her, his head full of the facts and tales she had told him, relieved her sorrow and cast away her anger, for which she now had no good use.

One day, Emily returned home from the library to find her landlady, the widow, upright in an easy chair. She sat with a small book in her lap. Her head was bent, as if she were reading it. Emily had never encountered death firsthand, but she knew at once that the widow was dead. She called the city coroner. Men arrived and took the body away.

A few days later, the landlady's son arrived to settle her affairs. He was a brusque, middle-aged man who treated Emily like a feature of the house that he would get rid of as soon as the house was his. He informed Emily that he and his wife would take the house over. Whatever agreement Emily had had with his mother was now void. She could stay

until she found another place, which he asked her to do speedily.

Then, the news broke that Mr. Granger would give up his position at the college. He was terminally ill. A dinner was held in his honor; Emily did not attend.

These deaths—one actual, the other imminent—interrupted her life, which had taken up a steady, gentle course. While the widow's son was away making arrangements to move from his house and into his mother's, Emily was alone in the house, and this solitude was unlike solitude she had known before. She began to think of death, to really think of death, for the first time in her life. Her body had once come near to death, but her mind had kept its distance. Now, she felt the proximity of death in every room, even her own. The house became intolerable. She escaped it by visiting John, but he provided little relief. He had no thoughts in particular about death. He considered it a foregone topic, and, thus, one not worth his attention. Still, she began to sleep at his apartment.

"It's awful," she said to him. "It's not my own anymore, it never was. It was hers."

He didn't have much to say to that. He fell asleep without saying goodnight. They slept side by side, hardly touching.

By the end of the month, she had found nowhere to live. Over dinner with John, she confessed her dilemma.

"Come live with me," he said. She demurred. "You already do, really. I don't mind the arrangement."

Still she declined, though she knew it was only for the moment. She spent two days away from him, searching the classifieds for an apartment in her budget. But rents were not what they once had been, and besides this, she felt that the outcome of this situation was inescapable. Death had come into her life and would never again leave it. She

imagined it variously as a herd of rats, or as a spill of ink from an overturned inkwell. It advanced upon her, hounding her out of her own life and into John's.

"All right," she said. They were walking down a street.

So she moved in.

"It's going to be lovely," she said while she unpacked. At the sound of her voice, she thought of the promise she had once made to her mother, that she would soon return to Tinwire.

Emily and John lived peacefully, more or less. In spring, John asked her to marry him, as she had known he would. She requested a couple days to consider, and he granted them. When the days were up, she agreed.

She had spent those days—there were three of them—doing nothing in particular. She had puttered in the office he had made for her, she had taken *Demons* from its drawer and rifled its pages.

But on the second of the three days, she had gone to Mr. Granger's house. He lived in a gothic estate reserved for distinguished faculty. Upon arriving at its gate, Emily recognized it at once as a house in which someone lay dying. Curtains covered every window. The lawn was poorly kept. It reminded her of the unruly hair that skirted Mr. Granger's bald head, always in need of a cut and a comb. Junk mail overfilled the box. She went up the stair to the door and knocked. A middle-aged woman answered. She was pale and thin and her eyes were pink rimmed. Emily asked to see Mr. Granger.

"Who are you?" said the young woman.

How could Emily describe herself? All the descriptions that occurred to her—a former student, an old friend, an archenemy—seemed false.

"I'm Emily Chalk," she said. "Mr. Granger was . . . " She looked off into the interior of the house, which was lit by dim bulbs and full of shadows. "I came to say goodbye," she said.

The woman said that she was sorry, but Mr. Granger could accept no visitors. She shut the door. Emily stood for a moment. Then she turned and went home. The following morning, she accepted John's proposal. They planned a small, secular ceremony. John had few friends and little family; Emily had none.

"What about your mother?" said John.

"What about her?" said Emily. She was at the table, filling out tax forms.

"Maybe this is a good time to reunite," he said. He spoke of this as a practical step that might safeguard their future, just as the early tax filings were, at which Emily was now at work.

So, under John's advice, Emily invited her mother. Her RSVP was among the first to arrive. They exchanged letters and agreed that Catherine should come some days before the wedding and stay with John and Emily.

"We have so much to talk about," wrote Emily, "so much time to make up." She signed the letter, "Love, Em."

Catherine arrived a few days before the wedding. She was just as Emily remembered her; sad, quiet, inward, meek, elsewhere. They embraced without tears; each apologized for their years apart. They spent the days before the wedding summarizing their lives to each other. Emily truncated her own story enormously. She said that she had written "a thesis," and that her time in college had been "difficult." She said that John was "a wonderful influence." Catherine asked ordinary questions and had even less to say

about herself. No change had come through Tinwire. No happy change, anyway. A few neighbors and family friends had died, but no one Emily knew well. A few old buildings had come down, a few new ones had gone up; Tinwire had neither grown nor shrunk. Neither woman had any news of Emily's father. Catherine looked a little older, but not much older; her hair had indeed gone fully gray, and she still kept it in a tail, but it still hung only to her waist, as it had when Emily had seen her last.

"I give it a little trim from time to time," said Catherine when Emily asked.

The wedding approached, occurred, and concluded. It was brief and serious. The reception was a quiet affair.

When it was time for Catherine to return to Tinwire, Emily embraced her at the door.

"This was so good," said Catherine. "So, so good. We've got to keep in touch. We've got to never again let petty things come between us. Promise."

"I promise," said Emily.

When her mother had driven off, a momentary but overwhelming misgiving went through Emily, so quick and strong it stole her breath. "Petty things." They had not seemed like petty things at the time, but now, at the very start of married life, she felt that her soul faced no danger. She had an urge to call her mother back, to say a different goodbye, to make different promises. But Catherine was gone. Emily went into her home. She and John honeymooned the following week. A few days after they returned from their honeymoon, the newspaper carried Mr. Granger's obituary. It eulogized him with one of his own poems, which Emily had never read. It was about a crow among a flock of crows that roosted in an olive tree. She could read it only halfway before grief commanded her to

set it aside.

A new age of her life began. Domestic duties occupied her. She sometimes found herself sweeping dust into a dustbin, or folding a sheet by holding it under her chin as her mother had done. At first, these tasks sickened her. But after a while and by mysterious means, they ceased to be unhappy chores and became, almost, pleasures. John worked in the offices of a mining company, managing its activity in the stock market. He was prosperous and frugal. He warned that famine often follows feast, and they lived neither rich nor lean. He had few friends, she had none. A block of years elapsed as if in a single night of sleep, from which she awoke from time to time in a panic, often at night, when, still dreaming, she took the darkness of the bedroom for the lid and walls of a coffin in which she had been wrongly interred. And from time to time, the smallness of her life occurred to her, and she became restive. She fiddled with *Demons* and agitated that she might go off to graduate school after all. John encouraged her mildly, and in his voice she heard his confidence that her urges would pass before she could act. At such moments, she hated him and thought of him as a carrion bird who had won her by patience. She conspired to leave the marriage as quickly as she had entered it, and to take an enormous portion of his wealth, as much as she could (she had seen it done) in payment for her soul, which he had, over weeks and months and years, nearly extinguished.

But these were aberrant moments. Her urges did pass, and as they did, she felt overcome with shame with herself. She silently endured the urge to apologize—to John, to anyone, to strangers who passed her on the street—for thoughts she had never voiced and of which only she had knowledge. But this urge passed, too, and she could feel her life

returning to its usual size and shape. That was always a sad moment, for it preceded a return to a living sleep, in which she swept and shopped for the groceries and looked on the world as if through an astronomer's telescope.

"That's all right," she thought one afternoon—her life now seemed to exist only in afternoons—returning *Demons* to its drawer and putting aside half-written letters and literature from faraway colleges. Perhaps her life was small now; it had not always been. Perhaps her triumphs lay behind her; she was lucky to have had triumphs in the first place. There were causes to which she could apply herself when she was ready, and time yet to ready herself. Her life was like a suit of clothes, she decided, which she could let in and take out as she wished.

The summer of her fourth year with John, she got pregnant. She bought a pregnancy test, and then made an appointment with a doctor who confirmed its results. She went to this appointment alone. That night, and for many days afterward, she said nothing of the news to John, or to her mother, with whom she exchanged punctual, summary letters.

A new feeling came to her. It was not sorrow, nor was it anger. But neither was it the unfeeling stupor in which she had lived the last five years. One night, she dreamed, and the dream was of the tree from Mr. Granger's poem, the one whose boughs were jacketed in crows. She awoke and knew that she could not bring the pregnancy to term; it would be her doom, and this doom, unlike any prior doom, would be final.

Still, she did and said nothing. Her morning sickness came on. John asked her if she was sick.

"Yes," she said. "It'll pass soon, I'm sure." She turned on the tap and washed her vomit down the sink.

And for a time, she really thought it might pass and come to nothing. Then she began to show. One afternoon, while John was at work, she made an appointment at a clinic to have an abortion. Over dinner that night, she asked John for money.

"What for?" he said.

"Does it matter?" she said. Then she said, "There's a course at the community college I want to take."

"What in?"

"Medieval literature."

He gave the money over the following morning, in the form of a check that she cashed as soon as he left for work.

On the day of her appointment, she got no farther than the end of her walk. To take another step seemed impossible. So did the return voyage to her home, a trip of four long strides. Twin impulses—to go forth and to retreat—warred within her, leaving her standing in the walk. Finally, a light rain started up and drove her inside. At some afternoon hour, the phone rang; she did not answer it.

That night, she confessed her pregnancy to John. The baby came in winter, at night. It was a girl. They named her Connie. It was a joyous occasion for Catherine, who had left Tinwire the moment she had gotten John's call, and even for John, who held Connie with a little smile.

But Emily had hardly experienced the birth at all; she had expected tremendous pain, but the pain had been nothing much, just a small, remote thing. She had even

declined her epidural. When it came time for Emily to hold Connie, she did so limply, nearly letting the baby slip from her arms. She was deaf to the happy chatter around her; she heard only Connie's cry, which was was an intolerable keening.

"Ssssh," said Emily. She wanted only for Connie to be quiet, and then to be taken away.

So it went for the first months of Connie's life. She was an angry, inconsolable baby, as unhappy in John's arms as she was in Emily's. John saw in her an omen of future success and security, with which he was satisfied. He was dutiful and kind to Connie and to Emily. He was oblivious to Connie's anger, and to Emily's increasing gloom.

It had not been a difficult pregnancy, but Emily did not recover from it as the doctors promised her she would. She could keep her mind on nothing. Even when nursing Connie, she stood or moved or walked as if the baby was not at her breast. She had little interest in food. She began to lose weight, a fact she only noticed when she stepped from the shower and saw herself in the mirror. The body reflected back to her seemed not her own at all; it seemed like an alien doppelganger that mimicked her movements. By Connie's first birthday, Emily struggled to get from morning to night. She had stopped lactating and had put Connie on formula. Emily was tired all the time; she slept long and hard and awoke to find her fatigue awaiting her, which was physical and intellectual. John urged her to see a doctor.

"I'm fine," she said. "Really." She smiled from her bed, which she now rarely left. She did not deny that she was a little unwell, a bit underweight, perhaps in a funk. But there was no great emergency. A month went by this way, and then another. By spring,

Emily was so weak that she had to excuse herself from Connie's birthday party and doze.

Connie's anger did not relent; she cried at all hours, and now her cries were mixed with words. The sound of Connie's voice was Emily's only real discomfort, and though she plugged her ears, she could never shut it out entirely. She hardly left her bedroom, even when John exhorted her to see to Connie, or to take a walk. She just needed rest.

One day—she did not know the hour, nor the month, nor the season—she awoke in her bed. The light through the curtain was grey and diffuse. Sounds of life came from other rooms. Footfalls passed her door in one direction, and then in the other. She heard the babble of a child and the shake of a rattle. A bit later she heard toast spring up from a toaster. They were the sounds of a life that had once been hers but from which she had excused herself. The sounds soothed her. She knew that if she opened her mouth and spoke, John would come to her side. If she asked him for Connie, he would give her over. If she asked him for help, he would help.

She said nothing and made no sound. She fell into a doze, and in her doze, she dreamed of her morning on the campus footbridge. She had not thought of this moment in many years. There had, in that moment, been two voices in her ear, as perhaps there were in everyone's ear, always. The one had said to her, "Go, go." The other had said, "Don't go. Stay." She had once pledged herself to the former voice; it had commanded her to do everything she had ever done. Now, it had fallen silent; the other voice had prevailed. It whispered to her even now, pressing her into her soft bed, directing her attention away from the cold of her fingers and the emptiness of her stomach and toward the warmth of the bedclothes. Perhaps everyone's life was spent this way, witnessing the argument between these two voices. Perhaps cowardice always prevailed. She would be happy when

the argument ended. Perhaps it soon would. The dream dimmed. Then it went black.

In the black, she still had thoughts, which she at once spoke and heard spoken to her. They were common thoughts of things she ought to do, and they belonged to every age of her life: there was an application to finish, and then mail off. There were boxes to pack. There was a difficult goodbye to effect, and to then finalize in a short letter. There were classes for which she must register, and then attend. There was a thesis to plan, and then to write, and then to perfect. There was a wedding to plan, and then to execute. There was an appointment to keep. There was a dinner to make. There was Connie.

This was her terminal thought—that she must see Connie once more—before her mind went silent. For a time, she experienced silent darkness. Then she experienced nothing.

She awoke in a hospital bed. An IV tube ran from her arm to a bag on a hook above her. A tube went up her nose and down her throat. A nurse bustled into the room, and then out.

This was her entrance into the afterlife, a moment she had studied in all its known forms. She knew what was likely to follow; she would go from this room to another; her sedatives would be discontinued; a young, handsome, kindly doctor would interview her; through his kindness she would see monstrous cruelty, a desire to destroy her. Was she often angry? Was she often sad? Did she want to die?

To these, she marshaled her true answers, which she had once been unwilling, perhaps unable to give: Yes, she was angry. She was always angry. She had always been angry. She had not chosen to be angry; anger had chosen her. Her anger was more a lover and husband to her than John had ever been, and she had spent her life appeasing it,

indulging it, denying it, suffocating it. She had had some success and some failure. She had done her best.

Yes, she was sad. She was sad that her mother, her father, her friends, and her husband had had to endure her. They had been well-meaning people. Even her mother. Even Mr. Granger. Catherine had not asked to be Emily's mother; Mr. Granger had not asked to be Emily's thesis mentor. She had sought them out, just as her anger had done with her. They had been innocent. John had been innocent. Emily had been innocent. Everyone was innocent, and the world was unjust and bloody; yes, this disparity made her sad, as did others.

No, she did not want to die. Not especially. But she was ready to, if it came to that.

The room was quiet for a long time. Beeps from other rooms reached her, and the footfalls of nurses in paper slippers. The curtain which enclosed her room drew back. John came in. He carried Connie in his arm. Catherine was behind him. They chattered at Emily softly. Catherine took her hand and cried.

"My baby, my baby," she said. "Why didn't you tell me you were unhappy? Why didn't you tell me? You promised you would tell me these things." She thanked God and kissed Emily on the forehead. John stood back, looking disconsolately down at her. Connie, for the first time of which Emily was aware, was silent.

She stayed in the hospital for several days. A doctor asked Emily if she would eat. She nodded; the feeding tube was removed. When she was able, the nurses got her out of bed and made her walk around the ward. John pulled the IV stand behind her.

One morning, an elderly, kind doctor came in. He greeted her and John and tickled Connie, who frowned at him and threatened to cry. The doctor told Emily that there was

little physically wrong with her. She had starved herself and dehydrated herself nearly to death, but there was no medical cause for her collapse. He asked her if she had ever had a nervous breakdown. She said that she had. He asked her to describe it. She said that she had woken up one morning many years ago feeling strange, and that she had gone to a bridge with the thought of throwing herself off it. A passerby had stopped her, a young man whom she did not know and had never seen again.

"He saved my life," she said.

The doctor asked other questions. She answered some of them herself. John and Catherine answered others. The doctor said that he would refer her to a psychiatrist; with Emily's help, and John's and Catherine's, he would begin the work of restoring Emily to health. It would be long and difficult work. When he left, he squeezed Emily's toe, which stuck up from the blanket atop her.

Emily's appointments with her psychiatrist began at once. She saw him twice each week. He too was kind and attentive. When she told him she had once been a classics scholar, he smiled. He asked to read her thesis. At their following meeting, he questioned her about it in great depth.

"Fascinating," he said, handing it back to her. She knew he meant it. In that moment, he won her trust.

She told him the story of its conception, which was, she now knew, the story of herself. He asked about her marriage. She described it as empty and unhappy. She had had good intentions, but she had married for bad reasons.

"Fear?" she said. She lay on the couch. He no longer wrote notes while she talked. "Yes, fear, I suppose."

"What of?"

Emily couldn't quite say.

He did not pressure her to reconcile with her husband. He asked her about her relationship with Connie; she said that she did not feel a connection to Connie, even now. To her, Connie was a stranger. Worse, she was a stranger in Emily's likeness. She said she had meant to terminate the pregnancy but that her nerve had failed her.

"Are you glad of that?" the psychiatrist asked.

"Yes," she said, after a time, and with much breath, as if it were a grudging concession.

Did she think herself dead, spiritually dead? No, but she felt that her life was over.

At the end of a month, the psychiatrist prescribed her a medication that he said would return her to normal. She knew what he meant. She filled the prescription and began to take it. She did not consider it medicine for her; she considered it medicine for Connie that she took on Connie's behalf. Her psychiatrist told her to be patient; it may take weeks, even months before the drug had any effect on her. All of this was a trial in patience, he reminded her.

"Patience I have," she said. He laughed.

Catherine stayed to help Emily with Connie. The ordeal had shaken Catherine terribly, and though disturbed by the near loss of her only daughter, she demonstrated an interest in life that Emily had seen only once before and in much paler shades, when the wildfires had burned somewhere near Tinwire. Catherine loved Connie, and she hated John, and she endeavored to keep the two apart however she could. If John took Connie in his arms, Catherine watched him with wrathful eyes. If he drew near to Emily, Catherine

called Emily away. Connie learned Catherine's contempt for John and began to recoil from John's touch and withdraw from his presence. John regarded this as a momentary change in his fortunes. This, as did the markets he had managed through many years of war and recession, would normalize; it would work out; given time, all events in his life would come to equilibrium.

Connie was madly in love with Catherine. Catherine encouraged Connie in everything, especially her mischief. Emily could make Connie laugh from time to time, but in general, Connie showed only fear and distrust of Emily.

One morning, Emily watched Catherine and Connie playing. They played a game in which Catherine hid small blocks from Connie and challenged her to find them. Catherine hid these blocks unfairly, slipping one into a pocket or concealing it in her hand. Connie was not fooled, and she feigned anger. Catherine embraced her and covered her with kisses and began the game again. Emily watched from an easy chair in which she often sat.

Then, Emily asked Catherine about the old house, the house in which Emily was born, and in which Catherine still lived. Was it in good repair? Was the garden where it had always been? What did it grow now? What had she done with Emily's old room? Other questions like this, about the house and its environs.

Catherine heard these questions. She answered them slowly and with great care. The house was in excellent repair. The garden still stood, such as it was; it grew tomatoes and wild chives and whatever flowers were on the air that year. Emily's room was as she had left it, more or less. There was another spare room, too, which had once been her father's study. Did she ever take lodgers? She had considered it. She would consider it

again if a good offer came. How many lodgers did she suppose she could take? Certainly one. Two if necessary.

This was as much as they said that morning, but they had reached an understanding. Bit by bit, Emily made her arrangements. She secured a lawyer.

"I don't want to rob him," she said. "I just want out."

The lawyer asked as delicately as he could if she had ever been unfaithful to John, or if there were any secrets he might use against her should proceedings turn ugly. She disclosed her breakdowns. At her next meeting with her psychiatrist, she told him of her decision to leave her marriage. She had been taking her pills; her decision, she felt, was sure sign that they were working. She said that her husband might call her sanity into question in order to prevent her from leaving him. Would he support her if it came to that? He looked around the office.

"That's a hell of a thing to ask," he said.

"Will you do it or not?" she said.

A lot of time went by in silence.

"Yes," he said finally, "to the extent that I'm able."

She thanked him. He stood to prolong the thanks, but she had made her mind up; he, too, would have to leave her life.

"Goodbye," she said, "and thank you."

She selected a day to depart, a Friday in spring, three weeks off. She and Connie would leave with Catherine while John was at work. During the remaining days, Emily encouraged Connie to play with her father, to go to him, to be kind to him. Connie obeyed, but grudgingly. Emily observed John as she had not observed him in many years. He was

still young and shy and quiet. For all her changes, he had changed not at all. The wooden mask of his face was as smooth and blank as ever. A great sorrow came into her, and it was not accompanied by any anger. She imagined what lay ahead of him, a terrible future to which he was oblivious. She hoped that he would survive it. She guessed he would, but she didn't know.

The night before her departure, she got in bed beside him and wished him goodnight. He wished her the same. She fell asleep and awoke in the morning, alone in bed. She smelled coffee brewing. She went downstairs. John was at the window, dressed for work, looking into a dreary morning light that poured over him. He had poured her a cup. This was unusual. She took it and sat across from him. They drank their coffee. He read a trade journal. This was the way they had spent ever breakfast for many years, and she though she was glad that today was no different, she felt the urge to say something to him, to offer him some thanks for what lay behind them, or some apology for what lay ahead. When he was finished with his coffee, he said goodbye to her and departed.

Emily and Catherine and Connie departed, too. It was a long drive to Tinwire.

Indeed, the house was just as Catherine had described it. Connie took to it at once. For Emily, it was full of old memories, of death, of stillness. But she too adjusted to it, and Connie brought the quickness of new life to it. Quiet weeks went by. Emily gave up her married name and retook the name Chalk. She heard nothing from John until, a month or so after her departure, a courier arrived with divorce papers for her to sign. John had left money to Connie in the form of a trust and had arranged an alimony settlement for Emily. For an afternoon, Emily cast about the house, feeling a strange disappointment in his generosity. Another battle, perhaps her final battle, which she

had waged as if to the death, had ended in truce. She signed the papers the following morning and sent them along. Excepting the occasions in Connie's life that demanded they both be present—her graduation from high school, and then from college, and then her marriage—she never spoke to John again.

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